

## FROM ONE MOMENT TO THE OTHER... NOTHING IS LIKE IT WAS...

### THIS IS DEATH.

I

Staring at the sky until eyelids freeze. Listening powerfully to the vast space, the cautions, the omens... Every day, long conversations with him. He's still here. Giving all the rituals their due, laying aside the gold, the knotted cord, the *Pomana*... Only veiled do I step out on the streets. A woman says, we don't do that anymore. I glance at her wordlessly and am glad I have never concerned myself with such things. Nothing should distract me from my pain, I will not omit any of the rituals. And I will be as mournful as I am.

Prayers. Concentrated as never before in my life. Invoking and re-invoking myself with this mantra, "**But today...** I'll kneel only to truth, follow only beauty and obey only love." Not yet step beyond the *laws* we followed all those years but hold on to this path. Even if it's desert, even if an icy wind blows eternal solitude round me.

Peculiar number sequences appear. Wherever I look, number ONE.

As if there was no other time of day, doctor's appointment, date, license plate number...

Later, months later, it is joined by number 2, 01:01; 01:10; 11:11; 12:12; 22:22; 21.21...

On my left hand, the lifeline veers off, two separate paths go their separate ways. Between them...*nothing*. Weeks later, the upper line forks, two delicate channels. One hesitantly approaches the other lower one and, perhaps... one day, connects the end of one with the beginning of the other. A large piece is still missing.

Again, and again... slipping off into the eternal space of night, searching the stars for him. I can feel him sometimes, close, so close and suffusing the width around me. The whole universe speaks. Profound peace within me. *It was beautiful!* I think. So unsubdued and finally, we were free. That was what truly made it special. And our long, long journey there... embracing everything, including our most agonizing crises – those between us and those we each endured.

We made ourselves a promise, for all time, throughout all space. *Who will lead me?* He once asked me before he passed. *Who will remind me to turn off the hotplate?* I asked in return. I send my laughter and wink up into the heavens.

Returning to the black isle, Lanzarote. There, where it all began. Not just our love, but our human selves. Here, we recreated ourselves, we penetrated volcanoes until there was nothing left of us.

Of the poems written for him, two lines haunt me, *...and ignited the fire of an entire island...* and *... we erected monuments to silence...* OUR LIFE, not only on the island. Silence to fire, fire to silence. Eternity. Far beyond the reaches of time.

As we give his ashes to the frothy, turquoise ocean, my whole heart is illuminated. I can feel his joy as he dives into the spume.

It's on cold winter nights that I search for him in vain. For him and for meaning without him. Useless. My heart races, explodes. *Cold turkey*. It's only a few steps to the balcony. In critical moments, the cat, *Dsor*, settles on my chest, her eyes piercing mine. Weeks later, as my proxy, she jumps from the roof and breaks her neck. I hold her tiny head in my hand as she dies. My grief erupts with violence. This time I do not need to be stronger as the dying one. I cry without pause for seven days.

On good days, I listen to Rachmaninoff. Excessively. Sitting quietly in my chair and *listening*, I tune in to every nuance of his sound. I let the music forge paths for me, leading to the sublime where desolation is beauty and beauty exists only in truth.

Amidst the healing of sorting, clearing, letter reading...the world violently invades my protected sphere. It revolves and revolves while a human being has ceased to breathe. The authorities have joined forces to torment me. Rent, debts, our warehouse, nontransferable trips – they all want to be paid. I switch my brain to another channel and go out into the world, return internally to months prior when there was still power and visions... and I believed that something could be changed in this world. I light torches in students as if I still feel the fire; I sell pictures and projects, as if I still believe in the future. I confront authorities and officialdom in different countries. I learn laws I had no idea existed.

Gathering strength, I turn, return, to my inner eye. There, where I can see, even as the world around me is vaporizing. There, where I can remember eternity... where gateways open to both worlds, pulling down all boundaries... and to the moment he lay dying in my arms and I could read in his eyes everything that is important to know in this world.

I exchange my black garb for white. No one suspects that this is a leg of the journey that must be taken. Others are simply relieved to see me lighter; to need no longer ask or speak about the magnanimous, the unspeakable... Only questions about my future arise. I have no answers, am painfully aware that... for them, it was long ago. And no one wants me to remind them of their own mortality.

