



VINTAGE

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THE  
ACCORDIONIST'S  
SON

BERNARDO ATXAGA

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## About the Book

*The Accordionist's Son* is a remarkably powerful and accomplished novel, exploring the life of David Imaz, a former inhabitant of the Basque village of Obaba, now living in exile and ill-health on a ranch in California.

As a young man, David divides his time between his uncle's ranch and his life in the village, where he reluctantly practises the accordion on the insistence of his authoritarian father. Increasingly aware of the long shadow cast by the Spanish Civil War, he begins to unravel the story of the conflict, his father's association with the fascists and his uncle's opposition and brave decision to hide a wanted republican.

## About the Author

Bernardo Atxaga was born in Gipuzkoa in Spain in 1951 and lives in the Basque country, writing in Basque and Spanish. He is a prize-winning novelist and poet, whose books *Obabakoak*, *The Lone Man* and *The Lone Woman* have won critical acclaim in Spain and abroad.

Margaret Jull Costa is the translator of many Spanish, Portuguese and Latin American writers and has won various prizes for her translations, the latest of which was the 2006 Premio Valle-Inclán for Javier Marías' *Your Face Tomorrow: Fever and Spear*.

ALSO BY BERNARDO ATXAGA

*Obabakoak*  
*The Lone Man*  
*The Lone Woman*  
*Two Brothers*

# The Accordionist's Son

Bernardo Atxaga

Translated from The Spanish by  
Margaret Jull Costa

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

## The Death and Life of Words

This is how they die,  
the old words:  
like snowflakes which,  
after hesitating in the air,  
fall to the ground  
without so much as a sigh.  
Or should I say: without a word.

Where are they now  
the one hundred ways of saying butterfly?  
On the Biarritz coast  
Nabokov collected one:  
*miresicoletea*.  
Look, it lies under the sand,  
like a splinter of shell.

And the lips that moved  
and said precisely that -  
*miresicoletea* -  
the lips of those children  
who were the parents  
of our parents,  
those lips now sleep.

You say: One rainy day  
when I was walking  
along a road in Greece,  
I noticed that the guides to a temple  
were wearing yellow raincoats  
with a big Mickey Mouse on them.  
The old gods also sleep.

New words, you say,

are made of such commonplace materials.  
And you mention plastic, polyurethane,  
synthetic rubber, and declare  
that soon they'll all end up  
in the rubbish bin.  
You seem a little sad.

But look at the children  
shouting and playing  
by the front door,  
listen carefully to what they're saying:  
The horse rode off to Garatare.  
What's Garatare, I ask them.  
It's a new word, they say.

You see, words don't always emerge  
out of remote industrial estates;  
they're not necessarily the products  
of advertising agencies.  
Sometimes they are born out of laughter  
and float like dandelion clocks in the air.  
Look how they rise into the sky,  
look how it's snowing up there.



## The beginning

IT WAS THE first day of term at school in Obaba. The new teacher was walking from desk to desk holding the register in her hand. 'And what's your name?' she asked when she came to me. 'José,' I replied, 'but everyone calls me Joseba.' 'Very good.' The teacher then addressed the boy sharing my desk, the last member of the class left to ask: 'And what's your name?' The boy replied, imitating my way of speaking: 'I'm David, but everyone calls me the accordionist's son.' Our classmates, boys and girls of eight or nine, greeted his answer with giggles. 'So your father's an accordionist?' David nodded. 'I love music,' said the teacher. 'One day, we must ask your father to visit the school and give us a little concert.' She seemed very pleased, as if she'd just received a piece of wonderful news. 'David can play the accordion too. He's an artist,' I said. The teacher looked amazed: 'Really?' David elbowed me in the ribs. 'It's true,' I said. 'In fact, he's got his accordion over there by the door. After school, he usually goes and rehearses with his father.' I had difficulty finishing my sentence because David was trying to cover my mouth with his hand. 'Oh, but it would be lovely to hear some music!' exclaimed the teacher. 'Why don't you play us something? I'd really like that.'

As if her request filled him with sorrow, David slouched reluctantly over to the door to fetch his accordion. Meanwhile, the teacher had placed a chair on the main table in the classroom. 'You'd be better up here, where everyone can see you,' she said. Moments later, David was, indeed, up there, sitting on the chair and holding the accordion ready to start playing. Everyone began to clap.

'What are you going to play for us?' asked the teacher. "'Padam Padam",' I called out, anticipating David's reply. It was the song my friend knew best, the one he'd practised most often because it was a compulsory piece that all accordionists had to play in the local competitions. David couldn't help but smile. He enjoyed being the school champion, especially in front of all the girls. 'Attention, everyone,' said the teacher, like a master of ceremonies. 'We're going to end our first class with a little music. I'd just like to say that you seem very nice, hard-working children. I'm sure we're going to get on well and that you're going to learn a lot.' She gestured to David, and the notes of the song - 'Padam Padam' - filled the classroom. Beside the blackboard, the leaf on the calendar showed that it was September 1957.

