

CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

May 7, 2020—RISD Museum, RISD Sculpture, RISD Center for Arts & Language
Presented as a livestream via Zoom
<http://www.experimentallecures.org>

Free of All Ties

by Pablo Helguera

*The white chess pieces are in zugzwang:
They have nothing left but moving the king
From one square to another
Waiting terrible maneuvers
Against their besieged castling:
Fly kicking amidst the spiderweb.
I too am in zugzwang:
I have nothing left but moving
From one room to another
Waiting for bad news
Inevitable
Like the slow falling of the night.*

Luis Ignacio Helguera (1962-2003)

[Delivered while walking with a live streaming smartphone, Pablo Helguera leaves his apartment, descends the stairs, and exits his apartment building.]

Today is May 7th, 2020. It's shortly after 5 pm, and I am in my apartment building in Brooklyn. I am stepping out this minute after throwing away the trash. These days I seem to accumulate so much trash. I am in lockdown in an apartment, as most of us are, generating waste. Our neighbor, who acts like a communist-era building supervisor, goes through my trash every day to ensure that I am recycling. We are not recycling right now. A dark part of me wished that on the week when I had Covid-19 he went carefully through all my trash, item by item, touching everything. If I don't ever see him again, I will know why.

These days we are just seemingly in an eternal holding pattern, waiting for the day's news, news of the daily dead, listening to the governor's press conference, trying to find silver linings everywhere, trying as much as possible to think of something else, and of course, generating waste.

I live in Red Hook, in a pocket of a neighborhood that was unintentionally created by the construction of the Brooklyn Queens Expressway. Originally inhabited by Italian immigrants it is nonetheless a place with no significant history, a place that will likely be subsumed by the rising currents of the East River and completely forgotten one day, just like me, so it is fitting that I live here. We will both disappear one day from the world and the collective consciousness.

I often think of great writers that have extolled the beauty of this city: E.B. White with *Here is New York*, or James Agee writing about South Brooklyn, or Walt Whitman, with *Crossing Brooklyn Ferry*. I am not a great writer, but in any case, at present, I happen to believe that extolling the beauty of something is rather a symptom of feelings of deficiency, just as saying to someone that you love them all the time is a way in which you compensate for something that your actions evidently did not sufficiently show. Today I understand things differently: I am almost 50 years old and even in this moment where I came as close as never before to face death myself due to the virus, I've decided that I've had my share of empty gestures, of political grandstanding, of art history theories and monotone academic presentations, of descriptions, of labels. Surprisingly, as someone who was born nostalgic and has been one since a toddler, I see myself parting ways now even with nostalgia. And, as a deep-seated atheist, I am convinced as always that nothing lies beyond death—not even darkness nor silence, because there will be no awareness of either. And I have never believed in the spiritual or in imaginary vibes that supposedly run and transform the world. All I believe in is art, and in the memory of the living. And I do believe in cultural time zones, in the places where our collective actions have shaped current feelings and attitudes, which often remain frozen in cycles of practice in specific places, while in other places they evolve, or devolve into something else.

I apologize if I am blunt. Sickness did that to me. An essay writing professor I had, when I could barely write in English, admonished me then that the author should never apologize to the reader for their writing, and instead, he would say, they should fix their writing. He was right, but I am right as well in this moment. I have a reason to be blunt, and I cannot fix it, like many things today we wish we could fix.

That over there was the Human Compass Garden, now closed. That over there across the street was Mazzatt, where I used to order always the same dish and the owner adamantly tried to convince me to try something else. The Chinese restaurant over there, Red Apple, which was always open during snowstorms and hurricanes, and which I always thought would remain open even after a nuclear attack, has closed, permanently. Things that we thought were permanent are no longer.

We lived a few decades where we were given the dream of omnipresence, through the online world and its many doors and bridges. We thought we could be anywhere and everywhere. That dream ended a few weeks ago. We learned that there is little omnipresence without human touch, without physicality. Unwillingly, I am back to my childhood in Mexico in the 1970s, when stores were not open all of the time or always accessible, where there were things that one could not readily find and it would require an adventure to get them. I would ask my mother to order a couple of cans of root beer from my aunt who would travel to the United States border to buy American merchandise every other month. It was a business she had, before NAFTA. We stood in line often. The unpredictable was the rule. Perhaps this is why, as unsettling as this moment is, it does feel familiar and does make me regress to those adapted instincts of those times.

