

VINTAGE SARAMAGO

SEEING

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## About the Author

JOSÉ SARAMAGO was born in Portugal in 1922. His oeuvre embraces plays, poetry, memoirs and several novels which have been translated into more than 40 languages. It was the publication in 1988 of *Baltasar & Blimunda* that first brought him to the attention of an English-speaking readership. This novel won the Portuguese PEN Club Award, as did his next, *The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis*, which also won the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Award. His fiction has since established him as one of Europe's most influential living writers. In 1998 he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. José Saramago died on 18 June 2010.

Margaret Jull Costa has translated works by Eça de Queiroz, Fernando Pessoa and José Régio, as well as a number of leading Spanish authors. Her translation of José Saramago's *All the Names* won the Weidenfeld Translation Prize.

Also by José Saramago

in English translation

*Fiction*

The Manual of Painting and Calligraphy

Baltasar & Blimunda

The Year of the Death of Ricardo Reis

The Gospel According to Jesus Christ

The History of the Siege of Lisbon

Blindness

All the Names

The Tale of the Unknown Island

The Stone Raft

The Cave

The Double

*Non-fiction*

Journey to Portugal

For Pilar, every single day  
For Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, who lives on

# Seeing

José Saramago

Translated From the Portuguese by

Margaret Jull Costa



Harvill Secker  
LONDON

Let's howl, said the dog  
*The Book of Voices*

TERRIBLE VOTING WEATHER, remarked the presiding officer of polling station fourteen as he snapped shut his soaked umbrella and took off the raincoat that had proved of little use to him during the breathless forty-metre dash from the place where he had parked his car to the door through which, heart pounding, he had just appeared. I hope I'm not the last, he said to the secretary, who was standing slightly away from the door, safe from the sheets of rain which, caught by the wind, were drenching the floor. Your deputy hasn't arrived yet, but we've still got plenty of time, said the secretary soothingly, With rain like this, it'll be a feat in itself if we all manage to get here, said the presiding officer as they went into the room where the voting would take place. He greeted, first, the poll clerks who would act as scrutineers and then the party representatives and their deputies. He was careful to address exactly the same words to all of them, not allowing his face or tone of voice to betray any political and ideological leanings of his own. A presiding officer, even of an ordinary polling station like this, should, in all circumstances, be guided by the strictest sense of independence, he should, in short, always observe decorum.

As well as the general dampness, which made an already oppressive atmosphere still muggier, for the room had only two narrow windows that looked out onto a courtyard which was gloomy even on sunny days, there was a sense of unease which, to use the vernacular expression, you could have cut with a knife. They should have postponed the elections, said the representative of the party in the middle, or the p.i.t.m., I mean, it's been raining non-stop since yesterday, there are landslips and floods everywhere, the abstention rate this time around will go sky-high. The representative from the party on the right, or the p.o.t.r.,

noded in agreement, but felt that his contribution to the conversation should be couched in the form of a cautious comment, Obviously, I wouldn't want to underestimate the risk of that, but I do feel that our fellow citizens' high sense of civic duty, which they have demonstrated before on so many occasions, is deserving of our every confidence, they are aware, indeed, acutely so, of the vital importance of these municipal elections for the future of the capital. Having each said their piece, the representative of the p.i.t.m. and the representative of the p.o.t.r. turned, with a half-sceptical, half-ironic air, to the representative of the party on the left, the p.o.t.l., curious to know what opinion he would come up with. At that precise moment, however, the presiding officer's deputy burst into the room, dripping water everywhere, and, as one might expect, now that the cast of polling station officers was complete, the welcome he received was more than just cordial, it was positively enthusiastic. We therefore never heard the viewpoint of the representative of the p.o.t.l., although, on the basis of a few known antecedents, one can assume that he would, without fail, have taken a line of bright historical optimism, something like, The people who vote for my party are not the sort to let themselves be put off by a minor obstacle like this, they're not the kind to stay at home just because of a few miserable drops of rain falling from the skies. It was not, however, a matter of a few miserable drops of rain, there were bucketfuls, jugfuls, whole nils, iguaçús and yangtses of the stuff, but faith, may it be eternally blessed, as well as removing mountains from the path of those who benefit from its influence, is capable of plunging into the most torrential of waters and emerging from them bone-dry.

