



FLOR FANÉ

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AN INTENSE STORY OF OVERCOMING THE ODDS

SYNOPSIS:

Olga's family situation is stifling, with a controlling father and a home where happiness is a relic of the distant past. Her powerful imagination, together with her rebelliousness, will guide her days and nights as she grows, walking and sometimes teetering, along the fine line that separates defeat from success. Sara Morante pens this intense story, submerging us, with her unique perspective, in the protagonist's universe.

DRAMA | PARENTHOOD

I Lockup

Place in which those who are locked up reside

I am surrounded by crickets. I cannot move and insects crawl across my arms, across my face; they go in and out of my mouth and nose. I cannot breathe. I lift my gaze and see my dolls beside me. They tell me: the crickets are angry. I too am angry, I want to tell them, but I cannot because now my lips are sealed. My lips are sealed and my throat is full of crickets. I feel a tickling on my face, drawing closer to my eyes. Suddenly, everything goes dark. I wake up in a fright with a scream trapped in my throat.



I am here





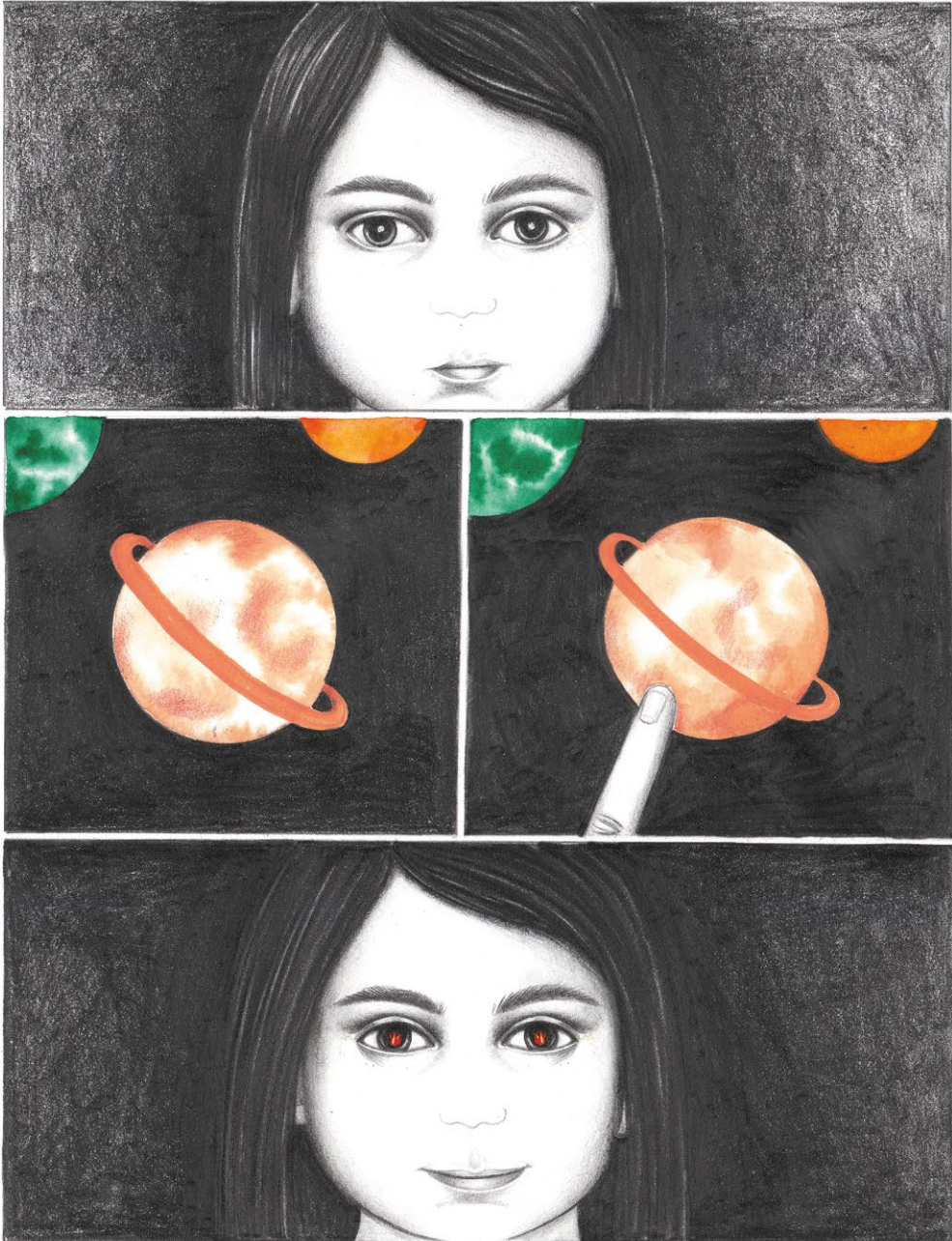
House

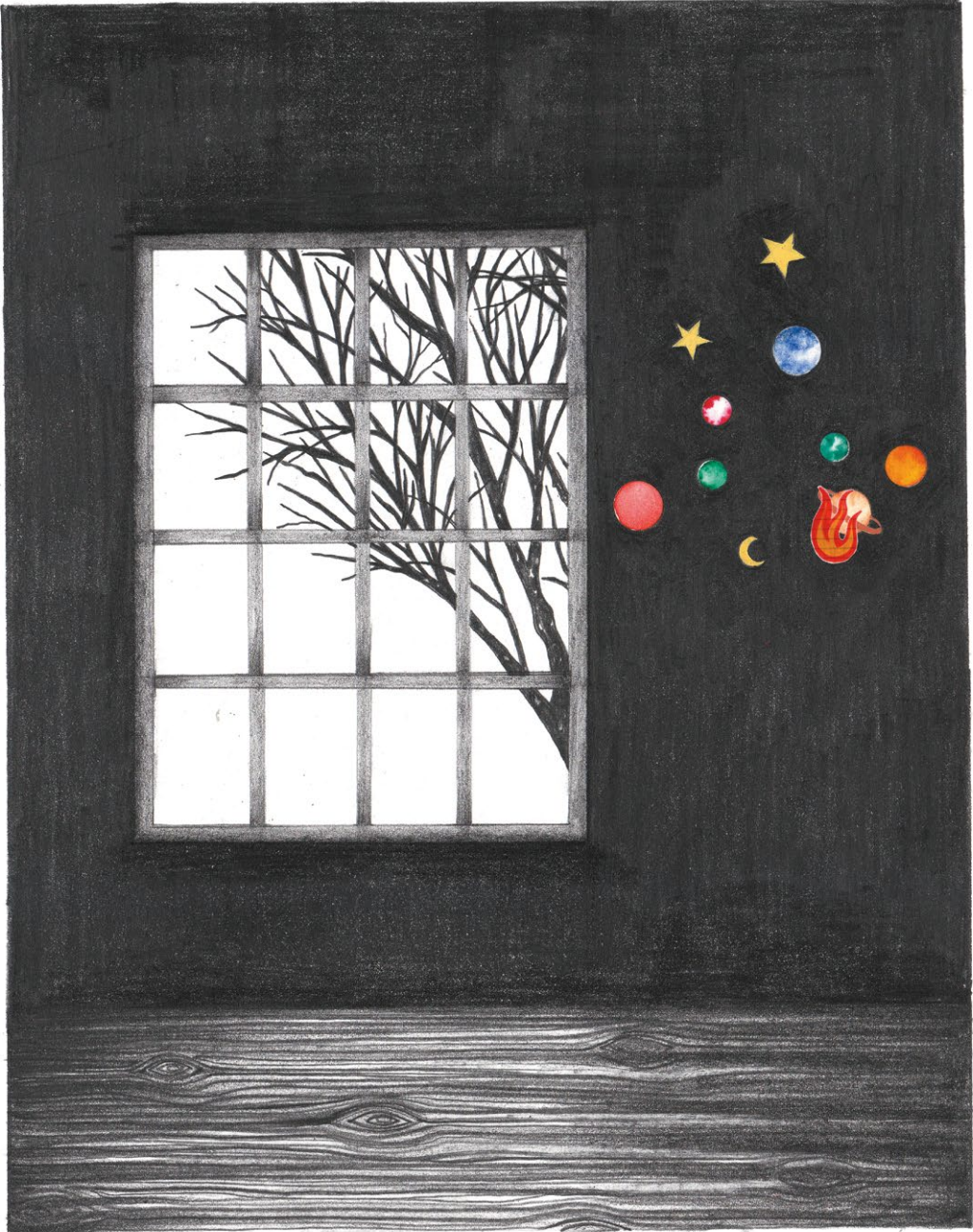
People in town know the house as The Lair because of the creeping vines that separate it from the sidewalk and climb up its gray façade. It's one of those old houses facing the bay, so exposed to the sea and punished by storms and saltpeter that no one wants them, and they end up abandoned and in ruins. The damp cold and wind sneak in through every crack and there is not putty enough to seal the windowpanes, large and abundant throughout the building, for which during a large part of the year breezes travel around skimming the floor throughout the house; they come down from the second floor and crowd around the foyer, dragging a whistling along with them, almost a cry. This same salted air spoils any crops in the garden, and for many years no one in the family has bothered to try and grow anything in this place. They let the old plants, decrepit like the land and the house, grow the little that they can grow anymore. No one bothers to prune them, no one pulls the white Martian-looking woodlice off them, like someone picking the lice off a child's head; one by one.

