The Book of Homes

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Translated by Elizabeth Harris

Xavier replied that a home is not a linen closet or a bird in a cage but the presence of the person we love. And then he told her that he himself had no home, or rather, to put it another way, that his home was in his pace, in his walk, in his journeys. That his home was wherever new horizons opened. That he could only live by going from one dream to another, from one landscape to another…

Milan Kundera, *The Book of Elsewhere*
(translated by Aaron Asher)

Underground Home, 1976

His first home has three bedrooms, a living room, kitchen, and bathroom. The baby's bedroom—and this baby we'll refer to as I—is actually a closet with a cot crammed inside. A bit damp, like the rest of the apartment. There are no windows, but the room is comfortable and close to the kitchen. And the clattering of dishes, the tick-ticking of the knife on the cutting board, the water running from the faucet are probably I's first memories, even if he doesn't remember them. Just as he doesn't remember the soft thud of the refrigerator door closing, or the resistant tearing as it opens. A small polyphony in the kitchen: metal percussions, counterpoints of clanging ceramic and running water and the hum of the refrigerator and the stove-hood fan.

His home is below ground-level. The apartment can only be reached by a spiral staircase or else the elevator. The lobby, a strip of red carpet leading to these stairs, smells much different than the floor below, with its dampness and basement smell. And really, this is the same level as the basement, this apartment where I's family lives, and there are two other massive wooden doors, and beyond them, other undetermined families.

But the Underground Home isn't entirely below ground-level. The dining room, kitchen, bathroom, and two bedrooms actually face two internal courtyards. Dining room, kitchen, and bath on one side, two bedrooms on the other. The internal courtyards, or cement yards, are enclosed by a series of condominiums, five to six stories high, and built in the 1950s and 60s.

Stepping out into the courtyard you're forced to tilt back your head. I's Grandmother—from now on, Grandmother—has the same routine every morning: she steps out, tilts back her head, and looks up at the sky to check the weather. Then she goes back in.

From inside the Underground Home, it always seems cloudy. The windows facing the two cement yards don't bring in enough daylight. That's why you have to turn on a lamp in the hall when you come in; the lights stay on all the time.

In that darkness, I begins to crawl. The objects and furniture push their shadows over the floor, spilling everywhere, flooding the apartment, climbing onto side-tables, windowsills, the ceramic fruit basket that stays at the center of the dining-room table. I learns how to move around among those shadows, to trample them, be overwhelmed by them. Sometimes, crawling and disappearing inside a shadow, or just sticking out a hand, or foot, abandoning them to the glowing light: I goes to pieces in the darkness, streaks of him left on the rug.

In the Underground Home, the lights go off only when it's time for bed or time to leave: the apartment's consigned to darkness, its natural element. Four turns of the key, loud voices on the stairs, then silence. And the shadows slip off the objects entirely, dive onto the floor, subdue every square centimeter, capture the place.

The courtyard facing the kitchen, bathroom, and dining room is where Turtle lives. Lives more or less hidden behind flowerpots or inside her carapace. It's rare to see her step out from cover. Only when Grandmother comes does she run to meet her, scuffling across the courtyard, shell repeatedly hitting the ground, a rhythm identical to her joy. Grandmother picks her up, talks to her; Turtle waves her four wrinkly legs, testing out this assisted flight among those buildings that force the sky into a square where she might be free. Then she returns to her

place behind the pots, dragging the lettuce leaf that Grandmother has brought her and that she'll greedily, stingily devour, shredding the leaf with her hard beak, until it disappears.

Turtle is the first animal I has met in the Underground Home. Then again, I is the only human—aside from Grandmother—that Turtle has ever let see her head, as it slides out from her shell.

I looks for her in the courtyard, knows where to find her: he crawls until he's close, scrambling across the courtyard, every day, his rhythmic knees, faster. They always meet behind the flowerpots. I slaps his palms on Turtle's carapace, an excited, merry drumming. That tribal drumming—I sitting on the ground, on the soft throne of his own diaper—is probably I's first accomplished ritual. I beats time on her armor and Turtle stretches out her neck.

Turtle is also the first being whose example I follows: unlike most other children, who detest every kind of vegetable, I demands lettuce. Even his movements are turtle-induced: long periods of stillness, in various hiding places, then accelerating sharply down the hall.

When the two find themselves face to face on the ground, I bursts out laughing. Then he puts his small, bare foot in the turtle's face, and with his big toe, rubs her head. Because I's big toe and Turtle's head are the same shape, I is certain his head is his foot. So in his vision of his first two years of life, I is a turtle with two heads. Turtle and I greet each other through the child's feet.

The Underground Home is on one of the seven hills of the city of Rome.

Every day, at the top of the hill, two soldiers of the Italian army roll a cannon out to the ramparts. At the stroke of noon, the cannon fires at Rome.

The crowd claps at this staged scene, the Italian army shooting—blanks—at their capital. The children often cry at the blast, while the parents vainly attempt to explain the meaning of this fiction, the difference here from reality. The explosion can be heard for kilometers, its shock waves carrying over the landscape, this same landscape that those present shoot with their cameras.

In the Underground Home there's Father, Mother, Sister, Grandmother. And I.

Home of the Radiator, 1998

It was groundbreaking, buying that television now sitting on the fake terracotta-tile floor. A small set—14-inches, according to the box—with the power to draw people to the ground: as soon as it's plugged in, I is on the floor, on his side like an Etruscan on his tomb, staring at the bright screen.

Bought out of pure instinct, millions of years of evolution for the species. Still unfamiliar with Turin, he went to the one electronics store he knew of, that he'd seen every day for ten months, from the tram: outside the city, by the bypass entrance, selling TVs, blenders, washing machines, many other appliances, arranged in the shop window, a landscape of efficiency.

And so the bus trip to his first home after graduating from college was a ritual of lifting. I got on the 55 with the large Panasonic box, apologizing as he went, blaming the carton. He set the box on the first free seat and stood beside it, on-guard. At the twelfth stop, counted through door puffs, he got off, walked three-hundred meters with this box in his arms, then up four flights of stairs. His roommate watching—the owner of the apartment, a man of about sixty, showing signs of personal wreckage—secretly jubilant and outwardly disapproving: not wanting to pay the state fee, not wanting the hassle, but knowing he'll benefit. Standing at the door, watching I pull it from the Styrofoam, set it on the floor, and push the power button. On the first viable channel, a female newscaster, well-dressed, the first female presence in that room.