With the table now complete, with each officer in his or her allotted place, the presiding officer signed the official edict and asked the secretary to affix it, as required by law, outside the building, but the secretary, demonstrating a degree of basic common sense, pointed out that the piece

of paper would not last even one minute on the wall outside, in two ticks the ink would have run and in three the wind would have carried it off. Put it inside, then, out of the rain, the law doesn't say what to do in these circumstances, the main thing is that the edict should be pinned up where it can be seen. He asked his colleagues if they were in agreement, and they all said they were, with the proviso on the part of the representative of the p.o.t.r. that this decision should be recorded in the minutes in case they were ever challenged on the matter. When the secretary returned from his damp mission, the presiding officer asked him what it was like out there, and he replied with a wry shrug, Just the same, rain, rain, rain, Any voters out there, Not a sign. The presiding officer stood up and invited the poll clerks and the three party representatives to follow him into the voting chamber, which was found to be free of anything that might sully the purity of the political choices to be made there during the day. This formality completed, they returned to their places to examine the electoral roll, which they found to be equally free of irregularities, lacunae or anything else of a suspicious nature. The solemn moment had arrived when the presiding officer uncovers and displays the ballot box to the voters so that they can certify that it is empty, and tomorrow, if necessary, bear witness to the fact that no criminal act has introduced into it, at dead of night, the false votes that would corrupt the free and sovereign political will of the people, and so that there would be no electoral shenanigans, as they're so picturesquely known, and which, let us not forget, can be committed before, during or after the act, depending on the efficiency of the perpetrators and their accomplices and the opportunities available to them. The ballot box was empty, pure, immaculate, but there was not a single voter in the room to whom it could be shown. Perhaps one of them is lost out there, battling with the torrents, enduring the whipping winds, clutching to his bosom the document that

proves he is a fully enfranchised citizen, but, judging by the look of the sky right now, he'll be a long time coming, if, that is, he doesn't end up simply going home and leaving the fate of the city to those with a black car to drop them off at the door and pick them up again once the person in the back seat has fulfilled his or her civic duty.

After the various materials have been inspected, the law of this country states that the presiding officer should immediately cast his vote, as should the poll clerks, the party representatives and their respective deputies, as long, of course, as they are registered at that particular polling station, as was the case here. Even by stretching things out, four minutes was more than enough time for the ballot box to receive its first eleven votes. And then, there was nothing else for it, the waiting began. Barely half an hour had passed when the presiding officer, who was getting anxious, suggested that one of the poll clerks should go and see if anyone was coming, voters might have turned up to find the door blown shut by the wind and gone off in a huff, grumbling that the government might at least have had the decency to inform people that the elections had been postponed, that, after all, was what the radio and television were for, to broadcast such information. The secretary said, But everyone knows that when a door blows shut it makes the devil of a noise, and we haven't heard a thing in here. The poll clerk hesitated, will I, won't I, but the presiding officer insisted. Go on, please, and be careful, don't get wet. The door was open, the wedge securely in place. The clerk stuck his head out, a moment was all it took to glance from one side to the other and then draw back, dripping, as if he had put his head under a shower. He wanted to proceed like a good poll clerk, to please the presiding officer, and, since it was the first time he had been called upon to perform this function, he also wanted to be appreciated for the speed and efficiency with which he had carried out his duties, who knows, with time and experience, he might one day be the

person presiding over a polling station, higher flights of ambition than this have traversed the sky of providence and no one has so much as batted an eye. When he went back into the room, the presiding officer, half-rueful, half-amused, exclaimed, There was no need to get yourself soaked, man, Oh, it doesn't matter, sir, said the clerk, drying his cheek on the sleeve of his jacket, Did you spot anyone, As far as I could see, no one, it's like a desert of water out there. The presiding officer got up, took a few uncertain steps around the table, went into the voting chamber, looked inside and came back. The representative of the p.i.t.m. spoke up to remind the others of his prediction that the abstention rate would go sky-high, the representative of the p.o.t.r. once more played the role of pacifier, the voters had all day to vote, they were probably just waiting for the rain to let up. This time the representative of the p.o.t.l. chose to remain silent, thinking what a pathetic figure he would be cutting now if he had actually said what he was going to say when the presiding officer's deputy had come into the room, It would take more than a few miserable drops of rain to put off my party's voters. The secretary, on whom all eyes were expectantly turned, opted for a practical suggestion, You know, it might not be a bad idea to phone the ministry and ask how the elections are going elsewhere in the city and in the rest of the country too, that way we would find out if this civic power cut was a general thing or if we're the only ones whom the voters have declined to illumine with their votes. The representative of the p.o.t.r. sprang indignantly to his feet, I demand that it be set down in the minutes that, as representative of the p.o.t.r., I strongly object to the disrespectful manner and the unacceptably mocking tone in which the secretary has just referred to the voters, who are the supreme defenders of democracy, and without whom tyranny, any of the many tyrannies that exist in the world, would long ago have overwhelmed the nation that bore us. The secretary shrugged and asked, Shall I make a note of