[Re-enters apartment building, ascends stairs, and re-enters apartment.]

But I am not here to talk about my neighborhood, or the fact that my local laundromat has closed, or that the older lady that lived next door to us, who used to sit in the sidewalk every day, has now passed away from Covid. I am here to talk about the very relationship between time and place, and particularly about the relationship between a particular place and the un-particular time it occupies.

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[Sits at desk and begins screensharing.]



So I am interested in places that are like Spinoza once described, places that persevere into themselves. If they have any purpose, they're purpose would be to be more themselves. Which in the case of these locations, means that they are both anonymous and outside of time, outside of reason. They are the proverbial insect trapped in amber for millions of years. I read the other day that somewhere in the Midwest, in an Illinois coal mine ten years ago, researchers discovered a 320 million year old piece of amber, very similar to modern resins. There's a place in that region several hundred miles from where I am right now, of which I want to talk to you right now.

This is an all-American neighborhood, like most of the American suburbs, it finds its identity in its anonymity.

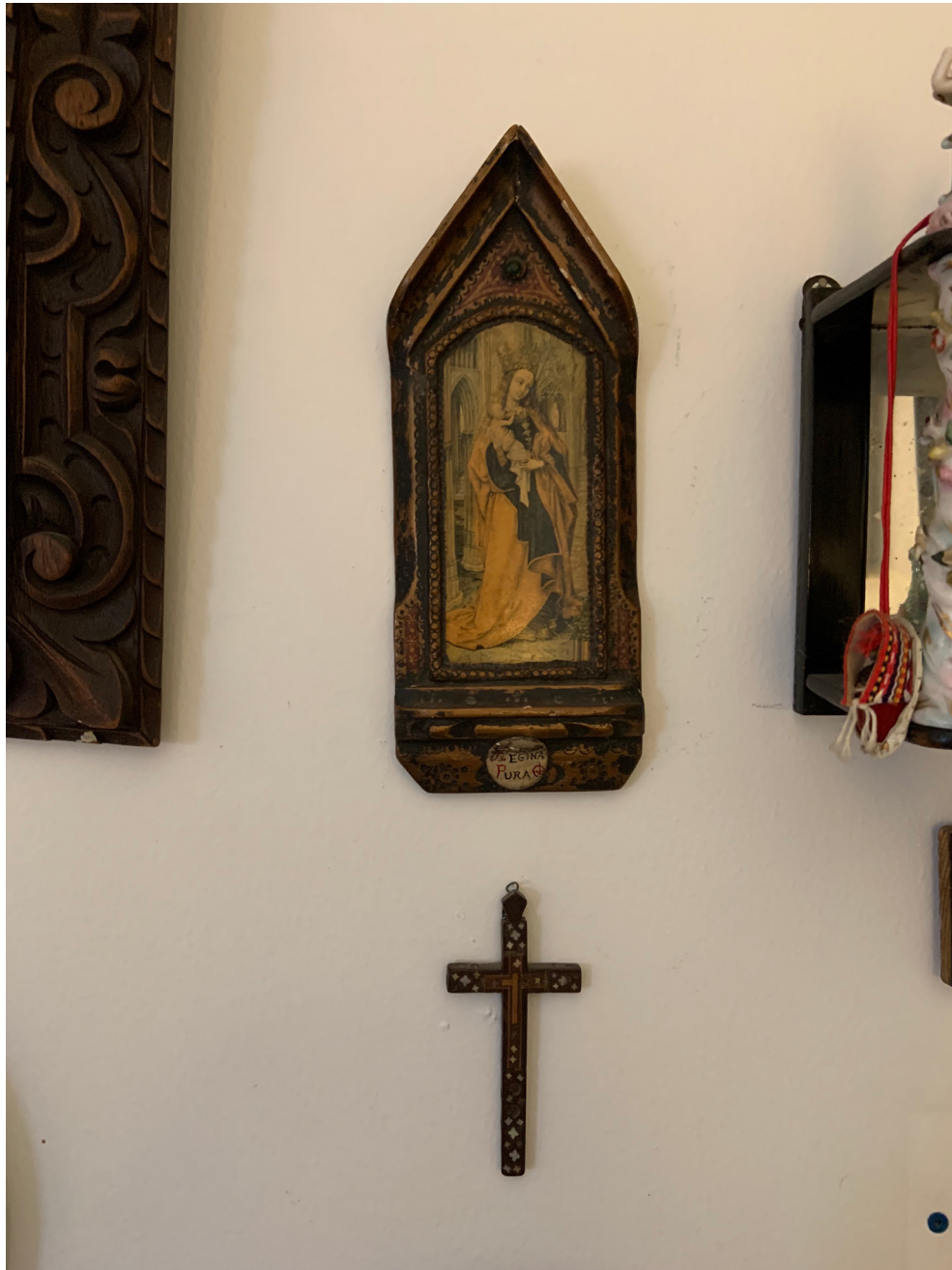
I am aware that this comment might sound like a criticism, but having lived of a life of relentless self-identification and promotion, I actually find respite in this kind of anonymity, in the sense that one feels special by blending into a homogeneous pattern that both gives one a sense of individuality and, at the same time, is an equalizing force. This is exactly why I avoid bed and breakfast places where one has to have breakfast with strangers whom one might never see again, sharing details about one's life in a forced intimacy. This is why many of us like anonymous, conventional, brand, corporate hotels. But to the apartment: the apartment I am about to describe is the most average place in the world in that sense of individuality I previously described.