That this place is temporary is obvious from the lack of a wardrobe in I's room, though it's been a month and half since he first stepped through the door. His open suitcase by the cot serves as a dresser. Plus there's no real agreement, nothing signed between him and his

roommate. Money exchanges hands at the end of the month and the only other condition is Tuesday afternoons, I has to be out until dinner, to allow his roommate his weekly sodomy.

As for I's sexual activity—the unspoken part of this agreement—he has the entire weekend, when his roommate disappears, leaves the city.

I won't be there long, this is clear to them both, just as it's evident to them both that the memory of it, this living together, will be better than living this every day. Actually, they have little interaction at all save for dividing the shelves in the refrigerator and then a common courtesy sanitized by discretion. The life going on here is mainly a bedroom life. The rest of the apartment doesn't exist: the kitchen is blind—with a grille facing the stairs—and hardly the space to maneuver and a table for one. And the entryway is almost entirely taken up by a kerosene radiator, the only source of heat. The bathroom right beside it is the warmest room in the apartment.

The radiator is the reason why life in the bedrooms is a life of open doors. The alternative is privacy at outdoor temperatures; but it's January and outside the first snow is falling, that empty promise first of Christmas, then New Year's. The Turin rooftops are white, and so is the train station, two blocks away, the snow softening the whistling of the trains as they come and go. Privacy, basically, is two sweaters and chattering teeth.

It's why I has cut off the fingertips to his gloves: over a month and half he's gone from the shock of his early days in this microclimate to equipping himself for survival. Within that icy room, he warms his fingers by striking the keyboard of an old computer, rescued in extremis from the Dumpster where a friend was planning to chuck it. An extinct species, discontinued, the monitor screen arthritic, exhausted, with barely visible images, and very slow. But it's the

first computer I has owned, and there's no amount of cold that will reduce the impact of what I calls *The Revolution*, the coup that over the course of a few weeks has supplanted the television set, pilloried on the floor, condemned to die. Abandoned, the TV flaunts its cathode tube, its blind screen like a long snout—but I, back turned, takes no notice.

So at that moment, what the windows view on the other side of the street—as they do every evening, almost without variation—is a boy buried in sweaters, a cap sometimes pulled low over his ears, typing away on the keys of a keyboard, on a piece of particle-board propped on two trestles and clearly too high for the boy's chair. And all of this blurring in the falling snow, at a distance, if someone's actually watching.

What's impossible to see, no doubt, is the gap between I's outburst of typing and the technology limping up behind; between the pounding rush of words and the screen standing white, stunned and weary, then finally spitting those words back all at once, on-delay, when I's already left the sentence, his hands motionless, in thoughtful pause. Fingers raised over the keys, he sees the words stepping out from all that whiteness, a column of them, proceeding all in a row, then rushing forward, only stopping if a period commands it. Afterwards, I reads—stunned himself now, and moved—what all these words, standing at attention, have come to tell him in the cold.

Family Home, 2009

The Family Home consists of three rooms plus a kitchen. The entry hall is dimly lit. A small table to the right of the door is where you automatically toss your keys. A floor of yellow and gray granolithic tiles, ill conceived, that extends into the kitchen.

The two rooms off this entry hall, the eat-in living room and I and Wife's bedroom, both with wood floors. The eat-in living room has a simple sofa bed, sand-colored upholstery. It's such an ordinary, plain couch that you forget it once you've seen it, like it's not there at all. In front of this couch, the TV. Not much more to say about this room: a table, cherry-finish, that can seat six, four chairs carefully positioned on opposite sides.

At the back of the room, a window with a view of a rooftop terrace across the street, where an old couple has lunch and dinner in the summer and then in the winter, becomes a storage area. Beyond that terrace, the Alps. As it begins to warm up, I will open the window and spend a lot of time there, elbows on the sill. Now and then Little Girl's head pokes up as well. Sometimes just for a second, other times she stops beside him. The moment someone shows up on that terrace, Little Girl silently waves hello; another hand, mute, good-natured, waves back. A long-held custom that hasn't turned into a relationship, has never blossomed into a verbal greeting, and has never lost its gentleness. A matter left up entirely to hands.

All around, early twentieth-century buildings, nice middleclass people wandering around, pastry shops, Sunday pastries, restaurants full of nicely—tastefully—dressed families. Two-hundred meters away, Turin's main railway station.

Wife and I's bedroom is the largest in the apartment—roughly thirty square meters—and split into a night zone and day zone. A queen bed with a lightwood frame stands at the

back of the room by a glass door onto a balcony. On either side of the bed are two wooden cubes, much like fruit crates, but designed for a post-agricultural clientele that shops at the supermarket. You can tell I's side by the precarious tower of books. A couple of books lie, spine up, flipped open, on the floor, like dragonflies, waiting. Other dragonflies are scattered throughout the apartment, on the armrests of the couch, the kitchen table.

The so-called day zone of the bedroom is, essentially, Wife's writing desk: here you'll find highlighter pens, a basket with scissors and staples, notebooks, a laptop and printer. On the writing surface, pink and yellow post-its.

The last room is Little Girl's.

The frosted-glass door is always closed. Through this glass, even coming closer, you wouldn't see much: it's mostly covered by a sheet of paper taped at the corners. A poster that Little Girl can see from her bed, the back of it facing those outside the room. Hers is a room thought of only as an inside: outside is an inside-out inside, the seam-side world.

When she goes to school, the room's left open. Wife goes in and cleans; normally I won't go any further than the doorway, but it's hard not to look in. The floor, the usual yellow and gray tiles. Bed against one wall. Facing him, a white, two-doored wardrobe coated in a moss of stickers, and a couple of photos. One with Girlfriends, another with Little Girl's Father. Beside the wardrobe, on a shelf, a stack of textbooks and a photo of her and I hugging, taken by Wife. All told, no longer a nursery: a room.

Opposite this room, the kitchen with its few meters of granolithic tiles. On the wall, three sets of cabinets, cherry-colored, upper and lower, clearly fitted into this space. The countertop has been lopped off on one side, the particleboard edge showing. At the center, the stovetop, a convection oven below. Against the wall, a small table and three chairs. Hanging on the wall, a white board with Little Girl's week, divided into columns of days and rows of hours.

