Sidewalks

Valeria Luiselli

Translated from the Spanish by
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To Álvaro
To Maia

ALTERNATIVE ROUTES

Calle Mérida—northbound

Around six in the evening, when that last layer of daylight begins to detach itself from the objects in our living room and the electric light only serves to blur the somewhat unclear outlines of things even further, I feel an urge to leave the apartment. I don't know if it's because matter itself becomes restless with the first shadows of night—as if darkness allows objects to overflow a little beyond themselves and things are on the point of breaking their pact of silence with the world—or if it's just I who can't find peace at that tranquil hour. And it's around that time too that Sara comes back from work and takes out her painting materials. The apartment fills with kettle murmurs, barefoot steps, the pine-forest smell of oils and thinner. I put on the old hat I've taken to wearing, get on my bicycle, and go out into the streets of the Colonia Roma.

A few blocks later, I chain my bike to a lamppost and go into the Librería del Tesoro—one of the few bookstores left in the neighborhood. I look for a Portuguese dictionary, which, once again, I can't find. I shall have to continue putting off my good intentions to learn Portuguese the proper way. Instead, I buy two books of Brazilian poetry and a postcard for forty-seven pesos. I'm beginning to suspect that what I like about Portuguese is misunderstanding it.

Some years ago, I attended a conference in which two experts were discussing the Portuguese term *saudade*. It was one of those

events where the speakers establish a hierarchical relationship between themselves and the audience, the members of which come away with the sole idea that they haven't really understood what was being discussed. The first lady—whom I had trouble taking seriously as she vaguely resembled a wrinkled version of the child Shirley Temple—argued that *saudade* is one of those untranslatable words that can only be understood by those who love, experience pleasure, and suffer in Portuguese. If you are not a lusophone, the other speaker declared, you have no right to borrow *saudade*. Could be. But then, why not just steal the word?

It's started raining outside, so I grab a stool and sit down between two sets of shelves to take a look at my new books. I search for any trace of the word *saudade* among their pages. Nothing. But some lines I half understand jump out at me:

calçadas que pisei
que me pisaram
como saber no asfalto da memoria
o ponto em que começa a fantasia?

I'm not sure what the lines say, though the words *ponto, asfalto, memoria,* and *fantasia* form a dim constellation of possible meanings—perhaps all connected to saudade. When we have only a partial knowledge of a language, the imagination fills in the sense of a word, a phrase, or a paragraph—like those drawing books where the pages are covered with dots that, as children, we had to join with a crayon to reveal the complete image. I don't understand Portuguese, or I understand it as partially as any other Spanish speaker. If I say "saudade," it will always be joining the dots of a foreign page.

Turn left at Durango

Saudade isn't homesickness, lack, or longing. The Finnish *kaihomielisyys*—though it contains smooth, mellifluous sounds—expresses only its most desolate sense. The German *Sehnsucht* and the Icelandic *söknudur* seem to suck out the meaning of the word; the Polish *tesknota* sounds bureaucratic; the Czech *stesk* shrinks, cringes, cowers; and the Estonian *igatsus* would come closer if spoken backwards. Maybe saudade isn't saudade.

Circle Plaza Rio de Janeiro—clockwise

Although saudade is loosely related to melancholy and nostalgia, the origins of the word are unclear. It's possible that it was the name of a Portuguese sailing ship, the São Daede, which, in 1497, preceded Vasco da Gama in the exploration of the Indian Ocean. It may be derived from the Latin *solitudinis* or the desert *saudah* of the Arabs. It could also have been a musical instrument from the coast of Mozambique, or just as possibly the name of a voluptuous woman from the jungles of Guinea Bissau.

Left again at Orizaba

Melancholy used to be a humor, an excess of black bile. Aristotle thought it was a divine gift, only given to men of true genius. In the Middle Ages, melancholy's fetid vapors were thought to dim understanding and perturb the soul. Of the four bodily humors—phlegm, yellow bile, blood, and melancholy—the last was the coldest and driest. The melancholic person had sunken eyes and a taciturn expression: he was circumspect, stern, and solitary;

insomniac and given to nightmares; passionate and jealous. He had a waxen complexion, was flatulent, his excretions were painful, his urine colorless and sparse. The cause of melancholy, according to popular wisdom, was poor diet, and it was cured by purges, unguents, poultices, and bloodletting.

