

ORCHESTRA

By Miqui Otero

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You will never forget this night.

The singer made this promise just a few hours ago from up on stage. And if you're about to find out what happened, it's because the Orchestra never lies.

The first step to making something unforgettable is to tell its story, and the best place to start may be the end, when the memories and evidence still remain. That distant sun, for example, is a bronze medal hung over a cloud, and the happy sky, bubble-gum pink like skin on the first day at the beach, holds glimpses of archipelagos of bruises and bluish pinches. The hills are a green treasure trove of old banknotes scattered on a bed of sawdust and cocoa. There are traces of smoke on some of the tiles, too. Flies probe the cream cakes that no one has even tasted.

The Valley wakes up in a state of iridescent confusion, the events of the street party still not quite coming into focus: it looks around like a hungover man trying to figure out what happened, searching for clues among the knick-knacks on the bedside table, the stains on the bedspread, the pockets of his trousers. At dawn, the grass in the square outside the Romanesque church is littered with the bodies of dozens of dead starlings. Here and there are plastic cups, contorted, as if lava from a volcano had caught them dancing and their final pose was preserved in ash. There is an orange lighter with an anti-wildfire slogan that reads *Todos contra el fuego*, a 10,000 peseta note ripped right at the neck of the King's effigy, a Peppa Pig jacket for ages 2-3 (European child size), a human earlobe colonised by industrious ants carrying tiny candy diamonds, the left ventricle of a heart-shaped lollipop, a solid gold comb, a splintered iPhone screen that vibrates and flashes, the word 'Whore' lighting up, and the left foot of a pair of white Converse All Stars splattered with blood. There is silence, so there was music. There is death, so there

was life. There is nobody, so everyone passed through here. The whole story in one night and the whole world in one place.

“You know that in a hundred years all these people will be dead?” an optimist whispered yesterday into the ear of the child on a red bike who rides past now, whistling, his lips defying the silence with the tune of ‘Who’s afraid of the big bad wolf’ to make me keep telling the story.

I can talk about this land because for centuries I have been coming to the Fiesta that marks the end of every summer. Here we have seen horses taller than a raised granary, processions of souls wrapped in white shrouds, and grandmothers marching in neon sportswear. And children with rooster combs, indianos in open-top Cadillacs, ladies with wolf feet. Picnics to the sound of gentle bagpipes and early mornings of orchestras and blinding stage lights: young men dancing with hollow eyes, their berets resting on the girls’ backs, and teenagers grinding low to the ground to Latin rhythms. Cows that gave blood instead of milk and dogs that spat out fire. Bicycles with a Vespino heart. And? That was nothing compared to this night, not for anyone who had experienced it before or for anyone about to experience it now.

You will never forget this night.

1

I am inside and outside of you at the same time. I am each heartbeat stronger than the last and I am footsteps drawing closer: the heart of the world and the feet of God. As long as someone will listen, I will keep on telling this story.

I am invisible, but everyone moves when I pass by. I am millions of years old, like the mountains, and I am born and die every night, like the mosquitoes.

I am your first time, over and over again.

I reduce you to the size of a flea and make you bigger than the clouds. You shake like a leaf and I chisel you out of marble. I am the breath that ignites the embers of everything you fear and long for.

I vibrate in the dried intestines stretched across a tortoise shell, I rumble in the donkey skin of drums as Roman armies approach, I whistle in the vulture bone and mammoth ivory of the ancient flute, I announce my presence with oboes and trumpets, I tap on pianos, I warble on the nickel strings of electric guitars and trace patterns on its neck, taking the form of a digital mountain range on the Mac Pro screen.

I have existed since man came down from the trees, stood on two legs and could hear both the pumping of his heart and what the noise of the planet was trying to tell him. I have been courtship and desire; and protection from predators. Without me, prehistoric men would have lost their way in the labyrinths of caves, and without me there would be no kissing in nightclubs.

I bring sensibility to reason, and emotion into harmony.

Planets, stars and wretches dance to my arithmetic.

