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I knew very early on that I would need to leave.

And I did as soon as I was able to read: by plunging into the Golden Book encyclopedia.

From Egypt, whose pyramids I know by name, to revolutionary France; from Costa Rica, where giant ants are devoured by anteaters, to Italy, rattled by Etna, from Salzburg, which saw Mozart compose minuets at the age of six, to Philadelphia, where Benjamin Franklin invented the lightning rod, I go from elsewhere to elsewhere, from era to era. To be anywhere but here, at the awkward age that I am?

The house I live in near the church of Saint-Ludger, in Rivière-du-Loup, is graceful and spacious, but it feels stifling. My mother, nicknamed Catin – “doll” – has cut all ties with her family and demands that we marvel at the amber of her eyes. My father, who acts like an only child – his sister having exiled herself to the city of Quebec – expects us to listen with rapt attention to his stories as chief of police. And my grandmother, who lives under our roof like an empress, keeps reminding us that the Aprils are a class apart.

I'd love to prove her wrong, but I'm the only one in my grade who has perfect spelling and can multiply two-digit numbers without a pencil and paper. I'm also the only one to bump into open locker doors and freeze at somersaults. Something about space eludes me. And about how people connect.

For me, withdrawal becomes the best way to access the world. Reading the encyclopedia, which I borrow from the library one volume at a time, seems to open up the space I need. I can easily remember even the most random facts.

But the most important thing I learn from the encyclopedia – though I don't know it yet – is how to travel from picture to picture, page to page, at the rhythm of my hands. From Parthenon to millepede, from dugout canoe to cumulonimbus, I connect and compare. I am honing my desire for the infinite.

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At nineteen, I leave Rivière-du-Loup to study visual arts in the city of Quebec, at Université Laval. Like the thousands of other internal emigrants who, in the early 1970s, journey from Quebec's small towns to its cities, I find myself in a radically different world.

My room in the Latin Quarter overlooks a strange back courtyard. My eyes lock onto it. A tangle of clotheslines, balconies with patched railings, garbage bags, half-open shutters, dead house plants, floorecloths, stacks of beer cases... Down below, figures shuffle about in long coats, their steps leaving enigmatic signs on the canvas formed by a patch of snow. Part of the courtyard was excavated, but the work was interrupted by the sudden arrival of winter: scattered around a low, unfinished concrete wall lie pieces of scaffolding, lumber, old tarps, and concrete blocks.

Where does it come from, the feeling that this place is talking to me, telling me something, asking to be heard, understood? Standing at the window, I let myself be drawn in. My eyes glide over the planks, spiral down metal stairs, climb up a post...

Seeing should always be like this: tirelessly on the move.

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[...] the path,
more than a path,
is a place,
a place for being right there,
as anywhere,
for only a moment.

On the other hand,
every place is a path
even if we dream of lingering there.¹

¹ Roberto Juarroz, *Poésies verticales I-II-III-IV-XI*, Paris: Gallimard, collection Poésie, 2021, p. 279. Our translation.

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At Université Laval's school of visual arts, I am not encouraged to do photography: I have to draw, sculpt, paint. Few of my professors see the A student in me: sullen, dressed in zebra-print pants, she's clenching her fists.

Forced to learn on my own, I fall back on my encyclopedic reflexes and start to record everything with my camera, including life in the Arts building. Overcoming my shyness and reserve, I approach my classmates one by one to capture in their eyes a hunger that is also mine. The magnetization that I find, the power of connection: I will continue to look for them everywhere, even in eyes that are turned away.

Some students spend hours putting the finishing touches on their monochromes. I need to move, to come and go, because that is how images come to me.

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One day, a few classmates who have invented instruments in a course join a group of music students outside in the courtyard. Gestures cross as they jam on xylophones, makeshift percussion instruments, mouth harps and banjos, creating a tumult amplified by their wind-tossed hair and the jumble of undulating shadows cast by the spring sun. In the architecture of these tangled bodies, I come across the mystery of the back courtyard again: a kind of original, almost cosmic, state of being, where everything seems to be simultaneously coming together and apart. Is this what the mystics that I'm reading were thinking of?

