



VINTAGE

OBABAKOAK
BERNARDO ATXAGA

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ABOUT THE BOOK

One of only a hundred or so books originally written in the Basque language during the last four centuries, *Obabakoak* is a shimmering, mercurial novel about life in Obaba, a remote, exotic, Basque village.

Obaba is peopled with innocents and intellectuals, shepherds and schoolchildren, whilst everyone from a lovelorn schoolmistress to a cultured but self-hating dwarf wanders across the page.

Obabakoak is a dazzling collage of stories, town gossip, diary excerpts and literary theory, all held together by Atxaga's distinctive and tenderly ironic voice.

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.

ALSO BY BERNARDO ATXAGA

The Accordionist's Son

OBABAKOAK

Bernardo Atxaga

TRANSLATED BY
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VINTAGE BOOKS
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TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

Obabakoak was originally written in Basque and published by Editorial Erein in 1988. This English translation is based on the author's own Spanish version, published by Ediciones B in 1989.

I would like to take the opportunity to thank Bernardo Atxaga, Neil Belton, Annella McDermott, Faye Carney and Philip Polack for all their help and advice.

THE GAME OF THE GOOSE

The Game of the Goose (*el juego de la oca*) is still played in other parts of Europe (for example, *le jeu de l'oie* in France, *il gioco dell'oca* in Italy). It is played on a circular board of sixty-three squares, the sixty-third being occupied by Mother Goose. The first person to reach square sixty-three wins. Geese also appear on other squares and if you land on one of these, you jump forward to the next goose and get another throw of the dice. If you land on less fortunate squares such as the maze, the prison or the square symbolising death (a skull or skeleton) you must either wait for another player to take your place, go back several squares or return to square one.

PROLOGUE

(The author speaks of his language, *euskera*)

I write in a strange language. Its verbs,
the structure of its relative clauses,
the words it uses to designate ancient things
– rivers, plants, birds –
have no sisters anywhere on Earth.
A house is *etxe*, a bee *erle*, death *heriotz*.
The sun of the long winters we call *eguzki* or *eki*;
the sun of the sweet, rainy springs is also
– as you'd expect – called *eguzki* or *eki*
(it's a strange language but not that strange).

Born, they say, in the megalithic age,
it survived, this stubborn language, by withdrawing,
by hiding away like a hedgehog in a place,
which, thanks to the traces it left behind there,
the world named the Basque Country or *Euskal Herria*.
Yet its isolation could never have been absolute
– cat is *katu*, pipe is *pipa*, logic is *lojika* –
rather, as the prince of detectives would have said,
the hedgehog, my dear Watson, crept out of its hiding place
(to visit, above all, Rome and all its progeny).

The language of a tiny nation, so small
you cannot even find it on the map,
it never strolled in the gardens of the Court
or past the marble statues of government buildings;
in four centuries it produced only a hundred books . . .
the first in 1545; the most important in 1643;
the Calvinist New Testament in 1571;

the complete Catholic Bible around 1860.
Its sleep was long, its bibliography brief
(but in the twentieth century the hedgehog awoke).

Obabakoak, this book published now in this city,
the city of Dickens, of Wilkie Collins and of so many others,
is one of the latest books to join the Basque bibliography.
It was written in several houses and in several countries,
and its subject is simply life in general.
And *Obaba* is just Obaba: a place, a setting;
ko means 'of'; *a* is a determiner; *k* the plural.
The literal translation: *The People or Things of Obaba*;
a less literal translation: *Stories from Obaba*
(and with that I conclude this prologue).



CHILDHOODS

ESTEBAN WERFELL

ESTEBAN WERFELL'S books, mostly leather-bound and ranged in serried ranks along the shelves, covered almost every inch of the room's four walls. Those ten or twelve thousand volumes were the summation of two lives, his own and his father's, and when he sat down amongst them to write, as he did on that February day, they created a warm enclave, a high protecting wall separating him off from the outside world. Like many of the books, the old oak table at which he wrote was another reminder of his father; when still very young, he'd had it brought there from the family home in Obaba.

There was, however, one chink in that wall of paper, pages and words, a window through which, while he wrote, Esteban Werfell could see the sky, the willows, the lake and the little house built there for the swans in the city's main park. Without really impinging on his solitude, the window made an inroad into the darkness of the books and mitigated that other darkness which often creates phantoms in the hearts of men who have never quite learned how to live alone.

For some minutes Esteban Werfell contemplated the cloudy, greyish-white sky of that February day. Then, looking away, he opened one of the drawers in his desk and took out a notebook with stiff covers, bearing the number twelve, identical down to the last detail with the other eleven notebooks he had already filled and that contained his personal journal.

They were nice those notebooks with their stiff covers, he liked them. He often used to wonder whether he didn't misuse them, whether the stories and reflections he noted down in them did not perhaps turn them from the proper

destiny that might otherwise await a notebook, especially one with stiff covers.

