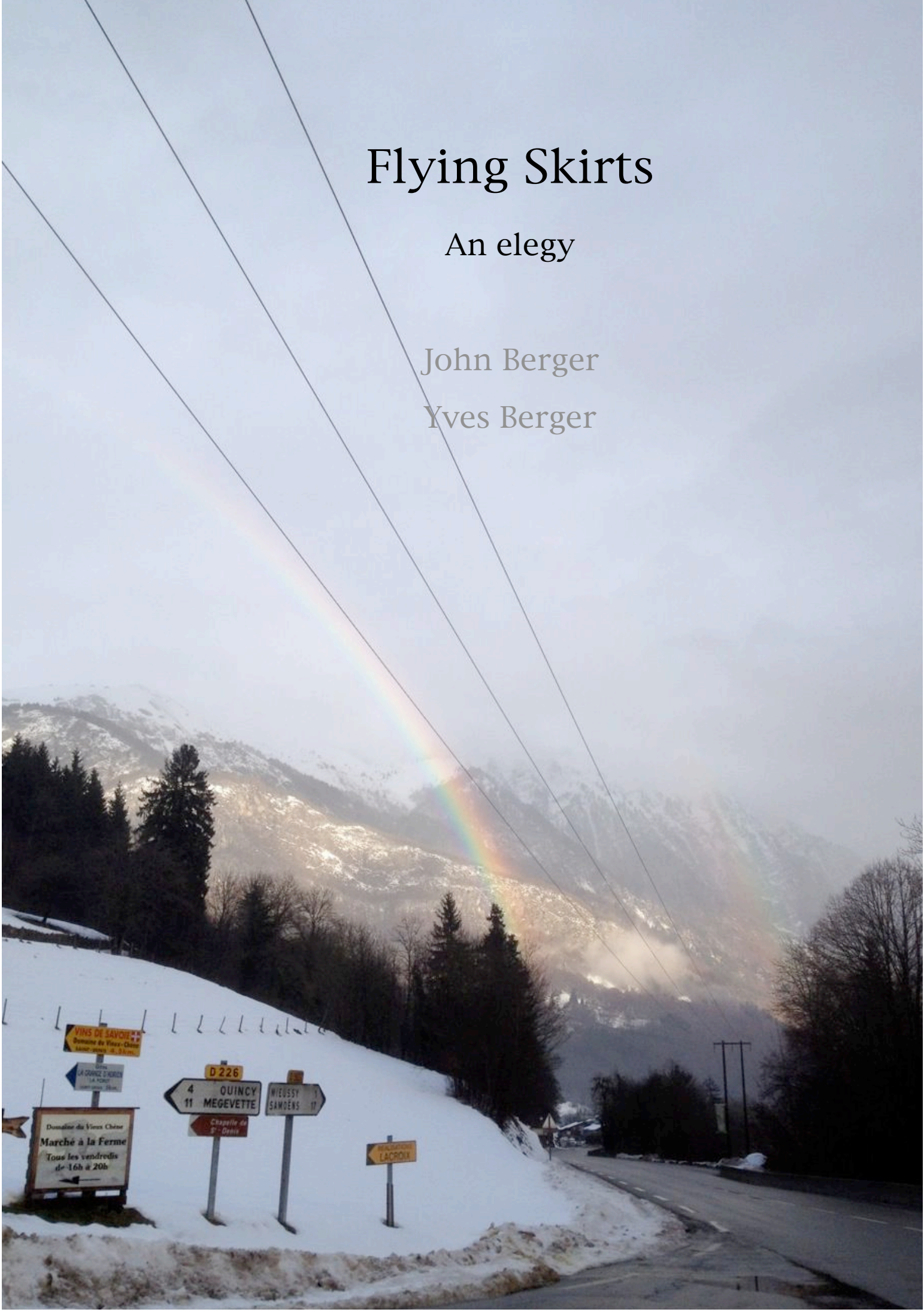


Flying Skirts

An elegy

John Berger

Yves Berger





“Mama,

My first London show is about to open. How much I miss you're not here. And how much I know you would have been pleased.

I can see you, beautifully dressed-up, smiling, with this smile of yours I keep in my heart. Facing me is Noel Road, where you used to live some years before I was born. I imagine you walking down, crossing this corner, with that same smile.