Form is a trace of the formless; it is the formless that produces form.²

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Between semesters, I go home to Rivière-du-Loup, which – I'm struck to realize – has become an elsewhere for me. The bridge, the waterfall, the Pointe, the river, the wild roses, my parents, my coworkers at the tree nursery: everything stands out in new relief, detaches itself, becomes fragmented, complex. I discover that I need to understand even what's already familiar, to feel again

² Plotin, *Ennéades*, VI,7.33.30, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1924-1938. [Plotinus, *Enneads*, VI.7.33, as cited in the epigraph to Jacques Derrida and Maruizio Ferraris, *A Taste for the Secret*, tr. Giacomo Donis, Cambridge: Polity, 2001, p. 4.]

what I thought I'd already experienced what I thought I'd already experienced. The act of returning imposes itself on me as a gesture, a form: a never-ending journey.

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Summer is coming to an end and nothing is right. I'm completely exhausted. Dr. Godbout, after diagnosing a case of mononucleosis, prescribes bedrest. Forced to take a break from university, I'm back in my childhood bedroom, but the encyclopedia I discover is infinitely more supple, more mysterious, in reach: *In Search of Lost Time*. Moving from the external to the internal, it's a whole other odyssey: I recognize its enchantments, detours, dangers.

Proust speaks of returns, illness, withdrawal, bedrooms. And about memory – the incredible journeys it takes us on – the desire for fiction, and the body. I devour the seven volumes in a state of numbness shot through by flashes of brilliance.

It is in sickness that we are compelled to recognise that we do not live alone but are chained to a being from a different realm, from whom we are worlds apart, who has no knowledge of us and by whom it is impossible to make ourselves understood: our body.³

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What can photography say of this estrangement from the body and the self if the narrator remains hidden, mute? And of these bouts of sadness that give a whole other density to reality, and that surface in the afternoons, when I'm alone in the apartment on rue Richelieu?

On one such day, at the age of 25, again in a bedroom, I leave my usual place behind the viewfinder, cross the space – the air buzzing with the subtle vibrations of the self-timer – and turn to face the lens. Sitting on the bed, a wool hat pulled low on my forehead, unrecognizable, I wrap myself in old furs and look away from the pile of papers and architectural drawings in front of me. A boundary has been crossed; what is happening here? I thought I could abolish the distance, make myself “one,” fill an absence. But no: other absences, other distances take over and spin out ahead of me. I have insinuated myself into the picture, but someone else has appeared. I sense that this character will

³ Marcel Proust, *Le côté des Guermantes*, Paris : Gallimard, Collection Folio, 1988, p.288 [Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time, III, The Guermantes Way*, tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff and Terence Kilmartin, rev. D.J. Enright, 1992, repr., London: Vintage, 2000, p. 321.]

always ask to be transformed. Here, she comes across as romantic, but staged; naïve, but intensely self-aware.

I have committed body and soul, and yet a feeling of detachment comes over me, that of the traveller who has no choice but to put her identity on the line. Who is that crossed the boundary? An *I*, no doubt. Consider the brusquely lyrical sentence that I attach to the image: “I spent days doubting about everything.” But who is the *I* that doubts with such cool assurance? And *everything*: what is it, if not a gap, an opening?

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My partner, Serge, won't be going today to the studio he rents above the *La chambre blanche*. And so I'm free to spend time in this space in which I like to feel like an outsider. I go in with a roll of images that I photographed in encyclopedias and then enlarged. Having made myself into a picture, I can now survey the world of images from the inside.

I tape a photo of a roaring waterfall to the wall. In my right hand, I hold another one, of a volcano, its plume of smoke moving up my legs and into the folds of my skirt. This is what matters most to me: releasing the picture I take. Yielding it to movement, of water, air, wind or smoke, in the hope that it in turn takes me and – this is the dream – frees me from myself.

I'm contemplating water, holding fire. Between the two: this body in which I am trying to instill a sense of balance.

I've been taking ballet classes. I'm wearing my ballet tights and slippers; my hair is tied back. My left hand rests on the handle of an open door as though I were holding the barre at the dance studio. I'm still a long way from leaps and pirouettes. First I need to understand what supports movement: posture, flexibility, angles, direction. With my back to the window, I let my shadow extend all the way into the vast, dark space ahead. Who said that dance is always a movement toward light? If I were to dance now, it would be to bring the night back into the picture.

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I'm living with Serge, in an apartment not far from the studio he has rented on rue Saint-Laurent, above the Slovenia butcher shop. I meet him there in the late afternoon and find the large, decrepit loft transformed by the low-angled light coming in through the windowed facade. Serge has prepared

the materials he will need to create, starting tomorrow, a series of drawings and sculptures. To my eyes, the creation is happening right now: the undulations of the sheets of Kraft paper spread out on the floor and the shadows cast by the scattered balls of paper create an astral landscape that is extended by paint splatters on the rough floor and the play of light on the walls. One by one, I frame these mirages, pictures of the untouched. He will subsume it all in the inscription of his signs tomorrow; I take flight here, in the world itself.

