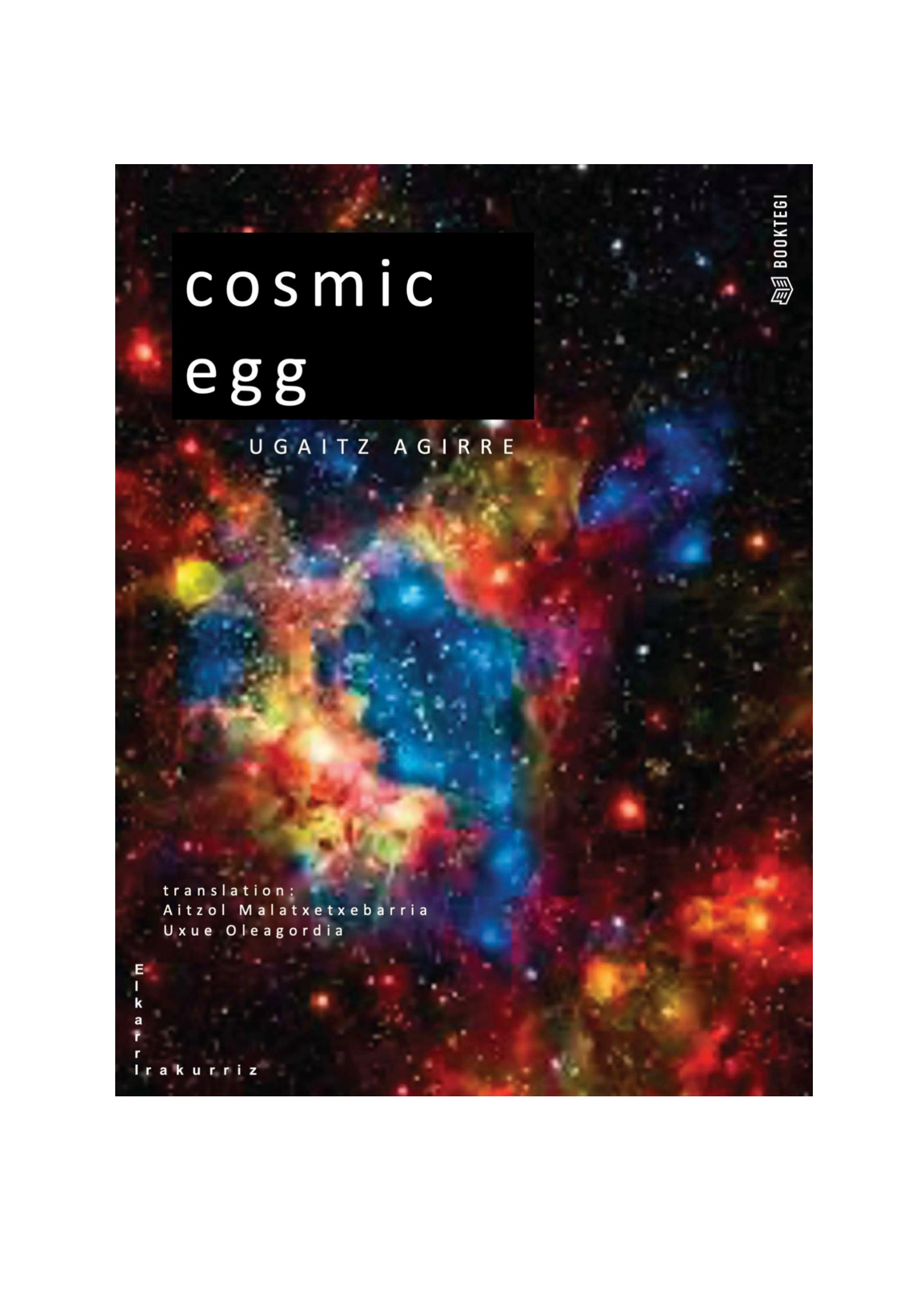


The background of the book cover is a vibrant, multi-colored nebula or galaxy cluster, featuring swirling clouds of red, orange, yellow, green, and blue against a dark, star-filled space. The title 'cosmic egg' is centered in a black rectangular box.

cosmic egg

UGAITZ AGIRRE

translation:
Aitzol Malatxetxebarria
Uxue Oleagordia

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UGAITZ AGIRRE

cosmic egg

original title: Arrautza kosmikoa

translation: Aitzol Malatxetxebarria and Uxue Oleagordia

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Grandpa had the same name as the poet, Virgil. But I would hardly like to keep any memories of him.

