To begin at the beginning

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It's hard to explain why I spend so many hours writing. It's perhaps even harder to explain why I spend those hours writing mere inventions or fabulations. And why, in the latter case, when I do borrow elements from reality, instead of simply describing them exactly as they were or as they happened, I attribute them to non-existent characters and mix them up with or insert them into a wholly fictitious story, as if I wanted to dilute or infect the actual events with fiction.

Many writers have done exactly the opposite and tried to give their novels and stories – their imaginative texts – the appearance of reality; they have resorted to various ploys intended to persuade their readers that their imaginings were not imagined at all, but corresponded to real events, that they are, as the saying goes, "true stories". The initial credits for many films, whether made for TV or for the cinema, still declare: "This is a true story". In Spanish, this usually translates as "Based on real events". Whenever I hear or read these words, far from feeling reassured or attracted or intrigued; far from thinking that I'm not going to be told a lot of nonsense and bunkum, cheap whimsy and a string of unbelievable coincidences; far from thinking that this has added prestige or verisimilitude to what I'm about to watch or read, I'm

filled with a feeling of tedium and anticipatory boredom, of distrust and resistance, of suspicion and even scepticism. The thought that immediately assails me, albeit more vaguely and not as clearly formulated as I am about to formulate it now, is more or less this: “What is so strange and unbelievable, so extraordinarily random, arbitrary and corny about this story that, even though it’s already happened in real life, they still want to tell me about it, even warning me that I *have* to believe it whether I like it or not, because this is how it was, this is what actually happened?”

Contrary to the current view and the view of many writers and critics who are fascinated by such vacuous and somewhat pedestrian terms as “auto-fiction”, “true stories” or “faction” - that English combination of “fact” and “fiction” – I am, I realise, one of those people who believes that the only way of telling a true story is by clothing it in the elegant, modest disguise of invention, precisely because the person who invents or fabricates – if he does this well and intelligently, or is not a complete fool – will never bow to the vulgar, bizarre demands of reality. In an interview I did for *The Paris Review* some years ago, I remember saying that reality was a very bad novelist, because it doesn’t select or order or adapt; because it uncomplainingly admits all coincidences without a murmur – well, what else can it do, since coincidences do happen; because it swallows down every improbability, even ones that in a novel or a film would cause us to protest angrily: “Oh, come on! Surely they don’t expect me to believe that!”; because it doesn’t choose or conceal or postpone when it *should* choose or conceal or postpone; because it’s perfectly capable of ruining a mystery or an uncertainty and demolishing an anxiety; because it lacks intention and, even worse, style; because

sometimes it doesn't stop for a moment and, at others, stops for far too long, so much so that we lose the thread and lose interest; because it's full of dull characters and boring situations, and is constantly bombarding us with superfluous, not to say, tedious details, like precisely what each guest ate for lunch; because sometimes it sheds too much light and at others so much darkness that what seemed to be a story ends up not being a story, because you either suddenly know everything or can make no sense of it at all; because it often lacks rhythm and is either full of longueurs or jam-packed with incident.

Nearly everyone intuitively knows this, and those who tell true stories all too often fall into a contradiction: on the one hand, they use the veracity of the facts as a guarantee for what they are saying ("Look, this really happened, I'm not inventing it just because it suits me; incredible though it may seem, this really is how things turned out") and, on the other, they try to make their account of events appear to be a fiction, because they never actually do tell *all*, describing exactly what happened, omitting not a single moment or detail, no pause or lull, no trite snatch of dialogue. On the contrary, they leave all that out in order to make their account of real events approximate or resemble an invented tale ("Look, this is a true story, but because of the way you're hearing or reading it and the way I'm telling it, it's just as if it wasn't; my story is so perfect that you would think it could never possibly have happened like that, purely by chance, without anyone's intervention, without someone's intervening will, intelligence, ploy or plot or plan").