With time, the number of causes of melancholy grew and became less worldly:

The planet Saturn
Idleness
Excess of knowledge
Witches and wizards

The cures, however, remained terrestrial. In 1586, in a letter to an imaginary melancholic patient, Dr. Timothy Right recommended that he avoid:

Cabbage, dates, olives
Leguminous plants and chickpeas
Pig meat, mutton, and goat
Seals and porpoises

Continue along Orizaba—ride on sidewalk to avoid traffic

Bastard daughter of melancholy, the term *nostalgia* inherited the characteristics of black bile but never achieved its former divine status. The magic humors of mother melancholy evaporated in the three dry syllables of her aseptic daughter: nos-tal-gia. Like other such "algias" as cephalalgia and neuralgia, nostalgia was, in the seventeenth century, firmly fixed as a clinical condition. It's

no surprise that its appearance coincides with the era in which "afflictions of the soul" became "pathologies of the psyche."

Nostalgia was the invention of Johannes Hofer, a military doctor. Hofer treated Swiss soldiers who, after long periods in foreign lands, suffered from a set of common symptoms: headaches, sleeplessness, heaviness of heart, hearing voices and seeing ghosts. The exiled soldiers took on a gloomy, almost phantasmagorical aspect—they walked around as if absent from the world and in their imaginations confused the past and the present.

Hofer made note of every one of the soldiers who came into his consulting room during the year 1688, and as the number of nostalgic cases on his list grew, so too did his impatience to organize that series of coincidences into a single pathology. Like someone who awaits the passage of a comet in order to be able to place his name on the celestial map, Hofer waited for the arrival of the very last soldier to christen his hypothesis. Then, satisfied, he closed his casebook and began his *Medical Dissertation on Nostalgia.*

Nostalgia, according to Hofer, is an illness that expresses itself in a specific symptom: pain (*algia*) for the home (*nostos*). And like any other illness, remedies can be found to treat it. If the nostalgia is a longing for something concrete, it may perhaps be weakened by eclipsing the memory of what was with the overwhelming presence of what is. Leeches, for example, may distract the mind from the abstract pain of the loss of home by the very real pain of their bites. Opium constructs inebriating scenarios that mist the memory of the past.

But the soldiers eventually became immune to such palliatives. After many experiments, Hofer concluded that nothing produced better results than sending them back home.

Turn right at Tabasco

There is no such thing as a nostalgic or "saudadic" child, but there are melancholy ones. When I was about five years old someone told me you could dig a tunnel all the way to China. We were living in Central America and I thought I could save my family the expense of the plane fare by digging my way home. If someone had got as far as China, I could surely get to Mexico, which was much closer. I asked my father to tell me the exact direction of our house there and he drew me a map. I started digging a tunnel in a corner of the garden.

The tunnel project dragged on for several weeks, until I began to get bored.

I was on the point of abandoning the hole—by that time quite deep—when I suddenly hit something solid: a possible treasure chest. The three following mornings, I dug around that hard surface and completely forgot the original plan. Then I extended the treasure hunt. In the end, I made holes all over the garden, but never found anything more than a few earthworms and the water tank. Naturally, my parents began to lose patience. They ordered me to call a halt to the excavation. I obeyed, but it seemed to me that I should put the holes to good use by burying something in each of them. In one I hid some marbles, in another a toy train, and in a third a horrible paperweight with a snowscape. In the main hole, where the treasure that turned out to be a water tank had been, I placed the map my father had drawn for me. I thought that some future child—who, coincidentally, would also be Mexican and living in that same house—could reconstruct the story of the holes. Making use of more modern instruments than mine, that child would find the map and come to visit me in Mexico. And

if too many years went by and I died, there would at least be a trace of my passage through that garden. From that moment, the garden stopped being an invitation to return to Mexico and became instead the promise of the future discoveries of that other child: I was cured of my precocious melancholic temperament—like a patient in the Middle Ages—by a bit of earth.

Ride on sidewalk for one block

Saudade, which retains some form of pain in the gliding movement between its first vowels, brings to mind those things that are at once beautiful and a little sad: boats, willows, saurian lizards, a bough.