the representative of the p.o.t.r.'s comments, sir, No, I don't think that will be necessary, it's just that we're all a bit tense and perplexed and puzzled, and, as we all know, in that state of mind, it's very easy to say things we don't really believe, and I'm sure the secretary didn't mean to offend anyone, why, he himself is a voter conscious of his responsibilities, the proof being that he, as did all of us, braved the elements to answer the call of duty, nevertheless, my feelings of gratitude, however sincere, do not prevent me asking the secretary to keep rigorously to the task assigned to him and to abstain from any comments that might shock the personal or political sensibilities of the other people here. The representative of the p.o.t.r. made a brusque gesture which the presiding officer chose to interpret as one of agreement, and the argument went no further, thanks, in large measure, to the representative of the p.i.t.m., who took up the secretary's proposal, It's true, he said, we're like shipwreck victims in the middle of the ocean, with no sails and no compass, no mast and no oars, and with no diesel in the tank either, Yes, you're quite right, said the presiding officer, I'll phone the ministry now. There was a telephone on another table and he walked over to it, carrying the instruction leaflet he had been given days before and on which were printed, amongst other useful things, the telephone numbers of the ministry of the interior.

The call was a brief one, It's the presiding officer of polling station number fourteen here, I'm very worried, there's something distinctly odd going on, so far, not a single voter has turned up to vote, we've been open for more than an hour, and not a soul, yes, sir, I know there's no way of stopping the storm, yes, sir, I know, rain, wind, floods, yes, sir, we'll be patient, we'll stick to our guns, after all, that's why we're here. From that point on the presiding officer contributed nothing to the dialogue apart from a few affirmative nods of the head, the occasional muted interjection and three or four phrases which he began but

did not finish. When he replaced the receiver, he looked over at his colleagues, but without, in fact, seeing them, it was as if he had before him a landscape composed entirely of empty voting chambers, immaculate electoral rolls, with presiding officers and secretaries waiting, party representatives exchanging distrustful glances as they tried to work out who might gain and who might lose from this situation, and, in the distance, the occasional rain-soaked poll-clerk returning from the door to announce that no one was coming. What did the people at the ministry say, asked the representative of the p.i.t.m., They don't know what to make of it either, after all, it's only natural that the bad weather would keep a lot of people at home, but apparently pretty much the same thing is happening all over the city, that's why they can't explain it, What do you mean pretty much, asked the representative of the p.o.t.r., Well, a few voters have turned up at some polling stations, but hardly any really, no one's ever known anything like it, And what about the rest of the country, asked the representative of the p.o.t.l., after all, it's not only raining in the capital, That's what's so odd, there are places where it's raining just as heavily as it is here and yet, despite that, people are still turning out to vote, I mean, obviously there are more voters in areas where the weather is good, speaking of which, the forecasters are saying that the weather should start to improve later on this morning, It might go from bad to worse, you know what they say, rain at midday either gets much worse or clears away, warned the second clerk, who had not, until then, opened his mouth. There was a silence. Then the secretary put his hand into one of his jacket pockets, produced a mobile phone and keyed in a number. While he was waiting for someone to answer, he said, It's a bit like the mountain and Mahomet, since we can't ask the voters, whom we don't know, why they haven't come in to vote, let's ask our own families, whom we do know, hi, it's me, yes, how come you're still there, why haven't you been