Forty-two years later, in September 1999, David was dead, and I was standing by his grave along with his wife, Mary Ann, in the cemetery belonging to Stoneham Ranch, in Three Rivers, California. Opposite us, a man was busy carving the epitaph that was to appear on the gravestone in three different languages, English, Basque and Spanish: 'He was never closer to paradise than when he lived on this ranch.' It was the beginning of the funeral oration that David himself had written before he died and which, in its entirety, read:

'He was never closer to paradise than when he lived on this ranch, so much so that he found it difficult to believe that life could possibly be any better in heaven. It was hard for him to leave his wife, Mary Ann, and his two daughters, Liz and Sara, but, when he left, he had just the tiny necessary sliver of hope to ask God to take him up into heaven and place him alongside his Uncle Juan and his mother Carmen, and alongside the friends he once had in Obaba.'

‘Do you need any help?’ Mary Ann asked the man carving the gravestone, shifting into English from the Spanish we normally spoke together. The man made a gesture with his hand and asked her to wait. ‘Hold on,’ he said.

There were two other graves in the cemetery. In the first lay David’s uncle – Juan Imaz. Obaba 1916–Stoneham Ranch 1992. ‘I could have done with two lives, but I only had one’; in the second, the first owner of the ranch – Henry Johnson, 1890–1965. Then, in one corner, there were three more tiny graves, like toy graves. They belonged, as David had explained to me on one of our walks, to Tommy, Jimmy and Ronnie, his daughter’s three hamsters.

‘It was David’s idea,’ explained Mary Ann. ‘He told the girls that their pets would sleep sweetly beneath the soft earth, and they accepted this gladly and felt greatly consoled. However, shortly after that, the juicer broke, and Liz, who must have been six at the time, insisted on burying that too. Then it was the turn of a plastic duck that got burned when it fell on the barbecue. Later, it was a music box that had stopped working. It took us a while to realise that the girls, especially the little one, Sara, were breaking their toys on purpose. That was when David invented the business about words. I’m not sure if he talked to you about that or not.’ ‘I don’t think he did,’ I said. ‘Well, they started to bury words.’ ‘Which words do you mean?’ ‘Your words, words from your language. Did he really not tell you?’ I assured her again that he hadn’t. ‘I thought you talked about everything on those walks of yours,’ smiled Mary Ann. ‘We talked about things that happened in our youth,’ I said. ‘As well as about the two of you and your idyll in San Francisco.’

I’d been at Stoneham for nearly a month, and my conversations with David would have filled many tapes. Except that there were no recordings. There were no documents. There were only traces, the words that my memory had managed to retain.

Mary Ann looked down towards the banks of the Kaweah, the river that flows through the ranch, where, in a field of green grass, five or six horses grazed among granite rocks. 'It's true about our idyll in San Francisco,' she said. 'We met while we were both on holiday there.' She was wearing a denim shirt and a straw hat to protect her from the sun. She was still a young woman. 'I know how you met,' I said. 'You showed me the photos.' 'Oh yes, of course, I forgot.' She wasn't looking at me. She was looking at the river, at the horses.

*He was never closer to paradise than when he lived on this ranch.* The man carving the stone came over to us carrying the piece of paper on which we'd written the epitaph in three languages. 'It's a strange language this,' he said, pointing to the lines in Basque, 'but kind of beautiful too.' He pointed at one of the words; he didn't like it, he wanted to know if there was another better word that could replace it. 'You mean *rantxo*?' The man put his finger to his ear. 'Yeah, it doesn't sound good,' he said. I looked at Mary Ann. 'If you can think of a better one, go ahead. David wouldn't have minded.' I racked my brain. 'I don't know, perhaps . . . ' and I wrote *abeletxe* on the piece of paper, a word which the dictionaries translate as 'fold or shelter for cattle, separate from the farmhouse'. The man muttered something I couldn't understand. 'He thinks it's too long,' Mary Ann explained. 'He says it's got two more letters than *rantxo* and that there's barely enough room on the gravestone as it is.' 'I'd leave it as it is,' I said. '*Rantxo*, it is then,' said Mary Ann. The man shrugged and returned to his work.

The path that connected the stables and the houses that made up the ranch passed by the cemetery too. First came the houses of the Mexican ranch-hands, then the house that had belonged to Juan, David's uncle, and where I was staying; and finally, higher up, on the top of a small hill, the

house where my friend had lived with Mary Ann for fifteen years; the house where Liz and Sara had been born.