I slip away into the branches, I look for worms in the dirt. When I see one, I pull on it with all my might and break it in half, then I throw it into the bait jar for fishing and go back to plunging my hands in the dirt. I sniff up my snot, swallow it and put my hands into the wet and moldy earth that is between the bramble hedge and the leafy conifer from the house next door. I raise my gaze and my glance crosses with that of the neighbor, on the other side of the wall, who presents me with a toothless hole when he smiles. I make a face back at him, but I show him all of my baby teeth, arrogant, proud. I turn my back on him and run to the house.



Little Fire on Saturn

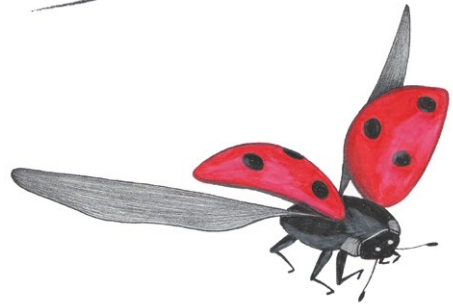




Pet

I take the dog for a walk upstairs and I stop at every corner. I wait patiently for him to pee on the wood and we continue on until the next corner, between the bathroom and my parents' room. The animal follows me obediently and stops where I tell him to, without a word passing between us. I crouch down and stroke his soft back, brushing the fur the wrong way. It's flame-orange with splotches of cream, he has long and lustrous hair, and two tails. He's like a flame that never goes out. I take him up in my arms, kiss him, and put him back down on the ground. Having a pet, like my friends do, makes me happy. It makes me happier than anything else. I pull his leash and we go to the next corner together. We won't be going downstairs, doggy, go pee-pee here, don't be a bad boy, I tell him in a whisper. Behind me, my mother's voice. I've told you a thousand times not to take my things, don't drag mommy's stole on the floor, Olga, don't drag it! She strips the fox fur from my hands and puts it back in her bedroom closet. She's so angry that her voice strangles in her throat. Why can't you play like the other girls?

Stroll



My Mother and My Father





The Smell of the Sun

I breathe in the smell of the sun that falls in pieces across the wood of the floor, where I am sitting, surrounded by a fence of foam rubber printed with giraffes. It smells like hot floor wax and ironed clothes. I watch them through the windowpanes. My mother holds onto a few cuttings in her hand, my father bends over and hands her a terra cotta pot. They embrace. Around me, on the floor, await my dolls, who paused their chatter when I interrupted them to look at my parents, a chat in a language only we understand. I lift them up again with my short fingers, my small hands, and we take up the game again beneath the light that warms everything.

