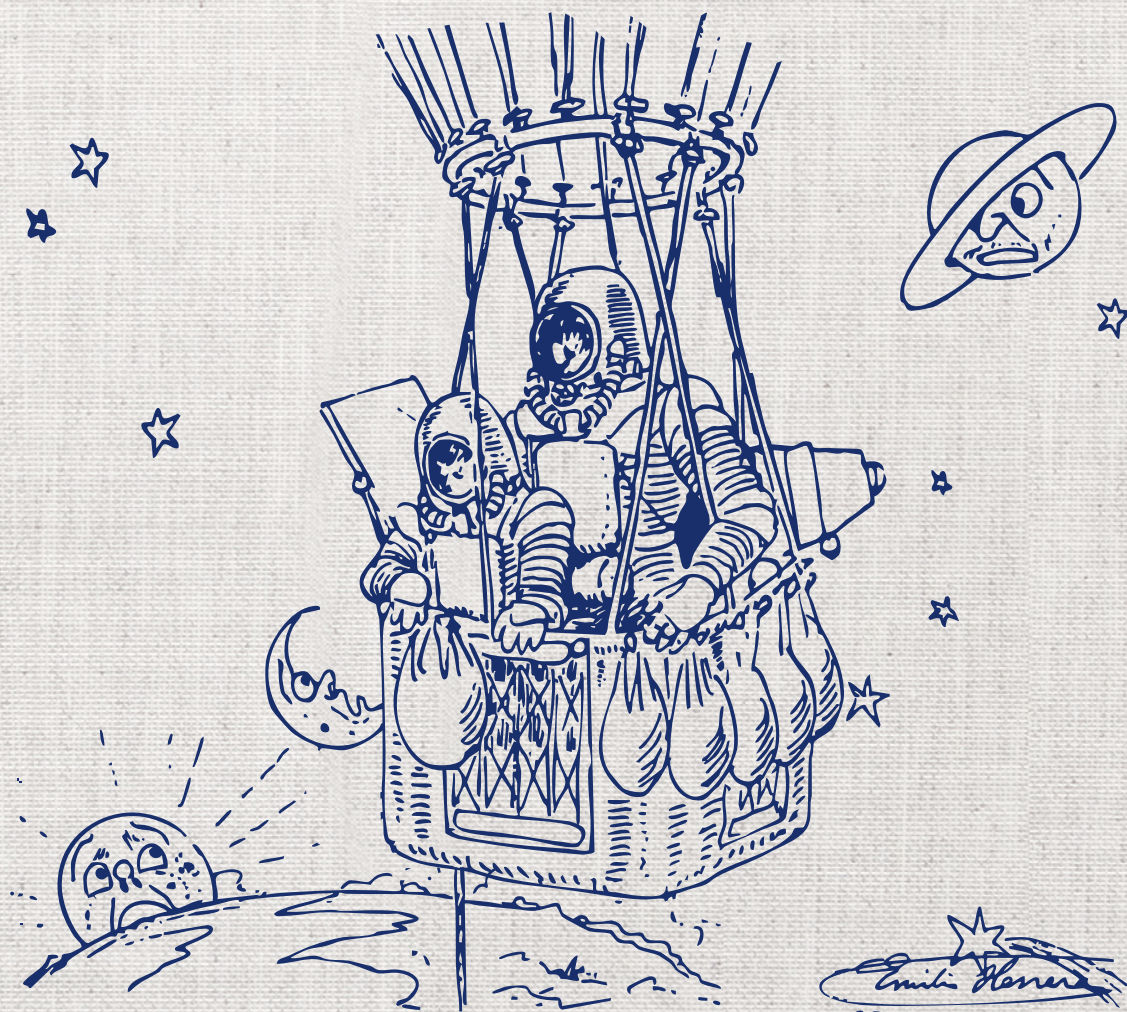


SHORT STORIES

"I'll Tell You in the Air"



Special Edition 2025

EMILIO HERRERA LINARES

Winning and Shortlisted Stories



Fundación
ENAIRE
30 Aniversario



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Self-portrait of Emilio Herrera included in the dedication of a book for a friend, a few days before the outbreak of the Civil War, during the summer courses at the International University of La Magdalena (Santander). Irene, his wife, once said that she would not hesitate to accompany her husband on his stratospheric flight. The second figure may represent her or their son.
Source: Thomas F. Glick, *Flying: The Memoirs of a Spanish Aeronaut*, Albuquerque, 1984.
Publication: *El papel de Cercedilla*, No. 5, 2022.





Emilio Herrera Linares

It is an honour to present this collection of short stories inspired by the life and legacy of Emilio Herrera Linares.

In 2025, the eighth edition of the Short Story Competition was dedicated to Emilio Herrera Linares as part of our initiatives to share his scientific and personal legacy. This was the commitment we made when we posthumously awarded Emilio Herrera the Fundación ENAIRE 30th Anniversary Honorary Aeronautics Award.

This edition received 138 entries, all of outstanding literary quality, each between 2,000 and 2,500 words long, as stipulated in the rules of Fundación ENAIRE's "I'll Tell You in the Air" competition.

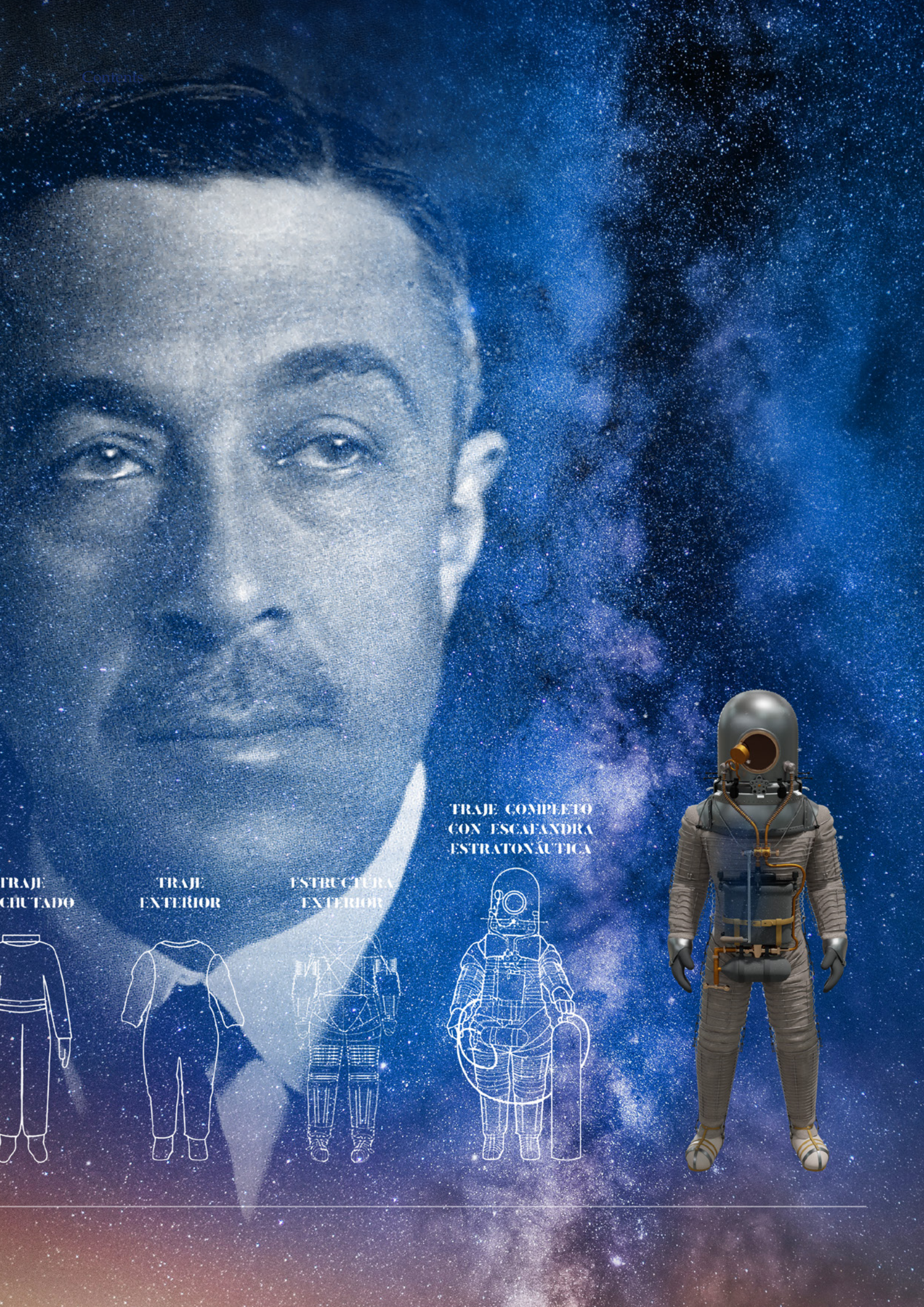
An exceptional jury comprising members of the Herrera family, expert historians such as Emilio Atienza and Carlos Lázaro, and the President of the Emilio Herrera Linares Scientific Association, Juan Gerardo Muros, ensures that the winning and shortlisted stories offer a respectful exploration of Emilio Herrera, both as a scientist and as a person.

Emilio Herrera Linares was a hero of aviation and aeronautical science, as the stories collected in this book amply demonstrate. May this volume help bring his legend to life once more.

We are certain that you will enjoy reading these stories and that they will awaken your curiosity to discover Emilio Herrera's remarkable legacy.

Our thanks to everyone who took part, and our congratulations to the winners.

Margarita Asuar Jiménez
Managing Director of Fundación ENAIRE



TRAJE COMPLETO
CON ESCAFANDRA
ESTRATONÁUTICA

TRAJE
CHUTADO

TRAJE
EXTERIOR

ESTRUCTURA
EXTERIOR

WINNERS AND FINALISTS

8TH SHORT STORY COMPETITION "I'LL TELL YOU IN THE AIR"

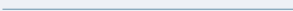
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The Gravity of Honour takes us into the world of Emilio Herrera, a pioneer of flight and engineering in early twentieth-century Spain. From his childhood in Granada and his love of physics and aerial adventure to his relationship with Irene Aguilera and his role in modernising Spanish aviation.

(Biographical story)



THE GRAVITY OF HONOUR



Gloria Patricia Lozada García

Prologue:

The Legacy of the Moon (1969)

Lunar dust still clung to the rock, a fragment of silence four billion years old. The astronaut Neil Armstrong, whose composure contrasted with the worldwide hysteria, handed it to the Spanish air attaché in Washington. His words were meant not for the regime that ruled Spain, but for a ghost.

"In memory of Emilio Herrera," he said, with the restrained reverence of a soldier.

The name hung in the air, an anomaly in the triumphant narrative of the space age. It was neither Wernher von Braun nor Sergei Korolev. It was an echo, a footnote in the history of a nation that had chosen to forget. Who was this man, to deserve a piece of the Moon, the destination he had mapped in his dreams long before the world dared to look so high? To find the answer, we must rewind time to an age when the sky was still a promise.

Act I:
The Ascent

Emilio Herrera was born with a calling to reach upwards. In late nineteenth-century Granada, he devoured the novels of Jules Verne, convinced that physics was the instruction manual for fantasy. The air was not a void, but an invisible ocean awaiting the artist bold enough to paint it with a propeller's wake. He became an engineer and a military officer, two disciplines that fused within him into an alloy of pragmatism and daring.

The true revolution came with Irene Aguilera. A pilot herself, she conquered the skies at a time when a woman flying was an extraordinary sight. They met at Cuatro Vientos; Herrera saw her climb down from her biplane and knew he had found someone who spoke his language. They married, joining two lives and two ambitions. Irene became his confidante, the only person who could decipher his silences.

One afternoon, after a failed flight, Herrera stayed late in the hangar, obsessed with his equations. Irene found him there, bent over his plans in frustration.

"The air is fickle, Emilio," she said, resting a hand on his shoulder. "You can charm it tomorrow. Come and have dinner now."

He smiled for the first time in days. "Sometimes I think you understand the laws of flight better than I do." "That's because I live them with you every day," she replied.

His name soon became synonymous with the future. In 1914, while Europe sharpened its bayonets, Herrera stitched two continents together with the thread of his biplane over the Strait of Gibraltar. He was a friend of King Alfonso XIII, who saw him as the embodiment of a modern Spain.

His sanctuary was the Cuatro Vientos Aerodynamic Laboratory, a crackling synapse in the brain of Spain's Silver Age. The air smelled of castor oil and hot metal, and the sounds formed an industrial symphony. Herrera conducted that orchestra of visionaries, where geniuses such as Juan de la Cierva and Leonardo Torres Quevedo designed tomorrow. It was an ecosystem in which Spain did not look at the world with a sense of inferiority, but taught it to fly.

In 1923, Albert Einstein visited Cuatro Vientos. Herrera welcomed him as a fellow explorer. They walked among models and wind tunnels, and Einstein listened, intrigued by the beauty hidden in the equations of flight.

Standing before a blackboard, Herrera began: "You and I, Professor, are fighting the same battle. You study the force that anchors us to this world: gravity. I devote my life to defying it."

Einstein laughed. "Ah, but it is not a challenge, my dear engineer; it is a dialogue. You do not violate gravity; you charm it. Your aircraft do not break the laws of physics; they dance with them."

Herrera felt understood. "Your equations, Professor, say that space and time curve. Sometimes, when I fly very high, I feel I am touching the edge of that truth."

"That is the intuition of a true scientist," Einstein replied. "Calculation is not enough; one must feel the truth. But tell me, once you have mastered the air, what comes next?"

The question hung between them. And Herrera shared his ambition.

"The limit is where the air disappears. The stratosphere. The place where the sky turns black and you can see the stars at noon. I want to ascend there, not for a record, but to be the first man to look out from the balcony of the cosmos."

Einstein did not laugh. His eyes shone. In Herrera he saw a philosopher of ascent, a man whose geometry of honour was as dependable as the laws of the universe.

"Be careful," he said softly. "Men who fly so high discover that the greatest resistance comes not from the air, but from the ground. Yet your inner gyroscope, your moral centre, is perfectly calibrated. You will fly high."

That conversation was an affirmation. Herrera's ambition was no longer merely the stratosphere; it was the first step on an endless staircase. And now he had another reason: his son Emilio had been born, and every night, as he rocked him, he whispered stories of men who touched the stars.

Act II:

The Pressure Suit

Surviving in that limbo required a miracle. And so, in 1935, the "stratonautical suit" was born. It was not a suit; it was a portable microcosm. A covering of polished aluminium gleamed like liquid silver, a thermal shield against the sun. The helmet, a steel dome, filtered radiation. The carbon-free microphone prevented a spark from turning the pilot into a pyre.

The workshop was the heart of the house. His son Emilio, a young cadet, watched his father working on the plans.

"Father, will a man really be able to breathe up there?" he asked.

Herrera turned, his eyes bright. "Not just breathe, son. He will be able to think, to discover. This suit will expand human consciousness."

He explained every technical detail. Young Emilio drank in every word.

"One day, when you are a pilot," his father told him, "perhaps you will take it to the stars."

It was a legacy, a torch being readied to pass from one generation to the next.

Putting on the suit was a ritual. Once the helmet was sealed, only the echo of one's own breathing and heartbeat remained. The trial by fire took place in a vacuum chamber. Herrera insisted on being his own guinea pig.

Inside, the air was sucked out. The silence was absolute. The mercury plunged to seventy degrees below zero. But then an unexpected enemy emerged: heat. His own body, a furnace, began to drive the temperature up. Sweat soaked the wool; panic clawed at his discipline. He was slowly cooking. He signalled for the test to be aborted.

When he emerged, exhausted, he was smiling. He had not failed; he had discovered a law. The problem was not insulation from the cold, but the removal of heat. That night he designed a cooling system, solving a puzzle that would take NASA a quarter of a century to unravel.

In the summer of 1936, the balloon Hispania stood ready. Spain was about to overtake the world. But on 18 July, a storm of history aborted the flight: the Civil War.

Days later, his friend General Alfredo Kindelán, the mastermind of the rebel air force, came to recruit him.

"Emilio, I need you at my side. Together, we will clear the skies, and then we will carry on with your balloon. The new Spain will usher in the space age."

The offer was a dagger: betray his oath, or see his dream come to an end.

"Alfredo," Herrera said calmly, "a pilot trusts his instruments. My moral compass, my oath to the constituted government, is the only one I have left in this storm."

Kindelán struck the table. "Legality? Your loyalty is to Spain, not to a government that is destroying it!"

"My loyalty is to my word," Herrera replied. "I swore to serve the Republic. To do otherwise would be like flying with the polarity of the wings reversed. I would crash, Alfredo. My soul would crash. My honour is my centre of gravity."

Kindelán understood his friend's integrity.

"Then you are a fool," he said, with furious sadness. "A fool who would rather crash for a principle than fly towards glory. Your name will be erased."

He left. When Irene came in, she found Herrera looking out of the window.

"You have done the right thing, Emilio," she told him.

He turned, certainty and desolation in his eyes. "I know, Irene. But I have just buried our dream."

She took his hands. "There is something they will never be able to bury: your integrity. And in the end, that will carry more weight than any balloon."

She was right, but virtue felt like a gravestone laid upon the ambition of a lifetime.

Act III:

The Void

The dream disintegrated. The silk of the balloon Hispania was cut up to make raincoats. The pressure suit disappeared. And the war dealt him its cruellest blow: his son Emilio, a Republican pilot, became a trail of smoke in the sky over Belchite. The young man who dreamed of touching the stars crashed into the brutality of his century.

In 1939, exile began. Crossing the Pyrenees was like being ejected from a cockpit. Irene had died two years earlier, taking half his soul with her. Exile meant living in a vacuum. The general and pioneer was now just another refugee.

He spent his days in the National Library, his mind soaring while he felt the cold through his worn shoes. He sold his decorations to buy food, shedding a glory that no longer kept him warm.

In October 1957, Sputnik's beeping echoed around the world. Herrera heard it in his Paris apartment. The sound was not something new, but the echo of a broken promise. It carried him back to 1936, when Hispania had been cut to pieces. He felt no envy, only the melancholy of a father watching a stranger raise the child who had been taken from him.

His integrity remained intact. During the Nazi occupation, he turned down an offer from the Luftwaffe. Years later, in the 1950s, he received a letter from NASA. Astonished to discover his patents, American engineers offered him a contract as a senior adviser. It was vindication, poetic justice.

A young diplomat visited him. "General, your country failed to appreciate you, but we do. Your name will be in the history books."

Herrera read the offer. The temptation was immense. But his eyes came to rest on a framed photograph: his son Emilio, smiling in his pilot's uniform.

"I would accept on one condition," he said calmly.

"Whatever you say, General."

"The day an astronaut sets foot on the Moon, I want the flag of the Spanish Republic to be planted alongside the Stars and Stripes."

The diplomat blinked. "But, General... your government no longer exists. It would be impossible."

"I know," Herrera replied with a faint, sad smile. "That is precisely why it is my only condition. That flag does not represent a government, sir. It represents the legitimacy that was taken from me and the oath I never broke. It is the price of my knowledge."

Turning down NASA was his final act of loyalty: to the Republic and to the cause for which his son had died. He became President of the Government in Exile, the captain of a ghost ship, a symbol that one can lose a war without being defeated.

Epilogue:

The Return

Emilio Herrera died in Geneva in 1967. His final flight was into silence, two years before Apollo 11 completed the odyssey he had begun. He did not live to see a spacesuit, a grandchild of his own pressure suit, leave the first human footprint on the Moon.

The rock Armstrong presented in his memory was placed in the Air Museum. There it remained for years, a fragment of the Moon honouring the man who had charted the way. Then, like the final act of a tragedy, the stone disappeared, an unsolved mystery.

But in 1993, Spain performed an act of justice. His remains were repatriated to his native Granada. The man who had pursued the heights made his final landing, returning to the earth that had seen him born. His ashes came to rest beside Irene's, at last reuniting the pioneers who had shared the dream of touching the sky.

The funeral was attended by former pilots, historians and a NASA delegation that had come expressly to honour the man whose ideas travelled to the Moon before any rocket.

His story is not one of failure, but of a moral victory so immense that it could not fit within his century. It is the ballad of a man whose vision flew so high that history took half a century to look up. A pioneer who taught us that the most powerful force in the universe is not the one that launches us towards the stars, but the gravity of our own honour.

And now, when we look at the stars, we know that part of him is already there: in every spacesuit that protects an astronaut, in every dream that defies gravity. Emilio Herrera did not merely touch the stars; he became one of them.

The Suit of Time tells how, in the midst of the Spanish Civil War, Emilio Herrera manages to ascend in a balloon with a young pilot thanks to his stratonautical suit. During the flight, a quantum fracture transports them to the year 2197, where they discover the ‘Collective Memory Core’, an archive preserving only what official history remembers, leaving those who, like him, were exiled and ignored to be forgotten. There he realises that his invention opened a gateway through time, but also that his name was erased. He then decides to return to his own era, even knowing that war and exile will condemn him to anonymity, hoping to leave traces that will inspire future dreamers.

THE SUIT OF TIME



Javier Martínez Rueda

GUADALAJARA 1939

The laboratory smelled of rubber, copper dust and that lingering mixture of engine oil and cold coffee. Emilio Herrera, his grey moustache carefully trimmed and his eyes sunken after sleepless nights, bent over the suit like a monk before his altar. It was neither armour nor mere protection for the body: it was his legacy, his act of faith in science and the future.

While outside the shells traced clouds of steel across the sky, he finished adjusting the oxygen-system valves. The war had shattered his plans: the stratospheric flight scheduled for the summer of '36 had been cancelled, as dreams are cancelled when barbarity breaks in. But now, in a Spain torn in two, with the Republic on the brink of the abyss, Emilio was determined to fly.

‘Are you sure, Professor?’ asked Julián, the young Republican Air Force pilot who had agreed to accompany him without asking too many questions. ‘We could die up there.’

Emilio did not answer at once. He took off his protective goggles, rubbed his eyes and looked at the young man as though trying to guess his exact age.

‘Or down here. If we die, Julián, it will be for a cause that has not been stained with blood. That is something in itself.’

‘I don’t want to die, Professor,’ the young man said, lowering his gaze. ‘But I don’t want to spend my life wondering what might have happened if we hadn’t tried, either.’

Emilio smiled for the first time in weeks. He patted him affectionately on the shoulder.

‘Then we have a deal.’

That night they barely slept. Emilio mentally reviewed every calculation, every adjustment to the suit, every instruction for the gondola, as though reciting them could protect him from everything else. Julián, meanwhile, walked in circles outside the hangar, smoking in silence. Neither wanted to admit his fear. Fear was natural; surrender was not.

The balloon rose at dawn from an improvised platform in the fields of Guadalajara, protected by a unit of loyal soldiers. The white fabric, inflated with hydrogen, looked like an artificial moon floating above the frozen fields. Emilio and Julián, encased in their pressure suits, were two supernatural beings: astronauts in a world that did not yet know what space was.

The preparations had been meticulous: pressure calculations, seal tests, valve calibration. Emilio had worked relentlessly for days, barely sleeping, inspecting every part of the suit as though it were a living creature. Julián, for his part, had written a letter to his mother, which he left hidden in an empty ammunition box beneath his bunk. No one was to know they were flying.

As the balloon slowly rose, the fields shrank to patches of frost and mud. The shadows of the trees shortened, and silence gained ground. At a thousand metres they could no longer hear the engine of the lorry that had brought them. At five thousand, the world began to resemble a blurred memory. Julián watched through the hatch without speaking, his jaw clenched. Despite the cold, Emilio recorded mechanical data with a steady hand and moist eyes.

They passed ten thousand metres and the light changed. The blue grew deeper, almost liquid. The clouds fell behind like white islands floating in an inverted sea. At around fifteen thousand metres, the silence was so absolute that Julián thought he had gone deaf. Emilio laid a hand on his shoulder.

‘Everything is all right,’ he said over the suit’s internal channel. ‘Just listen.’

And they listened. They listened to the atmosphere becoming nothing. To the planet seeming to draw away. To how, at that height, a human being was as insignificant as he was eternal. They listened to the silence.

At 22,000 metres, the blue of the sky dissolved into deep black. The Earth curved like a vast, powerful fruit. Inside the pressurised gondola, Emilio recorded data, now with trembling hands and eyes wide as a child’s. He had never thought he would rise so high.

But then it happened.

A sudden vibration shook the balloon. The altimeter needles began to spin senselessly. A light—neither natural, nor solar, nor electric—enveloped them for one eternal second. Emilio tried to speak, but the radio did not transmit his words. Then silence returned.

He awoke with his face covered in sweat. He was standing, still wearing the suit, but no longer inside the gondola. The air was breathable. Gravity was normal. The sky was leaden. Julián stood beside him, disoriented, tearing off his helmet.

‘Where are we?’

Before them rose a city of glass and metal, without defined edges. Buildings floated on platforms suspended by invisible fields. On a luminous screen, words in an unknown language gradually turned into Spanish: WELCOME TO THE EARTH COLLECTIVE MEMORY CORE. YEAR 2197.

They did not know whether they were alive, dreaming or dead. Everything seemed real, yet alien. The colours were different, almost liquid. The air smelled of ozone and absence. On the horizon, towers more than a thousand metres high floated like colossi without foundations, and wheelless vehicles glided noiselessly through the air. It seemed a world born of an impossible dream.

A human being—or something similar—stepped into their path. Her face was ambiguous, as though carved in a dream. Her voice, however, was clear, almost warm. Her name was Aera, and she described herself as ‘curator of the human historical archive’.

‘Where are we?’ asked Julián.

Aera regarded them curiously. Her outline seemed to tremble slightly, as though she were not entirely on this plane.

‘You are in the Core. An orbital facility that safeguards humanity’s active memory. You are in the year 2197. And you arrived here through a quantum fracture in the temporal axis.’

Emilio frowned, trying to understand.

‘A quantum fracture? Did we cause it?’

‘Your suit, Professor. It was designed with an intuitive understanding of pressure balance and thermal insulation that was not reproduced until the 1960s. Combined with the atmospheric conditions during the ascent and a natural electromagnetic fault, it opened a transit point. A crack in time. No one has crossed before. No one has arrived that way.’

Emilio fell silent. The word ‘crack’ resounded within him like an ancient echo. Could a simple creation of his, born amid the dust of a laboratory and the roar of war, have opened a path through time? He felt his entire body grow cold inside the suit. He looked at Julián, whose mouth hung half open, as though he still could not breathe normally.

‘But... are you saying... that time... that we have travelled through it?’ Emilio managed to stammer.

‘You have not merely travelled through it,’ Aera replied. ‘You have torn it. The suit was the key. The exact moment in the precise place was the lock. You crossed a threshold that until now was purely theoretical, a hypothesis without evidence. You are the first visitors from history.’

Emilio leaned against a floating handrail. His scientific mind wrestled between disbelief and fascination. He had read about relativity, about space-time, but this... this was something else.

‘There is something you must see,’ she added, as though reading his mind.

Aera led them into a white room where fragments of books, objects and images floated. It was like a calm ocean of suspended memory, an archive without shelves, a dream ordered by thoughts.

‘This is the heart of the Core,’ she explained. ‘Here we preserve what humanity has recorded, what it has left written, captured or passed on through time. It reflects what was told, not necessarily everything that happened.’

‘So not everything is here?’ Julián asked.

‘No. What is here is what was documented, what survived in the official accounts, what resonated enough to endure. Lost voices, inventions

that were ignored, ideas driven into exile... fade away, invisible unless someone, from outside or within, reclaims them forcefully enough.’

Emilio tilted his head, trying to grasp the magnitude of what he had just heard. It was an archive of history... but not of every story. A mirror of the victors, of storytellers with printing presses, not of those who died with their words still on their lips.

‘And if someone was never recognised, if his achievements were forgotten or destroyed...’ Emilio said slowly, ‘then he is not here.’

Aera nodded with a mixture of compassion and respect.

‘Exactly.’

Emilio stepped forwards. His heart was pounding. He reached towards a translucent structure. Images began to revolve before him: plans, formulae, names... but none was his. None bore his signature.

He searched for his name. His writings. His suit. There was nothing. It was like a calm ocean of suspended memory, an archive without shelves, a dream ordered by thoughts.

‘Why am I not here?’ he asked, barely able to breathe.

‘Because history forgot those who did not serve power. Your suit was destroyed in a bombing raid. You died in exile. Your ideas inspired others, but never under your name.’

The silence became unbearable once more. Julián, who had remained quiet, stepped forwards:

‘Then... can we change that?’

Aera did not answer. But she led them into a room where capsules floated like seeds. Inside one of them, a younger version of Emilio slept.

‘This archive preserves residual copies of consciousness from certain moments. The past cannot be changed, but new futures can be inspired. The past does not disappear; it hides in the folds of history, waiting for a hand to caress it.’

For days—or weeks; time there was not linear—Emilio learned how space technology had developed without him. He saw suits similar to his worn by Soviets, by Americans, by private companies. No one mentioned a Spaniard. No one spoke of the laboratory at Cuatro Vientos. His name was barely a footnote, misspelt.

He also saw the mistakes. Colonies destroyed by environmental negligence, conflicts over the ownership of asteroids, wholesale disregard for the most basic ethical principles. Science had flown, yes, but without a moral compass.

‘What if we stay here?’ Julián asked one night.

‘To live among holograms?’ Emilio replied. ‘No, lad. History is honoured by living it.’

Then he made a decision. Aera, his faithful companion since their arrival, looked at him as though she had known it already.

‘I want to go back. Even if I die on landing. Even if no one knows. I want to write that report, leave those photographs, make just enough of a difference for someone, one day, to speak of this suit again.’

Aera nodded.

‘Then the cycle will be complete.’

‘And me?’ asked Julián. ‘Must I go back too?’

‘You choose. But if you decide to stay, make sure you tell the story properly.’

After a few days of preparations, they returned to the balloon. Their ascent was slower, more deliberate, until they reached the precise point. Emilio remembered the exact instant of the fault. But now he knew what to do. He adjusted the regulator, protected the oxygen cylinders and managed to stabilise the pressure. Once it reached its highest point, the balloon descended gently, as though rocked by the consciousness of time.

They landed in a spot in Cuenca near the boundary with Madrid. The war was dying, but still breathed in the corners. It took them hours to remove their suits and days to reach the capital. The war was lost.

Emilio went into exile weeks later. But first he wrote. Took photographs. Encrypted documents. Gave copies to young scientists. Became a shadow.

In Paris, he dictated notes to former colleagues. In Geneva, he signed letters with no addressee. He devoted his final years to leaving traces in invisible places.

Geneva, 1967

He died in a small flat, surrounded by books and papers. In his final days he talked to himself, as though reciting instructions to an invisible voice. No one understood his scribbles. No one knew that, hidden among the folds of an old pressure suit kept in a trunk, there was a metal cylinder bearing this message: ‘To whoever finds this: the future is a place that begins with awareness of every act. If you forget the dreamers, only dust will remain.’

Cuatro Vientos, 2197

A twelve-year-old girl touches the floating surface of an interstellar museum. An old pressure suit revolves slowly in the air. A synthesised voice tells its story.

‘Emilio Herrera Linares, pioneer of spacesuits. Twentieth-century Spanish visionary. Exile. Dreamer. Time traveller...’ Her eyes and mouth open in wonder.

‘Did he fly into space?’

The guide hesitates for a second.

‘Perhaps not. But he dreamed so fiercely... that he made us all fly.’

The girl smiles. Her gaze loses itself in the helmet suspended before her. For an instant, she thinks she sees a reflection that is not her own: a man with a grey moustache who winks at her. And like someone keeping a secret, the girl winks back.

The Gravity of a Red Pencil recounts the final days of Emilio Herrera Linares, who, faced with a blank sheet of paper, relives the childhood he shared with his friend Maximino, when together they built a red balloon called El Infierno and dreamed of conquering the sky. That memory, marked by hope and tragedy, becomes his refuge from loneliness and the failures of a life cut short by war.

THE GRAVITY OF A RED PENCIL

Jorge Juan Codina Ripoll

There are two kinds of emptiness: that of the cosmos, for which I was created, and that of a room where a man awaits death. The latter is the more immense.

Today, the air in the Paris flat, always so heavy, shimmers. A lifetime has passed, and the sun of memory melts the frost in his eyes. It is him. He sits at his desk, bent over a rectangle of paper that looks like a scrap of dirty snow in the light from the window.

He has been like this for three hours, perhaps four. A span of no consequence to me, made of metal and glass, the stratonautical suit he designed, but an eternity to his fragile body. His stillness is not that of rest; it is the tense stillness of machines about to break. His right hand, an arthritic spider streaked with ink, hovers a millimetre above the paper, suspended over that white abyss.

It is not the emptiness of the page that paralyses him. I have seen that same hand trace equations on blackboards, tame chaos with the precision of a logarithm, design armour for mechanical angels intended to conquer a virgin sky. That was the hand that shaped me, that calculated every curve of my helmet to maintain pressure against the vacuum. No, it is not emptiness. It is worse. It is a name he has not yet dared to write, a single word that must head the letter, the sound of a rusty key trying to open the door to a buried time.

I know because his breathing has grown thin and shallow, like the breath of a bird trapped in a cage of ribs. And I, designed to contain a man’s breath at the edge of the universe, recognise the unmistakable whistle of suffocation.

The silence suddenly tears. Without a crash, like the crackle of fallen leaves: the sound of his own voice trying to emerge through a worn-out throat. He does not look at me. His watery eyes, lost between the paper and the memory, settle on my concave glass face, perhaps because my emptiness returns a blurred reflection of himself.

‘Max...’ he whispers, and the name sounds of dry earth, of long-ago thirst. ‘What does a dead man say to someone who has not yet gone?’

I do not know whether he is asking me, his creation, his folly of aluminium and rubber. I am the only one left to listen to him, the one who does not judge him, who knows neither the poison of flags nor the bitter taste of exile. His monologue spills out in gushes, like murky water from a forgotten well.

‘I would write to him about barometric pressure in the stratosphere,’ he says, ‘about my calculations for the spacesuit, and he would tell me about the olive harvest. I would draw him the diagram of a jet engine, and he would paint me the sun setting behind the outline of the cathedral...