Mary Ann left the cemetery and went out on to the path. 'It's supper time, and I don't want to leave Rosario on her own,' she said. 'It takes more than one person to get the girls to turn off the TV and sit down at table.' Rosario, along with her husband, Efraín, the ranch foreman, was the person Mary Ann depended on for nearly everything. 'You can stay here a while, if you like,' she said when she saw I was about to follow her. 'Why don't you dig up one of those words? They're behind the hamsters' graves, in matchboxes.' 'I don't know if I ought to,' I murmured doubtfully. 'As I said before, David never spoke to me about them.' 'He was probably afraid of looking ridiculous,' she said, 'but there was no reason to. He invented the game so that Liz and Sara would learn something of your language.' 'In that case, then, I will. Although I still feel like a bit of an intruder.' 'I wouldn't worry. He used to say you were the only friend he had left on the other side of the world.' 'We were like brothers,' I said. 'He didn't deserve to die at fifty,' she said. 'It was a dirty trick.' 'Yes, a very dirty trick indeed.' The man carving the gravestone looked up. 'Are you leaving?' he asked. 'No, not yet,' I replied and went back into the cemetery.

I found the first box of matches behind Ronnie's grave. It was in a pretty bad state, but the tiny roll of paper it contained was perfectly preserved. I read the word David had written on it in black ink: *mitxirrika*. It was the word used in Obaba to mean 'butterfly'. I opened another box. The roll of paper contained a whole sentence: *Elurra mara-mara ari du*. It was what people in Obaba said when it was snowing softly.

Liz and Sara had finished supper, and Mary Ann and I were sitting outside on the porch. The view was really beautiful: the houses of Three Rivers nestled beneath enormous trees,

for the road to Sequoia National Park ran parallel to the river. On the flatter ground, I could see vineyard upon vineyard, lemon grove upon lemon grove. The sun was gradually setting, lingering on the hills surrounding Lake Kaweah.

I could see it with pristine clarity, just as you can when the wind blows the atmosphere clean and everything seems newly minted. Except that there was no wind, and my perceptions had nothing to do with reality. It was all because of David and my memories, because I was thinking about him, about my friend. David would never see this view again: the hills, the fields, the houses. Nor would the songs of the birds around the ranch reach his ears. His hands would never again feel the warmth of the wooden boards on the porch after a day of sun. For a moment, I imagined myself in his place, as if I were the one who had died, and I felt the awfulness of that loss even more keenly. I couldn't have been more affected if a great crack had suddenly opened up in the earth, swallowing fields and houses and threatening the ranch itself. I understood then, only in a different sense, what is meant by the words: 'Life is the greatest thing there is, whoever loses life loses everything.'

We heard a whistle. One of the Mexican ranch-hands - wearing a cowboy hat - was trying to move the horses away from the river bank. Immediately afterwards, however, everything fell silent again. The birds stopped singing. Below, cars with their headlights on were driving along the road to Sequoia National Park, filling the landscape with bright red splodges and lines. The day was drawing to a close, and the valley was at peace. My friend David was now sleeping for ever. Accompanying him in that sleep were Juan, his uncle, and Henry Johnson, the ranch's first owner.

Mary Ann lit a cigarette. 'Mom, don't smoke!' shouted Liz, leaning out of the window. 'It's one of my last ones. Don't worry, I'll keep my promise,' replied Mary Ann. 'What's the word for "butterfly" in Basque?' I asked the girl. From inside

the house came the voice of Sara, her younger sister: '*Mitxirrika.*' Liz shouted: 'Hush up, silly!' Mary Ann sighed. 'Her father's death has affected her a lot. Sara's coping better. She hasn't really grasped yet what his death means.' There was the sound of neighing and another whistle from the Mexican ranch-hand in the cowboy hat.

Mary Ann stubbed out her cigarette and started rummaging around in the drawer of a small table on the porch. 'Did he ever show you this?' she asked. She was holding an A4-size book of about 200 beautifully bound pages. 'It's the edition the friends of the Three Rivers Book Club were preparing,' she said, a half-smile on her lips. 'It had a print-run of three. One for Liz and Sara, one for the library in Obaba, and a third copy for the friends of the club who helped publish it.' I couldn't suppress a look of surprise. I didn't know anything about this either. Mary Ann leafed through the pages. 'David used to say jokingly that three copies were three too many, and that he felt a complete fraud. He said he should have followed Virgil's example and asked his friends to burn the original.'

The book had a dark blue cover. The title was in gold. At the top was his name, David Imaz - using only his mother's maiden name - and, in the middle, the title in Basque: *Soinujolearen semea - The Accordionist's Son*. The spine was made of black cloth and there was no lettering on it at all.

