

Preface

by Raimondo Bultrini

Andreini's book is rich and dense, but also gifted with the light, lavish euphoria of discovery. Her America is a kaleidoscope of different moods and features—from the more superficial to the deepest strata of society—describing all the beliefs, conditionings, contradictions, vices and virtues of a great country which is perpetually transforming.

Her tone is light and often ironic in dealing with the theme of human suffering through her authentic, first-hand experience as an expatriate. She goes beyond just being content with her discoveries and doesn't judge her new surroundings with indifference, rather by intimately participating in them.

Her careful, sensitive, but sometimes stern gaze is poised on people and events, always questioning whilst acknowledging she will never know enough to fully embrace the wonder and joys of each new disclosure. Her writing flows, relaxed and lyrical, considering the vastness and variety of natural attractions as well as the rich and complex humanity they contain. Her measure is the awareness of dealing with a different space, which requires a new outlook on reality, setting everything in its place, and where opportunities have always been sketched by the possibility of finding a "new space" to express themselves.

What is available to Americans which is unknown to those of us from the Old Continent? And what, instead, have the Americans forsaken? What could they recover from the culture they left behind?

The understanding, questioning and analysis of the New World is, however, not the focus of her book: rather the twisting and turning through the essential traits of the author's personal, domestic and most intimate dimensions. The everyday experiences, a challenging illness, the kids' schooling, and the difficulty in relating to others, echo more dramatically when in a foreign land, far

away from one's usual support system, surrounded by unknown social codes and idioms which are alien to our lives—normally based on acquired certainties.

New awareness and new solutions are born thanks to this totally estranging experience and the loss of the support of those comforting mental mechanisms which she could count on before. So the author—and with her the reader—can now discover unexplored dimensions of consciousness.

CHAPTER I

Off we go

The other travelers look at their watches, check the departure boards and take off in a hurry, grasping the handles of their suitcases. Some, in transit, remain seated, crunching morsels of snacks and tiredness, among tangles of luggage, arms hanging low, magazines and whining kids. The heat, in Fiumicino, followed everyone deep into the airport, hidden under summer clothes, and is now seeping out of every movement.

It hangs over the five of us too, as we take up a whole row of seats. We, the grown-ups, are strewn with bags and shoulder straps; the children, dressed in multiple layers of clothes, are ready to endure all temperatures. Slightly pale, slightly crumpled by a spring full of commitments, we now sit transfixed, holding essential things such as laptops, contracts, bookings and teddy bears. The usual mini move that takes off with us with every relocation.

My youngest daughter looks at me, flushed.

"Mum, can I take my vest off at least?"

"Where are we going to put it? Have a bit of patience, we'll be going soon. Maybe if I move this you'll be more comfortable... ok?" I answer while repositioning the large suitcase between us.

"How old are they?" the petite woman sitting opposite asks.

I smile: "Five, ten and thirteen."

"Traveling must be a business."

I shrug, we're used to it.

The woman seems perplexed by the number of offspring and objects we have in tow. I wonder what she would have thought seeing us a few years ago when we travelled with two strollers and our youngest on a leash. Or even just a few minutes ago, when our cat was still with us, glaring straight out of her crate, a deep desperate sound gushing from her throat.

To put the crate through the scanner, we had to extract her then shove her back in amid panicky screams, scratches, attempted breakaways and cursing.

Now, she's lingering in some depot in the special luggage unit. And we are sitting here. Still.

"Why do we have to leave?" the little one asks. Again.

"Because it's fun," I repeat. "Because Dad was offered a great job, and we'll do lots of new stuff..."

Because the money has dried up, my love. Because for the past five years I've been soaking up Rome with its lights and commotion, as if it were a feeding bottle full of noise and chaos, meetings and vibrant days. Because I've spent nights writing and breathing sleep as if it were rare oxygen. Because a plethora of obligations have sent Mum and Dad down two separate, steep paths we couldn't take our eyes off.

And the time has come for us to invent ourselves a new life, together.

The airport moves around us while others are stirring. The children stretch the fatigue out of their muscles.

"And now, what do we do?" the eldest daughter asks.

"We wait, that's all we can do."

We, the parents, interlace our scratched fingers and look straight ahead, like bewildered cats.

We have spent weeks saying goodbye to friends, teachers and relatives, cancelling utilities, subscriptions and engagements. Changing services, closing accounts. We were cautious and started ahead of time; this isn't our first relocation after all. Let's take our time, we told ourselves, and do everything right. Even so. These last weeks, matters which hadn't been dealt with suddenly cropped up, so we had to put things right, run around hurriedly and make more phone calls.

Like a dervish getting caught in a crescendo of whirling spires, or a first time wizard who doesn't know how to stop a spell, we threw our lives into a spinning vortex that frantically tore away our habits, our certainties and everything we had built over the last few years. Like magicians and exalted dancers, we dizzied

ourselves for weeks with tasks, throwing ourselves into this rush towards a new path.

Right up to this morning, this airport, these smelly seats that feel like the eye of the cyclone, where everything is suddenly still and flat.

Now we can rest, hold hands and wait.

Watch the hurricane we ourselves have put into motion, still whirling around us, hurling everything away.

A friendly face, a regular hangout, the smell of a hug, the fountain at the end of the road, the pigeons wetting their heads, the gravel underfoot, the leaves which have lived through changing seasons, the flowerbeds in the park, the children's games, the curls of the little boy who says goodbye without smiling, "Are you really leaving?"

Everything is spinning and moving into the distance; our former life rapidly disappearing into a blurry mist.

We let ourselves be distracted by some magazines, the hustle and bustle around us, the comics and games crumpled up halfheartedly. We, the adults, check the tickets and documents one last time, answer a few last messages from friends and colleagues.

I'm startled by a number appearing on my phone, take a breath and answer.

It's great to hear your voice, of course I'm happy to be going... Of course I'm sorry.

"You'll see, it'll be great, I'm sure you'll find something interesting to do. It's just too bad you're leaving, we were a great team, you and I..."

As I end the call, I see two years of work falling apart, breaking away and flying off my fingertips into the hurricane, with everything else. I won't be contributing to the final draft; someone else will be wrapping up the film project. I've been running like a child at the top of my lungs and, now that the kite is finally in the air, I have to open my hands and let it fly away...

"The passengers going to Washington are kindly asked to head to boarding."

Finally.

"Kids, let's get going."

We all pick up our too many bags.

"Have we got everything? Are you sure?"