Make a right at Chihuahua

The melancholy temperament was once the emblem of genius; black bile a divine substance. Aristotle was responsible for spreading this rumor, the echo of which was contested in the Middle Ages but apparently heard again by the Romantics and then by the poètes maudits and the aesthetes. But later, melancholy became mere aggravated emotionalism; and it is perhaps Sigmund Freud who bears the greatest responsibility for finishing off its founding myth. Freud democratized melancholy: once the psychiatrist's couch had appeared on the scene, the illustrious and the intellectual were no longer the jealous owners of a divine illness. By the early twentieth century, melancholy had ceased to be the way of life and state of the soul of poets and had become a contemptible trait, only worthy of hysterical females on the couch. The same is true of nostalgia, which in time was no longer a hypochondria of the heart or

a mental illness, but something from which maybe only Uruguayans and Norwegians suffer. Melancholy and nostalgia eventually ended up in the same bottomless pit: depression (according to the definition of the International Classification of Diseases).

Right again at Frontera

Sara insists that the most exact Spanish translation of *saudade* is "tiricia." I've searched everywhere for definitions of that term. There are several on the internet:

> Dentera (synonym): a disagreeable sensation in the teeth and gums on eating bitter substances and hearing certain unpleasant noises, corresponding to the English idea that something "sets one's teeth on edge."
>
> Ictericia (synonym): a disease produced by the buildup of bilious pigment in the blood, the external sign of which is yellowness of the skin and the conjunctiva; in other words, jaundice.
>
> In El Salvador: laziness, negligence, ill humor.
>
> Infantile depression.

Two blocks on—make a right at Zacatecas

Now that melancholies and nostalgias are no longer owned by doctors, the "Ulysses Syndrome" has been discovered. In the strap line of a Spanish newspaper that Sara left on the couch some days ago, I read:

> Fifty percent of immigrants develop some form of mental disturbance . . . ! A third of illegal immigrants are likely to suffer from the "Ulysses Syndrome."

Despite the literary name given to the new pathology, it is also conceived of as a clinical problem. The symptoms of the disease: sadness, crying, stress, headaches, chest pains, insomnia, fatigue, and hallucinations. The remedies: psychiatrists and drugs. In Barcelona there's already a team of doctors treating the affected "undocumenteds." How many pills will be sold before it's discovered that the Ulysses Syndrome can't be cured by medicines? How many years before it is understood that the pain in the chest is nothing more than saudade, a bit of nostalgia, an excess of black bile?

Plaza Luis Cabrera—cross slowly

Commonplaces:

> "Saudade is something you have." You have saudade the way you have a plaything. It's a perfect marble, round and never-ending. It's a monad in the palm of your hand: a paperweight enclosing a miniature snowscape.
>
> "Saudades are both pleasant and painful." The scabs on knees we pick at until we draw blood; the teeth we prod with the tip of the tongue until they fall out; the pores on bare skin that open on contact with scalding bathwater.
>
> "Saudade is the presence of an absence." A stabbing pain in a phantom limb; a crack that opens up suddenly in the asphalt; the rivers and lakes of Mexico City; sheets after lovemaking.
>
> "Saudade is saudade is saudade." A map—of a map.

Turn south onto Orizaba

Wisdom from Cyril Connolly: "Imagination = nostalgia for the past, the absent; it's the liquid solution in which art develops the snapshot of reality."

But the nostalgia isn't always nostalgia for a past. There are things that produce nostalgia in advance—spaces that we know to be lost as soon as we find them—places in which we know ourselves to be happier than we will ever be afterwards. In such situations, the soul twists itself around, as if in a voluntary simulacrum of seeing its present in retrospect. Like an eye watching itself look from the perspective of a later time, it sees that remote present and yearns for it.

Go left at Querétaro—use the sidewalk

Sara is doing an oil painting from a snapshot she took in Madrid some years ago, when we lived there together. It's of a long, narrow street called the Paseo de los Melancólicos, through which we often had to ride home. Along the bank of the river Manzanares—that "liquid irony," as Ortega y Gasset described it, due to its almost total lack of water—the melancholy Paseo de los Melancólicos stretches out like a pleonasm. On one side is a row of gray buildings, each one identical to the last. On the other, a concrete wall behind which one has to imagine that, a few steps away, an attempt at a river flows. In this section of its course, where the waters resemble black bile, the Manzanares has vents—tall tubes sprouting skyward from the water like the chimneys of an old, sunken factory. Nobody knows the purpose of those giant industrial pipes, but on some winter nights they emit a sound like whale song and

a fetid vapor that settles on the Paseo de los Melancólicos like a beautiful, suffocating blanket.