Mary Ann pointed at the title. 'Needless to say the gold lettering wasn't his idea. When he saw it for the first time, he clutched his head and again quoted Virgil and said what a fraud he felt.' 'I don't know what to say. I'm really surprised,' I said, examining the book. 'I asked him several times to show it to you,' she explained. 'After all, you were his friend from Obaba, the person who would present the copy to the library in the village where he was born. He kept promising he would, but only later, when you were getting on the plane to go home. He didn't want you to feel obliged

to offer an opinion.’ Mary Ann paused before continuing. ‘And maybe that’s why he wrote it in a language I can’t understand. So as not to put me in an awkward position either.’ The half-smile returned to her lips, but this time it was sadder. I got to my feet and paced up and down the porch. I found it hard to remain seated, hard to know what to say. ‘I’ll take the copy to the library in Obaba,’ I said at last. ‘But first, I’ll read it and write you a letter giving my impressions.’

There were now three ranch-hands rounding up the horses by the river bank. They seemed to be in a good mood. They were laughing loudly and pretending to fight, swatting each other with their hats. Inside the house, someone turned on the TV.

‘He’d been toying with the idea of writing a book for ages,’ said Mary Ann. ‘Probably ever since he arrived in America, because I remember him mentioning it to me in San Francisco, the first time we went out together. But he didn’t do anything about it until the day we went to see the carvings made by the Basque shepherds in Humboldt County. You know about those carvings, don’t you? They’re figures and inscriptions carved with knives on tree trunks.’ I did know about them. I’d seen a programme on the *amerikanoak*, the Basques in America, on Basque TV. ‘At first,’ she went on, ‘David was really happy, and all he talked about was what those inscriptions meant, about the need every human being has to leave his or her mark, to say “I was here”. Suddenly, though, he changed his mind. He’d just spotted something on one of the trees which he found really disturbing. There were two figures. He told me they were two boxers and that one of them was a Basque and that he hated him. I can’t remember his name right now.’ Mary Ann closed her eyes and searched her memory. ‘Wait a moment,’ she said, standing up. ‘I’ve been sorting through his things and I think I know now where I can find the photo we took of that tree. I’ll be right back.’



It was getting dark, but there was still some light in the sky and a few clouds lit by the sun, small, round, pink clouds, like the little cotton wool balls you might use to plug your ears. Below the ranch, the trees and the granite rocks blurred into one, as if their shadows were all made of the same material, shadows that filled the river bank, where there were now no more horses or ranch-hands wearing cowboy hats. The loudest sound was the voice of a TV presenter describing a terrible fire near Stockton.

Mary Ann turned on the porch light and handed me a photograph of a tree trunk. It showed two figures with their fists raised as if squaring up to fight. The drawing was fairly crude, and time had so distorted the lines that they could have been two bears, but next to the figure, the shepherd had carved their names, along with the date of the fight and the city where it took place: 'Paulino Uzcudun-Max Baer. 4-VII-1931. Reno'.

'I'm not surprised David was upset,' I said. 'Paulino Uzcudun always sided with the Spanish fascists. He was one of those people who claimed that the Basques themselves had been responsible for destroying Guernica.' Mary Ann watched me in silence. Then she told me what she remembered: 'When we came back from Humboldt County, David showed me an old photo in which his father appeared along with that same boxer and with some other people. He said it had been taken on the day the sportsground in Obaba was formally opened. "Who are these people?" I asked him. "Some of them were murderers," he said. I was surprised because that was the first time he'd ever spoken about anything like that. "And who were the others? Thieves?" I said, half joking. "Probably," he said. The next day, when I came back from school, I found him in the study, setting out on his desk the files he'd brought with him to America. "I've decided to make my own carving," he said, by which he meant this book.'

The porch light glinted on the gold letters of the cover. I opened the book and started leafing through it. It was in very small print, and almost every inch of the page was used. 'What year was that? I mean the trip you made to see the carvings and when he started to write.' 'I was pregnant with Liz, so that's about fifteen years ago.' 'Did he take long to finish it?' 'I'm not sure,' said Mary Ann. She smiled again, as if amused by her own reply. 'The only time I helped him with it was when I translated the story you heard the other day.'

*The story you heard the other day.* Mary Ann meant 'Obaba's First American', a story she'd translated into English for publication in the anthology *Writers from Tulare County*. There had been a reading of it at the ranch, in David's presence, only two weeks before. Now he was no longer there. Nor would he ever be there again. Or anywhere. Not on the porch, not in the library, not in his study, sitting at the white computer Mary Ann had given him and which he had been using only hours before he was taken to hospital. That was the nature of death, that was the way death behaved. No sweet talk and no niceties. It simply arrived at a house and bawled: 'That's it, it's over!', then set off to another house.

'Now that I think of it, I did translate a couple more things for him,' said Mary Ann. 'I helped him translate two stories he wrote about friends in Obaba. One of them was called "Teresa", and the other . . .'