Bearing excessive weight, we all walk along like drunken ducks towards the gate, pass the airline desk and make our way along the bridge.

The little one pulls my sleeve.

"Mum?"

I dislodge my backpack to get a better look at him.

"Yes, my love?"

"Will my fish be happy in your friend's pond?"

I smile at him.

"Of course... He'll have the time of his life!"

I turn to the girls who were listening carefully without saying a word, and smile at them too.

As we advance through the cabin crew's welcoming ritual, I catch my husband's eye. Every few years he carts us all off to live somewhere far away. Now, he's glancing at me, wondering whether—once again—I'm actually in the mood for smiling.

Then, in the plane, having ditched our heavy bags and fastened our seat belts, we all doze off. Biting the bullet of our adieus in solitude. Each one of us, flattened against his seat, tasting the chagrin of taking off.

I don't look out as Rome grows smaller and farther away below us. Instead, with my eyes closed, I think of the objects, the faces, the rooms and the sensations which have suddenly become my past.

As we climb higher and higher, they hover over me, like a friendly ghost who doesn't want to fly away into nothingness.

The wooden floor steeped in the meals we cooked, games we played, pets' paw marks and baby vomit... The unique blend is still there, where we left it a few hours ago. But it's already far away. In the past.

I wonder how the cat is doing. She must be meowling desperately, locked up in her crate. Anyway, no one can hear her, stored away in the hold, like any other piece of luggage. And, she has no

distant present to deal with. She carries her present around with her, at all times, doesn't have to worry about putting it into perspective or making connections, explaining or expecting anything. She's in the hold, suffering, crushed by the noise and lack of oxygen, with her common-luggage present upon herself.

We soon reach cruising altitude and the food carts, with boiling hot smells, start coming through. The ritual of routine questions and extended arms begins.

We drink wine or coca cola, and open the boiling hot containers.

"It doesn't look too bad, right kids?"

Then we slip on our earphones and tune into the tiny screens in front of us. It feels as if our lives depend upon watching everything we can watch and eating everything we can eat.

Each one of us now clutching the distant fragrances, lights and faces we have left behind.

"We'll do lots of fun stuff in the US!" we, the parents, tell the kids, between a film and a meal.

We describe what the distant present suggests our future will be like: a life that is just as remote and imperceptible, and so unknown it seems impossible, but which will come true, some day.

"We won't have the same old habits, but we'll take trips and go on adventures. It won't be Rome, but it'll be big cities and really tall skyscrapers. And new people, not just the usual faces."

People of all kinds and strange people no one turns around to look at, because that's what happens in the States. You can dress the way you want. Do what you want. Speak your mind. No one's blown away and, if they are, they keep it to themselves. They just say hi and smile because that's the way it is, everyone says hi and smiles.

"Why do they always smile?"

"Because people in the States are welcoming. They're open."

They are kind and easygoing. And practical: everything works well and is easy to use. The United States is fun, and comfortable. We've told you over and over again; we grownups have been there and really liked it. We travelled around quite a bit, and saw beautiful places.

"I don't want to see beautiful places!"

"Of course you do! We'll take a lot of trips!"

We'll see great open spaces, so vast you feel lost in them. Highways so long you never meet another car and feel free. Motels with signs on the road telling you if they have vacancies and how much they cost; you don't even need to get out of the car! And these motels are everywhere, you don't need to plan ahead. Everything is so easy in the States. You'll see.

Grated parmesan

"Look, there it is!"

"Where are the skyscrapers?"

"Mum, Dad, where are the skyscrapers? Why can't I see any skyscrapers, Mum?"

Skyscrapers are everywhere in the States and in many other countries in Asia, the Middle East, even in Africa by now. But not in Washington.

Washington, from the airplane, looks just like the satellite view on the computer screen: a lush, dark green, tropical stretch of land.

"It must rain a lot around here..." I think, faced with all that green.

Then it dawns on me: that green place, where it rains a lot, is about to become "our" home. So I ask the first steward walking by for another glass of wine.

As the airplane descends, the green turns into trees, grass and hedges, and in between the trees, grass and hedges, some light colored houses start standing out. Not too close to one another and lined up, along roads that seem to have no beginning and no end.

Getting closer, we can spot the white picket fences, the garages and the driveways, cropping up throughout the green of the trees, plants and grass. As if some mischievous rascal had taken one of our cities, from over there in old, overcrowded Europe, crumbled it up in the palm of his hand and scattered it around, here and there, on a vast green expanse.

Empty nature with a sprinkling of houses.

That's my impression as we are about to land in the place we'll be living in for the next few years. And I walk down the jetway picturing a plate of pasta sprinkled with grated parmesan.

Then we walk out of the airport with the cat in her crate hurling insults and desperation. We are probably just as loud as she is, calling out orders and instructions, grabbing things. Catch up, watch out for the cars, look where you're going and say sorry! Didn't you see the man?

"Sorry, I'm so sorry... Kids, be careful!"

The crate weighs a ton, but it was the only way we could bring the cat with us. The American airline gave us no choice: we were only allowed the old, outdated, heavy, expensive kind, with bolts and screws. And I wonder how anyone elderly could actually manage to drag their cat along with them—in such a heavy crate—down this long narrow corridor that winds around the airport. It seems to never end, and has no other exits, no moving walkways, just walls and doors which sometimes open, letting loose passengers from another flight—and you have to watch you don't get separated in the crowd or get lost, or end up stepping on a child's foot or with your stomach under some teenager's backpack.

"But isn't the United States supposed to be so efficient?" my mischievous brain chimes in. And I tell it to shut up, we're going to be just fine here and there's nothing wrong with a few irrational things in the beginning. We are going to be just fine.

As with the crate, there's another piece of luggage we hadn't taken into account: tropical heat. When we come out onto the street, it grabs us by the shoulders and doesn't let go, hugs and embraces us, as if we had adopted a bothersome little monkey. While the bags and the suitcases weigh down our tired arms, already worn out by the long hours of travel, the little monkey grips us and takes our strength away. Sometimes it climbs down our necks and jumps all over our suitcases, making them so heavy we can hardly drag them along.

We walk and walk, sweat pouring down our strained necks.

"'No Country For Old Men'—no wonder, only young guys can survive this kind of haul!" we the parents comment, jokingly.

Meanwhile, we walk along overpasses, and underpasses, catch a bus, get off the bus until "Finally!" we find the car rental office. One bureaucratic setback later ("What? Can this be worse than in Italy?!"), we get our car and drive into the city.