Left again at Jalapa

Saudade is a child with a bad squint: he looks ahead with one eye and back with the other. When the right eye urges him to move forward, the left exhorts him to go back. That's why he remains forever motionless in his place and the only steps he's allowed are the ones the soul takes around itself.

Tabasco—make a right—ride against traffic

Sara says that Fernando Pessoa is the personification of saudade. Could be. Over dinner, we read aloud randomly chosen fragments from *The Book of Disquiet*, which has been lying around the house for more than a month—sometimes in her bedroom, sometimes in mine, often in the kitchen, almost always in the bathroom. As she reads, I imagine Pessoa, standing at the window of his small attic, on the fourth floor of a house in Lisbon's Biaxa district, looking down over the haphazard agglomeration of roofs in the tawny evening light. If he were to go down the stairs to the street, he'd perhaps cross to the other sidewalk to buy a packet of fresh tobacco; in the doorway he'd meet Esteves, who would nod in greeting. But, ever ill prepared for spontaneous meetings, Pessoa wouldn't be able to look him in the eye. If, on leaving the establishment, he were then to walk down to Rua dos Douradores and on to La Travessa do Almada, he'd pass the office where his boss, Senhor Moitinho de Almeida, would be waiting for him to arrive at half past eight on the dot the following morning. Stopping off

for a short time in the restaurant that now bears his name, he'd see Bernado Soares, with whom he would have a glass of wine and a bowl of kale and chicken soup. Continuing along the street to Rua do São Mamede, he'd go up the steps at São Crispim and, a few meters farther on, reach Rua da Saudade. Maybe there, leaning over a balcony, he'd discover another of his heteronyms: a melancholic South African from Cape Town, a professor of English literature, specialist in the mysteries of the iambic pentameter. But Pessoa doesn't move away from the window—as I don't really move from my spot while I write.

> *I invoke myself and find nothing.*
> *I go to the window and see the street in absolute clarity.*
> *I see the shops, see the sidewalks, see the cars passing by.*
> *I see the live, clothed beings passing each other by.*
> *I see the dogs, which also exist.*
> *And all this weighs me down.*
> *And all this is foreign, like everything.*

Calle Mérida—make a left—ride on the sidewalk—stop

"Perhaps what is inexpressible (what I find mysterious and am not able to express) is the background against which whatever I could express has its meaning," wrote Wittgenstein somewhere. The same may be true of words that resist comprehension.

If I were to leave my apartment now, I'd ride my bike to the Librería del Tesoro. I'd chain it to a lamppost and go into the bookstore, looking for a Portuguese dictionary. It would start raining outside, as it always does on September afternoons. I'd eventually find the dictionary, look for the word, and maybe read:

> Saudade: streets, cracked sidewalks, archipelagos of dog shit, the leprous walls of old buildings, the concrete sadness of a bicycle ride around the Colonia Roma at the violet hour.

I'd buy the dictionary—go outside and put it in the basket of my bike—dry the saddle a little with my sleeve—unlock the chain. I'd make my way back home. Sometimes I'd ride in the street—sometimes, on the sidewalk.

RELINGOS: THE CARTOGRAPHY OF EMPTY SPACES

Work suspended

On the Paseo de la Reforma, that grand avenue simulating the entrance to an imperial Mexico City that of course no longer exists, there's a quadrangle of tiny absences, small plazas, where once there were things that are now only gaps. As if the perfect, majestic smile of Madame de la Reforma now lacked a number of teeth. Only God and perhaps Salvador Novo—modernist chronicler of the city—know what was there before the appearance of those empty spaces.

These urban absences, as they might be called, were formed during the extension of the Paseo de la Reforma in the 1960s. The widening of the avenue and the addition of a new stretch were accompanied by the indiscriminate demolition of the buildings in the area. As this new road cut diagonally across the orthogonal layout of the city, some rectangular plots became triangular or trapezoidal. And, since the construction of buildings in these irregular spaces—leftovers from the Paseo—was inconceivable, the asphalt and paving-stone trapezoids and triangles remained like odd pieces of a jigsaw, the origin and purpose of which no one remembers any longer, but which, equally, no one dares to either destroy or use in any permanent way. Nowadays these residual spaces on and around certain corners of Reforma—between the enormous new junctions with the avenues Eje 1 Norte and Hidalgo—are abandoned to the perpetual comings and goings of

ambulant street vendors, tourists, delivery men, petty thieves, the homeless, people taking strolls, dust, and debris.