As far as I know, the first person in my family to write a novel was my Cuban great-grandfather, Enrique Manera y Cao, the father of my grandmother Lola Manera, who was born in Havana, and the grandfather of my mother, Lolita Franco, who was born in Madrid, because her mother, the aforesaid Lola Manera - along with her parents and brothers and sisters - had left the island in 1898 when she was only seven or eight, and those who survived the crossing settled in Spain. I said that my great-grandfather was Cuban, which he would probably not have considered entirely accurate: he was, rather, a Spaniard from Cuba, and precisely because of that, he left his country with great regret.

My grandmother Lola and her younger sister María, whom we all knew as *Tita* María - Auntie María – both, nevertheless, retained a strong Caribbean, or what they called *criollo*, accent, as well as a number of expressions that dated from their early childhood in Havana. Whenever they scolded me or my brothers, they would call us *guajiros* or *guachinangos*, and I never bothered to find out what associations those words had for them, but for me they are inevitably associated with childish naughtiness.

My grandmother had eleven children, of whom, when I was born, seven were still alive. She had lost two little girls, one born just before and the other just after my mother (who thus became a false first-born), and two very young, almost adolescent boys: my Uncle Carlos, who died of typhus when he was seventeen, and my Uncle Emilio, who was murdered during the Civil War by a group of Republican militiamen when he was more or less the same age. I wrote about this uncle in a fictional work, *Your Face Tomorrow*, in which I called him Alfonso, and in a book that I described at the time as “a false

novel", *Dark Back of Time*, in which I gave his real name, because the narrator of that book was Javier Marías and none of the events described – even if, overall, the story reads like a novel - were made up or fictional. As readers familiar with those books will know, the body of that young man was never found, and the only proof of his disappearance from the world was a small photo of him dead, which was handed to my mother, his sister, in the *cheka* or detention centre in Calle del Fomento, and showed him with a few labels hung around his neck and placed on his chest: on one the number 2 appears and, underneath that, the numbers 3-20, although I have no idea what these meant, one was like a luggage label, complete with a hole and a piece of string through it. I had assumed that this gruesome, bureaucratic photo no longer existed, until I found it a few years ago in a small metal box, along with some university library cards, postcards and other papers belonging to my mother, in the basement of my father's house (my mother having died long before, in 1977).

Since 1989 (before many other writers who are now famous for doing the same thing) I've made a point of including in my novels the images mentioned in the text, be they photos or paintings or posters or even documents, so that the reader can see the images as they are being described or analysed or commented on. When I wrote about the narrator's uncle in the first volume of *Your Face Tomorrow* - that is, *his* Uncle Alfonso, who was clearly *my* Uncle Emilio – I added a photo of my real uncle taken when he was still alive, and for many months, even when the book was finished and ready to be published, I hesitated over whether to include the photo of him dead. This was a novel, after all, a work of fiction, and the first person narrator wasn't me, but

a character called Jacobo Deza, and the uncle who was murdered during the Civil War wasn't exactly my uncle, even though he resembled him in almost every respect and was clearly based on him. If I didn't include the photo, I would appear to be concealing it, since it's referred to and described in the text, and, besides, as I said, the "norm" in the novel was to show all the images mentioned. I was so uncertain that I even asked a friend who draws very well to make me a sketch of the small photograph, thinking that this halfway-house could serve as an alternative. It was rather hard on my friend, because (and I quote from the novel, from the volume entitled *Fever and Spear*): "…there are bloodstains on his young face, the largest on the ear, where it seems the blood may first have spurted forth, but on the nose too and the cheek and the forehead and there are spatters of blood on the closed left eyelid too, it barely looks like the same face as that of the living boy in the other photo…the boy with the tie". I still could not decide, until the person to whom the book is dedicated said: "You've written an article criticising the modern-day custom of showing the faces of the dead on television and in the press, and you've called those dead people 'those who can no longer defend themselves' and 'those who can no longer see themselves'. You've bemoaned the loss or demise of the respect implied by that old gesture of immediately covering the dead person's face or, if possible, their whole body, and said that, in your opinion, this wasn't simply a matter of saving the living from an unpleasant or shocking sight, but of saving the dead person from being exposed to view when he can no longer control the way he looks. It makes no difference if the photo "becomes" Uncle Alfonso, Jacobo Deza's uncle and not yours, that as soon as it's included in the novel, it will be