Outside, a view onto the garages and the apartment railings of other buildings. Beyond, the hills. A kitchen cabinet, due to a lack of space, sits out on a balcony, and is used for storage.

Generally speaking, with the furnishings you can easily guess that the Family Home is actually two sets of furniture stuck together to make a nonexistent third. It's easy to say whose are whose—those belonging to I, those belonging to Wife + Little Girl—it's easy to reconstruct the two original apartments in hindsight, these two lives glued together into one new experiment.

That's why I spends a lot of time in the main room, sitting at the table or else on the couch. Especially when he's in a bad mood or they've fought, which doesn't happen very often: his old furniture is his embassy, where he beats a retreat. He'll collect himself, on the couch, heels drawn up, feet not touching the floor. He stays there until he feels better, then he'll get up and move around the apartment. Often, though, it's Wife who comes to him to make up, and he opens the embassy door. He moves to one side, lets her sit, welcomes her with his eyes. When she gets up again, their peace made, I sets his feet back on the ground, leaving behind his capricious, childish expression.

Seeing Little Girl, asleep on the couch nearly every afternoon, her math or science book on the cushion, pencil on the floor, is a sight he's still not used to.

Underground Home, 1978

One of the first things I remembers is Father shut up in his room for days, maybe weeks.

It's early spring; in the two cement yards enclosed by buildings, there's finally sun. Not much and not for long. An apparition showing up twice a day. The first time: when the sun's above, in this period, around 12:40: a time when sunlight spills over the yard, but little more than a bucketful.

The second time the sunlight arrives from the east, in the early evening, around 6:30. Only a ray of light slipping between two building. But after working its way through, this ray expands, descending, taking hold, lighting a meter and a half of ground. At that point you feel an ordered drumming: Turtle appears, runs out from behind the flowerpot, carapace scraping. Catches that ray on the fly, a tennis player. Then she stops, head out, in its spotlight.

If she's lucky, she'll stay like this as long as that evening sunray lasts. Then it goes out and Turtle slowly returns the way she came. If things go badly for her, I comes running—and usually screaming—and turns Turtle into a drum.

Father is always shut up in his room: he only leaves to go into the bathroom, and afterwards he shuts himself back inside.

Often, he doesn't eat, rarely with Sister, Mother, Grandmother, and I.

If Father's not there, the voice heard is almost always Grandmother's. During meals, the television speaks, but if Father's there, this voice is quiet. The television speaks of a kidnapped

politician, shut up in an apartment and condemned to die. A photo's shown of the man holding a newspaper; it's to demonstrate that the man—that day—is still alive.

You can't tell from the photo where he is. There's only a flag behind him.

No one at the table is really watching or listening to the television.

But the television throws light on them, a sheaf of light within the rectangle of that object, which then floods over the table. The only one outside this light, at times, is I; he runs around the apartment, falls, but doesn't cry. He always stops outside the closed door to Father's room.

Then he races back, and into the dining room, and sees Mother, Grandmother, and Sister inside the light of the television; and he goes inside as well, just like Turtle in the afternoon sunlight. The television spills the man with the newspaper over their heads.

The screen is the entrance to a tunnel tying the Underground Home where they're eating lunch to the apartment where the man's being held. A rectangle that only I can enter, and only crawling on all fours.

Sister's already too big.

For Mother and Grandmother, this wouldn't be graceful.

But I can comfortably slip inside that rectangle of light; he'd just have to crawl a little—who knows how long—and then pop out the other end, by the Prisoner with the newspaper.

But I and the others don't really consider this option: they stay where they are, and the television pours its entire contents over their heads. Plus, since he's tested out, then adopted his upright position, I's not particularly interested in returning to all fours.

He only does it sometimes with Turtle, but this is a long established relationship.

The rest of the time, he eats, runs around the apartment, and sleeps in the closet.

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When lunch is over, Mother carries a plate into Father's room. I follows behind her, but stays outside; she gestures to him, then shuts the door.

A short while later, Mother comes out again and talks with Grandmother as she washes the dishes.

At times Mother also leaves the door ajar, if I's not hot on her heels, and once he poked his head through the crack and saw them both sitting on the couch. Father had his head in his hands, elbows on his legs; Mother was near him, not touching, knees together, not talking.

On the phone, Grandmother says her son—Father—is scared.

He won't leave the apartment because he's afraid they're going to hurt him.

He hit someone he shouldn't have.

She says you have to be sure of yourself before you pretend to be strong.

The phone is in the kitchen, by a small table and a chair. There's a chalkboard above the table where Grandmother can jot down notes so she won't forget.

When Grandmother talks about Father on the phone, she pulls the door closed, but I pushes it open because that's how he gets through to go find Turtle out in the cement yard.

Grandmother's words fall on his head as he goes by; they stay in his hair until—kicking and screaming a thousand screams—Mother washes them out.

Home of Words, 2010

It's less than a kilometer from the Family Home, past the Turin train station.

Every morning I leaves home, walks through the station atrium, and makes his way to the Home of Words.

A seven-minute walk; eight if you stop and look at the Departures schedule-board. Some days he doesn't look up. Other times he does, glancing up at the destinations. Imagining himself in some of those places. Then he keeps walking, cutting through the crowd; he comes out here, in this other part of the city.

Before there was gunfire here, and people stayed inside. Sleeping meant earplugs or a pillow over your head. Or thinking about leaving, and finally managing to drift off, then still staying.

There's no gunfire now. Pushers are limited now to two street corners, near the underpass. It's full of bars now and young people shouting outside all night long. With every glass, their voices grow louder. Sleeping means earplugs and a pillow over your head. Or opening the window and pointless shouting. Thinking about leaving, not sleeping, that thought gnawing at you. Then still staying.

The Home of Words is on the second story of a building built in the 1930s. At street-level, there's a large window to an old grocery store; the manager installed a grate so people wouldn't sit on the ledge with their drinks.

I is directly above this business; he feels the vibrations of the store's refrigerator in his feet, especially on Sundays, with everything quiet. The rest of the week he doesn't notice, though he does hear the bell ring as every customer comes in.

Every day I enters the House of Words around dawn, and he leaves with the sunset. Sooner during the winter, during the summer around dinnertime, following the rhythms of the sun. I doesn't want to see the collapsing and dying of the light.

At lunchtime, he goes out, gets a sandwich at a coffee bar or some pasta at a trattoria. He doesn't talk to anyone; he prefers a place with a TV on, likes to stare into the rectangle of light.