Mary Ann couldn't remember the title of the second story, only that it was someone's first name. 'Lubis?' She shook her head. 'Martín?' Another shake of the head. 'Adrián?' 'Yes, that's right, Adrián.' 'Adrián was part of our group,' I explained. 'We were friends for nearly fifteen years, from primary school through university.' Mary Ann sighed: 'A colleague of mine at college wanted to publish them in a magazine in Visalia. There was even talk of sending them to a publisher's in San Francisco, but David got cold feet. He couldn't bear the thought of them

appearing for the first time in English. It felt to him like a betrayal of the old language.'

*The old language.* For the first time since my arrival in Stoneham, I heard a note of bitterness in Mary Ann's voice. She spoke perfect Spanish, with the Mexican accent of the ranch-hands. I could imagine how she must have said to David on more than one occasion: 'If you can't write in English, why don't you try writing in Spanish? After all, Spanish is one of your languages. And it would be easier for me to help you then.' David would have pretended to agree, but then postponed the decision again and again. To the point, perhaps, of causing irritation.

Rosario appeared on the porch. 'I'm off now. Efraín can't even make himself a sandwich, and if I don't make him one, he'll go without any supper at all.' 'Of course, Rosario. Joseba and I have talked longer than we thought,' replied Mary Ann, getting up from her chair. I stood up too, and we both said goodbye to Rosario. 'I'll present the book to the library in Obaba,' I said afterwards. Mary Ann nodded: 'At least someone there will be able to read it.' 'In the old language,' I said. She smiled at the irony in my words, and I set off down the hill towards Juan's house. I was leaving America the next day and had to pack my bags.

Mary Ann returned to the subject of 'the old language' the following morning, while we were waiting at the airport in Visalia. 'You must have thought me really rude yesterday, the typical minority-hating reactionary. But don't get me wrong. When David and Juan used to talk to each other, they always spoke in Basque, and I found it a real pleasure, like listening to music.' My flight was being called, and there was no time for any long disquisitions. 'Perhaps you were right yesterday,' I said. 'Given that David had no intention of returning to his native land, it would probably have done him good to write in another language.' But Mary Ann ignored my comment. 'Yes, I really loved to hear them

talking,' she said again. 'I remember once, when I'd just arrived at Stoneham, I said to David how strange that music sounded to me, all those k's and r's. Had I never realised, he said, that both he and Juan were, in fact, crickets, two crickets lost in America, and that the sound I heard was of them rubbing their wings together. "Yes, as soon as we're left alone, we start rubbing our wings together," he said. That was his humour.'

I had my own memories. The 'old language' had been a major topic of discussion between me and David. There were references to it in many of the letters we'd exchanged since he left for America: Would Schuchardt's prediction come true? Would our language disappear? Were we, he and I and our fellow countrymen and women, the equivalent of the last Mohican? 'Writing in Spanish or English would have been very hard for David,' I said. 'There are so few Basque speakers, fewer than a million. And every time even one of us abandons the language, it feels as if we were contributing to its extinction. In your case it's different. There are millions of you. You'd never hear a speaker of English or Spanish saying: "The words that were in my parents' mouths are strange to me".' Mary Ann shrugged. 'Well, there's nothing to be done about it now,' she said. 'But I would like to have read his book.' Then she added: 'There can't be many American wives who've had to say: "The words that were in my husband's mouth are strange to me".' 'Well put, Mary Ann,' I said. 'Well complained, you mean.' And her American accent seemed suddenly much stronger.

They started calling for the passengers to board; there was no time to continue our conversation. Mary Ann gave me a goodbye kiss on the cheek. 'I'll write to you as soon as I've read the book,' I promised. 'Thanks for being here with us,' she said. 'It's been pretty tough,' I said, 'but I've learned a lot. David was a man of real integrity.' We embraced again and I joined the queue to board the plane.

The pink clouds I'd seen the previous evening in Stoneham were still there. From the plane window they seemed flatter, like flying saucers in a blue sky. I took David's book out of my hand luggage. First came the dedications: two pages for Liz and Sara, five for his Uncle Juan, five or so more for Lubis, the friend of his childhood and youth, two for his mother . . . and then the body of the story, which he described as a 'memorial'. I put the book away again. I would read it on the flight from Los Angeles to London, in that ethereal region ploughed by great planes and in which there is nothing, not even clouds.

A week later, I wrote to Mary Ann to tell her that David's book was now in the library in Obaba. I told her, too, that I'd made a photocopy for my personal use, because the events described were familiar to me and because I appeared in some of them as a protagonist. 'I hope you don't mind me increasing the print-run to four.' The book was important to me. I wanted to keep it near me.