A group of architects from the National University (UNAM), headed by Carlos González Lobo, have christened these spaces "relingos." I'm not sure where the term comes from, but I imagine it could be related to the realengas of old Castilian, a term that refers to pieces of land not belonging to the Crown, abandoned to disuse. (The strange ups and downs of words: in certain Latin American countries, *realenga* is now used to talk about an animal with no owner; in others, the word is synonymous with "layabout.")

I'm also pretty certain that *relingo* is derived from another similar concept: the terraines vagues of the Catalan architect Ignasi de Solà-Morales. Just like a relingo, the terraine vague is an ambiguous space, a piece of waste ground without defined borders or limiting fences, a species of plot on the margins of metropolitan life, even if it is physically to be found in the very center of a city, at the junction of two main avenues, or under a newly built bridge.

Coming out from Hidalgo metro station at the exit nearest to San Judas Tadeo church, there's a small triangular plaza, in the middle of which stands a tribute to the work of Mexican journalists: a statue of the nineteenth-century newspaper editor and politician Francisco Zarco surrounded by a large fountain that bubbles and spits out mouthfuls of gray water. The homeless people of the neighborhood go there with their bars of soap and towels to wash their faces and bodies beneath the bronze figure. At certain hours in the afternoon, that same plaza becomes a six-a-side football field, and at midday on Sundays it's transformed again, into the venue for a tertulia for the deaf mutes coming out from the sign language mass at San Judas.

An architect friend of mine, José Amozurrutia, once showed me the plans of a possible building he designed for that relingo. What he envisioned there was a theater that would house the hypothetical San Hipólito Deaf League, and provide a space where the congregation of the sign language mass could indefinitely prolong their Sunday gatherings, silently reading scripts and rehearsing plays. I can't think of a more brilliantly crazy idea for a relingo than a silent theater that has absolutely no possibility of ever becoming a reality.

Crane in use

Architecture, according to Roland Barthes, should be simultaneously the projection of an impossibility and the putting into practice of a functional order. In his well-known essay on the Eiffel Tower, Barthes recounts that in 1881, not long before the construction of the gigantic antenna, another French architect, Jules Bourdais, had imagined a "sun tower" for the Champ de Mars—at that time a relingo, a sort of playground or tabula rasa for speculative architects. However Bourdais may have conceived his tower, in Barthes's version—at least in the English-language translation—the structure was to have an enormous "bonfire" that would illuminate the whole city by means of a complex system of mirrors. On the top floor of the tower, crowning the great beacon decorated with wrought iron galleries, there would be a space to which Parisian invalids could ascend for air therapy.

Although Barthes's description of the sun tower lacks certain important details—for example, one wonders if the mirrors to reflect the light of the giant beacon would be installed around the city or on the tower itself, or how the invalids would get up to the top of the structure and, once there, not scorch themselves—

the idea itself is perfect in the Barthesian-architectonic sense: a semifunctional folly. Whatever the case, being incapable myself of imagining things in three dimensions, I find it fascinating to think that a person would stop in the middle of an empty space and conceive there the details of a building full of deaf mutes acting out *Macbeth* or a tower on whose pinnacle the invalids of Paris would warm their hands on a giant bonfire.

Spaces survive the passage of time in the same way a person survives his death: in the close alliance between the memory and the imagination that others forge around it. They exist as long as we keep thinking of them, imagining in them; as long as we remember them, remember ourselves there, and, above all, as long as we remember what we imagined in them. A relingo—an emptiness, an absence—is a sort of depository for possibilities, a place that can be seized by the imagination and inhabited by our phantom-follies. Cities need those vacant lots, those silent gaps where the mind can wander freely.

No soliciting

I don't think relingos are necessarily limited to exterior spaces. A few steps from the plaza where the Deaf League rehearses plays in the imagination of a certain architect is the old Miguel Cervantes Library. The building is an empty interior these days, used and reused for different purposes. Two guards stand at the front entrance: one tall and angular with a melancholy expression; the other short, with a pronounced paunch—like unwitting ghosts of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza.

When anyone enters an official-looking building in Mexico, they're greeted with variations on the questions: "On whose behalf

have you come?" "Who asked you to come here?" "Who do you want to see?" To declare that you haven't come on anyone's behalf, that no one recommended your visit, that you don't need to consult any person in particular, that you're taking a walk, and would like to go inside to take a look at the ceiling—just for the sake of it—seems to disconcert the angels in blue who guard the entrances to these bureaucratic paradises.