‘He would call me a dreamer, you know?’ A muted laugh, without a trace of joy, ends in a cough that shakes his chest. ‘Lieutenant Herrera, the one who dreamed of touching the stars!’

He picks up the pencil lying beside the sheet. It is a humble thing, a gnawed piece of wood. He turns it between his knotted fingers, its point a tiny heart of red graphite catching the afternoon light. And then that minute scarlet gleam, an intruding colour in this grey room, lights a fuse in the depths of his mind.

His eyelids widen a little, as though he suddenly sees through the paper something that burns, that glows on the other side of winter. His hand stops trembling. Stillness returns, expectant, the calm before the storm.

And suddenly Paris tears apart. The gloom gives way to a sun of liquid gold smelling of myrtle, burst figs and pine resin warming on the slopes. From my lookout on a pedestal, I see what he sees: the cracked earth of a patch of waste ground on the outskirts of Granada, where cicadas wring the air with their shrill cries.

There are no aviation commanders there with glittering decorations from opposing sides, only two boys lying on dry esparto grass that pricks their skin and smells of horses and mules. They are like two lizards drunk on heat. One, Emilio, is thinner; his eyes fixed on the clouds, he reads and deciphers the invisible air currents that rock them.

The other is Maximino, an extension of the earth itself: his knees are covered in scabs like an atlas of past falls, his black hair is tousled, and his perpetually muddy hands seem made to seize the world and never let go.

They are the two halves of a single plan, a magnificent folly hatched under cover of the grown-ups’ siestas.

‘It will have to be light,’ Emilio says, without taking his eyes off the sky. ‘Like an onion skin.’

‘And strong,’ Max replies, pulling up a dry stalk. ‘Or the wind will gobble it up.’

‘And it will need fire inside,’ Emilio adds, and in his voice there is the first hint of that mixture of poet and engineer that will mark him for ever. ‘Hot air to send it flying.’

They pledge themselves, plotting the oldest desecration: to steal a piece of its mystery from the heavens. Their plan is no children’s game; it is an undertaking with the brutal seriousness of childhood dreams, a first declaration of war against the tyranny of gravity.

The raw materials for that contraption were all the fragile things they could find. First, the ribs of an old umbrella they stole from a pious aunt of Max’s, patiently hammered and bent on the stones of the stream to form the ribs of their creature. Then the costliest treasure: sheets of red tissue paper bought at the bazaar with a few saved coins, a material so delicate it seemed made from the membrane of dreams. They spread it on the ground, and for a moment the waste ground was adorned with a giant poppy.

They christened it El Infierno because it was red and needed the flame they themselves would give it to be born: a childish blasphemy that made them feel powerful. With a certain solemnity, Emilio drew the principles of their precarious aeronautics in the earth with a reed. He explained the expansion of hot air to Max, who nodded, more concerned with the construction of the frame and how to join the sheets with homemade paste.

But El Infierno needed a navigator, its first stratonaut. They found him prowling near the reed beds of the Darro: a careless, timid field mouse, an unwilling prisoner whom they bestowed with a mythical name: Ícaro. From the remains of a wicker basket they made him a tiny gondola. They tied the rodent with hemp thread, leaving him scarcely able to move. They promised him glory, a

journey beyond the Torre de la Vela. The little creature merely trembled, his black eyes like drops of oil, unaware of the fate those two gods with dirty knees had prepared for him.

It was a perfect tragedy: the chariot of fire, the doomed hero and the indifferent blue sky, waiting. Every sacrifice requires its ceremony.

They chose sunset for the launch. It was cooler, and their contraption's fire would glow against the violet peaks of Sierra Nevada.

The scarlet balloon looked like a giant's torn-out heart. Max struck a match and lit the resin-soaked tow. At first the flame was yellow, timid and foul-smelling. Then, slowly, with an almost inaudible hiss, the air inside the paper began to warm. The balloon swelled. It grew taut, stretched tight, and came alive in their hands like an impatient animal. Ícaro, in the little basket, was paralysed with terror.

'Now!' shouted Emilio.

And they let go.

For one glorious second, it seemed the entire universe yielded to their will. El Infierno wobbled, found its balance and began to ascend. It rose into the air, dignified and proud. Up, up it went... a fragile red star they had created. The tiny silhouette of Ícaro's gondola stood out against the light. They were gods. They had defeated the world. They shouted, jumped and embraced as the contraption drifted away, about to become another star.

But the sky has its own laws, cruel and non-negotiable. A treacherous gust of easterly wind swept down from the mountain ridges and struck the balloon. They saw it falter, list like a drunken ship. The tissue paper strayed too close to the flame that breathed life into it.

And then...

A tongue of fire licked the envelope, and it burned instantly in an orange flare. In less than the blink of an eye, their magnificent star was nothing but a ball of fire falling in silence. They saw Ícaro's tiny gondola break loose and plummet towards the ground. They ran through brambles and poplars. All they found was black ash scattered over the weeds and a piece of scorched wicker. No trace of their astronaut.

The first journey to the sky had ended in a funeral without a body.

The return from that Granada ablaze with memories is slow, like waking from an anaesthetic. The golden light retreats, giving way once more to the grey tones of Paris, to the weight of time accumulated on the spines of aerodynamics books and the plans for aircraft never built. Here, in this room that is both cell and refuge, I watch the feverish gleam in his eyes fade with a moisture that is not the Mediterranean of his childhood summers, but the salt of an inner dead sea.

A tear, solitary and heavy as a drop of mercury, traces a clean line across the wrinkled skin of his cheek. It stays there, trembling, like a small delta into which sadness flows. The old man no longer looks like a dethroned god, simply Emilio Herrera Linares, the man behind the legend: a general without an army, an aviator without a sky, a forgotten pioneer, an exile without a homeland who has accepted the cost of broken dreams.

The anguish that paralysed him has dissolved, replaced by an exhausted peace, the serenity that sometimes follows great cyclones.

My creator lets out a long sigh containing decades of frustration, of abandoned laboratories, of space projects cut short by wars and their senselessness. He murmurs something to himself, but he is speaking to me, his metal confidante. His voice is no longer that of the child who shouted at the sky, nor even that of the old man who hesitated over the paper a little while ago; it is a new voice, strange and even-tempered.

'Max won't remember the war. Perhaps not even the balloons, or my calculations for reaching the Moon in rockets...' he says, as the tear begins its descent and vanishes behind his worn shirt collar. 'But he cannot have forgotten the colour of that fire inside the balloon. Or Ícaro. He cannot have forgotten. He cannot.' He fixes his gaze on me, a Polyphemus of glass and rubber. 'That would be enough.'

The hand, which a little while ago was an uncertain claw hovering over an abyss, now descends firmly: it has found the only possible route on a map erased by time. It does not hesitate. There is no trembling. He takes the red pencil and sets it against the snow-white surface of the sheet.

I wait for the torrent of words: explanations, reproaches, justifications, yearnings... I await the long architecture of a letter of reconciliation.

But with brutal simplicity he writes a few solitary words in the centre of the page: 'Max, do you remember?'

And below, where perhaps the farewell should go, he draws something. It is not a precise diagram or an aerodynamic equation. These are childish strokes: a small pot-bellied balloon made of lines, with a gondola hanging beneath it. With the thick-leaded end of the pencil he compulsively fills the balloon's shape with red, with the same passion as a child colouring his first sun. The point breaks with a dry crack, leaving a trail of tiny clots of wood and graphite on the paper.

He turns the pencil round and, with the utmost care, uses the fine point to sign his first name: Emilio. No other titles.

He has done it. He has completed a bridge, stretched with the essence of memory across the abyss of half a century of History. And I have witnessed the engineering of a miracle.

For the most untameable force in the universe is not the one that chains planets to their star, nor the one that unleashes the fury of atoms. It is another: the invisible gravity of absence, which anchors the soul to the only place every human being has, at some time, called home.

A Lofty Vision presents an imaginary dialogue between Emilio Herrera and Carlos, a psychiatric hospital patient who considers himself an inventor. They discuss the stratonautical suit, the war that cut short Herrera's dreams and the loneliness of exile, drawing a parallel between scientific isolation and psychiatric confinement.

A LOFTY VISION

José Ernesto Velasco Navarro

'Ah, Don Emilio, what a life this is, isn't it?... From a crust of bread to a crab, everything is perfect. If only it weren't for those out-of-tune humans who tarnish this planet with foolish decrees... But what can I tell you, when you have a hundred years on me? Did you know that I too am inventive? I invented the twin-slice knife, for cutting two slices at the same time.'

'A twin-slice knife? What clarity of thought, Carlos. That is efficiency applied to cured sausage. Do not underestimate it: every great invention begins by meeting a humble need. You see, my stratonautical suit was merely a portable differential-pressure cabin, designed to preserve oxygen, temperature and life beyond an altitude of twenty-six kilometres, where the temperature falls to minus seventy degrees Celsius. Quite simply equations of life and death, you know...'

'Yes, yes, I understand perfectly. I discussed something similar with the craftsman from Albacete who made my prototype. You see? You really can imagine the challenge of cutting two slices at once; that is why I love talking as equals. We both understand complexity. Had we met sooner, my tool would have fitted into your design, don't you think?'

'Certainly, don't rule it out, Carlos. Two simultaneous slices optimise eating time, and at great heights every second of energy counts.'

'There you have it! Exactly, my dear sir, cutting salchichón quickly is no whim. Mine was a key experiment in the strength of materials applied to cured sausage. Though I had my problems, believe me, because with every cut the second slice got stuck between the knife blades and had to be pushed out with a finger... Very frustrating. I imagine you faced complications too.'

‘Of course I had difficulties. Perfection is rebellious. The oxygen regulators froze; the rubber seals cracked like dead skin. My suit’s cellulose visor misted up on the inside, and every breath clouded my vision. One mistaken calculation could leave me blind at an altitude of twenty kilometres. Imagine feeling your way through the void.’

‘I can imagine it perfectly, I certainly can... It is a pleasure how well we men of science understand each other, Señor Herrera.’

‘Indeed, my friend Carlos, science makes no distinctions. Small mistakes teach us just as great ones do. The difference is the price of the lesson. Mine cost me my life; yours, a dirty finger.’

‘Exactly, which is why you will understand that my mistake was considerably more serious than yours, since without life one suffers no further consequences, whereas the awareness of being smeared with grease is a nuisance the dead do not endure. By the way, I read in the book on my bedside table that it was war that amputated your wings. It says that while you were calculating ascents, others were devising devastation with lead and shrapnel. How does one digest that, Don Emilio? How does one chew on the emptiness of a project aborted by bullets?’

‘One does not digest it, Carlos. One is forced to swallow it. In 1935 we had the balloon ready, a colossus of rubberised silk inflated with pure hydrogen to reach the stratosphere. The suit was already calibrated to withstand minimal pressures, with a metal framework to prevent lung collapse and multilayer fabric to combat the temperatures up there... We had even tested the radio systems, rudimentary but sufficient to maintain contact during the ascent. And suddenly the bullets came. The curve of my calculations was erased by the parabola of the projectiles. There was no ascent, but a great descent. The balloon remained on the ground, the suit and the plans too, and I was condemned to the void of exile. Believe me, Carlos, the cold of the stratosphere is more bearable than the chill of a torn homeland.’

‘A broken homeland, you say... I live in a similar climate, Don Emilio. The air here is not frozen, but loneliness numbs hope. They lock me up merely for speaking truths aloud, for talking to someone who understands me. And what else can I do? Isn’t it worse to remain silent until you suffocate?’

‘Exile takes many forms, my dear friend. Mine was geographical; yours is imposed by these walls. But the effect is the same: a man without a horizon or bearings loses the needle of his compass.’ ‘Then tell me, what is sanity? Following a map I never drew? Or drawing my own, even if they call it delusion?’

‘Sanity and its opposite are other people’s words. A man determined to rise, even blindly, even if no one follows him, finds his precise orbit. The others, Carlos, know only the safety of the ground.’

All was still in that dining room, the television playing quietly. Suddenly a voice at the far end erupted like thunder. A woman patient screamed with animal howls, overturning her tray. The plastic cup rolled to the wall and bounced on the floor, splashing. A second patient, frightened, burst into hollow laughter. Another, beside the window, banged his forehead against the glass in a monotonous rhythm.

The nurses hurried in. Two restrained the woman, a third tried to stop that deranged laughter, and the last held down the man who was banging his head. Chairs scraped, plates fell, metal echoed against tiles. For a few minutes the whole dining room became a cage of noise and frenzied bodies, like an anthill suddenly stirred by a single drop of frenzy.

Meanwhile Carlos did not move. Facing his tray, back straight and gaze fixed on the eyes of the void, he moved his lips serenely, nodding with a smile, oblivious to the clamorous chaos.

‘You see, Don Emilio?’ he said, unperturbed. ‘Oxygen is scarce here too. There is no need to climb to the stratosphere to breathe the void.’

On the other side of the glass, a mother’s eyes shed uncontrollable tears. She clutched her handbag to her chest like a lifebelt in the midst of her own shipwreck. ‘Don’t worry, madam,’ said the doctor beside her, in the cultivated tone of someone prescribing comfort as medication. ‘Carlos is not suffering. I would say he is quite happy with his conversations. He is well, I assure you. Look at him, he is calm,’ he added, gesturing towards the dining room and playing down the disorder.

‘Oxygen is scarce wherever fear rules, Carlos, wherever each word must be measured, wherever thought cannot expand without risk. The atmosphere is made not only of nitrogen and oxygen, but also of dignity. And when that runs out, the air becomes unbreathable, even if the lungs still work.’

‘So we live in the same laboratory, Don Emilio. You isolated in the suit of oblivion, and I in this bolted room. Both half breathing, searching for valves no one will lend us.’ ‘The thing is, my friend, I always allowed a margin for leakage in my calculations. I knew how many minutes of air remained. Down here, however, among men, there is no reliable pressure gauge. No one knows how much dignity remains in a society’s cylinder.’

‘Sir, what remains of a man when his surname is erased? If even you, who held air in a cabin against nothingness, now slip through the cracks of oblivion... what hope remains for me, who only builds cathedrals with napkins of words?’

‘A name is scarcely more than a label, Carlos. It flakes off like paint from a façade. What remains is the structure. Who remembers a cathedral’s bricklayer? And yet the vault still stands.’

‘But you were no bricklayer, my friend; you were an architect of the void. Does it not hurt when others cross the bridge without looking at the engineer who designed it?’

‘Pain is human, but science knows no vanity. My suit was a sketch ahead of its time. It does not matter whether I signed it or someone else perfected it. What matters is that today men walk on the Moon with air in their lungs. That is remembrance enough.’

‘I read that even Einstein admired you. That man, who deciphered the music of the universe, stopped his time to listen to a Spanish engineer speak of an impossible suit! Is that scene not proof that memory has luminous cracks?’

‘Ah, yes, Albert. He was not a myth then, but a man with tired eyes and gentle humour. I showed him the calculations for my stratonautical suit. He took them not for madness, but for a bridge. “This is the future,” he told me. I replied that it was only a sketch. But he was right when he added that the future always begins with a sketch.’

‘Then not everything is forgotten, Don Emilio. If Einstein thought well of you, if you held the attention of his silence, you ought to be very well remembered.’

‘Perhaps. Or perhaps not. What matters is that, even if no one remembers the engineer, air still reaches the lungs of those who fly higher today. And that is enough.’

‘No, no and no, Don Emilio!’ He struck the table with his spoon, splashing watery coffee. ‘It is not enough for your work to fly hidden in the lungs of nameless astronauts! Your signature must be engraved on every helmet, on every rocket, on every step on the Moon!’

The words tumbled out, as though he were trying to carve the air with his voice. Some patients glanced over, then returned to their babbling. ‘Do you realise?’ he insisted in a burning whisper. ‘I talk to giants too, and they lock me up for it. History locked you up. The doctors locked me up. But we are alive here, at this table. Alive, Señor Herrera!’

‘Easy, Carlos. It is not excitement that lays the foundations of memory, but perseverance. The future does not shout; it breathes. Do not think that everything in my life was plans and valves. Before that I was an aviator, when aeroplanes were made of fabric and wood, little more than skeletons with wings. In 1908 I exceeded an altitude of six thousand metres. Flying then meant throwing yourself into the void with your heart beating in your throat. Every ascent was a wager with death, and that wager forced me to calculate precisely, taught me that up there mistakes exact a price.’

‘How marvellous! You risking your life between fabric wings, and I doing the same here with my paper wings, scribbling on anything, as though leaving manifestos. We both wager on flight, Don Emilio, even if mine barely leaves the tray. But do go on, go on...’

‘Then came 1935. We had the great balloon ready, a colossus of rubberised silk inflated with pure hydrogen. My stratonautical suit awaited the ascent, calibrated against the extreme cold. Then war tore us from the sky. The calculations became proclamations, the hangar a barracks. There was no ascent; everything was a fall.’

‘Ah, falls... you with your balloon, I with my mind. And yet here we are talking, as though the air had not quite run out.’

‘Later they gave me a solemn title: President of the Republic in exile. A country without territory, a government without ground beneath it. Does that not strike you as ironic? A president who designs pressure suits, governing from a borrowed table in a foreign land.’

‘Now that is poetry, Don Emilio! A president who does not govern, an engineer who does not engineer! You are the greatest poem in this dining room, sir. A man who breathed dignity even when they took away his air. And tell me, if the square root of the void were a real number...? Because I think silence can be calculated too. What formula would you use to measure that emptiness, to put figures to oblivion?’

‘The void admits no square root, Carlos, but it does admit quantities. It is measured in millimetres of mercury, in pascals of pressure. There is no poetry in it, however much you look for it.’

A brief pause. He smooths his moustache, as though correcting an invisible equation.

‘But I will tell you something: even in the coldest calculation, metaphor lies hidden. If the void can be measured, oblivion might be measured too. And perhaps the result is not a number, but the echo of a question like yours.’

‘Aha, I knew it! There is no formula without metaphor. No equation without delusion. So I am not mad, Don Emilio; I am only trying to solve unknowns that will not fit on the blackboards of the sane. So that is it!’ He struck the table with his open palm. ‘The whole universe is nothing but a badly wiped blackboard! Some write formulae, others decrees, and we all leave our chalk dust in our lungs. But who dares solve the unknown of man? Who dares find the x of dignity?!’

The patients at nearby tables turned their heads for a moment. One laughed for no reason; another muttered an insult. The murmur of the dining room rose in a brief swell, then died away. Carlos leaned forwards, lowering his voice as though sharing a state secret. ‘I try, Don Emilio. Every day. I write down equations, multiply loneliness by hope, divide madness by time... Perhaps my numbers are clumsy, but they keep me alive.’

‘That is the difference, Carlos. You calculate with questions; I with data. But we both seek the same thing: to survive the void.’

‘To survive the void... Yes, that is what we do here every day. I with my conversations, you with your calculations. And the others, poor souls, with their pills. We all breathe what we can, as best we can.’

‘Do not despise pills, Carlos. They are valves too, though humbler ones. What matters is not the method, but endurance. To endure is a more powerful verb than to fly.’

He calmly smoothed his moustache, like someone putting the final full stop. His eyes, real only to Carlos, seemed to say goodbye without doing so.

‘Are you leaving already?’

‘I am not leaving, Carlos. I am only changing altitude.’

Don Emilio rose slowly, as though floating. He straightened his invisible jacket and left a presence so real that the air vibrated as though it had weight.

‘Remember this, Carlos,’ he said serenely. ‘Men pass, but questions remain. They are what keep us alive in the midst of the void.’

Carlos nodded solemnly. He followed him with his eyes as far as the door. The dining room returned to its monotony of trays and shuffling footsteps. On the other side of the glass, his mother was no longer there.

Carlos stood up and shouted towards the door:

‘Don Emilio! Would you like me to tell you about the time I invented the hinged, folding, disposable teaspoon?’

Between Two Futures tells the story of Pedro, a Spanish astronaut who fulfils his dream of travelling into space in 1998, but after a shuttle accident mysteriously wakes in Granada in 1958, in an alternative world where the Spanish Republic won the Civil War and leads the space race alongside the USSR. There he meets the engineer Emilio Herrera, who invites him to stay, share his knowledge of the future and help Spain conquer the stars.

BETWEEN TWO FUTURES

Kevin Cotter Murillo

29 October 1998. The shuttle Discovery lifted off from Florida with a colossal roar, bound for space. In the cockpit, Pedro gritted his teeth and smiled at the same time: at last he was fulfilling his childhood dream. At thirty-five, he was becoming the first Spaniard to orbit the Earth. He had no family waiting at home; he had devoted his life to science and space, carrying a loneliness that sometimes weighed on him. But at that moment, feeling the vibration of launch in every fibre of his being, he knew it had all been worthwhile.

During the days in orbit, Pedro worked on microgravity experiments: he observed fluids forming perfect spheres, crystallised proteins purer than those on Earth, and analysed chemical reactions without the interference of convection. That scientific routine in weightlessness, accompanied by the majestic view of the blue planet beneath his feet, filled him with a profound mixture of melancholy and wonder. He was aware of how small he was in the vast cosmos and, even so, felt fortunate to contribute to human knowledge.

On 7 November, Discovery began its re-entry into the atmosphere. Pedro, in his orange suit, sat in his seat with disciplined composure as the spacecraft became enveloped in fire around him. Suddenly a violent jolt broke into his thoughts: shrill alarms, uncontrolled vibrations. Through the window he saw incandescent fragments breaking off the wing; something was terribly wrong. The shuttle’s hull was disintegrating at hypersonic speed. A sharp impact, one final roar, and everything went black. In the last moments before losing consciousness, Pedro thought his end had come. He closed his eyes sadly, thinking that he would die consumed by the sky he loved so much.

He awoke with a start in a hospital bed. There were bandages on his arm and a bitter taste in his mouth. Raising himself slightly, he noticed that he was connected to a drip and medical equipment. A nurse approached when she saw his eyes open.

‘What happened? Where am I? Is the crew okay?’ Pedro asked in a hoarse, bewildered voice, assuming he was in Houston.

‘Please, stay calm. You are safe, in Granada,’ she replied in an Andalusian accent, adjusting his pillow.

Granada? Pedro’s confusion deepened. Before he could ask any more questions, a doctor entered the room. After checking his vital signs and noting that the patient was conscious, he exchanged a few quiet words with the nurse. Then he addressed Pedro kindly, but with evident curiosity in his eyes:

‘You are at the Space Operations Centre, on the outskirts of Granada. Do you remember your name and what happened to you?’

‘My name is Pedro... I’m an astronaut. My spacecraft had an accident...’ he stammered, increasingly dazed.

The doctor nodded slowly, as though confirming something he already knew.

‘Rest for a moment. You have been through a great deal.’

When the doctor left, Pedro gathered the strength to sit up and, trembling, approached the window. Outside he recognised the silhouette of the Alhambra on the hill and, closer by, extensive technological facilities: giant satellite dishes, white buildings bearing unfamiliar emblems. It looked like a major space centre. None of it existed in the Granada of 1998 he remembered. On a tower he saw a tricolour flag with red, yellow and purple stripes: the flag of the Second Spanish Republic, which had vanished in 1939. Pedro felt a shiver. What kind of place was this? His heart racing, he searched for some clue to the date. On the bedside table he saw a folded newspaper. He picked it up with a trembling hand and read the date: 12 April 1958. He had to read it several times. 1958. That was forty years earlier... and yet nothing made sense: the Republican flag, a Spanish space centre... It was like waking up in an American film. Dazed, Pedro could barely move any further. His legs still felt numb, and slight dizziness forced him to lie back. From somewhere in the hospital, perhaps a radio playing in the adjoining room, came an announcer’s clear voice:

‘...in this year of 1958, the Spanish Republic steps up its space race following the successful launch of an experimental rocket, while the Soviet Union denounces the militarisation of space...’

Those words finally convinced him of the impossible: somehow he was in an alternative world where Spain remained a republic and competed with the USSR in the conquest of space. Before Pedro could fully take it in, two guards approached. One, courteous but firm, said:

‘Sir, the director wishes to speak to you. Please get dressed and come with us.’

With little choice, Pedro got up, put on the clothes they offered him—a grey uniform with the letters COE in white—and walked slowly behind the guards. His mind was a whirlwind. Had he travelled through time? Into another reality? It was absurd, but everything around him confirmed it. He walked along broad corridors with glass walls. Through them he saw control rooms full of engineers, rocket plans and world maps showing orbital trajectories. It resembled Houston’s Mission Control Centre, but with signs in Spanish and equipment halfway between retro and futuristic.

At last the guards led him into an underground meeting room. There, standing before a table covered with documents and technical diagrams, waited an elderly man with white hair and an intelligent expression. He wore a blue uniform with aeronautical insignia. Pedro recognised him instantly from historical photographs: it was Emilio Herrera Linares, the legendary Spanish engineer who in the 1930s designed the first stratospheric pressure suit—a forerunner of modern spacesuits—and who, according to the history of his world, ended up in exile after the Civil War.

‘Welcome, Pedro,’ the old man said in a measured voice, indicating a chair. ‘Sit down. We must talk.’

Containing his nerves, Pedro sat down opposite Herrera. Over the following hours they talked at length, sharing their stories. Still half incredulous, Pedro explained that he came from the year 1998 in a reality where Spain had experienced a dictatorship under Francisco Franco from 1939, and where the space race had been dominated by the United States, through an agency called NASA, and the Soviet Union. He confessed that his shuttle had suffered a fatal accident in his world and that, mysteriously, he had appeared here alive.

In turn, Emilio Herrera briefly described how things stood in this reality: the Spanish Civil War had ended in victory for the Republic in 1939, preventing Franco’s regime. Spain had remained democratic and had even played

a decisive part in the Second World War on the Allied side. That war had been shorter than in the timeline Pedro knew, for Nazi Germany had been swiftly defeated by the Soviet Union around 1943. The United States had never fully entered the fighting, maintaining its isolationist policy. After the conflict, with much of Europe weakened, Spain had emerged as a technological and military power in the West. Now, in 1958, the world was immersed in a distinctive Cold War: on one side the Soviet Union, on the other Spain and its European allies, competing for influence... and in the space race.

Pedro listened open-mouthed. It was like an alternative-history story, except it was real and he was in the middle of it. He learned that in 1957 the Soviets had launched a satellite called Sputnik, just as in his world, and that Spain had responded by launching its own first satellite months later. Now the two nations were competing to send the first human being into space. Herrera, who headed the Spanish Space Agency, was leading his country's effort.

'When we found you among the remains of your spacecraft,' Herrera recounted, 'we could hardly believe it. Your capsule fell in Sierra Nevada. Examining your extremely advanced suit and equipment, we realised you were not from here. Your arrival is a scientific enigma we may never fully solve. But more important than how you arrived is what we shall now do with this miracle.'

Herrera smiled faintly and rested his hands on the table.

'You possess knowledge of the future, young man. You have travelled into space in craft we have not even imagined here. Frankly, you could be the key to Spain winning this race to the cosmos.'

Pedro shifted in his seat, overwhelmed.

'Are you suggesting that... I stay?' he asked quietly. The elderly engineer nodded slowly. 'That is up to you. I know this is a great deal to take in. Perhaps you wish to try to return to your dimension, if there is a way. We do not rule it out; our theoretical physicists are bewildered, but investigating. However,' he added, leaning towards him, 'I must be honest: we need your help. I am seventy-nine, and I shall not be in charge of this much longer. I need brilliant minds with real experience in space. You could train our pilots, improve our rocket designs, prevent the mistakes that could cost us years and lives.'

Pedro could barely reply. A day earlier he had resigned himself to dying; now, incredibly, he had the chance to begin again in a different world. And not just in any way, but by helping his homeland—a more idealistic and advanced version of it—reach the stars. His heart filled with a strange emotion: a mixture of joy, loyalty and vertigo.

'I will not pressure you into deciding now,' Herrera said sympathetically. 'This place can be your home if you wish. Think about it. Whatever you choose, we shall do all we can to help you.'

That night Pedro stepped onto a balcony of the Granada complex to clear his mind. Above, thousands of stars shone over Sierra Nevada. They had never looked so sharp, he thought, or perhaps his eyes were now seeing them from a new perspective.

In silence he reviewed the two options before him. On the one hand, to attempt the impossible: return to the 1998 he knew, to his original life. But that life, he admitted to himself, had been almost empty outside his work. There was no family waiting, no deep emotional ties. If he managed to return, he would continue doing science, yes, but Spain in his world would remain the country he had always wished to see become greater, and could not; he himself would remain a small cog in a vast international machine.

If he stayed in this reality, however, he would have the chance to make a historic difference. He could share with this Spain everything he knew about the future of space exploration, work side by side with heroes he admired, such as Herrera, and perhaps feel part of something truly epic. Here his knowledge and experience could save missions, advance inventions, inspire others. Here, perhaps, he would stop feeling alone.

A gentle night breeze carried the scent of earth and the distant murmur of the night-owl engineers' voices. Pedro closed his eyes and pictured two possible futures. In one, he imagined himself back in his shuttle capsule, waking in a Houston hospital in 1998, his space feat reduced to a tragedy survived and little more. In the other, he saw himself staying in 1958, helping to send the first Spaniard—or perhaps himself again?—into space, watching the tricolour flag flutter on a rocket rising towards the stars. Both destinies had their cost and their reward.

He opened his eyes and gazed at the silvery Moon suspended in the sky. He thought how, in his own world, in only another decade, man would succeed in setting foot on it. What if we could do it here too, even sooner? he found himself thinking with excitement.

A slight shiver of excitement ran through Pedro. Whatever he decided, his life had taken an extraordinary turn. He smiled in the solitude of the night, feeling that his personal journey had only just truly begun.

The future remained a mystery. But for the first time in a long while, Pedro did not fear it: he faced it directly, with the longing for yesterday in one heart and the hope of tomorrow in the other. After all, he stood between two futures, and dawn would soon come to illuminate whichever path he chose to follow.

The Paper Pressure Suit tells the story of a boy who, after being punished, discovers letters belonging to his grandfather about Emilio Herrera, an inventor who dreamed of flying and created a spacesuit.

Through the letters, the boy connects with his grandfather's legacy, reflecting on nostalgia, war and unfulfilled dreams.

THE PAPER PRESSURE SUIT

Milagros Moisés González Alba

I don't know why punishments always taste of summer. This time it was for trying to hack the neighbour's Wi-Fi to play Fortnite. Mum took away my tablet, my phone, even the Nintendo I had hidden under the mattress. 'Off to Grandma's,' she said, as if it were a death sentence. And here I am, in this village that smells of thyme and boredom, where the only entertainment is counting the cracks in the ceiling.

Grandma's house is a museum of things nobody uses. There's a rotary telephone that looks like a black UFO, photographs of serious people who never smile, and that pendulum clock that chimes every hour as if it wants to remind you that time passes differently here. Slower. Heavier. Like gravity on Jupiter, but without the excitement of being on another planet.

The attic is out of bounds. So I went up.

The stairs creak like old bones. It smells of mothballs and secrets. Among shoeboxes full of buttons and albums of yellowing photographs, I found something odd: a notebook covered in brown paper, tied with a ribbon that used to be blue but is now the colour of clouds before rain. On the cover, in old-fashioned handwriting, it said: 'Letters to my son – E.H.L.'

I opened it. Grandma always says curiosity killed the cat, but she never says the cat died knowing interesting things.

The first page left me... I don't know how to explain it. It was like finding a message in a bottle, except the bottle was time:

‘Granada, 15 October 1935

Dear José,

Tonight I have flown without leaving the ground. I have touched the stars with hands encased in rubber and steel. My stratonautical suit works, my son. It is like a diving suit, but for swimming in the sky. When I put it on you this afternoon and saw you walking around the laboratory like a little tin astronaut, I thought: this child will go further than his father. This child will touch the Moon.

But something tells me that birds of ill omen are already flying over Spain. War is a bird afraid to fly, my son. It stays on the ground, pecking at other people’s dreams.

Your father, embracing you from the stratosphere of his hopes, Emilio’

Emilio? José? I didn’t know any Emilio in my family. I kept reading, page after page. The letters spoke of a spacesuit built from scraps of the future, of a man who wanted to walk through the sky when the world barely knew how to fly. There’s gravity at my school too, but it’s the gravity of exams, of not fitting in, of feeling like a weirdo for preferring space documentaries to videos of YouTubers shouting.

‘Paris, 3 March 1941

José, my child of the air,

It has been five years since I last saw you. I wonder whether you still remember when I would lift you onto my shoulders and we would pretend you were a pilot. Here, on this fourth floor without a lift, I sometimes open the window and think that if I jumped in my pressure suit I could fly home. But the suit stayed in Spain, like you, like everything I loved.

The Germans occupy Paris. I occupy this small space between memory and hope. I design rockets on café napkins. I calculate trajectories in the condensation on windows. The universe fits inside an equation, but Granada fits on none of the maps I have here.

They say that in America they are building aeroplanes that fly higher than birds. I still dream of my suit for exploring the sky. Sometimes I think all exiles are astronauts: we float in the void, breathing canned air made of nostalgia.

Your father, sending you stratospheric kisses, Emilio’

I ran downstairs to find my phone. I needed to google who this Emilio was. Then I remembered: punished. No technology. Like Emilio without his suit.

Grandma was in the kitchen, peeling potatoes with that surgical precision grandmothers have.

‘Gran, who was Emilio Herrera?’

She dropped the potato. She picked it up slowly, as if gathering up years.

‘Where did you hear that name?’ ‘In the attic there’s...’

‘The attic is out of bounds.’

‘I know, but...’

She looked at me with those eyes that had seen wars, hunger and reconciliations. She sighed.

‘Emilio Herrera Linares was...’ She sat down, suddenly very old. ‘He was the man who almost touched the stars. He invented the first spacesuit, you know? Before the Americans, before the Russians. But he had to choose between his inventions and his principles. He chose the latter. He went into exile.’

‘And what has he got to do with us?’

‘Your great-grandfather...’ Her hands were shaking a little. ‘Your great-grandfather worked with him at Cuatro Vientos. He was a mechanic. He helped build the suit. When Herrera left, he gave him those letters. Not for his real son, who had died in the war. For the son he would have wished to see grow up.’