swallowed up by the fictional whole. However, it's quite different for your real aunts and uncles, for those who are still alive and remember their brother Emilio; for them that image couldn't possibly be that of a fictitious person, but the picture of a much-loved young man who was murdered pointlessly and gratuitously, and whose death was a painful reality for them, as it was for your mother, for her more than anyone. It's not a photo of some fictional character, but of someone who had a life and, however briefly, existed in the world. Don't show it, don't exhibit it, no one else has the right to see it."

She convinced me, I took her advice, despite recalling Faulkner's words (and other authors' similar words), according to which the novelist is a completely ruthless individual, for whom everything goes by the board: honour, pride, decency, security, happiness, anything to get the book written; someone who wouldn't hesitate to steal from his own mother if doing so would help him achieve the best result for his novel, to reach the greatest heights and draw the reader in. And despite my belief that, ultimately, once you introduce reality into a fiction, it ends up being pure fiction. Even a photograph. Maybe I'm not on the same level as the artists Faulkner was talking about, or perhaps I simply do not dare to deprive of all reality someone who was once real.

But I digress - deliberately. My grandmother Lola had eleven children, whereas her younger sister, *Tita* María, had none. Both were very cheerful souls, by which I mean that children could easily make them laugh and thus disarm them and escape all punishment. This was harder to achieve with *Tita* María because she liked to pretend to be very stiff and starchy. She always insisted that whenever my parents introduced her to one of their friends, they

should do so in the following manner, without leaving out a single detail: “Doña María Manera, Marquesa viuda de Barroeta” – Doña María Manera, widow of the Marquis of Barroeta. I know nothing about that Marquis or perhaps pseudo-marquis husband of hers, who died before I was born, only that my parents used to refer to him, in a slightly jocular tone, as *Tito* Alfonso. After being introduced in the required manner, *Tita* María would proffer the back of her hand, letting it be understood that, if the new acquaintance was a man, she expected him to kiss it. She had certain rather contradictory delusions of grandeur: she spent our childhood telling us that her father’s second family name – and, therefore, our twelfth, she explained – was Cao, which came “directly from the famous Indio Cao, Moctezuma’s lieutenant”; and yet in the family memoir she left when she died, entitled *Como se pasa la vida (Notas 1896-1936) (As Life Goes By (Jottings:1896-1936))*, she wrote: “Only the purest Spanish blood runs through my veins.” An entirely unnecessary statement that makes one suspect the very opposite to be true. And according to her, certain members of the family had inherited from that famous Indio Cao a strange lump or bump – a prominent or protruding bone – on the top of the head. I seem to recall that she would carefully inspect the craniums of all her great nephews and nieces and that only my brother Álvaro, who is now a musician, had inherited that lump – or so she said. But she was probably more of a joker than she seemed, because in the aforementioned memoirs, she doesn’t mention the Indio Cao at all, but speaks instead of “the Caos of Pontevedra” in Galicia. And surely only someone with a sense of humour would laugh when I, as an adolescent, would greet her with such nonsense as: “I know your secret, *Tita* María.” “And what secret would that

be?" she would ask, intrigued. "Bilbao Athletic are going to sign you up as centre forward." And instead of calling me *majadero* or *guachinango*, she would laugh, taking care not to disturb her lovely white hair.