So much is the same and so much is different. That's how it goes Mama. And if, as you used to tell me : “Rome wasn't built in one day”, maybe the most essential things we carry deep inside, from the day we are born to the day we die. Yes, maybe what you carried fifty years ago down Noel Road, I carry now as I'm sitting in front of the gallery. And if my paintings come from somewhere, I believe it may be between you and me, then and now.



Where life never ends, as our love, Mama.”

You died four weeks ago. Last night for the first time you came back. Or, to put it in another way, your absence was replaced by your presence. I was listening to a recording of Beethoven's Rondo n.2 for piano (op. 51). For almost nine minutes you were that Rondo or that Rondo was you. It contained your lightness, your persistence, your raised eyebrows, your tenderness.

We are making this elegy to you and it's a kind of reply to the Rondo.

At the same time it's a message to the reader about you. To you and about you. And about the forty years during which we lived together and worked on the same things.



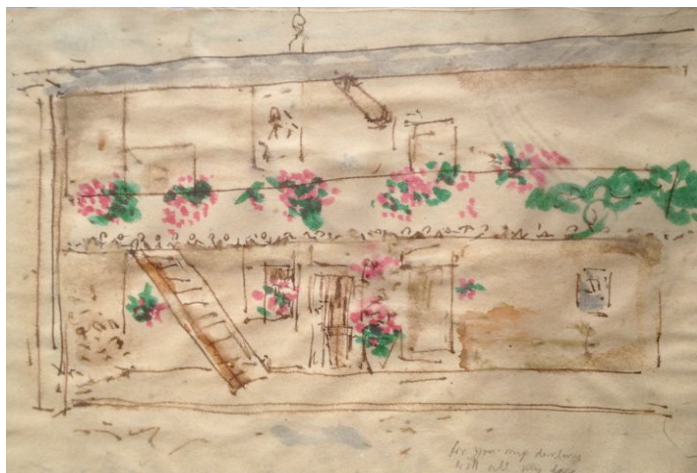
To you and about you. Quite often when listening to music played solo, one has, the impression at first of overhearing something addressed to somebody else ; then one becomes the somebody else. And so perhaps a reader may become you.

When you were watering your plants, the ones in the soil along the front of the house and the ones in boxes for the balcony, I sometimes saw a link with prayer, and also the next link between prayer and love. The temperature of the water changed according to the weather and how long the bucket had stood in the sunshine. Sometimes it was warmer than a body. Sometimes it was chilling. But this did not alter the lovingness of the act, nor the way I loved you in your watering hat.

And suddenly writing this I think of some lines by Mahmoud Darwish and I see us eating in a restaurant with him in Ramallah (or was it in Nablous ? I would have asked you, and you with your prompt memory and your dexterity with records - you handle them with the same panache as you deal from a pack of playing cards - you would have told me immediately. Now you can't !) You said little during the turbulent conversation but you asked him to read a poem, and he was flattered and recited very calmly.

The lines I'm thinking of now are not what he read then but these :

« ... and you told me, if I die before you,
save me from canned words and expired dates.
Take me away from the earth wherein I sleep,
for maybe a blade of grass will show you
how death is but another planting ... »



You liked looking after plants because it was a way of touching, adjusting the future - just as you adjusted my scarf by the front door before I went out into the cold. You were devoted to the future not because you believed in utopias but because such a devotion enables us to contest and sometimes outflank the present. You passed through the present like a runner carrying messages from past to future and you had the body of a runner and a jockey and an ice-skater.

You jumped horses, supported Black Liberation, danced on ice, married Dilip from India when you were nineteen, and left the States for good, before we met. You took your steps, whether on ice or in life, discreetly ; there was nothing flamboyant about the way you chose things.

When I watch you, you have the air, the attentiveness of an experienced pathfinder. In the way you wear a hat, coat, hold your head, open a door, turn round. You are a pathfinder.



As you proceed calmly - almost dreamily- you are on the look-out for possible yet never assured tracks. Tracks leading to alternative futures because you quietly, sardonically refuse the stagnant present.

You have the reconnoitring feet and finger-tips of a pathfinder. You don't waste words ; often a brief smile tells all.