So, I speak, speak as if I had words. Walk upright as if grief was not burdening me. Negotiate, narrate, organize, sell...mentally calculate how long this must go on. I'm courteous, interested, hold the *off* switch down, withhold the fact that right now, *nothing* interests me. Traveling, travelling, the sense of nonsensical grows, nothing fits or feels right. Finally closing the doors of home behind me, there is nothing but exhausted silence. No more outgoing letters, work-related emails forced, thank-you letters to friends lay on the table, untouched.

Instead, I put the final touches on ***Yasadim\****. Day and night with technicians, perfecting second by second, exchange words, images, sentences and full stops. When it's finally

completed, I feel something close to happiness for the first time. *I had done it*, and it was good. *Worthy* of him. **Homage to Vanesco**, and also homage to LIFE.

\*see video on vimeo: <https://vimeo.com/255370754>

Only then do I drive to our children. Bathe in warmth and understanding. Laughter is possible, monkeyshines are possible...we were once monkeyshine masters! It is a reminiscence of him who we loved most, the greatest prankster of all times. The same with my soul-sister in Seville. A deaf-mute and lame one laughing as they lead each other through the streets.

## II

From time to time, a hiatus from the world, I sit at our large table. I work, as I hear us talking together, hear his brush scratching...I make collages, draw, write, grateful that I am granted an artist's life in time of the tsunami. Rachmaninoff still accompanies me. I think of Cuba as the next possible site...and of Varanasi where I will ultimately burn all things that keep me from moving on with my life. Back then, I allowed myself seven years' time as, on the day following his death, the large mirror – *untouched* – suddenly lay smashed to smithereens. Seven year's bad luck, Vanesco had said. Seven years of mourning, I said to myself. It seemed not enough.

After the last, arduous trip I never want to board an airplane again. Yet, a month later, I accept the invitation to live in a large, *white* (!) house overlooking a placid lake. I buy a one-way ticket, taking only the story I have been writing the past years. Re-reading. Maybe some corrections. Maybe not. Maybe do nothing at all. Just breathe. Gaze. Heal myself of this punishing year. Of these punishing *years*. Sleep! No Christmas, no New Year's, they have nothing to do with my life. I beg my children's pardon and understanding. I only wish for emptiness. No ideas. No sounds in my head. No plans. Just me and my silence.

My only goal, to return to the center. To *feel* myself. My grief...and my strength. To re-read my notes and see, from this distance, what we went through, and most importantly, to read in non-partisan print what, *despite everything*, holds us up upright. And apply these things to my amputated heart. Not selfies but self-awareness. This is how it could be to emerge from tragedy, not mortally damaged, but free.

Throughout these months, I immerse myself in **white**. The color behind all colors, the *disintegration* of color. I study, listen, read, perceive everything white. Intensely explore the white walls of my house, how light nuances white and white becomes nothing but light. And light dissolves...even white light can cease to exist. As mind dissolves, grief dissolves, *I* dissolve and become nothing but a silent sound...of what? I delve deeper and deeper into nothing...strive to become *no one*. Only being, only breath in this nothing of everything.

Coming home, it is no longer my home. My eyes see differently, coming from this place where everything is different; the rooms, the streets, the people, the sounds, the colors...the distance helps me to see what truly is, what is true *now*. And this true reality is entirely other as that when we lived here together in this house, this city, this country. What was once expansive and roaming, back to the roots and down-to-earth is now confining. Not only because **his** magnitude is gone.

My pre-departure altar – *everything his karmic hands had ever touched*—is now weighty. At long last, I feel resolution; a resolve I have been waiting for in vain for so long. It must all go. Strengthened by the time spent far from memory, I feel nearly invincible! But only a few days later, I collapse. Too confident in my new power. The truth is, each moment demands my attentiveness to myself. Perhaps, this is the best lesson I have learned: All strength, all self-trust can utterly vanish from one second to the next. And the only thing that can safeguard me from the abyss is to be *completely present* in every moment.