It wasn't until years later that we discovered that, as well as them and their older sister, Luisa, and two brothers, Enrique and Eladio – these last three were already dead – there was a fourth sister, still alive: *Tita* Carmen. I never saw this other great-aunt. She lived in Argentina, having at some point quarrelled with my grandmother and with *Tita* María, and they never spoke of her nor, of course, wrote to her. However, *Tita* Carmen did occasionally write secretly to my mother, her oldest niece, and whenever my parents picked up an airmail envelope containing her letter, their only comment, at least in our presence, was: "You only have to look at her handwriting," my mother would say to my father, "to see how wicked she is." My father would agree, among other reasons because he had shown my aunt's handwriting to a graphologist friend, whom he trusted implicitly and whose verdicts were, so to speak, taken as gospel. And this friend had said that the person behind that handwriting – sometimes all she needed was to see the name and address on an envelope – was indeed a treacherous individual. (My parents were both very rational people and not in the least superstitious, but they were so amazed by the accuracy of their friend's analyses that, in recent years, since my father's death, my brothers and I have discovered numerous improvised "graphological reports" about all kinds of people, from my own aunts and uncles – there's a most unflattering one on my film director uncle, Jesús Franco or Jess Frank – to the philosopher José Ortega y Gasset or the poets Jorge Guillén or Pedro Salinas, as well as the various possible girlfriends that

my brothers and I acquired in early youth, and who had no idea what they were exposing themselves to when they sent us an innocent holiday postcard.

As for *Tita* Carmen's "sins", these were so swathed in silence that, after many years, all I've been able to discover is that these were not apparently *her* "sins", but grave crimes committed by her husband during the time he was in command of a fort or stronghold in Morocco. The suggestion was that he had ordered a Moroccan to be shot purely so that he himself would be free to enjoy the widow's favours, a crime for which he was demoted. And there are even uglier rumours that he ran a Moroccan brothel specialising in prostituting minors of both sexes, and that he gave orders that any parents who protested or threatened to report him should be got rid of. According to some more recent evidence, he reached the rank of captain and, despite being sadistic, corrupt, syphilitic and extremely licentious, he was such a bold, handsome dandy of a fellow that my aunt Carmen remained madly in love with him and went off with him to Argentina when the Spanish army, to avoid a scandal, gave him the chance to go into exile, an offer he accepted. Presumably what her sisters could not forgive was her continued loyalty to that disgraced and murderous soldier, against whom they had warned her before she married him.

But I was talking about their father, my great-grandfather Enrique Manera y Cao, landowner and soldier (he was a colonel in the judicial branch of the army, I understand), an occasional painter of land and seascapes, a composer of songs, editor of the Cuban newspaper *Por el honor de la Bandera* (*For the Honour of the Flag*) and author. I've tracked down five books by him, but it seems there were more: one is *Cómo y por qué se*

perdieron las colonias hispano-americanas (*How and and why we lost the Spanish-American colonies*) published in 1895; another, entitled *Manual del cazador cubano* (*The Cuban Hunters' Manual*), complete with a curious hunting glossary, was published in 1886, and is perhaps the most sought-after and most valued of his books (I found a copy through an antiquarian bookshop in California); a third is entitled *Estudio y organización táctica de la caballeria* (*The Study and Tactical Organisation of the Cavalry*) and a fourth *Guía oficial de caballería ligera en campaña* (*An Official Guide to Light Cavalry on Campaign*) published in 1882, but I have never found either of those; the last, published in 1875, was a short novel, *El coracero de Froeswiller (Recuerdos de la Guerra Franco-Prusiana)* (*The Cuirassier of Froeschwiller (Memories of the Franco-Prussian War*)), and was bequeathed to me by *Tita* María when she died, because, by then, I myself was a novelist. I know this was not the only novel he wrote and published, but I've never come across any of the others in my trawls through the second-hand bookshops of half of Europe and the occasional American city. Enrique Manera y Cao died in 1898 at the age of forty-nine, and so he must have published *El coracero de Froeswiller* when he was about twenty-six.