I will not mention any names or make any particular personal or familiar references, because they are unnecessary. I depart from the certainty that we only value those things and people where we see ourselves in them, not when we see something unrelatable. So I will not appeal to your emotions or expect you to feel that you are me, or that you share my insecurities, or my conflicts, nor my desires. And I also do not know when I am speaking to you—it could be you right now, it could be to you in the future, or it could be someone a hundred years from now, someone who might think that our current time is absurd and naïve. So I will only focus on the observable attributes of objects.



It is an immigrant's apartment. It has barely or no referents to the cliché of the country where it came from. The immigrant family never fully fit the cultural stereotypes often projected onto their country. A family of classical musicians, it had no significant connection to its popular culture. A family of mixed European and local roots, they looked white in a country that is mostly indigenous. A family of atheists, it had no connection to its country's deep religious fervor.



But as it happens in most families that exist within the Catholic culture of a country, some remnants of those elements remained, partially in an unexamined, instinctive form, and partially as traditions now disassociated from their religious origins: placing, for example, nativity scenes and celebrating Christmas while not believing in Jesus. Which makes one reflect on the extent on which so many of the things that we do actually come from religion, even if we no longer consciously reflect on them.

There is one object in that house that I often obsess about: it is a container of wishes, Guanyin, the Buddhist goddess of compassion. In this household it was just often referred to as the Chinese goddess. The ceramic statue has a removable hand that allows one to insert wishes inside its body. We used it to wish for passing exams, and for being corresponded to by those who we were in love with in school. It is most likely that our wishes never became true, but that did not diminish our belief in the magic powers of this goddess.

Which again says something perhaps paradoxical about the beliefs of a family that does not believe in god.





This is a portrait of the ancestors. We do not know their names, we do not know in fact where or when this drawing was made; although it seems to be a drawing made in the 1830s, or 40s, in the Alsace region. The boy, I once was told, was the father of my grandmother. The grandparents appear to be farmers; the son and daughter appear to have slightly ascended in social class. This is a period where many Alsacians emigrated to America, and the boy depicted here emigrated as an adult, sometime around the 1860s, to Mexico, to work at the University of Guanajuato.

I have said that this family did not believe in god, but in contrast, or perhaps because of it, showed a particular fervor, almost religious, to music. This is perhaps the replacement of their spiritual life that would typically have been occupied by religion. My father was so moved by music that once while driving and listening to a Brahms piano intermezzo on the radio, he had to park to weep, because it was one piece that his mother used to play.



Hanging in the living room is a drawing of Beethoven, made by Ignacio Rosas, a Mexican artist born in the late 19th century who was a classmate and contemporary of Diego Rivera. My father considered it his most valued possession, not least because of his great admiration of Beethoven. On his deathbed, when he appeared to be having an onset of Alzheimers and his mind was wandering off into the sunset wandering through ages and periods, he sometimes spoke as if he was in his office in the 1960s in the street of Isabel la Católica in downtown Mexico City, speaking as if he was in a meeting. Other times he would talk to me as if I was his brother. And at times he asked about me as if I was still a child.