He was a small man, though, and his eyes were hidden under deep wrinkles. He could hardly see anything. His cheeks were fallen, and the skin of his neck moved around like jelly. Probably, if he had shaken all the skin of his body, he would have danced like a cream caramel ('the process of suppressing the figure was underway: three, two, one') and, for the greater happiness of all, like those who believe in the sin of the flesh, he clothed his raisin-like body from top to bottom. That way the features of his face became more prominent. Especially his pointed ears and bad mood. He was a tenacious elf, exhausted by his own strength, always jealous, quickly denouncing knuckleheads and fools with his poisonous tongue. If he heard the news, there were pretexts for murmuring, and if the correspondent said anything against his ideals, he would immediately pick up the phone to call the newsroom. The family catechesis was passive obedience, though nobody believed in the creed.

But let me not go round and let me round and, I'll tell you the plain truth: grandfather Virgil was a full-blown bastard. He could have been a villain in a story, and if he had been hired for acting, he would not have had to learn the script. Furthermore, he could pull cruel faces whenever he wanted. It was enough for him to be hated by everyone.

But he died, yes, so he couldn't have a career in acting. However, his greed had lasted almost a century; but finally, kaput. Even if it is hard to put an end to weeds, you can kill them too.

We didn't open a bottle of champagne even though we couldn't stand him. Local people celebrated the event as if it were the death of a dictator. They even hired a band! Our family, on the other hand, just calmed down.

We buried him, and most of the people who had come to the ceremony came to make sure he was safely under the ground, just in case it was the old man's evil trick to take revenge on everyone. As if he needed to do that! It was all correct. Then they opened another bottle each, and the barman wondered what else he could offer them. Water? Don't toast with that, customers, that's bad luck!

'Imagine the old man resurrecting himself.'

The next day the notary called us to read the will. Even though it was on paper, the old man had recorded it in a video for all his relatives to see.

I won't bother you with my grandfather Virgilio's monologue. Just saying what I had to say was enough. So, he turned to me from the screen, wanting my attention and trying to intimidate me:

'To my stupid, bloodless, clumsy grandson' (offensive adjectives were necessary to know who he meant), 'I give this duck egg.'

A duck egg? I thought. But what kind of inheritance is that? Is it a joke? Where are the cameras?

'Don't be silly, dickhead! The egg is a test, ideal for a lazy person like you. I'll give you my inheritance if you can keep this egg intact for thirty days.'

The others quickly turned up their noses. They didn't agree about the money being divided up between his sons and daughters. Anyone can complain, of course, but what a fortune Grandfather made over almost a century... I've never seen so many zeros in a row. All the fruit of his meanness All to be divided into six parts; and the mansion for me... with one condition.

'If you've thought of swapping the egg, that'll be complicated. A detective is going to shadow you night and day. The dumbest person could do your tricks, but for once I'll imagine you're a clever boy.'

The murmurings that had started since the thing about mansion became known soon became louder and louder, and not only my uncles, but my parents, became part of the battle. They said it was madness, they were the direct descendants, it was a terrible mistake...

'Shut up, for God's sake! You don't even respect the dead. I know very well what I have taught you, and what you have learned: nothing!'

Grandfather Virgilio's six children shuddered with indignation. Thomas, the eldest; then Augustine,; Maite and Sebastian, the twins; Mertxe; and Tiburcio, my father, the youngest. Which was maybe why he'd given him that name with its connection with Rome, he gave him that name. He had soon given up the idea that any of the others would follow in his footsteps. Grandfather was good at finding excuses: he was too subtle, she one was lame, they were too

much of a dreamer, not as fast as he wanted, too clever... For Grandfather believed himself to be a Roman consul, and his example was to be followed literally by those of his own blood. So, he gave them one last chance for obedience, justice, order, greatness... But my father wasn't able to get into the SPQR. Not all roads lead to Rome, even if they once had.

