I dream of hard-fought microscopic battles

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I dream of hard-fought microscopic battles, armies of cells disembarking on a yellow beach, in front of high city walls. This, my *Iliad*, is taking place in your body, in the sentry ganglion in your left armpit, and the besieged emerge the victors, they drive out the intruders. In my dream there is not the cunning of Ulysses, there is no Trojan horse.

The surgeon asked you to undress from the waist up and pulled round a screen on wheels to conceal you from my gaze, you and him. I looked away, uncomfortable that another man should be ordering you about. There was some slight discomfiture in his manner, a vague underlying embarrassment that years of experience had not succeeded in dissipating. Later on I joked about the situation, I told you that your illness is nothing more than a sham, the doctors are conspiring so that they can look at your breasts, such beautiful breasts. I told you that they're all in collusion and they all pass on the word to one another. And you're so naïve you always fall for it. I made you laugh and spent that day busy repeating that joke and embroidering on it, knowing that next day it would no longer be funny and it would be necessary to start all over again to distract you.

The actual expression, “sentry ganglion”, evokes wars and cities under siege. The Romans clubbed to death those sentries who fell asleep at their post. It was the comrades of the defaulter who carried out the sentence, like someone punishing an act of treason. When you received the news, you told me you felt as if your body had betrayed you. In the early days of our love, you once told me: “I’m very healthy.” As if you were telling me: “I can be trusted, I won’t let you down. I won’t be a burden on you.” But now your body has betrayed you, the sentry ganglion fell asleep at his post. Your own body threatens to become a burden on you, threatens to control your whole existence. It threatens to enslave you. You told me: “I don’t want to turn into one of those women who drag a burden with them, an appendage taking up space, annoying everyone with its presence: ‘Me and my divorce.’ Or: ‘Me and my dogs.’ In my case it’ll be: ‘Me and my cancer.’ I don’t want that. I just want to keep on being me.” You told me you didn’t really take the diagnosis in when you heard the word “cancer” in the doctors’ mouths. The word “cancer” was a stone in a fruit, a pip you spit into the palm of your hand before putting it on the plate. You only really believed you had cancer when you read the diagnosis in a letter from the Portuguese Oncology Institute: “Invasive carcinoma, with lobular type growth pattern.” You resisted the word “cancer” for as long as you could, you only gave in when you could no longer drive it away, then you withdrew to the second line trench. You’re dynamiting everything while you’re in retreat. You don’t leave the cancer anything to feed on.

The postman had lost his importance long ago, he'd become an obsolete, picturesque figure. For weeks on end, we ignored the letter box. Suddenly, the postman became again the postman from the old days. He rings the doorbell around eleven in the morning, midday. I know it's him, because he rings various floors, he sounds the doorbells in the building like a church canon. I press the button to unlock the door, I hear him coming into the building, I listen for the dull sound of the letters sliding through the slots. I wait for him to leave then I go down, to check if there's a letter from the POI. Your cancer has made me more serious, less carefree. I can no longer pretend the postman doesn't exist. I can no longer pretend that your body is everlasting, that time isn't passing for you, that you don't burn in a soft flame like everyone else.

Your hands shook in your first appointment with the POI surgeon. You reminded me of a Sunni Iraqi woman of your age I saw in a documentary about the war against Islamic State. The Shiite militia soldiers entered her house and the camera filmed her standing up in the middle of the living room, surrounded by her children, holding a huge white flag improvised with a sheet, and her hands were shaking, convulsive, like yours, and her voice caught in her throat, just like yours when you asked if they were going to remove your nipple. The surgeon said no. He calmed you down, just as the Shiite soldiers calmed the woman: "Don't be afraid, madam. Don't be afraid." For a moment you seemed defenceless. You pulled yourself together, uncomfortable because you had given way to panic, you asked him

when you'd be having the operation. He didn't know the date, it was too early for that. It was only the first consultation, it was necessary to wait for the letter arranging the appointment for the "decision to operate". But he said your tumour is small, it is slow-growing. "In a year, it'll grow a millimetre, if that." Now, in my dream, the city with high walls has stopped being the sentry ganglion, it's turned into the tumour, your army of cells is disembarking on the yellow sand. We need Ulysses' cunning again, we need the Trojan horse. Little by little the city expands, people build houses up against the wall, on the outside. A millimetre per year.

Two auxiliaries dressed in white, a man and a woman, came into the POI waiting room pushing a trolley with free food and drinks, they asked the people if they wanted tea, coffee or orangeade. The man went from seat to seat handing out sweets, two to each person, as if we were children at a birthday party. Cancer, like all illnesses, tries to infantilise us all the better to subdue us. You declined politely, you weren't ready to join in with the other patients, who unwrapped one of the sweets with a translucent crackling before putting it in their mouths and put the other one away in their pocket or handbag. That tea, those sweets, they're a rite of passage. There'll be plenty of time for that, when all the other paths are blocked off.

There are bald women wearing maharajahs' turbans. There's a man with a tube round his face, in a bold curve. One would say it was the wire for some earbuds for listening to music, but then I notice it's actually a transparent tube coming out of his nose, stuck on with tape.

There's a woman with a gauze visor covering one eye. There are people with strange valves in their throats, as if they were easy-open tins. There are ravaged bodies on show. I enter this strange world with caution, on tiptoe, feeling that I am being tested. I don't know where to look, I don't know how to look at these wounds. At night, I don't know what to dream about these people, I don't know what stories to make up to rescue them from suffering. I try to learn from these sufferers what is the best way to deal with what is coming, I observe them discretely in search of smiles, I spy on the way the spouses, sitting beside the cancer patients, speak to them, I try not to miss the gestures of mutual affection. You walk among them as if you were a foreign traveller far from home, in a country whose language you don't speak, someone who is merely passing through, who isn't going to hang about.