to vote, I know it's raining, my trouser legs are still sopping wet, oh, right, sorry, I forgot you'd told me you'd be over after lunch, sure, I only phoned because things are a bit awkward here, oh, you've no idea, if I told you that not a single voter has yet come in to vote, you probably wouldn't believe me, right, fine, I'll see you later then, take care. He turned off the phone and remarked ironically, Well, at least one vote is guaranteed, my wife will be coming this afternoon. The presiding officer and the clerks looked at each other, they were obviously supposed to follow the secretary's example, but not one of them wanted to be the first to do so, that would be tantamount to admitting that when it came to quick thinking and self-confidence the secretary won hands down. It did not take long for the clerk who had gone over to the door to see if it was raining to conclude that he would have to eat a lot of bread and salt before he could compete with the secretary we have here, capable of casually pulling a vote out of a mobile phone like a magician pulling a rabbit out of a hat. Seeing that the presiding officer, in one corner, was now calling home on his mobile, and that the others, using their own phones, were discreetly, in whispers, doing likewise, this same clerk privately applauded the honesty of his colleagues who, by not using the phone provided in principle for official use only, were nobly saving the state money. The only person who, for lack of a mobile phone, had to resign himself to waiting for news from the others was the representative of the p.o.t.l., of whom it should be said that, living as he did alone in the city, with his family in the provinces, the poor man had no one to call. The conversations gradually came to an end, one after the other, the longest being that of the presiding officer, who appears to be demanding that the person he is talking to come immediately to the polling station, we'll see if he has any luck with that, but the fact is he's the one who should have spoken first, but, then, if the secretary decided to get in ahead of him, too bad, he is, as

we've already seen, a bit of a smart aleck, if he had as much respect for hierarchy as we do, he would have merely suggested the idea to his superior. The presiding officer let out the sigh that had long been trapped within his breast, put the phone away in his pocket and asked, So, what did you find out. The question, as well as being superfluous, was, how can we put it, just the teensiest bit dishonest, firstly, because, when it comes down to it, everyone would have found out something, however irrelevant, secondly, because it was obvious that the person asking the question was taking advantage of the authority inherent in his position to shirk his duty, since it was up to him, in voice and person, to initiate any exchange of information. If we bear in mind the sigh he uttered and the rather querulous tone we thought we detected at one point in the phone conversation, it would be logical to suppose that the dialogue, presumably with a member of his family, had not proved to be as placid and instructive as his perfectly justifiable interest as a citizen and as a presiding officer deserved, and that he does not feel sufficiently calm to launch into some hastily concocted extemporaneous comment, and is now sidestepping the difficulty by inviting his subordinates to have their say first, which, as we also know, is another, more modern way of being the boss. What the clerks and party representatives said, aside from the representative of the p.o.t.l, who, having no information of his own, is there in a purely listening capacity, was that their family members either didn't fancy getting a soaking and were waiting for the heavens to clear once and for all, or, like the secretary's wife, were intending to come and vote in the afternoon. Only the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on seemed pleased with himself, his face bore the complacent expression of one who has reason to be proud of his own merits, which, translated into words, came down to this, No one answered at my house, which can only mean that they're on their way here now. The

presiding officer resumed his seat and the waiting began again.

Nearly an hour later, the first voter arrived. Contrary to the general expectation, and much to the dismay of the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on, it was a stranger. He left his dripping umbrella at the entrance to the room and, still wearing his plastic cape glistening with water and his plastic boots, went over to the table. The presiding officer looked up at him with a smile on his lips, for this voter, a man of advanced years, but still robust, signalled a return to normality, to the usual line of dutiful citizens moving slowly and patiently along, conscious, as the representative of the p.o.t.r. had put it, of the vital importance of these municipal elections. The man handed his identity card and voter's card to the presiding officer, the latter then announced in a sonorous, almost joyful voice the number on the card and its owner's name, the clerks in charge of the electoral roll leafed through it and, when they found both name and number, repeated them out loud and drew a straight line against the entry to indicate that the man had voted, then, the man, still dripping, went into a voting booth clutching his ballot paper, returned shortly afterwards with the piece of paper folded into four, handed it to the presiding officer, who slipped it solemnly into the ballot box, retrieved his documents and left, taking his umbrella with him. The second voter took another ten minutes to appear, but from then on, albeit unenthusiastically, one by one, like autumn leaves slowly detaching themselves from the boughs of a tree, the ballot papers dropped into the ballot box. However long the presiding officer and his colleagues took to scrutinise documents, a queue never formed, there were, at most, at any one time, three or four people waiting, and three or four people, try as they might, can never make a queue worthy of the name. I was quite right, commented the representative of the p.i.t.m., the abstention rate will be