"Where are the skyscrapers?"

It's me wondering this time. The kids, in their infinite wisdom, have understood that grownups have a vast repertoire of "things they just say" and have filed away almost everything we've told them over the past few months. They start chatting among themselves and playing video games.

We grownups watch the dense green wall of very tall trees that are still lining the road we have been traveling along since the airport. Miles and miles and not even a crack in the green wall. Nothing to see, no sign of a civilization unlike our own. Or even similar. Beautiful or ugly, or peculiar, or just different. Green is green and the leaves are leaves and we could have landed in the Amazon for all we know. Maybe we have.

"Look, the skyscrapers!"

The enthusiasm is suddenly back. After passing some isolated warehouses and an empty baseball field, the green brush is gone and we are, all of a sudden, on streets which intersect other streets.

We've reached Silver Spring, a town near Washington where we'll be spending our first few weeks. In the only apartment we'd managed to find, for a reasonable price, and which allowed a cat.

My wicked brain whispers that maybe I should have started having doubts about everything being so easy and welcoming in the States before even getting to the airport. While I had spent long nights searching and it seemed I couldn't find a roof to put over our heads for love or money. Even the families of my husband's colleagues, who had been through the same problem, were unable to help.

"You need time and luck. It took us three months," they told us.

I only had a handful of days and sleepless nights.

Silver Spring has a fair supply of skyscrapers; six or seven, all standing together, so it looks like more. And it really is full of differently colored people.

On our first evening exploring, we walk around, satisfied, among all the multiethnic faces and clothes.

We point out the Indian women in their colorful saris and the tiny asian women, to the kids. The blond, red and brown haired people. Some latinos with the facial features of ancient forsaken American civilizations. And lots of black people; I'd only ever seen so many when we lived in Dakar. Here in Silver Spring, they seem to be the majority. It brings back the feeling I'd had in Africa of living in an upside down world: everything which was once one color, is now the opposite. And it feels surprisingly like home.

We come across a group of African Americans who have gathered a little crowd around them. They are holding signs with drawings of Neanderthal men and slogans saying that we, white people, are like those guys: dumb and evil. Other posters show pictures of Hitler and World War 2, and the African Americans holding them are shouting that this is the world, this is white people's history.

Our kids look at the crowd with the posters and smile at them because they don't understand what the protesters are saying.

We tell them to stop smiling, because they might think we are making fun of them.

"Making fun of them, why?"

"It's a bit hard to explain..."

As we walk by, I think of all the wars white men have waged and are still waging. Yes, they are right. Right to insult us for all those horrible things we have done. I walk ahead, feeling good, because I agree.

It's a midsummer evening. There is still a lot of light and lots of people are out on the streets.

Everyone has his own little monkey around his neck, and is doing what he can to shake it off. A little boy on a skateboard glides, slowly, through the crowd. An Arab mother sits with a baby in her arms, fanning herself with the hem of her hijab. A group of bare-chested teenagers stroll by, holding enormous cups of icy soda.

Others lean against the walls or sit on the steps of this little

square decorated with red bricks, signs, and several bright lit cafés.

People greet one another in the evening heat, in slow, low voices.

“Hey!” “Hi!” “Hiya doin’?”

The monosyllabic words struggle to find their way from one person to the other.

In the middle of the square, a fountain gushes water high into the sky, before letting it fall in a loud shower all around. It’s a fountain with no edges and no fixed perimeter, with water pouring down, spreading out on the tiny multicolored tiles outlining its base, flowing away and evaporating. A dozen kids in their underwear are running around under the spray laughing, splashing and having fun.

My little one looks at me and I smile with my consent. Then again, he’s too new here. And his body is telling him it’s two o’clock in the morning, not eight pm as they say it is here. So we sit down on the steps nearby and watch the kids playing. At some point, a chubby boy with flabs of fat around his waist, hips, chest, and right up to his neck, sits on the fountain, right on top of the water spout. The spray stops and silence falls. Then a few kids, who were splashing around, start complaining that there’s no water.

My kids are now laughing noisily and we scold them. Others could think we are laughing at his physique and that wouldn’t be kind.

The other kids in their underwear take off to splash around in the other smaller fountains nearby, leaving the fat boy to plug the main spout for as long as he wants. So he sits there, proud of the momentous impact of his backside. Then he stands up and joins the others.

I don’t know why, but I feel sure this will always be one of our first memories of the United States, even in the years to come.

The second one will be the first day of school

Long strips of yellow plastic tape suddenly appear beyond the windshield, as I come out of the garage. I’ve just driven on to the street and find myself wrapped in all this cheerful tape fluttering in

the wind. It's everywhere: stretched between lampposts and street signs, as well as from one building to another. Like decorations.

A small crowd of pedestrians files along the sidewalk, brushing the tape with their chests while scanning the area with watchful eyes.

Is this an art installation?

It's the first thing that comes to mind, as I awkwardly try to come to terms with all the tape and the people standing by. Then I notice the policemen clad in riot shields and helmets, and the helicopters hovering low, around the skyscrapers. They fly over and over the roofs of each building, including the one I'm driving out of.

Yes, we are living in a skyscraper now. When we arrived, we discovered that the little apartment we had rented from Rome was in one of those brick buildings with thousands of windows.

Entering the rooms full of light and sky, we dropped our luggage and gave in to our surprise.

"It's so cool, Mum! Did you know?"

"No, I had no idea... It's beautiful."

We are on a lower floor but the other skyscrapers are all around us and the impact is guaranteed. The large windows, giving onto the roads below, make us feel as if we were in a reversed aquarium: we, the spectators, are inside and the show is out there, in the urban landscape. The streets, ninety-degree crossroads, cars and pedestrians who take turns at the traffic lights, the windows of the other buildings through which we can hint at what is happening inside... People's lives are so easy to observe: so vulnerable.

In the buildings opposite, we watch the morning ritual of windows being shielded from the ruthless sun followed by the loud whirring of the air conditioners (hung by the hundreds, one at every window). In the evening, the ritual of curtains being pulled open, as pools of light flood down from the neon ceiling lights onto half-empty rooms.

Rituals which our residential skyscraper shares with the offices in the buildings opposite.

And with the Discovery Channel skyscraper nearby, where TV documentaries are made.