The air in the kitchen grew dense, as the air in the stratosphere must be.

‘And Great-Grandad?’ ‘He was a pilot. But after the war... he never flew alone again. He said the sky had grown too big. Or he had grown too small.’

We went up to the attic together. She didn’t tell me off. Sometimes things are forbidden only to protect pain.

There were more things in the box. Blurry photographs of moustached men beside strange machines. Hand-drawn plans for impossible contraptions. And at the bottom, wrapped in tissue paper, a piece of silvery fabric.

‘It’s from the suit,’ Grandma said. ‘The only thing left.’

I touched it. It was rough and smooth at once, like touching the future and the past at the same time.

That night I couldn’t sleep. I read all the letters. The last one broke something inside me:

‘Paris, 12 April 1961

Dear child of the air,

Today a Russian called Gagarin has flown into space. He did so in a suit that resembles mine as a son resembles his father. I sat on the balcony and cried, and the neighbours thought it was from emotion. And yes, it was emotion, but the kind that hurts.

I have refused to work for the Americans. They wanted my knowledge, but not my flag. Not the present one, the old one. The one from when Spain was a place where one could dream of touching the sky.

Perhaps I shall never see the Moon, my son, but I hope you will go further. Further does not mean higher. Sometimes further means knowing when to stay on the ground and look at the stars with your feet firmly planted.

I did not build the suit to escape the Earth, but to prove that we Spaniards knew how to dream vertically too. But dreams, my son, sometimes weigh more than any spacesuit.

If you ever read this, if you ever exist beyond my imagination, remember: to inherit is not to receive things, but to dare to dream the dreams others could not finish.

Your father of the sky, Emilio’

I cried. Yes, I know, I’m thirteen and I’m not supposed to cry. But there was something in those letters... It was as if Emilio were speaking to me. To the weird boy who prefers planets to matches, who understands orbits better than social rules.

Grandma found me on the roof at three in the morning. She didn’t tell me off. She sat beside me, and we looked at the stars.

‘Your great-grandfather used to come up here,’ she said. ‘After reading the letters, he always came up here.’ ‘Why didn’t he fly again?’

‘Because there are heights it is hard to come down from. Herrera knew that. That is why he built the suit: not to go up, but to be able to come back.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘All children dream of flying, but few learn to land. Your great-grandfather learned too late that what matters is not how high you fly, but having somewhere to come back to.’

The night wind moved the television aerials as if they were the antennae of giant insects exploring the cosmos. Grandma smelled of lavender cologne and stored-away stories.

‘You know,’ she told me, ‘Herrera sewed dreams into the fabric of the sky, and every stitch was a wish to come home. But sometimes, my child, home is not a place. It is an idea. A flag. A principle.’

‘Do you think he was ever happy?’

‘I think he was free. And sometimes that hurts more than being happy.’

I kept thinking about that. About Emilio in Paris, designing rockets on napkins. About my great-grandfather, with wings broken by fear. About me, punished with no Wi-Fi, but discovering that there are connections stronger than 5G.

The next morning Mum came to fetch me. She expected me to be furious, to demand my phone back the moment I saw her. But I didn’t.

‘How was your punishment?’ she asked, ready for my teenage drama.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘I’ve learned to fly.’

She gave me a funny look. Grandma smiled.

In the car back to Madrid, I held the box of letters on my lap. Mum didn’t ask. Sometimes the best gifts come wrapped in silence.

That night, in my room, with my phone returned but no desire to turn it on, I went out onto the terrace. Madrid shone like a horizontal galaxy. I raised my arms, the way Emilio used to when testing the movements of his suit. For a moment, just a moment, I felt I was floating.

The air in the stratosphere smells of childhood memories. It smells of Grandma's attic, of silvery fabric, of letters that never reached their destination but found their way all the same.

I don't know whether I'll ever reach the Moon, but from up here on the roof, the world is a little less small.

And somewhere in Paris, in a time that no longer exists, a man in a paper pressure suit is still writing letters to an imaginary son, teaching him that flying is not about moving away from the Earth, but finding the exact height from which the way home can be seen clearly.

My name is Hugo. I am thirteen. And I am heir to a man who touched the stars with rubber gloves and a heart full of longing. A man who taught me, across time and yellowing paper, that true astronauts are not those who go furthest, but those who know why they take off.

Gravity is not in the Earth. It is in the places we want to return to.

And from my rooftop in Madrid, I already know where I want to return: to that attic that smells of time, where a boy from the twenty-first century and an inventor from the twentieth met in the only place where every flight is possible: in the pages of a notebook that waited eighty years to teach me that inheriting means daring to dream the dreams others could not finish.

My phone is still in my pocket, switched off. The stars don't need a password. And for the first time, neither do I.

The End

An Ironic Wager follows Lucas, a collector of failures who travels to Seville, obsessed with the forgotten engineer Emilio Herrera. In his search for traces of the inventor, he encounters collective indifference: Herrera’s former house is destined to become tourist apartments, and only a withered cactus remains as a symbolic vestige.

AN IRONIC WAGER

Ramón Mayol Aranda

The man, a certain Lucas, found himself lost in a maze of narrow streets shimmering with heat. Seville burned beneath the August sun, a crucible that melted the tarmac and blurred every outline. Lucas, who was not from Seville, nor even from Spain, felt sweat trickling down his back like a river of regret. He had come to the city in pursuit of a ghost, a shadow cast by history: Emilio Herrera Linares.

Lucas, much to his own dismay, was a collector of failures. Not his own failures, but other people’s, although, to be honest, the line between the two grew dangerously blurred with time. His Miami apartment was a mausoleum of abandoned projects, forgotten inventions and shattered dreams. There lay yellowing plans for flying machines that had never crossed the sky, prototypes of perpetual-motion engines that had refused to immortalise anything, perhaps a voiceless echo of what had never been, and letters, heaps of disordered letters from eccentric scientists who had once tried to bend the laws of physics and ended up in thrall to madness.

Herrera Linares was his latest obsession. A visionary engineer, an aeronautical pioneer, a brilliant inventor... and, in the end, an exile, a man erased from collective memory. Lucas had stumbled upon his name by chance, in an article in one of the many science magazines that decorated the corners of his apartment and fed hundreds of silverfish. The piece dwelt on the spacesuit, the ‘stratonautical suit’ Herrera designed in the thirties, a decade before NASA even existed. The idea that a Spaniard, during the Republic, had almost conquered space before

anyone else struck Lucas as an exquisite irony. And ironies, like failures, were his speciality. He had to know more about this visionary. There and then, he took his lilac notebook and began planning a new adventure.

In the Archive of the Indies, Lucas spent hours tracing documents that attested to Herrera's existence, his projects and his aspirations. He found faded photographs of a slender man with an intense gaze, wearing an immaculate suit and a beret at an angle, posing beside a futuristically designed aeroplane or explaining the intricacies of his pressure suit to a group of sceptical military men. In every image, Lucas saw a flash of genius, a spark of ambition foreshadowing the disillusionment to come.

Outside the Archive, tourist Seville, gentrified, humid and clammy, unfolded like a mirage. Groups of camera-wielding Japanese visitors snapped the Giralda as though there were no tomorrow; elderly British couples drank warmed-over sangria on packed terraces; young Americans wearing bullfighters' hats from Chinese bargain shops sought stereotypical adventures. Nobody seemed to remember, or even know, who Emilio Herrera Linares was.

Lucas sat on a bench in the shade of an orange tree, took out his notebook and scribbled a few notes. The thick, sticky air made breathing difficult.

He watched a group of pigeons pecking at breadcrumbs on the ground. He thought of Herrera, his aeroplanes, his spacesuits, his dreams of flying higher, of going further. What had become of it all? Where were the fruits of his ingenuity? In what dustbin of history had his ideas been lost?

He decided to visit what had once been Herrera's house, or at least the house where he had lived for a time before his exile. He checked the address in his lilac notebook and, after several failed attempts, found the street. It was a modest street in a working-class neighbourhood, far from the tourist bustle. The house was a two-storey building with peeling paint and closed windows. It looked uninhabited.

Lucas stopped before the door and felt a stab of disappointment. He had not expected a commemorative plaque, or a museum dedicated to Herrera's memory, but at least... something. A sign, a trace, proof that the man had existed, that his ideas had carried weight in the world.

He looked up and saw a pot holding a withered plant on the upper-floor balcony.

A stunted cactus covered in dust. Lucas felt a strange connection with that plant. A living thing abandoned to its fate, barely surviving in a hostile environment. Like Herrera, like himself, like all collectors of failures.

At that moment, a car stopped outside the house. A stout man in a white linen suit climbed out and walked towards the door. A mixture of curiosity and apprehension swept over Lucas. Who was this man? What was he doing here?

'Can I help you?' the man asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

Lucas hesitated. He did not know what to say. He could hardly tell him he was looking for the ghost of a forgotten engineer. He could not explain his obsession with other people's failures.

'I was... admiring the house,' he said at last, inventing an excuse. 'It's very beautiful.'

The man frowned.

'It's an old house,' he replied. 'It needs a thorough renovation.'

'Do you live here?' Lucas asked.

'Yes, I have for a few years. I bought it recently. I'm thinking of turning it into tourist apartments. Seville's full of tourists, you know. It's good business.'

Lucas shivered. Tourist apartments. The irony was almost unbearable. Emilio Herrera Linares's house turned into a refuge for tourists, fleeting visitors who knew nothing of his history, his ingenuity or his dreams.

'Do you know who lived here before?' Lucas asked, with a thread of hope.

The man shrugged.

'I don't know. An elderly gentleman, I think. An engineer, something like that.'

'Emilio Herrera Linares?'

The man made an indifferent gesture.

'Doesn't ring a bell.'

Lucas felt something break inside him. Something he had not known he still possessed. An illusion, perhaps. The hope of finding a connection, a resonance, an echo of the past in the present.

‘And the plant?’ he asked, pointing at the cactus on the balcony. ‘Do you know whose it was?’

The man smiled. ‘Oh, that plant. I was going to throw it away. It’s in a sorry state.’

‘Don’t,’ Lucas said, with an urgency that surprised him. ‘I’ll buy it from you.’

The man gave him a puzzled look.

‘The plant? What do you want it for?’

‘I like it,’ Lucas said. ‘It reminds me... of something.’

The man shrugged.

‘As you wish. Five euros.’

Lucas took out his wallet and handed over the money. The man opened the front door and disappeared inside. Lucas waited patiently, feeling the sun burn the back of his neck.

A few minutes later, the man returned with the pot in his hands. He had not bothered to remove the dust. He handed it to Lucas without a word and went back inside, slamming the door.

Lucas stood alone in the street with the stunted cactus in his hands. He examined it closely, searching its spines and withered leaves for some trace of its past, some hint of a connection with Herrera Linares.

He found nothing. Just an abandoned plant, barely surviving in a hostile environment.

And yet, at that moment, Lucas felt a strange sense of peace. He had found something. Not what he was looking for, certainly, but something. A symbol, a metaphor, a mirror of his own existence.

He decided to return to his apartment in Miami. He did not know what he would do with the cactus. Perhaps he would repot it, tend it, try to bring it back to life. Or perhaps he would let it die, like so many other abandoned projects, forgotten inventions and shattered dreams.

Whatever happened, he would take it with him. As a trophy, as a reminder, as proof that even in the most absolute failure, the deepest oblivion, there is always a wisp of hope, a thorn of irony, a drop of hope.

On the flight home, Lucas watched Seville’s lights receding through the window. He thought of Herrera, his aeroplanes, his spacesuits, his exile. He thought of the man at the house, the tourist apartments, the withered plant.

And he thought of the planet. Of environmental devastation, human greed, collective blindness. Of how we were destroying the world Herrera had dreamed of conquering.

Then Lucas realised that the true failure was neither Herrera’s nor his own. The true failure was humanity’s. Our inability to learn from our mistakes, to value our past, to protect our future.

Lucas closed his eyes and rested his head against the seat. The cactus, in his travel bag, brushed his leg. He felt a pang of remorse. He had been so obsessed with the failures of the past that he had forgotten to pay attention to the failures of the present.

As soon as he landed at Miami International Airport, Lucas went straight to a florist’s and bought a new pot, fertile soil and organic fertiliser. He lovingly repotted the cactus, watered it gently and placed it on his apartment balcony, beside the yellowing plans, the perpetual-motion engine prototypes and the letters from eccentric scientists.

Then he opened his lilac notebook and wrote a single sentence:

‘Failure is not the end, but the beginning of a new irony.’

And he smiled.

Because, after all, life was a maze of narrow streets shimmering with heat, a crucible that melted dreams and blurred every outline. And the only way to survive was to learn to laugh at oneself, at the world, and at the inevitable devastation awaiting us at the end of the road. Even at the subtle irony of having paid five euros for a dying plant. The journey had ended with a plant instead of answers, and a firm resolve to begin examining the consequences of human pollution. The future thus revealed itself as an ironic wager.

The Call of the Air recounts the Graf Zeppelin’s 1928 crossing, narrated by the journalist Grace Drummond-Hay, the first woman to cross the Atlantic by airship. During the voyage she meets Emilio Herrera. The narrative combines Grace’s admiration for Herrera and the crew with reflections on the courage needed to master the skies, while highlighting women’s pioneering role in aviation.

THE CALL OF THE AIR

Ramón Candelas Pérez

Aboard the Graf Zeppelin,

15 October 1928

America.

In the first light of dawn, the coast is a blurred brown line, barely distinguishable on the horizon of this immensity we have been flying over for three days: mostly a menacing metallic grey, occasionally an invigorating deep blue. I raise my coffee cup to my lips, then resume my furious assault on the keys of my portable typewriter, faithful accomplice to my reporting wherever the news takes me in search of a story.

Thoughts crowd into my head, ideas, images, and I must pour them onto paper before they dissolve like shreds of Atlantic mist in a pale dawn. I have barely slept tonight, reliving the most dramatic hours of the adventure I am experiencing; and, thinking of the articles I must write about this feat, I could not help reviewing in my mind the most intrepid of my companions: the aeronauts who command these flying machines, as enormous as they are beautiful. There is the unflappable Captain Hugo Eckener, of course, also director of Luftschiffbau Zeppelin, the company that built our aircraft; there is First Officer Ernst Lehmann, an experienced airship pilot on military and commercial missions; there is Charles Rosendhal, the handsome United States Navy commander travelling with us as an observer and adviser; and there is that Spanish officer who behaved so gallantly towards me when I came up against the boarding officer’s stone wall.

‘I am sorry, Lady Drummond-Hay,’ the German insisted, ‘but the orders are strict: baggage weight is limited for safety reasons. All passengers were informed, and you must leave at least one of your cases ashore. The company will arrange to send it on the next packet boat, and...’

‘But it will take weeks to reach America!’ I protested. ‘I’m sure Captain Eckener will make an exception.’ ‘The orders come from Captain Eckener himself. I’m sorry, but...’

Clearly, the word ‘exception’ did not feature in the rigid German officer’s vocabulary. From the queue of passengers waiting their turn came the odd jocular remark about my bulky luggage. I frowned, trying to assess the situation coolly: I could not do without my comfortable travelling clothes; still less the thick woollen undergarments and long sheepskin coat that would protect me from the cold during the flight. I shuddered at the mere thought that the Graf Zeppelin’s accommodation was unheated. And just as I was beginning to resign myself to my precious evening gowns not arriving in New York with me, a stranger stepped forward and gave me the open, confident smile of a lifelong friend.

‘Ah, Lady Drummond-Hay,’ he said in English with a Spanish accent, ‘how pleased I am to find you. I had to go back to the railway station when I realised that the chauffeur had forgotten to load one of my cases, and there they told me you had offered to bring it to the airfield. You have no idea how grateful I am.’

Then he picked up one of mine, the very case containing my elegant clothes, and said a few words to the boarding officer, who merely nodded and returned his military salute.

‘It was... ahem, no trouble,’ I stammered, feeling rather foolish as the officer stamped my ticket and called a subordinate to take care of the rest of my luggage, ‘Mr...’

‘Emilio Herrera, lieutenant colonel in the Spanish Army and second-in-command of the Graf Zeppelin.’ The stranger clicked his heels together and bowed his head respectfully. ‘At your service.’

After formative experience in the Middle East and Asia as a war correspondent, I now work for the Chicago Herald Examiner, whose owner, the press magnate William Randolph Hearst, has secured me an invitation to join the first commercial transatlantic crossing by an airship: the LZ-127 Graf Zeppelin. Designed to make

maximum use of the company’s hangar in Friedrichshafen, it is so large that it fits inside like a lady’s hand in a cocktail glove. This makes the aircraft seem larger still, and my first sight of it, as tall as a ten-storey building and as long as a New York block, made the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

Later, as I was settling into my cabin, someone knocked at the door. Mr Herrera stood holding my suitcase. He apologised that his duties aboard had prevented him from bringing it sooner, and the lively conversation that followed led him to offer me a guided tour of the airship, during which I had the opportunity to appreciate his profound knowledge of aeronautical science.

‘The gondola, as you can see,’ he explained, ‘is housed in the bow to take advantage of the curvature of the nose. In this way it does not project beyond the outline of the main cylinder, which considerably improves aerodynamic efficiency.’

‘But isn’t it rather small?’ I asked in surprise. ‘I mean, I understand there are forty crew members. If we add the twenty passengers, I don’t see how...’

Herrera waved his hand dismissively.

‘Ah, but the gondola contains only the bridge and the passenger accommodation,’ he said. ‘The crew’s quarters are inside the hull, their bunks distributed along the keel. Unfortunately, they do not enjoy such splendid views as the passengers,’ he added with a restrained chuckle. ‘And now, if you would like, we can visit the innards of this modern flying leviathan. If you would be so kind as to follow me...’

The gondola is, in fact, more than Herrera suggested. Behind the bridge are the navigation and radio rooms, and an electric kitchen—no naked flames aboard with all that hydrogen above our heads—fully equipped to cater for the sophisticated passengers. The dining lounge resembles a railway dining car, equally sumptuous in its decoration but more spacious. Behind it, a central corridor opens onto two rows of cabins, all with windows to the outside and bunks that, like those in sleeping cars, turn by day into comfortable sofas for conversation or reading.

The following morning, 10 October, the scheduled departure date, a festive crowd came to the airfield to watch the operation. The latest reports, however, forecast adverse weather when we were due to face the

Atlantic, and Eckener was forced to postpone take-off. Since the captain regarded Herrera's advice as decisive in reaching that decision, my curiosity about this Spaniard, who seemed to wield such influence over the experienced German, increased enormously.

'How does a Spanish pilot become second-in-command of a German aircraft of this size?' I asked that same evening after dinner, at my first opportunity to speak to him. 'For you are an aviator, are you not, Don Emilio?'

'Indeed he is,' said Eckener, who was also present. 'Herrera was an aviation pioneer in his country and one of its first military pilots; above all, however, he is a distinguished scientist and engineer. And, in answer to your question, an excellent airship pilot.'

'And a good friend of the captain, who is exaggerating with his excessive praise,' the Spaniard said modestly.

'Nonsense,' the other dismissed him. 'Besides, Don Emilio has made an exhaustive study of Atlantic meteorology, which makes him ideal for the post.'

'I did so because I hoped to establish a commercial transatlantic service using my compatriot Torres Quevedo's semi-rigid airships, but our investors decided to back Zeppelin's rigid airships, with their greater carrying capacity. That is why you find me here, lending a hand wherever I can.'

'For which I am exceedingly glad,' Eckener concluded cheerfully. 'And now, if you will excuse me, there are still many preparations to make aboard. Remember, we leave early tomorrow, God willing. We shall meet at six to examine the reports, Emilio. And you too, Lady Grace, would do well to rise early if you wish to describe the take-off to your readers.'

'I wouldn't miss it for the world,' I said fervently. 'It must be a thrilling spectacle.'

It certainly was. And not only the take-off, with all five engines roaring at full power in their gondolas and the Graf Zeppelin lifting its nose towards the skies above beautiful Lake Constance, but also skirting the jagged Alpine peaks clad in perpetual snow, over which one would not wish to lose too much height; and seeing the narrow valleys, little villages and great Swiss cities, which we passengers amused ourselves by identifying with the help of our road maps. Later, once novelty had become

routine, the descent towards the Mediterranean coast along the silver ribbon of the Rhône was tranquil, conducive to an excellent lunch served beside the panoramic windows.

Zeppelin's guests, mostly politicians, scientists, engineers, journalists and photographers, spent the afternoon reading, talking or applying themselves to their various tasks. A couple of artists sketched scenes in pencil that they would later transfer to colourful canvases in the warmth of their studios; and two American tycoons, the only people to have paid for their tickets—allowing the company to describe the flight as 'commercial'—made every effort to befriend the others, particularly the politicians.

I spent much of the time at my typewriter, transcribing my notes. Towards six, an aide brought word from the second-in-command, who wished to show me the view unfolding beyond the incomparable forward vantage point of the bridge: the great port city of Barcelona. Without relinquishing control of the aircraft, Herrera described the city's most notable sights in detail: the refreshing Ciutadella Park, with the austere building of the former arsenal converted into a palace; the chaotic jumble of the Gothic Quarter, where the stern bulk of the church of Santa María del Mar stands alongside the cathedral's elaborate Gothic spires; and further away, rising above the orderly grid of the Eixample, the curious towers of the Sagrada Família, a basilica, according to Don Emilio, perpetually under construction.

'... and there ahead you can see the fortress of Montjuïc,' he pointed out, 'a defensive stronghold once used to suppress uprisings by bombarding the city, and now used as a prison.'

He spoke with a knowledge of the terrain and a certain pride that I thought I knew how to interpret.

'I see you know Barcelona well, Don Emilio,' I said with a nod. 'Were you born here, by any chance?'

My question, however, made him laugh aloud.

'Good heavens, no!' he exclaimed. 'You speak my language very well, Lady Grace, but you have yet to become familiar with its accents. Mine is from the south: Granada, to be precise.'

I blushed, though that did not stop me from seizing the opportunity before me.

'In that case,' I said with a mischievous smile, 'I hope you will be kind enough to show it to me when we fly over it. If your knowledge of the wonders of

Barcelona is so impressive, I can scarcely imagine what it must be like for those of your beautiful home city.’

‘Oh, it is simply that pilots are accustomed to remembering the most conspicuous features of the cities we fly over, as landmarks to help us find our way, you understand. Unfortunately, the imposing Sierra Nevada will stand between our coastal route towards the Strait of Gibraltar and the city of the Alhambra.’

‘What a pity.’

‘And now, if you will excuse me, I must send a radiotelegram to His Majesty Alfonso XIII, who is following our voyage with interest.’

Four days have passed since that conversation with Don Emilio Herrera, followed by others that revealed his human qualities, his vast knowledge of modern aeronautics and, above all, his composure as a soldier seasoned in the skies of battle. I suppose my own experience on the front lines of wars and revolutions must have impressed him too; in any event, this mutual regard has given rise to a warm friendship.

To avoid repeating the account I am preparing for the Herald, I shall not dwell here on the adventures that have befallen us during the Atlantic crossing: the storms that hurled themselves upon us, weathered in extreme conditions by Eckener, wisely counselled by Herrera and Rosendahl; Lehman’s skill at the helm when everything suggested we were plunging into the sea, to the point that the captain decided to send an SOS; and, finally, the heroism of the men who, led by Knut Eckener, flight engineer and worthy son of his father, clambered onto the horizontal stabiliser in the worst of the storm to clear away a large torn piece of covering that was preventing the elevator from moving. The purpose of these more reflective, intimate lines is to express my admiration for these cool-headed men of swift reflexes, capable, even when panic spreads around them—and we have had a good measure of that on this voyage—of making the right decisions in adversity. In their hands I feel safe and, why not admit it, healthily envious. This crossing, which will, happily and in all likelihood, culminate today in a rapturous reception at Lakehurst airfield, makes me dream of following in the wake of women such as Katherine Stinson, Ruth Law and Amelia Earhart, shining stars in this extraordinary adventure of mastering the skies.

* * *

Grace Drummond-Hay, the only woman aboard the Graf Zeppelin and the first to cross the Atlantic by airship, was cheered by her companions for the composure she displayed during the crossing’s most critical hours. She would also be the only woman on the first

flight around the world, which the airship made in August of the following year and which Lady Grace chronicled for William Hearst, the project’s financier. A committed advocate of airships, taking part in several of their most celebrated voyages, she would finally succumb to the call of the sky when she decided to become a pilot and buy her own aeroplane, in which she made countless journeys for pleasure and work. Always committed to women’s emancipation, she went on to serve as president of the Women’s International Association of Aeronautics, founded in 1929 to help women pilots make contact with one another and encourage women’s access to aviation.

There is no record of her meeting Emilio Herrera again, although her constant journeys around the globe as a war correspondent until her death in 1946 mean that it cannot be ruled out.

A Reverie among the Clouds recounts an experience Emilio Herrera had on 9 September 1919: feeling tired and unwell, he falls into a deep sleep and finds himself aboard a strange flying ship with a peculiar crew. As he explores this dream world, he experiences wonder and excitement, confronting fantastical situations. On waking, he feels inspired and determined to advance science, dreaming of creating an aerodynamics laboratory.

A REVERIE AMONG THE CLOUDS

Pablo Fernández Rojas

I do not know whether anyone in times to come will read the words I set down below. Today I record what happened on the afternoon of the ninth of September, nineteen hundred and nineteen. It is an entirely true story, alive in my memory, and on this plane of existence it could be verified by only one means: the imagination.

That afternoon I was exhausted. Still tired of the whole New York affair, tired of my country never having enough funds to advance as far as I believe the world needs, and physically tired from our latest flight. That afternoon I suffered from a headache and nausea. My body was asking me to stop, although my restless desire for discovery conflicted with all of that.

Then, reclining at an angle on the sofa in my study—with nautical charts in my hands, considering how to transfer certain routes to the aerial world—my eyelids fell shut and I sank into a deep sleep.

I felt myself rocking violently. Looking warily from side to side, I caught a glimpse of sea foam against some portholes.

‘The sea? Am I at sea?’ I thought. ‘When did I get here? Whose ship is this? Could it belong to Juan’s father? What is this?’

Little by little, feeling rather dizzy, I sat up. Then a funny, silent face appeared directly in front of me, its enormous eyes staring into mine.

Features that belonged at once to a child and to a grandfather. Chestnut-brown hair with a fringe, and a beard surrounding an already rounded face. He wore a pointed cap of solid burgundy—with its tip flopping to one side, almost covering an ear—and a tweed waistcoat over a billowing shirt. His bodily features and his sense of style were utterly unfamiliar to me, and I realised I could not be anywhere near home, nor even in a region I knew. The fellow before me looked impatient, waving his upturned palms.

‘Hej, Rubro, ĉu vi fartas bone?’ this strange person said. ‘Venu, leviĝu, ni devas surmeti niajn kosmoskafandraĵojn!’

I could not believe someone was speaking Esperanto to me naturally, without a congress being involved. I had wished for such a thing a thousand times, but I had never imagined it happening in circumstances like these. ‘Where the devil am I? Is my memory failing, or what is going on? Why is he calling me “Rubro”? And would someone kindly explain what a kosmoskafandraĵojn is, and why I have to put one on?’ I wondered anxiously.

Naturally, being who I was, I tried to reason it out: ‘This must be some sort of dream. But I’ve never had a lucid dream... now, let me see, I remember being told that you can’t tickle yourself, or read, or smell anything in a dream...’ Imagine my fright when I pinched myself and felt the sting as ordinarily as could be; although I had nothing to hand to read, I did breathe in deeply and detect two scents as distinct as the tolling of a bell: the familiar caress of sea mist, and a fruity treacle.

The strange man in front of me went away muttering, with gestures of exasperation. I stood up and perceived myself as a strange being. All my proportions seemed to have changed. My hands seemed larger, my belly somewhat bigger than usual, and I could see my own nose, more bulbous in shape... and something had happened to my moustache. It was long, extending far beyond the tops of my lips and curling over my cheeks. I raised my eyes to look through the hatch and felt something powerful within me, a kind of momentum in my vision, enabling me to see much further than ever before. I saw a whale that terrified me by its gargantuan size. It must have been at least five times larger than any I had ever imagined.

I left the cabin and felt an unequivocal vertigo. I was not usually prone to vertigo on account of anything or anyone, either then or now, but this was altogether different.

Before me bustled a crew I had never seen. I counted four strange people dressed in similar styles. To this day, I remain convinced that they all had

slightly larger heads than normal. And the vessel we were aboard had vividly coloured sails. Yet... ‘These sails don’t look like sails... they’re more like quilts,’ I mused. I looked more closely, and a fresh sensation of astonishment mingled with a burning excitement. I could not help smiling at such a marvel. I felt brimful, like a child on his birthday.

Above our heads were three balloon-shaped fabric envelopes, the central one much larger than the others. I was not in a balloon, but neither was it a zeppelin; it was not a ship, yet it was not quite anything else. There were a couple of jibs, but the other fabrics were not those of a boat. And, at least at first glance, everything seemed handmade, stripped of industrialism. ‘This is a hybrid! This thing can fly! How did I get here? And who are these people?’

A crew member bellowed at me through a sort of helmet:

‘Preta por ekflugo! Rubro, kie estas via kosmoskafandraĵojn?’

Then I noticed that everyone there was wearing something resembling diving suits. I considered the possibility that this admirable vehicle might also be a submarine... but reality soon supplied the answer. The gentleman who shouted at me was announcing that take-off was about to begin, and the one I had seen earlier in the cabin had already warned me that I needed to put on a kind of cosmic pressure suit.

I was living through a scene worthy of Verne as the ship began to rise. ‘To rise, no less! With all that weight!’ I told myself, trying to calculate a few coefficients. Another sailor took me by the arm and dragged me into a compartment resembling a technical changing room, with a row of hooks suspended from the ceiling and the last of those peculiar suits waiting for me. I put it on as quickly as I could. It was extraordinarily light, although it looked heavy; delicately smooth, although it looked coarse.

I looked for someone to question. Everyone seemed very calm, very accustomed to their duties, and I liked that. I approached a small woman. In truth, I had never seen a woman in that kind of situation. But then, technically, I had never been in it either. I asked whether she knew where we were going. She laughed, perhaps thinking it was a joke, and through the helmet I understood her to say: ‘Wait, I’ll tell you when we stop in the air.’

Next, another companion brought me a metal board the size of a small writing slate, but with rotating components of different colours and textures; some were wheels or discs

made of stone, others small spheres, and all of them turned at different speeds. He told me to keep an eye on one, pointing to the only blue one. I immediately understood that this device was some sort of wind-current map.

I knew I had to watch the board, but I could not resist peering carefully over the side. I wanted to enjoy the landscape, though my real aim was to calculate some coordinates and establish my position. We were ascending vertically, and very fast, but I wanted to know our whereabouts. I remember thinking: ‘Where are the buildings? I can’t see a single village. But that looks like the Sierra Nevada. How can that be?’ My chest felt tight, but among my conflicting emotions, joy now undoubtedly prevailed. ‘I have no idea what all this is, but I want to see it through to the end.’

And so, once the craft steadied, now rising slowly, the young lady approached me. Through the glass of her helmet I could see beautiful fair hair and a host of freckles around her upturned nose. She scolded me a little, saying I ought to pay closer attention. ‘I’m not at all accustomed to being scolded,’ I kept to myself. Then she told me they had to go up again, into the indigo zone, because there was another green hole.

I am a scientist, a man of reason. I was out of my depth, for I had not the faintest idea what she meant. I deduced that, whatever it was, they had done it before, because of the ‘again’ and ‘another green hole’. The people speaking to me did not seem mad from their behaviour, although the whole experience struck me as complete madness. There had to be some meaning behind it that was unknown to me.

Around us, the atmosphere turned orange, filled with white clouds, and I thought that perhaps the glass in those suits made us perceive distortions of light in different ways. ‘Air isn’t coloured, but perhaps this technology lets one perceive certain details...’ I tried to work it out. Perhaps the ‘indigo zone’ was the stratosphere. Perhaps ozone looked blue through those suits. Perhaps the pressure suits allowed us to breathe at such an altitude.

We left the clouds below, and at that moment I felt the board shaking vigorously in my hands, and the wheel I had been told to watch was spinning fast, changing to a strong electric green. ‘It seems like magic,’ I thought. And I shouted:

‘Hej!’

The same individual who had given me the board came running. He examined it like a scholar inspecting an electrical circuit he had built himself, nodded, and

then signalled to someone. The flying vessel stopped, holding firmly in place for a moment. Then a chord sounded, rather like an organ. It reminded me of a musical instrument I had once seen aboard a steamship, at a world’s fair exhibiting inventions and patents from across the globe. I do not know whether the two things were connected, but next I saw the girl I had spoken to earlier standing in a sort of raised place above the deck, like a church pulpit. She lifted her hands over her head and made an abrupt movement. ‘Is she casting a spell? That’s all I need,’ I said to myself in bewilderment.

We seemed to be somewhere where there was nothing. Nothing could be seen above, below or on the horizon. Everything appeared uniform and ethereal, and it was hot. Until I saw something approaching with a graceful movement, as graceful as it was gigantic. This took us beyond what I had considered a Verne-like experience and into the realm of mythological adventure. Towards us came an enormous winged beast, larger than any imaginable bird, of a snowy whiteness that overwhelmed the senses, though with scarlet gleams that flashed astonishingly.

I—who at that moment was not Emilio but Rubro, for that situation was my only reality—had not merely never seen anything like it; I had never even conceived of such a thing in any form. I felt I was about to faint when suddenly my eyes met the dragon’s.

‘Be calm. You cannot understand it now, but these things happen.’ Those words echoed within him.

I, a man of science, paralysed by an encounter with a dragon! Indeed, yes. A creature whose single toe-claw I would not have reached even standing up and jumping. An animal that seemed to bring those illustrations by British palaeontologists to life, but with an intelligence and a power that could only be felt in stories and legends.