To dream is to forget the materiality of one's body, to confuse in a way the outer and the inner world. The omnipresence of the cosmic poet has perhaps no other origin. I always dream a little what I see [...] When I'm in the countryside, the landscape suddenly becomes almost interior by I don't know what process of gliding from the outside to the inside and I move on in my own mental world.⁴

A few years ago, I could only have explored this lunar studio – this foreign world – on my own. Something is slowly opening up inside me. My world is populated by singular beings. Here is Serge, playing for me the part of a kind of horned explorer, a fantastical figure visible only as a silhouette in the anemic light. The snapshot reminds me of another one, taken by a lake, where I photographed the opaque silhouette of a group of friends, backlit by the sunset, two hands emerging from the form in greeting. And I follow the thread back to other related photographs, of interiors and exteriors, that I've recently classified and numbered.

I spread the images on my table, move them around, remove some and add others. I feel them attract, repel, extend one another. I hear their desire to be as vast as the sky, deployed over walls, horizontally: endless sentences to be walked along.

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We share this conviction: travel sharpens the eye. And so, together, we're often on the move. We've been in the Algarve for just a day and already the hotel room is a mess. I woke up first, brushed my hair. When Serge gets up, I see his bare chest spangled with drops of sunlight that have entered through the gaps in the blinds. These luminous rays have come from so far to land on his skin: I

⁴ Jules Supervielle, "En songeant à un art poétique," *Œuvres poétiques complètes*, Paris: Gallimard, collection Pléiade, 1996, p.563. [Jules Supervielle, *Selected Poems and Reflections on the Art of Poetry*, tr. George Bogin, New York: SUN, 1985, p. 161.]

perceive their tactile dimension. In the instant in which I capture the delicacy of their gesture, I feel as if I am the one doing the touching.

Gentleness has an astonishing connection to thought. A feeling of weightlessness that it shares with cosmonauts, comets. Gentleness liberates skin from being skin, it doesn't resonate, it merges, it winds itself around the lines of the landscape; it doesn't dampen anything, it gives space to things and removes the weight of shadows.⁵

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Although making art side by side involves with its share of imbalances and tensions, a deep gentleness flows between the two of us. It also circulates through the group of loyal and supportive friends that we are a part of. Without it, I would have long been swallowed by the chasm that separated me from the world as a child and that always threatens to open up again. Gentleness – its power – is the bridge that connects us.

Ten years: that's how long Serge and I have been lovers. Would we believe it if we were told, on this warm Portuguese morning, that this will be the last summer of our life together?

I've taken hundreds of pictures of him, but I never get tired of it: his way of abandoning himself to my gaze feels new every time. I like to photograph him when he's reading, outside, chin cupped in one hand, or off-guard, as he delicately rubs the tip of one finger over a fingernail on the other hand until the light bounces off it like a mirror. I will photograph him forever.

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The first time I meet Charles, he's nineteen. Two days earlier, penniless, he'd spent a whole night shivering in an underpass in Geneva, a knife tucked against his thigh. In the truck loaded with umbrellas that brought him back to Paris, he felt his body becoming feverish.

The moment he walks through the door of the Quebec Delegation gallery, with his big backpack and his worn leather jacket, I can guess who he is: Serge's student. He stands out in the crowd of guests in navy-blue blazers and suits. Charles leans his bag against a wall and immediately dives

⁵ Anne Dufourmantelle, *Puissance de la douceur*, Payot, collection Manuels, Paris, p.129. [Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, tr. Katherine Payne and Vincent Salle, New York: Fordham University Press, 2018.]

into the constellation of small dark photos in which, among specks of light, I can occasionally be made out.

Have I ever seen anyone linger so long over my pictures? He looks, looks and looks. When we introduce ourselves an hour later, he tells me he likes the way the title evokes immanence: *Moi-même, portrait de paysage*. But, he adds, the “self” is him. These images speak of the fever seizing him at this very moment; of that night, too, that he spent on a boat between Brindisi and Patras, looking up at the stars and telling himself he couldn’t ever be happier.

This feeling of fusion that he’s telling me about: is that what will lead him, two years from now, to make me into a written character whose life is essentially his own?