One day, he called me to his bed and said “hijo te tengo que pedir un favor,” my son, I need to ask you a favor. He asked me to travel back to Mexico to bring back that Beethoven drawing, which was very important to him. “It’s a great art work,” he said. He was oblivious that the drawing had been hanging in the living room of his apartment all these years. I did not know what to say, and I did not want to correct him. I promised him that I would bring back the drawing.

The artwork symbolized to him at that moment all that we had left behind in our country when we emigrated, and the imperative need to bring it with us. The truth of course, is that when you are an immigrant, the very act of immigration is an event of catastrophic loss, of leaving half of your being behind, and only symbolically one can attempt to reconstruct it in one’s memory, one’s poor understanding of who they once were, but that initial condition cannot be recovered.



Also hanging are the paintings of an uncle, the painter. He was brought to the US by his older brother when he was in his early twenties, and remained in the country until the end of his life.



This painting was made in 1928 when he was 29 years old. He was never interested in modern art, nor did he ever try to engage with it. Instead he became an illustrator, in the style of Charles Montgomery Flagg. He is perhaps the reason why I went into art. The drawing gene somehow got reproduced in me, and I ended up pursuing that practice. In contrast to him, my choice was to pursue contemporary art practice, and my path took me away from illustration and onto things like the one I am doing right now, a so-called performance-lecture.



As we review the objects of that apartment, here I must add that I have worked in museums my entire life and I have witnessed, and delivered, thousands of hours of guided tours, lectures, and didactic gallery conversations. I have trained and overseen dozens of educators to do inquiry-based conversations, object-centered study, and interactive activities meant to bring the public into the world of an artwork. I painstakingly trained myself to be empathetic, to learn to listen, to be sensitive and yet to feel nothing, first for the purpose of retaining objectivity but also to protect myself against stupid, ignorant, or racist views and comments directed at me or at artwork that I cared about. I learned over decades to help others love art, even artworks for which I have no love, and to help them respect the art that they reject. One becomes a technician of experience.



However, all these years of experience seem useless to me at this moment, now that I need to speak of these images. It is perhaps because of something Fernando Pessoa once wrote: to understand is to forget about loving. It also makes me think of the fact that there are things that can never be spoken about. Perhaps I am encountering one of those circumstances, and this presentation is a failed attempt to speak to them. It is unfortunate that images are always explained and governed by words, I wish I could imagine a world where this was not the case.



What I can describe as I enter into this apartment is the feeling of being observed by genealogical history. In this apartment there is a collection of old photographs of several people silently looking at you.



When I was a child I would see them, in my mother's apartment, and would be intimidated by all their gaze toward me. I felt as if I were in a room of ghosts, of talking pictures that were staring back at me, unapproving. I was their object of inquiry. I am still their object of inquiry.

I also know that I will be one of those silent black and white photographs one day, probably the one photograph I did not pick to keep myself, but the photograph that survived, and I will be hung in the context of this community, silently there for an unknowable amount of time.

They are similar to the collections of books.



My grandfather, who aspired to be a writer one day (and self-published six or seven books, none of which anyone other than my father read,) was a voracious reader, and also a bibliophile.



He bought the entire collection of La Austral, a famous imprint from Buenos Aires, that published many well-known titles, from the classics to works by living writers. The collection, this one published in 1941, has titles by writers who were famous at the time but now have been forgotten, and others who are still known but whose aesthetics and sensibility feel old-fashioned and remote from ours.







Other books, like the encyclopedic collection of the history of France, printed in Spain, the collected works of Balzac, have never been opened or read even once.

Objects linger in silence, waiting to be activated one day.



I am thinking again of that 320 million year old piece of amber found nearby this place, even the one hundred and thirty three years that these books have been waiting for to be read represent only a few minutes in contrast.



The same with all those wishes at the bottom of the Chinese goddess, all those little pieces of paper that we filled out full of hopes, with requests such as asking for help to pass exams, or asking for someone we had a crush on at school to love us back, or asking for money and happiness. I often fantasized about breaking it open one day, surely a major sacrilege that might bring eternal damnation in some minds — but in my case, the concerns of course would be ethical — a breaking of trust with my family that would reveal everyone's deepest secret desires and fears. In the case of those pieces of paper, they are more powerful inside the statue, remaining secret, never read or revealed.