The crew member who seemed most involved with the balloons went towards the stern, pulling on a rope. Against all expectations, and for the first time on the journey, the craft glided horizontally, following the dragon along an invisible path. After a few minutes, the dragon breathed out around itself. A trail of ionised, incandescent flames, discharged in a carefully calculated manner. The spectrum of colours changed, clearly revealing a green patch in the air. The crew—who seemed less human to Emilio with every moment—stirred into action, and the girl made another abrupt movement from her pulpit. Two of the sailors brought out substantial heaps of gems and precious stones and threw them into the air towards that greenish area. As though under a spell, following her movements, those gems

transmuted into a kind of alchemical liquid which, inscrutably, made the green disappear, merging with the air.

There were cheers and hurrahs from all the crew, who remarked that everything had worked 'first time'. We saw no more of the unfathomable reptile. The descent began, we passed through the clouds, and finally we all took off our pressure suits.

Feeling like Emilio again, I rose. My mind might have been confused, troubled and distracted. Quite the opposite: I was inspired, determined and content. I was filled with an energy with which I longed to propel my destiny forward. Then my dear Irene came into the room to see how I was, and I could not help running to embrace her: 'We're going to build an Aerodynamics Laboratory! And we're going to rise so high we'll need a pressure suit! And one day, science will seem like magic!'

The Thirst for Cobalt tells the story of Clara, a pilot embarking on a momentous journey in Dédalo-1, an aircraft designed not only with advanced technology but also with the legacy of the inventor Emilio Herrera. As Clara flies, she experiences a profound connection with her aircraft, feeling herself become part of it while reliving childhood memories. During the flight, Clara reflects on her life, the weight of her decisions and the sacrifices of dreamers.

THE THIRST FOR COBALT

José Antonio Pérez Checa

Silence had weight. In the cockpit of Dédalo-1, silence was a dense, almost solid substance, made of the expectation of thousands of hours of engineering and the held breath of a single woman. Clara felt that silence as an additional pressure on top of the pressure the suit already exerted on her body: a second skin of Nomex and circuitry that imprisoned her blood and whispered vital data into her ear. Through the acrylic-glass canopy, the runway was a perfect grey scar in the sleeping landscape of dawn. Beyond it, the world waited. Higher still, the promise.

Now

Nobody spoke the word. It was an unspoken command, an electric current running down her spine. Clara’s hand, sheathed in its technological glove, moved across the illuminated console with a precision rehearsed beyond conscious thought. Her fingers did not tremble. But she felt a cold bead of sweat, rebellious and solitary, begin an infinitely slow journey from the seat, slipping along her back like an icy insect. It was not fear. It was the liturgy. The solemn respect that precedes the desecration of a sacred place. And to her, nothing was more sacred than that translucent abyss beginning precisely where the beast’s titanium wings ended.

It was a scent, subtle, almost imperceptible beneath the antiseptic smell of recycled oxygen, that opened the hatch to another time. A breath of dust and ozone, the fragrance of parched earth after a summer storm whose rain never falls. And every so often, she was no longer in the cockpit.

She was seven. The sun beat straight down on the plateau's dry farmland, splitting the stones and making the air shimmer above the golden stubble. Cicadas drilled into the afternoon with their metallic song, a soundtrack for a motionless world suspended in a bottle of heat. She sat on the farmhouse steps, watching her own sweat darken the dust on her shoes. Boredom was an ocean in which she swam effortlessly. Until the sound came.

It was not thunder. It was a distant, sustained roar that came not from the earth but from the very heart of the sky. She looked up, shielding her eyes with her hand. And saw it. A white wound, an impossible tear drawn with surgical precision across the almost violently blue dome. A scar of pure smoke upon perfection. The aeroplane was only a tiny speck, a silver needle stitching together the two ends of infinity. The sound arrived afterwards, an expanding wave that made the windowpanes vibrate and, somehow, the bones in her chest as well. The rest of the world disappeared.

Only that fleeting line existed, proving that immensity could be broken, that someone had been up there, where everything was blue, and survived to leave a record. In that instant, she did not want to be a pilot. Her child's soul yearned not for the machine but for the gesture. A strange thirst was born within her, an almost physical need to understand that mystery, to feel the dizzying freedom of that clean cut in the fabric of the universe. A thirst that, she learned much later, she could never entirely quench. Only ease, sip by sip.

A flicker of green on the console brought her back to Dédalo-1.

'Systems nominal.' The metallic voice of mission control sounded in her headphones, distant, oblivious to the storm of memories.

Clara adjusted the pressure in her helmet. The suit she wore was an engineering marvel, a personal microcosm capable of withstanding the most brutal G-forces and the most absolute vacuum.

She felt powerful and fragile at once, a centaur of metal and blood. But as her fingers checked the fuel readings and the ailerons' response, her mind made another leap, guided by the sensation of synthetic fabric against her skin. A leap into a garage that smelt of rancid grease and patience.

She was sixteen. Her grandfather's hands were maps. Maps of swollen veins and old scars, with nails permanently stained a black that no soap could conquer. Those hands had dismantled and rebuilt engines

for fifty years, from the earliest SEATs to the turbines of old fighter planes now resting in museums.

One afternoon, while she was helping him clean a stubborn carburettor, Clara told him of her obsession. With the sky. Her grandfather set his tools on the workbench, wiped his hands on a rag that looked dirtier than they were, and regarded her with bright eyes sunk in a sea of wrinkles.

'There was a man...' her grandfather began, in that voice broken by coughing and tobacco. 'A genius from Granada. His name was Emilio Herrera.'

The name meant nothing to her. Her grandfather smiled as though he could read her thoughts.

'You won't find him in your schoolbooks. That's what this country is like: it buries its giants and builds statues to its dwarfs. This man, my girl, long before the Americans and the Russians, when we were still getting about in carts here, already dreamed of travelling to the stars. And he didn't merely dream it. He calculated it.'

Her grandfather went over to a shelf full of jars of screws and orphaned parts and took out an old magazine with fragile, yellowing pages. He opened it with a surgeon's delicacy. On the page was a drawing of a man inside a suit that seemed to have come out of a Verne novel. Silver armour, bulky yet elegant.

'He designed a suit for strolling among the stars,' her grandfather continued, his voice now a reverent murmur. 'An astronaut's pressure suit, he called it. With three layers. One of wool, one of rubber, and on the outside, silk fabric reinforced with steel cables. Think about it, Clara. Silk and steel. Delicacy and strength. He'd thought of everything: heating so you wouldn't freeze to death, a microphone for communication, glass that wouldn't mist up... People laughed, you know. They said he was mad.'

'But he was already there, long before anyone else. The war stopped everything. The dream stayed in a drawer. But the dream existed.'

'And do you know the saddest part, my girl? The Americans asked for that suit of his years later, when they began thinking about the moon. From exile, he helped them. A genius giving his dreams away to others because his own country had turned its back on him. That's what they don't tell you. That great achievements are often built on the silence and oblivion of pioneers.'

That day, Emilio Herrera ceased to be an unknown name and became a recognised figure. The patron of stubborn dreamers. The beacon that would remind her, in her darkest moments, that limits exist only in the minds of those who do not

dare to look up. The thwarted dream of that Andalusian engineer became her personal debt.

A red warning light. An alert. A little red inlet heralding a storm.

‘Initiating ignition sequence.’

Reality struck her with the force of a hammer. Her heart raced, like a runaway drum inside the resonating chamber of her chest. Preparing for this moment had been a road of sacrifice and pain. Fleeting memories, like frames from a film slashed with a razor, assailed her mind.

The metallic taste of blood in her mouth after the centrifuge, her body fighting to remain conscious beneath the brutal weight of nine times the force of gravity.

The weight of her eyelids, like slabs of lead, at three in the morning, trying to decipher an aerodynamics manual that seemed written in a foreign language while the rest of the world slept.

Her mobile phone vibrating silently inside her locker, displaying the missed call from her sister on the day her nephew was born, while she was shut inside a simulator, dying and being reborn again and again in a world of pixels and algorithms. She remembered the frustration of crashing into a digital mountain for the seventeenth time, the crackle of static electricity her only companion, while outside real life, the life of smells and embraces, continued without her.

Every mistake was a small death. Every restart a cold, soulless resurrection, a relentless reminder of the price of perfection. Every step towards that cockpit had been a scar. Every hour of flight an hour stolen from life. But now, sitting at the tip of that obedient arrow, it all made sense. It was an act of almost religious faith.

Five. Four.

Clara closed her eyes for a moment. And thought of the other suit. Not hers, but his. She imagined the friction of silk against rubber, the coldness of braided steel cables, the weight of a dream too large for an age too small. Her flight was no longer hers alone. It was the culmination of a silent conversation across the decades.

Her suit, with its sensors and controlled microclimate, was the answer to the questions Herrera had asked himself, alone in the half-light of his study, almost a century before.

Every parameter now appearing on her screens echoed one of his calculations, made with a ruler and logarithms. That flight was the word completing the sentence history had left unfinished.

Three. Two. One. Ignition.

A thunderous sound erupted from the beast’s innards. First a deep vibration, like the steady beat of an artificial heart awakening. Then a roar that grew until it devoured the silence, the world, the entire universe. The force crushed her against the seat, an enormous invisible hand stealing her breath. Dédalo-1 broke free of its earthly bonds with a controlled fury and hurled itself towards the cobalt dome.

Earth. Blue. Bluer still.

Speed was a drug, a distortion of reality. The landscape became a green and brown blur, ever more distant, ever more abstract. She pierced the clouds, an ephemeral bank of mist, and emerged on the other side, in a realm where the sun burned unfiltered and the sky was no longer blue. It was turning a deep, dark indigo, the colour that precedes eternal night.

Clara released the breath she had not known she was holding. She eased her grip on the controls, letting herself and the machine breathe as a single entity. She looked down. The curvature of the Earth was no longer a formula in a book but an evident, humble truth. A fragile blue line, the atmosphere, separated life from nothingness. Up there, time curved.

Concepts such as ‘yesterday’ and ‘tomorrow’ lost their meaning, becoming mere coordinates on a map she could no longer use. Only now existed, that absolute and perfect present. She disengaged the autopilot for a moment, just to feel the beast’s pulse directly in her hands. Dédalo-1 was not a hostile machine; it was an extension of her own body, a titanium skeleton that allowed her to inhabit the impossible. She felt immense gratitude, not only towards the engineers who had built it but towards the entire invisible chain of dreamers who had come before her.

She thought of the little girl gazing at a scar of smoke, consumed by a thirst she did not understand. She thought of her grandfather and his grease-stained hands, telling the story of a forgotten dreamer. She thought of Herrera, of his silk-and-steel suit that had never felt the cold of the stratosphere.

She was there for all of them. She was not alone in the cockpit. Travelling with her were the weight and lightness of all the flights that had never been, all the dreams that had died in a drawer. Her hand traced a new line in the void, an answer to the question a genius from Granada had cast into the universe almost a hundred years before.

What if...?

Up there, in the silent immensity where colours die and stars are born, Clara smiled. She had eased the thirst. For a moment, at least. And that moment was eternity.

The Origin of the Red Wind Jacket tells how, on a silent Mars governed by routine, a girl named Cira discovers the story of the red wind jacket, a symbol of human memory and dreams. León tells her about Emilio Herrera, who inspired generations of astronauts. Through sewing a symbolic jacket, Cira learns that mending is also a way of preserving memory.

THE ORIGIN OF THE RED WIND JACKET

Salvador Vázquez Pérez Grovas

The days on Mars did not pass; they accumulated. Each cycle of artificial light was an exact replica of the one before, an echo without an origin. But for the girl, something had changed. The man’s words had planted a garden of impossible images in her mind: trees that creaked, a sea that cried out, and leaves that danced before they died. Now the silence of the dome seemed deeper, and the recycled air more insipid.

She went looking for him again. She found him in the same place, beside the auxiliary hatch, but this time he was not sewing. He held the jacket in his lap, his eyes closed, as though listening to distant music trapped among its fibres. The girl, who was no longer merely a Martian but the heir to an earthly curiosity, sat beside him without a word. The silence between them was a bridge, not a void. He was the one to break it.

‘Do you know why it’s this colour?’ he asked, stroking the faded red cloth with a familiarity that spoke of years.

She shook her head, absorbed in the movement of his hands.

‘They called it “the red wind jacket”. Because on Earth the wind sometimes carried the dust of distant deserts, or the colour of the setting sun. You couldn’t see it, but you could feel it. It was a wind with a memory.’

‘The wind is red here too,’ she said, thinking of the iron-oxide storms that sometimes battered the world outside. ‘But it has no memory. It only has sand.’

The man smiled with a gentle sadness. ‘Exactly. The wind here screams, but it tells you nothing. Earth’s wind whispered stories. And this jacket... this jacket is one of those stories.’

The girl moved a little closer, her fascination overcoming the formal distance everyone in the colony maintained. ‘Is it yours?’

He looked at her, and his eyes seemed to travel across decades, across millions of kilometres of emptiness. ‘No. It is the story of a man who dreamed of this,’ he said, his gesture encompassing the dome, the reddish ground visible through the reinforced glass, the very act of being there. ‘A man who never set foot on the Moon, much less on Mars, but who taught us to breathe in a vacuum.’

He settled himself, feeling the weight of his own body in the Martian gravity, which had never ceased to feel like an absence.

‘His name was Emilio Herrera. He was born in a place on Earth called Andalusia, a land of sunlight so strong it bleached the walls of houses and made the air shimmer above the tarmac. I imagine him as a boy, listening to the hum of cicadas during hot afternoon siestas, smelling jasmine at night. Sounds and scents that anchor you to the earth. Perhaps that is why he felt such a great need to look upwards, to seek an escape route in the blue. He wasn’t an astronaut like me. In fact, I am an astronaut partly thanks to him. He was a visionary. An engineer who looked at the sky and saw not just clouds or stars, but pathways.’

‘You see, long before space agencies existed, when flying was still a recent and dangerous miracle, Emilio was already thinking about how to leave the atmosphere. His colleagues saw him as an eccentric, a dreamer too far ahead of his time. They talked of improving engines, of flying faster, but he talked of surviving where there was no air. People thought the sky was infinite, but he knew it had a boundary, a blue skin that protected us. And he dreamed of looking beyond it. In 1935, long before anyone else did so, he designed the first spacesuit in history. He called it a “stratonautical suit”.’

The girl frowned. The word was long and complicated.

‘Like our suits?’

‘Like the grandfather of your suits,’ he corrected her. ‘It was... simpler and, at the same time, infinitely more complex, because he was inventing it from scratch. He had no computers to do his calculations for him. He had his mind, paper, pencil and an immense faith in the laws of physics. The suit he imagined had three layers. One of wool, for the cold of space, a cold unlike anything else, a cold that is the absence of all warmth. Another of rubber, to maintain pressure, so your blood wouldn’t boil in your veins. And an outer layer of silver, so the sun wouldn’t cook you inside it.’

As he spoke, his hands moved over the red jacket as though its seams were the map of that story.

‘Inside the helmet, which was made of steel and glass, he put a microphone. Do you know what for?’

‘To talk to the base?’

‘That too. But above all, to describe what he saw. He used to say that an explorer who doesn’t communicate what he discovers is merely a tourist. He wanted to tell the world how the Earth curved from up there, how our planet was a blue-and-white sphere floating in solitude. He wanted to tell it over the radio. He wanted to tell it to the air.’

The girl imagined a solitary man suspended in darkness, his voice travelling over the airwaves to describe a miracle.

‘And did he? Did he go up?’

León, for that was the man’s name, sighed. The air whistled softly as it left his lungs. ‘No. Earth’s history is... complicated. War broke out in his country. A war of brothers against brothers, the worst kind of all. Emilio’s dream had to wait. His suit was never built. The balloon that was supposed to carry him into the stratosphere was used for something else. Knowledge is sometimes used to build, and sometimes to destroy. His moment passed.’

A heavy silence settled between them. The girl felt a strange tightness in her chest, a sorrow for a dream that was not hers, for a man she had never known.

‘Then... this jacket isn’t his?’

‘Not directly. I made this one many years ago, when I was a young pilot dreaming of the stars and read his story in old archives. It seemed a profound injustice that his name had almost been lost to time. I felt it was a duty to remember him. So it is a replica, a personal tribute. Not of his silver

suit, but of the flying jackets of his day. I chose this colour, the colour of the wind with a memory, to remember that all of this’—and once again he indicated the Martian universe around them—‘began with a dream born beneath the Andalusian sun. It began with Herrera. He was the first to design a suit with the movement of arms and legs in mind, with self-contained breathing, with communication.’ León paused, looking intently at Cira. ‘Believe me, Cira, the day I stepped out of the spacecraft for the first time and set foot in lunar dust, I thought of him. All of us who have walked on the Moon or across this red desert walk upon his shoulders. We wear suits that are the children of his.’

Cira stretched out her fingers and touched the fabric again. Now she felt more than roughness and warmth. She felt the weight of a story, the texture of an interrupted dream.

‘You said... you would give it to me if I learned to sew.’

León looked at her steadily. In the girl’s gaze there was no longer mere curiosity, but a kind of determination. He saw in her the same spark Herrera must have had, the need to understand, to connect, to build.

‘Yes. I did.’

‘I want to learn,’ she declared, with the firm voice of someone who has just found a purpose.

And so the lessons began. Every cycle, Cira came to the auxiliary hatch. León brought her a metal needle, large and rather unwieldy for her small fingers, and a spool of silver thread. They did not practise on the jacket. That would have been sacrilege. They used scraps of old uniforms, the same practical synthetic fabric they wore every day.

At first Cira’s fingers were clumsy. She pricked herself; the thread tangled into impossible knots. León was in no hurry to teach her. He spoke to her of rhythm, of the right tension.

‘Sewing isn’t just joining two pieces of cloth,’ he would tell her in his measured voice. ‘It is an act of patience. It means understanding that, to create something strong, every stitch counts. One weak stitch can undo all your work. It’s like building a spacecraft. Or a life.’

Cira listened and practised. She learned that the thread must be neither too tight, for it would tear the cloth, nor too loose, for the seam would be useless. She found a strange peace in that repetitive act. In her world, information appeared and disappeared on screens, fleeting and weightless. But a seam was different. It was a permanent line,

a physical decision that could not be undone with a simple command. Each stitch was a commitment. The act of creating something real and tangible with her own hands was revolutionary.

As they sewed, León told her more. Not just about Herrera, but about Earth. He spoke of the feel of sheep’s wool, rough and warm, and how it smelt when wet. He described silk, soft and cool as the water of a stream.

‘This stuff we’re sewing,’ he said one day, pointing to the synthetic scrap, ‘is dead fabric. It was born in a laboratory. It has no memory. But Earth’s fabrics were alive. They held the sun, the rain and the wind in their fibres. That’s why mending something made from those materials was like caring for a living being. You prolonged its existence.’

One day, after many weeks, León brought the red jacket and reverently laid it across the girl’s knees.

‘There is a little tear beside the left pocket. Look. The original thread has broken.’

Cira examined the wound in the cloth. It was small, but now she understood it was not merely a hole. It was a memory being lost. With infinite care, she threaded the needle with the silver thread. Her hands no longer trembled. She pushed the needle into the old fabric and felt its resistance, a texture laden with time. She made the first stitch. Then the second. Each movement was deliberate, precise. It was not a robot’s task but a craftswoman’s ritual. As she sewed, she felt she was joining not merely two edges of fabric, but a past to a future, a man’s dream to a girl’s hands.

When she finished, the seam was almost invisible, a small silver scar on the red cloth. She looked at León. The man’s eyes were moist, but not with sadness. It was a different emotion, one Cira had never seen before.

‘What is of no use is all that remains,’ she whispered, repeating the words he had spoken at their first meeting.

‘And what is mended will live for ever,’ he finished, placing a hand on the girl’s shoulder. ‘Because it will carry the memory of whoever cared for it.’

León did not tell her to keep the jacket. Not yet. But they both knew the handover had already happened. It was not a transfer of ownership, but of guardianship.

Cira was no longer simply a Martian girl. She was the seamstress of a dream, the guardian of a red wind that had travelled from the Andalusian sun to the heart of a silent planet.

That night, as the dome's lights dimmed to simulate the artificial twilight of a lost world, Cira did not think of the trees she had never climbed or the seas she would never swim in. Those were borrowed images, echoes of a planet that was not hers. Instead, she thought of the feel of silver thread beneath her fingers and the resistance of the old fabric. She thought of a man who, armed only with paper, pencil and the audacity of imagination, had drawn a path to the stars from a sunlit room in Andalusia.

A man whose dream, like a patient seed, had travelled through emptiness and war, through oblivion and time, finally to germinate here, in the red heart of a silent planet, through a girl's hands. It was then that Cira understood that memory was not a data archive to consult, but a fabric to mend and tend.

She understood that the true legacy lay not in great deeds engraved on monuments, but in the invisible threads connecting a dream to an action, one generation to the next. The most important stories, the ones that truly keep us alive, are not written in books or stored in the cold logic of a computer.

Those stories, the essential ones, are sometimes simply sewn with silver thread and told to the air.

The Key to Everything tells the story of Clara, who receives a mysterious envelope containing an old photograph that connects her to Emilio Herrera Linares, a fascinating figure linked to Spain’s military history and space exploration. Her investigation takes her from Madrid to Granada, unearthing secrets and clues in forgotten places that seem to emerge from the past.

THE KEY TO EVERYTHING

Paloma Bárcena López

The newsroom was almost empty when Clara opened the envelope. There was no sender’s address, no official letterhead, only rough, yellowish paper. Inside was a black-and-white photograph: a man with a thin moustache and a solemn gaze, in an immaculate uniform, posing beside a strange metal framework. It looked like a diving suit, but its rigidity made it something more outlandish, almost otherworldly. On the back, a sentence written in uneven blue ink: The key remains hidden where it all began.

Clara felt a shiver: she had seen that face before. Then she remembered the exhibition at the Institute of Military History and Culture she had visited in Madrid a few years earlier. Her parents, natives of La Alcarria and proud of anything devised in their region, had insisted she visit it because it concerned two military men with strong connections to Guadalajara and the space race. The man in the photograph was undoubtedly one of them, and someone seemed keen for Clara to discover something about him. She looked up information to refresh a memory already meagre at only twenty-five, and rediscovered that her mysterious man was called Emilio Herrera Linares and that no, he was not from Guadalajara but from Granada. She had not told her parents at the time, and she was not going to tell them now.

Outside, Aranjuez resembled a board game in the half-light. She did not know it yet, but that night she had opened a door that had been closed for more than eighty years.

Granada was dawning beneath a shroud of mist when Clara stepped off the train. The message in the envelope had brought her there, following instinct more than logic.

She walked to the university, where a contact of hers, a retired professor of the History of Science, was waiting on the second floor.

‘The story of Herrera is no legend, young lady,’ said the old man as they descended the broad, bright staircase in the university’s entrance hall, a stark contrast to the narrow, dark basement of the Mecenás building, where they went immediately afterwards. The professor opened a rusty door that creaked as though waking from a sleep of several decades. Stale air filled the cramped room, and dust lay on the old laboratory instruments. Among the sagging shelves, Clara felt she was travelling back in time, just as she had when playing in her grandparents’ attic as a little girl. In the darkest corner, half buried beneath splintered boards, a small metal chest emerged. Inside was only a notebook with a worn hard cover and, on the first page, a tangle of strange symbols: numbers, formulae and what looked like an alphanumeric code. Clara realised then that the envelope she had received was only the beginning of a great adventure.

Madrid, 1935

Emilio watches the horizon from the roof of his house. The sun sinks behind the Sierra de Guadarrama, staining it a deep metallic red that reminds him of the inside of a running engine. In his workshop, the prototype stratonautical suit rests like a sleeping giant, waiting for a man, one day, to reach the stratosphere and survive where the wind cuts like a knife. His wife calls it ‘the suit of the gods’; his colleagues, by contrast, consider it a dangerous eccentricity. He does not care about their mockery: he knows the future will prove him right. On his desk lies an unopened letter bearing the seal of the Government of the Republic, informing him that the project is about to be approved. As twilight colours the landscape, Emilio daydreams of becoming the first man to behold the curvature of the Earth.

Clara leafed carefully through the notebook. Some pages were covered in formulae, even in the margins; on others, strange geometrical drawings could be discerned. And in the bottom right-hand corner of the final page, almost like an anonymous signature, a sequence of letters was repeated: XQH-L4.

‘A military code?’ she murmured.

The professor shook his head. ‘I don’t know, but Herrera worked with symbols of his own. He was an engineer, a physicist, an aviator. All at once.’

Clara photographed the pages with her mobile. At that moment, something echoed at the far end of the corridor, and the old man gave her an anxious look: they should not be there. Clara should not be there. They switched off the torch and stood in silence for a long while. In the half-light, a shadow moved stealthily. Someone else had entered the Mecenás basement. The feeling of being watched ran through her body, and a lump rose in her throat. The young woman closed the notebook and put it in her bag. Whoever the intruder was, they had just made her investigation far more dangerous than she had imagined.

She left the university clutching her bag to her chest, just as her grandmother did on market days. In the deserted square, more to calm her nerves than out of habit, she lit a cigarette that she eventually threw away without taking a single drag. Then she saw him: a man in a dark suit, far too elegant for a Granada dawn, watching her from a corner. He carried a briefcase and wore sunglasses that concealed his gaze. He began following her at a considerable distance, but made no other move, not even when Clara vanished into the alleyways of the Albaicín. Hours later, as she examined the photographs of the notebook on her laptop screen, the reflection in the hotel window betrayed the man’s presence. He was sitting in a café across the street, looking directly towards her window, and no, he was not an onlooker: he was a guardian. He was in Granada for the same reason she was. Had he too received the envelope with the photograph?

The afternoon in Granada had grown heavy. Clara decided to leave through the hotel’s garage entrance and walk to a nearby café to go over her notes, but she had barely turned the corner when she saw the mysterious man again. He was following her. She quickened her pace. The echo of shoes rang out behind her. Then she remembered a page in the notebook showing an equation surrounded by arrows pointing to a handwritten name in the margin: Santa Isabel. Clara turned sharply into a narrow street climbing towards an old Dominican convent. She pushed the wooden door, which yielded with a groan. Inside, the gloom smelled of wax and incense. The cloister was almost empty, and an elderly nun sweeping the floor looked at her curiously. Clara hid behind a column. She waited. The man in the black suit walked past. She breathed a sigh of relief. Then she looked up and saw it. On one of the convent walls, beneath layers of flaking whitewash, she could make out a fresco depicting an angel with metal wings. And on its robe, painted in tiny strokes, was the same sequence: XQH-L4. The nun allowed her to approach the fresco and, with a slow movement, set aside her broom and whispered:

‘That angel has watched over this convent since the thirties. Nobody knows who painted it.’

Clara stroked the rough wall. The angel’s metal wing looked more like a cog than a feather, as though the artist had wished to conceal a technical message beneath a religious guise. She took several photographs, and when she enlarged them she saw that the inscription was no mere embellishment: the letters seemed to have been painted with a different, steadier hand than the rest of the fresco. It was not just art. It was a map.

Back in Madrid, Clara met Mateo, the TikTok mathematician who had seemed the most trustworthy during her train journey home. They spread the photographs of the fresco and the notebook pages across his office table.

‘It isn’t a military code,’ Mateo murmured, adjusting his glasses. ‘They’re hidden coordinates. Look: the X and the Q refer to Cartesian axes, the H is a height, and... L4 corresponds to a Lagrange point.’

A sudden dizziness took hold of Clara; she understood nothing of what Mateo was telling her.

‘Herrera’s code doesn’t point to a word, Clara. It points to a place.’

Mateo typed on his computer and plotted the decoded coordinates on a map. The point shone on the screen: Cuatro Vientos airfield, in Madrid. Clara then remembered the sentence in the envelope: ...where it all began.

Madrid, 1936.

Engines roar on the runway at Cuatro Vientos. Herrera watches the young aviators training beneath a sky increasingly charged with political gunpowder. He knows his country is falling apart. In his briefcase he carries documents he must not lose: plans for the pressure suit, formulae on pressurisation and sketches of a stratospheric balloon. Before leaving the base, he hands a metal box to a trusted pupil.

‘Protect it. One day someone will know what to do with this,’ he told him.

The outbreak of the Civil War shattered his dream of ascending to the stratosphere, and instead of looking to the heights, Spain drowned in its own blood. What Herrera could not foresee was that the box, forgotten in a hangar, would survive the decades, waiting for someone to follow the trail of his legacy.

Cuatro Vientos airfield looked like an open-air museum, with the occasional vintage light aircraft among the Cessnas used for pilot training scattered along the runway.

The rusting hangars overwhelmed her with their outrageous size and silence. Clara moved with the caution her investigation demanded among the shadows of those metal monsters until she found the hangar the coordinates had indicated. It had been closed for decades. With some effort, though less than she expected, she slid the old doors just far enough apart to squeeze her slender body through. She was marvelling at the vastness of the space when a sudden noise at the back of the hangar caught her attention. It was the man in the dark suit, holding a metal box. Her heart was about to leap from her chest. It matched the description in Herrera’s diary. It was no rumour: the box existed.

‘Don’t bother. There’s nothing of interest in this box.’

‘Who are you?’ Clara asked, her voice faltering.

‘Let’s say I represent those who understand the value of Herrera’s legacy, and I’m not going to find it here.’

Paris, 1941

Emilio Herrera rests his forehead against the misted windowpane. From there he hears the cold breathing of a subjugated city. His makeshift workshop in exile amounts to a table, a lamp and memories of a lost country. The pressure suit has remained in Spain, guarded by soldiers who will never understand its purpose. Yet rumours that American scientists have shown interest in his designs are growing. Herrera keeps silent. Torn between pride and bitterness, he realises that his legacy might travel higher than he ever imagined, but without his name being engraved in history. With trembling hands, he writes a warning in his diary: If this invention falls into the wrong hands, the sky will become a new trench.

The man took a few steps towards Clara and handed her the box disdainfully. She pressed it to her body, and when she managed to open the rusty lock, she held her breath. She found no weapons plans or futuristic prototypes; inside was only a bundle of yellowing letters handwritten by Emilio himself. She read them standing, breathing fast. In them, the engineer confessed his fears: that his suit would be used by armies for war, and that the dream of exploring the stratosphere would become an excuse to dominate the sky. Science is a double-edged sword, he wrote. In wise hands it opens paths, but in clumsy hands it destroys horizons.

This was no technical treasure, but a moral testament. Herrera had hidden not plans, but his own conscience. And suddenly she understood something the man in the suit had failed to appreciate: that secret ran deeper than any invention.

Paris, 1945.

Emilio closes his eyes and, for a moment, imagines himself rising inside his stratospheric balloon. He sees himself clad in the pressure suit, his lungs unharmed, his gaze fixed on the blue curvature of the Earth. The murmur of war falls away. Beneath his feet, humanity seems a fragile seashell, unable to comprehend the magnitude of the universe around it. He watches his dream dissolve in the dimness of the room: he will never fly so high, never test his invention. But he knows that somehow his suit will open new paths. Perhaps other men will succeed later. And in their suits, though no one says it aloud, his name will echo.

Clara let the letters fall onto the hotel table. The digital files she had scanned shimmered like a mirage on her laptop screen, and a single click would carry Emilio’s warning across decades of silence. Only a few would understand it, but the world had to know Herrera’s message. Now more than ever. She closed her eyes and clicked ‘send’.

From: Investigative Journalist 2

To: Editor-in-Chief

Subject: Space is for dreaming, not for conquering.

Seams of Infinity highlights the profound connection between the human desire to transcend physical and metaphysical limits, symbolised in the story of Emilio Herrera. Through philosophical references to Plato, Nietzsche and Pascal, it emphasises humanity’s drive to fly and explore the unknown.

SEAMS OF INFINITY

Sergio Motos Fuentes

Plato said that the human soul is like a winged chariot yearning to rise towards the world of ideas. Ever since, the dream of flight has been not merely a physical challenge, but a metaphor for the eternal desire to transcend.

Thousands of years later, Nietzsche would write that man is a bridge and not a goal: a being in transit, destined to surpass himself. Looking at the sky, building wings and machines, or designing suits to reach the stratosphere... all answer to that same impulse: to escape the gravity of the human and brush against the divine.

And I think of this now as I adjust the airtight seals of my spacesuit in the silent corridors of the spacecraft Aurora. I am not the first to try; before me, others dreamed of crossing the frontier of the air. One of those dreamers was Emilio Herrera Linares, an Andalusian engineer who, in a country torn apart by wars, conceived a pressure suit to explore the height where the air dies and the realm of the stars begins.

The philosopher Pascal shuddered at ‘the eternal silence of these infinite spaces’. But Herrera did not tremble: he looked straight into them. It was not simply a matter of reaching higher than anyone else; it was, as he put it, an act of knowledge, a duty to humanity. ‘Man must prepare to ascend to where the air dies out,’ he wrote. And those words contain as much metaphysics as science: the conviction that at the limit of the sky lies a limit of the human too.

Perhaps that is why, as I put on this suit, a hybrid of future polymers and past dreams, I feel I am clothing myself not merely in a technical device, but in a tradition

stretching back millennia: that of Icarus, of Leonardo and of the pioneers who burned their wings in the attempt to see beyond. But above all, the tradition of a man, Emilio, who knew how to hear the same call as Plato, Nietzsche or Pascal, and translated it into valves, seams and pressurised metal.

Now, on the verge of descending to a strange world orbiting another star, I wonder whether I am truly the one taking this step, or whether I am merely the vehicle of a desire that runs through us as a species: to break through the sky, to remember who we are.

The ground of the exoplanet trembles beneath my magnetic boots. Every step I take on this strange surface reminds me of what Heidegger wrote: man is a being thrown into the world. Here, on this world alien to Earth, those words resonate with a different echo: we have not merely been thrown into existence; now we have thrown ourselves towards the stars.

The Aurora mission was supposed to be routine: collecting atmospheric samples and recording the chemical composition of the lilac oceans boiling beneath our spacecraft. But the cosmos rarely respects human routines. A metallic roar shakes the air, if this air can be called that, and a colossal flash of lightning, an impossible blue, cuts through the atmosphere like a wound in the sky.

The sensors go wild and the radiation rises. The spacecraft in orbit warns me that this planet's magnetic field is unstable: a solar storm has reached us without warning.