Perhaps it was foolish to think that way about something like a notebook. It probably was. But he couldn't help it, still less when he was about to start a new one, as he was then. Why was he always thinking about things he didn't want to think about? Once his father had said to him: 'It isn't the fact that you've got a few batty ideas that worries me, it's just that they're always the same batty ideas.' It was true, but he'd never understood why he was so drawn to such ideas.

Whatever the reason, the force propelling him towards them was very strong, and Esteban Werfell couldn't resist the temptation to look up at the shelf where he kept the other eleven notebooks. There, half hidden amongst various geographical treatises, were the pages that bore witness to his life, the pages that contained all its most beautiful moments, its most important events. Not that they were a treasure. They'd lost any brilliance they once had. Rereading them was like perusing papers smeared with ashes; rereading them he felt ashamed and saw how the desire for sleep and oblivion still grew within him.

'Notebooks full of dead letters,' he murmured to himself. Even that expression wasn't new.

But he couldn't allow such thoughts to distract him from the task he'd sat down at the table to perform, nor, as had happened on countless other occasions, allow them to carry him from one sad memory to another, deeper and deeper down, to a land which, long ago - ever since his days as a student of geography - he'd named the Cape of Despair. He was a grown man now, able to fight against his own compulsions and fight he would, by filling that new notebook.

Esteban Werfell picked up his pen - the one with the wooden shaft that he used only when writing his diary - and dipped it in the inkwell.

'17th February 1958,' he began. He wrote in a beautiful, neat hand.

Outside the window the sky had turned completely grey and a fine, invisible rain was darkening the ivy that covered the swans' house. The sight of it made him sigh. He would have preferred a different kind of weather. He didn't like the park being empty.

He sighed once more, then dipped his pen in the ink again and bent over the notebook.

I have returned from Hamburg - he wrote - with the intention of writing a memoir of my life. But I will not do so in the ordered and exhaustive manner of one who, perhaps quite rightly, holds himself to be the mirror of an age or a society. That, of course, is not my case and that is not how I will proceed. I will restrict myself to recounting what happened one afternoon long ago, when, to be exact, I was fourteen years old, and the important consequences that afternoon had for me. For a man already in the autumn of his life a few short hours may not seem a matter of much significance, but it is all I have to tell, indeed it is the only thing worth telling. And perhaps, given the life I have led, it is not such a small thing. After all, I dedicated myself to teaching and a life spent sitting at a teacher's desk is a surer recipe for constipation than it is for adventure.

He sat back in his chair to wait for the ink to dry. The day was still grey, but the rain was much heavier than it had been a few minutes earlier and the sound it made, the dull murmur of rain on grass, was clearly audible in the room. And there was a change too around the lake: the swans had come out of their house now and were beating their wings with unusual vigour. He'd never seen the swans like that before. Did they enjoy getting wet? Or was it the lack of spectators that cheered them? He didn't know, and it really wasn't worth wasting time on such stupid questions, time better spent going over what he'd just written.

He never got off to a good start. The words refused to give faithful expression to what was demanded of them, as if they were lazy, or as if they lacked the energy to do so. His father used to say: 'Thought is like sand and when we try to grasp a fistful of it, most of the grains trickle out between

our fingers.’ And it was true. For example, here he was proposing to write a memoir, but it would have been more exact to describe it as a meditation, because that in fact was what he wanted to write: a fine meditation on the events of one afternoon in his adolescence. And that wasn’t the only blunder, there were others.

He could, of course, cross out what he’d written and start again, but he didn’t want to. It was against his rules. He liked his pages to look immaculate, his as well as other people’s, and he felt proud that his scrupulousness had led his students to nickname him after a well-known brand of soap. Anyway, why worry about finding a good beginning? He’d make mistakes on the second attempt too. There would always be mistakes. It was better to press on, getting it right as he went along, gradually making amends for his poor beginning.

He looked out at the park again. There were no swans on the lake now, they’d retreated to their house. No, they didn’t like the February rain either.

However – he wrote – any attempt to select out special moments of our life may prove a grave mistake. It may be that a life can only be judged as a whole, *in extenso*, and not by its parts, not by taking one day and rejecting another, not by separating out the years like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, in order to conclude that this bit was very good and this very bad. The fact is that everything that lives is like a river, with no shortcuts and no halts along the way.

But, whilst that is true, it is equally true that memory tends to behave quite differently. Like all good witnesses, memory takes pleasure in the concrete, in selected details. If I had to compare it with anything, I’d say it was like an eye. I would never, on the other hand, compare it to a book-keeper who specialises in taking inventories.