I listen to Bach instead of Rachmaninoff now. Clear, mathematical notes help me not to lose myself, help me adjust my own rhythm that had nearly disbanded in the infinity of a world beyond. Step by step, I order the chaos of our last years together. I take my time, bringing my old life to a close. Just as Vanesco had died, slowly and fully conscious – *¡la buena muerte!*\* – should end our life together, leaving nothing but a blank, white page. Anything else – I feel – would be the opposite of presence. (\*'The good death')

*In the face of death there are no more doubts, only deeds*, I read in the 'Notes'. So often practiced over the last years, this helps me now in my life. I feed the first things to the fire. The most important things. Those not meant for the public. Words and drawings leaving their final imprint on ashes. I blow gently, and words and lines vanish. Not in *me*, where they live on, sealed by fire.

Over the coming weeks I rummage once more through his life. Take the last, unexplored boxes in hand, leaf, look, read...how *courageous* he was. How strong-willed his desire to be a Lover, leaving all wounds behind him. To pass through fire. Also through hell. And in the end... he was *radiant*, was pure **essence**.

Semana Santa, Holy Week... *Spring is here again. No one knows how it happened*, Antonio Machado wrote... A ray of evening light pierces purple a red blossom, a hornet, shimmering onyx! alights gently on my arm and stays. A full moon over the city's twilight roofs, I relieve my aching shoulders on warm pan tiles. A stork is slowly circling above me, circling, circling...as I watch, following his revolutions until they are spiraling within me. *Fill me up with this stork's flight*. I laugh. I feel blessed that I am alive! That I can once more perceive all life's beauty, that within this beauty I can sense HIM deep inside me. That I can carry into this world his tenacity, his courage, his stamina, his insistence, his acceptance of ordeals, his laughter, his exceptional spirit, his nobility, his nonconformity, *his wide and wild heart*...

After weeks of reviewing the studio and warehouse in Seville, the same awaits in Germany, where more of Vanesco's work is stored. Not slowly this time, but task work, taking note of the work that survived each time we changed countries. Collecting storage ideas and contacting art collectors. I have my doubts... Did we ever work toward our efforts suffocating in a museum? Does it make sense to hold on to material results when our true emphasis lay in the spiritual process? Releasing into the ether how the *human experience of art* can lead us to the essential... Staunchly convinced that what we were doing – and what we *did not* do – effected the world.

His voice says, *burn it all!* Other people say, *don't do that!!!* I make no headway. It is all so very exhausting for my *still wounded heart*.

### III

At the end of summer, I rent an old composer's residence. I give myself one month to iron out **Notes** (*The half story*). Documentations on dying, on despair and surrender and love and at-the-end-of-my-rope and painful truths and pain that is truth and anger and forgiveness and helplessness...and *freedom*...and a wholly unknown and unexpected *profound peace* amidst barbarity.

I confront it all mercilessly once more. I want to do this. Alone in the quiet garden, uninterrupted, I write, bring multi-lingual notes into *one* language, make stylistic corrections, putting the full stop behind the day of his death...*catharsis*. The gaps must be filled, the real work begins. But the manuscript has been saved.

When I'm exhausted from writing, I sit at the grand piano in the salon. Untouched since the composer's death. Among the sheet music I find a piece from Chopin. A piece I, months ago in Seville, found and heard endlessly. I saw it as a sign. Not a piano player, I worked my way through, note for note, until my fingers and memory found the right keys. When I played it from beginning to end **just** as I felt it, a deep joy flooded my being. And *pride*. I had held my ground, confronted the virtually impossible, an utterly useless, yet successful act of defiance in this world.

One final meeting on this find-a-place-for-Vanesco's-legacy journey takes me to Ticino. Breathlessly, I drive into the mountain, shades of grey, layers of might. *Mountains*, Vanesco said, *are magnificent masters. Make silent students*. Only now do I begin to understand what he meant. I believe it has something to do with humility.

Intermittent lakes, turquoise and radiant as jewels. Every mile a quavering experience of Earth, of beauty, of divine gifts. Creeping through cloudbursts and fog on the return route. Odd...this, too, *feels like merciful grace*.

Driving...possibly my new destiny, occurs to me over the next days. And I decide...to just drive. Had planned to sell the car but didn't. Instead, I buy a *duna*, a feather duvet, this old Mercedes is now my home. A week later, I'm off. Some bread for lean days, a knife to cut and defend myself with and a CD I happened to find of Rilke's poems set to music. Sliding it

in, I'm electrified. Tooling down the highway at 160 kmh, southbound, I am sent flying as no drug in the world could do. Montblanc rises up before me, powerful as an Indian king, snow-capped and glowing in the evening sun. I drive into his heart, into the heavens, directly into infinity... Rilke's words speak of our life together. Vanesco's and mine. It's as if the poet steps to me through space and time. A *revelation*. As I spoke of this to a mutual friend later on, he remarked, you certainly read Rilke often! I said, we didn't know him at all. But our life...**was** Rilke.