Let's get back to Virgil's own words:

'My six sons, in addition to the amount of money just explained, will be able to get hold of the mansion. How, the idiots will ask. Well, it's a game.'

Yes, yes, we heard him correctly: he wanted to force us to play a game. The proverb says let sleeping dogs lie, but Virgil found his relaxation in the agitation of others, so it was the other way around: stir the sleeping dogs up!

The story I want to tell you is about to begin, the story of the relationship between me and the duck egg, but I absolutely have to explain Grandfather's character for you to understand what I was put through. I did talk about him being a bastard, didn't I? The thing about the egg was like this:

If he wanted to acquire Grandfather's mansion, he had to keep the damned egg intact for thirty days. So far, so good. But if fate decided to burst the egg on the fifth day, the mansion would go to uncle Thomas. On the other hand, if some slip threw the egg up into the air and the omelette ended up on the floor on the ninth day, uncle Augustine would be lord and master. If on the twelfth day the egg ended up under a car wheel, mansion Maite would inherit the mansion; if the misfortune occurred on the fifteenth, his twin brother Sebastian. If the shell cracked on the twenty-sixth day, Mertxe would receive it as a gift. And finally on the twenty-ninth day, when the challenge my grandfather had set me was almost up, it would be for my father if a crack went through it from top to bottom and spilled yolk and white on the ground.

The details of the accident were mere examples to insert the ideal illustrations into the mind of the criminal. It was enough to break your will. And back to those vain bourgeois people in the twentieth meeting room, I assure you that if you had seen the eyes of those six insensitive people gleam, accompanied by malicious, sadistic, insane smiles, and followed by those of their partners like pitiful scavengers....

'Don't worry,' (said Grandfather from the screen), 'the month will go by quickly for people who have a lot of headaches, and when we come back together, we'll know who's going to sit in this armchair, and in the meantime you can all go to hell!

I left in a hurry, without saying goodbye or anything. I called a security company to provide me with armoured doors, triple locks and as many bolts, sheets of titanium, scanners and, if necessary, the Swiss guard. I didn't have enough in my pocket for the latter, and besides, their contracts didn't let them leave Vatican City. I had to make do with the rest, and I locked myself in my house: coup d'état to myself: I kept the courts and the parliament running even if the executive had no reason to listen: the dissident press named the regime the tyranny of advisers.

In view of the situation, the first victims emerged immediately: their partner packed their bags and went into exile. 'Although I promised her the craziest adventures, everything has its limits,' they explained before closing the door. It is better for us too if we play like this for a month: you there and us over here.

Because of the pain of the moment, I stepped away from all the noise and as fate would have it, I was right, because my eyes were quickly drawn to the egg. Had the knock on the door made it tremble?

I reacted in the same way when they knocked once, twice, three times at intervals on the door.

'Who is it?' I asked as I looked at the stranger through the peephole.

'Detective,' he said dryly.

I had already forgotten about the detective. Grandfather said he was going to be my shadow night and day, and perhaps I would have to give him a bed. The guest room was free; I wasn't expecting visitors, and he could stay there unobtrusively. Besides, he could be a helpful, the Swiss guard that the security company couldn't provide.

I opened the door and a stereotypical detective stood before me. His whisky and tobacco smell, his forty-something years, and his emotional family problems, his hat and his trench coat, his superficial negligence and his sensitive interior.

He pushed me brusquely and quickly rushed off in search of the egg. He found it in an instant and broke it in front of me, shattering it in his hand.

Heartbreak must be something like that.

That's why you mustn't open the door for anyone!' he admonished me. 'Don't worry, the original is here', and he opened his other hand.

No idea which side the guy was on. I didn't know if he wanted to help me, if he had come to put more pressure on me to screw up, or if he had come to laugh in my face. He told me this as if it were a painkiller:

'Do you know that in Hinduism an egg is the beginning of everything?'