Midday



Cracks

The yard behind the house is my favorite place in the world. Even more than my room, a lot more. It looks like a bird's nest, with all those plants growing without any pruning to hinder them. I pass my hand around the façade, it is made of concrete falling apart into powder like limestone, like an ice cream cone in your mouth or like wet sand when it dries, buckling at its legs. My fingers are reddened and covered in wounds, and it makes me cringe to touch the dry and gritty surface. I put my pinky into a crack and with its tip I drag a piece of paper blackened by the dust, but it's fastened to the stone, and I can't pull it out whole without tearing it. I make use of a stick I find on the ground, but the paper rips without coming out, and I give up. In those cracks I hide my smallest toys, my most valuable odds and ends. I hide them so they don't disappear.

I lift my gaze from the ground, a wooden cage erects itself over me; this morning my father has been painting the façade and the unsteady scaffolding he devised for the job is still up. In fact, by neglect, they'll be left up for several months. I stumble over one of his work shoes, it is big, crude, made of leather turned rough as sandpaper, I get it out of my way with the tip of my sandal and I spit on it. I creep through a solid mass of hydrangea bushes stuck to the façade of the house, wall-like, downcast by the direct sun that falls upon them, despite which, they are as large and lush as a mammoth. They are full of splatters of white paint, they remind me of Alicia's painted roses. I am upset and worried, but I can't manage to identify the cause of my disquiet. It's a sensation so habitual that the reason is never important. I look for a place where I can pass unperceived until dinner time. In the pockets of my green dress, I keep my little treasures, my little bits of junk, as my mother says each time I empty them before putting it in the drum of the washing machine. A marble, the miniscule head of a plastic soldier, a googly eye without the adhesive on the back, the silvery wrapper from a piece of candy. I wrap them up in a piece of paper upon

which I wrote a poem about the wind, spiders, or rain. At school we read and write poems, but mine don't come out that well and I'm embarrassed to read them aloud, so I lie about it; I say that I haven't written them, and I get into trouble with the teacher and another red mark on my report card. My report card has the measles, she says.

Last week my mother and I planted more hydrangeas along the east-facing wall, so that they don't get too much sun, like the others, she said. I suppose she said it to me, since no one else was around. I like listening to her and looking at her hands when she works in the garden. She has very soft hands, even though she uses them all day at home, while washing, cleaning, ironing, or smoking. Her fingers are slim and agile. She shuffles cards very quickly, and, when she's nervous, because she's waiting for a call or a letter, or she grows impatient because the washing machine hasn't finished, or when she and my father argue, she turns them over each other with skill, or crosses the fingers of one hand with those of the other with speed. Sometimes she smooths out my hair without a comb; with her fingers, so as not to yank my hair. Once, in bed, sick, I asked her for them, and she gave them to me for a good while. I stroked them until I fell asleep.

They call me to dinner. The sun still hot, the light is orange and stains everything a metallic ochre; the windows reflect trees the color of old gold. I run towards the house and hitch up the skirts of my dress to climb the stairs. I feel damp on my fingers, I've gotten myself dirty with white paint. I try to clean the fabric with a rag I find thrown on the ground, but I realize too late that it too is stained with white paint, what a mess. My hands, my legs, the cloth, covered in white specks. My mother won't be able to get the paint out even with paint thinner. That was the reason she was troubled, I tell myself. In that moment I am convinced that I have a strange capacity to perceive when something is going to go wrong.

Herbarium



My grandmother and I are going to make an herbarium. She knows a lot about plants and trees. We've gone to the country to look for oak leaves and dandelions and clovers. She showed me the differences between angelica and hemlock.





At home we put the leaves and flowers between the pages of a heavy old book, and we will wait until they are pressed and dry, next time she comes. Later, grandmother lets me draw her. She posed for a long while, very patiently, very quiet, seated in the living room and without ceasing to look at me all the while I was drawing her.