Along your tracks, which cross the present, you carry what you consider may be useful from the past towards a sought-for, unknown future. And you carry this selected heritage like a very light knapsack between your shoulders blades. It appears to weigh nothing. As for the future - it's there in the exchange of glances.

In an envelope on the table at which I'm writing are two lenses for your glasses, brand new, straight from the optician. Remember ? You could only lie on your back, any other movement, despite the morphine, was too painful. You kept notes, taking your glasses on and off. Often they got hidden and lost. Sandra or I would find them under a pillow, among the bedclothes, beneath a newspaper. Then you noticed how the lenses in their bottom halves, where they correct hypermetropia -long-sightedness- were a little worn and you said : why not a new pair ? And I ordered them from the old prescription. It would take ten days to make them. And for some reason I decided to pay for them straightaway, a kind of pledge. When I went to collect them, I had already kissed your closed eyelids for the last time.

I pick them up. Both the left one and the right one correct myopia in their upper halves and hypermetropia in their lower halves. You wore glasses or contacts since your early childhood. With them your vision became used to discerning with a special clarity both the near and the far. Both past and future?

I hold them up to my old eyes and look through them. The scale of what I see becomes confused but the surrounding brightness increases. You gazed and observed and chose through such a transparency ; it was intrinsic to your vision.

I think again of the Rondo. Several times the Rondo stops abruptly as if before a lasting silence ; then it restarts. And in each sections it repeats certain refrains. The special transparency of your glasses held to my eyes is like the persistence of the Rondo.

I shut my eyes and I see your repetitions, your refrains, transforming forty years of bustle and of research and of getting lost and of finding half-answers, transforming forty years into a single act.



During those years nearly all the pages I wrote I passed first to you. And you responded in a flash and made suggestions and typed them and sent them out and followed them up and arranged translations and contracts.

Whilst writing I consistently awaited your reactions. Writing for me is a form of stripping away, of trying to lead the reader closer to something naked. And the

expectation of this nakedness, we shared. We wanted to peer together at what lay behind the names of things and, when we did, we held on to each other tight. This holding on gave me the courage to continue when again writing alone.



The habit has become intrinsic. Even writing these pages now I await your response.

What would you say is the opposite of monumental ? Aerial ? The act of Becoming expressed more of your nature than the act of Being. When we were riding together on the motorbike - how many did we have over the years ? Four ? - you were a very calm and still pillion, yet I had the sensation that it was you who were propelling the bike with me as a navigator.

You turned everything you could into a vehicle for Becoming. That's why the blue of the ceiling of our bedroom upstairs in the barn was so appropriate. Its planks were already painted this blue when we moved in forty years ago. A sky blue. Probably the colour was chosen because it discourages flies, and the stables for the cows was immediately below the room. When we woke up in the morning we contemplated this blue as if it were the face of the day confronting us. A beckoning space.



A day or two ago , a soul from the past beckoned me. Amie Johnson, the aviator. The first to fly solo across the Pacific, from London to Australia. In 1930. I remember a song about her from when I was a young kid.

“There’s a little lady who has captured every heart...”

I’d seen photos of her and I wanted to look at her face again. I wanted to see whether a strange premonition was right. I tracked down some photos. I would have loved to have shown them to you. You’d have raised your eyebrows high, and a little later, I think you would have nodded, smiling.



You shared similar habits of anticipation. Pathfinders.

The way you both hold your heads. The way you both look intently at what is there in front of you and simultaneously at what is beyond it.

When you took a shower and washed your hair and came into the kitchen and sat on a chair near the cooker so that I could dry your hair with a hair-dryer plugged

into a plug to the right of the gas-rings, you touched your hair when I had finished, and you brushed it hard backwards, never around your face or down.



You brush it as if it is being swept back by a wind as you go forward.

Remember how Rema Hammami nicknamed you Flying skirts? And we called her Donk for Donkey because of her luxuriant mane of hair.

When you observed that one of your sneakers was dirty and needed whitening, you washed it immediately, or as soon as you could in the sink, and sat down at the table to apply the whitener with your slender, nimble fingers. Then you put the pair of shoes in their special place in the wardrobe. And like this they would be straightaway ready for the next occasion when you needed to put them on to make an excursion. The pathfinders.