Their skyscraper has a bogus shark stuck to it, stretched across the facade: the torso and tail hanging out one side, the head and wide open jaws sticking out the other side. We would often stop to examine it from below. Our noses in the air, looking at the long white teeth and the deep red throat, gaping wide, some twenty meters above the pedestrians.

Right now people have their noses in the air, but this time they are looking at the helicopters instead of the shark. They fly back and forth, and their very loud flap flap sound is covered, now and again, by the wailing of the police sirens, the ambulances and the armed forces.

No, it can't be an art installation after all... So, what's happening?

"Somebody has kidnapped a few Discovery Channel employees. The whole building has been evacuated, apart from the Discovery offices," my husband explains from his office.

I'd called to tell him I was stuck behind the tape. So he'd turned the television on and seen the images from the helicopters: our skyscraper and the neighboring ones being surrounded by a large contingent of law enforcement.

Because no one knows who's in that building, if there are others nearby or if they want to blow something up...

Meanwhile, the school bus with our kids is on its way back, full of all the worried thoughts, tensions and events they have lived through, on their own, during their very long first day without their friends, their usual points of reference and stomping grounds. With only one certainty they could rely on: Mum, at the bus stop, to greet them with her arms open, ready for their inevitable sulking.

But their Mum still has to get through the tape. She's been told that American policemen are nervous, so she mustn't make any sudden or reckless movements; always speak calmly and keep her hands in sight because you never know what could happen.

Still, however hard she tries, the only sound coming out of her locked jaw is a desperately mumbled explanation of her plight. And, instead of looking like an upright citizen, she has the frantic glare of a crazy woman ready to blow herself up if she can't get to her children in time.

Otherwise they'll be left on the sidewalk without knowing what has happened or how to ask for an explanation. Without knowing where they are and whether anyone will ever pick them up.

"Officer, I beg you..."

Their Mum watches the glitzy mirrored sunglasses, the stiff posture of the uniform, and understands the policeman won't listen to pity, he'll only follow orders.

He observes her from behind his expressionless glasses. Evaluates. Talks into a headset.

Then, finally, one hand lifts the tape in front of the windshield while the other hand signals her to go, quickly.

Soon after, another uniform lifts another tape while another hand signals to hurry up. Then one more, and again another.

And she is out from behind the tape.

As she struggles through the swell of cars that are jammed together from various directions under the glistening heat, scenes from the last few nights come to mind. The sleepless children, with swollen eyes, making long lists of all the people they have left in Rome and won't be joining on their first day of school. Everything they won't see. Everything they won't do.

She mustn't be late.

So she reclaims all the subtleties and forbidden tricks, learnt in the many years of driving in African and Middle Eastern countries, where getting through traffic jams is a perpetual and regular norm, not a mere setback. And in Rome, where gridlock is a daily affair even if people consider it an unacceptable holdup to be forcefully expelled from their lives.

Taking stock of the years spent with tires up on traffic islands, squiggly detours and forbidden turns, their Mum arrives at the bus stop only one hour late. But calm enough because her brain, in the meantime, has told her that the school bus must have also been caught up in the traffic jam.

And her brain is right this time: when the noisy, smelly yellow bus arrives, she is already there, her arms are open, and she is ready to take on and diffuse all the sulking.

The third memory: Maine

The cool and stretched out state of Maine we drove through for long hours of endless daylight. The sun shimmering on the woods, ocean and rocky coves.

Later, back in the skyscraper, we often talk about Maine and the heart-wrenching nostalgia it left us with: the clear air, beautiful calm boats anchored to the piers, large wooden mansions, freshly painted and spotless, surrounded by stunningly kept flower gardens.

Houses we'd often stopped to admire, photograph and compare, during our first hours on the road.

"I like that yellow one best!"

"I like the one with the windows on the roof!"

"I like the one with the porch!"

The one with the wild flowers in the flowerbed, the one with the tree house and the one with the American flag hanging from the balcony...

The balconies, porches, tree houses and American flags appearing over and over again.

The mansions in Maine are differentiated by an infinite score of small variations. Just like in any residential American suburb, but with a neater shine and sharper colours. I suppose it comes from the surrounding landscape, so briny, clean and fresh, it reflects on the way everything has been conceived: the houses, the boats, the piers and even the restaurants inside wooden verandas, stretching out to sea.

Nonetheless, somewhere along the trip, we got bored with all the variations and the straight lines, symmetry and spotlessness. We stopped making comparisons, taking pictures or even commenting. The children drew on their paper pads. We and the friends from Italy who had joined us for the trip, looked at the maps.

Meanwhile, other tourists continued jumping in and out of their cars, calling out "Oh, look at that one!" while looking at the various porches, gardens, flags and sky windows. Dreaming of the privileged existence of the owners of this or that fairy-tale mansion set among a cluster of rocks, looking out over the ocean. The white

lighthouse nearby and the seagulls swooping overhead, crying out to the waves. Mansions which also have small sandy coves, tucked into the rocks nearby, where the residents can stretch out to sunbathe.

“And you never get sunburnt here! You can play ball without sweating and picnic on the sand without sunscreen on your hands!” as my American friend from Italy commented, perfectly at ease with the scenery around us.

Neither she nor the other visitors seemed at all bothered by this sort of private property which, instead, made me more and more outraged. Because there are notions such as coastline, shore, rocks and woods which, in my view, can't be paired with the idea that someone has taken possession of *that* coastline, *that* shore, *those* rocky boulders and least of all *those* woods. Which is exactly what the owners of these wonderful variations of American homes do, without worrying about environmental or moral issues.

I can't be passionate about a wonder I can't enjoy. What's the point in looking at a shore when you can't dip your feet in its water? Or a meal without sunscreen and sunburns in a cove if you're not even allowed to walk through it, even when it's not fenced off.

We had already been forced away from another heavenly niche—a clearing in the woods with a lake and water lilies.

“This isn't a park! It's private property!” the owner had barked at us.

So we'd collected our shoes and bags, sandwiches and laughs, caught the kids, who were running after one another through the trees, and thrown everything back into the car.

Why was that guy so upset? How were we supposed to know that Bambi's forest belonged to someone?

“Why don't they use fences?! That way we'd know,” I blurted out, disappointed that our bucolic idyll had been interrupted.

“It's not what people do here. They don't close areas off!” my friend told me.

“Private property is off limits, here. Everyone knows it, so there's no need to protect it,” her husband added.

So, I stepped onto the accelerator and drove the wheels and

my nerves to the first spot that was neither fenced nor belonged to anybody because it belonged to everyone.