Explorer

I'm seated at the kitchen table, my mother and I are having a snack of sandwiches and apple juice, she is standing, next to me. Something moving along the floor attracts our attention. An ant crawling along the white tiles. We watch it in silence. It seems as though sometimes it knows the way, but then it starts meandering along again like the uninvited stranger it is. It advances quickly, goes back, finds a direction that pleases it again and goes on. My mother breaks the silence: Do you know what it's doing? It's an explorer ant: explorer ants usually go alone and their job is to open new ways for the rest of the troops, she explains to me almost in a whisper, as though in fear the ant will hear her. Its mission is to find food sources, for which it hazards through unknown lands leaving behind a chemical substance imperceptible to human beings, but not for other ants, which will guide the rest of the hive to raid houses, invade kitchens, plunder closets, make the bag of flour theirs, the raisins and the soup noodles, because behind the visit of an explorer ant arrives a line of ants, black, brilliant, and compact that invade, raid, and plunder, and destroy everything they find in their path. My mother seems to be talking to someone who isn't here again and her voice dims and stops. It is no coincidence that this small and dark explorer finds itself in our kitchen, at this point there must already be other paths explored through the rest of the house. I listen, terrified, to my mother. I crush the ant with my bare foot and then I get rid of what remains of the insect with my hand. My mother cleans my hand and foot with the kitchen rag, kisses me and strokes my head and then gets a bucket ready with water and bleach. She mops the kitchen floor painstakingly to eliminate all of the marked path. Once finished, she continues with the rest of the floor of the second story. Upon arriving to the living room, the largest room in the house, she opens the door and pauses at the threshold, turns, and says to me: Don't tell your father we saw an ant in the kitchen. You know how he is.

Storm

The wind woke us all this morning. It knocked the open shutters of the house about, and it seemed like we were inside a drum or under an air raid. The heat is stifling, and the air is oppressive and dry. I have the feeling that this wind emits an electric sound, imperceptible to the human ear, but it's there, electrifying my head and my hears. The headache doesn't take long to appear. I know that, after this wind, comes the storm. And it comes before dusk, like an explosion. We still haven't cleared the lunch table under the shade of the walnut tree. First dense clouds gather beneath our heads, the sun goes out and the wind changes. The trees bow over, they shake their green crowns in every direction, because not even the wind knows where it's going, and the birds flee, without knowing where either. My mother gathers up all the lightweight objects from the table that the wind could send flying and, in their flight, break one of the house's windows, then she hastily gathers up the clothes hanging on the line, which had been dry for hours, but the day had been pleasant and relaxed, and she had prioritized devotion over obligation. I try to help her, but she sends me with anxious gestures into the house. My father watches from the living room window. I run inside. Although the wind that destroys everything, alters everything, fascinates me, I am afraid of lightning and thunder. Above all, that final thunder that makes me tremble and, as close as it is, never seems like it's the last one. But it is. And it echoes as though the dark sky would devour us. Seated on my bed, my father soothes me in the darkness. Don't be afraid, it will be over soon. Lightning. This one will be the last one, he assures me. Thunder. My father grips my hands tightly. I feel safe and privileged by his attention. Deep down I like storms, or perhaps I only begin to grow used to them.

That night, the rain against the windowpanes lulled me to sleep.

The Universe Inside my House



Today my action figure set off on a journey to the inside of my house. I know that in its guts there is an enormous universe to fly over and that he will be very happy.