In the consultation to decide about surgery there were three surgeons in the room. The same surgeon as in the first consultation, around sixty years old, and a very young boy and girl. It was the same consulting room as the other time, narrow, with a wash hand basin in the corner. Again the surgeon asked you to undress from the waist up, pulled the rolling screen round. The screen was lined with blue cloth, I could see your head poking out above the top, as in the parapet walk in a barbican. I couldn't think of any new joke to keep in my memory and use later on to soften what had happened. The girl looked at the computer screen and said: "The biopsy was on the tenth of May, wasn't it?" We exchanged looks, you said "I don't know for sure", I told you "look in the papers." You pulled out a cardboard binder from your bag,

opened it. Thrown inside, in no particular order, were the medical tests, the prescription requests, all the paperwork about your illness. There wasn't enough space on the little desk to put down the binder, you rested it on your knees, began to turn the pages, one page slid on to the floor, another got crumpled. The oldest surgeon said to you: "Never mind, it isn't needed, we have that information, the date in the computer is correct." You fumbled even more, another piece of paper fell, you picked it up from the floor, ended up saying: "Here it is." The information in the computer was wrong, the biopsy had taken place a month earlier. When we left the consulting room, I told you we had to go to a stationer's to buy a binder with dividers to organise the documents, arrange them by date. You refused, said you knew perfectly well what you were doing, you certainly didn't want "a binder with dividers". I got cross, we argued. At night, lying in bed, I understood what you meant. Organising the papers, classifying them with care, would be to give in to the blackmail, it would be playing the enemy's game. A man who fell into the hands of Klaus Barbie says in Marcel Ophüls documentary that when the torture began, he decided to say nothing, not even his name. The first act of surrender one makes brings all the others in its wake. If he tried to invent an elaborate lie, from scratch, he knew he would surely get tangled up in it, losing his thread. You too refuse to take a step that takes you closer to the cancer. You too refuse to invent a story that accommodates the cancer, a story where it moves around, a story in which the cancer plays the leading role. I am even surprised that you keep the POI papers in the binder, that you don't leave them lying about

the house, in among the old newspapers, that you don't throw them away. Bundled together in a confused jumble, they look like bricks and debris in an illusory street barricade.

At the end of the consultation, you signed a consent form giving them the right of life and death over your cells, trusting them to delimit the part of you that has become harmful and needs to be extirpated. Only then, you told me afterwards, did you take on board that they were going to operate, although they'd already told you several times. You aren't yielding an inch to the cancer without putting up a ferocious fight. You distrust everything they tell you. If your own body has betrayed you then everything can betray you. The world has stopped being a safe place. A tumour the size of a grapeseed, even smaller, may kill you. You comb through the past in search of omens you may have missed, that you missed, certainly. You comb through the present seeking omens that will reveal what will happen from now on, to guide you in the choices you have to make. You look for reassuring signs, a logical progression, signalling buoys, relations of cause and effect that at first sight don't match up, just like the Ancients did. Like all warriors, you became superstitious.

In the consultation with the nurse, a fortnight later, the nurse looked at the screen and gave the wrong date for the biopsy, the tenth of May. The error persists, it has taken on a life of its own, like the tumour. The tumour is made up of wayward cells that have gone crazy, commanded by a faulty IT program. The tumour is a Nazi army, you can't negotiate with it, there are only two alternatives, you resist or you

collaborate. You said “No, that date is wrong”, you re-established the truth absentmindedly, almost out of boredom, like someone correcting a senile grandparent or a badly intentioned interrogator who wants to incriminate us at all costs.

In a letter from the POI, they undertook to operate on you within forty five days from the date of the last consultation. The nurse said they would almost certainly telephone you on a Thursday. I spend every Thursday living on my nerves. When your phone rings, I rush to pick it up and run through the house to bring it to you. The telephone call doesn’t come. A month goes by, then a month and a week. I sit down at the table with you and, with a solemn demeanour, tell you that time is passing, you have to look for another solution, another hospital where things happen more quickly. I refrain from seeming like a harbinger of doom, I am well aware of the value of words of some Cassandra or other. Like the Ancients, you’ll believe in the omens that suit you, and only those. I didn’t talk about cancerous cells, I didn’t talk about ganglions, I didn’t mention my dreams, which are less and less optimistic. I just talked about time passing, the days going past. You answered me no, you cut off my words. You’re not going to go to another hospital, you prefer to wait for the POI’s telephone call, which will come on some Thursday or other. You got up and left the room.

When the Cimbri and the Teutons invaded Italy, they massacred several legions that came out to meet them in open countryside. The Roman soldiers panicked in the face of the wild horde. The consul Gaius Marius, sent *in extremis* to retrieve the situation, dug into

trenches with his troops. The barbarians, tall and long-haired, authentic giants, paraded in front of the ramparts unleashing piercing shrieks that ripped the air and made the Latin hearts tremble. They challenged the Romans to fight like men, not to hide like cowards, they insulted them, they ridiculed them. They were people on the march, with wives and children, oxcarts, it took them several days to go past. When the barbarians' dust settled, Marius raised the entrenched encampment, followed them and massacred them to the last man. The legionnaires had got used to the guttural shouts, the manes of hair, the tattoos, they had lost their fear.

For the moment you are waiting, behind your rampart, for the slow-moving horde to pass by. You can't rush into anything. For an untrained army the offensive can be fatal. You'll wait as long as it takes. You'll let me get upset, wear myself out, rant and rave for no good reason. You'll let me plead with you, playing the rational man. You'll let my dreams branch out to no avail. You'll let me think up complex plots and happy or dark epilogues. When the telephone rings, in a month, two months, six months, half a millimetre from here if necessary, you'll be prepared.

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