enormous, massive, there'll be no possible agreement on the result after this, the only solution will be to hold the elections again, The storm might pass, said the presiding officer and, looking at his watch, he murmured as if he were praying, It's nearly midday. Resolutely, the man to whom we have been referring as the clerk who had gone over to the door earlier on got up and said to the presiding officer, With your permission, sir, since there are no voters here at present, I'll just pop out and see what the weather's doing. It took only an instant, he was there and back in a twinkling, this time with a smile on his face and bearing good news, It's raining much less now, hardly at all really, and the clouds are beginning to break up too. The poll clerks and the party representatives very nearly embraced, but their happiness was not long-lived. The monotonous drip-drip of voters did not change, one came, then another, the wife, mother and aunt of the officer who had gone over to the door came, the elder brother of the representative of the p.o.t.r. came, so did the presiding officer's mother-in-law, who, showing a complete lack of respect for the electoral process, informed her crestfallen son-in-law that her daughter would only be coming later in the afternoon and added cruelly, She said she might go to the cinema, the deputy presiding officer's parents came, as well as other people who were members of none of their families, they entered looking bored and left looking bored, the atmosphere only brightened somewhat when two politicians from the p.o.t.r. arrived and, minutes later, one from the p.i.t.m., and, as if by magic, a television camera appeared out of nowhere, filmed a few images and returned into nowhere, a journalist asked if he could put a question, How's the voting going, and the presiding officer replied, It could be better, but now that the weather seems to be changing, we're sure the flow of voters will increase, The impression we've been getting from other polling stations in the city is that the abstention rate is going to be very high this time,

remarked the journalist, Well, I prefer to take a more optimistic line, a more positive view of the influence of meteorology on the way the electoral mechanisms work, and as long as it doesn't rain this afternoon, we'll soon make up for what this morning's storm tried to steal from us. The journalist left feeling contented, it was a nice turn of phrase, he could even use it as a subtitle to his article. And because the time had come to satisfy their stomachs, the electoral officers and the party representatives organised themselves so that, with one eye on the electoral roll and the other on their sandwiches, they could take turns to eat right there.

It had stopped raining, but nothing seemed to indicate that the civic hopes of the presiding officer would be satisfactorily fulfilled by a ballot box in which, so far, the votes barely covered the bottom. All those present were thinking the same thing, the election so far had been a terrible political failure. Time was passing. The clock on the tower had struck half past three when the secretary's wife came in to vote. Husband and wife exchanged discreet smiles, but there was also just a hint of an indefinable complicity, which provoked in the presiding officer an uncomfortable inner spasm, perhaps the pain of envy, knowing that he would never exchange such a smile with anyone. It was still hurting him in some fold of his flesh when, thirty minutes later, he glanced at the clock and wondered to himself if his wife had, in the end, gone to the cinema. She'll turn up, if she ever does, at the last possible moment, he thought. The ways of warding off fate are many and almost all are useless, and this one, forcing oneself to think the worst in the hope that the best will happen, is one of the most commonplace, and might even be worthy of further consideration, although not in this case, because we have it from an unimpeachable source that the presiding officer's wife really has gone to the cinema and, at least up until now, is still undecided as to whether to cast her vote or

not. Fortunately, the oft-invoked need for balance which has kept the universe on track and the planets on course means that whenever something is taken from one side, it is replaced by something else on the other, something that more or less corresponds, something of the same quality and, if possible, the same proportions, so that there are not too many complaints about unfair treatment. How else can one explain why it was that, at four o'clock in the afternoon, an hour which is neither late nor early, neither fish nor fowl, those voters who had, until then, remained in the quiet of their homes, apparently blithely ignoring the election altogether, started to come out onto the streets, most of them under their own steam, but others thanks only to the worthy assistance of firemen and volunteers because the places where they lived were still flooded and impassable, and all of them, absolutely all of them, the healthy and the infirm, the former on foot, the latter in wheelchairs, on stretchers, in ambulances, headed straight for their respective polling stations like rivers which know no other course than that which flows to the sea. It will probably seem to the sceptical or the merely suspicious, the kind who are only prepared to believe in miracles from which they hope to gain some advantage, that the present circumstance has shown the above-mentioned need for balance to be utterly wrong, that the trumped-up question about whether the presiding officer's wife will or will not vote is, anyway, far too insignificant from the cosmic point of view to require compensation in one of Earth's many cities in the form of the unexpected mobilisation of thousands and thousands of people of all ages and social conditions who, without having come to any prior agreement as to their political and ideological differences, have decided, at last, to leave their homes in order to go and vote. Those who argue thus are forgetting that not only does the universe have its own laws, all of them indifferent to the contradictory dreams and desires of humanity, and in