My team shouts at me through the communicator, but I can barely hear their voices. I hear only the creaking of the suit and my own rapid breathing. The temperature rises and the electronic systems fail one by one. For an instant, I feel the primal fear Pascal described: terror before 'the infinity of spaces that surround and engulf me'.

And then something happens that I did not expect.

The suit holds. Where the digital systems collapse, the old logic of valves, filters and pressurised layers stands firm. Where the technology of the future fails, the legacy survives of an engineer who, in 1935, understood the essential truth: that the human body needs no miracles, only shelter from absolute cold and vacuum.

I think of Emilio Herrera and his exile in France, of the bitterness of watching his invention slumber in the drawers of oblivion while other countries conquered space. What would he think if he could see me now, surviving thanks to ideas he sketched in pencil in a notebook?

Perhaps what Nietzsche wrote is true: some men are bridges, not destinations. Herrera was that invisible bridge, linking the turbulent Spain of his time to my improbable present, in which I walk on a planet twenty light years from home.

At this moment I understand: I am not here to discover a new world, but to prove that one man's dreams can sustain an entire species.

The suit is not made of polymers. It is made of memory and hope.

And as I withstand the storm, I understand that, somehow, Emilio Herrera has reached this place too.

The solar storm strikes the planet's surface like a cosmic hammer, and every impact of radiation makes the helmet ring with a metallic echo. My internal systems fail, one after another. The control panel goes dark, and for an instant I am left alone in the half-light of my own breathing.

And then I hear him.

'Don't be afraid.'

The voice does not come from the communicator. It cannot come from there: the lines are dead and the interference is total. It is a deep, serene voice.

'Who... who's there?' I ask, knowing that no one should answer me.

'Someone who dreamed of this path long before it existed.'

I see him then, not with my eyes but with my memory. An ethereal figure, barely a human glow outlined against the horizon of violet clouds. He wears an old uniform, with the dignity of another age.

'Emilio...' I whisper.

The glowing figure nods, and in that gesture there is more humanity than in any hologram or projection aboard the spacecraft.

'You have come further than I ever could,' he says. 'But you are not here alone. Every valve and every seam around you is my voice, my obstinacy and my faith that one day someone would walk where I could only imagine.'

A flash of lightning splits the sky in two and I stagger. The suit creaks under the pressure, but holds. And I understand that I am not the one sustaining it: he is, his ingenuity and his determination.

‘I thought history had condemned me to silence,’ he continues. ‘But now I see that dreams do not die: they become paths for others.’

I feel tears burning behind my eyelids, although the temperature is freezing.

‘Thank you,’ I tell him.

He smiles, as though those words were enough.

The storm grows fiercer, but his figure stands firm beside me, lit by electrical flashes. And for an instant, amid the chaos, the loneliness disappears: I am not an astronaut lost on a remote planet; I am the heir to a dream.

‘Take the step, daughter of the future,’ he tells me. ‘Not for yourself, not for me. Do it for all those who still dare not look towards the sky.’

The glow dissolves into the storm, but the voice remains within me. And when I lift my boot and move across the unstable ground, I know I do not walk alone.

I walk with Emilio Herrera.

Another blast shakes the atmosphere. The horizon opens like an abyss of violet and blue fire, and I feel the planet’s gravity twisting beneath my feet, as though that world wished to cast me off its skin.

The systems in my suit flash red alarms: unstable oxygen, falling pressure and risk of structural failure. Every beep is a cruel reminder: a single mistake, a small tear in the invisible fabric separating me from the vacuum, is enough to turn me to ash.

‘Don’t stop,’ Emilio whispers.

‘I can’t go on,’ I reply, my voice trembling.

‘Yes, you can. Because this is the moment I waited for all my life,’ he answers.

The planet’s unreal wind becomes a blade. My boots sink into viscous terrain, and for the first time the ground gives way. Beneath the surface crust churns a

boiling ocean of liquid metals, as though that world breathed with a heart of fire.

The spacecraft calls to me, shouting over the radio: interference, broken orders and voices I cannot understand. I hear only him.

‘The suit is not your prison. It is your temple,’ he tells me.

‘I’m going to die here...’ I whisper.

‘We all die. What matters is where we leave our mark.’

A creak brings me back to reality: one of the suit’s seals has opened by a millimetre. The air in my lungs freezes instantly.

I fall to my knees.

Then I see him. I do not know whether it is a vision, madness or a revelation: Emilio bends towards me, ethereal yet solid, and places a hand over the crack in my suit. An impossible, absurd gesture, but I feel the pressure stabilise, although the indicators remain red.

‘What... what are you doing?’ I gasp.

‘Not me. You. You are remembering me,’ he says with an inhuman calm. ‘And as long as you remember me, this suit will hold.’

Tears blind me, but I move forwards. One step. Another. The storm roars around me like a hungry beast. Lightning strikes so close that the ground fractures into incandescent lines, but I keep walking, as though each flash were a torch guiding me.

I look up: on the horizon, amid the torn clouds, something appears that I have never seen on the orbital maps. A tower. No, it is not a tower: it seems to be a natural formation, a column of black crystal rising hundreds of metres, like a finger pointing towards the stars.

The spacecraft does not know it is there. Nobody knows. Yet Emilio smiles.

‘That is why I brought you here,’ he says.

‘What is it?’ I ask, breathless.

‘An answer. Or a question. You decide.’

The ground trembles, the storm grows fiercer, and I feel that every second could be my last. But I do not stop. Because now I am not walking to survive. I walk because that impossible tower calls to me, and because a man dead for more than a century is guiding me towards it.

I stumble onwards. The wind is an invisible lash striking my chest, and the lightning turns the surface into a stage of fleeting shadows.

The tower rises ever closer. It is neither rock nor crystal, nor is it metal: it is a material that seems to absorb the light and return it multiplied in internal flashes.

The communicator crackles. Distant voices, alarms and orders to retreat. I do not reply. I listen only to Emilio, who walks beside me as though none of this affected him.

‘I always knew that what mattered lay beyond the air,’ he says. ‘The stratosphere was not an end, but a threshold. And you have crossed it for me.’

‘What do you want to show me?’ I ask, gasping.

He does not answer. He points to the tower.

I draw closer. As I walk around it, I discover that it has no doors, no cracks, no visible entrances. But the suit reacts: my sensors activate of their own accord, as though recognising a signal I do not understand. The visor projects red lines, a geometrical pattern that vibrates across the black surface.

‘This... isn’t natural,’ I murmur.

‘Nothing in the cosmos is entirely so,’ Emilio replies. ‘Every world has a message inscribed within it. Some call it chance; others call it destiny.’

The surface pulses. And then it happens: the tower opens silently, sliding like an eyelid to reveal a luminous interior. A pure white light that does not hurt my eyes enfolds me like an embrace.

My heart quickens. The life-support systems stabilise, against all logic. The air inside the opening is breathable. Slowly I remove my helmet, hesitating... and breathe. The air is cold and gentle, almost sweet.

‘How is it possible...?’

‘Because you are not alone,’ Emilio replies, and for the first time his voice breaks, as though emotion were passing through him.

I walk inside. The space opens into an immense chamber with no visible walls, only light and silence. And in the centre, suspended in the air, a dark sphere turns slowly, showing reflections of planets, stars and constellations on its surface.

The sphere stops at a point. The image draws closer: Earth. Blue and vibrant, surrounded by infinite blackness.

‘Home,’ I whisper.

Emilio takes his place beside me. He is no longer merely a glow: now I see him clearly. His tired eyes, his thin moustache and the dignity in the bearing of a man who endured defeats without allowing himself to be defeated.

‘Man has always sought answers in the sky,’ he says. ‘But the sky is not a limit. It is a mirror. What you see there is not a destination: it is your reflection.’

The sphere darkens. And another image appears in its place: the stratospheric suit, turning slowly in the light, as though that invention had been engraved in the memory of the cosmos.

My lips tremble.

‘Your suit... is here.’

Emilio smiles.

‘Because true dreams are never lost. They remain inscribed, like seeds, waiting for someone to find them.’

The tower trembles. The storm outside intensifies, as though the planet itself were roaring against our presence.

‘You must go back,’ he says.

‘And you?’

His eyes look at me with infinite tenderness.

‘I never crossed the threshold. I only dreamed of it. And now, thanks to you, I can rest.’

His figure begins to fade, dissolving into the very light that surrounds us.

‘Emilio...’ I whisper.

‘Remember’—his voice rings out like an echo vibrating in my bones—‘we do not travel alone. Every step towards the stars is the echo of those who dreamed before us.’

The chamber dissolves. The tower disappears. And I find myself outside again, my helmet sealed, the storm abating and the spacecraft calling me.

I move forwards, certain that I have not seen an illusion.

I have seen a legacy.

I return to the spacecraft. My crewmates greet me with embraces and cheers, but in my heart the victory is not mine. It belongs to all those who dreamed.

That night, before sleeping, I write in the mission log:

‘Plato gave us wings. Pascal reminded us of the abyss. Nietzsche urged us to cross the bridge. Heidegger threw us into the world. And Emilio Herrera clothed us to walk among the stars.’

I turn off the light. And as cosmic silence enfolds the spacecraft, I know that the dream continues, that it will live on in others, in those not yet born. Because the wonderful thing about true dreams is that they belong not to those who imagine them, but to those who inherit them.

And so, on the threshold of an unknown planet, I understand that humanity does not walk alone. It walks accompanied by the voices of all those who have ever raised their eyes to the sky.

And among them, clear as a star in the night, one will echo for ever:

Emilio Herrera Linares.

The Comic Book Artist recounts the experience of an artist immersed in creating a comic about the life of Emilio Herrera Linares. Through his panels, the author blends reality and fantasy, imagining Herrera as a hero.

THE COMIC BOOK ARTIST

Lourdes Aso Torralba

I always liked carrying pencils in my pockets and hardback notebooks, even on holiday. Without them I felt naked, although my wife Iris did not always understand. I never knew whether it bothered her. I came to believe she did not take my profession seriously because she disliked my ability to provoke laughter and horror at the same time, exaggerate tragedy and distort reality.

The year we chose Granada for our holiday, she booked tickets to the Alhambra well in advance. Muslim culture fascinated her, and with her name of a goddess of the stars, she might well have been the reincarnation of Cleopatra, the ancient queen of Egypt, for she walked beside me dazzling the other tourists, as though she had just arrived from another age and were about to rise from the ashes.

Perhaps it was fate, but on our way back to the hotel to change our shoes, we wandered past the gates of San José Cemetery. Going inside for a few minutes seemed obligatory: enough illustrious figures lay there that we could hardly pass up the opportunity to visit their graves.

Beside the trunk of a cypress tree, a baby sparrow had fallen. It was trying to fly, but could not. It must have been less than a week old. The sound of our feet on the gravel frightened it, and seeing the creature’s fragility, I felt I was intruding on far more than the silence of a resting place. I understood how fleeting life was. I thought of all the people I had said farewell to. Of what they had done with their lives, and whether that eternal question, What if...?, might have changed history.

We greeted the gravediggers, who were busy with the early pruning, and they told us that three avenues further down, if we turned left, we would come face to face with the grave of Emilio Herrera Linares, the scientist and aeronautical engineer known for inventing the stratonautical suit and serving as President of the Republic in exile.

We walked on together. She for the pleasure of a newspaper exclusive. As for me, the pencil was already escaping from my pocket to make the first sketches, mixing biographical details with others pulled out of a hat.

Iris, my wife, knew what came next. The sound of graphite on paper set her teeth on edge. And she had to give me space for at least a few hours if she did not want things to end in tragedy. I imagined her praying to Our Lady of Sorrows to bring me down from the sky, preferably with a parachute.

I did not know how to explain that before me stood the Superman of the early twentieth century, that I could truly clothe him in a gleaming metallic cape which would have protected him from the sun's radiation had he been able to ascend to eighty-two thousand feet as he intended. That I wanted to make him walk on the Moon hand in hand with Neil Armstrong. Although that erroneous detail missed the real chronology by a mere two years, in my panels the hero enjoyed immortality.

Such feats required scientific rigour. Commercial aircraft had a flight ceiling of forty-two thousand feet, and exceeding those twelve thousand eight hundred metres of altitude meant facing limitations in the engines and the pressurisation of the fuselage, since as density decreased they could not generate enough thrust to stay aloft.

On paper, I could make things fly that could not fly, and show the world a legend's life in a simple way.

I stood frozen before his headstone. 'Do not mourn him. Paint him.' My wife told me to read it properly: it said 'imitate me', from the verb to imitate, but she gave me up as a lost cause.

I did not dare tell her what had passed through my mind. Paranormal phenomena amused her because, she said, they had no scientific basis, and unless something was documented it was a matter of perception. For her, what one saw was one thing. What one thought one had seen was another. She believed I had reached a point in my career where I could no longer distinguish reality from fantasy very well, and that many of my creations were the fruit of madness; otherwise, how could I think of turning a beautiful smile into a grotesque grimace more suited to a ninot carnival figure?

Her analytical mind clashed head-on with my eclecticism, although perhaps that was why our worlds met in some galaxy to restore our balance.

I felt as though my pupil were adjusting to the eyepiece of a telescope and, on the other side, Don Emilio himself were pointing at me, asking me to draw him in my panels. It seemed presumptuous until I thought I heard:

'Mind you, be careful what you do,' he had added, faithful to his noble, sovereign principles.

The normal thing would have been to see stars, one of those lunar eclipses that occurred once every hundred and sixty thousand years, but what I perceived was a kind of summons I could not escape. 'Do not mourn. Paint me.'

Iris questioned me with her eyes, as though weighing up whether that life might produce a comic that would send me soaring, only to force me to land in the humiliation of failure.

During our evening walk through the military area of the Alcazaba, my mind was already flying. Every place seemed prophetic. We dined by candlelight to Sephardic music in a restaurant very near the Jewish quarter, as though in answer to my wife's prayers to Our Lady of Sorrows. I remembered Einstein, his journeys through Spain and the friendship he had formed with Don Emilio before the Nazi regime in his native Germany persecuted him for being Jewish and forced him into exile in Princeton, in the United States.

I had to make an effort not to start drawing until we reached the hotel. Iris would not have forgiven me, for we rarely had time to spend together. The suite was large. There was a space to work where the light would not disturb her sleep. I worked away all night.

I opened the first caption box to note down information about Emilio at the Cuatro Vientos Aerodynamic Laboratory, also crucial to the development of Don Juan de la Cierva's autogyro. The laboratory's closed tunnel began to come alive beneath my pencil. A journey through time without miscalculations. Without interference. With algorithms escaping from my head.

Herrera himself seemed to emerge from the 'action panel', giving orders on how to measure precisely the air circulating through the circuit as he tested aircraft propellers.

From time to time, they chatted with Einstein. Numbers spilled from one man's brain, while the other flew aeroplanes across the ocean; somehow, though, the theory

of relativity converged with the desire to conquer space, where the force of gravity, or its absence, had its own peculiar significance.

I filled the speech bubbles with humorous dialogue. Above all, though, I worked on the drawings so that they would clearly illustrate the suit later used by NASA to reach the Moon. I took pains to show the microphone it was equipped with, the barometer and even the anti-fog system, as well as the bellows design at the knees and elbows that would let him move more comfortably while collecting results in the stratosphere.

At dawn I must have fallen asleep over the table, curled up as far as my body, unused to contortionism, could manage in order to keep my head resting on something.

The sheet with the five panels had fallen to the floor. Iris picked it up carefully, slipped it into a stiff folder and tiptoed out to let me rest while she had breakfast. A coffee addict, she needed to drain two strong cups before she began waking up.

A woman on her own still exerted an attraction on the gentlemen who had made the city of Granada their place of leisure.

‘Are you alone? May I?’

A few moments later came the introductions. Noticing the comic strip took a little longer, according to my wife’s embarrassed account of how events had unfolded.

‘Well now, so you draw? My grandchildren love space adventures. Every month we have to buy them the American Zita or Mighty Jack comics. But I don’t know which series this one on your table belongs to.’

‘It’s my husband’s. He made it last night,’ she must finally have explained, putting an end to any attempt at an advance.

‘Well, in that case, if you don’t mind, I’ll wait here with you so I can pay him my respects. I know a few details of the life of the illustrious Emilio Herrera Linares because here, you know, they tell you whenever they can that he was born on Calle San Isidro in the San Antón district. But like this, with illustrations, surely every child and young person will end up taking an interest in his exploits. Because, as you know, a good comic artist brings out their most human side, makes them cry, grow angry and beseech the heavens, and

that is the beauty of it: without our noticing, they become like family. In fortnightly instalments that keep us on tenterhooks. Has it been running for many Wednesdays since its launch? For heaven’s sake, tell me it hasn’t, because how am I going to find the back issues?’

The man seized the sheet, and there was no getting him to let it go until he had finished reading and examining every last detail, even though I had not coloured it in.

‘Fascinating. Truly fascinating. I can’t wait to read the strip about when he invented Esperanto. Or when he crossed the Strait of Gibraltar between Tétouan and Seville. Did you know that during his exile in France he was visited by undercover NASA agents sent to assess his knowledge of aeronautics, and that Hitler himself even offered him a job at the Berlin Vibrations Laboratory?’

Iris recovered my comic strip shortly before I appeared. The bells of the Church of Santo Domingo were striking ten when my day began. From my wife’s frown, I knew something was wrong. Or that I was not going to like it.

I greeted him politely. The stranger soon introduced himself as a pensioner who had escaped the duty of babysitting his grandchildren. He said he was an avid reader and a comic book collector.

I soon understood what had happened: I had been looking for the work I had spent all night on, and when I could not find it in the room I had assumed Iris had taken it to look over at leisure. She preferred not to have me nearby, hurrying her, because she knew I would ask for her objective opinion.

‘Your wife hasn’t said exactly how many panels you’ve drawn about Emilio Herrera already. I don’t know how you came up with the idea, but you’ve got enough material to last a while. Are you going to send him flying into space, or would you prefer to stick to the facts? It was a pity the war began in Spain. That man had studied every last detail, and his mission could not fail. Will you promise me he’ll reach those eighty-two thousand feet?’

I almost told him I did not know what I was going to do. That I had drawn out of the same impulse as always. And that the comic strip had emerged without much thought.

But the man did not seem ready to give up.

‘Which publisher do you work for?’

At that, my throat went dry. I had no publisher. Most of my strips never saw the light of day. My wife could confirm it.

‘You don’t say! Oh là là. We must do something about that. I have a friend who has a friend... well, you know how connections work. I promise nothing, but I wouldn’t want to miss out on this talent.’

He handed me a card and wrote my telephone number on a napkin, promising to call as soon as he had made his enquiries.

As soon as he left, I told Iris he was just a crank. That he had probably spent the night drinking and was still nursing his hangover. But my wife said she liked what she had seen. And that there could be no better tribute to someone as illustrious as Don Emilio than to keep drawing, in instalments, each of the enthralling chapters of his life.

I was surprised by Iris’s emotion, when she was always so quiet about my work, as though at that instant, with the Alhambra illuminated in the background, she wanted to renew our sacred marriage vows.

Her article on the life of Emilio Herrera Linares focused on a cape his granddaughter had kept, a gleaming cape I drew in my panels, because the discovery deserved the honours due to a Superman who wanted to cross the sky to the stratosphere.

I was drawing the squadron of aircraft in Morocco when I received the stranger’s call announcing that a publisher was interested.

From then on, a new instalment appeared every fortnight, with panels about the life of the soldier, father, husband, President, engineering professor, scientist, politician and exile.

I grew fond of the character. He inspired such respect in me that I sometimes struggled to add a spark of irony or make an embarrassing situation funny.

Since the readers liked him, Herrera Linares kept appearing at the newsstands.

I neither mourned him nor imitated him. Painting him was enough.

Living in a Pressure Suit recounts a vivid, complex dream in which the protagonist assumes the identity of Emilio Herrera. The dream becomes an interdimensional odyssey, taking him to a post-apocalyptic Paris devastated by an atomic explosion, where his pressure suit protects him from radiation. On waking, he realises he is not Emilio Herrera and laments his own lost opportunities.

LIVING IN A PRESSURE SUIT

Alberto Galache Ladriñán

Every night, when I close my eyes, something within me rises from the bed and sets off on a journey, naturally through the air, somehow compensating for my confinement in this city that everyone wants to visit but that I would like to leave behind and never see again.

I walk along the Champs-Élysées and Boulevard Saint-Michel, and everyone turns to look at me. I do not understand why. Some very small children cry when they see me, and their mothers, dressed in pastel shades and deeply concerned about what people will say, scold them with a severity sheathed in velvet. Other little ones, however, fix their eyes on me with fascinated curiosity and follow me, pestering me with questions, and suddenly I become anxious. I fear that, as on other occasions, one of these children’s faces will be that of my dead son, Emilio, and I do not feel ready to speak to him in this situation. I break into a run, but a great weight slows me down. I walk carefully. If I trip and fall, I shall not be able to get up again.

Just as the mob of ragamuffins is about to catch me, I realise I am in a dream and can do whatever I wish. I leave Paris and, wondering where I might go, can think of no choice but my native city, Granada. I summon it as I knew it as a child, enormous and magical. In keeping with my mood, I appear on the Paseo de los Tristes. But for some reason I cannot raise my head and see the Alhambra and the Generalife, all those views so familiar to me in childhood. And a merciless sun beats down on me as on an anvil. I would like an ice-cold leche rizada on a terrace. I reach the counter of a bar, where everyone stares at me in bewilderment, and order the drink. When the glass stands before me, I try to lift it to my lips, but an obstacle prevents me every time.

I look around for a mirror, find one behind the bar and can finally see myself. I am wearing the helmet of my stratonautical suit. No, I am wearing the entire suit.

I try to take off the helmet, but cannot. My dream self cannot remember the opening mechanism, and however much the people of Granada around me try to help, the cylindrical piece with its rounded top and porthole at the front will not separate from the neck of the suit to let me drink. At that very moment I realise I shall not be able to take off the suit until I reach my destination. A dream is a game the unconscious plays with itself, and each of these games sets its own rules. Tonight's rule is this: unless I complete the journey, I shall not get out of the suit.

Since in dreams my intellect can master all the complexities that elude me when awake, I see before me, pristine and orderly, the infinite dimensions of space and time, barely glimpsed in my cosmological theory, and at last I find the method I shall use to return home. I use one of these dimensions to return to Paris. There my great secret project awaits me, which, with the scant logic typical of nocturnal imaginings, I am developing in the open air, in full view of everyone.

At the Trocadéro, near the Eiffel Tower, we are building the aircraft Alfonso XIII, which will allow us to return to our country. On both sides of its fuselage we have painted the red, yellow and purple flag, representing the country to which we have all sworn allegiance. A country that a group of treacherous military men took from us. They destroyed everything we had worked so hard to build. Several of them were friends of mine and shared lunches with me, General Staff meetings, even the sacred sacrament of the Eucharist. Yet afterwards they did not hesitate to sow death among their own brothers. They even cut up the fabric of my balloon, the one on whose maiden voyage I was to test the suit from which I now cannot escape, to make raincoats for the soldiers and ensure that at least they would die warm and dry.

But I am forced to take a detour on my journey to our mission's base. In my interdimensional leap from the Granada of my childhood I miscalculated the distance, and now find myself obliged to walk along one of the long avenues radiating like spokes from the Place de l'Étoile, where the Arc de Triomphe stands. I must have gone wrong in some other dimension that has hurled me into a reality that will be, or could be, for everything around me is laid waste, as though swept by the fires of the Apocalypse. Buildings burn and the survivors of the mushroom cloud wander aimlessly around me, dazed by thirst and fever, losing their hair, bleeding beneath their skin. I had already warned of all this; I wrote about it before the Americans dropped their bomb on Japan, but, as usual, no

one listened to me. As a result, my subconscious now feels guilty for failing to make my advice heard, and makes me imagine a Paris in ruins, devastated by the fission of the atomic nucleus. In the invented universe of my dream, the suit protects me from radiation. In reality, it would not. After long minutes of desolation, I can make out in the distance, unscathed despite the bombing, the framework where my aerial vehicle is being built.

As I reach the base, the earth heals beneath my footsteps, the grass grows fresh and green again, the air regains its clarity, and the smell of burnt human flesh, which my helmet could not entirely filter out, disperses in a spring breeze. My dream seems divided into zones of time and possibility, and now I have returned to the territory of hope. I hear cheers around me and wonder why, until I realise. I am Captain Falcon. I am president in exile, leader of an ephemeral nation that barely came into existence. Nothing could be more fitting than an aerial navigator to preside over a country of dreams, transformed into an ideal, into an immaterial substance, if the contradiction may be allowed. I wrap myself in my silver cape, originally designed to protect me from solar radiation and the high temperatures it produces, but which now lends me the majesty of a storybook character, an otherworldly hero like those American children admire in their clumsily drawn comics with their naïve plots.

Many of those cheering me are ordinary men and women who fled the reprisals awaiting them in their places of origin. Some find it hard to obey my orders; they say I am a reactionary and a religious zealot. They do not believe I can guide them back aboard the Alfonso XIII to their native lands. They cannot understand how I can give a monarch's name to an aircraft bearing the emblem of the Republic on its flanks, but I want to explain to them that human beings are made of contradictions. They do not know the quantum theory of matter, according to which a single particle can possess opposing qualities at the same time, until an observer enters the scene to define it. If this can happen with mere matter, what might not be possible with the human soul and an observer of God's stature, whose power is unlimited?

Now I am granted the chance to complete that aborted flight, to undertake that voyage, albeit in the opposite direction. Often, in Paris, I have felt myself beneath an unfamiliar sky, an unusual blue, different from the one that enfolds the heights of my true homeland. At night, when I take it into my head to leave the aggressive glare of what they call the 'City of Light' for the serene firmament of the French countryside, I seem to glimpse other constellations overhead, forming other patterns, the outlines of other mythological heroes, and then I understand the truth. I am not in another country: I am on another planet. Perhaps in another universe. I should have recognised the fact from subtle clues, such as the natives' taste for frogs' legs, unworthy of

civilised people. I know some in my own country eat them, but this merely proves that our planet was once visited by inhabitants of other worlds. It must have been a fashion imported by explorers whose craft made forced landings in Extremadura or Valencia.

Now it is time to return. I shall take off the suit only to breathe the air of my true country. But deep down there ought to be only one country: that is why we fly, to abolish distances, to connect places that would otherwise remain isolated. The Alfonso XIII will serve not only to travel to the Spanish Republic. It will also carry back to their lost homes all those men and women rendered stateless by wars, dictatorships and totalitarian regimes. My construction crews include not only Spaniards but Hungarians, Algerians, Brazilians, Latin Americans in general, every nationality. I address them in Esperanto, the universal language conceived to facilitate communication among all the different peoples. But since Esperanto is a combination of Romance languages, I cannot help using a variant of the word *cielo*, sky or heaven, which resonates so strongly within me, physically and spiritually, in that upward impulse which has guided me all my life.

The narrative vertigo of dreams, capable of condensing months and years into seconds, places me before the completed craft, ready to fly. It is a hybrid of the balloons I began piloting at the start of the century and the heavier-than-air vehicles pioneered by the Wright brothers, whose invention I saw them demonstrate in person in Germany. Since I am aware of the unreality of everything I witness and experience, I am not surprised by the contraption's motley appearance: at times it resembles a flying cathedral, with towers, flying buttresses and stained-glass windows, bringing the medieval and the Gothic together with the propellers, compressors and turbines of the aeronautical industry. According to the common sense of physics, the Alfonso XIII could never leave the ground, but too much common sense can be fatal to the spirit, especially when one wishes to achieve the impossible.

With everything ready for take-off, I say goodbye to my family, whom I do not wish to endanger on so risky a journey, although I know that, if I succeed, they too will be waiting at my destination. As we rise and watch the Eiffel Tower slowly shrink, I remember that other balloon ascent in my youth, when I wished to observe a solar eclipse from high above Burgos. Once again I feel buffeted by the wind; once again, despite the crew now surrounding me, I feel alone against the elements. I think that, in a way, I have spent my life observing eclipses: that of the monarchy and then the republic I swore to defend, that of a son's life, that of the many ideas that arose in my mind like little lighted candles which I failed to make shine as brightly as they should against the winds of adversity.

As the earth disappears from view and the air grows thin, I pray, for science has its limits. May God grant that my speculations are correct and that, by playing with the multiple dimensions, we can pass through the precise intersection of the different planes of reality that will take us to a Spain before 1936, to warn my compatriots of the world about to vanish unless we know how to prevent it. Captain Falcon, for such was my nickname, prepares, having mastered the abysses of space, to conquer those of time as well, if the suit's breathing system allows him.

The craft is seized by turbulence as we enter a nebula studded with lightning, but I shall never know whether the mission will reach a safe conclusion: I am slowly waking. The sad certainty grows within me: I am not Emilio Herrera. I am neither a scientist nor an aviator. Nor, as in my dream, have I invented a craft to travel back through the years, and I shall not be able to recover my lost opportunities. If I have ever had great ideas, I have been unable to realise them, in part or in full. People more capable than I, like our great engineer from Granada, have had to settle for long periods for appearing only in history's footnotes. Yet simply by inspiring visions such as the one I have just experienced, they have already made the world a better place. My body feels light, free of the weight of the suit that oppressed me as I slept, and I believe myself capable of any undertaking.

Powerlessness explores a boy’s helplessness in the face of his mother Marina’s suffering, caused by the news from Gaza. Seeing his mother cry, Guille decides to design a ‘suit’ inspired by a drawing by his great-great-grandfather, an astronaut, with the intention of protecting her from sadness and bad news.

POWERLESSNESS

Francisco Javier Garrido Hernández

Those eyes again. Once more that look, that way of being there without being there, turning the sunshine of her presence grey. Once again the redness in her brown eyes, vast as the sea, heralding the drop of salt water that will soon fall down her cheek. There it is: he was not mistaken. That shy but wretched tear is stroking his mother’s cheek again. Again he feels that thing whose name he does not yet know. Again he wants to heal her, to hug her. For her to laugh again, and for her eyes to be white as sea foam once more. He wants that tear never to appear again, because it is that tear which always dims Marina, his mother, whom he already loves deeply without knowing it. But he does not know how to do it, does not know how to tell her that everything is all right, that the thing she is crying over is called Telly, the thing he is only allowed to watch for an hour and a half a day. That it is not worth it, that it is not real. But he does not know how to do it. Because his mother’s answer is always the same: what I am watching is all too real.

Marina knows what that feeling is called, because it is the same one she feels now as an adult, eating her up inside. It is the same feeling that courses through her stomach every time she sees news from Gaza on television, the city where she took part in that aid programme in 2009, sharing life in its bustling streets and putting faces to those she now sees on the television her son Guille believes is not real. But it is all too real.

Guille goes back to his room after lunch. This is his time of day. He runs and leaps onto the bed, and in a second he is transported to Afghanistan, a land too far away and too dangerous to travel to now, according to his mum.

‘Still, The Kite Runner will take you there faster than any aeroplane.’

‘Even faster than the ones Grandad made?’

‘Even faster than those, my darling,’ Marina answered him that day, a smile painting her face.

Today he knows it will not be a good day for travelling. It always happens: that tear falling down his mother’s cheeks turns everything grey, even the sky inside his mind, stopping him from travelling anywhere. He does not give up; he tries at least to finish the chapter he has been reading for almost a week. The same week his mother has spent crying silently, day after day. The same week they have spent hearing the same news, day after day, from the land of Shadi and Falasteen.

Shadi and Falasteen are his Palestinian uncle and aunt, who cook the best rice he has ever tasted. They called it Maqluba. They laughed the day they made it, when Guille asked if it was like paella, and told him it was nothing like it. He met them on the day of his First Communion, when they came to Spain for two weeks and stayed at his house. His mother insisted that they were his auntie and uncle, because they had been her brother and sister that year in the neighbourhood of Khan Yunis. Guille remembers those two weeks fondly: he missed seven days of school because they had to show Shadi and Falasteen around Granada, the place they said looked so much like the drawings they had at home in Ramallah, where they have lived for four years now, thank goodness. They always receive letters from them at Christmas, but this year has been different.

He tries not to think about them, or their chicken and rice, or the walk they took down the Cuesta de la Alhacaba when Auntie Falasteen nearly fell over. He tries to keep reading, to shake off this feeling whose name he does know. Because if he stays sad, he will cry too, and that will make his mother cry even more. He tries to summon his courage, escape from everything and fly back to Afghanistan. But the sky at home has been grey for too many days now, and the journey grows more difficult with every page he turns.

Once again he notices the picture his mother hung on his bedroom wall the day he was born: a grey drawing of an old-fashioned astronaut, bearing only the words From your grandad Emilio. According to Mum, it is a treasure, a family heirloom that his grandfather, the aeronautical engineer, gave Marina on the day of her First Communion. Apparently, it is a drawing by Emilio, who was the father of his mother’s grandfather. He loves telling people that, because telling his friends it is by the father of his mother’s grandfather shows them how old and valuable it is.

‘It’s from the last century!’ he always tells every friend he shows it to.

Looking at it today, something occurs to him: what if the answer is there again? After all, Mum always says that the astronaut suit this Emilio drew was designed to protect against anything that might happen at the very top of the world. It was designed so that all the bad things outside could not harm whoever

wore it, who, according to his mother, was going to be Emilio himself. But for some reason he never got to put it on in the end, although no one has ever told him why. What if he draws a suit for his mother, but one that protects her from the bad things on the telly?

‘THAT’S IT! A suit that protects her from everything, like Grandad Emilio made,’ he thinks, shouting inside his head.

He carefully puts the book away as he jumps from his bed to his desk. He looks at the clock: homework time. Perfect: that way his mother will not suspect anything if she sees him concentrating. Today, instead of his Faber Castle 0.5 mechanical pencil, he will take out his set of pencils in every colour. The drawing has to be perfect and detailed; he cannot leave anything out. They will have to send it away to be made, and, as he already knows very well, the clearer the instructions, the better. Like Lego. He starts with the feet. He looks at the suit in the picture and decides that, instead of making them so hard and ugly, he will give them cotton soles, like clouds.

‘That way Mum’s feet will never hurt again, and she’ll be able to float along the ground,’ he dreams.