For example, right now I can see the swans’ house, covered from ground to roof with ivy, which is by its nature dark and darker still on rainy days like today. I see it but, strictly speaking, I never see it. Each time I look up, my gaze slides over the monotonous green and black of the leaves, and doesn’t stop until it finds the reddish stain on one of the corners of the roof. I don’t even know what it is. Perhaps it’s a scrap of paper or a primula that’s chosen to bloom there or a single tile that the ivy has left uncovered. As far as my eyes are concerned, it doesn’t matter, for they shun the dark and unerringly seek out that one point of light.

Esteban Werfell stared out at the reddish stain, but still failed to assuage his doubts. It could as easily be a primula as a scrap of paper or a tile. In the end, though, such a detail was of no matter. What did matter was what he had just written about memory. To say that memory took pleasure in the concrete was inexact. It was a question of necessity, not pleasure.

That is how the eye behaves - he went on - and, if my idea is correct, memory does too. It disregards the ordinary and instead seeks out remarkable days, intense moments; in my own case, it seeks out one particular far-off afternoon of my life.

But enough of this. It's time to begin the story itself.

Once he'd ruled a line to bring to a close that first page of his notebook, Esteban Werfell felt relieved. There it was, he had managed to outline an introduction to what he wanted to say. He didn't know quite why he went about things that way, with all those detours and delays, but it was certainly very typical of him, it always had been. He never wrote or spoke directly, he never dealt frankly with the people around him. After all these years, he accepted his timidity, his cowardice, as a character defect, but the opportunities he had let slip by because of it still hurt him. His whole life had been one of silence, passivity, withdrawal.

But he was getting sidetracked again. It wasn't a question now of how he lived his life, but of how he wrote, and it was a matter of indifference whether he took a circuitous route to get there or not. No one would ever read his personal journal. He did occasionally allow himself to fantasise about some imaginary future reader - sitting at that same table after his death - poring over his notebooks, but he could never really bring himself to believe in him or her. No, there would be no such reader. There was, therefore, something slightly ridiculous about his preoccupation with style.

As he dipped his pen in the inkwell, he looked across at the park. In the rain, without the usual walkers, the area

round the lake looked more solitary than ever. The little streams that sprang up amongst the grass rippled as they flowed over the pebbles.

Hic incipit - he wrote - here begins the story of the afternoon when, for the first time in my life, I was taken to church. I was fourteen years old and I lived with my father in a place called Obaba.

It was Sunday and I'd arranged to meet up with some schoolfriends and go to the cinema that had been built some three miles from Obaba near the railway. But for the first time, and contrary to the rules governing our friendship, my friends turned up at the house long before the agreed hour and, as soon as I opened the door to them, made a most unexpected request. 'Come to church with us this evening,' they said, 'come and sing in the choir. Ask Mr Werfell to let you come. You can tell him it's just a matter of singing some psalms, you don't have to believe in anything.'

Such behaviour was odd in them. Such boldness, I mean. And the word 'boldness' is apt on this occasion, since in Obaba paying social visits - insofar as that implied seeing the interior of someone else's house - was considered to be in distinctly bad taste, in the same league as turning round to stare when someone was getting undressed. Moreover, my father was a foreigner, a stranger and an enemy and everyone knew how much he hated the church and religion in general.

Looking back, I have no doubt that the person behind that proposal was the canon of Obaba, a Jesuit. In his eyes I must have seemed a soul in mortal danger, a child who, lacking a mother - she had died when I was born - was at the mercy of a hateful man, a man who would not hesitate to drag his own son into the abyss in which he himself lived. The canon must have thought there could be no better way of attracting me than through my friendship with my schoolfellows.

The hatred between the canon and my father was not, so to speak, purely intellectual. It had its roots in something other than the iconoclastic approach adopted by my father from the moment he was put in charge of the mines at Obaba. That something was my existence. To use the words I heard on the lips of the schoolmaster one day, I was not the 'legitimate fruit of a marriage'. And I wasn't, for the simple reason that my parents had joined together in free union, without recourse to the church, a fact which at that time and in that place was deemed inadmissible. But that's another story and has no place in this notebook.

The park was still deserted and the trees, oblivious of the coming spring, seemed listless. Not even the swans gave any sign of life.

He looked away from the window and re-read what he'd written. No, his parents' story had no place in that notebook, perhaps in the next notebook, the thirteenth. It

would, above all, be the story of a young woman who chose to live with a foreigner and, because of that, was slandered and condemned to be ostracised. 'Your mother would sleep with anyone. Your mother didn't wear any knickers. Your mother died young because of all the wicked things she did.'

The words heard during playtime at the school in Obaba still wounded him. He wasn't sure whether he would write that thirteenth notebook or not but, if he did, he knew how difficult it would be. But he would face that when he came to it. The task in hand was the story he had brought back with him from the trip to Hamburg.

Esteban Werfell bent over his notebook again. His schoolfriends' unexpected visit once more filled his imagination.