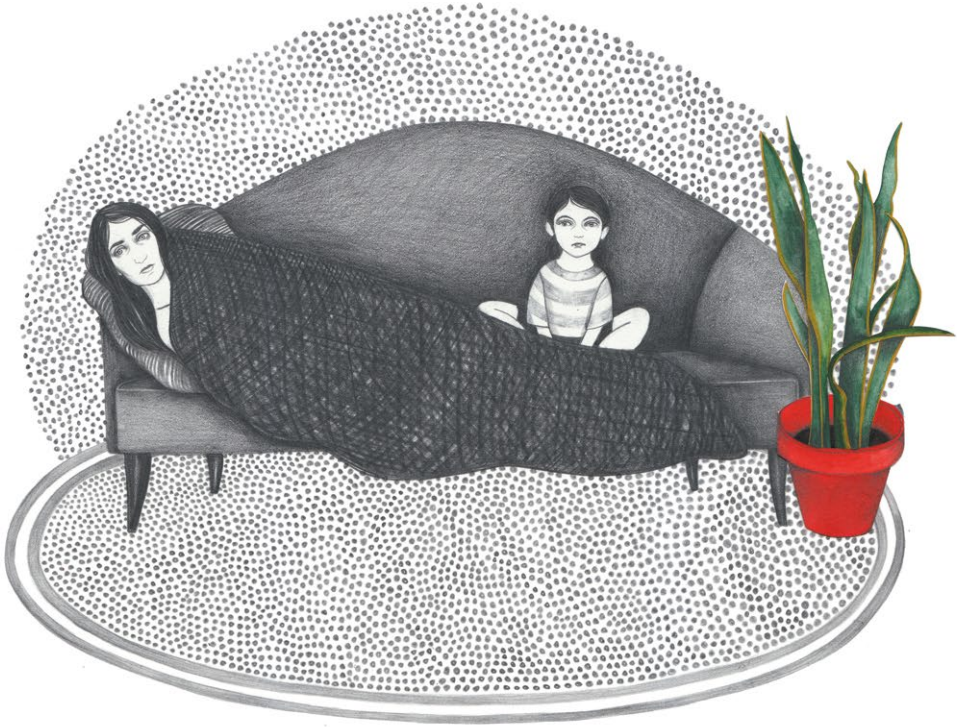
Friend

My mother has a friend from childhood. Sometimes she and her husband come to our house. They came to lunch today, they've brought their newborn son, they introduce him to us. He is so tiny and delicate, he awakens a tenderness in me. You're not jealous of him, are you, the husband asks me, half joking. I don't respond, because I don't know how to respond to such a question. How stupid. I like children and animals for the same reason. Don't touch his head, it's very delicate and can break! They scold me before I even dare to touch it. They talk about fontanelles, and how you can see the pulse in his tiny open skull. I imagine that, beneath the bone, he has a tiny brain throbbing soft and golden, like quince paste. The baby smells like cottage cheese. I draw a little closer to smell him. He smells like cheese, I say. You do too, I address the mother. How delicious you both smell. We laugh. His mother nurses him on the living room sofa, the sun on their backs. I feel soothed by what I see. My mother smiles warmly at them both. I smile warmly at her.

My mother's friend speaks of milk letdowns and blouses permanently damp. She does it in a soft voice, so as not to interrupt her child while he nurses. She says that, when she takes her baby for a walk in the park, if there are other newborns around, and they cry, her milk lets down. And it soaks her bra and the clothes she is wearing. She would feed them all, she assures us amusedly. My mother nods pensively. I am sure that she is thinking of my brother. Once I heard my parents talking of it. They did not want me to hear, but I did. My brother stayed in my mother's belly, and was not born, and she told him she did not want to go through that again. That they already had me. It made me feel sad to hear it, to think that I could have a playmate with whom to hide toys in the cracks, to weave a hideout under the hydrangeas, to share the responsibility of belonging to them.

My father asks my mother to clear the table. Annoyed, she leaves the room and heads to the kitchen, her step firm but her shoulders slumped; with her hands in a fist, though not tense. From the living room, I hear him ragging on her. You could've also cleared away the dead leaves from outside, if it rains everything will be ruined. My father must really have his nose out of joint now over the leaves outside, I think, since he never bothers with the state of the garden. My mother responds quietly, inaudibly, but her friend and her husband look at each other and look at me, and then stop looking. Their baby has fallen asleep, and all three of us look at him.

With my Mother



Adult Voice

I see my mother more as an older sister than as an authority figure responsible for me. Are you going to disobey me again?, my father asks. No, my mother responds very quietly, on the foyer rug. We are equals, we are the same height, her being much taller than me, so grown and with that adult woman's voice.

Smell

I have a metallic taste in my mouth. There is something in the texture of my palate that has to do with the route I am walking on. It is a tunnel full of ochre-colored triangles and red and green circles. I look at them and I know through my tongue the texture they have. Rough. They move about atop my head, they surround me. I feel trapped, not by these figures, but by this place. I know that this is not normal. How can I explain to my parents that I am here, alone? This path, that is not a path, but rather a direction, never ends, more and more masses of color, solid and opaque, appear, and move randomly around me. They have a strange taste, sticky. Everything is, in one way or another, in my palate. As though my tongue, and not I, had entered this tunnel. I wake up crying. It's dark, but I don't know if I've opened my eyes. My whole body hurts. My mother draws close to my forehead, pulls the covers off, consoles me, smells me before kissing me. You smell like fever, she tells me.