Did I hear that in an after-lunch documentary or on a silly Internet video? What was it, cosmic egg? While I was idly wondering, the detective put his things in order.

His shirts were neatly folded, his pairs of shoes were over there, his ashtray and bottle over there. I asked him what he was doing, and he calmly replied that he was preparing for thirty days' active service.

'But why here in the middle?'

'Because it's where your shadow falls.'

'And when it's noon, what will you do? Go underground?'

'Worry about the egg, not me, if you want to own the mansion.'

I didn't speak to him any further. I came to the conclusion that he was crazy, as were all the security company staff. Well, they thought they were setting up a security system in a madhouse when they heard it was all about looking after an egg. But the craziest people, and I

didn't expect this, were the ones in my family. I never thought all my aunts and uncles, and don't forget my parents, were mafia-families. Organized criminals.

The construction of the walls of Constantinople was a good idea at first. On the fifth day Thomas sent me all types of deliverymen and distributors, all of them with the clear intention of coming through the door. They gave silly excuses: deliverymen had an urge to pee, a document had to be signed, it was a survey from the Basque Government, that they had to inspect the house because a criminal had taken refuge there... No one managed was allowed in; I told them to leave what they were carrying in front of the door. However, one of them tried to get in through the window. Useless, to say the least. His claim that he came from a school of magic with a letter of acceptance was not credible, though it was original.

Meanwhile, I was taking good care of the oval object well cared for, protecting its fragility using soft materials. They were opposites, and got on well tother. The mobile rang and I was stared at it like a dullard. My holidays were over, and on the other end of the phone the human resources guy asked me if I was thinking of returning to my duties and obligations. He was very nice, by the way, because he said to me that I was under siege by six mafia families:

‘They might fire you for having delusions like that.’

Oh, how lucky I would be if they actually were delusions. The psychiatrist was about to diagnose schizophrenia, but he prescribed me fresh air after talking about the confinement I had set myself. The tyrant leader called the body cells to the vote, and the simple majority won: every time I went out into the street, the duck egg was another of my appendages.

I've never put up so many obstacles before. Augustine, Maite and Sebastian – the bipeds mafia, the two-legged mafia and the motor vehicles mafia – would have to pay. To be honest, I expected more from Augustine. I accepted the twin brothers and sisters using similar tactics, but not the second in the family; uncle Thomas didn't try much either. Besides, what did he expect? To find somebody, if possible the same age as me, the things I was carrying would fall to the ground, she would try to pick them up clumsily, and with the mere touch of our hands a sudden love story would begin, the body language would melt my heart, and that in the end I'd realise that she was Mata-Hari with a broken heart (and egg) in front me? Thinking about it calmly, it was good thinking. He shook his head vigorously.

Sebastian, however, was unaffected; he was the one who got away. Well, he didn't send a Boeing 707 straight into my living room! Thank goodness I felt puckish and went to look for something in the kitchen. Yeah, I was carrying the egg around at home too, is that a problem?

My aunt Maite hadn't made a very good decision by allying herself with the cyclists. Society was divided between those in favour and those against, and everyone knows that if you choose a side in times of polarization, you may end up disappointed. Pedestrians took a dim view of cyclists riding on the pavement and I thought they were going to kill her. Forget about the '10 most traumatic wars in history'; the world was a different place after the cyclists' and pedestrians' battle.

In spite of everything, I was working on the thesis of egg care. I already had several patented methods. Bubble wrap for wrapping crystals? Amazing. Putting the egg in a bag full of water as if it were a tropical fish? Amazing. There was only one snag: aunt Mertxe paid ninjas to spoil my dreams. One of them threw some metal stars right into my face! One on the forehead, one on the left foot, one on the right thigh, one on the belly and one on both buttocks. The latter was intentional; I have no proof of that, but no doubts either.

The nurse advised me to stop playing games like that. However, I replied that I had to face the toughest of opponents:

'Who?' she asked in wonder and fear.

'My infamous father.'