By Happy Hour, he's usually left.

The Home of Words is a two-by-four meter room. There's a window overlooking the street, and a door in front of the stairs. I's name isn't by the doorbell or intercom. No one rings for him because no one knows he's there. If the bell rings, it's for someone else; I never opens to anyone.

In the House of Words there's a table, a desk chair, and an armchair.

Behind the desk is a chalkboard that Wife gave I: in chalk, she wrote, For your words. Wife's words, her clean, delicate handwriting, blankets his shoulders.

The walls are white, nothing on them; only nail-holes and frames of absence. From the life before in that place.

I's done nothing to remove these traces. Within the frames, the light has drawn on the wall; the past watches I, and I can watch the past.

The largest holes probably once held up a shelf. Or two, one above the other. I hasn't put up a shelf or brought many books; the few books he does have are piled on the table; these books are always changing.

He does have a lot of notebooks, though: small engagement books, eighty pages, grid or ruled paper; it doesn't matter. White eraser curls appear between the pages and also on the table, which is black. A slight snowfall, circumscribed, of eliminated words.

The chair by the table is a swivel office chair.

I usually sits turned toward the window, staring off at the building across the street. If someone appears at the window and looks his way, I turns back to his computer screen.

When he steps inside the Home of Words, he takes off his shoes and arranges them side-by-side, next to the door. If it's summer, he also removes his socks; he folds them and tucks them where his feet just were.

When he slips off his shoes and turns on his computer screen, I moves into a place where Wife doesn't exist.

Every day, he grabs hold of one end of the string of words he sees on the screen, holding on, sliding down, bare toes pointed at the white wall of his monitor, until he disappears, below, into the rectangle of light.

And what he sees when the light takes him, I doesn't speak of this to Wife or Little Girl; honestly, he wouldn't know what to say.

All he knows is he comes back at sunset: he grabs hold of the string of words and, pointing his toes at the wall, he pulls himself up meter by meter. Until he reaches the surface, and reappears, beyond the glowing rectangle of the computer, in his office.

And what I sees during those hours, seven minutes away from the home where he lives with Family, perhaps all that remains of what he sees are traces left in his expression.

In the evening, when he sits down at the table for dinner with Wife and Little Girl, they don't ask him what happened during his day. Wife only asks, How'd it go, and he says, Well; then they talk of other things.

Wife would like to ask more but knows this is exactly what's most dangerous. So she doesn't ask, out of fear of knowing and also out of respect. She knows the only thing she can do is wait; that one day, when it's all done and he lets her read it, Wife will understand and redistribute everything, divided into each silent, past dinner.

But day after day, she can only try to decipher that expression I wears at the table. And try to understand if something is shifting inside, if something irreparable has occurred; if there's a space for her, too, somewhere, or if he's already moved someplace different, coming home now only to sleep.

Home Beneath the Mountain, 1983

While a fortress, it's nestled on the third floor of a recently constructed condominium. I's last name is by the intercom, in the same typeface as the others on the push-button panel. It's the third name on the right, and pressing the button gets you inside to a ringing sound: the only way in. The change now is a family that Father has locked away and appears once in a while at the window.

I is eight; if he could, he'd look outside forever.

The location: a town of two thousand in the foothills of the Alps. Seven-hundred kilometers from the Underground Home. The difference, it goes without saying, is unfathomable, the greatest distance still within the country's borders.

The condominium is part of a residential complex, its construction announced years before the complex was actually built. Three mustard-colored buildings surrounded on three sides by flower beds and three signs posted saying "Trampling the flowers is strictly prohibited." On the fourth side of the complex is a modest-sized parking lot. From here, access to the complex is through a series of cobblestone paths leading to the front door.

The Home Beneath the Mountain consists of a kitchen and two rooms. These rooms are off a central hallway. At the end of the hall, always closed, is the pebble-glass door to the bathroom.

Once inside, the kitchen is the first room to the right. On the same side, down the hall, is dining room. The furniture in both rooms is from a local factory specializing in alpine furnishings. The kitchen table, the sideboard—also the couch, two armchairs, and wardrobe are massive wood pieces engraved with a floral pattern.

There's a small balcony off the kitchen. It looks over a planted field. Past the field, the road, blacktop not visible. On the right, you can make out the cemetery with its solid, low walls and the path bordered by cypresses.

On the left, the papermill's smokestacks blow clouds into the sky. Although marginal in the topography around here, the paper mill is the area's lung, guaranteeing employment. It also raises the testosterone level of teenage boys with the porn magazines left out by the Dumpsters. It will be out there, with no imaginative effort, that I will have his first conscious ejaculation, a release, a jolt in the lower abdomen, without even touching himself.

But that's not now—that's in a few years—for now the papermill is only billowing, blinking, and burning, and I is a little boy watching it being swallowed up in the background. Often he's watching the older boys out on their bikes along the main road, groups of three or four, shouting and standing up on their pedals, excited to be reaching their destination, and the promise of photos of breasts and genitals, stained with rain, mud, and sperm. And he also watches these boys riding back slowly—hours later—tires buzzing, chains still.

I's room is across from the dining room. A large room with a wardrobe that has three plain doors. The bunk bed, a nice display of the floral pattern, is to the left as he enters.

I sleeps on the top bunk, protected by a massive wood headrest. Every night he scrambles up the ladder and climbs into bed. Sister is in the lower bunk.

The glass window looks onto a balcony that juts out over the complex's flower bed. Not far off, looms the mountain.

The dining room is Father's room, the same way the kitchen pertains to Mother, defining a clear social hierarchy and areas of specialization. Father only enters the kitchen to eat, Mother, the dining room, only to make the bed.

After dinner, in fact, the dining room transforms to a private room. The couch with the flower pattern expels the queen-sized bed. The armchairs are set by the window and the TV goes on, with Father and Mother watching from under the covers. What you see going in there after dinner is a normal bedroom. No evidence that only a few hours before it was a different room.

Owing to the double nature of this space, I knows metamorphoses exist. I's universe can be capsized at any moment. I accepts that his world can be subverted, quashed, if Father chooses. He accepts that disappearances like this are a fact of nature. If the dining room's not there at night, asking why isn't proper.

For him it's enough to retreat into the carapace of his room, climb over the railing, and stare up at the ceiling like a turtle staring inside its own shell.