After so many weeks in the North, I longed vehemently for the South. I want to reach the Camargue today. Our place. Yet, when I arrive at the beach in the middle of the night, I'm uneasy. It's so dark, I can't see where I am. I breathe, exhale my fear. Knife in hand, I arrange my arms and legs on the narrow back seat and eventually fall asleep... Awakening in the early hours of a new day, it is the first day I awaken without pain. As if there were no better bed. I know, *he was with me the whole night*, finally appearing in a tender dream. I open my eyes and perceive a deep, unknown, inner joy at awakening in this world. I wake without weight, without longing, without a destiny to fulfill, I feel only... lightness and grace. For the first time since his death. For the first time in my life?

I walk down to the beach...dawn's seagulls, dawn's stray dogs, dawn's first sounds, dawn's first light and color, gradually penetrating the world's affairs...just looking is the miracle, *it is all here*. I tremble.

I travel the old routes. Through all of Southern Europe, I creep over narrow streets, bidding a ceremonial farewell to our old life. I bow to every place of our happiness, eat all the foods we loved to eat, stop in at every café we once haunted and order two coffees...roam into every wood and out of every city, sit down on beaches, rivers, hills...and gaze – always alone, far from other people – at time. At that that was, and now as radiant gratitude is resurrected in me. This life was so special! Past becomes present in me. *Transforming time*.

Spent and stone-broke, I arrive in Sevilla. I look for ways to make money. Not much success. After so many years of silence, it's difficult. I don't really have any ideas what I can offer now to earn money, what I did before makes no sense. I am not who I was. Yet, art, the omnipresent creativity within me – what to do with it now after all I have been through? I currently express myself through writing, but there's no money in it. The lack of ideas must be endured.

While waiting for new fire to consume me, I sign up for a *Pranayama* training. I want to know more about breath's secrets. With breath...we were able to surmount the mercilessness of dying. In the end, even negotiate with Death for time. I want to learn the *techniques* now, turn intuition into knowledge. The only provisions for my old age. My breath.

To my amazement, the training teaches me that there are Sanskrit words for all the strange things I have experienced in my life. I read the *Autobiography of a Yogi* and am rocked to the core. I read about *Samadhi*, surprised that it is considered something remarkable. I

delve into this ancient knowledge and, for the first time in my life, feel I am recognized. By yogis who no longer live and yet, whose names I cannot commit to memory.

In financial straits, I rent out a room in my apartment. By the week. I'm lucky with my tenants – digital nomads – and I grill them mercilessly. How do they, *young* people, experience a world that, after years of reclusion, I now follow in the media with consternation. Everything I once spoke of has come about when, back then, I brought to life the *Art & Humanity Project*. When I called out for people to be a counterweight to the imbalance, releasing this countering strength into the vastness. My efforts weren't really taken seriously then, but that was no deterrent. Today, I feel much too tired to take up the lance against windmills again. What is there left for me to do in this world? Especially young people love me, but I cannot singlehandedly carry them on my shoulders any more. The mere thought triggers nothing but exhaustion. And yet, somewhere in the background of my soul, I sense that I do not have the right to pursue only *my* own peace.

Although I have found an acceptable solution – a source of income, as well as meeting interesting people– I am increasingly plagued by the lack of silent space. Tenants now live in our quiet room, where we always used to withdraw from the world. While I now improvise a life among boxes in my workroom. Me, a lover of emptiness, am slain by the few things I possess that suddenly no longer have a place. Camping out...in my own home.

*Deep homelessness takes possession of me.*

Occasionally, I get in the Mercedes and cruise over remote roads just to talk to Vanesco in peace...