For a moment I pictured my father in a dark armchair, elegant and slender in a white suit, with expensive liquor in one hand, and my mother's sexualised waist in the other. Behind him three or four armed men like Miami drug dealers.

All my fantasies soon faded away because my parents weren't glamorous enough to be the characters in a Scorsese film. Maybe if they had been just a quarter as glamorous, but no, they were routine, just too bureaucratic for my taste.

That is why I expected that twenty-ninth day as a child does a birthday. I wanted my convictions turned upside down. They would let the bomb off without having any doubts, cool as cucumber,

and I would suffer that soulless attack, ending up on the ground wounded and helpless from the explosion. My parents would approach when I was about to faint on the ground, to see, at last, how, from a low angle, which would enlarge what they saw, they would wisely step on the egg. Insulting and humiliating me with their smiles alone, put an end to the game, because I never could to face up to them, but at least they would appreciate my useless daring.

It is legitimate to make your own film. I wanted a suffocating climax, a lot of to-and-fro and then the reveal: We knew from the beginning that you would be able to do it, but we needed to get to know you: we may be fragile, but can be convinced if we watch with care. Finally relentless rain falls at just the right moment because in the climactic scene it was supposed to start raining. Faced with the ultimate challenge, I would look after the egg one for more day. Suddenly I would remember the detective's words, which at first seemed out of place: 'Do you know that in Hinduism the egg represents the origin of everything?' Grandfather Virgil died to teach us a lesson, and the whole family came together because of that. The inheritance issues were just details; the real, deeper value would have pushed us forward energetically. Can you imagine that? To be content just to imagine it, knowing that none of it happened.

It was the quietest day ever. So quiet that I forgot the egg on the beach. I had to take advantage of the weather, you know, to get a bit of colour, b12 vitamins and the rest of it. I put on my sunglasses and the egg and I lay down like meat on a grill. I got up scorched and, swearing, forgot all about the egg. A simple mistake, something that can happen to anyone, it was nothing more than that. I went back to the beach at sunset and the egg was still there. But I didn't pick it up and returning because the incandescent sun caught hold of me. What is sunset a metaphor for? Perhaps it's the thirtieth.

The show is over! The circus is over! Once the light bulbs have gone out, only the fireflies glued to the celestial dome will light up the abrupt path of life. It barely helps in the dark night, and all it takes is a misstep, a clumsy love match, and the egg will crack.

It is possible that deep and pessimistic thoughts, as at first, would lock it in the house.

The bed swallowed me up, and I watched the duck egg horizontally. It would be the key to the mansion in less than twenty-four hours, and the chronology of those who lived together turned round and round, softly like a caress.

Internal movement. Was it possible? I thought.

Tweet, tweet

It isn't possible!

The inside of the shell moved some more. Tweet, tweet. I jumped to stop it all, but I lacked psychic powers. I heard the tweet, tweet, the tweet, tweet of anger, and it echoed in my heart, making me even more uneasy. At the first sign of the crack, I began to scream:

‘Stop! It can still be saved!’

From my shadow the detective shook his head hesitantly.

‘I should consult an expert.’

A sudden calm. I believed for an instant in my psychic powers. It was a night for telekinesis. But it couldn't be controlled, and with triple force the inner duckling cracked the shell up. Its beak appeared. I put my hands to my head and the detective said:

‘There's no turning back now.’

My curses, my outbursts of anger, my screams, were heard as far away as the Antipodes. I'm sure grandfather Virgil also laughed wherever he was.

Behind me I could hear the noise of the tweet, tweet. It irritated me. I went back to see if the damned duck's expression had changed because of the misfortune it had caused.

Tweet, tweet. Among the pieces of shell there was a yellow plastic duck.

Virgil wrote in Georgics: 'Felix qui potuit rerum cognoscere causa', and in an even older language: 'Felix- felix, we will be back with some champagne tomorrow'.

The yellow duck had a rough or perhaps uncertain fate. I couldn't cope with the unknown cosmos and threw it into the sea. Both the tide and the waves would carry it to who knows what port. Mine suddenly became like that too. Well, Grandfather