In the Home Beneath the Mountain there are no telephones because Father needs his rest. That's why it's always silent, while in the upstairs and downstairs apartments, a phone is always ringing.

Once a week, Mother will leave with a handful of coins and go to the phonebooth, three-hundred meters away. These coins for phone calls she saves up in an ashtray near the sets of keys in the entryway. When Mother returns from her phone call, she tells them that Relatives say hello.

The missing phone is the fence colliding with Grandmother's and Relatives' phone calls. It's inside this absence that Father has walled in I's family. Walled-in alive, the family stays safe; no one can call.

Father is free to rest easy.

Mother sets the change from shopping aside so she can call.

Turtle's Home, 1968

There's not much space, but it doesn't feel cramped. It's conceived for a single tenant, a studio of sorts, with the bare necessities.

One frontal entrance.

From here, Turtle observes the world; from here, more often, she withdraws.

Toward the back are two windows, always open, where light enters and legs exit. Other openings appear closer to the front, on either side.

The ceiling is vaulted, imposing, in spite of the home's reduced size. The openings—front and back—project everything Turtle passes onto the vault. The world is everything that winds up projected onto the ceiling. When Turtle moves, the projection changes: the vault becomes a screen; her home is a traveling theater.

The floor, like all the other surfaces, is a bony material. About ten tiles, though they seem to be a single casting.

Austere but not cold, elegant with imperfections.

Turtle doesn't so much walk on that floor as stretch out there.

What she walks across is outside, where she leaves her footprints.

The interior is somewhat plain. With the acoustics of a cave: the noise of the world remains trapped inside, entering through the windows and spreading. Little by little the sound grows weaker, slowly leaking out.

Inside her home, thunder rumbles and echoes on and on. Rain makes her apartment a living hell. Every drop becomes a drumroll.

Viewed from the outside, Turtle's home is a private dwelling. One-story; no upstairs or downstairs neighbors, no intrusions. No foundation, sitting on the ground.

The roof is made up of sixty dark, inlaid tiles.

An outdoor bathroom.

Turtle's Home is also her tomb.

She drags it behind her with every step. While alive, she lives there.

She won't have to move when she dies.

Turtle's Home exists in the same urban context as the Underground Home. Rome, the 60s fading, coming to a close.

But Turtle has only just arrived; she doesn't know anything yet.

Grandmother (not grandmother yet, only Father's mother, and Father still only a son) found her in the grass, in a nearby park. She thought Turtle was a stone, but then she saw her moving: slowly, of course, but moving enough to erase any doubt. When Grandmother picked her up to look more closely, Turtle shut herself back up inside her home. She felt herself lifted off the ground, and rising, she saw the sky.

She appeared again as she heard Grandmother speaking, asking her where she came from, why she was there, where she was going. Seeing that face speaking to her from so close, Turtle trusted her, which hasn't always been the case.

Turtle was still small, she fit entirely in one hand; Grandmother carried her in her palm the entire way back to the front door of the Underground Home. It wasn't much, but this is the longest flight she's ever taken.

The whole trip, Grandmother spoke to her; they met some women, spent a short time together. They all tried to touch Turtle's head, but she stayed hidden.

Just to be safe, she stayed inside the rest of the flight.

Then they went down the stairs to the Underground Home, and Grandmother opened the door, turned on the lights, and went out to the yard opposite the kitchen and set Turtle on the ground, and she ran behind the first pot. Jasmine would grow there, that Grandmother planted a few weeks before.

Rather than buildings, Turtle now sees pots, the cement blocks she walks across, the green rubber tube that sometimes spouts a jet of water over the flowers, the tree trunk, a dark bucket.

Home of Sex, 1991

The Home of Sex is a corner apartment, on the third floor of a 1950s apartment building at the edge of a small town with metropolitan ambitions. Oriented toward the street, on one side there's the kitchen and living-room/dining-room combo, connected by a balcony. On the other side, Virgin Girl's room, her parents' room, and the bathroom. The décor is modern; the kitchen has a dishwasher, plus a microwave, the first one I's ever seen. The dishwasher is noisy and heats up the kitchen, so the family closes this door after the noon meal. Every room has a TV, except for Virgin Girl's room.

The living-room/dining-room combo has a leather couch and an easy chair, plus a massive wood table—plain, devoid of floral emblems—which they use if they entertain in the evening. During the day, it's Virgin Girl's desk: she leaves her third-year high school textbooks and notebooks on this table.

Nearly every afternoon, I bikes over. It's not more than ten or fifteen minutes from the House Beneath the Mountain. He wears his backpack with his textbooks. On the hills up to Virgin Girl's home, I feels the entire weight of his burden, so he stands up on the pedals. When he coasts instead, his head down over the handlebars, the mountain of books on his back, he looks like an exhausted tortoise.

On the dining-room table, Virgin Girl and I discover ecstasy and the bewilderment brought on by sex. She stretches out over her books, opens her legs, lets her skirt ride up her hips. At this point, I penetrates her, clothed, standing at the head of the table. The door to the

room is closed, and neither one of them thinks it might open. And it doesn't, but they also wouldn't notice if it did, in their frenzied orgasms.

Virgin Girl's slender, vibrant body lies on a bed of Asymptotes, pie charts, Cicero, Svevo excerpts. What I views as he climbs onto the table, lies down over her and continues enthusiastically thrusting between her thighs. Cicero, Newton, Pythagoras, they watch as his face twists in a spasm.

Then they change places: I rolls onto his back on the table and waits for her to straddle him, squeaking with pleasure, her knees crumpling their homework.

When they're done, I slips out from under, pops the rubber off and ties it, isolating the sperm in an opaque bubble. Then they go back to studying, flushed, their breathing slowing down, finding its own pace.

Sometimes Virgin Girl, not satisfied, begins again: she disappears under the table, gets down on all fours and takes his erection in her mouth. I remains composed, doesn't drop his pen on his notebook. It's only when he ejaculates that he drops his pen and groans, fist over his notebook. Afterwards, Virgin Girl returns to the surface, sits down, smiling, not saying a word, and goes back to writing as if nothing's happened.

Virgin Girl and I aren't going out, and they never speak to each other with affection. They don't flirt or nod in agreement before they leap on top of each other. They're complementary bodies that couple every afternoon.

When I leaves, by late afternoon, Virgin Girl clears the table, takes her books and notebooks to her room, then sets the table for dinner. She spreads out a white tablecloth,

arranges the silverware by the plates, puts the glasses up to the right. She doesn't think for one instant about what's underneath, the traces of her secrets conserved in the wood.