One day, after a certain amount of obstinacy on my part, the two guards of the ex-Cervantes library finally allowed me to pass into the ruined interior. Inside, there was not the slightest trace of the volumes that had once resided there—perhaps just a screw clinging to the peeling wall, against which a bookcase had rested. But there was still an air of bookishness: a heavy atmosphere, the stink of squandered ink, of ideas bound in hardback.

As far as I could tell, the ex-library was being used as an improvised and not quite official workshop for restoring murals. Six or seven long tables ran the length of the first floor, and on them lay the panels of a mural from the 1930s, painted by Ramón Alva de Canal and called *The History of Writing*.

A small, suspicious, mousy man—the "Workshop Director," according to the nametag pinned to his shirt—came up to chase me away as soon as he saw me cross through the arched entrance accompanied by one of the two guards. But the squat angel in blue, now on my side, immediately vouched for my good intentions: The señorita says she's come to see you, chief.

Each section of the mural recorded a different moment in the graphological history of mankind, beginning with a simple image of the first tremulous strokes on the wall of some cave, and ending with a sort of strident hymn to the great industry of the modern press. It seemed a little ironic that this very mural, *The History of*

Writing, was being restored in an ex-library completely devoid of books. The image of the empty, dilapidated library housing this mural, itself in a ruinous state, should have perhaps made up the seventh, nonexistent panel to complete the series:

1. Cave painting
2. Cuneiform writing
3. Papyri and hieroglyphs
4. The alphabet
5. Johannes Gutenberg
6. Modern printing
7. The fall of libraries and bookshops

No parking

In the middle of a sentence, after the umpteenth comma deleted and undeleted, I suddenly lose the will to continue writing. I get up from the desk, impatient and defeated, and go to the bookcase. With the persistence of a mosquito around a lightbulb, I prowl the shelves in search of that book, that page, that underlined phrase I vaguely remember, but which—if I could only reread it—would finally give me the confidence to complete my recently abandoned idea. But I find nothing and sit back down at my writing desk.

I know that the times I feel most excited about what I'm writing are when I should be most suspicious, because more often than not I'm repeating something I either said or read elsewhere, something that has been lingering in my mind for a while. I'm almost always saying something trivial just when I believe I'm on the verge of a novel idea. In contrast, the worst moment to stop writing is when I no longer feel like going on. On those occasions,

it's always better to keep rapping thoughts into the keyboard, like drilling holes in the ground, until the exact word emerges. Only then, take the book off the shelf and drop into an armchair to read. In some way, I guess, writing is making space for reading.

We buy old books

Cities have often been compared to language: you can read a city, it's said, as you read a book. But the metaphor can be inverted. The journeys we make during the reading of a book trace out, in some way, the private spaces we inhabit. There are texts that will always be our dead-end streets; fragments that will be bridges; words that will be like the scaffolding that protects fragile constructions. T. S. Eliot: a plant growing in the debris of a ruined building; Salvador Novo: a tree-lined street transformed into an expressway; Tomás Segovia: a boulevard, a breath of air; Roberto Bolaño: a rooftop terrace; Isabel Allende: a (magically real) shopping mall; Gilles Deleuze: a summit; and Jacques Derrida: a pothole. Robert Walser: a chink in the wall, for looking through to the other side; Charles Baudelaire: a waiting room; Hannah Arendt: a tower, an Archimedean point; Martin Heidegger: a cul-de-sac; Walter Benjamin: a one-way street walked down against the flow.

And everything we haven't read: relingos, absences in the heart of the city.

Guaranteed repairs

Restoration: plastering over the cracks left on any surface by the erosion of time.

Writing: an inverse process of restoration. A restorer fills the holes in a surface on which a more or less finished image already exists; a writer starts from the fissures and the holes. In this sense, an architect and a writer are alike. Writing: filling in relingos.

No, writing isn't filling gaps—nor is it constructing a house, a building, just to fill up an empty space.

Perhaps Alejandro Zambra's bonsai image might come closer: "A writer is a person who rubs out. . . . Cutting, lopping: finding a form that was already there."

But words are not plants and, in any case, gardens are for the poets with orderly, landscaped hearts. Prose is for those with a builder's spirit.

Writing: drilling walls, breaking windows, blowing up buildings. Deep excavations to find—to find what? To find nothing.

A writer is a person who distributes silences and empty spaces.

Writing: making relingos.