I invent what you feel; I discover it, describe it and bend it to the laws of numbers.

I tame it, filter it, cultivate it; I detonate your subversive outburst with control.

I open and close wounds like zips, and I flow out along with the haemophiliac's blood. I am the cut and the scar.

I make you hum in the lift, whistle in the waiting room, make you buy and decide that nothing, no one, not even you, has a price.

I speak to you and only you when everyone listens and thinks I am speaking to them and them alone.

I can beautify the unpleasant and mar the beautiful, burnish the humble and rust the noble.

I am as democratic as air, as commonplace as a glass, as perfect as a knife, as a wheel, as a book.

I am inside and outside of you.

Who am I? I am the music of History. I can only tell what happens in the places where I resound. Allow me to explain.

This is how I begin. Fifteen minutes past eleven at night, a finger on the bass string of the Orchestra also plucks at the heart of every person in this town: the first heartbeat, the starting shot for tonight. The moon is a silvery banana cautiously illuminating the tracks and paths with no power lines. Rising in unison are the scents of burnt embers, damp clothes, far-off manure, dizziness, burnt cable, dry grass baptised by the drizzle, sugared almonds.

Let us draw an invisible dome over this Valley, surrounded by eucalyptus forests, ploughed with secret rivers and poorly paved roads, the sea eternally poised at the northern exit. Neighbours support each other in their misfortunes almost as

much as they argue over dwindling plots of land, divided up with every death and every inheritance: the scattered houses, as if dropped by a giant child running with them in his hand, are home to wary neighbours. This place is not a model of anything, neither of rural heroism nor of exemplary poverty: around 350 registered people make a living with a mixed economy, wood and vegetable gardens, tamed sea and industrial forest, a ceramics factory and several bars, in a fertile land that does not translate into a wealthy land. An incredibly rainy territory where every sun brings the suspicion of a storm: with more dogs than children and more deaths than births, the dead dream of the living, who receive around 600 visitors when summer arrives, with their old bicycles and their brand-new babies.

The loudspeakers of the annual Fiesta are already thumping in the chests of all the people of Valdeplata, from the peasant grandparents to the grandchildren with careers, the former more solvent than the latter, their pulses already as synchronised as their desires. The first bass lines, with which the Orquesta Ardentía tests the sound, run along roads and narrow lanes, and pinches the chests of those who are preparing to dance. There are bicycles in the doorways of homes, rubber hoses wrecking the bougainvillea that climb the granite or brick facades painted in bright colours (flamingo pink, pistachio green, sapphire blue) that rebel against the leaden past and the deathly grey of the sky. Cars accumulate in slightly sloping ditches and gutters, leaning to the right: music – pasodobles or summer songs – escapes through some of the car windows, from which the out-of-towners throw their cigarette butts without a care in the world.

A gaggle of grandmothers refuse to think of this night as anything special and share peanuts (and a frenzy of whispering) on a stone bench outside the Savings Bank. Others walk home at a brisk pace, holding torches, jackets tied around their waists, wearing sportswear in the kinds of neon colours that otherwise

only exist in furious sunsets: “Hey, where are you going so fast, what are you running from, is there a fire?” says a man sitting on a folding chair at the door of the town’s Social Club, who for years has witnessed how women have taken to exercising at night, in this place where people used to keep fit by working in the fields every day. The husband’s nose, bulbous and purple, shot through with blue constellations of wine-blasted capillaries, points in his wife’s direction as he says this. El Casiguapo, his drinking companion, says he will not be attending the Fiesta this year. For an hour and a half he’s been saying he should go home, that it’s time, that they’re waiting for him. He’s just ordered another wine.

On balconies and terraces, bottles are opened with lighters. Windows flash like disco lights, illuminated by the frugal bustling of the people inside their houses as they cook, dress and shower, making the old wooden slats rattle as they dash to arrive on time. Dragonflies or damselflies squander light, flying through the air thick with manure. Wood snaps the fingers of its branches in the flames of barbecues.