the formulation of which we contribute not one iota, apart, that is, from the words by which we clumsily name them, but everything seems to indicate that it uses these laws for aims and objectives that transcend and always will transcend our understanding, and if, at this particular point, the scandalous disproportion between something which might, but for now only might, have seen the ballot box deprived of, in this case, the vote cast by the presiding officer's supposedly unpleasant wife and the tide of men and women now on the move, if we find this difficult to accept in the light of the most elementary distributive justice, prudence warns us to suspend for the moment any definitive judgement and to watch with unquestioning attention how events, which have only just begun to unfold, develop. Which is precisely what the newspaper, radio and television journalists, carried away by professional enthusiasm and by an unquenchable thirst for news, are doing now, racing up and down, thrusting tape-recorders and microphones into people's faces, asking What was it made you leave your house at four o'clock to go and vote, doesn't it seem extraordinary to you that everyone should have come out onto the street at the same time, and receiving in return such abrupt or aggressive replies as, It just happened to be the time I'd decided to go and vote, As free citizens, we can come and go as we please, we don't owe anyone an explanation, How much do they pay you to ask these stupid questions, Who cares what time I leave or don't leave my house, Is there some law that obliges me to answer that question, Sorry, I'm only prepared to speak with my lawyer present. There were polite people too, who replied without the reproachful acrimony of the examples given above, but they were equally unable to satisfy the journalists' devouring curiosity, merely shrugging and saying, Look, I have the greatest respect for the work you do and I'd love to help you publish a bit of good news, but, alas, all I can tell you is that I looked at my watch, saw it

was four o'clock and said to the family Right, let's go, it's now or never, Why now or never, That's the funny thing, you see, that's just how it came out, Try to think, rack your brains, No, it's not worth it, ask someone else, perhaps they'll know, But I've asked fifty people already, And, No one could give me an answer, Exactly, But doesn't it strike you as a strange coincidence that thousands of people should all have left their houses at the same time to go and vote, It's certainly a coincidence, but perhaps not that strange, Why not, Ah, that I don't know. The commentators, who were following the electoral process on the various television programmes and, for lack of any firm facts on which to base their analyses, were busily making educated guesses, inferring the will of the gods from the flight and the song of birds, regretting that animal sacrifice was no longer legal and that they were thus prevented from poring over some creature's still twitching viscera to decipher the secrets of chronos and of fate, these commentators woke suddenly from the torpor into which they had been plunged by the gloomy prospects of the count and, doubtless because it seemed unworthy of their educational mission to waste time discussing coincidences, hurled themselves like wolves upon the fine example of good citizenship that the population of the capital were, at that moment, setting the rest of the country by turning up en masse at polling stations just when the spectre of an abstention on a scale unparalleled in the history of our democracy had seemed to be posing a grave threat to the stability not just of the regime but, even more seriously, of the system itself. The statement emanating from the ministry of the interior did not go quite that far, but the government's relief was evident in every line. As for the three parties involved in the election, the parties on the right, in the middle and on the left, they, having first made rapid calculations as to the losses and gains that would result from this unexpected influx of voters, issued congratulatory statements in which,

along with other stylistic niceties, they affirmed that democracy had every reason to celebrate. With the national flag draped on the wall behind them, the president in his palace and the prime minister in his mansion both expressed themselves in similar terms, give or take a comma. At the polling stations, the lines of voters, standing three deep, went right round the block and as far as the eye could see.