Seeing my astonishment, my friends proceeded, rather clumsily, to argue their case, studiously avoiding all mention of the canon. According to them, it was wrong that they and I should have to go our separate ways on Sundays. It was a sheer waste of time, because sometimes they finished their singing ten or fifteen minutes earlier than usual, minutes which could prove vital if we were to get to the cinema on time, minutes which, in fact, were never put to good use; all because of me, of course, because I was their friend and they had no alternative but to wait for me.

Summing up, one of them said: 'We always arrive after the film's started, and it seems stupid to me to cycle three miles only to miss half the plot. It would make much better sense to stick together.'

Their arguments were, as I said, rather clumsy; in fact the service tended to finish later rather than earlier. I said nothing to contradict them, though. Deep down I wanted to go to church. Not just because it was forbidden territory, and therefore desirable, but also because of the need I felt to be a normal child, to be one of the boys. Apart from my father, I was the only person in Obaba who had never set foot in that building and, naturally - I was after all only fourteen - I didn't like being marked out as different.

Their proposal was in line with my own desires, therefore, and I didn't argue with what they said. I simply indicated the door of the library, where my father was working. It was his permission they required. No, I didn't dare to ask him, it was best that they should do so. Not that I thought he would agree. I expected my father to dismiss them in a loud voice, declaring that he had no intention of going against the principles of a lifetime on that or any other Sunday.

Instead I heard him say: 'If he wants to go, let him.' I felt first surprised, then frightened; it was as if every pane of glass in the window had suddenly shattered. Why did he say yes? I couldn't even begin to imagine why.

A swan stood at the door of its house making loud honking noises, as if to reproach the continuing rain. It rained on and on, flattening the grass and forming puddles that grew ever deeper. Soon the whole park would be awash.

Esteban Werfell clasped his hands and rested them on the notebook. No, at fourteen he couldn't possibly have understood his father, because at that age, he saw him not with his own eyes, but through the eyes of others, through the eyes of those who, he later realised, were his father's declared enemies. In Obaba it was said that Engineer Werfell was a proud, intractable man and that's what he thought too. It was said - a little girl who played with him in the square told him this - that he was so cruel he beat the mineworkers; and Esteban would simply smile and nod. Indeed he accepted that image because he had no other. What was his father? Just that, his father. And beyond that? Beyond that, nothing. Well, apart from being a mining engineer.

But that time had passed. He was a grown man, not a rather unsympathetic adolescent. He thought now that he understood why his father had accepted his schoolfriends' proposal.

'Sheer weariness,' he sighed. He was beginning to enjoy the rain. It was helping him to remember.

Engineer Werfell had indeed grown weary, he regretted having left his native city of Hamburg to move to a place where all his ideas seemed ridiculous. At first, he dreamed of returning. 'We'll go back, Esteban, and you can study at the same university I went to.' Those words ran like a refrain throughout his childhood.

But then the bad news began to arrive. One day it was the mine closing down; the next it was the failure of the bonds he'd bought on the Stock Exchange, leaving him almost penniless; then came the letter from his best friend, Theodor Steiner, telling him that the association to which both belonged - the Eichendorff Club - had been banned in

Germany and that his ideas were now outlawed even in the country of his birth.

By the time Esteban was fourteen, his father had given up hope. He would die in Obaba, he would never return to Germany. His son would never study at a German university. It was logical then, given the circumstances, that he no longer had the strength to fight for his son's education. What did it matter? 'If he wants to go, let him.' The battle was lost anyway.

The swan standing at the door of his house honked again, this time managing to get all the other swans inside to join him. The din distracted him from his memories.

'Be quiet!' he shouted and went on to wonder: Why was he so proud? He didn't want to cut the thread at that moment joining him and his father.

If he'd been more humble, Engineer Werfell would have been better able to accept life in Obaba. If he'd been more intelligent too. Yes, that was what real intelligence was, the ability to adapt to any situation. A man able to adapt would never know that descent into hell. On the contrary, he would achieve happiness. What use had all his books, reading and ideas been to his father? In the end he'd been defeated. 'Only the mean of spirit adapt to life,' his father used to say. But he didn't agree with him any more. Nor did he agree with the old maxim coupling knowledge and suffering, or with the one that says the more a man knows, the more he suffers. As he used to say to his students, that unfortunate consequence came only after climbing the first rungs up the ladder of knowledge. As a man climbed higher, he had to learn to triumph over suffering.

The swans seemed to have quietened down. Esteban Werfell dipped his pen in the inkwell and covered the first lines of a new page with his neat writing. He was determined to note down these reflections in his journal.