Since everything is on hold, I make an agreement with myself: If the Indian holy man I wanted to invite for my project years ago agrees to come, I will continue with my work. If he doesn't, I will withdraw definitely. I travel to his organization's European center and discover what a (modern) ashram is. His followers' eagerness to completely surrender themselves unsettles me, and the holy man is so famous, he can only give 5-minute audiences. How can I explain my work to him in 5 minutes? All the same, I wait patiently, listen to the Hindi spoken by others waiting, study the people who seem so alien, yet so akin to me...When it's my turn, I try to explain my intentions, he says yes, he says no, he doesn't say yes, he doesn't say no, but as I rise to leave, our hands move of their own volition towards one another. For a fraction of a moment, we gaze deeply into one another's eternity. I recognize this look as the same one Vanesco turned to me during his last weeks. Come to my center in Bangalore when you are in Varanasi, he said. Did I say anything to him about having to go to Varanasi in the end???

Back in Seville, I feel I cannot wait any longer. I must leave for Varanasi *now*. Not seven years from now. I prepare my departure. Sublet the apartment, pack a small suitcase, including the *Bhagavad-Gita*, say goodbye to friends, say goodbye to family, make promises (to return) that I don't know if I can keep. What will you do there? Everyone wants to know. I merely reply, *meet Vanesco*. Some are shocked, thinking about why anyone would go to

Varanasi\*, ...others think I'm off on an adventure. I'm also frightened. And if it's true I'm going *to him*? And the price is abandoning my children and everyone who loves me?

\* As the Sanskrit saying goes, *kashyam marnam mukti*, or Death in Kashi (Varanasi) means liberation.

One early summer morning I get in the car and drive through the heat. Drive through vast, deserted land (*Extremadura*), stop at makeshift gas stations, sit on the one rickety chair outside of a bar and survey the broad horizon. Driving on, driving from horizon to horizon and feel how I become emptier and emptier... Driving for days and weeks over shifting landscapes, through hard Castilian, through the craggy North, then, directly behind the border, the abundant charm of southern France; the crickets' music at night, the stars that sound like chansons here, the ocean with its children's room cobalt blue, the peaches and the bulls, *my* Camargue, the treasured wild horses... When, one night, I am on a dangerous parking lot with a broken down car, I realize *no matter what happens, it's fine*. And I suddenly perceive the entire magnitude of freedom I have attained. If everything is fine no matter what happens, then absolutely *anything* can happen. There is *no one* left for events to touch. I have arrived, there, to where all my searching, my intensive research led of White... Nothingness... being No one.

The world took on new dimensions. Even the tiniest things became wondrous to me. Colors glowed more intensively, people all of them, now touch my heart deeply. Animals approach me full of trust. Babies gaze at me through wide-open eyes. I look in silence and drive... kilometer upon kilometer. My destination is Switzerland, or Germany or Austria... one of those rich countries where I can earn money and continue my journey by plane. But in France I realize that I will drive on in my car. I must approach my destination of Varanasi very slowly. I must first pave the way.

I stay with friends and look for a job. Any job. And directly find three. Waitressing, chauffeuring, cleaning... diving into working worlds, completely new to me, and find pleasure. I move with unexpected effortlessness, make friends, make ironing and preparing coffee opportunities for giving beauty to the world. All the while, I collect material for writing... and even get money for it. But, after a time, the fears and constrictions around me infect me, making me terribly tired. Rich country, full of worry... about what tomorrow, or the day after might bring. When everything could end, from one moment to the next! I feel an urgent need to move on...

Following inspiration, I invite my son to accompany me for a leg of this journey. We have always wanted to drive through Anatolia, now we have the car to do it. Traveling like we used to do? he asks. Sleeping in the car, I say. Eating little. Stopping at the most beautiful places. Silence and driving and looking at the ocean, or at McDonald's parking lot. And talking sometimes. If a tire blows, it shouldn't become a problem. And the car, I say, starts sometimes and sometimes it doesn't. Just being together. *jHecho!*\* he says. (\*Deal!)



Waiting for my son takes a while, and cold and darkness approach with threatening gestures. Will the sun be shining in Iran? Will this traveling as a twosome interrupt my inner journey? Will I be able to retain my freedom from myself when my child is with me? Qualms... It's the right thing, another voice says. *And it is important.*

I use this time to learn everything we once considered to be a waste of time. And, for the first time, I buy a smartphone, try to act like a modern person, open internet banking accounts, order Visa in various countries. Get thrown out of the net a thousand times, make 5 reservations instead of one, revoke everything, study Turkish and a bit of Hindi, take out insurances. I make an enormous effort and refuse to capitulate because **now** I need to be able to do all of this. Gone are the days when money in pocket and three forged passports brought you over any border.