This place, this configuration of books, photographs, old paintings and such, was some kind of sanctuary for me since I was very young.



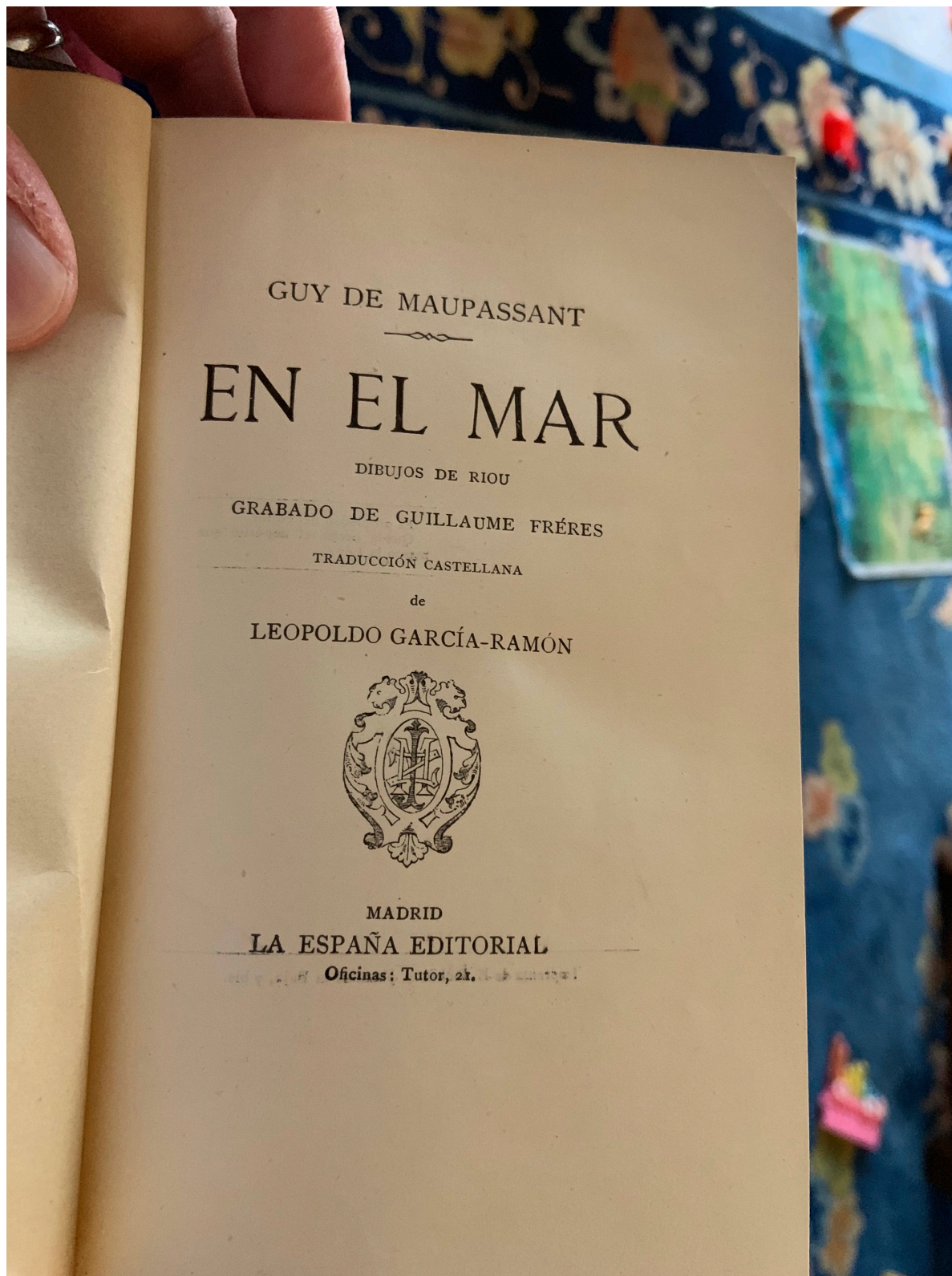
As I said, I have been an educator all my life, but ironically as a child I did not like to go to school. Being with others was difficult for me. I was antisocial. Instead I liked being in the house, inventing stories for myself in the living room, looking at the books, playing records, trying to turn on the old shortwave radio, a gigantic, bulb-operated furniture piece that brought signals from far and distant countries. For someone like me, who is part of the last analog generation, these books were my community, my friends. Some of the stories that I read would connect in my mind with the garden outside, with the strong sunlight of Mexico City mornings and early afternoons.