Within these walls, often chipped or blemished, pots and pans clatter promising tomorrow’s feast, while grandmothers hum and cousins braid each other’s hair or hose each other down to clean off the sand from the beach or the dirt from the forest. Everything inside those houses smells of salty seafood sauce, sizzling onions and vegetables, of distilled water from the iron, of cloudy white wine being uncorked, and Nivea cream. The family’s party clothes are laid out on the quilts of the box sprung beds: lots of frills and floral prints, lots of old striped shirts with starched collars, trousers with key rings on the belt loops, lots of underwear still with the label on. On their feet, virgin footwear: silver buckle sandals, espadrilles with rubber soles intact and with the price tag on, two-tone shoes with

heels high enough to sink into the grass a little, to remain balanced, to dance tonight.

It is impossible to discern, in the distance, the festive bunting that zigzags along the paths full of colourful clothes that the warm breeze, the same one that reluctantly sweeps some leaves along, dries on the clotheslines anchored to the meadow with aluminium poles.

Can you feel it? Can you feel the buzz of anticipation?

A car whizzes past, too fast (it can't be from round here), and three dogs, hopping on and off one another in a game that is impervious to the solemnity of the date, attempt to catch the honking horn as it passes. Some neighbours have just finished dinner, gathered around kitchen tables, the dishes jostling for space on the oilcloth: ham and leftover broth and rounded loaves that will also be served for the ceremonial meal tomorrow, when the bread van will not come round. In the dining rooms, bespoke stained glass and oak windows, Margadelos wedding sets and grandchildren's travel trinkets are perched on linen and bobbed crochet cloths. The tables, extended with a board on top, hide their woodworm under tablecloths which, like New Year's Eve TV presenters or the makers of the Oscars statuettes, only have a job once a year. That is why they last, but also because they are well-made, with lace or blue thread trim to match the napkins rolled up inside the glasses. Cutlery to the right, soup bowls perched on the plates. Lights out until the big festive meal.

The Orchestra's bass lines keep bounding up and down stairs: the Valley trembles with every step. They are outside, but we can feel them inside.

A local fiesta is like an electoral debate: it reaffirms opinions and rarely manages to change the mood. But it is also like a voting day: everyone, old and young, except the firmest non-believers, will go to exercise their right to vote. The

festival of democracy. The happy are happier. The sad are sadder. I don't change things, I shake things up. I am the alcohol that dilutes shyness and accelerates the narrative, which has not yet begun.

You will never forget this night, I say, and everything vibrates at that moment, when the drummer of the Orquesta Ardentía starts its soundcheck with the first drumroll.

The silver, wooden or plastic frames of the portraits on chests of drawers and side tables vibrate slightly. All those faces of the dead, who used to pose for a photograph once a year: there is no telling whether they were fearful, defiant or reproachful. Blink once if you want to get out of here. The sitters are static and obedient: they seem to be waiting for the command to go on with their lives, which may have stopped (in Sunday best) seventy years ago and could continue tonight if someone gives them the signal with one click. These photographs served to illustrate an era: the present was then one year, or five, or twenty, childhood or youth or old age (not an instant). Now the present is a second, five out of five photographs, and that is why the present, freed of solemnity and indecipherable because it has been sped up, is continuous and eternal: it leaves no room for the past or the future. Perhaps today someone will give the command and the Sunday-best dead will come out from the silver and wooden frames, to talk or even dance with the living, who are dressed in sportswear and trapped in phone memories. If the present could be fifteen years and now it is half a second, why couldn't all nights fit into this night? Here are some of its protagonists.

The boxwood headboard of a bed vibrates and chatters against the wall that belongs to Cristóbal Margadelos, the Count of the Valley, at least 105 years old, with his head wrapped in a towel and his nose half an inch from the boiling water in the copper pot, breathing in the medicinal aroma of dried eucalyptus leaves and

hissing Latin words that no one understands: *betula celtiberica*, *castanea sativa*, *cedrus deodara*, *cupresus arizonica*, *fraxinuas angrestifolia*, *gensta scorpuis*, *mirtus communis*, *toxus bacata*, *eucalyptus globulo*. A crucified Christ on the master bedroom wall and blood-stained clogs at the foot of that bed which, unless there is some miracle, he will never get out of again.