And on that gigantic stretch of fresh sand we ran, with the briny wind blowing on our faces and our mouths full of screams and laughter. We swam in the cold water, sunbathed without getting sunburnt and smelt the rosehip that stretched, as far as the eye could see, over the large bushes skirting the sand dunes.

Days with a tail wrapped around them

Back in the skyscraper, we cuddle up together in the place the kids now call our *homey home*. They really like it because it's small, lined with soft carpeting, has new furniture and large windows. But the cat is bored out of her wits. She can't go out; for the first time in her short cat life she can't even put a paw out into the open air.

Almost all skyscraper windows are sealed and those that do open a small crack, give on to a void. The cat looks at us, dejected, then solemnly wraps her tail around her down time, places it meticulously on her front paws and squints at the surroundings with her eyes half shut.

My husband was the first to start wandering about, getting to know places. He would go out early and come back late, and threw himself into his job as if it were a passing spaceship. One haul, no layovers: home-work-home. He thrust himself into a galaxy we know nothing about, where he meets people, does things, produces, he's useful and active, looks around and understands. He already knows how to find his way around and refers to places, explains routes and situations.

I, instead, look around the reversed aquarium, observe the kids playing and sit next to the cat. I wish I had a tail I could wrap around my hands.

I look at the building where the madman took the employees hostage on the first day of school.

They weren't terrorists and weren't even numerous. Just a lone, loony preservationist who attacked the documentary producing channel to make people aware of environmental issues. But,

because he did it while pointing a gun at the staff, no one even listened or understood. They shot him, killed him, and it was all over. A sigh of relief, the tape comes down, the helicopters land and people with their noses in the air go home.

They've also taken the decoration down: no more shark stretched over the building now, just a cementified normality.

All around, buildings and skyscrapers stand, alternating solid blocks and more blocks, creating an immense, right-angled prospect. In between these blocks, along short inclines which are either grey or green, streets and parks open onto large roads with vehicles, shops and walkways.

I'm surprised by the fact people here spend their everyday lives in these boundless planes, going in and out of these gigantic cubes. Maybe all this magnitude explains why everyone hurries around in a rush with a seemingly precise goal in mind, knowing exactly how to reach it.

Everyone.

Every mother, with her child in her arms or in a stroller, slung to her chest or her back, looking either overcome, kind, anxious or in a rush.

Every teenager, clutching the books which hold his future, or busying himself with some part time job to scrape together a bit of small cash.

Every elderly person, his old age dragged around on a senior's scooter or by a dog's leash.

Every father, dutifully showing he actually enjoys doing his bit while holding his kids' hands on swimming-lessons afternoons or, at the other end of a pitch, catching a ball, on playtime afternoons.

Kids aren't "every kid," they're always "the kids."

In the fenced school yards, in the parks running around playing games, pushing one another on swings, or faced with an adult's reproach in the street, the children are a collective entity, they're the kids. Probably putting together "his" or "her" future. But not each one for himself; they do things within a loud chorus of voices, faces and different languages. All together in their common childhood experience, collectively.

But what is it that holds together the others, the American adults, in this part of the States?

The air seems rarefied around here, made up of individual goals. And, here and there, a few soft gusts of principles that are so openly exhibited they don't seem quite genuine.

Especially now, with the election campaign in full swing and proclamations posted on every street corner.

In November, the House of Representatives and part of the Senate, some governors and some state legislatures will be up for re-election.

The usual midterm turnover is predicted, with the opposition party overthrowing the incumbent. But judging by the passion both Republican and Democrat candidates put into competing for each pedestrian's vote, all bets are off.

Smiling impersonators, dressed like the political nominee they are campaigning for, hold up placards with the party's slogans, and wave at everyone. Spotless billboards spell out the names of one or more candidates (It's so unlike Italy, where campaign posters are torn, covered in graffiti or glued on top of one another to hide the other candidate's face or message). Then, these same names—always the same—are printed on bumper stickers and leaflets left in the mailbox, or called out in recorded telephone messages that start playing as soon as you lift the receiver.

And that's not the only campaign taking place.

Every day, a man parades along one of the main avenues with a placard against pedophilia among the clergy. He was molested as a child and for years now he has been protesting in front of the Apostolic Nunciature.

Not to mention the banners in favor of Israel outside synagogues. Or the words of Christ posted outside churches for the Christians.

Everyone has the right to speak up, everyone has his own message.

Everyone.

"People here really can say what they want!" my children comment. In Italy, they'd learnt to hide their opinions to be well received. Now, in this part of the world, they're surprised by what people get away with declaring.

"In Italy, they would have scribbled all over that poster," they observe.

"And that guy would have been beaten up sooner or later," they infer.

Here instead, on trimmed front lawns, small shiny metal signs shoot up unscathed with the names of congressional candidates. Rivals of different colors, with opposing slogans, stand side by side, in neighboring gardens, competing for the attention of anyone passing by. Everyone with his own private property and his individual political opinion.

We see lots of these signs, more and more of them, as we move away from Silver Spring, and its downtown skyscrapers, looking for a house in Washington's residential neighborhoods and suburbs.

The kids complain: "Why can't we stay in our homey home?" But the location isn't right, it's too far from school and the apartment is just too small. We must explore.

Driving around in our rental car, we travel into neighborhoods we can't even pinpoint on a map, back and forth through woods that appear out of the blue ("How many parks are there in this city?!?"), along highways and into vast expanses strewn with little houses that all look almost identical.

We discover that in and around Washington there are only a few properties available, with all the agencies fiercely competing for them. And, they are off the market in a matter of hours. Choosing a house in these circumstances is like playing Russian roulette. When you still can't find your way around ("Is the school near or far from here?"), you have no idea what services are at hand ("Where do people shop around here?") and while you are standing there thinking about it, the dispirited realtor looks at you, his mobile phone in hand.

"I'm sorry, I've just been told this house is no longer available. We should hurry to the next one."

Finally, Lady Luck smiles down on us. On a day of torrential rain, we too find the American home that suits us.

Wooden and with a garden, a gray roof, painted siding and a pretty balcony.

A white house, looking old and wise, greets us. Sheltered by the surrounding tall trees, it promises silent evenings and cosy fireplaces.

But it has neither the candid Maine sheen nor the gracious neatness of the other houses on the street. What with too many former leases and its owner having turned a blind eye for years, it looks slightly neglected and ailing.