He takes great care over the boots. He leaves them black, the colour Mum always wears when she goes out to dinner. He makes the cotton soles into wedges. Mum likes those, especially the esparto ones, although these shoes will not be open but firmly closed: he does not want anything grey getting in through her feet.

Once he has made sure the boots will do their job, he starts drawing the body. He studies Emilio’s suit: there is not a single gap. It looks watertight, like the food containers his mother uses on days at the beach. So he puts a very strong fastening at the hips, to make sure the body and legs are tightly sealed. Now he remembers what his mother always told him when he was little. Behind that first layer, the only one you can see, there were others that kept out the light, because apparently the light up there in space burns you. So he decides to make another layer too, but one that will keep bad news out.

He thinks about what that layer could be like, how to stop even the slightest trace of sadness from getting through. He remembers the tear that ran down his mother’s face today and turned it grey again. That is it: he has it! He will fill it with colour, with all the colours she wears during the week of the fair, always the week when Mum is happiest. Luckily, his mother keeps all the flowers she wears to the fair in a box in Guille’s room.

‘I keep them here because all the flowers in my life have to sleep together,’ Marina tells Guille every year when the fair ends.

He opens that box full of life and colours the layer in every colour imaginable: red, pink, white, yellow, camel, green... It is the most beautiful layer anyone could ever create, Guille thinks. There is no way grey can get into Mum like that. Impossible!

He looks at the picture again: time for the gloves. The gloves, Guille thinks, have to be like the new ones they bought him this winter, the ones that let you keep using your mobile. Soft, thin and close-fitting, so Mum can still cook, paint on Sundays and look after her plants in the sitting room. But he leaves the fingertips transparent. He does not want to stop seeing Mum's nails. He loves it when she comes back from having them done. What will it be today? A sun, a sea, strange shapes? He loves his mother's nails; he cannot miss out on them.

The crucial moment arrives: there is still the helmet, or helm as Mum calls it, with that enormous neck ring in Grandad Emilio's picture. He stops, pauses. It dawns on him that once his mother puts on that suit, she will never be able to kiss him again. He starts thinking again, doubting his idea: is it worth paying that price? He remembers the tear running down his mother's face over the past seven days, and that wretched feeling it gives him, whose name he does not yet know.

'Yes, of course it's worth it,' he convinces himself. 'But I'll make it big and clear enough for us to see Mum properly and leave enough room for the bun she wears every day.'

He makes the neck ring silver, the colour of Mum's jewellery. In the middle he puts that funny pendant Dad gave her on the day he asked her to marry him. That way she will always be wearing it, and Dad will no longer be able to say she never puts it on. For the helmet, though, he only draws a circle. He needs nothing more; he does not want to cover any of Mum's face, especially now, when she will smile all the time once she puts on this suit.

He thinks it is finished when he suddenly notices the cylinder beside the old-fashioned astronaut in Grandad Emilio's picture. His mother has always told him that you cannot breathe up there in space, which is why you have to carry air in that cylinder so you do not die up in the sky. But Mum is not going anywhere. Still, he decides to add a cylinder and tubes to the suit, but specifies what the cylinder is to contain: the scent of jasmine, with a pinch of sea salt. He does not know what sea salt is, but his mother always says that is what the sea smells of. If his mother says so, it is the best smell in the world.

He finishes the last details and writes out clear instructions for the layers, just in case they are not understood when it is sent away to be made. He is interrupted by a knock at the door, which opens. It is his mother, her face still grey, calling him to have a shower and come to dinner.

'Already, Mum?' he asks in surprise.

'Of course, Guille, you haven't stopped all afternoon. Have you finished all your homework?'

He looks at the clock, and sure enough it is already the dreaded half past eight in the evening. Another day when he will go to school without his homework done. Still, Miss will understand this time. He is absolutely sure.

He showers quickly and runs eagerly to the table. There is a smell of Spanish omelette, the very one already waiting for the three of them in the middle of the table. Before sitting down, he goes to his room to fetch his invention, excited to tell his mother about her present and eager to send it off to be made that very night.

'Look, Mum, I've adapted Grandad Emilio's suit. Look, look at the boots, black just how you like them, with cotton wedges. The suit is designed so the greyness of the news can't get into your body. Inside, you'll always smell jasmine and sea salt. You'll be able to cook and paint. But we'll still see your nails whenever you go to have them done. Mum, look at this layer, with all the colours of the fair, the ones that make you smile. Mum, we have to make it, so nothing else can happen to you. It's just like the one Grandad Emilio drew, but to protect you from things down here, not things up there.'

Without warning, his mother's face fills not with one tear, but with many more than the news on television ever brings. That feeling again, the one whose name he does not yet know.

'Guille... Grandad Emilio made that suit to dream, to fly high and understand the world better from above, so that when he came back down he could mend it and help lots of people. If I put on this suit, my love, I won't be able to feel anything. I won't even be able to feel happy when you score another goal, or when I hear your clarinet solo at the summer recital.'

Now it is Guille who, overwhelmed by that wretched feeling, bursts into tears, not from anger, not from sorrow, but because of that stupid ache in his chest.

'Mum, then let's stop watching the telly,' Guille thinks. 'That would be unfair. We have to know that Uncle Shadi and Auntie Falasteen are still all right.'

He looks at the television, and there is Gaza again, the same report as at lunchtime. When it ends, the news tells how a man has called the launch of a rocket a success, although it exploded twenty seconds after lift-off. Apparently he wants to travel to space and back

in the same rocket, even though each launch costs more than twenty million dollars. Twenty million dollars, Guille thinks. How much is twenty million? What is all that money for? When he is happy with his five euros of pocket money every Friday. It seems, after all, that things have not changed so much from Grandad Emilio's day to today.

'I want Auntie and Uncle to be all right, Mum.'

'They are, Guille. I know, because I can feel it. If I wore that suit, I wouldn't be able to know.'

'Mum, what would Grandad Emilio say about this suit?'

'He would say, Guille, that this suit doesn't come from dreams. This suit of yours comes from powerlessness.'

There Is No Fall tells of a father, a designer of stratonautical suits, who receives the devastating news that his pilot son has been killed in combat. Plunged into profound grief, he experiences a vivid dream that transforms his understanding of loss and inspires him to continue his work as a tribute and a means of eternal connection.

THERE IS NO FALL

Mario Ferrándiz Gomis

The Valencian afternoon was fading with an unbearable lament. The light, as though refusing to leave the streets, lingered stubbornly in the windows of the house. Inside, Don Emilio Herrera was reviewing the plans for his stratonautical suit: the spherical dome of the helmet with its triple glazing, the metal joints at the articulations, the calculations for pressurisation and thermal insulation. The silence of the room was broken only by the scratch of pencil on tracing paper and the distant murmur of a tram. It smelt of ink, of wood, and of that productive solitude he loved so much. That tangle of papers bore witness to a life devoted to preparing human beings for the heights, that realm where the air dissolves and life barely survives upon an invisible thread. Often, as he worked, he thought of his son, of how his metal wings conquered the very sky he himself sought to master through science and precision. Yet Emilio did not experience this as anything particularly momentous, for he felt he was where he belonged, like the flame in a hearth at home.

The hours passed. Many years earlier, he had learnt to enter a kind of trance in which clear ideas mingled with calculations that needed scarcely more than a few supporting notes. He felt himself something of an artist, though he had never admitted it: a guilty pleasure.

The knock at the door brought him out of that now familiar state. It was a sharp sound, at odds with the flow of his afternoon. He went to the door, and the room gradually began to take on the quality of the reality he had relinquished a few hours before. There was an envelope. The mere touch of the paper between his fingers was enough for him to sense the weight it carried. He opened it.

ELDER BROTHER EMILIO HERRERA AGUILERA PILOT. KILLED IN COMBAT 1 SEPTEMBER 1937 MEDIANA DE ARAGÓN. WE DEEPLY REGRET. COMMANDING OFFICER ZARAGOZA FRONT.

The telegram, brief and cruel, announced his son's death in aerial combat. There were no reasons and no consolation, only straight black letters that cut like blades.

The paper fell onto the table and the world hung suspended. He felt the air leave his lungs in a muffled whistle. He remembered his son's last letter, full of an almost insulting vitality: 'The sky is calling me, Father. Up here, everything makes sense.' His body began to feel heavy, as though the cloak of time had become a tangible covering. There was more. Physics was undeniably part of his daily life: he knew quantities such as mass, velocity and time. In that precise instant, stretching towards some unknown limit, he sensed pain acquiring those very quantities, as if by alchemy. It weighed more than he could bear. It spread through his body and every nerve ending at a speed difficult to quantify and, above all, the time for which it would torment him seemed infinite.

Outside, Valencia was still alive, but inside everything was sinking beneath a dense silence. The air itself seemed an enemy. He reflected on the irony: to devote his life to overcoming the limitations of the sky, to opening paths for impossible flights, only to lose the person he loved most in that very place, in the air. Every line of his plans, every calculation, now seemed a sentence passed upon him.

Night found him walking among papers like a man crossing ruins. The lamp remained unlit. In every drawing he saw a reproach: the helmet that sustained life in a vacuum, the valves that mimicked artificial breathing, the folds that allowed movement inside a hundred-kilogram suit. Everything led him to the same place, to that newly opened wound. At last, exhausted, he collapsed onto the bed, the telegram clenched in his hand. He felt powerless, reproaching himself a million times before his body was gradually drawn into a sleep as unwanted as it was necessary.

He found himself enveloped in darkness, comfortably at ease. He began an exercise in proprioception and gradually understood his strange situation. His weight had vanished, and the machinery surrounding him moved with him like a second skin. The rhythmic hiss of oxygen in his ears was a mechanical lullaby. The murmur of the valves was a metallic heartbeat, borrowed breath sustaining him in an environment that should have denied it. He raised his eyes and found a place from which to take in his surroundings. He was inside the stratonautical suit he himself had designed and built. Beneath his feet stretched an ocean of clouds as solid as continents; beyond them, the curved Earth shone blue and white; above his head, the sky was no longer blue but a deep black, studded with stars visible in broad daylight.

Thoughts surrounded and shook him like a pack of predators encircling and harrying their prey. The purpose of the expedition he was on grew indistinct, for he no longer harboured the same longings as when he had begun the journey. He looked down again to make out what he had yearned for so intensely in his youth: the loveliest of blue spheres. To his surprise, he no longer recognised his home, the oceans or the clouds. A transfiguration was unfolding before him, and this time he recognised a hot-air balloon that seemed inescapably familiar.

He breathed in childhood memories. Granada appeared, untouched, and he saw himself as a boy, clinging to the basket of a slowly ascending hot-air balloon. The air smelt of scorched linen and taut ropes. The city shrank beneath him; the Alhambra looked like a red-brick toy on the hill. Little Emilio, his eyes full of wonder, clung to the wicker basket as the brightly coloured balloon rose slowly above his birthplace. The cool morning breeze caressed his face, carrying the damp scent of grass and the sweet fragrance of the wildflowers bordering the meadow. As the wind played with the balloon, Emilio felt his heart pounding; each gentle sway of the basket made him imagine he was floating among cotton clouds drifting slowly across the blue sky. Below, the meadow spread out like an endless green carpet, scattered with white daisies and red poppies swaying to the rhythm of the air.

The balloon began to descend. Emilio watched the grass draw gradually closer; he heard the rustle of dry leaves and the splash of puddles left by the recent rain. The wind whistled through the nearby trees, while a pair of butterflies fluttered beside the basket, as though wishing to accompany him on his journey. With a slight bump, the basket touched the tall grass. Emilio leant forwards and brushed the damp meadow with his fingers. He felt nothing. Instead, he felt the wind moving against him. He saw the six basic instruments that every aircraft uses for control and navigation. He saw distant land beneath his feet. Muscle memory brought his hands to the controls of an aircraft he recognised as Soviet-made. For several minutes, the aerial dance became a whirlwind of manoeuvres: tight turns, bursts of machine-gun fire and metallic flashes high above. The smell of hot oil and gunpowder flooded the cockpit. The little aircraft, skittish but agile, moved like a bolting horse beneath his hands.

But fate, implacable, was waiting for him. A bullet struck the aircraft squarely; the fuselage shuddered violently and a trail of black smoke began to draw a line across the sky. Emilio wrestled with the controls, trying to control the fall and searching in vain for a clearing where he could land. With all his heart he longed to regain control amid a tragic dance of frustration, machinery and fate. The Polikarpov spiralled downwards, dragging silence behind it.

He did not feel the impact. He felt only that he was back in the fragility and stillness of the stratosphere. He recovered from the brief journey and felt at ease once more in his metal skin.

In that inhuman clarity he sensed a presence. He felt his son close by, floating in the very space where he himself was barely surviving. He sensed him watching calmly, with the serenity possessed only by those who have left all weight behind. In that intangible closeness he understood: in that place there was no falling. Whatever rises reaches a different plane, where the vertigo of descent is only an earthly memory.

He allowed himself to be persuaded, despite a lifetime spent resisting any lure down a fruitless path. Curiosity, like another limb of his body, seemed to possess him more than ever. He wanted to stretch out his gloved hand to reach him, but realised that the suit itself, his salvation and the fruit of his ingenuity, separated him irrevocably from that contact. It was shelter and barrier at once. Yet the pain softened. With sudden clarity he understood that he had not lost his son in the void but had, somehow, brought him there, into the very space of his dreams. Understanding did not cancel his grief; it transformed it into a different raw material. If the first grief had been a rock dragging him down, this new form was a light mineral, hard and malleable, that he could use to build. His scientific mind had at last found an equation for mourning. What cannot be prevented must be raised higher. There is no fall if a new altitude can be found.

The vision of his son faded, but the essence of that serene presence remained anchored in his chest. The stratospheric silence was no longer hostile, but an immense cathedral they shared. Emilio now found himself facing the true challenge of his life: not to defeat gravity or the vacuum, but to channel love and loss into relentless perseverance. His work ceased to be an ambition and became a rite, a way of honouring the flight from which there had been no return. Every nut, every sewing thread in the pressurised fabric, was now a syllable in a letter written to the sky. He was there, at the highest point, and from that summit the way back was no longer a defeat at the hands of waking, but a return with a mission. The plans, the ink, the tracing paper: everything acquired a spiritual weight previously unknown to him.

The stratosphere returned with its light-speckled darkness. The pain remained alive, but it had changed shape. It was no longer a wound that tore him apart, but a scar burning clearly. He felt ready to absorb what had happened and almost felt he had lived through it himself.

He knew there was still something to be done: his work was unfinished, and that was his place among the living.

The radiance surrounding him gradually faded, and with it the dream. He woke with his face drenched in tears. The telegram was still beside him, crumpled on the bed. He got up and lit the lamp. The plans for the suit were waiting. They were no longer merely paper and ink, but the only language left to him for speaking to his son. He picked up his pencil and resumed his work with renewed calm. The helmet's triple glazing needed adjusting, the temperature-regulation system needed improving, the insulation had to withstand more extreme temperatures. His hands no longer trembled.

He went to the window. Valencia slept beneath a clear sky. The stars twinkled with a familiar insistence, as if confirming what he had experienced in the dream. And deep within himself he knew that his son was not lost in nothingness, but present in the very sky that had guided him since childhood. The thought rose within him with absolute clarity: up there, there is no fall!

From that night onwards, every line he drew and every adjustment to the suit became a silent conversation with his absent son. Many called him a man ahead of his time, an impossible dreamer. He accepted the label serenely, because he had understood that dreaming was not an indulgence but the only way to stay alive. The sky was no longer merely a realm for technical conquest, but the place where pain became memory and memory became eternal love.

The Pressure of the Air tells of a woman trapped in an oppressive marriage who finds both a symbolic and a literal escape by building an improvised spacesuit, inspired by her father's dreams, to reclaim her independence and her voice.

THE PRESSURE OF THE AIR

María del Camino Guardia Álvarez

The house is a motionless body. Its wooden ribs creak in the afternoon cold, a muffled groan that keeps me company in the sitting room, where the light breaks into particles of dust. I have spent hours in this armchair, the very one from which my mother used to watch life pass by; now it gives me back only a face I no longer understand. Outside, bare trees scratch a pewter sky. It is a landscape of bones.

‘Do you think the stars feel cold?’ she asked in a whisper.

Silence answers me with its icy breath. But I know Martín is here. I feel him in the air thickening beside me, in the way the lamp's shadow changes shape as though someone were leaning in to listen. He does not need vocal cords: his voice is an echo inside me.

‘The stars are distant fire, Elvira. They do not feel. They only burn.’

I smile. Martín always knows what to say. He understands the language of things that burn within until they are consumed. I pick up the little object on the side table: a cube of polished aluminium, so light it seems a fragment of the moon. It belonged to my father, a piece left over from some dream larger than himself, a component from the laboratory at Cuatro Vientos. I turn it between my fingers.

Ricardo's key in the lock is a detonation. A precise, metallic sound that ends suspended time. Every afternoon, the same sequence: the turn, the click of the door, his firm footsteps on the parquet. The footsteps of a man who never doubts, who

treads the world as though it belongs to him. He comes into the sitting room without looking at me, loosening his tie. His presence absorbs what little air remained.

‘In the dark again, Elvira. You look like a ghost,’ he says, switching on the main light. The bare bulb is a knife slash that erases every subtlety, every friendly shadow where Martín and I converse. I blink, blinded.

‘I like the half-light,’ I answer, and my voice sounds fragile, a thread of glass about to snap.

He puts down his dark leather briefcase, full of contracts and certainties. He comes over and kisses my forehead. He smells of the street, of tobacco, and of someone else's perfume that I no longer bother to identify.

‘Don't forget dinner at the Monteverdes' tonight. Wear the blue dress. It makes you seem... more present.’ His hand rests for a moment on my shoulder, a weight anchoring me to this armchair, this house, this life.

I nod in silence. He has already turned away towards his study. He does not ask how I am. He takes it for granted that I have simply been. Existing on the margins of his life.

When his door closes, the house grows still again, but the peace is broken. The harsh light has invaded everything.

I close my eyes and travel. To a Sunday when I was nine, holding my father's hand. The air smelt of grass and metal. We were in an enormous hangar, a cathedral of steel where the skeletons of aeroplanes slept. He was telling me about Emilio Herrera, who dreamed of a suit that would take him up to the stars. He showed me a piece of silvery fabric, shining like the skin of a fish.

‘This will protect him from the sun up there, where the sky is black at noon,’ he told me.

I touched it with my fingertip. It was cold, like the cube I am gripping in my hand.

Your father dreamed of flying, Martín tells me. And you, Elvira, what do you dream of? I open my eyes. The light is still there, relentless. I dream of silence. But a different silence. A silence full of stars.

The blue dress clings to my skin as though an icy lake had swallowed me. I did not choose it: Ricardo decreed it, just as he did the colour of the curtains. He says it brings out my

eyes, but I know that what fascinates him is the way the fabric yields, the way it obeys. In the mirror I give myself back a polished, almost unfamiliar image, and have the impression that someone else has put on my body.

‘That isn't you,’ Martín whispers from the surface of the glass.

‘No one is themselves in these houses,’ I answer, fastening my mother's pearl necklace. The pearls gleam, perfect and orderly, like the smiles I shall have to rehearse. Dinner at the Monteverdes' is a deafening ritual of glasses and recycled phrases. Ricardo moves among the guests with the assurance of a pilot in his cockpit: he knows every button, every gesture. I follow behind, a disciplined shadow. The wives' glances weigh more heavily than the chandeliers: they know enough about my ‘crises’ to label me. The delicate doll, the piece that does not fit in the display cabinet.

‘Elvira is much better, aren't you, darling?’ Ricardo announces, his arm tight around my waist. The pressure of his fingers is slight, but enough to mark his territory. I nod. ‘Yes, the country has done me good.’

I lie easily. The country does not heal me; it suffocates me in another way. When the men go out into the garden to smoke, I am trapped with our hostess, who lists her children's merits like some heavenly curriculum vitae. And, inevitably, the question comes:

‘And what about you two? When will it be your turn? A child would bring you joy.’

The words strike me below the stomach. I remember the white operating theatre, the silence that followed a fragile heartbeat, and Ricardo's voice passing judgement: ‘You weren't ready.’

‘It wasn't your fault,’ says Martín, so close his breath could mist the glass. I excuse myself and step out onto the balcony. The night smells of coal and expensive perfume. Above me, the stars crackle, engines alight that take me back to Cuatro Vientos, when my father lifted me into the cockpit of a biplane and let me brush the controls. ‘Can you feel it?’ he said. ‘It wants to rise. The machine will not resign itself to staying on the ground.’ His voice held the same passion with which he spoke of Herrera, that man who had designed a suit to challenge the black sky at noon. I touched the silvery fabric then; cold, yes, but full of promises.

‘What are you looking at?’ Ricardo appears beside me, glass in hand.

‘The stars.’

He gazes at them for a second, shrugging. ‘Burning gas. Physical reactions. Nothing more.’

There lies the boundary: for him, everything is measured in returns; for me, in vibrations that cannot be entered on a balance sheet. His hand returns to my back, too firm, too public.

‘Let's go inside. You'll get cold.’

I obey, as always. But this time, as I cross the sitting room, another sensation goes with me: a faint hum, an engine waking beneath my skin. It is not a memory or a ghost. It is the murmur of something that wants to rise, like that aeroplane beneath my childhood hands.

The next morning comes with a milky grey light filtering through the net curtains. Ricardo has left early for one of those meetings he calls ‘crucial’. The house breathes to a different rhythm without him. I wander through the rooms, brushing the furniture with my fingertips. Solid objects, mute witnesses to my disintegration. In Ricardo's study, order is absolute. Books aligned, papers precisely stacked. A geometry of control.

On a shelf, behind volumes on commercial law, sits a dark wooden box. I know it well: it is where Ricardo keeps whatever does not fit into his orderly world. Photographs of my father, letters from my grandmother, my teenage notebooks. Banished treasures. I open it, and the smell of cedar and time strikes me.

Find the map, says Martín. His voice is clear, a precise command. The one your father drew for you.

I carefully sift through the memories. There are my drawings of impossible birds, with metal wings and gears. And underneath everything, a yellowed sheet of paper, carefully folded.

I unfold it on the table. It is not a map but a diagram. A sketch of Herrera's stratonautical suit. My father drew it from memory, explaining every detail to me.

‘This is for the oxygen, Elvira. And this maintains the pressure. It is a little personal atmosphere, a bubble of life in the middle of nothingness.’

I stare at the lines, the annotations. The pressure suit, the concertina joints, the breathing system. It is not simply a suit. It is an architecture of survival. A declaration against the void.

He knew how to build a cage for protection, not imprisonment, Martín reflects.

He has given you the instructions.

An idea, as strange as it is lucid, begins to form in my mind. A small rebellion. An act useless in the eyes of the world, but vital to me. I go up to the attic, the only territory in the house that Ricardo never visits. It smells of dust and old wood. Among the forgotten odds and ends, I find what I am looking for: my mother's dressmaker's dummy, headless, its torso covered in threadbare fabric. I drag it to the centre of the room, beneath the skylight.

For hours I work with a concentration I thought I had lost. I gather absurd materials: aluminium foil, rubber tubing, a motorcycle helmet. With my father's diagram as a guide, I begin building my own version of Herrera's suit on the dummy. It is not a replica; it is an interpretation. A symbolic act. Every strip of adhesive tape is a stitch in my own skin. Every piece of aluminium, a shield against Ricardo's gaze.

The afternoon sun falls through the skylight, illuminating my creation. It is a figure. An astronaut of melancholy. A scarecrow to drive away demons. I sit beside it on the dusty floor and breathe deeply: the stale attic air seems purer than the air anywhere else in the house.

When I hear Ricardo's car in the drive, I do not move. My heart beats hard; it is not fear, but anticipation. His footsteps echo downstairs, his call: ‘Elvira?’ I do not answer. He comes impatiently up the stairs, and the attic door opens with a creak.

Ricardo stands motionless in the doorway. His gaze moves from the dummy to me, sitting on the floor. For a fraction of a second, I see no anger in his face. I see something more revealing: bewilderment. A crack in the wall of his composure. He does not understand what he is seeing.

‘What is this?’ he asks, and his voice has lost its edge. It is the voice of a confused man. I rise slowly. I stand beside my creation, my silver guardian.

‘A project,’ I answer. And for the first time my voice does not tremble. It is solid. Like aluminium. Like the promise of flight.

Ricardo's bewilderment did not last. He is a man who needs to catalogue the world, to label it. And he found a label for my act of creation: ‘eccentricity’. Over the following days he treated my tin astronaut as an eccentricity. He even

showed it to a couple of business associates: ‘That’s Elvira, an artist,’ he said with an indulgent smile. He did not destroy it; he neutralised it, which is crueller.

But he did not understand that the astronaut was not the end but the beginning. It was not an object but a declaration. I still went up to the attic every day, but no longer to build: simply to be. To breathe that dusty air which had become my only safe space. I sat at the feet of my silver guardian and read my father’s books on aeronautics. I read about atmospheric pressure, about the lack of oxygen, about the absolute cold of space. I read about how an unprotected human body would come apart in a vacuum. Its fluids would boil. A silent death.

It is not very different from what you feel here, Martín told me one afternoon, his voice reflected in the helmet’s visor. Your own atmosphere is escaping.

He was right. I felt myself dissolving inside, my essence evaporating under the constant pressure of life with Ricardo. Every forced smile, every meek nod, was a small leak in my invisible suit.

On the night of the anniversary of Ricardo’s company, the house filled with people: a murmur of voices, the clink of glasses, the smell of success. Ricardo was in his element, a sun around which everyone revolved. I, dressed in the Chanel he had insisted upon, was his nearest moon, reflecting his light but with no radiance of my own. I played my part: I smiled, listened, nodded. But inside I was in the attic, beside my astronaut.

At one point in the evening I went upstairs to my bedroom on the pretext of touching up my make-up. But instead of looking in the mirror, I opened the wardrobe and took out the silver motorcycle helmet. I held it in my hands. It was heavy, real.

It is time to put it on, Martín whispered. It is time to create your own atmosphere.

I came downstairs wearing the helmet. The world was transformed. The murmur of the party became a distant hum. The bright lights dimmed through the visor. My own breathing sounded loud and rhythmic in my ears, an anchor in the storm. I walked through the sitting room, an apparition from another world among the dinner jackets and cocktail dresses.

Conversations stopped. Heads turned. Silence spread like a shock wave.

I reached the centre of the room, where Ricardo was talking to the mayor. He stared at me, his glass halfway to his lips. His smile froze. This time,

there was no bewilderment in his face. There was fury. The fury of a man who has lost control of his most prized possession in front of everyone.

‘Elvira, take that off this instant,’ he said in a low, taut voice, an order he expected to be obeyed immediately.

I shook my head, a slow, deliberate movement inside my helmet. Through the visor his face looked distant, distorted. As though he were on the other side of an impenetrable atmosphere. I raised a hand and pointed towards the ceiling, towards the sky beyond.

‘There is no air,’ I said, and my voice, amplified and metallic inside the helmet, rang out in the absolute silence. ‘I need my suit to breathe.’

I do not know whether they understood. I do not know whether they saw a madwoman or a woman who had at last found the only way to survive. It does not matter. For the first time, the silence was mine. I controlled the pressure in the room. I turned and began walking towards the front door, leaving Ricardo, his party and his world behind. Every step was firm, assured. I was no longer Elvira, the delicate wife. I was an astronaut leaving a hostile planet, searching for somewhere to breathe.

In My Encounter with Emilio Herrera Linares, the narrator recounts a fantastical meeting in Granada with the engineer and aviator Emilio Herrera. As they walk through the city, Herrera shares memories of his life, his passion for aviation, his exile after the Civil War, his grief at the loss of his sons, and his vision of science united with poetry. Before saying goodbye, he gives her a letter encouraging young people to dream, not to fear failure, and to work steadfastly for truth and the common good, emphasising that the future is built not only with technology but also with imagination, effort and faith in oneself.

MY ENCOUNTER WITH EMILIO HERRERA LINARES

Silvia Estela Mangas

One autumn afternoon in Granada, a city where the mountains seem to keep ancient secrets, while the air smells of history and the sun gilds the pages of the distant past, I sat on a bench in Federico García Lorca Park to read a book about forgotten inventors.

I was absorbed in my reading. At such moments I usually lose touch with reality; my mind slips entirely into the world of the words printed in the book, withdrawing from its surroundings. On this occasion, however, I remained aware of the world outside, for I looked up when an elderly figure, dressed in an old-fashioned grey suit, sat down beside me. There was something magnetic about his presence, as though time had stopped to allow him to be there. The pull this stranger exerted on me made me feel as though I were possessed, as though I had lost control of myself.

I thought he was speaking to me and paid attention; it was then that he asked in a firm, measured voice:

‘Are you interested in science?’

By way of reply I showed him the cover of the book, *The Dreamers of the Twentieth Century*, and thought of remaining silent, but that would not have been polite enough, so I answered:

‘Very much. I am fascinated by those who imagined the future before it existed. I do not know how one can do that without even the slightest glimpse of tomorrow.’

The man smiled with a mixture of melancholy and pride. In that instant, his smile took me back to my childhood, to moments shared with my grandparents. The tenderness reawakened within me led me to put the book aside and give him my attention.

‘Then perhaps you would be interested to know that in 1935 I designed a suit for walking through the stratosphere. It was a self-contained stratonautical suit for the crews of high-altitude balloons. The suit, in case you do not know, was the forerunner of the Americans’ spacesuit, however reluctant they may be to acknowledge it.’

I looked at him incredulously. I thought he was joking, telling one of those stories old people tell to entertain the young, or perhaps simply mocking my innocence. Yet despite the tangle of doubts that exploded in my mind, there was something in his gaze that made me distrust my uncharitable thoughts.

‘Are you suggesting that you are Emilio Herrera?’ I asked, trying to contain my laughter, for the situation was getting the better of me.

‘The very same,’ he replied, as though it were the most natural thing in the world.

I fell silent. I needed to pinch myself to be sure I was not dreaming. According to every record, Emilio Herrera Linares had died in Geneva in 1967. He had been a military and aerospace engineer from Granada, distinguished as an aviator and scientist, and yet here he was beside me, speaking to me as though time had no dominion over him.

‘How is that possible?’ I managed to stammer, and added, making an effort to remember:

‘But you died many years ago. I know you were President of the Government of the Spanish Republic in exile and the father of the poet and novelist José Herrera Petere, and that the foundation bearing your name is responsible for preserving and safeguarding your personal archive.’

He looked at me with that penetrating gaze emerging from between the deep shadows under his eyes and his thick eyebrows, and, settling himself within time, said:

‘Let us say that science has its own paths, and sometimes dreams do not die with the body.’

I looked at him, and in his face I could imagine the catastrophes of his childhood in Granada: in the deep wrinkles I glimpsed the earthquake of 1855; in the hollows of his eyes, the floods caused by the waters of the River Darro as it passed through the city; and in his peaceful expression, the hope that the cholera epidemic would end. I thought I saw his lips move, abandoned my symbolic reveries, and heard his voice inviting me to walk.

I nodded and paused to look at his face again. His eyes caught my attention, lost behind the great curtain of his eyelids, so small and so intelligent, contrasting with the size of his ears. He had the appearance of an intellectual, but also of a man rich in experience and forged in war: in military balloons in Melilla, in the African campaigns, in crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, and as an aerial observer on different fronts during the First World War.

I looked away and began to follow him; we walked through the narrow streets of the Albaicín, that distinctive district in eastern Granada, set on high ground apart from the rest of the city. He began telling me about his childhood, about how aviation had captivated him from a very young age, and about his obsession with conquering the skies. He described the stratonautical suit in detail: a pressurised suit with a temperature-regulation system, panoramic vision and articulated movement. Everything was designed to withstand the external conditions of the stratosphere.

I listened, and in my imagination his words interwove with the landscape and its history as a medieval outlying quarter, one of the oldest Muslim settlements alongside the Alhambra, the Realejo and the suburb of Bib-Arrambla in the flat part of the city.

I turned my thoughts back to his words and asked:

‘And why was the suit never used?’

We walked in silence for a while. I did not know whether he was considering his answer or whether perhaps it brought back sad memories and he preferred to say nothing. After a time he began:

‘The Civil War changed everything; that war was a bloodbath between brothers. Many hopes were frustrated, not only the desire for freedom but also for progress. The future began to die slowly with that merciless war. I saw many deaths; I saw the soil of my homeland stained red; I saw Spain lose its longing for tomorrow; I saw the project abandoned, and I had to go into exile because I opposed Franco.

First I was in Chile, in South America, where I had arrived in 1939 on an official mission. But when the war ended, as I could not return to Spain, I stayed a little longer before travelling to France, where I lived austere because of my limited means. Yet despite everything, I had the satisfaction of knowing that my design helped inspire others, and that is why NASA's spacesuits have more of me in them than they admit.'

Accompanied by his story, we reached the flatter part of Granada. Walking among green market gardens and dusty paths, we arrived at a small whitewashed house that seemed to smile beneath the Andalusian sun. Its white façade reflected the brightness of the day, as though absorbing all the light of the Vega and returning it in multiplied radiance. The reddish tiled roof held the afternoon warmth, and shadows slipped along its eaves like ancient caresses. We passed through an old, dark wooden door that opened into a cool entrance hall, sheltered by a vine trellis offering bunches of grapes. To one side, a pair of red and mauve geraniums shone, so vivid they seemed to catch fire in the air and colour the whiteness of the walls.

The scent of damp earth and jasmine drifted from a small inner courtyard, where a little fountain endlessly murmured intelligible fragments as water ran slowly among pitchers and flowerpots, cooling the air. We went inside. The house was simple, humble and welcoming; without a word, he led me towards a room that was a kind of refuge amid the austerity of the home. It was full of strange instruments. As I stood frozen in the doorway, he invited me in, and there, alongside unfamiliar apparatus, were many photographs, plans and a replica of the pressure suit. The moment I saw it, I caught my breath. I could not comprehend what prodigious mind could have designed something so futuristic.

'Is this real?' I asked.

In truth, I was so astonished that I could not formulate a more intelligent thought. He answered at once:

'As real as you and I.'