The brown enamelled cast-iron pot in front of Placeres Fiallega, an 80-plus-year-old retired worker at the ceramics and earthenware company, vibrates and clatters as her left hand, gloved in a checked cloth, lifts the lid to peer at the octopus. “We have to scare them away, we have to scare them away, even if they’re fucking dead,” she shouts, alone in the kitchen, as she dips the creature in and out of the pot, as if torturing a spy to make them forget or reveal a secret (in reality, to calm the nerves of the octopus’s flesh, as well as her own). A lighter with an anti-wildfire slogan that reads *Todos contra el fuego*, and a blister pack of anti-anxiety tablets on the counter next to the wood-burning stove.

The watery pupil of Ventura Rubal, a gaunt 72-year-old retired Danone lorry driver, vibrates or flickers as, on the bonnet of his car in the closed garage, he arranges a black sequinned party dress, a hairpin, one hoop earring on the left and another on the right. The Renault R27 resembles a corpse and he has not driven it in ten years. Engine burnt out and tyres deflated.

Just before they slip, the leather-covered rubber soles of the Castilian shoes of Soledad Díaz, 62, a former regional councillor for a political party that did not win parliamentary representation, vibrate as she sinks into the muddy furrow in the vegetable patch where she has gone to pick a lettuce. The trouser hems of her turquoise suit jacket are already brown, and she is holding a sickle in her right hand (at least she is not also carrying a hammer). “Unhappiness is trying to attempt to control the uncontrollable,” she says to herself, looking down at her filthy trouser

legs. And then: “Destiny works through us.” She could be talking on speakerphone or talking to herself (but no one ever calls her, so she is probably pretending to do the former but doing the latter).

The wrought iron gate, an aluminium slatted bed frame, vibrate and clatter on the last piece of land belonging to Cosme Ferreira, in his 50s, recently divorced and a lover of cryptocurrency investment. He now selects a 10,000 peseta note (he inherited it from his father) with the effigy of the King on it, to wrap around a huge wad of five-euro notes, which he then fastens with a rubber band. He tries once again to remember a sequence of numbers he has forgotten and on which his life and that of his ex-wife depend.

The ultra-thin screen of the laptop vibrates, the cursor blinking like a soldier lost in the tundra, as Miguel, 42, the father of two small children and four long novels, now writes, as if dictating, the sentence “You will never forget this night”, because he knows that soon the singer of the Orchestra will say it. “Always the same faces. Not the same people, but the same faces,” he writes later in a notebook. Although he does not know what will happen today, so he cannot know what he will write tomorrow.

The mobile phone belonging to Caridad Villaronte, a social media manager for about eight companies, 33 years old, the Doll of the Valley, beautiful despite herself, now sitting on the toilet, vibrates. It vibrates because she has just received a message from her group of friends, to which she replies with a string of eight ‘crying with laughter’ emojis. When she hits send, she says: “What a moron... crazy whore.” She wipes away a couple of tears with a sheet of toilet paper, which she uses as an opportunity to blow her nose with its jet piercing. She tosses the paper it into the water tinged with red. There is also a pregnancy test on the lid of the

cistern, right next to the little aluminium hat that she now pulls upwards to release the flush.

The half-naked Hawaiian dancer on the dashboard of the bakery van driven by Ton Rialto, 20 years and a few days old, eyes ablaze, is vibrating, or swaying, and now she notices the little doll in the leafy mini-skirt and flower headband in full hula and shouts, “I’m fucking calm! I’m just a perfectionist,” as she takes a roundabout at nearly 100 kilometres an hour in reverse, clockwise, and puts her hand to her bloody ear.

