

ALMA

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Translated by Peter Kahn

Anecdotes are the only part of history that I love.

Mérimée

The rag-picker picks up what culture throws away, and sometimes found amidst the garbage are rags as valuable as humanity, subjectivity or depth.

Walter Benjamin

I am simply asking myself: Why a story at all- not that it was a bad story, or untrue, or that it debased anything. Why not, simply, the truth?

Doris Lessing

I remember masturbating once, thinking only of myself, and I felt no pleasure at all. My fingernails have no ridges and shine as if painted with nail polish. I like Chinese food, Indian food, Italian food, Japanese food and Mexican food. I can competently cook at least half a dozen dishes from each of these cuisines. I don't know anything about Australian or Chilean cuisine. I eat everything except offal and organ meats. At one time in my life the Cathars seemed agreeable to me. When I was older I was surprised to discover that the world was full of them. When I was little I had flat feet. Maybe I still have them. As a teenager I had scoliosis. My anatomical correctness is artificial. I joke with my friends that I'm the Pamela Anderson of orthopedics. I don't believe man will ever land on Mars. Until I was twenty years old I never wrote a single word that had anything to do with literature. I still don't really know what I'm talking about when I use that word. Perhaps it's best not to try to make literature. Just write, plain and simple. I learned to read and write when I was four years old. When I was five I wrote a letter to a girl in my class declaring my love and assuring her that we would get married when we were thirty. I still feel guilty about not keeping my promise. I started writing just to see what it was all about. I discovered that it was about many things. I'm not Colombian. I'm not the director of *El País*. I've never lived in Segovia. I'm not a soccer player. I'm not a cyclist. Melodies easily get stuck in my head but I almost always mess up when I try to sing a verse. At least twice in public I've confused the expression, "the miracle of the bread and fish" with "the miracle of the breast and fist." My favorite sandwiches are packaged ones you get at service stations. I prefer sandwiches made by others to ones I make myself. When somebody else makes them they have that added mystery of not knowing what's inside. To produce a mutation no cause is necessary. Causes are only necessary when you want things to remain static, immobile. When I eat meat I have to be careful not to

get any sinew stuck between my third and fourth molars on the upper right side because when that happens it can be really painful. Beautiful people tend to come from dissimilar parents, one who's beautiful, the other not so much. With good books something similar seems to happen (this sentence sounds deliberately enigmatic). As it says in the Wen Fu, "By combining the popular Xia Li melody with the refined Bai Xue melody, we increase the greatness of both." I fantasize about writing a story in which the main character (female) keeps a scanned record of all her experiences (faces of lovers, theater programs, movie tickets, hotel towels, etcetera) and saves them on her hard drive in a folder called Alma. Standing in a crowded subway car I see less heads higher than mine than heads that are lower, from which I deduce that my height must be above average. I imagine that after death, to get into paradise, we'll all have to enter a password on a keyboard the way we do at the ATM. Only the chosen will be able to remember their password. I'd like to witness the moment of the resurrection, to see how atoms cluster together into particles and then accumulate until they form appendages that in turn join together to complete their original bodies. Van Gogh's ear will meld back into the rest of his head. I imagine the moment God presses the rewind button on his remote control because history has reached the end and he wants to watch it all over again from the beginning and forget once and for all the causal adverbial clauses. Just after I was born an inexperienced nurse put my crib near an air conditioner. When my father came in to see me, he found a baby that was turning blue and shivering with cold. I wish I could remember my father's face in that moment. I believe women are better long-range planners than men. I've never had a maid. One day an old woman stopped me in the street and asked me for some money to buy a bus ticket (she said her purse had been stolen). I gave it to her. It's hard for me to get drunk. I recover well from heavy drinking. I've never tried Alka-