She gets definitively lost, just like the household objects do, in a slow whirlwind. She has lost all her senses or gained them all. She is not really herself, nor someone else. It’s as if she had two hearts. Two hearts beating at the same time.⁶

Some forty years later, he will go as far as to write – in the first person, for the exhibition *Traversée* – a piece of fiction in which he reinvents my life. Not only will I have consented to it: I will have wanted it. Because it’s what I myself have always done: create from the lives of others.

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After the party, very late at night, we go up onto the roof of La Chimère, the house by the river that I rent every summer in St-Roch-des-Aulnaies. Earlier, in the attic, Gérald enveloped us in the smouldering notes of his twelve-string; Serge dressed up as a straw sculpture, Charles recited a voodoo prayer, Nathalie unraveled a small patchwork-colored house before our eyes; others played bassoon, imitated the cries of shore birds, read Russian poems. I intoned, in a very low voice, the longest lament I know. The Perseids are visible tonight. Stretched out every which way on the asphalt shingles, we scan the sky, all looking in different directions. Cries ring out here and there on the roof, piercing the night air. Every streak of light – even the ones we miss – sends a thrill to us all.

⁶ Raymonde April, *Voyage dans le monde des choses*, exh. cat., Montréal: Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal, 1986, p.17. Our translation.

The next morning, even though the house is flooded with light, Gérald and I look for the last night's dazzlements in each other's arms. The summer is coming to an end. We both know that in the city, our love will lose its clarity. Gérald, naked, sits down in the armchair with the metal legs and lights a cigarette. Miraculously, he doesn't resist today. I capture his beauty, his gaze, and at the same time, the sun's glare on his bent knee.

Back in the city, I'm preparing my classes, sitting in the living room, when I notice the lace curtain billowing in the window of the summer kitchen. It is the exact image of the images I want to make: strong and transparent, like a light wind. The curtain floats over a chair that beckons me to have a seat. When objects are obeyed, reality can do its theatre. I sit down, rest my hands on my thighs and risk this gesture: I close my eyes. The image of the wind enters my thoughts and takes me back to the shore of Saint-Roch-des-Aulnaies, where my happiness is on hold.

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With Robert and a childhood friend, Marcel, I buy a triplex on rue de Lanaudière. They live on the second floor, and I'm on the third. We share the ground floor, where I've set up a studio. I bump into Marcel every day: on the balcony, in the laundry room, in the yard. As he tells me about his past – the troubles of his former classmates at the country school in Saint-Arsène, his first crush on a boy at the Cinéma Princesse in Rivière-du-Loup – my own past and place of origin are stirred up in me, but also this need to make life into a story.

I recently pulled out more than five hundred unpublished photos, which I sorted into piles of some fifteen images, by film roll and the order I took them in. Turning the stacked photos over and over again, I suddenly rediscover the pleasure of the associations and resonances that the encyclopedia offered me as a child. What interests me is not the intrinsic quality of the photos – which is what after all? – but their way of telling my story, in which life and photography merge. Ellipses, obsessions, epiphanies, gaps: what I see is my quest itself, in all its performative dimension.

When I juxtapose images, everything is there at once, but when I stack them, the previous image is erased. A temporality introduces itself, and a frontality, too. Together, they bring me over to the side of cinema. I decide that I will make these images into a film, and I already know the title: *Tout embrasser* – “*Embracing Everything.*”

Everything. Again and still. As though *a contrario*. To name this breach into which the infinite pours itself.

Because “the preceding image is always missing.”⁷

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This missing past is also an elsewhere, which I now have the impression of having approached in all its radicality. For the past two months, I’ve been living in India, specifically in Mumbai, in the Marine Drive area. I share an apartment with a stranger hired by the owner to clean and cook for me. His name is Ram. His body is thin and wiry; his skin the color of copper. He has a moustache and piercing eyes. His smile has a grave gentleness that I’ve never come across before.

Without him, I would have cut short the four-month artist residency I’ve committed to and returned to Montreal ahead of schedule. But what gives me the courage to face the ambient chaos is the prospect of coming back to Ram in the evenings, hearing him murmur his prayers in the kitchen, sharing with him – though it’s forbidden – the exquisite meals he prepares, and watching Bollywood movies with him, which he summarizes in English, with its mysterious syntax.

Every day, I have to cross the city from east to west to reach my studio in the Mazgaon area. For weeks, this commute of just a few kilometres feels like an ordeal because of the intense heat, constant noise, and heavy traffic. Then one day, back from a brief stay in a quiet place in Kerala, I understand that to escape what I’ve been experiencing as a kind of hell, I need to accept that I’m a part of a greater whole and let myself be carried along. What had seemed threatening or aggressive transforms itself into an extraordinary sensation of weightlessness and freedom.