Then I pick up my son at the airport. To see him again, to have time together. Time there was too little of when the death of our loved one tore the earth from beneath our feet. And *when* we had time, could only sit numbly in front of one another. Or buried in the other's arms.

But this journey begins with songs. The same old *compás* (rhythm), the same desire to scream into the wind. Suddenly we return to one another, where we are our best. During the first kilometers, all doubts of mastering this uncomfortable journey are thrown overboard.

The first time we get lost, mother abruptly becomes mother again and child is once again child. I say, getting lost isn't so bad. We just go back to where we lost our way and begin again from the beginning. Then, we're not equipped for the snow-capped mountain directly in front of us. But the child, most unreasonably, wants to keep on driving. Doesn't want to backtrack, *youth knows only one direction*. I am silent and wait for the right words, but they do not come. I search my sense of direction and suggest a shortcut. Accepted. The moment we leave the highway, the entire oppressive cloud cover tears apart. We drive over a landscape flooded with gold, in brilliant light and look at one another; no words are necessary. Simply happy to have surmounted the first crisis and be blessed with such unexpected beauty. How good it is to get lost sometimes.

We drive through five countries, through gorges that dampen our spirits, over empty highways, past smoking factory chimneys and coughing fits, stop at bars with nothing but Nescafé and goulash on the menu. We order goulash and the bartender shakes his head. We drive on and see the first snow, impishly delighted that despite the car's age, its heating works perfectly. We are warm and feel completely at home. In each other's heart, as well.

In the last of these Eastern Bloc countries, I realize that I cannot speak the language here. Not in the *least*. And we cannot read the signs since they are in Cyrillic script. In thick fog, we look for Sofia, and have no idea where we are. I think of Iran, of Pakistan, of India, where I cannot read the writing either. And, once again, I sharply feel how utterly unknown these waters into which I choose to leap.

Night falls and the fog is so dense I cannot see the hood of the car. We are on the highway and hoping for hours to find a rest stop. But it seems people don't rest in Bulgaria. Chavó notices my fatigue and takes the wheel. With concentrated poise, he guides the car through this compressed nothingness we have happened upon. It is then that I notice for the first time *that my son has become a man*. I know he is also uneasy, but he makes me feel as if he has everything under control. I let go and trust my life to him *completely*.

Finally, when we spot a few lights, the relief falls like sandbags from our shoulders. We discover the only gas station there is in this city. Drinking coffee in silent exhaustion, we observe the equally silent gas station attendants, try a smile, but they only stare back expressionlessly. Apparently, Bulgaria is too heavy for Bulgarians, too sometimes. We park the car on the only possible spot and, despite frigid cold and blinding headlights, fall immediately asleep.

And then we reached the promised land. Known only from Mom's tales and its music that touched our hearts so deeply. Its language we heard and barely understood and its dishes that are still our favorites today. Its cinematic art I follow and its old men with deeply dignified and creviced faces. *Hüsüm*, is what can be read in their eyes.

Approaching the border, we can already see the colossal white mosque between the border control pillars. The muezzin sings and intense joy permeates us. It seems that the most difficult part of the journey lays behind us. The car endured, we were warm despite the cold, we once more perceived each other differently, we could be silent and wonder, we were *truly* together. We were joyful on the way... *Shukar drom* we say in Romani when taking leave of a person. *May your path be beautiful to your destination*.

From now on, warmth determines our way. We drive West, we drive South, we drive East throughout this beautiful country, see people breeding roses at every window sill, stray dogs trustingly accompany us and are never hungry, poverty-stricken people selling melons in three-piece suits. Old people who prepare us fresh foods *full of love*, oceans views that take our breath away... And we also notice the care in the people's faces as they watch their homeland slowly deteriorate. *How to survive?*

I decide to forego Iran and Pakistan and to *fly* from Turkey to India. I am suddenly, vehemently drawn there. It is as if everything is good now. We have once again given each other mutual security, everything is perfect, *as it is*. And we can also trust that the other knows what to do, *whatever* may happen.

We cross the Bosphorus one more time and spend the last few days in a hotel in Istanbul. We wash ourselves for hours with hot water, write down our notes, gaze out on the Blue Mosque just beyond our window. We listen to the muezzin three times a day and are reminded of the *cante jondo* from our country. And we sense that music will always be our bridge.