Even in the most difficult situations there comes a moment when giving up the struggle becomes something desirable, even pleasant. Thus, for example, the victim of a shipwreck ultimately becomes reconciled to the sea, even someone who has sweated blood trying to save his ship and has spent the whole night beneath the stars, encircled by fishes, in the most utter solitude, defying the waves. It doesn't matter what he's done, or how dearly he clings to life, the end is always sweet. He sees that he can do no more, that no one is coming to his rescue, that no coast is in sight, and then he accepts the situation, he rests, he gives himself up to the sea like a child wanting only to sleep.

But my father was too proud. True his ship had foundered and he had no option but to submit, but he wouldn't accept that, he didn't want the final pleasure of defeat. He replied brusquely: 'If he wants to go, let him', and shut himself up in his library, the 'only place in Obaba that he liked'. When I knocked to ask him for money to go to the cinema, he didn't answer. He simply slipped a coin under the door. Now, I think, I regret the joy I showed then.

For as soon I had the money, we all rushed off, pushing and shoving, the way we did when the teacher let us out at break time. Then we wheeled our bikes up the hill known in Obaba as Canons' Hill.

It was a spring day of unsettled weather, with almost continual showers and squally winds, and the ditches by the roadside were full of water. Where they'd overflowed, the fallen apple blossom carried along by the current almost covered the ground. We trod on it as we passed, and it was like treading on carpets of white.

We walked briskly along, pushing the bikes which as Andrés, one of my friends, quite rightly remarked, seemed much heavier going uphill. At the end of the road, on the brow of the hill, stood the imposing spire of the church.

We all felt really cheerful. We laughed for no reason and rang our bicycle bells to compare the different sounds they made. 'Are you happy, Esteban?' I told them I was, that it was an event of real importance for me, that I was bursting with curiosity. 'Aren't you a bit nervous too?' I told them I wasn't. But I was and my nervousness was growing minute by minute. The time was approaching. As my father would have put it, I would soon be on the Other Side.

A moment later I was entering the church for the first time.

The massive door was extremely heavy. I had to lean the whole weight of my body against it before it yielded.

Andrés said to me: 'Before going in you have to make the sign of the cross.'

I told him I didn't know how to. So he wetted my fingers with his and guided my hand in its movements.

'It's so dark!' I exclaimed as soon as I went in. I was blinded by the contrast between the brightness outside and the shadowy depths inside. I couldn't see a thing, not even the central aisle immediately in front. 'Don't talk so loud,' said my companions going in ahead of me.

Far away, where I imagined the end of the aisle to be, a large candle was burning. It was the only point of light in the whole building. I took a few steps in that direction, only to stop again. I didn't know which way to go and my friends seemed to have disappeared.

My eyes remained fixed on the flame at the other end of the aisle but gradually I began to make out a few other things. I noticed the stained-glass windows, which were blue, and the golden reflections on a column near the candle. But still I didn't dare to move. Then I heard a voice behind me say: 'Don't be frightened, Esteban. It's only me,' and, despite the warning, I jumped.

Before I had time to recover, a long, bony arm had encircled my neck. It was the canon. Bringing his face closer to mine, he said:

'Come now, Esteban. Don't be frightened.'

His clothes smelled very strange to me.

'The flame of that candle never goes out, Esteban,' he whispered, pointing ahead with his free hand. 'When we have to light a new candle, we always light it from the dying flame of the old one. Just think what that means, Esteban. What do *you* think it means?'

I was so scared I was incapable of thought and I felt ashamed every time the canon said my name. I kept silent.

'It means,' he began, 'that the light we see today is the same light seen by our grandparents and our great-grandparents; it's the same light our ancestors gazed upon. For hundreds of years, this house has united us all, those alive now and those who lived before us. That's what the church is, Esteban, a community that transcends time.'

This argument clearly took no account of the circumstances of my own life. The Church not only united, it also divided; the fact of my being there was but one example of that. I said nothing, however, to contradict the canon. In fact, I felt humbled, as if my exclusion from that community were a personal defect or stain. I broke out in a cold sweat.

Smiling, the canon remarked that since there were still some minutes before the service was due to begin, I should take the opportunity to have a look at the altar and to visit other parts of the building. And, leaving me alone, he moved off towards a side door that led to the choir loft. I heard the rustle of his clothes even after he was out of sight.

We tend to think that things are in themselves either big or small, failing to realise that what we call size is in fact always relative. They are only big or small in relation to other things and that is why I can still say now; in all honesty, that I have never again seen anywhere as big as the church at Obaba. It was a hundred times the size of the school, a thousand times bigger than my bedroom. What's more the shadows blurred the edges of walls and columns and made the bosses and the ribs of the vault seem even more remote. Everything seemed larger than it really was.