Like all the other presiding officers in the city, the one at polling station number fourteen was all too aware that he was living through a unique moment in history. When, late that night, after the ministry of the interior had extended the deadline for voting by two hours, a period that had to be extended by a further half an hour so that the voters crammed inside the building could exercise their right to vote, when, at last, the poll clerks and the party representatives, exhausted and hungry, stood before the mountain of ballot papers that had been emptied out of the two ballot boxes, the second one had been an emergency requisition from the ministry, the immensity of the task that lay before them made them tremble with an emotion we would not hesitate to describe as epic or heroic, as if the nation's honoured ghosts, brought back to life, had magically rematerialised in those ballot papers. One of the ballot papers belonged to the presiding officer's wife. She had been propelled out of the cinema by some strange impulse, she had then spent hours in a queue that advanced at a snail's pace, and when she finally found herself face to face with her husband, when she heard him speak her name, she felt in her heart something that was perhaps the shadow of a former happiness, only the shadow, but even so, she felt it had been worth going there just for that. It was gone midnight when the counting finished. The number of valid votes did not quite reach twenty-five per cent, with the party on the right winning thirteen per cent, the party in the middle nine per cent and

the party on the left two and a half per cent. There were very few spoiled ballots and very few abstentions. All the others, more than seventy per cent of the total votes cast, were blank.

FEELINGS OF CONFUSION and stupefaction, but also of Mockery and scorn swept the country from north to south. The provincial town councils, where the elections had taken place without incident or upset, apart from the occasional delay caused by the bad weather, and which had obtained results that differed little from the norm, the usual number of straightforward voters, the usual number of inveterate abstainers, and no very significant number of spoiled or blank votes, these councils, who had felt humiliated by the display of centralist triumphalism that had been paraded before the rest of the country as an example of the purest electoral public spirit, could now return that slap in the face and laugh at the foolish presumption of those ladies and gentlemen who thought they were the bee's knees simply because they happened to live in the country's capital. The words Those ladies and gentlemen, pronounced with a curl of the lips that oozed disdain with every syllable, if not with every letter, were directed not at the people who had remained at home until four in the afternoon and then suddenly rushed out to vote as if they had received some irresistible order, but at the government who had hung out the flags too soon, at the political parties who had pounced on the blank votes as if they were a vineyard to be harvested and they were the harvesters, at the newspapers and the other media for the ease with which they moved from applause on the capitoline hill to having people hurled from the tarpeian rock, as if they themselves did not play an active part in the genesis of such disasters.

The provincial scoffers were right to some extent, but not as right as they thought there were. Beneath the political agitation that is racing through the capital like a gunpowder trail in search of a bomb one can sense a disquiet that avoids being spoken out loud, unless in a discussion

amongst peers, or between individuals and their closest friends, members of a political party and the party machinery, or the government and itself. What will happen when the election is held again, that is the question everyone is asking in a quiet, controlled whisper, so as not to wake the sleeping dragon. There are those who feel that the best plan would be to resist sticking the spear between the creature's ribs and leave things as they are, with the p.o.t.r. in government and the p.o.t.r. on the city council, to pretend that nothing has happened, to imagine, for example, that the government has declared a state of emergency in the capital and that, consequently, all constitutional guarantees are suspended, and then, after a time, when the dust has settled and the whole tragic incident has entered the list of long-forgotten past events, to prepare for new elections, starting with a carefully planned electoral campaign, full of solemn oaths and promises, at the same time trying to prevent, at all costs, without worrying too much about any minor or major illegalities, the possibility of the repetition of a phenomenon which a celebrated expert on such matters has already rather harshly dubbed socio-political teratology. There are also those who take an entirely different view, they protest that the laws are sacred, that what is written is there to be obeyed, regardless of who gets hurt in the process, and that if we follow the path of subterfuges and take the short-cut of under-the-table deals we will be heading straight for chaos and an end to conscience, in short, if the law stipulates that in the event of a natural disaster, the elections should be repeated eight days later, then they must be repeated eight days later, that is, on the following Sunday, and may god's will be done, since that is what he's there for. It should be noted, however, that when expressing their opinions, the political parties prefer not to take too many risks, in the spirit of trying to please everyone all the time, they say yes, but then again no. The leaders of the party on the right,