Has this inner shift altered my gaze? In the Bandra district, as I approach the water and see the birds mingling with the dogs on the shore, the verticality of humans imitating that of the flags, and the grey of the sky embracing that of the water, I’m seized for the first time by a sense of oneness with the world – a state of “oceanic feeling.”

Aren’t the feelings, the half feelings, all the most secret and the deepest states of our inner self strangely woven into a landscape, a season, a certain quality of the air, a gentle breeze?

⁷ Pascal Quignard, *Sur le jadis*, Paris: Gallimard, collection Folio, 2002, p. 67. Our translation.

[...] If we want to find ourselves, we cannot descend into ourselves: we are to be found outside ourselves, outside.⁸

What I had intuited earlier – in the presence of the encyclopedia, the back courtyard, the arts circuit musicians, Serge’s studio at dusk – suddenly stands out very clearly. When I return to the apartment and catch the scent of the spices Ram is preparing for his dahl – turmeric, cumin, garlic, nigella, chili pepper, curry leaves – I understand that what I just discovered in Bandra touches all the senses and can happen anywhere.

A month later, I’ll also discover that I’m in love.

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More than ever, my life is governed by returns. Every year, after the monsoon, I go back to Ram in Mumbai; there again is the little temple with the silver garlands, the wide-eyed spice seller, the studio’s dusty courtyard, the speckled façade of the Kaanchwala building. In the summers, I return to my little cottage at L’Anse-au-Persil, ten minutes from where I grew up, and where I rediscover the barking of the seals, the lavender-blue flowers of the marsh rosemary, and, of course, my mother, whose heart is becoming weaker, but who is told daily that she doesn’t look her age.

Immersed in this cyclical life, I often take photos similar to ones I took in the years before. When I was younger, this would have worried me. Not today. Because I know that something essential is happening in the intervals, variations, repetition.

*

One morning, when I go down to the shore to admire the delicate salicornia growing here and there in the mud, I sense something unusual. Turning toward the rocks, I see in a crevice a small, slender-bodied creature looking at me. It glides away abruptly, snake-like, then reappears higher up, standing on its hind legs, staring intently at me. “A weasel!” I tell myself. I’ve never seen one before. It darts away and returns, supple and tense, fierce and funny. It looks so indignant! I want to cry out or laugh every time it pops into sight, but I keep still so I don’t scare it away. The spectacle continues for

⁸ Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Gesammelte Werke*, Berlin, 1934, II/2, p.236, cited by Emil Staiger in *Les concepts fondamentaux de la poétique*, Lebeer-Hossmann, 1990, p.52 [Hugo von Hofmannsthal, as cited in Emil Staiger, *Basic Concepts of Poetics*, tr. Janette C. Huson and Luanne T. Frank, University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1991, p. 83.]

many minutes. I watch, amazed, motionless. And then it's over. The creature doesn't come back. I never see it again.

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In the fall of 2020, I get a call from my sister Marcelle: our mother has died. She was fine the day before. She was found sitting upright in her armchair; on the carpet, directly under her open hand, lay the pill she had been about to take when her heart gave up. This detail, which marks the exact moment when returning to her became impossible, obsesses me. I loved her.

In the following months, inconsolable, I go back into my archives and decide to digitize the negatives of photos I took between 1973 to 1999. Among them I find my mother, but also others who were dear to me and have died: my father, my aunt Rolande, Lise, Jean-Charles, Jean-Claude, Louise, Jean...

To my surprise, transformed by the passage from analog to digital, a number of photos I've always neglected now capture my attention: Serge lovingly holding the paw of his dog Castor; Michèle, looking solemn, sitting in a garden in Bercy; Fabienne and her angelic gaze in the reflection of a shop window... Isn't it curious that it took a technical transformation for these images to be recovered from oblivion and become such vivid objects of memory?

I feel no need to transform, assemble, or superimpose these photos. Is it out of respect for the singular journey that has brought them to me? All I want is to welcome them in their uniqueness, simplicity, starkness. And to let them tiptoe into the art world. I decide to present them in the order in which I took them, because I know that each of them is able to outplay time, proposing its own associations and vanishing points.

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As organized as it is, this *traversée* – which is one of many you've undertaken, Raymonde – is necessarily imaginary, multiple and open-ended, like this text I'm writing as if I were you.

Charles Guilbert