One of the picture books I used to read at the time recounted the adventures of an expedition that had become trapped inside a hollow mountain and I associated the pictures in that book with the place I saw before me. Not only because of the obvious physical resemblance but also because of the asphyxia that was beginning to afflict me as it had the

characters in the story. I continued on up the aisle but with the growing conviction that I would surely suffocate before I reached the flame burning on the altar. Then I noticed an old lady dressed in black approach the foot of the altar and lift a lever. Immediately the whole church was filled with light.

That change from darkness to light made me feel better and I began to breathe more easily. With some relief I thought: it isn't a hollow mountain, it's more like a theatre, like the ones my father used to go to in Hamburg, like the places where they put on operas.

Most of my father's memories revolved around the theatre and I knew by heart the plots and choreography of everything he had seen at the opera house on Buschstrasse or at the Schauspielhaus, as well as many stories about the actors and actresses of the time. Comparisons between what I'd imagined in those conversations with my father and what I saw then seemed unavoidable. Yes, the church was a theatre with a large central stage, images of bearded men, and seats and benches for the audience. And everything was golden, everything shone.

A deep, almost tremulous sound ran through the whole church and when I turned my head towards the choir loft, I noticed some twenty women kneeling at their pews. They were moving their lips and staring at me.

Oppressed by so many eyes, I ran towards the door the canon had entered and a moment later I was taking the stairs two by two up to where my companions would be waiting.

Esteban Werfell laid his pen down wearily on the table and raised his eyes to the window, though without seeing anything in particular, without even noticing the din the swans by the lake were making. One of his 'batty ideas' had just flitted across his mind, interrupting him, obliging him to consider the meaning of that twelfth notebook. What point was there in remembering? Wouldn't it be better to leave the past well alone, rather than stir it all up?

'Only the young really enjoy looking back,' he thought. But when they talked about the past, they were really talking about the future, about the fears and desires they had about that future, about what they wanted from life. Moreover, they never did so alone, as he did. He didn't really understand his urge to remember. Perhaps it was a bad sign, a sign that everything was over once and for all, that he was tired of life.

He shook his head to drive away such thoughts and finally noticed what was going on outside. By the side of the

swans' house someone had stopped to shelter from the rain and to throw pieces of bread into the lake. The swans were swimming back and forth honking like mad things. 'Their first visitor of the day,' he thought, 'they must be hungry.' Then to himself he said: 'Back to the choir loft.'

The moment I entered the choir loft, the canon got up from his seat at the organ and stretched out his arms. Almost sweetly, he said:

'Young Werfell is finally amongst us. Let us all rejoice and give thanks.'

Putting his hands together he began to pray out loud and all my companions followed suit.

'Welcome, Esteban,' he said afterwards, assuring me that: 'From now on you will belong to our community, you will be one of the chosen.' My companions stared at me as if they were seeing me for the first time. Andrés was in charge of distributing the books of psalms. The copy he handed me was almost brand new.

'Don't worry, Esteban. A few more Sundays and you'll be as good as us. You'll probably end up being the best of all,' he whispered.

The pages of the book were very thin and had gilded edges. A red ribbon marked the psalms for that day.

When the canon asked me to sit at his side, the gaze of my companions became even more fixed. I hung back. I realised that it was an honour to be asked, but feared the physical proximity of the canon. The disagreeable smell emanating from his clothes was still fresh in my memory.

'Don't be frightened, Esteban. Come and sit up here with me,' said the canon, as he began to play. The floorboards of the choir loft vibrated.

I was puzzled to see that the organ had two keyboards and that in order to play it, one had to move one's feet. Sometimes the melody grew unpredictable with abrupt highs and lows and the canon seemed to be dancing sitting down, rocking back and forth on the bench and bumping up against me. I found it difficult to follow the melody of the psalms we sang, I couldn't concentrate.

By the third psalm, I had closed the book and simply sat looking at the scene before me. There were my companions opening and closing their mouths and down below were the kneeling women; a little farther off, the candle flame burned, giving off orange lights.

Suddenly the flame began to rise into the air. At first it seemed to be moving of its own accord, as if propelled forward by something at its base. But then, when it was already hovering above the altar steps, I saw that this was not the case, that the flame was not travelling forwards on its own but was held in the hand of a young girl with fair hair. She was the one hovering there, gently, unhesitatingly.

'She's coming towards me,' I thought. The light from the flame was blinding me now.

The young girl flew across the whole length of the church and came to a halt in front of me. She hovered in the air, about a yard above the floor of

the choir loft. The organ had fallen silent.

'Do you know what love is, Esteban?' she asked sweetly.

I replied with a nod and tried to get up from the bench in order to see her face. But the candle flame kept me riveted to the spot.

'Could you love me?' she asked and for a moment I glimpsed her nose, her half-open lips.

'Yes,' I said. It seemed the only possible answer.

'Then come and find me, Esteban. Come to Hamburg,' she said. 'My address is Maria Vockel, 2 Johameshofstrasse, Hamburg.'