It's not without irony that an anecdote about his life and death should be one of the first I heard as if it were a story, that is, a fiction, so much so that I myself turned it into a story the first time I wrote it down, in 1978. I then told it at least a couple of times more, in an article in 1995 and in the above-mentioned "false novel", *Dark Back of Time*, a book that probably none of you will have heard of, because, although it's possibly the most influential of all my books, it's also one of the most ignored and least appreciated, understood or

remembered: a kind of curse has fallen on it, or perhaps it quickly passed into the region described in the title, which I sometimes refer to as “el revés del tiempo” or “the other side of time”. That’s why, and because none of you can be absolutely sure that this story is true and not just an old fiction invented by me over thirty years ago, I hope you’ll forgive me for telling it again.

When Enrique Manera y Cao was still a young man, perhaps around 1873, perhaps before, when, at any rate, he was still a bachelor, he went out for a ride one morning and, on returning home for lunch, a mulatto beggar – another version speaks of a gipsy – forced him to stop by grabbing his horse’s bridle and then had the nerve to ask for alms, a request that my great-grandfather, doubtless incensed by such boldness, refused, and presumably sent him packing in no uncertain terms. It was then that the beggar put a curse on him, “a somewhat baroque and unusually precise curse” as I put it in *Dark Back of Time*. “You and your eldest son,” he predicted, “will both die before you are fifty, far from your homeland and without a grave”. Young Manera y Cao took no notice, roughly pushed the mulatto out of the way and went home, where he recounted the anecdote over lunch, then immediately forgot all about it. Someone, however, did remember it: perhaps a black nanny who passed the story on to the next generation when they came along, which is how the story has come down to me. Or perhaps someone recalled it in the light of what happened later, and without which the anecdote would doubtless have been lost for ever. And at this point, I should perhaps make the following comment: in literature as in life, we don’t always know what is part of a story until that story has reached its conclusion. My writings are, of course, full of episodes and anecdotes, images and phrases that seem to

have no specific or significant function in the whole. You might think they were there purely by accident, on a whim, and that is usually the case when they first appear in the text. Later, however, they reappear and take on meaning or a different meaning, and turn out not to be as episodic, accidental or capricious as they seemed: they become a fundamental part of the story. As I have said on numerous occasions, I work without a map, I work only with a compass, that is, if I already knew the whole story I was going to tell, if I had it all in my head before I sat down to write, I probably wouldn't bother to write it. I would see it as a mere exercise in transcription and that would bore me, and I would even think: "If I know everything from the start, what is the point of setting it down on paper if, during that process, I'm not going to find out anything new?" Or, put another way: if I know why the encounter between my great-grandfather and the Havana beggar turned out to be important or significant, what is the point in telling that to myself? Because the first person a writer tells a story to is always himself, and if I already know the story from start to finish, I'm sure to get bored – and, worse, my readers would sense my boredom – if I'm merely engaged on a mechanical task, giving a story form and pace and style and rhythm, with no element of surprise for myself, no new discoveries, without in the process discovering or finding out anything new, that is, without inventing anything, because the Latin verb *invenire*, from which we get our words *inventar,* to invent, *inventer* and *inventare*, means exactly that: to discover, to find, to find out. That's why I have so often said that when I write, I apply the same principle of knowledge that rules life. Just as we do what we do when we're twenty without knowing that when we reach forty, we may wish we had done something else, and just as when we're forty, we have

no alternative but to abide by what we did when we were twenty, we can't erase or amend anything, so I write what I write on page five of a novel with no idea if this will prove to have been a good idea when I reach page 200, and far from writing a second or third version, adapting page 5 to what I later find out will appear on page 200, I don't change a word, I stand by what I wrote at the very beginning - tentatively and intuitively, accidentally or capriciously. Except that, unlike life – which is why life tends to be such a bad novelist – I try to ensure that what had no meaning at the beginning does have meaning at the end. I force myself to make necessary what was random and even superfluous, so that, ultimately, it's neither random nor superfluous. I force myself to give meaning to what initally lacked meaning and was simply like a dice thrown into the air.