I don't know whether what I'm going to tell you now, you knew or didn't. There are so many levels of knowing and, often, knowledge at the deeper levels, will not fit into words or thoughts. I believe you knew.

When you were lying on your back and could not move because of the pains which would pierce you, when all we could do to keep the pain quiescent was to give another dose of morphine or cortisone or rearrange one of the pillows under your body, when you could not raise to eat and could only drink by sucking through a straw, when you could only be fed morsels on a teaspoon -one with a handle that you liked, when your body was washed six times a day, when you could only piss and shit into nappies, when we rubbed your heels and elbows to prevent bed-sores, you were incomparably beautiful. And this incomparable beauty emanated from your courage.

How ? you asked Sandra, your nimble hands plucking at the air, how to go ?

Come, you said, your hands beckoning Yves, tell me something ...

Your courage, instead of trying in vain to overcome fear, welcomed it as a guest.

The beauty of your courage accompanied you to the end. And, defying time, it stays with us. It fills the silence.



As I drive back here from the main road I of course pass that mysterious bench under its wooden shelter which the council put up two years ago for the kids from that hamlet waiting for the early morning bus to take them to school three miles away in the village centre.

Remember how when you suggested an after-lunch stroll before restarting our paper work, we sometimes decided to walk in that direction? And after a while you would say : let's sit down for a moment on the bench. You already got tired quite quickly, particularly when there was a north wind and walking back we'd often be walking against the wind.

We sit on the bench. There's something strange about it. The seat is very high, way off the ground. When we two adults sit on it with all our weight, our feet scarcely touch the road.

We sit there, legs dangling, wondering what the explanation for this can be, and laughing because the increquity is funny. We were never there at eight in the morning to see what the kids did.

Often now when I drive past the bench I see us sitting there, legs dandling, as if over eternity.

This afternoon a bowl of the last (till next year) raspberries from the garden. I see you, year after year, weeding them, taking off the old offshoots, tying the new ones to beanpoles. You wore gloves to protect your hands. You swore at the nettles.

These raspberries are large and , because of the August sun, considerably sweeter than the earlier ones, than those I put one by one into your mouth, when you could no longer move in the bed. They had nevertheless a taste you loved. You grinned with pleasure as you closed your mouth.

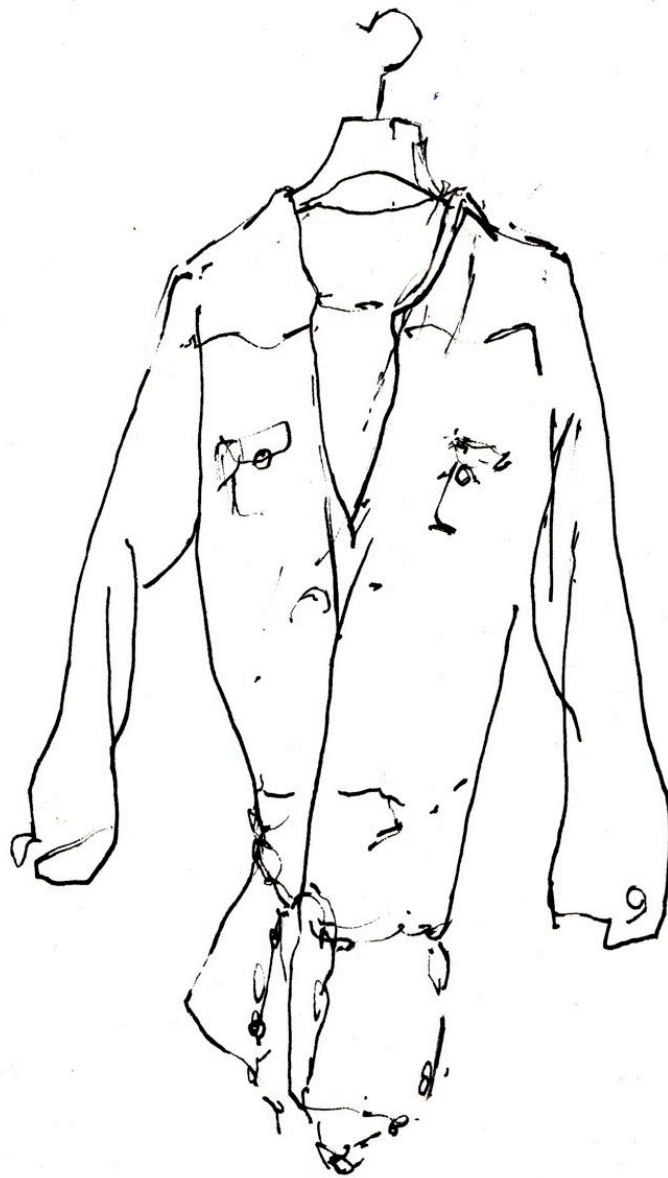
How to measure the time of that pleasure entirely surrounded as it was by an horizon of endured pain ? I don't know. Perhaps immeasurable.