Then, we move on, each now continuing their own important journey. Chavó takes the car westward, I take my small suitcase to the East.

**I arrive** in a country completely foreign to me. Although I have always felt this land *belongs to me*, I am battered when I arrive. For the first time, I experience the difference between two continents in this world. Everywhere here is filth, is cacophony, is chaos. I plunge into the middle of this from the absolute hush of these past years. Black tar coats my tongue and lungs during the taxi drive to the rented apartment. Fruitlessly, I search for the holy river but can only see mud and garbage and thousands of people perpetually trying to cleave a path. When I finally, after 20 hours of travel, lay exhausted in a bed that feels cold and alien, I think I must have made a mistake. I must be *completely* wrong. I will never find *Vanesco here*.

After a restless night I go down to the river the next morning.

Golden light flows towards me in blinding streams.... I fall silent in devotion.

I sit down, in between water buffalos and dogs, gazing at this river. *Hypnotized*. There are no words for what I feel. Not even in my mind. *Only a vacuum*. The animals come closer, I feel their breath on my neck and hands. My eyes are closed, and I whisper repeatedly *Om Namah Shivaya...* I am overwhelmed, I can't believe it!

I jump up and begin to run, run along all the Ghats, sobbing to myself the whole way. I have arrived! I am HOME!!! I run past Sadhus who greet me respectfully from a distance, past boatmen, some of whom bow; past peddlers who charge me but then withdraw; past children who catch hold of my hands... They must see it in my eyes, wide open... gazing into an eternity I recognize as *my home*. A circle has come to close. I am happier than I have ever been in my life.

Forty days I sit on the river and speak my prayers. Conduct my rituals. Speak with my husband and tell him all the things he already knows. *You* led me here, I say. After all the experienced there were no more detours, I hear his voice say. All you have left to do is listen to the holy river.

After my morning prayers, I sometimes go shopping with Habib, my loyal friend. We zip through traffic on the motorcycle, passing all obstructions by a hair. Amidst this chaos, I now feel a deep peace. *Breathing pure air*.

Everything... EVERYTHING merges together in one single river of life. Loud is quiet and quiet is loud... the crudest is part of the most delicate and delicacy encompasses crudity, and *everything* is part of the ONE. I can now be silence in the midst of blaring. This was the final puzzle piece I was missing. I no longer need to protect myself.

I spend Christmas night in the crematorium. From above and below, from a distance and up close, I watch the fire consume the bodies. I now understand why *Shiva* was the god who always fascinated me. Understand, too, why the only guru I could ever follow was Death himself. And some higher power that enabled me to come so intensely close to him... Grateful, I take Niranjan's hand, who, in the midst of all these dead, has revealed to me this night his entire life as a temple guard. Together, we sit before the fire that has been burning

for more than 3,000 years. With it, the dead are ignited and liberated, perhaps. *Moksha*. Happy, we gaze into the night, at the burning dead...surrounded by *doms*, who warmed themselves by the fire after their hard work or slept. Sharp, biting smoke brought water to me eyes. *Shiva's tears*, Niranjan said. *You must cry them all*. I laugh up at him. As if I hadn't already! He laughed back and said, I know, *Mataji*.

On the day before the fortieth day, I sought out a boatman to bring to place where I would make my sacrifice to the river. I find Hero, a fragile old man safeguarding the Ganges' entire story behind his eyes. The rudder creaks softly in a slow, repetitive rhythm, Hero is silent, and I scan the river bank. On Manikarnika Ghat, I believe this is the place. Now, I must bid farewell to Death. This is why I am here. Yet I feel nothing when we come to a halt in front of the Ghat. I wait... my eyes wander far away, to the bridge, at the end of the river, and then I suddenly realize, Death has long released me. It's over... Over!

Row on, I say to Hero. He nods mutely. When we pass Manikarnika Ghat, he begins to sing a tender song... There, I see the Aghori hut and, across from it, the red banner from my dream. That is the place! The place I will ultimately surrender the grief for my wild and gentle husband to the river. *Mother Ganga*. There I release him... the eternal lover.

I prepare carefully. Speak the final prayers in the night. Arrange the objects, put each part in its place. Lay in the darkness with open eyes...