which is in government and runs the city council, start by assuming that this undoubted trump card will hand them victory on a silver platter, and so they have adopted a tactic of serenity tinged with diplomacy, trusting to the judgement of the government upon whom it is incumbent to see that the law is respected, As is only logical and natural in a long-standing democracy like ours, they conclude. The leaders of the party in the middle also want the law to be obeyed, but are asking the government for something which they know to be totally impossible, that is, the establishment and application of rigorous measures to ensure that the next election takes place absolutely normally and, presumably, produces absolutely normal results, In order, they allege, that there will be no repetition in this city of the shameful spectacle it has just presented to the country and to the world. As for the party on the left, they have gathered together all their top people and, after a long debate, drawn up and published a statement in which they express their firm and genuine hope that the approaching election will bring into being the necessary political conditions for the advent of a new era of development and social progress. They don't actually say that they're hoping to win the next election and take over the city council, but the implication is there. That night, the prime minister went on television to announce to the people that, in accordance with the current legislation, the municipal elections would be held again on the following Sunday, and a new period of electoral campaigning, of four days only, would begin at midnight and end at midnight on Friday. Putting on a grave face and speaking with great emphasis, he added that the government was sure that the capital's population, when called upon to vote again, would exercise their civic duty with the dignity and decorum they had always shown in the past, thus declaring null and void the regrettable event during which, for reasons that have yet to be clarified, but into which investigations are already fairly well advanced,

the usual clear judgement of the city's electorate had become unexpectedly confused and distorted. The message from the president will be kept back until the close of the campaign on Friday night, but its concluding phrase has already been chosen, Sunday, my dear compatriots, will be a fine day.

And it really was a fine day. From early morning on, with the protecting sky in all its splendour and the golden sun blazing forth against a backdrop of crystalline blue, to use the inspired words of a television reporter, the voters started leaving their homes and heading for their respective polling stations not in a blind mass as had appeared to happen a week before, but with each person setting out alone, and so conscientiously and diligently that even before the doors were opened there were already long, long queues of citizens awaiting their turn to vote. Not everything, alas, was pure and honest at these gatherings. There was not a single queue, not one amongst the more than forty that formed at various points of the city, that did not have amongst them one or more spies whose mission was to listen and record the comments of the people present, the police authorities being convinced that, as happens, for example, in doctors' waiting rooms, a prolonged wait will always sooner or later loosen tongues, revealing, even if only by the merest slip, the secret intentions of the electorate. The great majority of the spies are professionals and belong to the secret service, but some are volunteers, patriotic amateurs of espionage who offered to help out of a desire to serve, without remuneration, as it said in the sworn declaration they signed, whilst others, quite a few, were attracted merely by the morbid pleasure of being able to denounce someone. The genetic code of what, somewhat unthinkingly, we have been content to call human nature, cannot be reduced to the organic helix of deoxyribonucleic acid, or dna, there is much more to be said about it and it has much more to tell us, but human nature

is, figuratively speaking, the complementary spiral that we have not yet managed to prise out of kindergarten, despite the multitude of psychologists and analysts from the most diverse schools and with the most diverse abilities who have broken their nails trying to draw its bolts. These scientific considerations, whatever their value now or in the future, should not allow us to forget today's disquieting realities, like the one we have just seen, for not only are there spies in the queues, trying to look nonchalant as they listen and secretly record what people say, there are also cars that glide quietly past the queues, apparently looking for a place to park, but which carry inside them, invisible to our eyes, high-definition video cameras and state-of-the-art microphones capable of projecting onto a screen the emotions apparently hidden in the diverse murmurings of a group of people who believe, individually, that they are thinking of something else. The word has been recorded, as has the emotion behind it. No one is safe. Up until the moment when the doors of the polling stations were opened and the queues began to move, the recorders had captured only insignificant phrases, the most banal of comments on the beauty of the morning and the pleasant temperature or about the hurried breakfast they had eaten, brief exchanges on the important subject of what to do with the children while their mothers came to vote, Their father is looking after them at the moment, we're just going to have to take turns, first me, then him, I mean, obviously we'd rather have come to vote together, but it was just impossible, and, as the saying goes, what can't be cured must be endured, We've left our youngest with his older sister, she's not reached voting age yet, yes, this is my husband, Pleased to meet you, Nice to meet you too, It's a lovely morning, isn't it, It's almost as if it had been laid on deliberately, Well, I suppose it was bound to happen some time. Despite the auditory acuity of the microphones passing and re-passing, white car, blue car, green car, red car, black car, with their