I have a fever of 102 and a scarlet-colored rash across my torso. A week and a half in bed awaits me along with injections that will be given to me by a physician's assistant each afternoon at six o'clock. And I wait for it in front of the clock, because I am panicked by the injection's ritual: of the smell of disinfecting alcohol, of the cold cotton on my buttock, of not being able to see what's happening behind my back, before the prick. Anguish at ten minutes to six, wishing for the clock to stop. Five minutes to. On the dot. Give thanks to a man called Fleming, the physician's assistant tells me with a syringe in hand, sixty years ago people died from what you have.



The Love of No

My grandmother has come to spend a few days with us while I recuperate. She lives very far away and arrives on the regional bus laden with food and presents. Her presents are always practical (a pair of socks, a book, a flannel nightgown) because she is a practical woman, but this time, because of my illness, she brings store-bought ice cream. She says it's good for the swelling in my throat, and she winks at me. I see her like a pencil line: straight, but soft and porous. With her I learn to plant cuttings and remove pests from plants with detergent and perfume. She also teaches me the properties of plants and how to make the bed. My mother always says that grandmothers are there to do with their grandchildren what they couldn't do with their children, but my grandmother treats me as though I were her daughter, and asks me whether I've brushed my teeth after breakfast and scolds me if I mess up the toys in my room. She is always looking out for me, teaching me; so that I am able to look after myself. I try to slip out of her sight sometimes, but she finds me. She gives me noisy kisses on my ears and combs my hair with perfume into a very tight ponytail that then gives me a headache. She makes me change my clothes if I get dirty in the garden. She names the insects. She brings me with her on her errands in town and to the town square, and to feed the pigeons and sparrows. She knows the shopkeepers and neighbors by their first names. Life with her is an unshakeable routine, and this routine gives me peace: for some reason I don't know, when she is at our house there are no frights, no uneasiness that alters the days and nights. When she is at our house, everything else disappears. She smiles a lot. She tells me: no, no you cannot do that, and I find all the love in the world in that no my grandmother tells me.





The Smell of the Sun II

I breathe in the air of the gas heater that is next to me, on the floor, where I am sitting, surrounded by my drawings and sketchpad. I color dark green foliage. In my left hand I hold a bouquet of greens: olive, moss, pine, verdigris, and indigo blue. My mother is outside, in the garden, I watch her through the windowpanes. In one hand she holds cuttings and in the other, kitchen scissors; on the other side of the wall, the neighbor leans his head over to greet her. They start to talk. He places his arms on our part of the wall, he seems to say something funny and my mother bursts out laughing. Even the expression on her face is different than the one she has when she laughs for us. I smile from the wood floor; her loud laughter is contagious. I hear wood creaking, the floor upstairs, in my father's office. I perceive his movements by the sound; now he has gotten up from his chair and is peering out the window, the creaking of a loose floorboard betrays him—whenever I hear it, it reminds me of the bellowing of a small elephant—. I look again at my mother, who has lifted her gaze. It has surely crossed with my father's. The creaking of wood, again. My father goes back to his table. He opens a drawer and closes it forcefully. He drags his chair across the floor. He always scolds us when we do it. My mother says a terse goodbye and heads towards the house, her face is serious and distressed. She doesn't even notice my presence on the other side of the window. She shuts the front door softly. The wood creaks again. I sense, by the closeness of the sound, that my father is already at the top of the stairs. All around me, on the floor, my crayons and the half-finished drawing of a tree await me; I had thought of coloring leaves, birds, and ripe fruit on the dark brown ground. The creaking gets louder. I switch off their voices, I only hear their steps. I let go of the greens. I grab hold of a red crayon and I draw a brilliant ring, solid and dense above the tree without end. It is not a scribble, it is a ball of fire. The smell of burnt gas from the heater makes me dizzy.

I mark the concentric circles forcefully, with the crayon burning in my fist.