We have very few alternatives but some negotiation is still called for.

"It needs a lot of work, we can't take it in these conditions."

"The owner has no intention of refurbishing, I'm sorry."

"What a pity."

"Otherwise, could you deal with the renovation yourselves?"

So, we decide to take the work on ourselves. To stop the charm of better times becoming a swarm of termites, and keep the drains and the creaking within the normal range of a house with "some character."

With the help of a team of tireless Peruvians, we sand away the rust from the elaborate ironwork, waterproof the beams, and replace the windows covered in webs of cracks. We scrub away, wax, paint, air every corner of the house in a tidying frenzy that brings to mind an old fashioned village spring-cleaning. But, instead of holy water and prayers¹, we are blessed, in the end, with a twenty foot container unloading itself into the empty rooms.

Suddenly the cyclone is hailing everything back at us: objects, clothes, medicines, tights, combs, games, books, notebooks and heaven knows how many things we have been dragging around the world for years. A bit more ruined at each time, a bit more opaque and fed up with being shipped around and dealing with different climates. Having moaned in the damp, cracked in the drought, lost color in the scorching heat or been tarnished by the cold, depending on where the hurricane had flung them in the past.

"Here's the kitchenware!"

"I've found the books!"

We knife open the boxes with a kind of Dionysian glee. With more and more expertise and speed, we dive our hands into

the soft polystyrene packaging and pull out letter openers, nasal sprays, wool sweaters and poolside flip flops. The usual stuff that gets thrown into boxes in a hurry, when even hesitating between “Should I keep it or throw it out?” costs time and money, and in the end it all ends up in the cauldron.

Then we kneel down to gut the larger loads and free our home’s sacred objects from multiple layers of cardboard and paper.

Bookshelves. Sofas. Dining room table. Beds.

We bow down to nourish and polish them with bee’s wax, offer incense and scented candles to give thanks: everything is here and nothing’s been broken.

One afternoon, boxes and box cutters still in our hands, the next door neighbors pay us a visit. Very kind and discreet, they provide us with cookies and photos of their family, each one’s name written underneath. Covered in sweat, we relax our faces and beam because this is a prophecy come true: the kind Americans really are welcoming us warm-heartedly.

“Thank you, see you soon!” we call out as they walk away.

Our words expressing a vision: let’s take a break, every now and then, to have a chat with them; get to know them and let them get to know us, build a friendship. Get their advice and pick up some tips. Watch our little one play with their three boys who are more or less his age.

But, within a few days, our dreams crash into a fence of reality.

The neighbors go about their business, discreet, proactive, according to their schedules and habits. Their routines are unchanged by this external event: the sudden arrival of a clan of strangers next door. They decline our invitations and, a few times, send back my little boy who had gone over to suggest an afternoon of fun and games, because it just wasn’t a good time for them.

On the other hand, during one of our first unplanned encounters in the street, I realize we too disappoint them.

The mother tells me she keeps her two youngest at home and teaches them herself.

“Really?”

"Yes, it's a common practice here in the States. It's called homeschooling. But our eldest goes to the local school, so I'm sure we'll meet there. What after school activities do your kids do?"

"Our kids go to an international school..." I answer.

With just one sentence, a common ground made of school programs, recitals, meetings and pick-ups is swept away.

"Yes, well, I understand..." she adds and bends over to pick up her last-born child.

Then she brightens up: "Well, anyway, we'll see you in church on Sunday. Do you go to the one down the road?"

"Actually... no, we don't.»

At this point, all she has left is a polite glint of a smile. I understand she'll always grant me a kind thought and a considerate word, but access to friendship will invariably be denied.

We continue unpacking, cleaning and tidying up. Tired and glum, we have dinner on the floor, surrounded by boxes and wrapping. And a sole distraction: our stupefied cat wandering around, hiding in every den she can find and coming out only to the sound of food.

Sitting on the floor, our kids look at us and mercifully say nothing.

And that's when I think I've understood what has been puzzling me lately. I suddenly feel it all coming together, all the data collected watching individuals wandering this earth without seeming to have a connection, a common understanding, a feeling of belonging to something more than the macrosystem of Federal States, capitalism or the Stars and Stripes.

Over the past few weeks I've been asking myself: "What is it that holds this crowd of individuals together?" Finally, thanks to the neighbors, the cookies, and pulling back from a more demanding exchange, it dawns on me that the answer could actually be really really simple. Because, apart from the designated places and scheduled meeting times, the open secret seems to be that they are all here together, so that they can all be on their own.

Maybe it's my own fault if I see things this way. Maybe I'm still too high strung because of the cyclone and my roots are still hanging in the air, dripping droplets of another country.

But then I remember arriving in Syria, where everything really was exotic and foreign. Where the light and the smells and even the air's consistency seemed to come from a truly different and unknown dimension.

I think back to my house with no roof and our neighbors' balconies strewn with carpets hung out to air. The strong food smells, the pollution, the muezzin's heart-wrenching voice. The dust from the streets flowing up my nose with the smell of jasmine. The smiles, the pleasure in meeting a stranger, the fear of the police. The amenable shopkeepers dressed in long garb. The veiled women looking at my hair and sighing "Haram!" (sacrilege!) as I walked into the market. The Hezbollah barracks I passed every day on my way to the playground with my girls. The young men standing guard on the doorstep with machine guns, weighing more than their years, strapped to their necks. The *mukhabarat* deliberately dressed in dark clothes so that every citizen knew he was being spied on, at every street corner. The donkeys trotting down the streets, the smell of kebab trickling out of stores, the freshly baked bread cooling on car hoods...

And I reminisce how, from the start, I'd felt enlaced in the texture, swathed in invisible fibers; the fibers of languages, habits and duties that string people together. The pattern of their movements, of their relationships, was so obvious that when you saw them you could believe you were looking at a living traditional carpet. It was so straightforward, you knew what people were thinking even when they didn't say a word. And you knew where your place was within that thick and complex composition: you always knew where you stood in the tapestry and which stance others saw you in.

Here in the States, there are millions of threads. Each one with a different color, dialect, intonation and praying position. Threads which have flown here, from distant times and places, to settle in the land of freedom; or were forced here, from far away lands, to safeguard the freedom of others.

And now, these threads drift, each one for itself, carried by

the wind of its own circumstances, the choices it has made. They flutter in the breeze and get caught up; sometimes intersecting other threads before continuing along their windy journeys. So assorted, diverse and free, they can never really fill the enormous web they move around in. The web of the Federal States, of capitalism, of Stars and Stripes that intentionally remains wide enough to allow the wind and the threads to continue blowing through, free.