The solid gold comb vibrates in contact with the patchy scalp of Iria Agarimo’s doll. The 11-year-old girl hastily yet patiently untangles the pink-tinted polyvinylidene chloride hair before rushing to unhook the flower-print dress with ruffled sleeves that is drying on the clothesline. The solid gold comb was brought home several generations ago by a pig. And she wants to wear that dress today, even if it’s still damp, because she wants to celebrate something, anything, after a year of her mother and father fighting. The dress was made by her grandfather, a handyman, who also crafted her first rattle out of wood and rice. He used leftover fabric from the girl’s own dress to sew a matching one for the doll with the pink hair. The grandfather takes care of the granddaughter as the granddaughter takes care of the doll.

A 36-week-old foetus—an articulated, monochrome doll, the smallest human being in the Valley— vibrates and does backflips in the bulging belly that strains against the blue amoeba-patterned fabric of the mother’s dress, who gets a kick in the back, to which she replies: “Hold your horses, it’s not time yet, and you’re not old enough to go out partying.”

The bell shaped like an old football on the aluminium handlebars of the red bicycle, whose eleven-year-old rider will have to talk for the next few hours to all

these (and more) inhabitants of the Valley, vibrates: there is a Raffle, and taking part involves writing a message on a piece of paper (a compliment or an accusation or a question or a thought or a confession), which the Orchestra will then read out at some point in the evening for all the neighbours to hear. The boy is well liked in the Valley and everyone will listen to him; perhaps because he was deaf when he was younger, perhaps because he is about to get a new baby sister (the foetus that was thrashing around in the previous paragraph), perhaps because this summer he has helped (going from door to door) to raise funds to pay for today's Orchestra, or perhaps because there is a buzz of expectation about this game he has invented, the one in which the neighbours in a Valley of milky light where so many secrets curdle, will come out with some truth for the whole Fiesta to hear.

When Apollo found out that Hermes, the earliest messenger of antiquity, had stolen his cattle, Hermes decided to give him a gift: a tortoise shell, strips of wood and strands of dried tripe, which vibrate, which make sound. He gave him the privilege of music, the very first instrument, to appease him. Is the messenger, with his bag full of messages from the Valley choir, to blame for everything that will eventually happen tonight? Is it my fault, the Music? Guilt is obsessive, as am I, and we shake it off only when we manage to pass that remorse or that melody on to someone else.

Instruments are tuned like animals trying to reach an agreement in a language with too many dialects. Our messenger's hands, the same size as Iria Agarimo's, vibrate as they cling to the rubber of the handlebars every time the red bike bumps over a stone on the path leading from the great pazo to the church lawn, where the Orchestra is already playing: four zigzagging basslines, three coloured streamers drawing trumpet and saxophone phrasings, a tachycardia of

bongos and that boom-boom-boom of the bass drum, synchronised with the boom-boom-boom of the hearts of all these characters of the Valley.

I am in your chest and in the Count's room, as he listens to the public classical music station on his radio (he makes his maid call in to the same programme every day to ask for Mozart's sonata number 10 in C Major; she, perhaps out of carelessness or perhaps as revenge, sometimes leaves him tuned in to The Top 40). The Boy with the Red Bike climbs the stairs.

Inside and outside of you. The boom-boom-boom: it sounds like the heartbeat of a happy creature. The boom-boom-boom: it sounds like the footsteps of an approaching monster, which is already here.

MB agencia literaria

I

By clearing the forest in winter, the fires of summer die out.

I am over a hundred years old and my stories are almost as plentiful as my money, but, like the number of hours ahead of me, I have few certainties. All my certainties include a solution or a relief. Like the fires. Or like this one: we are going to die, but we won't be the only ones.

You've come for a message and you'll leave with a few. Why? Because you've come to ask me to reveal something to the Valley on a piece of paper, to take part in the Raffle. I don't need the prize. You asking me is reward enough. Many of my people have died; I have realised that some of my people were not my people and the rest, the other neighbours, don't even know me anymore. I could be dead and that wouldn't change a thing. In fact, if I were to appear at the Fiesta, some people might think they had seen a dead man wandering across the field, which, actually, is quite a common occurrence in this Valley. But there is something I can do before I die. And that something will end up on the piece of paper you're asking me for. Look, those clogs with dried blood on them, they are the clue.