And he began showing me a notebook filled with notes in blue ink. I could not understand them: calculations, formulae and reflections on the physics of the vacuum and the endurance of the human body. But, to my surprise, tucked among the pages were sheets bearing poems, thoughts on the soul and on humanity's destiny. One flew from its hiding place; I bent to pick it up and read that it was dedicated to his sons. 'Poem in Memory of My Sons'.

The title caught my attention, and I asked what had led him to write to his sons. His eyes filled with tears. I regretted my untimely question, and he made me understand that both had died in the war.

Then he gathered his strength and added, leafing through some pages:

'Science without poetry is like a body without a soul.'

We spent hours in pleasant conversation. He told me how he had met Einstein, how he had debated the future of the human species with philosophers, and how he believed space was not only a physical frontier but a spiritual one. He thought human beings were enslaved to prejudices, dictates and traditions that often prevented us from flying or seeing beyond.

'And what do you think of the world today?' I asked.

'Too much speed and too little reflection. The art of imagining slowly has been lost.'

With that answer I sensed nostalgia once again taking hold of his soul. I was moved to see a man so marked by life. A man of genius, a man who had given so much to science and carried so much sadness in his soul.

As the sun began to set, he accompanied me back to the park. We walked among shadows, shadows of yesterday and today. Before saying goodbye, he gave me a small wooden box and gently asked:

'Open it when you are ready to dream in earnest.'

And he disappeared into the folds of dusk.

I longed to get home quickly so I could open the box. Once inside, my hurried fingers struggled to lift the lid. Within lay a handwritten letter.

I unfolded it, my hands trembling, and began to read:

Granada, 12 May 2025

Dear Young Friend,

I was deeply moved by the time we shared; I was glad that you confided your hopes and concerns to me. Allow me to tell you that youth, when kindled by the flame

of curiosity, can transform the world. However difficult the times may seem, knowledge and discipline always open paths where every way appears closed.

Science and study are not only a refuge for the spirit, but also tools of freedom. The future of Spain and of all humanity lies in the hands of those who, like you, dare to dream and work steadfastly to make those dreams possible.

Do not fear failure: it is the noblest teacher, far more so than an easy victory. And remember that serving truth and the common good ennoble every human effort.

With affection and hope for your future,

Emilio Herrera Linares

After reading those lines, my heart leapt and filled with pure feeling. It was nourished by hope, because I understood that the future is built not only with technology, but with imagination, effort and faith in oneself. That it is possible and necessary to keep dreaming, questioning, learning and acting, because nothing is impossible if we have faith in ourselves.

Human beings are marvellous creatures; we need only know our own worth and understand how important it is to unite our efforts in pursuit of a better, more humane, more liveable world.

Drawing sustenance from Emilio Herrero Linares and seeing ourselves in his mirror is for the good of us all.

Flying Dreams tells how, from his childhood in Granada, Emilio Herrera nurtures his passion for flight through Jules Verne’s Five Weeks in a Balloon and dreams in which he becomes Dr Ferguson. Years later, invited aboard the Graf Zeppelin’s historic transatlantic flight, he experiences the journey with excitement, amid storms and celebrations, sharing it with figures such as the journalist Lady Hay. During the crossing he dreams of Benito Molas, a Spanish aviator who died attempting to break an altitude record, inspiring him to think of a suit able to withstand the extreme conditions of the sky. From this mixture of experiences, memories and dreams, the idea of the ‘stratonautical suit’ is born.

FLYING DREAMS

Isabel Umbría Andrades

I am leaning out of the window, watching sparrows fly over the rooftops of Granada. They fly in a flock; they seem to be dancing. I move my arms, following their choreography. Oh, how I wish I were a bird so I could fly with them!

There is a knock at the door. It is Father. He is wearing his uniform and holding something in his hand.

‘Happy birthday, Emilio! I have brought you a present. Here.’ My father hands me a parcel. ‘How old are you now? Twelve?’ He looks at me and smiles.

I nod as I eagerly tear the wrapping paper from the parcel and discover Jules Verne’s Five Weeks in a Balloon. I throw myself at him to give him a hug.

‘Thank you, Father.’

I open the book and the room disappears. Everything changes. I look at my hands and feel my body and face. I am no longer a boy but a man of about forty, tall and strong, and I have a beard! Before me, my father is no longer my father. He is older, with white hair and a beard. The initials J.V. are embroidered on his jacket. The room has become the basket of a hot-air balloon. I look up and see a balloon inside another balloon. In the centre, the flame feeds the burner, and the balloon rises swiftly through the air while, in the distance, the thunder of artillery comes from a ship. I lean out and see its name: the Resolute. The old man looks at me.

‘Fly, Emilio, fly!’ he urges, smiling at me.

At that moment I wake. It is not the first time this has happened. I become the very hero of Five Weeks in a Balloon, Dr Ferguson! And Jules Verne's words still echo in my head. Everything is so vivid. It is no coincidence that I should have this dream today of all days. I gather my things, the copy of the book that appears in my dream and that I always carry with me, and a letter containing the following message:

'Dear Mr Herrera, we are pleased to invite you on the first transoceanic air crossing by the Graf Zeppelin LZ-127, departing at 9.00 a.m. on 20 October 1928 from Friedrichshafen, Germany.'

I put the envelope in my jacket pocket, pick up my belongings and head for the hangar that houses the largest aircraft ever invented. When I arrive, I find a clamorous crowd of curious onlookers of every kind. Behind them all stands the Graf Zeppelin LZ-127. It looks like an enormous fish whose scales gleam in the sunlight, a great whale about to sail through a sea of air. It is beautiful!

I show my invitation and am directed to join a queue. I count us. There are twenty of us fortunate enough to enjoy this aerial experience. Nineteen men and just one woman. Her name is Grace Drummond Hay and she is a journalist. I recognise her face because it has appeared in the newspapers. Her fragile appearance reminds me of a little wildflower, but nothing could be further from the truth, for I notice that she likes being the centre of attention and flirts with the airship's other passengers.

The queue moves forwards and we board the passenger cabin. While most of the travellers are praising its tasteful décor and every comfort, someone comes to fetch me. Herr Eckener requests my presence in the control gondola to study the weather reports with him. The forecasts are not at all favourable for the flight, so for safety's sake he decides to postpone our departure until the following day.

Shortly after dawn the next day, although the weather is still not entirely favourable, Herr Eckener and I weigh up the variables and decide to set off. At eight o'clock sharp, the zeppelin leaves the hangar and rises slowly. The crowd, though smaller than the day before, sees us off with music and cheers.

The control gondola is a hive of people working intensely to raise the enormous airship, in contrast to the tranquillity of the passenger cabin, where the other passengers sit peacefully in their comfortable seats.

Although this is not the first time I have flown, I never quite get used to it. I feel as I did the first time: I notice the tingling in my stomach, my heart beating rapidly and sending blood surging into every corner of my body.

I close my eyes and breathe deeply... I feel more alive than ever!

Seeing the world from above is a feast for the eyes. No one wants to miss it. Most of the travellers lean out so as not to miss a detail. We fly over the Rhine and its green fields. Over French territory, several aeroplanes escort us for part of the journey. And as we cross Barcelona, my heart leaps. Seeing my country this way is so special!

Soon we reach the Atlantic and are engulfed by the vast blue. At times it is hard to tell where the sky ends and the sea begins.

Herr Eckener has arranged a dinner in honour of the distinguished guests on board. I take my seat beside Grace Drummond-Hay.

'Let us drink to this voyage!' Eckener calls to the diners when dinner is over. Everyone raises their glasses.

'This is an incredible experience!' says Lady Hay, holding her glass towards me.

'It certainly is,' I reply, clinking my glass against hers.

'We are living in an age of great technological advances... Next we shall be travelling to the Moon,' she declares. She laughs and goes on, 'By the way, what a pity about what happened to Major Molas aboard the Hispania on 15 September.'

'Losing a fellow Spanish aeronaut has been a terrible blow,' I lament.

'Molas broke the world altitude record in a balloon, though it cost him his life,' she remarks.

'You know that, until now, people have remained inside cabins during flights for safety. Molas, by contrast, used only a special suit to protect him from atmospheric pressure at that great height. So it was a risky situation,' I explain.

'They say the tragedy was caused by a fault in the mask, which left him suffocating,' she continues, downcast.

'There must have been a crack or a structural flaw in its design,' I suggest.

‘With your experience, do you think you could solve these “structural flaws” you mention?’ she asks, arching her eyebrows in curiosity.

‘There are many variables that would need investigating, various tests to carry out to check the safety of the suit and the mask...’ Countless possibilities unfold in my mind while Viennese melodies play in the background from a gramophone.

On the second day the forces of nature rise against us: the wind stains the sky with black clouds that bode ill, and in the distance lightning illuminates the darkness around us. We head straight towards it at full power. The zeppelin’s crew has not a second’s rest; they must battle the elements.

The wind tosses the aircraft violently like a ball, and beneath us the waves rise to swallow us. The passengers fall and stumble, not knowing where to hold on. I lend a hand in the control gondola; every bit of help is needed.

After several hours that seem an eternity, the storm finally eases. Having assessed the situation, Herr Eckener tells us that the zeppelin is damaged and must be repaired before we can continue. This will delay our journey. With dusk, calm returns. After such an intense day I am exhausted and fall into a deep sleep.

I am beside Dr Ferguson, travelling in his hot-air balloon across the valleys, rivers and mountains of the African continent at great speed.

‘On the next expedition, instead of going sideways, we shall go forwards without ceasing to climb.’ The doctor reads this sentence aloud from Five Weeks in a Balloon and looks at me. He closes the book. Now I am aboard the Hispania. I see Benito Molas wearing a special suit capable of withstanding atmospheric pressure, gloves, goggles and a mask connected to an oxygen cylinder so he can breathe at high altitude.

‘Ready to break the record?’ I ask him. But he does not hear me. Perhaps it is because of the suit he is wearing. The airship rises into the sky.

‘3,000 metres and climbing,’ he says, checking the barometer.

‘4,000 metres and climbing. All normal.’

At that moment he has a problem with his mask. He adjusts it carefully and manages to put it right.

‘5,000 metres. Temperature falling.’

He seems unaware of my presence.

‘6,000 metres and pressure rising.’

‘7,000 metres. Ascent normal.’ Molas checks all the instruments.

At 8,000 metres the air currents change direction, forcing him down to 6,500 metres. Once the situation has stabilised, he releases ballast and gradually climbs. But at 7,000 metres Benito begins to feel his heart beating faster, and touches his chest. At 8,000 metres his breathing quickens still further. At 9,000 metres he also feels a pounding in his head and struggles to breathe. I witness the scene, but some invisible force holds me back and prevents me from helping him.

At 10,000 metres he feels everything spinning and his vision blurs.

‘Benito, you should descend!’ I shout, trying to make him hear me, but I am an invisible spectator of these events. He cannot hear me, and he does not want to give up when he is so close to breaking the altitude record. Just a little further...

The Hispania rises to 11,000 metres. He has done it! It is forty degrees below zero. He feels cold; his suit cannot insulate him from the low temperature surrounding him. With the atmospheric pressure, there is much less oxygen, and together with his breathing difficulties from altitude sickness, this means the oxygen cylinder is emptying very rapidly.

With great effort he switches off the burner and opens the parachute valve. The balloon begins to descend, but he does not know whether he has enough oxygen to reach an altitude of 2,400 metres, where the oxygen level is sufficient to breathe without a mask. He loses consciousness.

‘No!’ I cry. I feel powerless. I can do nothing, and I leap into the void. My arms turn into wings. I am a bird heading towards the stratosphere! The world is so tiny from up here...

I wake with a jumble of emotions and scribble something in a notebook so I will not forget.

A strong wind blows that day, slowing the balloon and forcing the crew to remain alert to any change.

During the early hours a thunderstorm arrives, so I remain in the control gondola all night beside Eckener to help him and his team.

At dawn the next day, the first glimpse of land takes shape through the mist. A favourable wind pushes us towards the coast, and seagulls escort us there. We follow the shoreline and make out the Appalachians. The passengers tune the radio to American stations and cheer and applaud. We have done it!

All along our route everyone applauds and sounds horns and sirens. Even the President of the United States himself waves to us as we pass the White House in Washington.

On our arrival in New York, crowds await us atop the granite giants, waving flags and handkerchiefs.

Euphoria sweeps through the zeppelin. Everyone embraces excitedly and leans out of the windows, missing nothing. It is a historic moment!

Lady Hay wants to capture everything we are experiencing and writes without pause.

From above I look down at New York, the “Big Apple”. Why should the island of Manhattan be called that? I can see no resemblance to the fruit.

We fly over the area twice in a triumphant dance, then follow the Hudson River towards our destination at Lakehurst. There the aircraft finally moors, one hundred and eleven hours after leaving Friedrichshafen.

The following day we are welcomed as heroes in New York. The mayor invites us to a grand banquet, and I take the opportunity to seek financial support for an airline connecting Spain with South America. It will be called “Transaérea Colón”.

But I cannot get the image of Benito in my dream out of my head.

Travel upwards instead of horizontally, travel upwards instead of horizontally...

I repeat it over and over to myself. I pick up the copy of Five Weeks in a Balloon my father gave me, and then my notebook. I open it and, beside the drawings I made of a suit for flying, write “stratonautical suit”.

The Sky as Destiny recounts the life of an aeronautical pioneer born in Granada in 1879, whose childhood was marked by a fascination with the sky and a desire to fly. His military and scientific career led him to design the stratonautical suit, a forerunner of those used in space exploration, though his work was interrupted by the Civil War and exile. Despite loneliness and neglect, he never abandoned his passion or his research, keeping alive the hope that humanity would reach the stars. (Based on real events, but a work of fiction.)

THE SKY AS DESTINY

Froila López De Álvarez

I. Childhood and Early Aspirations

I was born in Granada in 1879. Although my memories grow blurred with the years, one runs through them all: the sky. While the other children ran through the streets of the Albaicín, I would stop to gaze at the immense blue stretching above our heads.

My mother said I had “a neck twisted towards the stars”. I could spend hours lying in the grass, following the invisible strokes of the wind, trying to guess what lay beyond the white clouds. Granada was a crucible of contrasts: the solemnity of the Alhambra set against the poverty of the humble neighbourhoods. There I understood that my destiny could be nothing other than to pursue that radiance.

In the countryside, I measured the height of trees, the speed of the wind, the time it took shadows to cross the gardens. My games were experiments; my toys, instruments of the future. I watched the flights of birds and the gliding of comets, wondering what it would be like to rise above the city and look at the world from a distance. Every night I imagined machines that could carry me to the stars.

When I was ten, my father took me to the hill of Sacromonte. A comet crossed the sky, tracing a furrow of fire through the darkness. I stood transfixed. “Do you see it, Emilio?” he asked. I nodded, and swore that one day I would not merely watch them: I would join them.

II. Military and Scientific Career

Fate led me to the Academy of Aeronautical Engineers. Discipline was rigid, calculations endless, the nights sleepless over plans and formulae. There I learnt that dreaming is not enough: rigour and patience are needed. We engineers were the priests of a new temple: science.

I remember my first balloon ascent. The basket creaked beneath my boots, the wind shook the canvas, and as we rose, the world grew tiny, as though the mountains were folds in a handkerchief. It was not fear: it was the certainty of entering the dwelling place of the gods. Higher up, the air grew colder and thinner, but my eyes shone. There I understood that the sky was not a limit, but a path.

I met European pioneers and learnt from their successes and failures. Europe was in the grip of a fever to conquer the air, and I felt part of that secret brotherhood seeking to rise. During a test flight, a gust threw us sharply off course. The basket struck a roof and almost overturned. Some people screamed. I experienced a strange calm. I confirmed that I was prepared to risk everything to fly.

My military career gave me discipline and resources, but also brought me up against the narrow-mindedness of many superiors. For some, balloons and aeroplanes were curiosities; for me, they were the future. Every flight, every calculation, confirmed that I would devote my life to preparing humanity to conquer the stratosphere.

III. The Stratonautical Suit

Reaching the stratosphere required the human body to be transformed. Thus I conceived my stratonautical suit, an armour that would make man a guest tolerated by the vacuum. I designed layer upon layer, each intended to protect against an invisible enemy: cold, lack of oxygen, pressure.

Many called me a visionary; others, a madman. But I knew it was possible. I had seen man rise in balloons and aeroplanes to extreme heights. Why not believe that, with the right suit, we could brush the boundary of the cosmos? When I heard talk of astronauts and cosmonauts, I understood that my dream had germinated in other soils. My suit was a forerunner of those that would walk upon the Moon.

I remember the day I saw it finished, gleaming under the workshop light. I ran my hand over the metallic fabric, the oxygen tubes. A shiver passed through me, as though I were touching the future

itself. To many it was merely a suit; to me, it was a poem in steel and rubber, a promise fulfilled by the boy who chased comets.

IV. The Civil War and Exile

War came like a storm that lays waste without looking at what it destroys. Spain tore itself apart. I, who had devoted my days to preparing wings for humanity, found myself dragged into a fratricidal struggle, where science became a weapon and dreams became rubble.

I remained loyal to the Republic because I believed in a country that could move forwards. That loyalty cost me dearly: I lost my place in the army and watched my hopes collapse. The suit was relegated to a dusty corner. Exile came: France, then Switzerland. There I learnt that no banishment is crueller than walking among crowds and knowing oneself invisible.

Life in Switzerland was cold, not only because of the winter that seeped into the bones, but because of the distance separating me from Granada. My days passed between modest jobs and tending my little improvised workshop. Every foreign sound, every curious glance, reminded me that I no longer belonged anywhere. Sometimes nostalgia overwhelmed me: I remembered the sunlit courtyards, the vendors in the squares, the scent of freshly baked bread, and a shiver ran down my spine at the thought that all of it was far away, perhaps for ever.

Yet even in that silence, the world kept moving forwards. News of rockets, space flights and new machines reached me in fragments, through journals, letters from colleagues and rumours filtering among exiled scientists. Every piece of news awakened a mixture of pride and melancholy: pride because humanity was advancing towards what I had dreamed of; melancholy because my name remained hidden, and I could only watch from afar as others took the steps I had foreseen.

During the long winter afternoons I devoted myself to writing notes, revisiting old plans and devising flights that might never take place before my eyes. Every written line was a bridge towards hope, a reminder that science and dreams could coexist even amid pain and solitude.

Sometimes I catch myself looking at the window like a boy waiting. I open it, though the cold punishes me, to gaze at the stars. There they remain, impassive, the

same stars I saw as a child from the Albaicín, the same ones that accompanied my balloon flights, the same ones I stubbornly sought to reach in an impossible suit.

Today I feel my strength ebbing, and perhaps this will be my last sleepless night. I write so that oblivion will not erase me. It was neither vanity nor pride that drove me, but a longing older than myself: to fly higher than any man had dreamed.

I close my eyes and the cold disappears. I can hear the distant bustle of Granada and its bell towers, and there, amid that earthly music, I feel the call of the sky. It was always there, like a promise. Perhaps all I ever did in life was answer it.

VI. Final Years and Legacy

Time is unforgiving. My body was fading, but inside me still lived the boy who dreamed of chasing comets.

In my final years I lived simply, surrounded by yellowing papers and memories. Few people visited me. Few knew that in that exile's room lived a man who had anticipated the path of the astronauts. But what mattered was something else: that humanity dared to make the leap I had imagined.

I remember the day I heard that a man was orbiting the Earth. Then the Americans announced they would send spacecraft to the Moon. I no longer had the strength, but I felt immense joy. It was not my hands piloting those craft, nor my body wearing the new suits. Yet I knew that part of me travelled with them.

Sometimes I close my eyes and allow myself to imagine that, as Neil Armstrong took his first step on the Moon, he heard an Andalusian whisper saying, "Welcome." Perhaps it is fantasy, but I prefer to believe that every breath drawn in the vacuum thanks to a suit also held an echo of my sleepless labours.

I do not know what fate awaits me when I cross the threshold of this life. Some speak of heaven as a paradise; I prefer to imagine it as an infinite ocean where, at last, I shall be able to fly without limits. If my name is ever spoken again in my homeland, I wish it to be without cold solemnity, but with the fervour of a child looking at the stars for the first time.

Now, as night advances over Geneva and silence envelops me, I know I can depart in peace. I did not conquer the stratosphere with my own hands, but I helped

humanity learn to dream higher. And that, in the end, is enough. Out there, in the immensity, the same stars of my childhood are shining. They will be waiting for me.

The Dream tells the story of the Herrera Aguilera family across several decades, beginning in 1929 with Emilio Herrera Linares, a young boy who dreams of adventure and exploration, especially when his father shows him his new invention: the stratonautical suit, designed for stratospheric flights. The narrative moves to 1937, when Emilio’s mother, Irene, faces the harsh reality of the Spanish Civil War, receiving the tragic news of the death of her younger son, Emilio, who had fulfilled his dream of becoming a pilot. The story advances to 1969, when José, the elder brother, reflects on his family’s legacy.

THE DREAM

Luis Javier Ruiz Lería

Madrid. 1929. Emilio Herrera Aguilera

The first time I saw it, I felt as though I were aboard the submarine Nautilus, beside the great Captain Nemo, about to dive down to explore the ocean depths and confront who knows what savage creatures.

But no. The truth is that Father’s laboratory has never contained the slightest trace of submarines, unknown animals or nautical equipment... Nor was that all. However hard I tried, however much I wanted to, I could not make Father resemble, even a little, the image of Captain Nemo I had formed in my head from reading and rereading Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Seas. The blame, of course, lay with Jules Verne. And with my brother José and his fondness for literature.

Whether, after what I had just seen beside his desk, I could overlook it and remain full of questions and nagging suspicions was another matter. So I decided to do what we never did: interrupt Father’s work.

“Are you planning to explore the bottom of the sea and discover unknown animals with Captain Nemo?” I asked him. Deep down, I was hoping he would say yes, so that I could start boasting about my father and take that bore Miguel, son of the Real Madrid footballer Juanito Monjardín, down a peg or two, along with that cheeky Marcos González, who never stopped saying his father, Machaquito, was the finest bullfighter of the day. Honestly, they were unbearable.

With exaggerated deliberation—a strategy Father had perfected over the years and often used to formulate an answer that would calm my boundless excitement without crushing the hopes of the child

who still saw his father as a role model, despite having little idea what he actually did—he capped his pen, removed his spectacles, carefully folded their arms, placed them on the desk, aligned them with some sheets covered in incomprehensible scribbles, raised his head, looked me in the eye with a serious expression and, after almost a minute’s silence, answered as he usually did, with a question:

“What do you think, Emilio?”

“Well... yes?” I answered, already knowing he would say no, but refusing to abandon that innocence from which only age can force you to set sail.

“Now then, Emilio. You’re ten years old, nearly eleven, and you can read quite well already, can’t you? Then, if you don’t mind, read aloud what it says on that yellowing diploma beside the door. The one in the dark brown frame with gold edging.”

“Diploma awarded to Emilio Herrera Linares, born in Granada on 13 February 1879, upon completion of his higher studies at the Academy of Engineers in Guadalajara,” I read.

“And now, tell me the truth. Do you think someone who studied at the Academy of Engineers in Guadalajara can turn overnight into someone as daring as Captain Nemo, whom you talk about so much, and reckless enough to leave his family behind and go hunting giant squid at sea?”

“Father, I think you should have been a bullfighter... or a footballer,” I replied.

And we both burst out laughing. Father was not the kind to spend much time with his children, and rarely given to jokes or laughter, so I tried to hold on to every second before José, my elder brother, came into the study with Mother.

They arrived looking frightened and worried, but their expressions soon changed and they joined in the family’s merriment.

“Come here,” Father said. “Let me introduce you to what will be my new invention: the stratonautical suit. It will take some time to finish, but I have it all here,” he said, pointing to his head with his right forefinger.

And he began telling us that the suit consisted of several layers, the outermost an airtight covering of a special fabric, vulcanised silk, through which

oxygen was injected to simulate atmospheric pressure in a vacuum; that the metal framework was articulated, with different kinds of accordion folds at the shoulders, hips, elbows, knees and fingers, which made it considerably easier for the wearer to move.

The metal helmet also had a circular hatch with three panes: one, he said, was unbreakable; another had an ultraviolet filter; and the third blocked infrared rays.

The bad news came when he said that no, it was not designed for visiting the seabed in the Nautilus, but for a stratospheric flight in an open hot-air balloon that would reach 11,000 metres, protecting the pilot from the low temperatures, low pressure and lack of oxygen at that altitude.

I think I stopped listening when he began talking about the articulated folds, long after my brother José, still a budding poet, had started searching fruitlessly for a book in Father’s study. Only Mother seemed to be paying attention, although I do not know whether that was out of love for Father or because she was genuinely interested in the suit.

“I’ll be the first to wear it, Father,” I said, interrupting him.

I do not know why, but everyone began to laugh. I think that was when I decided I would be a pilot. The best pilot in the world.

Valencia, 1937. Irene Aguilera Cappa

Irene sees the postman coming. A shiver runs down her spine. For days, for months, she has been thinking that sooner or later this would happen. With both sons at the front, fearing the worst is not pessimism, simply realism.

She has not seen Emilio, the younger one, for a long time. She has been told that he returned to Spain months ago after spending some time completing his pilot training at the Soviet base in Kirovabad, in the Caucasus. She imagines him flying over one of the fronts, defending the country against the coup.

José, the elder, has been closer at hand. Of the “great poet”, as she affectionately calls her firstborn, she knows that he enlisted in the Fifth Regiment of the People’s Militias. Little more. A few weeks ago she lost track of him, and she does not know where he is.

The postal service in Valencia has been unreliable for some time. It is the war, she tells herself for comfort when nothing arrives, and when she sees the postman, she trembles. As she does now. She tries to hide it by clenching her fists, tightly gripping one hand with the other, but it is impossible. In the end, all she can do is call her husband Emilio, who has been shut away in his study for days.

Before they open the letter, tears begin to take possession of her face. Of both their faces. The letter is signed by an old family friend whom the war has placed on the enemy side. Anything signed by General Kindelán means bad news. Tragic news. There is only one question: José or Emilio? Which of the two will they never see again?

“Your son died bravely in combat, and apparently his death was instantaneous, since the aircraft was not on fire. You cannot imagine how deeply Lola and I have felt, and still feel, for you. Why say more? There is so much we would have to say, and it is so sad, that it is better left unsaid. Know only that you have been, and remain, one of the bitter sorrows of this war for me.”

It is Emilio. The younger one. The one who always dreamed of touching the clouds. The one who wanted to fly. The one who promised his father he would be the first to try the stratonautical suit. He had fulfilled some of his dreams. He had become a pilot, yes, but the war had exacted the heaviest price.

Irene does not finish reading the letter. Her scream silences the entire neighbourhood. Her neighbours need no further explanation. They already know what has happened. Another family in mourning. The pain is shared. Those who have not lost a son have lost a husband. Some have lost them all. Irene takes refuge in Emilio’s study. The suit is there, and she embraces it. As though it were her little Emilio. She embraces it, then hurls it to the floor. Violently. Furiously. In rage. She curses the rebels; the republicans; the Church; the atheists; she curses all humanity. Emilio holds her. Tightly. In silence. No words are needed.

“Yes, my love. We’ll leave tomorrow. This has not been our country for a long time,” Emilio tells her.

Geneva. 1969. José Herrera Aguilera.

It is past half past three in the morning, and he imagines Mother asleep on the sofa. He knows—they both know—that these are her final days. The doctors perform verbal

acrobatics, but she in Madrid and he in Geneva both know that the countdown has begun. The distance imposed by exile and dictatorship makes the pain almost unbearable.

He is working on his next book, *El incendio*, which he hopes someone will publish in two or three years. The television is still on, but he prefers to look out of the window and take a breath of air. He is not surprised to see a light burning in almost every flat at that hour. This is no ordinary day. It is 21 July 1969, and everyone wants to witness a historic milestone. If everything has gone as it should, Apollo 11 must already have spent several hours on the lunar surface. The journey began four days earlier, and it is due to return three days from now.

If everything has gone well. That was the phrase the media repeated most. If everything has gone well. A refrain that crept into every report and essentially meant that everything described might have happened quite differently.

Petere—everyone calls José Herrera Aguilera Petere—looks towards the far end of the sitting room and sees, on a small side table, the helmet from the prototype suit designed by his late father, which his late brother had promised to test. He thinks of them both and cannot, does not want to, stop the tears flooding his face. Only he and his mother remain. And an exile that keeps them apart. But tonight, he thinks, belongs to the Herrera family. Not to NASA or Apollo 11. To the Herrera family.

The journalist broadcasting the Moon landing on Swiss television seems to shake off the drowsiness of the early hours and raises his voice. It is subtle, like everything in Switzerland, but enough to bring Petere back to reality. The hatch of the lunar module Eagle opens, and a human-shaped figure appears with a large mirror where its head should be and a white suit reminiscent of the Michelin Man.

“That’s one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind,” Neil Armstrong says as he steps onto the Moon. Petere smiles when he hears it. The great step for humanity was taken long ago. A man from Granada named Emilio Herrera Linares took it in 1935, thirty-four years earlier, with his stratonautical suit—the very suit another Emilio Herrera, his younger brother, had wanted to be the first to wear a year later. Without them, humanity would not have reached the Moon. Or at least not so soon.

“Dad, you’ve done it!” he cries, tears in his eyes, as he approaches the suit’s helmet that decorates his sitting room. “It all began with you.”

Madrid. 1969. Irene Aguilera Cappa

Irene goes to bed with a smile on her lips. It is almost five in the morning on 21 July 1969, and at last, she trusts, humanity will be able to thank her Emilio for everything he did.

She thinks there will be tributes and honours; that hundreds of streets will bear his name; that even NASA will acknowledge the research of that engineer from Granada who died in exile in Geneva in 1967. She thinks this and feels herself the happiest woman in the world. Tomorrow she will go to the cemetery to tell him, although she knows he will have watched from the front row, the one reserved for good men.

And so, thinking of her Emilio, of his suit, of her younger son, and with a smile on her lips, Irene falls asleep.

For the last time.

The Man Who Spoke to the Stars takes us to Geneva in 1967, where a narrator spends a year of personal transition in an old flat, filling her days with work at the university and everyday routines. Next door lives a Spanish couple, the elderly husband rarely venturing out and apparently a former engineer. One day, this old man begins an unexpected, profound conversation about looking at the sky, stirring feelings and questions within her.

THE MAN WHO SPOKE TO THE STARS

Ana Tejedor de la Fuente

I arrived in Geneva in February 1967. I settled into a small flat in an old building with high ceilings and a stately air. It was on the fifth floor, with no lift. From my bedroom window I could see the luxuriant cedars, firs and yews of the Parc des Bastions. Among them stood an old plane tree with a mottled trunk that seemed to defy the others, remaining upright beneath the weight of its bare branches, spread like weary arms. I would gaze at it as I drank my first coffee of the morning, a coffee that drew me out of my morning reverie and gradually brought me back to reality. There was a stubborn fragility about that plane tree, always on the verge of breaking beneath its own weight, that reminded me of myself at that point in my life, suspended between the life I had known and what had yet to come.

I had set aside that year as a time of transition, hoping to find work I truly cared about. Meanwhile, thanks to my studies in French philology, I had obtained a scholarship in the University of Geneva’s archives to study and catalogue old manuscripts. The work was interesting but monotonous, and I expected little from that year; even the idea of meeting new people failed to excite me. I led a simple life: I woke early, drank a coffee, went to work at the university, took walks and listened to music on a new radio I had just bought. A life on hold, in parentheses.

The flat next door was almost always closed, but one could sense the comings and goings of daily life inside. When I asked the caretaker, he told me that it

was occupied by a Spanish couple who had not been there long. “The old man hardly ever goes out. I think he was an engineer. I even believe he invented something,” he said one morning, sweeping the entrance hall with a broom that looked older than the building itself.

One rainy afternoon, returning from the supermarket with my shopping, I saw him for the first time. He was sitting on the wooden bench on the landing, opposite his open door. His hands rested on a wooden walking stick, and every road in the world seemed etched into his face. He addressed me with an old-fashioned courtesy, and I sensed a restrained emotion in his eyes.

“Do you like looking at the sky?” he asked without preamble.

The question surprised me. Not because it was unusual—which it was—but because of the calm, almost intimate way he asked it. As though he were speaking not to me but to a part of myself I did not yet know.

“It depends on the day,” I replied, for something to say.

He nodded, as though the answer satisfied him, and turned his gaze back into space.

A few days later, I found a note beneath my door:

“If you would like to see something interesting, come round tomorrow at six. —Emilio Herrera Linares—”

I found myself smiling as I decided to accept this unexpected invitation. I had received few invitations lately, and accepted more out of curiosity than politeness.

The next day, there I stood on my landing, outside his door. His wife, Irene, opened it. She had sad eyes and an open smile. She was very kind to me from the outset.

She showed me into her husband’s study, full of books and plans spread out like treasure maps. In the centre, beneath a lamp as old as the rest of the dark wooden furniture, something lay covered by a grey cloth. Emilio solemnly removed it: there stood a strange object straight out of a science-fiction story.

It was imposing. A pressurised suit, with a helmet as round as a fishbowl and valves that looked ready to burst into song. There was something of an insect about it, and something of an ancient god. A shiver ran through me; it was like standing before a presence that overflowed the bounds of time. Beside it, Emilio seemed smaller.

“I designed it in 1935,” he said. “We were going to ascend into the stratosphere by balloon. But then came the war. And then exile. And then the other war. And then... silence.”

He told me he had been a military engineer, that he had worked with Juan de la Cierva on building the autogyro, that he had been the first to fly across the Strait of Gibraltar, from Morocco to Seville. He spoke of the helmet and suit as though they were members of his family. He said it was not merely a suit: it was an idea. A way of protecting the body from the vacuum without losing one’s humanity. The suit had been presumed lost, but in fact he had rescued it and taken it with him wherever he went.

“Inside that helmet, you can hear things you cannot hear on Earth,” he said.

“Such as?” I asked in surprise.

“The thoughts of the sky. And sometimes, the whispers of the stars.”

I laughed reflexively. I was not quite sure why. Perhaps to lighten a slightly awkward moment, perhaps because I thought he was joking. But when I saw that he did not share my laughter, something inside me contracted. I felt I had just brushed against a truth I did not understand, and that his silence confirmed it.