Family's Self-Propelling Home, 2008

Not an autonomous dwelling per se, though resistant to the cold and other bad weather. Self-propelling with a motor, but this doesn't matter, and neither do all its kilometers. A dwelling that's an extension of the Family Home.

Technically, a Fiat Panda, white, with a flirtatious flurry of stickers, one of them a faded baby sticker. Compact, geometric, square-lined, straight-nosed: one of the many heirs to Italy's mass-produced tin cans which then canned the new family of the late 50s, happy, satisfied, each new family alike and headed for the coast. 80s models, no spark but utterly reliable, and an abundance of spare parts.

Some paint missing around the headlights, but otherwise in pretty good shape. Their regular mechanic reassures them: the Self-propelling Home, it would seem, plans to go on forever. A source of great comfort to mechanics: with the hood propped open, they take in the sight of the motor as though gazing over an extremely sensible landscape. Everything is visible, everything is familiar, everything can be attended to. No electronic control unit, meaning no religious frenzy of maintenance. The last spark of enlightenment left on the market.

The Self-propelling Home is where Family truly takes shape. From the beginning, their true incubator, the depository that allowed—allows—their survival.

Imperfect at birth, the Self-propelling Home has been kept alive by science when nature would have killed her off. First the assembly of the two disconnected parts—I on one side and

Wife + Little Girl on the other, not tied by blood—then the sutures. A successful first surgery, no recorded glitches or infections.

The next step was potentially the most lethal—where almost all family organisms (modified like theirs) succumb: survival in an outside environment, exposed to threats of the world. The self-propelling Home performs a very delicate function: it's the hyperbaric chamber for Family in its postoperative phase, the sealed, carefully sanitized space where Family waged its first struggles to survive. Intensive treatment the first year, then downshifting but never entirely abandoning the piece of equipment.

That's why, in this initial phase, I+Wife and Little Girl always go around shut inside this metal container with wheels. Anyone watching them go by can see that they're in a delicate place, on a very thin ridge between certain death and artificial life. Wife and I in front—I at the wheel, Wife beside him.

They never spend less than two hours a day inside the incubator. Traveling all around the city, but more often, slipping onto the two-lane bypass headed for the Alps or else to the sea. Trips, both long and scenic, make the treatment less burdensome: not to mention, the outside, if it's nice, is like an inside with the added pleasure of enjoying it while seated. The surrounding countryside, the mirrored water seen from the turn onto the provincial road, is the perfect setting for programmed cell regeneration, meaning the metamorphosis from I + Wife and Little Girl to Family, period, full stop.

What's happening inside can be seen through the windows, which is basically zip. Moods forming in a closed space, brought on, circulating from what's said. The temperature inside the Self-propelling Home—68 to 78 degrees—is necessary in order to trigger the desired

cellular response for this type of surgery. Aside from this, anything goes, munching potato chips, singing, not talking for long stretches, fighting, falling sleep.

Periodically, Wife and I check to see that the treatment's working. This happens at night, at the table or in front of the TV or out on a walk.

I wants to see immediate results.

Wife is far more patient.

Little Girl believes whoever's the most persuasive at the time.

On some nights it does seem to be happening—there are glimpses of Family—and Wife and I make love into the late hours.

Other nights, though, nothing seems to be happening, I sees the trench between their separate sides, Wife and Little Girl at a distance—and not a trace of Family, just a bad reaction.

When this occurs, I goes out for a walk, wanders like a cat through Turin, sticking close to the buildings, appearing in the lit doorways, darting into the shadows cast by the streetlamps, between the parked cars.

Out on the street, he looks inside the lit apartment; from his face, it's hard to tell how he's feeling—free or rejected—but this is usually clear from his stride. If he sees the Self-propelling Home in the paid parking lot, between the blue painted lines, it's out of the corner of his eye, and left at that.

Relatives' Home, 1985

Relatives' Home is on the second floor of a five-story building. This building was designed and built in the late 60s, like the rest of the district.

It's three kilometers as the crow flies from the Underground Home, headed towards Fiumicino Airport. A straightforward, half-hour stroll through the hills. The buildings of the area, when you arrive, are fairly uniform, tending toward orange. Sometimes yellow, with gray railings.

At a glance, this might be the same neighborhood, but meter by meter, the color changes, the slightest details alter; by the end of this walk, past the main street, all resemblance stops. No more park, no domes, no monuments, no pre-Christian ruins.

The historic center, not even a thought now: this is the center now, the only possible center, like all the other suburbs. The oldest inscriptions on stone were done in spray paint, and date back to the '83 championship.

Relatives' Home is mainly a hallway; at the end of this hallway, Relatives sit around all day. You see them when you come in, shrunk in perspective. Sometimes one Relative will separate from the background and come meet the new arrival, will slowly increase in size on the approach. And at the door, will be on a 1:1 scale.

The Relatives' Home consists of only a few rooms. A dining-room/living-room combo halfway down the hall; here there's a round table with one leaf, a couch, a sideboard for the holiday plates and glasses, and a medium-sized TV on a stand. When not in use, this room stays closed, the rolling shutters always pulled down.

The rest of the apartment is made up of a long, narrow, modular kitchen; a master bedroom with a tall four-season wardrobe reaching the ceiling, and two smaller, nondescript bedrooms where Young Relatives sleep.

The difference between the Young and Old Relatives' rooms: the former have bulletin boards covered in photos and the latter has photos in silver frames of married couples and Dead Relatives.

I's memory of that home is vague and intermittent. He remembers, and then it dissolves as if it never existed. Then reappearing, flickering, disappearing.

Through Father's decree, in fact, Relatives disappear for fairly long periods; sometimes months; sometimes years; in some cases, they disappear forever. They remain walled up inside the absent phone of the Home Beneath the Mountain. The word, Relatives, is abolished from the lexicon of that home. Relatives no longer exist, and if Sister and I say that word, Father threatens to abolish them as well.

With this word erased, Relatives disappear from I's mind.

Only Mother, when she goes to the phonebooth with her handful of coins, pronounces this word, and when she comes back, she brings greetings from the entire family. But the day she calls, the thought of Relatives shows on her face like a black eye. Relatives' warm voice, for Mother, is a punch in the face, a mark lasting for days. During that time, Father won't look at her and waits for the bruise to disappear.