Before illness brought me back to this room, I had been holed up in the cabin for a long time. When they heard that the Count, at almost 70, had decided to leave the pazo (this stonework mansion with its turret and semicircular arches, with its enormous biomass boiler, they thought I was mad, which is how people deal with any curious mystery they come across. They thought that losing my wife had also robbed me of my sanity. I built the cabin with my own hands over twenty years ago, at the foot of the forested hills, beyond the woods: thick oak poles served as

beams, the slate roof was covered with broom and gorse, the walls were made of acacia boards daubed with linseed oil. It had a door, a small window with a curtain and a bay leaf tree. When my wife died, I, who'd always lived in the biggest and most comfortable pazo in the region, could only sleep in that little cabin. I had a rickety old bunk and a table where I read Voltaire, Adam Smith, Steinbeck, Shakespeare, the Russians (I grew a starlets beard) and that 1848 edition of *Memoirs from Beyond the Grave*, where the deceased being watched over is a whole world. And plenty of time to think, to look back and reflect on things, such as the thing I will write down on paper for you.

I would put on my gaiters and go out with my Remington carbine to shoot wild boar. Once it got jammed on me, I tripped over and had its barrel in my ear for several minutes. I hunted roe deer, foxes, hares, pigeons and partridges. I defied future power lines by planting pine trees. I cleared forest trees, gorse and ferns. I enclosed the land with a hedge of spikes and filled vases with the humblest of wildflowers, with grasses and bushes from that ravine, from all that uncultivated land. I have never been happier than during these last few years, which are supposed to be the ones nobody is interested in. Give them to me, I'll take them all. "The Count has lost it," they said, especially my son, but I was living.

I'm telling you all of this because you asked. And because I know that I don't have much time left. I've always been that way: I can see the future. They say I was anointed with the oils of the deceased instead of baptism oils and since then I've always known if someone is going to die or not. Ever since I was a child, I could tell whether that uncle who emigrated to Texas, or the one who emigrated to Cuba, would die. They were making a fortune across the ocean but I would see their faces in the window of my childhood bedroom at midnight, and days later the letter would arrive to say that they had died.

“Do you want coffee? Mamá brewed a pot,” I would say to them. And they, mute, just smiled as if they knew everything, their faces framed by the oak window (they didn’t leave any mist on the glass).

Now I know it’s my turn. Most liars are capable of deceiving anyone they want to, except for themselves. Whereas I can see that I have only a few hours left. My heart is an exhausted man, who neither can nor wants to walk any more. Maybe I’ll go when the whole Valley is at the Fiesta. I’d come with you, but I can hardly stand up. Look out of that window. Yes, take that kneeler, the one with my initials on it. See those lights? No, they aren’t the lights of the Fiesta stage, no. It’s the Compañía, the double-file procession that goes out in the dark (*Go in the daytime, for the night is mine*) to visit the person who will die soon. They must be coming for me, surely. If you got closer you’d see that they’re carrying torches and are dressed in white shrouds and walking without feet, floating on two centimetres of mist. At the front is a living man with a crucifix or a bone (don’t be scared: they say it’s usually the burning tibia of a child) and at the end of the procession is another man with a cauldron. They are coming here, yes, and I’m glad. They say they are lost souls, departed but still in purgatory, but you know what? They are actually the dead who are not yet completely gone, which is a way of saying that they are the dead who have not yet been completely forgotten by the living. They walk as long as someone remembers them.

The best thing is that some of them are my neighbours. It’s frightening but beautiful, this magical procession that unites the living and the dead: under those hoods there will be the face of my first wet-nurse; the first peasant girl I fucked; the friend I always used to play with, shooting at bird’s nests and looking for cockles in the estuary. My life now belongs only to the dead. My son is alive, but to me he has also died: he did a lot of bad things, some of the same things I did in my

youth, but then he betrayed me twice (I could forgive the first time, which took us to court, but I will never forgive the second, which had to do with the memory of these forests and of my wife). I won't go into more detail because it's complicated.