I then explained my interpretation of David's behaviour. As I understood it, he'd had other reasons for writing his memoirs in the Basque language, apart, that is, from the reason I'd given her at Visalia airport - his desire to defend a minority language. David had preferred not to mix up his first life with his second, American life; and since she'd been the person mainly responsible for that feeling he'd had at Stoneham of never having been closer to paradise, he hadn't wanted to implicate her in matters that had nothing to do with her. Lastly, out of the possible alternatives - Virgil wanting to burn his original script - he'd chosen the more human one: giving in to the impulse to publish his writings, but in a language that would prove hermetic to the majority, but not to the people of Obaba, or to his daughters, if the latter fulfilled his wishes and decided to increase their vocabulary and go beyond *mitxirrika* and the other words buried in the cemetery at Stoneham.

‘He felt that the book would mean very different things to the people of Obaba and to your daughters,’ I argued. ‘The former had the right to know what was being said about them, whereas in the case of Liz and Sara, the book might help them to know themselves better, because it’s about their progenitor, a certain David who would inevitably continue living through them and influencing – at least to some extent – their sense of humour, their tastes and their decisions.’

At the end of the letter, I copied out the words David had used as a coda to his book: ‘I’ve thought about my daughters as I wrote each and every one of these pages, and from that “presence” I’ve drawn the courage I needed to finish the book. That, I feel, is only logical. One mustn’t forget that even Benjamin Franklin, hardly the most devoted of fathers, included in his list of valid reasons for writing an autobiography the need to leave a record of the circumstances of his life “for his posterity”.’

Mary Ann answered with a card sent from the post office in Three Rivers. She thanked me for the letter and for having made David’s wishes reality. She also asked me a question. She wanted to know what I thought of the book. ‘Very interesting, very dense,’ I wrote back. She sent me a second postcard: ‘I see. So events and facts have all been crammed in, like anchovies in a glass jar.’ The description was fairly accurate. David was trying to tell everything, leaving no gaps; but some facts, which I knew first-hand and which seemed to me important, weren’t given the necessary emphasis.

Some weeks later, shortly before the twentieth century came to an end, I wrote to Mary Ann setting out the project that had first begun to take shape in my mind on my return from the United States: I wanted to write a book based on what David had written, to rewrite and expand his memoir. Not like someone pulling down a house and building a new

one in its place, but in the spirit of someone finding a tree, on which some long-vanished shepherd had left a carving, and deciding to redraw the lines so as to bring out and enhance the drawing and the figures. 'If I do it like that,' I explained to Mary Ann, 'time will so blur the difference between the old incisions and the new that eventually there'll only be a single inscription on the bark, a book whose main message will be: "Two friends, two brothers were here".' Would she give me her blessing? I proposed starting as soon as possible.

As always, Mary Ann replied by return of post. She said she was thrilled by the news, and told me that she was sending me a batch of papers and photographs that might be of use to me. She also said that she was acting purely out of self-interest, 'because if you write the book and it's later translated into a language I can understand, it won't be too difficult for me to identify the parts that correspond to the life David led before we met in San Francisco. Your corrections and additions may leave almost no scar at all and be invisible to a stranger, but I shared more than fifteen years of my life with him, and I'll be able to tell the two styles apart.' In a postscript, Mary Ann suggested a new title, *My Brother's Book*, and reminded me not to forget about Liz and Sara, 'because, as you yourself said a few months back, they might one day be readers of the book, and I wouldn't want it to cause them any unnecessary suffering'.

I wrote to Stoneham reassuring her about her daughters. Like David, I would think about them on each and every one of the pages, and they would be a 'presence' for me too. I wanted my book to help them to live and feel more at ease in the world. Naturally, not all my desires were so noble. I, too, was motivated by self-interest. Rejecting the other option, that of becoming a mere editor of David's work, meant that I didn't have to relinquish the chance to make my own mark. 'There will be people who won't understand

what I'm doing and who'll accuse me of tearing the bark off the tree, of stealing David's drawing,' I explained to Mary Ann. 'They'll say I'm burned out as a writer, incapable of writing a book of my own, and that this is why I'm having to resort to rewriting someone else's work; and yet the truth is quite different. The truth is that, as time passes and events become more remote, the protagonists begin to resemble each other; the figures grow hazy. That's what is happening, I think, with David and with me. And also, although in a different way, with our friends from Obaba. Any lines I add to David's drawing must be true to the original.'

Three years have passed since that letter, and the book now exists. It still has the title it started out with and not the one suggested by Mary Ann. However, as regards everything else, her wishes and mine have been respected: there's nothing in it that could hurt Liz and Sara, nor has anything been omitted of what happened in Obaba in our time and in our parents' time. The book contains the words left by the accordionist's son as well as my own.



# Names

LIZ, SARA

LIZ, THE OLDER of our daughters, was two and a half and Sara, the youngest, was only one. Liz was with me at home; Sara was in hospital in Visalia with Mary Ann. Sara had been there for about twenty-four hours, inhaling salbutamol and, intermittently, connected up to an oxygen tube. The mucus blocking her bronchial tubes was preventing her from breathing, and her little seventeen- or eighteen-pound body just didn't have the strength to get rid of it. Her cough was truly terrible to hear.