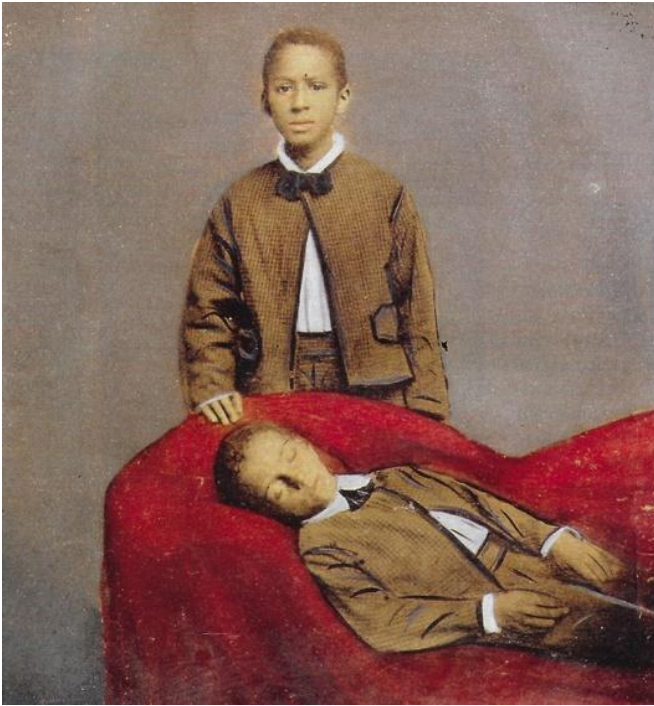
I rise early to find the most beautiful wreath of flowers. Then we row off. I wash my face and hands in the sacred river and arrange the objects on the boat's prow. Whisper the mantra from my radiant soul. Shiva's mantra. *Shiva*, the Anarchist, The Gentle and the Cruel... the Traveler of Worlds, who sits since the beginning of time on the hallowed mountain Kailash... the Lover, languishing for his *Parvati*. He, who births the world and destroys it, annihilating everything in his frenzied dance, who tears away and tears apart, handing everything over to fire... until Nothing is left. And for she, who is now *no one*, this Nothing rips open the heavens of Truth. All is One.

The boat glides slowly and I am this gliding, I am the sun and I am the river and I am the prayer... I am far away and present, I am in the other world and in this one and I am beauty with every act... I gently place the candles in the river, the flowers, the offerings... the white dress. No farewell, rather infinite union. He has been with me the whole time. Not a moment since his passing has he distanced himself from me. Because he was the *Love* I encountered. Not only the human being, whose voice I now hear, *Bring this love to the world abundantly*. I look up to the sky and feel this profound peace again, the peace we found at the end of our time together. Two *Sadhus* who took each other by the hand and walked the *Bakhti* path, the path of devotion, together. In between... life. So good to know this, too, I think. Eternity without transience – and its grief – is only half of the ONE. This is the knowledge I need when I return to the world...

## RETROSPECT

### Semana Santa 2015

I awaken in the night, my heart breathless in terror, *the hand in my hand is cold*. Death has forced his way into our bedroom. I lay my arms protectively around the cold, stiff body next to mine. I breathe warmth into his face, but the cold only spreads, as does my panic. I am not ready. I have *absolutely* no idea what to do...I *ought* to know, but I don't know. Not



now. I gather all my strength, concentrate, breathe... breathe... breathe... whisper holy words in silent repetition and look directly in the face of dread, negotiate with Death – ***Not now!***

Endless minutes later, I feel blood flowing through his hands. His body gradually becomes soft and warm again, he begins to breathe. A wisp of breath, but breath. Some days later, I sit at my window and faintly hear Semana Santa music. Spine-tingling, beautiful, played on tambourines, timpani, trumpets. For days, I seek the original recording and find it. On the night before Easter, I sit at my window, listening again and again to Vladimir Vavilov's wholly overlooked *Ave Maria*. My heart contracts in pain, but also... *profound accord*.

Both brutal and sweet agony permeate my being; birth and death. Union and separation. Becoming *one* and shattering again into a thousand pieces. Ebbing away...

I make my peace with the inevitable this night. The he will soon be there, and I will be here. I humbly receive my sentence. And for a fleeting moment I know this: one day, this agony will make me expansive and gentle. One day, my rage will have passed and I will thus **defeated my fate**.