The sunlight there was the one that allowed me to picture landscapes in the books of Pierre Loti, the romantic stories of Gérard de Nerval, the picturesque episodes of Don Quijote de la Mancha.



And I am just realizing, as I speak, how light has been so important in my life. I now as I close my eyes, see the yellow skylight of Sala Margolín, a long closed classical record music store that I used to visit with my brother in Mexico City. The yellow light was the context of my discovery and love of music, of the first cassette tape I purchased, Tchaikovsky's nutcracker, and my first LP; Saint-Saëns' Danse Macabre.



Returning to the books, there is a book by Guy de Maupassant, one of those famous French writers of the late 19th Century that were popular during my grandparents' youth. The book, which one day I opened in the middle, showed me this phrase:

just as we remain alone despite all our efforts, we remain free despite all ties.

man todo su corazón en un corazón desconocido encontrado la víspera, toda su alma en un alma deparada por la casualidad y cuyo rostro les ha gustado. Y de esta precipitación en unirse nacen tantas equivocaciones, tantas sorpresas, yerros y dramas.

Lo mismo que permanecemos solos á pesar de todos nuestros esfuerzos, permanecemos libres á pesar de todos los lazos.

Nadie pertenece nunca á nadie. Se presta uno, á su pesar, á ese juego coqueto de la posesión; pero no se da uno nunca. El hombre, exasperado por esa necesidad de ser dueño de alguien, ha establecido la tiranía, la esclavitud y el matrimonio. Puede matar, torturar, encarcelar; pero la voluntad humana se le escapa siempre, aun en los casos que ha consentido á someterse por algunos instantes.

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I later learned that the story it tells is about two fishermen brothers. The younger brother gets his arm caught in a net and the older brother refuses to cut the rope, because it's expensive and they make money with it. As a result the younger brother develops gangrene and loses his arm. It's a morality tale about how we put profit over morals, but it is also a tale, as the phrase suggests, about what are the implications with one another in our lives and how we are tied with one another.



At this juncture in time, more than ever in our lives, we put to the test the various theorems and corollaries about life in society that we once knew.



I don't know what are the right answers, and I do not know what visiting an apartment so separate from its geographic and historic origins means.



But I know that deep in it, like an insect trapped in amber millions of years ago, lies a particular truth of who we are, of which are our equivalent stories as exiles within our homes, as those forbidden to touch one another and receive affection that way.



It's an example of how freedom is never free — that there are never perfect conditions around our liberation from others, and ourselves. Heaven and hell is both not being with the others.



Fray Luis de León once wrote,

*Vivir quiero conmigo
Gozar quiero del bien que debo al cielo,
A solas, sin testigo,
Libre de amor de celo
De odio, de esperanza, de recelo*

*Alone I want to live with myself,
To rejoice in the good that I owe to heaven,
In solitude, unwitnessed,
Free of love, of zeal,
Of hate, of hope, of suspicion.*





I remain now, like all of you, inside a room that I simultaneously need to live in and need to escape from. All I wish at this moment is of not being afraid of silence and solitude, of not being tied to objects while also not to lose them. I do not wish to speak alone with portraits hanging on the walls, but I want to feel the joy of doing so if I wished it. In the meantime, the memories and the many museums within us invite us to become the archivists of our own past and we document ourselves through objects, sensations, and create an amber archive where to place them. And then we can dispose of it all, like Wittgenstein's ladder, once we have climbed to the other side — perhaps the only place where we will be free, even if we are not there to witness it. That is perhaps the one wish that I will carefully write, the next time I am before the Chinese goddess, will carefully deposit inside her, knowing perhaps that it is just a superstition, but this desire, now will also be part of that fossilized portrait of this moment, like a daguerreotype, captured in amber, for anyone who might happen to encounter it one day, anyone who might one day want to get a glimpse of what some of us talked and thought about during these fateful Spring days.