As on other afternoons, I suggested to Liz that we go for a walk. I did so, moreover, with a certain enthusiasm, pretending a good humour I didn't at all feel. I assumed she hadn't noticed the ruckus at home on the previous night, with Rosario weeping and screaming - 'Oh, dear God, the child's suffocating!' - and that she knew nothing about what was going on. 'How's Liz? Is she missing us?' Mary Ann asked when she phoned from the hospital. I told her 'No', she was perfectly calm and had eaten well.

Liz isn't particularly interested in looking at sweeping landscapes. She prefers studying the ground to contemplating the mountains or the valley. She crouches down again and again and scrutinises whatever pebbles, twigs or other insignificant objects happen to be near her feet, cigarette ends included. If, during these observations, an ant or some other insect appears, so much the better. She greets this novelty with joyful laughter.

We walked along at our usual slow pace, stopping every few yards. It took us half an hour to reach the swing near the river. Then, when she got bored with playing there, we went over to the paddock where the new-born foals are kept, and after that, to the garden where the stone gnome 'lives', beside Rosario and Efraín's house. This is another of Liz's habits: she goes over to the gnome, talks to him for a few minutes, kisses him and comes back. 'How's your friend?' I asked her. 'Fine,' she said. 'And what did he say to you?' 'He said Sara will get better very soon.'

I was so touched. Both because of the unexpectedness of the reply and because her words – the words of a little girl of two and a half – seemed to me to have a beauty I'd never known before. 'Of course she will, she'll be back home in no time,' I whispered in her ear, holding her in my arms. Through my mind passed a multitude of thoughts, as if I had many souls, each with its own voice, or a single soul endowed with many tongues, and I couldn't rest easy until I'd made myself a promise: she and Sara would receive from me something more than the ranch and its sixty or seventy riding-horses. I would take up my pen again and try to finish the 'memorial' I'd been thinking about writing ever since my arrival in the United States.

#### JUAN

In the last few months of his life, the deterioration in Uncle Juan's state of health was so marked that Liz and Sara were always saying: 'What's wrong with him? He's stopped telling us stories.' One day, Mary Ann told them the truth. His heart was very weak, and any effort, however slight, wore him out. 'It's best to leave him alone,' she told them. 'So I don't want you playing at his house any more.' Liz and Sara took this advice very seriously indeed. They would do as their mother asked. 'I knew Juan was ill. Nakika told me,' explained Liz. 'She said "ay-ay-ay Juan doesn't play golf any

more ay-ay-ay that's a bad sign. And he doesn't go out to see how the horses are running ay-ay-ay".' Nakika was the name of her favourite doll.

She was right. Juan had given up his two favourite occupations months before, when he was still in good health. First, golf and then horses. More than that, unusually for him, he began hanging around our house. He was, to all appearances, the same as ever: a man concerned about current affairs, about politics and the economy; an attentive conversationalist with his own ideas. But he tired very easily, and after a while would sit down in front of the television or phone for Efraín to come and fetch him in the Land-rover.

In June, his condition worsened. He came to the house one afternoon, asked Mary Ann for a coffee and sat down on the porch to watch the horses – 'I used to know all their names' – or to look out over the valley. His remarks began to sound, to use Efraín's word, *bizarros* – bizarre. He said for example: 'I bet those men riding along the river are Indians. They probably want me to offer them a cup of coffee. Coffee makes them crazy.' His voice grew gradually weaker until it became – as Mary Ann put it – as flimsy as cigarette paper. Towards the end of June, a few days before he died, he asked me to play something on my accordion. 'There's a tune I want to hear,' he said. 'Which one?' I asked. 'The one you played the other day, the one about *café*.' At first, I didn't know what he meant. I hadn't played the accordion for years. 'I don't know which one you mean, Uncle,' I said. He took a deep breath and started singing: '*Yo te daré, te daré, niña hermosa, te daré una cosa, una cosa que yo sólo sé: ¡café!*' – 'I will give thee, I will give thee, lovely girl, I will give thee something, something only I can give thee – coffee!'

Finally, I remembered: I'd played that song shortly after my arrival at Stoneham Ranch, the day of Efraín and Rosario's wedding. After the meal, Juan had told us about

his encounter with Indians in the Nevada desert, and how frightened he'd been when he realised that a large group of them were following him. 'The worst part was when it got dark and I began to see shadows creeping around the encampment. My horse got real jumpy, and so did I. In fact, I took the safety catch off my rifle. But the redskins weren't interested in attacking me, they just wanted some coffee. They whooped with joy when I picked up the pot and started making some.' He had followed this story with that song - *yo te daré* . . . - which Juan had sung in a strong voice, very different from his voice during those last few days. I fetched my accordion and did my best to repeat my performance at Efraín and Rosario's wedding. He seemed really pleased.