Far away

Our new home is coming together and being filled. It's starting to look like us, reminding us of who we were and what we used to do.

We're all feeling more comfortable, more settled. Recapturing our simple little habits actually allows our bodies to take a breather; being able to sleep between these fabrics, comb our hair with the teeth of that comb, listen to music being played by that machine in particular...

The kids are relieved and take heart. My husband goes ahead assuredly in his bold discoveries. The cat stretches out on the old blanket.

I, instead, start along a slow, foggy slide that I have been through in the past. Sensations become murky, feelings rarified, everything standing at a distance.

The presence of streets and people in the streets doesn't elude me; I hear the steps and the voices, watch the colors and the routes. But everything is opaque as if it were all taking place behind a cold, damp mist.

The meaning of things floats around, lost behind something I can't pinpoint. And I'm surprised others actually manage to catch on, perceive things as existent and alive, next to them, guiding them, walking them through life as if they were wandering through a well known, well kept park.

I, instead, find myself in a dark wood, among blurred shapes, lost in a confusion which can't even be defined suffering.

I've been here before, I know it happens sometimes: it's the alienation that sets in with every relocation. Nothing to worry

about. I get through the first heroic period: dealing with all the matters of primary importance such as a roof over our head, a school for the kids, transportation, food and medicine. Then, having fixed this and that, I find myself slightly anesthetized. It's happened before. I know I'll get over it, eventually. The anesthetic will be digested and disappear, and I'll get my energy and my sensations back again. I just need a bit more time. I know that too.

But it's unfortunate because, in the meantime, I find myself experiencing some interesting events.

Like the dinner with some former members of Congress, important entrepreneurs and clever guys who raise money to finance election campaigns.

Interesting matters such as the midterm elections are discussed that night. Will the President obtain even just the marginal majority he requires in Congress to carry out his policy reforms? Or will he have to concede to a quashing Republican majority and abandon the needy to their fate?

Or the excellent reasons behind the need for an organization to protect Italian products abroad whose names are being used to fob off atrocities such as the "True Italian Mozzarella" produced in Wyoming—which can only be sliced with a sharp bread knife.

The opportunity for new ways of developing alternative energy sources in the States, although strong lobbies are opposed. Even the heartfelt attempt at introducing the US to the cheerful, bizarre and liberating Italian carnival: Americans don't have anything like it and we really should pave the way.

I listen, smile and dutifully converse with the guests seated to my right and to my left. But I have the emotional reactivity of an unplugged fridge.

The same thing happens on the other important occasion: the quintessential annual society event which, again this year, lots of swell people attend. Set in the immense dining hall of a luxury hotel, the soirée is dedicated to prestigious Italian Americans: heart surgeons, entrepreneurs, movie stars and Italian special guests, including a famous film producer.

Americans love honoring those who have made it, according

to their standards. They organize loads of events like this, congratulate the winner, whatever field he has distinguished himself in. He is set as an example and celebrated with very long and meticulously planned functions.

At the event for successful Italian Americans, the guests of honor are all on the stage, seated at a very long and richly decorated dining table. The other tables in the immense dining hall are just as richly decorated amid a sea of curtains and clothes, carpets and rugs—all in different shades of cream—and loud voices.

The waiters rush around burdened with vast trays, while loudspeakers call out the names of those on stage and their accomplishments. Then they blare out the speeches of those presenting the guests of honor. Finally they blare out the speeches of the guests of honor.

Meanwhile, videos are being replayed on gigantic screens hung in the far corners of the hall, showing the heart surgeon operating, the entrepreneur doing business, the CEO buying a baseball team.

Here too I feel a bit estranged. Sinking through the confused chatter and waves of color, I feel a bit shipwrecked. I think I'm going to drown.

Strange things happen in this distant, opaque state of perception. Some events suddenly break through, their defined edges so sharp and clearcut they hurt even more.

Like when my husband ran up the stairs of our home and came looking for me while I was taking a shower. With frightened, incredulous eyes, his mouth was repeating the same concept a few times before my brain actually let it sink in.

Our cat is dead.

We went down to get her from the middle of the street, slaughtered by who knows who, at who knows what time of the night, which she always wanted to spend outside, after so many weeks locked up in the small Silver Spring apartment.

The worst thing was neither her deformed shape nor the stiff coldness laying under her coat, normally so soft and welcoming.

The worst thing was the feeling of distraction. How little concern, how little care we'd taken until then of our beloved pet. The fact we hadn't realized how dear she was to us.

Dragged from Africa, where she was born, to Italy and then from Italy to the States. To finally die, run over, just outside our American house, the home we had just settled into.

We live dodging fears. The fear of losing a job, becoming sick, losing children or a friend's affection. We face the fear of growing old and no longer being cherished by someone who once loved us. Of suffering chronic pain or not being able to pay back debts. But we never ever face the fear of losing a cat. Who ever thought of that one?

And this unaccounted pain is a sensation I perceived, loud and clear, for many days thereafter.

I was struck by another flash of sensitivity at the celebration for wounded warriors.

This country is at war. The theaters of war are in Afghanistan and Iraq. You don't think about it, before coming here. But then, living here, reading, hearing and seeing how they insist on their love for the homeland and the good fight, the fight for freedom and the heroism of fallen martyrs, you start to become aware of it all.

Even if they aren't allowed to show the bodies of the dead soldiers on television.

Even when, with so few favorable outcomes, they omit the defeats and underline the objectives.

Even when the rhetoric just becomes a customary refrain, a syrup poured more and more generously over every report.

Despite all this, living here makes you aware of this uniquely American situation, and the fact the United States is constantly having to account for difficult choices, without always managing to justify them.

So they organize innumerable celebrations, commemorations and fundraising events.

I found myself going to one: a classical music concert in honor of war veterans and the wounded. Youngsters of all ages crowded in the large welcoming auditorium set up at the Italian embassy. A bold, modern structure that can be rented for commemorations or social and promotional events. This time it had been leased by a company doing business with the armed forces. Every year they provide wounded veterans with a concert and a buffet and, during

the soirée, people donate considerable sums of money to some of the associations helping veterans with their recovery.

"It's a bit like Beretta giving money to the Italian League for Bird Protection," my naughty brain whispered.