So I won't even tell the tale. Being the only one left is very tedious, because even if you're surrounded by people you feel lonely. It's one thing to feel unique and quite another to feel that you are the only one left. And that loneliness, like being the last person at the party who no longer understands the music, has made me think of something to do with your blood. With those wooden clogs.

I have had several gifts since I was a child. I would appear and disappear as if by magic: the chickens, those cheeky creatures, would trail behind me, the dogs would not leave my side, and birds would come and land on my hand. When I was your age, for example, I saw a Mouro. I'm talking about another time, when it was said that there were babies with cockscombs, hens that hatched solid gold broods (only seen at dawn), cows that gave blood instead of milk and when I, who believed and didn't believe in all of that, always carried a piece of San Nicolas cookie with me: you threw some of the crumbs into the bush and put out fires; you threw it into the sea and calmed storms. Once I even thought I spotted one of those transparent maidens: they were drinking wine and you could see the reddish liquid running down from their mouths to their . Do I still really believe in all that? I don't know. What about you, do you believe? Let's see now.

The Mouro appeared to me on a festival day. Right by the church, where those delinquents are making music right now. In those days, the celebrations started with bagpipes and ended with wafers: they were tea parties, but with knuckle sandwiches on the menu. People brought rye bread, octopus or pork shoulder, and shared it on the grass outside the church. After mass, a few pipers played. I remember one year when a stallion began to mount a mare right next to

them, and they got all worked up, imitating coitus with their instruments, and we all encouraged the animals to give it to her, harder, for the health of the musicians. It went on, with wine after wine: it could go on that way until the first fight broke out. Or until the fire. Because here, fires have always started without warning.

I remember the year that halfway through the festivities we saw a huge fire, when the Maquis family burnt down the house of El Casiguapo's father: I thought he was a horrible man, a tight-ass with a lot of pretensions, although between the fact that he owned a bar and that he made the fireworks for the fiestas, people didn't hate him as much as he deserved. He repulsed me because he was a falangist, who always struck me as illiterate opportunists, but I coordinated the whole Valley to put the fire out together. It had not been caused by lightening, or by a stray cigarette butt. These things are almost always caused by man, and there is always a reason, even if the reason is terrifying. People are afraid of wolves, but if you know them they don't do any harm, only to a few chickens; they don't even eat white mares. But you don't understand men. Nor did I understand myself for a long time.

I, like I said, would always leave first: the secret, in any situation, is to arrive last and leave first. I would stroll off, almost always playing old melodies on a myrtle flute. That's how both the living and the dead knew I was coming. I had drunk a lot of wine that day, and wine is not water. I needed to sleep. I was in one of my family's fields sleeping it off when, suddenly, the figure of a horse the size of a granary was silhouetted against the prune-coloured sky. It was at least six foot tall, or so it seemed to me from the ground, and riding it was a handsome, dark-haired giant. We had been prepared for this. Conventional wisdom had it that these ancient settlers came back for our money, which they saw as theirs. If you came across one, you had to put a handkerchief over your eyes so as not to see it and

say, very loudly. “Give me of your wealth and I will give you of my poverty.” That was how it was supposed to go. I, the richest child in the region, changed the phrase around: “Give me of your poverty and I will give you of my wealth.” He was the one who ran away (I made sure to explain it that way). Ever since then, this is what I have always done with the people of the Valley, instilling a mixture of fear and respect in them. There are three keys to keeping everything in order so that people will toe the line: miracle, mystery and authority. The Grand Inquisitor knows it and I, a modest count, know it too.

Being a Count sounds very nice but it no longer matters. The only important thing now is the land that title gave to me; land that I still keep, almost all of it. So you have to know how to win over your neighbours. I still remember how I used to dress up as a poor man and go down to the local bar. I'd look at the drunkest man there and say, as long as you keep singing, everyone else drinks for free. That's it. Fear and respect. Which, like the sun, feel both near and far away, unreachable. The sun, like a coin perched on top of a mountain of banknotes.