On the day before he died, he was sitting quietly on the porch, not wanting to eat or drink anything. 'Do you want me to get my accordion?' I asked. He shrugged. He didn't feel like listening to music. He was staring off into the distance, past the vineyards and the lemon groves to the hills surrounding Lake Kaweah, behind which the sun had just disappeared.

'So stupid!' he said suddenly. It sounded more like a sigh. 'Mary Ann, have you ever heard of the Spanish civil war?' he asked. I felt sad for him. Mary Ann's father had fought in the International Brigade, and we'd often discussed the war. 'Uncle, why don't you tell us about the colts you were looking at this morning,' I suggested. 'Efraín told me you'd been to visit them.' He took no notice of my remark. 'When the fascists entered Obaba, a lot of young men fled into the hills to see if they could join the Basque army,' he said. His voice was stronger now. 'But I stayed on in the village because the party asked me to, and that's how I came to see that dreadful scene. A captain arrived, Degrela he was called, and he started haranguing us from outside the town hall, in the same place where, only hours before, he'd ordered seven men to be shot, amongst them, my friend Humberto, a good man who'd never done anyone any harm.'

Anyway, this captain said he needed young men who were prepared to give their lives for religion and for Spain. "I need your red blood," he said. "I cannot promise you life, but I can promise you glory." And they all went crazy, pushing and shoving to be the first to reach the table and sign up. It was as if they had only one desire in the world - to die for the Spanish fascists.'

He stopped speaking, as if he'd stumbled upon an obstacle his voice couldn't overcome. Then he went on, gesturing with his hand: 'One of those young men from Obaba was excitedly urging me to go with them. "I can't," I said. "I'm lame. I can't go to the front on crutches." Because I happened to be using crutches at the time. According to a certificate I had in my pocket, which was completely false, but which bore the signature of a real doctor, I had a very serious cartilage injury. That's how I got out of it. All the others marched off to the front, I've no idea how many, perhaps a hundred. Before the year was out, half of them were dead and buried.'

Efraín came to fetch him in his Land-rover. 'The girls are fast asleep,' Efraín said when he came into the house. So Liz and Sara would be spending the night at his house, in Rosario's care. 'How are you, boss? Feeling better?' he asked Juan. 'There are a lot of innocents in the world,' Juan said. Efraín thought he was referring to a prisoner in Texas, whose picture we kept seeing on TV because he was about to be put to death in the gas chamber. 'And a lot of guilty people too, boss,' he replied, helping him to his feet.

'He's going to die soon, isn't he?' I said to Mary Ann when we went to bed. She nodded. 'Yes, I think so, but I wouldn't want today's conversation to be our last one.' I agreed. His story about the young men who'd marched off to war as if to a fiesta - that dark 'carving', that sinister inscription - wasn't like Juan. He'd always been such a cheerful man.

The following day, 24 June, as if we were under the protection of some kindly genie or even of God himself, our

wish was granted. Just hours before he died, Juan felt much better. As soon as we saw him, we knew he was in a good mood. He called for champagne. 'Great! Why not?' said Mary Ann with exaggerated enthusiasm. 'What are we celebrating?' 'You Americans forget all the important dates,' he said. 'In case you don't know, today is San Juan. My saint's day! A very special day in the Basque Country!' 'It's true, I'd forgotten as well,' I said, 'I must be getting too American.' 'Congratulations, Juan!' cried MaryAnn. Afterwards, while the champagne was chilling, we sat on the porch and amused ourselves watching the Mexicans who were, at that moment, training the horses. In the paddocks on the other side of the river, there were ten men, all wearing cowboy hats, and each carrying a rope. The horses were trotting round and round.

'How many have we got right now?' asked Juan, indicating the horses. 'Counting the colts, exactly fifty-four,' I said. 'Excellent,' said Juan. 'That was my idea when I came to America. To have horses, not sheep like the other Basques. Wandering around the mountains with two thousand sheep to look after is no life at all! Breeding handsome horses and selling them off for ten thousand dollars a head is a much better bet!' We got the bottle of champagne out of the icebox and poured three glasses. I looked across at the valley: the vineyards were in darkness; the sky was rose-pink; the sun had just slipped behind the hills.

'What was the name of that Hollywood actress who used to have a house on Lake Tahoe?' asked Juan, after taking a sip. 'A fantastic-looking woman. A real sex-symbol.' We knew who he meant, but just then Efraín arrived in search of some pyjamas for Liz and Sara, and he was the one who provided the answer to the question: 'How can you have forgotten? It was Raquel Welch!' Juan hesitated for a moment. 'I mean the actress that Sansón, that rather crude shepherd, was so keen on.' 'Yes, Raquel Welch,' repeated Efraín. Juan nodded, laughing. That was the woman!