Having said that, she turned and began to move off towards the altar. I cried out that yes, I would come to Hamburg and find her, but asked her not to go just yet, to stay a little longer. Then I heard someone say: 'It's all right, Esteban, it's all right. Calm down.' I was lying on the floor of the choir loft with the canon bending over me. Andrés was fanning me with the pages of a score.

'Maria Vockel!' I exclaimed.

'Calm down, Esteban. You must have fainted.'

There was a gentle edge to the canon's voice. He helped me to my feet and asked Andrés to take me outside to get some air.

'You'd best not go to the cinema, Esteban. Better safe than sorry,' the canon advised me as we said goodbye. 'You won't go now, will you?'

But the image of the fair-haired young girl still filled my mind and I did not feel strong enough to reply.

Andrés answered for me, reassuring the canon: 'Don't worry, father, he won't go and neither will I. I'll stay with him, just in case.'

The canon said that would be fine and returned to the organ bench. The service had to go on.

I felt better as soon as I got outside and my mind grew clearer. Very soon the image of the young girl with fair hair began to grow tenuous, to disappear, the way dreams do, the way specks of dust vanish the instant the ray of sun illuminating them moves on. But by my side was my schoolfriend, Andrés, to ensure that the scene I'd witnessed in the choir loft was not entirely lost. He was two or three years older than me and much preoccupied by affairs of the heart; he would never forget a woman's name.

'Who's Maria Vockel?' he asked at last.

It was then, when I heard her name again, that the image returned to me. Again I saw her flying from one part of the church to the other and remembered her questions. Hesitantly, I told Andrés all that had happened.

'It's a shame you didn't see her face,' he commented when I had finished. He seemed very interested in that missing detail of the girl's portrait.

'No, just her nose and her lips. But I'm sure she's prettier than any of the girls in Obaba.' I spoke as I thought, with the slightly ridiculous vehemence of my fourteen years.

'She can't be prettier than the girl who works in the bar,' he replied gravely.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to be rude,' I said.

I had forgotten how touchy Andrés could be on the subject of female beauty. From his point of view – which even then, at the height of my adolescence, struck me as slightly absurd – no woman could compare with the waitress he was pursuing. He spent every free moment scrounging enough money to enable him to spend Saturday evenings drinking at a corner of the bar where she worked. Drinking and suffering, of course, because she, the prettiest girl in the world, spoke to everyone but him.

‘You do forgive me, don’t you?’ I urged. I didn’t want him to go, I needed someone to talk to.

‘All right,’ he said.

‘Do you fancy a stroll?’ I suggested. I didn’t want to go straight home, I needed time to sort out the feelings at that moment thronging my mind.

‘We could cycle.’

‘I’d prefer to walk, really. I’ve got a lot to think about.’

We set off along a path which, starting from the church, encircled the valley where Obaba’s three small rivers met. It was narrow and somewhat ill-suited to two walkers like us with bikes to push, but I felt very drawn to the landscape you could see from there. It was green and undulating, with a scattering of white houses, the sort of landscape that appears in every adolescent’s first attempts at poetry.

‘It looks like a toy valley,’ I said.

‘Yes, I suppose it does,’ replied Andrés, rather unconvinced.

‘It looks like those cribs you make at Christmas time,’ I added, stopping for a better look. I was starting to feel euphoric. The strange vision I’d had in the choir of the church had made my heart drunk.

It had stopped raining at last and the swans were taking advantage of the lull to seek out scraps of food along the edges of the lake. The friendly passer-by who had been throwing them bread was now walking away towards the city along the main path of the park, his empty white bag folded beneath one arm.

Attracted by the new turn the day was taking, Esteban Werfell left his notebook and went over to the window. ‘I was so young then!’ he sighed, recalling the conversation he’d had with Andrés.

Yes, very young, and tormented by the remarks made about Engineer Werfell and about his own mother, tormented and confused, seeking in picture books the affection and security he failed to find at school or in the streets of Obaba. His heart then had been like a small Cape of Despair, fertile soil for a fantasy figure like Maria Vockel.

He wanted to believe in the reality of that fair-haired young girl, he wanted to believe in her words. The way in which she had appeared to him was, after all, not so very different from the methods employed by the heroines in the novels he read.

Even after all these years, Esteban Werfell still felt it right to consider Maria Vockel his first love. Walking along the path encircling the little valley, he grew melancholy, dreamy, just like Andrés. For the first time in his life, he felt he understood how his companion suffered over his waitress.

‘At least you can see her. I’ll never see mine.’

He remembered his words now with a smile. They were ridiculous, like most of the words recorded in his personal journal of the time. But to deny the past was mere foolishness.