Then it disappears, and Mother thanks Father for allowing her to call. She says her thank you by making Relatives disappear from her thoughts. Otherwise, Father would see them in her eyes. That's why Mother swallows them, squeezing her eyes shut with the effort: she feels them

going down her throat, scraping her esophagus, striking her pylorus; they hit her stomach like a rockslide, though on the outside, the crashing of their bones makes no sound.

Relatives are too big, too hard, to grind between her teeth. So Mother consigns them to the flames of hydrochloric acid. Their home, too. This is her gift to Father every week: Relatives dissolved in her stomach.

There are nights when Mother has a stomachache. Lying in bed, I hears her moaning; sometimes she cries for the pain, and he hears Father, nearby, telling her how to make it go away.

When Mother's moaning gets too loud, Father takes her to the hospital for tests. But they never find anything: there's nothing in her stomach, nothing in her belly.

Mother's good about not leaving a trace of Relatives behind, dissolving them in acid. They might slip a tube down her throat and into her stomach, but they won't find even one of them. The camera at the end of the tube, every time it goes down, shows everything is empty. Father looks at the results and is satisfied and brings Mother home. If she still cries the next night, they don't return to the hospital.

Father rewards Mother for her good behavior by giving her sex in the bedroom: I and Sister hear the sofa bed hitting the wall and Mother's panting. Stomachaches and sex become a single moan.

Sister rolls over and faces the wall, I pulls the pillow over his head.

After a while, everything's quiet.

This is how Relatives' Home disappears from their minds.

Then reappears.

Through Father's decree, Mother takes her coins to the phonebooth to say that after all this time, they'll get to see each other. She returns, trying to hide her joy. Then she packs for them and Father arranges the bags in the car in a pleasing geometric pattern.

On the trip from Home Beneath the Mountain to Relatives' Home, Mother summarizes Relatives, who they are, what they do, what's happened since they've been gone. It's a seven-hour drive, and Sister and I listen, distracted, watching the cars go by on the highway.

When they're back in Relatives' Home after so much time, usually someone separates off from the end of the hall and moves toward Father, Mother, Sister, and I. Then Relative hugs all four of them and says things and sounds happy.

Sometimes I recognizes these people, other times, no. He recognizes this space as if remembering a different space: not that it's new to him, but it's a matter of connecting the heart and sense of smell, leaving the brain out of the equation.

One after the other, all the Relatives hug them, especially Sister and I, the children. I answers all their questions because this is part of Father's decree. Sister stays quiet, turned nearly always toward I while Relatives talk among themselves.

I tries to tell them apart because they all look alike. And they also look like Mother. And they look like I, too, which Father can't forgive, just like he can't forgive Mother, and Relatives most of all.

Then the rolling shutters go up in the dining room, the holiday tablecloth goes on the table, and they start setting the table for everyone. Sister and I help, though they don't know where to find the silverware, glasses, or plates.

During this meal, I turns to the others and calls them Relatives, because he's supposed to. They keep saying how happy they are and that he and Sister are Relatives, too. I looks at Father to make sure this is correct, but Father is quiet; he wants to know what I will say. So I

says nothing, just smiles, embarrassed that he looks like them. But if the doctors put a tube down his throat, down to his stomach, the camera would show that Relatives don't exist. Or maybe they do, maybe they do exist—so it's better not to take any chances, better not to try, not to let that probe look around, just to keep swallowing, swallowing again.

Home of Adultery, 1994

It's a provincial town, indistinguishable in Northern Italy, a town like any other town like any other town like any other provincial town. Outside Turin, it's endlessly provincial in every direction.

The Home of Adultery is mainly a window and a field of vision. The field of vision is from the outside looking inside, at a diagonal, from below to up above. Above, Woman with the Wedding Ring's window; below, at street level, I, nineteen years old, looking straight up at the third story.

Between the street and the window, a column. No, more of a pillar, concrete, so a mix of cement, gravel, water, and sand. He's on the opposite side of the street from that window and standing in a portico. At the point where he escapes notice, this place of his daily stakeout. The point of contact is his right shoulder, half his face poking out.

I knows every detail of this pillar, his privileged observatory on the cement. Any new graffiti at all, he sees it. There's not much, most of it in spray paint; anarchy in black, intimacy in red. I Love You, or Fuck You, Always or Never Again, other variations of these.

The window—like all the others in the building, painted frame, standard-sized, two-paneled, opening out—is the designated mouth, the spokesperson for Woman with the Wedding Ring: it's the window that talks to I from above, that instructs and gives his wait meaning. It's the mouth of the building, the love oracle, the frame that will predict how long he must yearn.

The window speaks, and it is this that keeps I where he is, looking up.

The language the window speaks, addressing him, is composed of fabric and geometry. An orthogonal alphabet that anticipates horizontal and vertical movements. From above to below, through the green PVC rolling shutter; from left to right with the white tulle curtain.

Woman with the Wedding Ring's words, that only I can decipher, are an encrypted combination of the x- and y-axis.

Vertical for practical communication, horizontal for emotional.

Y-axis: rolling shutter halfway down, Husband at home; up a third of the way, Husband about to leave; all the way up, just out the door. Rolling shutter down, we're out, don't bother waiting.

X-axis: curtain closed, I love you but we're sitting here; curtain pulled back about ten centimeters, I love you and you'll see me here soon, so stay attentive; curtain halfway open, I love you, I'm trying to get the Twins to go to sleep; curtain open—entirely pulled to the right—I love you, I'm going out but I'll be back soon, and we'll be together, we'll close this curtain and finally make love.

Right shoulder against the pillar, chin raised toward the window, I translates what that oracle has to say. If it's good news, meaning, the time has come for him to enter the Home of Adultery, he'll feel a shiver from his ankles to his groin and he'll swell inside his pants. He slips his hand into his pocket and feels his erection. He swallows, trying to reduce the pressure on his temples.

If nothing happens, if the wait continues, if the oracular frame says only to wait, wait without end, if the wait continues with no shift in the two directions this language contemplates, I, in contrast, feels everything being pulled downward. Hope is grave, dragging chin and eyes down, toward the ground; even sex withers, is dead weight.

Then the raising of the rolling shutter, even after the most grueling of waits, suddenly lifts I's mood. The roller spinning, the traction raising the shutter, also pulls up I's chin and penis, both going back to staring at the window. Everything is antigravitational once more.