This not knowing however brings me close to you. Or is it that it brings you close to me as I taste the raspberry I've just put into my mouth?

What to do with your clothes ? The question following a beloved's death must be being asked at this moment in innumerable houses. The answers to it are clear : offer some to close members of the family, offer some to intimate friends and neighbours, give some to Distribution Charities, keep a few for love's sake.

The answers are obvious, yet the question intimately persists as a subterranean query which brooks no answer.

I'm hanging up some of your clothes in this message :











We are looking backwards and we have the feeling you are with us as we look. This is nonsense because you are beyond time, where backwards and forwards cannot exist. Yet you are with us.

Could it be that in some incalculable way it is we who (briefly!) join you somewhere beyond time?

And could it be that this happens because of the nature of the moments recalling? Moments which, as they occurred, were already eternal.

How many quotations from Spinoza did you type, print out and place for me? Amongst them this one :

“But nevertheless we sense and experience that we are eternal. For the mind no less senses those things which it conceives in understanding than those which it has in memory. For the eyes of the mind by which it sees things and observes them are proofs. So although we do not remember that we exist before the body, we sense nevertheless that our mind in so far as it involves the essence of the body under a specie of eternity is eternal, and its existence cannot be defined by time or explained by duration.”

“Whatever the mind understands under a species of eternity, it does not understand owing to the fact that it conceives the actual present existence of the body, but owing to the fact that it conceives the essence of the body under a species of eternity.”

Spinoza, Ethics Part 5, *Concerning the power of the intellect or, on human freedom.*

“Where are you Mama? Someone said the real place of the dead is nowhere. But what does that mean? We, in our lives, can’t refer to that. We don’t know what is nowhere.

I remember Papa stroking you forehead and hair, as you could move less and less, saying : there, there darling, there... Slowly, slowly, almost whispering, his voice approaching silence. How many times did he repeat that, Mama?

On good days I can feel you. Generally above me – above us rather. A diffuse presence. It feels as if you’re smiling. I tend to believe you’re approving what I’m doing, but I suppose, approval, like any judgment, is not relevant to you where you are. It’s our business down here on this earth.

On bad days, well, let’s not talk about those. Ok?

The walnut tree has been outrageously generous these last weeks. Now there’s almost none left on the branches. Most are drying in the studio. I spread them so there’s not too many on each layer. Plus I move them around every other day. But some rot, they seem hard to dry this year. Maybe all the rain we’ve been having. Or is it always like that. Is there a trick?

It’s night now here. A dark one. I hear the stream down in the valley : it’s rushing down. You are that flow.

Toussaint just passed and the cemetery is covered with flowers. Bunches and bunches. It’s like the fire works on the evening of le 14 Juillet. You are that blast of colours.

After shouting at Mélina – because of course she was complaining that I turned off the TV- I told her I wasn’t feeling well. It wasn’t her fault. I told her I miss you, I miss Mamie. She cried, slowly. With a finger she checked if I was crying too (we were in the dark). I wasn’t. I told her I couldn’t, I didn’t manage to. Men, often, have lost that gift, if they hadn’t they might not be so stupid, I told her. I think she agreed. I didn’t say my tears were pouring down inside. You are those tears, and hers.

As we don’t know where you are, we go to where you body lies. Soon the stones we have chosen will be arranged on your tomb. With the earth and plants we’ll put in the middle, we believe and hope it will be beautiful.

I know I can’t ask you now to type what I have just written, as you always did. So we will do it for you.