Seltzer. I'd like to write a story like *Against the Grain*, by Huysmans, with a character who rents a small studio with furniture that is one hundred percent from IKEA. The character would live almost his entire life connected to the internet, visiting extravagant pages—pages like words that appear only once in the dictionary and almost nobody knows. A digital sybarite. That would be the gist of it, the seed from which the character would grow in successive stages. I like aspirin. I like the groove drawn across the pill's diameter that makes it resemble the empty set symbol. The old woman I mentioned a moment ago asked me for money a second time for the same reason. This time I didn't give her anything. I sleep the sleep of the righteous. I suffer from bruxism. Bruxism is like rage, rage that keeps everyone safe and is only dangerous to oneself. If I were an artist I'd conceive of an installation composed of a house equipped with all the conveniences, almost blindingly illuminated with halogen lamps, furnished with the latest advances in automation. In the living room I'd paint a crevice in the wall. On the floor of the kitchen there would be a couple of small crystal urns. One would contain a live rat, the other would contain a cockroach (also alive). In the bedroom there would be a built-in cabinet with a glass case containing a moth (alive). In the perfectly sanitized bathroom I would put an air freshener. Every time someone pushed its button it would fill the air with a repulsive odor of detritus. My favorite chess piece is the knight. With the knight you can move everywhere on the board without landing on the same square twice. You can jump over the other pieces. Not even the king can do that. The knight is like the third dimension in chess. In writing, something similar happens. You can jump over coined phrases, over space and time: the third dimension of language. It occurs to me that this could be a good definition for literature. For a long period of my life I preferred long-sleeves to short-sleeves. When I was five I asked God for proof of his existence. I asked for loads of

toys. They were supposed to appear in the morning at the door to our house if he wanted me to believe in his omnipotence. It goes without saying that those toys didn't appear. Since then, not only don't I believe in God but I'm still a quite angry at him. One thing's for sure: I could be the character in that Huysmans-style novel. On my bedroom wall there's a reproduction (printed with a Canon Pixma 150) of Oedipus and the Sphinx by Gustave Moreau. Moreau is a painter—in poor taste, who I really like. In fact, the story about the girl who scans objects to convert them into memories and the one about the boy who rents a small studio apartment are suspiciously similar. They could become the same story. Or at least the two characters could get to know each other. She would have a lover named Darío who's a professional photographer. She would scan his skin (his face, his butt, his hands, the bottoms of his feet...) and she would contemplate those vestiges of that absent body as if they were the images of some badlands on Google Earth. When I had a beard I stroked it constantly. Now that I don't have a beard I don't know what to do with my hands. I write. That I do. They once performed a scintigraphy on me. Until I was ten years old I thought I could get pregnant. I avoided sitting on any toilet where a fertile woman had recently sat, including my mother. I have various explanations for this but almost all of them are too philosophical to put down in writing. I stopped smoking hashish several years ago. I was never very good at team sports. When I played soccer I always played goalie. I was good. That's what they said. I have good reflexes. I move quickly. I suddenly appear next to people without them even noticing. Sometimes I startle them. I think the two best pieces of Western music are Bach's *Erbarne dich, mein got*, and Vivaldi's *Cum dederit...* I think having two jobs is unbearable, unless one of them serves to forget the existence of the other. When I have to go to the gym I prowl around like a caged animal, trying to put off the moment when I'll finally have to leave and go back home.

There's no place that I feel more alone than at the gym. It's a fantastic place to disconnect the mind. To be only biceps, triceps, deltoids. To be only a body. At the gym people avoid each other's eyes like meteorites crossing paths in the void. The gym is a space of atrocious and devastating beauty. At the gym your degrees, the prizes you've won, are all unimportant. No intellectual merit is relevant. There you are just one more among many, insignificant amid the tons of steel subject to the tyranny of gravity, lying in wait for the beautiful bodies of athletes who try to defy it. You grab the weights and feel the force of gravity pulling your body toward the center of the earth. The gym is the closest thing to a communism of the body. It's becoming increasingly difficult to urinate in the street. Even the narrowest streets are now equipped with surveillance cameras. I've urinated under traffic lights, on tree trunks, into the sea, into a river, into a sink, on the windshield of a Mercedes, in the shower. I've never urinated in a doorway. Few things are as disagreeable as smelling the sweaty odor of someone in the audience attending the presentation of a book on aesthetics. I remember visiting the Barcelona Zoo as a child, but I don't remember having seen Snowflake. One of the good things about white shirts is that it's hard to notice dandruff on them. I really like white shirts. As a child I played at blanking my mind while staring out the window on public transportation. I think my life since then has been an attempt to fill those blank spaces. I hardly dedicate any time to the present. I am more interested in the present than in the future and in the present less than the past. A friend said that to be Jewish consists in substituting the word yesterday for the word tomorrow and the verbs in the past for their equivalents in the future. I circumcised myself when I was twenty years old. I bled and then an enormous blister like a toad's wattle appeared just below my glans. I had to explain this to the doctors. It was my way of becoming a Jew. Of starting to write.