‘Why don’t you go to Hamburg? That’s where your father’s from, isn’t it?’ reasoned Andrés. He was concerned with details, but not with the apparition in itself, nor with the likelihood of such an occurrence. On the contrary, it seemed quite reasonable to him. He knew of lovers who had communicated in much stranger ways than that. By becoming owls, for example. Maria Vockel must have had some reason for choosing that particular method.

Leaving his memories for a moment, Esteban Werfell opened the window and leaned out over the park. The sky was growing steadily bluer and late evening visitors were out walking their dogs or throwing bread to the swans. On the other side of the lake, a group of some twenty children were playing football.

‘Anyway,’ he thought, leaning on the windowsill and returning to his memories. ‘Andrés was no exception. People in Obaba had no difficulty in accepting even the strangest events. My father used to make fun of them.’

‘They have crude minds, Esteban,’ his father would say. And he always came up with some humorous anecdote to

illustrate that point of view. But he had disliked the anecdotes and it seemed to him that his father was unfair to the people of Obaba, that he was wrong to despise them.

‘I was a true Werfell for all that, though,’ he thought, closing the window and returning to the table. ‘However much I wanted to believe in that apparition, my mind refused to do so. This was real life, not a novel. It seemed ridiculous to accept even the possibility that what had happened was real. No, Maria Vockel could not be real, she could not possibly live at 2 Johamesholfstrasse.’

Esteban Werfell closed his eyes and saw the fourteen-year-old Esteban on his way home, full of doubts, telling himself that his head was full of stories about Hamburg, full of women’s names, the names of singers and actresses, and that they must be the source of the words he had heard in the choir.

Before continuing, he counted the number of blank pages left in the notebook. There were quite a few left, enough for him to be gripped by a desire to finish that last part of the story as quickly as possible. If he finished early, he would still have time to go out into the park and watch a bit of the football match the children were playing. But the desire lasted only a moment. He must tell the story with all its details just as he had decided to do before returning home from his visit to Hamburg.

He dipped his pen in the inkwell. A final glance at the park revealed a small boy wagging an umbrella threateningly at the swans.

‘What are you doing home so early?’ my father asked as soon as I opened the front door.

‘I didn’t go to the cinema after all.’

‘Why not?’

‘Because I fainted in church,’ I confessed, shamefaced.

I saw that he was alarmed and quickly explained that nothing untoward had happened. The darkness in the church and the flickering candle flame had been to blame. I shouldn’t have stared so hard at it.

Sighing, my father gestured towards the library.

'Esteban, if it's spirit you want, you'll find it in those books in there not in the darkness of a church,' he said. After a silence, I stammered: 'Can I ask you something?' I couldn't go on talking to him and still keep my secret. I needed to know what he thought about the Maria Vockel incident.

'Of course.'

He sat down in an armchair and indicated that I do likewise. He appeared nervous and it seemed to me that he no longer saw me as a child but as an adult, capable of making my own decisions.

I described everything that had happened from the moment I entered the church: the conversation during the fainting fit, my feelings at the time and my subsequent doubts. He listened attentively, without interrupting. When he saw that my story was over, he got up and began to pace about the room. He stopped by the window, plunged in thought. 'Now he'll go to the library and look up some book that will explain it all away,' I thought. But he didn't move.

'Could something like that really happen?' I asked. 'Is there any chance Maria Vockel might be real?'

'There's only one way to find out, Esteban. By writing to that address,' he said, smiling. I was glad to find him so understanding. 'I'll help you write the letter,' he added, still smiling. 'I haven't quite lost my grasp of my own language yet.'

Despite their friendly tone, his words made me lower my gaze. My father had not been successful in his attempts to teach me German. Even at home, I preferred to speak as I did with my friends and I grew angry when he refused to use 'the language we both knew'. But that Sunday everything was different. Repenting of my earlier attitude, I promised myself that I would make up for lost time, that I would not offend him like that again.

But my father was happy, as if the events of the afternoon had revived pleasant memories. He put his hand under my chin and made me look up. Then, spreading out an old map of Hamburg on the table, he started to look for Johamesholfstrasse.

'Look, there it is. In the St Georg district,' he said pointing to it on the map, adding: 'Shall we write the letter now?'

'Yes, I'd like that,' I replied, laughing.

Now, after all these years, I realise that the letter marked the end of an era in my life. I, who had never been like the other children in Obaba, was about to become, from that moment on, a complete foreigner, a worthy successor to Engineer Werfell. I would no longer go around with my schoolfriends and I would never again return to the church. Furthermore, I would begin to study, to prepare myself to go to university.

The sending of the letter was followed by a period riven by doubt. One day I'd be certain that a reply could not be long in coming, the next I'd think such a possibility ridiculous and grow angry with myself for cherishing such hopes.

That state of uncertainty ended one Friday, when my father came running into the room where I was reading and showed me a cream-coloured envelope.

'Maria Vockel!' I shouted, getting up from my chair.