And now I knows it's only a matter of seconds. He can shift his gaze downward, to the front door. It will open and Husband will step out, a leather folder under his arm, a tie, hair combed, wedding ring on his finger. He'll head left, then turn soon after.

He doesn't know, Husband doesn't, that as soon as he turns, someone across the street will step out from behind a pillar. And even if he saw him, more than likely Husband wouldn't be suspicious: it's only a boy with a backpack, his Walkman on.

The boy will cross the street, disappear through the main door Husband just walked out of. On the third floor, through the abscissas of curtains, the window will say that there's nothing more to see now. And for a couple of hours, it will stay quiet.

Underground Home, 1975

The polyphony of the world is far away, to put it simply. Inside the amniotic sac, I is a rather marginal lump in relation to the large belly Mother displays, even flaunts, as she walks around the apartment or through the streets of Rome. According to the manuals, he already has ears. Actually, he has almost everything, everything for life; actually, he's ready, fully equipped, though it's still too soon: life would kill him off before it gave him the illusion it gives to all, the illusion of pardon, of granting him eternity.

So I hears, from within his first true dwelling, set inside another, at the top of a city hill. What he hears is pure hypothesis, but most likely includes road traffic, ambulances, Grandmother's hoarseness, the roaring of water in the sink or shower, domestic clatter. Of course there's Father's voice, or at least the vibration of his voice; like everyone else, Father probably leans over the closed door of his wife's bellybutton and allows his vocal chords to vibrate in greeting. He understands Sister, the pressure on the placental ceiling when she climbs into Mother's arms. He understands the primitive percussion of Turtle, the drumroll of preparing to enter the world. And added to these, daily perhaps, the booming of the cannon firing on Rome. All the rest is Mother, his first environment, his sensory organ, his primordial refuge.

The rest, what's wading in I's first sea, what he intercepts, might be searched for by sifting through the cerebral cortex, which might reveal something else entirely from what's been hypothesized here. It doesn't really matter. What's certain is that in this phase everything I perceives is perceived head-down, in an upended world.

But that's not the point. The point is the scream, what's happening inside now, that starts in the silent room, and then becomes Mother's piercing, panicked scream, Father's excited chatter, Grandmother's voice that draws everything together into a decision, to call the hospital.

It's not a matter of water breaking, not evolutionary unpreparedness. It's Mother vomiting in the dining room, mostly blood and sputum, and blood between her legs as she touches herself, holds up her hands to see, and lets out a scream that shatters the still of the neighborhood, cracking the sky in Monteverde. What's happening inside her belly is hard to say, but they fear the worst for I, head down in his final slide. And he perceives this, as a roar, thunder, nothing, who can say.

The rest happens very quickly, Mother at home, on the bed, Grandmother, raising Mother's nightshirt, better to maneuver, shouting at her son to be quiet, to look after Sister, only telling her, It'll be all right, there's nothing to be afraid of, and meanwhile wiping the blood off her thighs with a piece of cloth, petting her hair, telling her belly, Little one. Finally, the stretcher, the siren through the neighborhood, the hospital lobby, then after the drama, the final joy, the regular heartbeat, the baby still alive, a gorgeous autumn in Rome, the abrupt cobalt sky of early winter.

And finally, the return to underground, Turtle waiting, standing guard. Mother put to bed, Grandmother keeping an eye on her, intermittent sleep and feeble smiles. Grandmother handles everything else, the shopping, lunch for her son, lettuce for the turtle out in the yard, baby food for Sister. There's still dried blood on the dining-room floor that Grandmother, smoking, not thinking much about it, wipes away with a sponge.

Above, on the table, still open, the hypothetical fuse that set off the explosion, random, pure coincidence, laid out as evidence: an open newspaper, the photos of Murdered Poet, face

mangled, soles of his shoes toward the lens, in his undershirt, lying in the dirt. Grandmother closes the paper, sets it on the couch, an old domestic habit.

Home of Escaped Memories

The home of memories escaped from I's memory lies outside any real location: it's a crease in space-time. Hard to tell if it's still or in motion, if it's subject to the forces of heaven or earth.

The Home of Escaped Memories is the black box of what he doesn't remember, what his memory has refused, even if it happened. It's what allows I to steadily say I while knowing it's a lie.

Imagine a carnival attraction, a plexiglass box with a mechanical arm and crab-claw attempting to clutch what's lying on the sandy bottom. Stuffed toys, watches, scuba masks. Consider a person's eagerness and zeal in manipulating that arm, grasping what he'd like, has always wanted.

Now see that triumphant sneer, while raising that arm, that claw squeezing some object, then the claw opening, dropping the prize into the winner's trough. And then consider the frustration of the rising arm, claw closed, nothing in its grasp, just some grains of sand the swinging mechanical arm chucks into the void.

For the sake of simplicity, think of I's mind as that box, his memories, the deposit of dolls and toys left on the sandy bottom. Imagine the mechanical claw clutching memories, and I

who sees them briefly soaring overhead, then falling, hurtled into the sand, covered in sand once more.

Now concentrate on that sand and the objects buried there. A deposit invisible to I, which he tries to access from the outside, by maneuvering a lever. No matter his precision and his luck, the number of attempts, the many coins he slips into the slot, the mechanical arm and claw will never free his memories.

I doesn't know the world beneath the sand, how many objects, faces, facts are buried there. He knows this world exists, and that's the only thing he can tell himself for certain. He'd like to pound on the box, shake it to shift the sand.

But in spite of everything, I never stops trying. Because he knows, without really knowing, that she's inside the Home of Escaped Memories, that there, in among all that clutter of memories, is Sister. She's the queen of that sandy underground world. She's the one, within the silence of all those grains of sand, who sees the very tip of that claw widening a gap every day in what, for her, is a dark, dull sky, that disappears soon after.

This is where I has buried her, and is perhaps the reason he keeps flailing away at digging. What he can't know is her agonizing hope whenever she sees that mechanical claw just piercing the depths, as Sister raises her arms trying to grab on. He doesn't know, I, about her desperation, her grit, as she pushes through the dark silence of the sand, trying to hold on. She doesn't know, Sister, if she'll make it, if I will see her emerge from under the sand, hanging from that mechanical arm, flying over that little world of dolls and toys, trying to withstand the forces willing her to fall. She doesn't know if it's ever going to happen, but she keeps trying, because she wants to be remembered.