That's why I am again telling the story of the curse that fell on my great-grandfather Manera y Cao, which, although it did actually happen, still seems - as it did to me when I heard it as a child from his daughters Lola and María - a clever fiction dreamed up by someone, by a purposeful narrator who knows what he's doing. In 1898, when Spain lost Cuba, Enrique Manera y Cao decided that he could not bear to see any other flag but the Spanish flag flying over Cuba, especially not the Stars and Stripes after the dirty war waged by those Yankees, as he and his descendants called them (I remember my grandmother and my great-aunt talking about what they called in Spanish, "*la voladura del* Maine", that is, the blowing up of the US battleship *Maine*, which many have suspected was blown up by the Americans themselves in order to be able to blame the Spanish and thus have an excuse to go to war. "That was just an underhand trick on the part of those filthy Yankees" the two old

ladies would declare in unison, sitting opposite each other in their respective armchairs, constantly fanning themselves - the abiding image I have of them from my childhood). And so my great-grandfather decided to abandon Cuba along with all his family and move to Spain, a country to which he had been several times but only as a visitor. His doctors advised against this, because he suffered from Ménière's disease and the crossing presented a risk to his health. He took no notice, just as he had taken no notice of the mulatto beggar all those years before: he hurriedly sold all his land and properties and embarked on the *Ciudad de Cádiz* with his wife - who was originally from Mexico and whose family name was Custardoy - his six children and a few servants. When they were not many days away from their destination, Cádiz, he suffered a massive brain haemorrhage while on deck and died a few days later, on 12th November, near Cape St Vincent. Possibly by order of General Luque, who was travelling on the steamship with his troops, my great-grandfather's body was thrown into the sea, weighted down with a cannonball. He was not yet fifty, he was far from his Cuban homeland and did not have a grave. I learned recently that he had a strange motto or favourite saying: "*Todos somos peores*", literally "We are all worse".

His first-born, Enrique Manera Custardoy, the eldest brother of my grandmother Lola and of *Tita* María (or, as it would seem, their half-brother from my great-grandfather's first marriage), followed in his father's military footsteps, in Spain; and in 1921, twenty-three years after his father had died on the high seas, he was sent to Morocco with the rank of colonel and as aide-de-camp to General Fernández Silvestre, who commanded the Spanish troops during that War, which is best known and remembered for the so-

called “Disaster of Annual”, during which those same troops fled in disarray and were massacred at the hands of Abd el-Krim’s Berber forces. In the midst of the rout, Fernández Silvestre, Silvestre’s son, a second aide-de-camp called Tulio López, also of Cuban stock, and my great-uncle Enrique - who, in the army, earned the nickname “Confucius” because of his level-headed, pithy sayings - were left isolated from the main body of the troops, but with a truck at their disposal. Fernández Silvestre, doubtless an old-fashioned type and perhaps uncertain as to how he would live with that defeat if he survived – or perhaps in order to live up to his nickname, which was none other than “The Wild One” – refused to abandon the field and flee, and Manera Custardoy, even more old-fashioned, refused to leave his superior officer. Together they persuaded the general’s son to escape in the truck and try to reach Melilla and save his skin, which the young man did, accompanied by that second aide-de-camp, Tulio López, whose behaviour in the midst of all the confusion and in what followed, *Tita* María always found highly suspicious, and said as much in her modest family memoir. And so Silvestre and Manera were left there to await death.

Nothing more was known of what happened. Their bodies were never found, and all that was left of my great-uncle were his field glasses and the epaulettes showing his rank as colonel, which I once saw in my grandmother’s house and which are now to be found in the War Museum in Madrid. It is feared that the two soldiers met with the worst possible fate, namely, being impaled and then dismembered and, now that I think of it, it’s strange that those two sweet, cheerful old ladies, my grandmother Lola and *Tita* María, should have used those terms in the presence of children – of the