But I decided to ignore it. I told myself: "Helping these poor people is really great..." and continued observing.

The wounded veterans huddled into the vast middle of the hall: men and women, alone or accompanied. So many youngsters of all ages all truly mutilated, having lost an arm, a leg or a smile. Their relatives ushering them, pushing their wheelchairs, standing by their sides without crowding them. While the sounds of vibrant speeches about honor and love for the homeland, justice and the fight for freedom, boomed down from the stage.

I listened to the speeches, listened to the concert and served myself at the buffet.

I watched and smiled, shook hands and exchanged greetings.

I noticed some children wandering around the tables looking solemn, wearing ties that were too big for them. They looked like they hadn't foreseen any of this: losing part of a parent to the war. And they hadn't foreseen the parent would lose his memories or the joy in being with them, the will to live, the means to work and provide for their future.

The trenches of loss the war was digging into these children stretched, briefly, inside me, strong and deep. So I left the hall and the celebration. In a spineless hurry, I quickly left behind all that terrible pain.

Out of the dens

Meanwhile it rains and rains. It's raining like we had imagined it would from the plane, when it hadn't started raining yet and we'd already thought "Good grief!"

The wall of sound has encased everything. Even the crickets, which always make a noisy racket around the little houses along the street, are now silent. Those little houses lined up with or without a window on the roof, a white or brown picket fence, porches with or without a swing, entrances with or without columns, flow-

erbeds with herbs or flowers. Now the crickets are quiet or maybe they are trying to screech out their shrill chirping but no one can hear it because it's lost behind the boisterous wall of rain.

Our little house and the others near us drip and drip, while the bloated streams created by the rain flow down the streets. The tops of chestnut trees and strong, old oaks are bent by thunderous bombshells of water.

Every now and then, a large branch falls. It breaks away with a distinct crack and crashes down onto the dead wood below. We hear it all loud and clear, at night, because there's a forest behind our house and the only sounds that reach us are the rain, the trees creaking and the branches breaking away and falling.

They also fall on the large road nearby, one of the main highways which connect Washington to the cities and states nearby.

We are in a small town called Bethesda, in Maryland. The border with Washington DC is a few kilometers away from our house, but nothing tells you you've crossed it. The same suburban landscape stretches along both sides of it, with the little American houses and all their variations; the parks, the forests of chestnut, oak and fir trees all around.

Very green and sumptuous trees hang over the main roads, their branches woven into the telephone and power lines. Wires that stretch low, along the second floors of the little homes, and are often covered in ivy. Every now and then they are torn down by the wind or the weight of the rain, and collapse with the trees onto the road.

Sometimes the rain dies down and loud drops fall from the trees, down every leaf, the dark, long tree trunks, through the hedges and onto the flowerbeds. Squirrels whirl up and down the trees and dart around looking for food. Crows jump hastily on the grass and woodpeckers scurry along the branches. But these are short pauses, allowing just enough time to look out and realize that the sound from the wall of rain is no longer there. Then the rain picks up and cloaks everything again. Day and night.

By now the air has changed consistency. It has solidified into a semiliquid state which makes us all feel a bit uneasy and in a hur-

ry, as if we were constantly looking forward to something else. In the meantime, we think about the acres of woods our little houses are scattered among and the strong trees that are sucking up all this water. There aren't any puddles or bogs, even after a week of continuous rainfall, even after ten days.

I watch the water cascading, listen to the wall of rain tearing down on everything and, every now and then, I find myself on the lookout for a shadow to stroll along the walls of the house, into the corners and hidden dens, curl up on my lap while I read, or slink through my legs when it's time for food. Neither insistent nor overbearing, just asking to stay, if that's ok.

Because that's what cats do, a friend tells me. And it's true. So quiet and discreet, they blend into the house and almost become its advocate. Creatures made up of imperceptible movements which bring together the hearth and home and nourish them by simply existing.

Then the rain stops.

The sky lifts into a prospect of dizzying blue light. No clouds, mist or limits to the horizon, it rests, clear and sparkling, on the woods and the roofs, the wide roads and blocks of cement.

Everything in the city, suburbs and on the highways is sparkling with light.

The dull green trees give way to the slowing lymph. At night, the first chills drape the leaves and stems, leaving a veil on the lawns which will soon become frost.

As life shuts down, more vibrant and varied tones gradually explode. Surprisingly, within a handful of days, vivid colors are splashed around all over the place. Reds and yellows and greens, initially as faint as they are in spring, veer into aggressive and magnificent oranges, mixed up with everything else down every street.

"It's so beautiful!" I hear myself saying one morning as I watch the sunrise from my window.

I decide to go for a walk and to walk until I tear apart, rip open and break out of the chrysalis which has swathed my senses.

So I put on some comfortable clothes, just like all those who go out in the morning to walk their dogs and their cocoons. I walk, and walk, through the woods, losing myself along the fresh and ar-

duous paths where only the owners of very large dogs wander—to let them run around freely—or some intrepid mountain biker ventures, unafraid of exerting his muscles and running out of breath.

I look at the warm colored leaves shining through the dark branches. I see a rabbit slip away, padding fallen leaves, and a woodpecker persistently poking a tree trunk. I watch squirrels rushing up and down, between the branches, rustling up acorns, filling their mouths and running away towards invisible burrows. Walking among the colors and animals is starting to dispel my numbness.

But seeing things is not enough to spur sensations, we all know that. Even hearing has its limits. The cracking, rustling and wind blowing through the tide of dry leaves can't dig up sensations burrowed deep in the hidden nooks and crannies of our mind.

Whereas smelling can.

Smelling the fragrant mixture of forest and rain, of sunlight drying the carpet of needles and yellow leaves—that's when it happens. When paths rapidly evaporating in the morning sheen overlap with other invisible paths, along displaced axes of unruly memories and juxtapositions.

The parks after the first days of school, the excursions in the Apennines, a lake shore in the company of friends, kisses exchanged on the dry grass of a lawn...

My nose sniffs down the trails of emotions and memories and finally ferrets out those buried sensations. Hidden behind distant thoughts, lost in empty planes or behind drab screens. It flushes them out without frightening them, takes them by the hand, scoots them out of their hideaways and brings them up to the surface. Here, among the colors and the rustling, above the sweet smelling paths, they can finally come out into the open.

Thrill and confusion, surprise and gratitude are set to rights and I feel complete, geared up. So I walk and walk and walk on some more.

I walk until, for the first time, I feel I have actually reached a destination.