child I was then – and even explained what they meant. Perhaps that gives you an idea of how times have changed and what a pusillanimous age we live in now; of how less than fifty years ago, we children were told about matters of life and death, however horrifying. We did feel afraid, it's true, but we learned such things early and so could never say later that we had been deceived. Enrique Manera Custardoy, the eldest son of Enrique Manera y Cao, died at forty-six, far from his two homelands, colonial Havana where he was born and Madrid where he grew up, and he never had a grave and never will. It was at the Disaster of Annual, almost half a century after that curse or prophecy had been uttered by a Cuban beggar, and on a far-distant continent, that the story came to be much more than an unimportant anecdote to be recounted over lunch. It was there and then that it became part of a story, or more than that, a catalyst. And even though it really happened, it was only at that point that it deserved to be told as a story, when it suddenly seemed like fiction. Not just a complete story, but one with all the loose ends neatly tied up. So much so that on at least two of the previous occasions when I've set it down in writing, I added the odd loose end that the story lacked: I said once, for example, that the curse fell not only on the eldest son of the person being cursed, but also on the eldest son of the eldest son, who, in my story, would never be born, and I began speculating on the incomplete part of a prophecy the first two stages of which had been fulfilled to perfection. I did actually know the third Enrique Manera, Manera Regueyra, and he lived on into old age. He was an Admiral and enjoyed telling how, during the Civil War, he had survived two firing squads, on both occasions thanks to his short stature, because the bullets had been aimed above his head. Then again, he also

described how he had sunk a submarine by hammering on it with his bare fists, so who knows. Anyway, in real life, the curse proved true since it said: “You, and your eldest son” and not as I have sometimes written: “You and your eldest son, and the eldest son of your eldest son…”

Who was the first person to tell me about that curse? Doubtless my grandmother Lola, who was in the habit of telling me such stories, which she, in turn, had been told as a child by her black nanny in Havana. Among these was the story of Chirrinchinchin the Monkey, Verum-Verum the Cow, and another story that I introduced into my novel *A Heart So White*, about a newly-wed who gloomily sang the following words: “Mamita, mamita, yen yen yen, the snake’s gonna eat me up, yen yen yen”; to which the bridegroom replied, contradicting his young bride: “Mother-in-law, she’s lyin’, yen yen yen, we’re jus’ playin’, yen yen yen, the way we do back home, yen yen yen.” “The following morning,” and I’m quoting now from *A Heart So White*, “when the mother, and now mother-in-law, decided to go into the newlyweds’ bedroom to bring them breakfast and see their happy faces, she found only a huge snake coiled on the bloody, rumpled bed and not a trace of her dear, unfortunate daughter, so full of promise.” But I’m sure this story was told to me not just by my grandmother Lola, but also by *Tita* María, by my mother, and her sister, my Aunt Tina, women are always the main passers-on of facts and fictions. It’s as if they instinctively knew the precept put forward by Isak Dinesen, or Karen Blixen: “Only if you can imagine what has happened and repeat it in imagination will you see the stories, and only if you have the patience to carry them inside you for a long time and to tell and retell them, will you be able to tell them well.”

This isn't the first time I've used that quote and what interests me most are the opening words: "Only if you can imagine what has happened and repeat it in imagination…" I think that therein lies one of the keys to literature: when you describe or introduce into a fiction something that really happened, the only acceptable and credible way of doing so is to pass it through the imagination and be capable of telling it as if it hadn't really happened. And perhaps it's the same process with invented stories, stories born directly out of the imagination and that have never happened: you have to imagine that they really did happen, so that you can then re-imagine them as something that *never* happened. That is the territory of literature, a territory that doesn't care where the material came from, because it comes and goes incessantly. And in the end, its various origins will be indistinguishable and of no importance, because the filter of the imagination renders everything equal. It's a territory of vagueness and mist, of darkness and uncertainty, in which, nevertheless, we see, more clearly than we ever do in life, everything that we decide should be a part of it. And the most astonishing thing is that everything *can* become a part of it, the true and the imagined, facts and daydreams, the verifiable and the unverifiable, the known and the unknown, what actually happened and what never did, what is told to us by witnesses and what could never be witnessed, like that curse which my novelist great-grandfather may simply have made up in order to liven up the lunch table.

Translated from the Spanish by Margaret Jull Costa