From then on, I visited his flat every two or three days. Being alone in that city, I greatly appreciated their company. I liked chatting for a while with Irene, who always offered me a little freshly made coffee, and sometimes, when he happened to be at home, their son José joined us: he was a poet and had another way of seeing the stars. Afterwards I went into Emilio’s study and immersed myself in a journey through time.

Sometimes he spoke to me about physics or politics; about colleagues who had become friends, such as Jean Piccard—a balloon enthusiast—or Ortega y Gasset, with whom he brought a human dimension to science during their endless conversations. At other times he told me his dreams. In one of them, a woman made of light explained to him the limits of the air. He said dreams were conversations with the future that had yet to take place. It reminded me of my own childhood summer nights, lying in the courtyard of my grandparents’ house with my cousins, playing at counting the stars and imagining tomorrow.

One night, when Irene showed me into his study, I found him wearing the suit. He sat motionless in his armchair, his eyes closed behind the thick glass. I approached nervously. I did not know whether he was asleep or dead.

“I’m listening,” he said suddenly, making me shudder.

“To the sky?” I asked curiously.

“Yes. Sometimes the sky speaks, but only if you listen very closely. That is not at all easy, actually, but when the stars speak, your only answer can be silence.”

After that, everything changed. I felt the suit watching me like a creature lying in wait whenever I arrived. Even the air in his study grew denser.

Emilio looked at me with tired but shining eyes, as though the light of those skies he had touched in his imagination still dwelt within them. He tried to explain why flying was not merely a physical act but a way of transcending human frailty, of seeing the world from a place where fear becomes wonder.

The old man died in September. His wife found him sitting opposite the suit. She said he looked as though he were waiting for a signal to move, that he did not look dead. His eyes were open, as though gazing into infinity.

While the flat was being emptied, Irene gently told me that the suit belonged to me. That I could keep it if I wished. Emilio had written this in the final pages of his notebook. I accepted without knowing why.

Sometimes I think what I truly inherited from Emilio was not the suit but his way of looking at the sky. That silent, almost childlike gesture of lifting his head as though always awaiting an answer. I have come to understand that beyond the plans and valves, what he gave me was an unfinished dream, a path opening towards the impossible.

The invisible seed Emilio planted within me was the conviction that every human being harbours a sky of their own, which one day they must dare to ascend. I have always been too cautious, too earthbound; yet there are nights when I feel that impulse making its way through me like a secret current.

To inherit his dreams was also to inherit his silence. He taught me that listening is not a passive act but a way of touching the sacred. After years spent seeking answers in books or in the jobs I had held, I now find myself sharpening my senses to catch what goes unsaid, and practising patience. Perhaps that is the true pressure suit: an enclosed space where, cut off from the world’s noise, one begins to perceive what has always been there.

I kept the suit and its helmet in my storeroom. I felt comfortable there. Going down at the end of the day had become my nightly routine. I would arrive and approach the suit. I touched it carefully, as though brushing the skin of a sleeping being waiting to awaken. To me, it was a fragment of arrested time, a doorway into an invisible universe. Sometimes I thought I heard a whisper calling to me from beyond time and space. That hushed voice beneath the helmet would then become an ancient song that seemed to invite me to leave certainty behind and leap into the void of the unknown. And I, who had always feared losing the ground beneath my feet, felt a strange calm in that call. As though the act of flying were also an act of surrender and hope.

In my dreams, the suit appeared as a capsule suspended in infinite space, surrounded by stars blinking to their own rhythm, as though telling secrets only to those who knew how to listen. I saw myself inside that suit as I ascended, passing through ceilings, cables and clouds to a place where time dissolved, floating weightlessly and without haste while the city became a hazy map fading into the distance.

Up there, time did not exist, or dissolved like smoke. It was a space where past, present and future intertwined, where memory and oblivion danced a silent dance. And I flew, not with my legs or with wings, but with my heart, with the memory of Emilio that refused to disappear. The sky was not merely a dark blue backdrop: it was a mirror reflecting the fears and hopes of everyone who had ever dreamed of flying.

And in those moments, I closed my eyes and let myself be carried away.

My friend Emilio was waiting for me there, with his careworn smile and eyes that seemed to hold the light of a thousand stars. He told me that flight was not an escape but a return. That every ascent held a fall, and every fall a new opportunity to rise.

I would wake with my heart pounding, certain that the suit was not merely an old, rusty object but held the hope that anything was possible. It was a bridge between worlds, a symbol that we can always go further, even when all seems lost.

Because flying is, at heart, the most human act of all...

And when night enfolds the city, I still listen for the heavens’ hushed voice.

Because some things do not happen in history, but happen in memory.

And others happen outside time, like the suit that still breathes.

Like the stars, which sometimes whisper.

And like Emilio, who continues to speak to them through others.

“But your God is merciful and has a gaze of white, and through the stars admires your radiant soul.”

—José Herrera Petere, *“To My Father, Who Died in Exile”* (Geneva, 1975)—

The Stratonautical Suit introduces us to a young cadet in Granada who, immersed in a world of military logic and mathematics, feels increasingly drawn to the mystery and revolution of powered flight in the age of the Wright brothers and Santos-Dumont. (A largely biographical story.)

THE STRATONAUTICAL SUIT

Francisca Pérez Ramírez

The world you know is a world of earth and sun. The streets of Granada smell of jasmine and dust; the air is filled with the buzzing of bees and the distant chiming of cathedral bells. It is a vertical world rising from the Genil to the Alhambra, a city built upon history. Your life is defined by serious study, military discipline, the unshakeable logic of mathematics and physics, as natural to you as breathing. You are the cadet, the engineer, the young officer; you move with purpose, certain that your destiny will be forged on solid foundations. Your feet are firmly planted on the ground, your gaze fixed on the horizon, on the Sierra Nevada mountains, and on a future that seems so predictable.

But something has always called to you, something beyond the earth. Since childhood, the sky has been more than a mere expanse of blue. It is a canvas of promises, an unexplored enigma. You watch eagles and vultures soaring above the peaks and see not only nature’s grace but a hidden mechanism, a choreography of aerodynamics that fascinates you. Your notebooks are full of calculations about lift, air density at different altitudes, the relationship between weight and thrust. You are the child who secretly dreams of flying. This is your ordinary world, the world that has shaped you, a world of logic and order that, unbeknownst to you, is about to crumble.

The first crack in that reality comes from far away, through newspapers and telegrams arriving at the barracks. The reports are vague, sometimes exaggerated, but persistent. In other countries, men are challenging the eagles. It is said that two brothers in a bicycle workshop have built a machine that rises,

not by the grace of God but through the power of a petrol engine. There is talk of a twelve-second flight, an initial flutter that has shaken the world. Then comes the barrage of news: the Wright brothers' flight, Santos-Dumont's daring leap, Louis Blériot's aerial feats over the English Channel. The world around you, the world of cavalry and infantry regiments, suddenly feels old and slow.

The call to adventure comes to you as a fever. It is not a sickness of the flesh but of the spirit. You are seized by an unstoppable need to understand, to participate, to be part of that revolution erasing the boundaries of the sky. Your calculations grow more feverish, your drawings more detailed. It is no longer a matter of understanding flight but of mastering it. You have crossed the threshold of mere interest; this is a vocation, an obsession. You stop seeing the sky as a canvas and begin to see it as a battlefield, a challenge to your intellect and courage. Engineering, your life, has found its ultimate purpose.

But the path is not clear. Around you, people shrug. Some laugh. Others look at you with the condescension reserved for dreamers. Your army superiors consider you a promising officer, but your ideas about the air are regarded as an extravagance, a youthful whim. "The sky is for birds, Herrera," a colonel tells you with a dismissive gesture. "We belong on the ground." Your father, with the wisdom of age, reminds you of your responsibilities. The dream of flight is expensive and dangerous. Spain lacks the infrastructure, the knowledge, the foundations for a project of such magnitude. You confront the scepticism of those around you and, in the darkest hours of the night, the resistance within yourself. Who are you, a young engineer from a forgotten corner of Europe, to join the vanguard of a worldwide movement? You feel the weight of tradition, of common sense, of caution. And for a time, you allow that weight to keep you grounded.

Your encounter with the mentor does not take place at a formal meeting, but in the dusty pages of a book. It is the work of an obscure nineteenth-century mathematician, a visionary who dared to dream of the upper atmosphere. His calculations of pressure and temperature thousands of metres above the ground are almost poetic in their precision. Through his equations, you feel a connection with a kindred spirit, a guide who shows you that your dream, the dream of going beyond flight, is not madness but the next logical step. This knowledge becomes your mentor; it provides the theoretical tools you need to give substance to your ideas. From that moment, resistance dissolves. You are no longer a naive dreamer but an engineer with a plan. You have found the key, and the door it opens leads not to a simple aeroplane but to the frontier of space.

With renewed determination, you decide to cross the first threshold. You use your military position to secure a stay in Paris, the epicentre of aviation. You leave behind Granada's tranquillity, family gatherings and familiar streets. The change is complete, overwhelming. Paris is a whirlwind of activity. The air smells of polished metal, engine oil and petrol. The hangars on the outskirts are temples of a new faith, that of the bird-man. You meet the pioneers, the men you have admired from afar. You rub shoulders with Blériot, the Voisins, Farman. Their passion is infectious, their daring inspiring. You learn to speak their language, to think as they do. You are in your element, at the forefront of a revolution. No longer merely an observer, you are a participant.

Your path is filled with trials and challenges. You have to persuade French engineers to take your ideas seriously, to accept that Spain has something to contribute. You face arrogance and scepticism, but persist. Your mathematical skills and tenacity earn their respect. Your knowledge of Spanish makes you an invaluable translator and a link between the Spanish army and the elite of French aviation. You make allies. You meet other servicemen and civilians who share your vision, helping you obtain the parts and permits your experiments require. But you also make enemies: envious rivals, weary bureaucrats. Your ideas for high-altitude flight, for travelling into the stratosphere, are considered madness. You are accused of wasting time and money on fantasies. Accidents teach you harsh lessons about gravity and the fragility of metal and wood. A prototype crashes; you lose months of work. Yet every failure is a lesson, a trial overcome that brings you closer to your goal.

In time, your vision takes shape in a singular project: designing a craft to sail through the stratosphere. It is no longer a simple aeroplane but an entirely innovative vehicle, a "stratospheric craft", as you propose to call it. You enter the deepest cave of your adventure, the place of utmost concentration and greatest uncertainty. You shut yourself in your study, surrounded by plans, logarithmic tables and calculations extending to infinity. The outside world fades away. There is no politics, no military intrigue, no street noise. There is only the immensity of the upper atmosphere, and the challenge of building a machine that can conquer it. Every line on a plan, every number in an equation, is a prayer for the solution to a seemingly insoluble problem. The cave is a place of creation, but also of solitude.

And just as you reach the deepest part of the cave, the supreme ordeal descends upon you, the greatest of all. It is not a miscalculation, not an engine stopping, but civil war. The world splits in two. Your colleagues

become enemies. Your work, the stratospheric project, is rendered irrelevant by chaos and bloodshed. The workshop closes; the plans are put away in a drawer. Your choice is difficult. You are a man of science, but also a man of honour. You remain faithful to your republican principles, and in making that choice, lose everything. Your beloved homeland becomes a place to which you cannot return. Personal tragedy compounds the national tragedy when your son, young Fernando, joins the fighting and dies at the front. It is the cruellest blow, the wound that will never heal. It is not merely a project that has failed, but your life as you knew it. The pilot, the engineer, the dreamer dies in the war, and from his ashes a new man emerges. An exile.

Exile itself becomes the reward. At first glance, it does not seem so. It means loss, destitution, the bitterness of living in a country not your own. But you have saved what matters most, the sword no one can take from you: your knowledge. You carry every plan, every calculation, every dream in your memory. You arrive in Paris again, but now as a refugee rather than an eager student. You face the task of rebuilding your life from nothing, finding work and preserving your dignity. Yet your mind remains active. You work in the shadows, collaborating with French scientists, designing survival equipment, testing new technologies. The reward is intangible: the freedom of your intellect. Although war has taken your country, it has not extinguished the flame of your curiosity.

The road back is long and tortuous. It is not a homecoming but a path of perseverance in a foreign country. Poverty is constant. Your wife knits to supplement your meagre income. You teach, consult, do anything that will keep your family afloat. But in your free time you return to your obsessions. You contact American and European scientists. You learn of a new project to take man to the Moon. The Americans are working on a spacesuit. And you, in your modest Paris flat, have an idea no one else has had. A pressure suit. A “stratonautical suit” that would protect the pilot from the vacuum of space and changes in pressure. You return to your old calculations from the cave, refining and perfecting them. You work alone, in the privacy of your study.

Resurrection comes when, quietly and indirectly, your legacy becomes reality. Your ideas, your plans, your vision of a pressure suit filter into the international scientific community. You receive neither the glory nor the recognition you deserve, but your ideas live on. Years later, a young American named Neil Armstrong prepares to walk on the Moon. The design of the suit he wears, the prototype protecting him from such a hostile environment, incorporates elements of your stratonautical suit. The pressurised glove, the breathing system... everything echoes your designs. You are not there

to witness it, you are not in mission control, but part of you, part of your genius, is on the surface of the Moon. It is the resurrection of your work, the ultimate vindication of your life. War took your homeland, but it could not take your immortality.

And so, at last, you return with the elixir. The elixir is not an object you can hold or an award to hang on the wall. The elixir is knowledge, example, inspiration. You become a legend, a beacon for young Spanish engineers and scientists growing up unaware of the reach of your legacy. Your story, that of an Andalusian who dreamed of the stars and laid the first stone so that a man could reach them, becomes a beacon of hope. You sit in your chair, an old man, in the peace of exile. The radio speaks of the space programme. You hear the astronauts’ names, the technical jargon. And at that moment, you know you have completed the journey. You did not fly to the stars, but your ideas did. You left the earth to dream of the sky, faced death in the cave and returned, not home, but to eternity. Your journey has ended, but your legacy is only beginning.

The Man Who Touched the Stars tells the story of Emilio Herrera. In his Paris workshop, amid calculations, stitching and memories of a lost Spain, he imagines a future in which men will touch the stars thanks to his invention. With passion and determination, he turns every stitch into a step towards the impossible, unaware that his work will be the forerunner of the suits that take humanity to the Moon.

THE MAN WHO TOUCHED THE STARS

Sebastián Moreno Leiva

Paris, spring 1935. Emilio Herrera’s hands trembled slightly as he adjusted the prototype’s final seam. It was not fear; it was the restrained emotion of a man who knows he is sewing the future. In the workshop on rue Saint-Denis, among dusty mannequins and rolls of metallic fabric, the first spacesuit in history was being born.

The smell of fish glue and varnish filled the damp air of the premises. Before the war it had been a hat shop, and it still retained the oval mirrors in which Parisian ladies had admired themselves wearing feathered and flowered headdresses. Now those same mirrors reflected precision instruments, German callipers, pharmacy scales repurposed as aeronautical measuring tools. The irony was not lost on Emilio: from adorning dreaming heads, it had turned to protecting the head of the first man who would touch the stars.

“How’s it going, Professor?” asked Marcel, his French assistant, peering over Emilio’s shoulder.

“Well, my boy. Very well.”

But the truth was more complicated. Emilio straightened, feeling the weight of his fifty-six years in his back. The suit hung on the mannequin like an unfulfilled promise, like all the promises Spain had broken to him.

He had arrived in Paris three years earlier, not by choice but out of necessity. The country that had seen him born in Granada, trained him as an engineer at the Academy of Engineers in Guadalajara and applauded him when he founded the first aeronautical laboratories no longer had room for men like him. Too progressive, too republican, too much of a dreamer.

The nights were worst. When Paris fell asleep and the city's noises faded, memories arrived like migratory birds unable to find their way home. The hangar at Cuatro Vientos with its corrugated roof, where he had taught the first Spanish military pilots to fly. The smell of aviation fuel mingled with the castor oil of rotary engines. His pupils' young faces, many already dead in flying accidents or, worse still, in the clashes tearing Spain apart like a ripped map.

What had become of them? Were they still flying, or had they exchanged their flight controls for rifles? The approaching war would turn their aircraft into instruments of death rather than progress. He thought of those with whom he had spent so many hours discussing the future of aviation. Which side would he be on when the time came to choose?

"Marcel, come here. Touch this."

The young Frenchman came over and ran his fingers across the spherical helmet's surface. The special alloy gleamed with golden reflections under the workshop lights.

"It's like touching the Moon, isn't it, Professor?" Emilio smiled bitterly. The Moon. How many nights he had spent at Cuatro Vientos, in the early days of Spanish aviation, gazing at that satellite and wondering whether man would ever reach it. Now, in exile, he was still searching for a way to get there.

"Do you know what my grandfather once told me?" Marcel continued stroking the helmet. "He said men who touch the stars can never walk with their feet on the ground again."

"Your grandfather was a wise man."

It was true. Ever since his first balloon flight over the Retiro in 1905, Emilio had felt that the ground was merely an accident, an uncomfortable pause between one sky and the next. But now the sky had become more complicated. Rising a few thousand metres was no longer enough; he wanted to go beyond, where the air ended and the unknown began.

He went over to the desk where the suit's plans lay spread out. The calculations covered three sheets of graph paper: atmospheric pressure, temperature, radiation. Every line was a verse in the most ambitious poem a Spanish engineer had ever written.

"Professor Herrera."

Emilio looked up. Pierre Monceau, of the French Meteorological Service, stood in the workshop doorway. His immaculate uniform contrasted with the workshop's creative disorder.

"Good morning, Pierre. Any news about the stratospheric balloon?"

"That is precisely why I am here."

Pierre closed the door behind him and removed his cap. He was a meticulous man, the kind who measures three times before cutting once. That was why his worried expression alarmed Emilio.

"What is it?"

"The Ministry has decided to suspend the project."

The words fell like stones into a pond. Emilio felt the ripples of disappointment spreading through his chest.

"Why?"

"They consider it too risky. A man thirty thousand metres up, inside a pressurised capsule... They say it's science fiction."

Emilio approached the suit and laid a hand on the helmet. The metal was cold, yet he felt it convey a strange warmth, as though it had already been into space and retained a memory of the stars.

"Science fiction?" he murmured. "Thirty years ago, they said flying was science fiction too."

Pierre sighed.

"I'm sorry, Professor. I know how much this means to you."

Marcel stopped working and watched them from the far end of the workshop. The silence grew dense, like the rarefied air of the heights Emilio loved so much.

“It doesn’t matter,” Emilio said at last.

“I shall carry on working.”

“Without funding? Without official support?”

“With my own hands, if necessary.” Pierre put on his cap and made for the door, but paused on the threshold.

“Professor, one question. Why is it so important to you to go so high?”

Emilio took a moment to answer. Images crowded his mind: the hangar at Cuatro Vientos where he had trained the first Spanish military pilots, nights at the Engineering School’s observatory calculating trajectories, his pupils’ faces when he spoke of flying machines that did not yet exist.

“Because someone has to touch the sky for all those who have remained on the ground.”

After Pierre left, the workshop regained its silence of a secular cathedral. Marcel continued sewing at the far end, respecting his teacher’s need for solitude.

Emilio sat in his favourite chair, a battered armchair he had rescued from a flea market. From there he could survey his entire kingdom: tables covered in calculations, measuring instruments, model airships, and at the centre, like an altar, the spacesuit.

He had begun designing it after reading the earliest reports on stratospheric flights. Balloons were climbing ever higher, but pilots were dying from the lack of pressure and extreme cold. It was a technical problem, and technical problems always had solutions. One simply had to find the right way to frame them.

The suit had three layers. The outer layer, made of metallised fabric, would reflect solar radiation. The middle, inflatable layer would maintain constant pressure. The inner cotton layer would absorb sweat and provide comfort. In theory, a man could survive for hours in the stratosphere with that protection.

In theory.

“Marcel, come here a moment.”

The young man approached, wiping his hands on his apron.

“Yes, Professor?”

“Help me try it on.”

“What?”

“The suit. I want to put it on.”

Marcel looked at him as though he had lost his mind.

“Professor, it isn’t finished. The oxygen connections are missing, the cooling system...”

“I only want to feel what it’s like to wear it.”

Together they took the suit off the mannequin. It was heavier than it looked, but flexible. Emilio removed his jacket and stepped into it as though into a second skin.

The process of dressing was complex, almost ritualistic. First came the special boots, with reinforced rubber soles and airtight fastenings Marcel had sewn according to Emilio’s plans. Then the gloves, five layers of different materials: silk inside to prevent chafing, rubber in the middle to maintain pressure, and treated leather outside to withstand the extreme cold of the stratosphere.

The suit itself fitted from ankles to neck like a protective cocoon. Emilio felt the seams mould to his body, the reinforcements at elbows and knees distribute the weight. Every detail had been calculated: the arrangement of pressure valves, the position of instrument pockets, the system of connections that would one day carry oxygen and heat.

The inside smelt of rubber and metal, but also of something subtler: dreams made real, sleepless nights calculating pressures and temperatures. Marcel zipped up the back and adjusted the straps. The young man’s movements were precise; he had learnt his teacher’s lessons well. When he placed the helmet on Emilio’s head, the world grew strangely silent.

“How does it feel, Professor?”

Marcel’s voice reached him muffled, as though from very far away.

“As though I were already flying.”

And it was true. Inside the suit, Emilio felt weightless, as though the laws of physics had changed for him alone. He closed his eyes and imagined himself suspended thirty thousand metres above the Earth, higher than the clouds, higher than the aeroplanes, on the boundary between the blue planet and infinite space.

From that height, borders disappeared. Spain and France were merely geographical features. Exiles and homelands were concepts too small for a man who could embrace the entire horizon.

“Marcel.”

“Yes, Professor?”

“Do you think men will really go into space one day?”

Marcel was silent for a moment. Outside, Paris continued its afternoon routine: trams, newspaper sellers, cafés where intellectuals solved the world’s problems with words.

“If you believe it is possible, Professor, then it must be possible.”

Emilio opened his eyes inside the helmet. Through the transparent visor he could see his workshop, but it looked different, as though it were the bridge of a spacecraft. The instruments shone with their own light; the plans had become star charts.

“Help me take it off.”

Emerging from the suit was like returning from a very long journey. Emilio felt the pull of gravity, the thick Paris air, the reality of his exile. But something had changed. In those few minutes inside the suit, he had touched something he could not name. A certainty.

“Marcel, we’re going to finish it.”

“Without funding?”

“With what we have. And if we haven’t enough, we’ll look for more. And if we cannot find it, we’ll invent it.”

The young Frenchman smiled.

“And then what?”

Emilio hung the suit back on the mannequin and approached the window. The Paris sky was grey, as it almost always was, but he knew that higher up, much higher, the blue turned black and the stars shone even by day.

“Then someone will put it on and rise so high that he can touch the stars with his hands.”

“You?”

“Perhaps. Or perhaps someone not yet born. But someone will do it, Marcel. I promise you.”

That night, after Marcel left and the workshop fell silent, Emilio kept working. By the light of a paraffin lamp, he sewed every stitch as though it were a prayer, calculated every measurement as though it were a verse.

The city breathed around him with the slow rhythm of sleep. From his window he could see the lights along the Seine reflected in the water, the night trams carrying early-shift workers, the first lights in bakeries where the new day’s bread was already being kneaded. Paris went about its ordinary life, unaware of the miracle taking shape in the workshop on rue Saint-Denis.

Emilio paused in his work and went to the window. Up above, among clouds dissolving in the night breeze, the stars shone with an intensity that seemed personal, directed at him alone. He wondered whether any of those lights might one day become a destination for human travellers, whether his calculations and stitches would be the first steps along a path ending on distant worlds.

The idea did not seem fanciful. In his youth he had seen powered flight emerge from nothing. He had witnessed the Wright brothers turn an age-old dream into tangible reality in barely twelve seconds of flight. If man had conquered the air, why should he not conquer the vacuum?

In the small hours, when Paris slept and only he and the stars remained, Emilio Herrera Linares continued building the bridge between Earth and sky. He did not know that he was creating the ancestor of the suits American

astronauts would wear to the Moon thirty years later. He did not know his name would appear in history books as the visionary who imagined the conquest of space before anyone else.

He knew only that his hands were full of thread and metal, his heart full of impossible dreams, and he had the whole night ahead to turn the impossible into the inevitable.

Somewhere in his mind, a voice whispered that this suit would not merely be a prototype forgotten in a Paris workshop. It would be the first in a long lineage of protective shells allowing man to leave his planetary cradle. He imagined a procession of future explorers, each wrapped in improved versions of his design, walking through airless landscapes beneath alien suns.

Outside, Paris slept on. But in the workshop on rue Saint-Denis, a man touched the stars with his fingertips and found them surprisingly close.

The future could wait. Emilio Herrera Linares was sewing the path towards it, stitch by stitch, dream by dream.

At dawn, when the first rays of sun stole through the workshop window, the spacesuit gleamed with golden light. For a moment, it seemed no longer merely a prototype but the fulfilled promise that man would one day leave his native planet to explore the immensity beyond.

Emilio leaned back in his armchair and smiled. He had touched the stars. And now he knew he could never again walk with his feet entirely on the ground.

Transaérea Colón recounts the life of the Spanish engineer and aviator Emilio Herrera Linares, who, after serving King Alfonso XIII faithfully and accompanying him into exile, is given the freedom to return to Spain. From that moment, the text looks back over his career. Despite his achievements, his career is cut short by the Civil War and exile. He declines to work for NASA on patriotic grounds, maintains his commitment to the Republic and dies in exile in 1967.

TRANSAÉREA COLÓN

María Esther Castillo Díez

“Your Majesty, at your service,” Emilio said courteously, accompanying the words with a military salute as he entered Alfonso XIII’s study. He tried, unsuccessfully, to adopt a neutral expression to conceal the dilemma tormenting him.

“Sit down, Lieutenant Herrera Linares,” the illustrious Bourbon instructed him with a slight gesture of his right hand, which rested on the folder lying on his desk’s blotter.

“Your inner turmoil has not gone unnoticed,” he continued, fixing his eyes on the officer’s to discern his reaction. He deliberately paused briefly, then continued in a solemn voice.

“You have served me faithfully, yet your loyalty must now, and always, be to Spain.” Once again he paused briefly before resuming.

“That is why I invite you to return to our homeland and swear allegiance to those who now govern it. To the Second Republic,” he declared.

Emilio tried to remain impassive. But a slight widening of his eyes and an upward curve at the corners of his lips betrayed his immense surprise and profound relief at being freed of the burden that had tormented him.

Ever since accompanying the monarch into exile in Paris, he had been unable to sleep. His life, his world, his vocation had remained far away, in the land

of his birth. And he could see no way of recovering that life without betraying his royal office as a “Gentleman of the Bedchamber”.

Release from the tacit obligation of loyalty to the monarchy in every situation and circumstance made him feel reborn. He could not help expressing his sincerest gratitude, respectfully bowing his head as he brought his right hand to his heart.

The king rose with regal deliberation and moved around the desk until he stood before him. He ceremoniously extended his hand, and a firm handshake replaced the military salute. A symbolic farewell at the bitter end of the road they had travelled together, which now divided.

Emilio found his own reflection in the eyes of a king defeated by events. Time froze at that instant, and every memory that had brought him there began to pass through his mind.

He saw himself as an architecture student in the late nineteenth century, imbued with the spirit of his illustrious ancestor Juan Herrera, designer of the monastery of El Escorial. And then succumbing to another way of rising from the ground, which would utterly captivate him: aerostatics. A new and expanding field at that time, whose path began at the Academy of Engineers in Guadalajara.

He relived his passion for those pursuits as though destined for them from birth. Overcoming gravity. Travelling through the air at any latitude on the planet, as only birds had done until then, presented itself as the greatest, most enthralling challenge.

He remembered transferring to the Practical School of Ballooning, impatient and eager to lift his feet from solid ground, after graduating as a lieutenant at the dawn of the new twentieth century.

He recalled his first flight. The lurch in his stomach as he overcame vertigo, suspended in the air inside a great basket. That same air caressing his cheeks as he floated through it, with no sound but the flame that made it expand beneath the hot-air balloon’s fabric.

The greatest and most marvellous sensory experience of his life.

Flying over fields and houses. Above the treetops and the lines of rivers winding across the land, setting off a wave of turning

heads among those watching his progress in astonishment from solid ground. An ineffable experience granted to so few, which made him feel extraordinarily fortunate.

Flashes of the achievements he had shared during the century’s first five years swirled through his mind.

“Mother, I’m thrilled. I’m going to take part in observing the solar eclipse in Burgos!”

“Mother, I came second in the Paris Grand Prix!” The feat that showed the world what an expert pilot he had become.

He remembered how this recognition and prestige among the country’s highest circles had helped bring about his marriage, around the age of thirty, to Irene Aguilera Cappa, daughter of the head of public works in Guadalajara.

His beloved Irene, patient companion and confidante. Always understanding and brave, from the beginning of their marriage in 1909, when she remained behind carrying their firstborn while he left for the war in Melilla on a ballooning expedition.

He thought of the first aeroplanes he bought, influenced by the Wright brothers’ machines at their Augsburg exhibition. And he remembered the photograph with his intrepid Irene in 1911, before flying in a biplane used to train military pilots. His wife was undoubtedly exceptional, proving it by breaking every convention of the time.

Her unconditional support carried him ever further in flight. He thought of the flight between Tetouan and the Tablada air base in Seville. The first ever between Europe and Africa!

He pictured his achievement, recorded on newspaper front pages in 1914. He recalled the king whose hand he was now shaking waiting on the ground to award him the title of “Gentleman of the Bedchamber” for so great a feat.

He reflected that this achievement had drawn him fully into serving as an aviator in Morocco’s Rif War, taking aerial photographs to refine the mapping.

From there his mind leapt to his journey to the United States to buy biplanes. And to his participation as an aerial observer on various fronts of the Great War, despite Spain’s neutrality.

He humbly recalled the importance of his work in correcting artillery fire, charting enemy trenches and photographing their troops.

The uneasy union of science and war brought Albert Einstein to mind, and the questions raised by the possible use of the atomic bomb. He relived the impression the champion of relativity had made on him when they met in 1923. And how it had led him to invest the principles of aeronautics and its advances with great potential for social transformation.

“The world should direct the development of aviation towards progress and lasting peace,” he remembered thinking.

That conviction had driven him to conceive Transaérea Colón, a civilian airline between Europe and America using the rigid airships patented by Torres Quevedo. And he recalled bitterly the lack of support for bringing it to fruition. Support that had been granted to the German company using the Zeppelin airship, the largest aircraft of the time.

The very company that had invited him not only to cross the ocean aboard it but also to circumnavigate the globe, acknowledging the merit of his proposal despite its failure in Spain.

“Others dare to bring about what this country considers outlandish ideas. Clearly, at this rate we shall never pioneer anything,” he remembered lamenting.

He felt proud as he recalled supporting Juan de la Cierva’s autogyro and the creation of the Cuatro Vientos laboratory, the beginning of today’s National Institute of Aerospace Technology. Despite the disappointments, he felt he had never ceased striving to place his country at the forefront of aerostatics.

He returned to the present as he felt the monarch’s grip loosen. Still slightly dazed by the fragments of his life crowding his mind, which had passed in perfect chronological order at ultrasonic speed, he held his grateful gaze a moment longer as he lowered his hand, then left the study with a firm step. And with the feeling that they would never meet again.

Although he felt it was his duty, returning to Spain promised to be a journey into utter uncertainty. How would his rather conservative character fit into the rather progressive, newly established republic?

Emilio begins an unknown journey, prepared to adapt to whatever lies ahead. He does not yet know that the distinguished engineer and pilot he has become will continue to outshine the loyal soldier.

The League of Nations, created after the First World War, will appoint him an international aviation expert. And he will join the Academy of Exact, Physical and Natural Sciences.

He will patent a slide rule for solving aerodynamic problems and present his project for a balloon ascent to study the stratosphere, equipped with what will be history’s first spacesuit: his stratonautical suit.

He will thus lay the foundations for spacesuit designs that NASA engineers will use several decades later.

He will also advance in his military career, becoming a lieutenant colonel and technical director of the Republican Air Force.

Above all, however, he will become the most prestigious aeronautical engineer. So much so that he will permit himself to turn down a blank cheque from NASA to work on its space programme because it refuses to fly the Spanish republican flag on the Moon.

Yet he will experience frustration and discouragement once again. Spain’s political situation will cut short his rise to stardom. When the Civil War begins, his stratospheric project will be abandoned.

This harsh setback to his career will make him appreciate all the more, with a father’s pride, the success of his firstborn, Petere, who will be awarded the National Literature Prize.

Yet until his last breath he will also grieve for the death at the Battle of Belchite of his youngest son, Pikiki, a pilot like himself. A devastating blow that will leave an indelible mark on his political path.

The war’s end will find him on an official mission to South America with the republican minister Indalecio Prieto. His exile will thus begin in Chile before continuing in Vichy France. There, through the German general he met at the tribute paid by Lima’s Spanish community for his plan to establish Transaérea Colón, he will receive an offer to work at the Vibration Laboratory in Berlin.

As a man of anti-fascist principles, and despite his evident scientific interest, he will refuse, condemning himself to an austere life sustained by royalties from his patents and his contributions to French aeronautical journals.

His renowned talent will thus win recognition from the French Academy of Sciences, helping him put a proposal to the French government to launch an artificial satellite using one of the German rockets requisitioned after Germany's surrender in the Second World War.

His political commitment will lead him to serve as prime minister of the Republic's government-in-exile from 1960 to 1962. Firm in his opposition to Franco, he will resign his post as a nuclear physics consultant to UNESCO when Spain joins the United Nations.

He will also support the idea of a referendum on national sovereignty, allowing Spaniards to express their preference for a monarchy or a republic.

And he will die in 1967, at Petere's home in Geneva. Almost two decades before his remains can rest in his native land.

But Emilio does not yet know any of this. And on the journey back to a once-again republican Spain, he continues dusting off his memories, as far back as he can recall what he experienced and what others told him.

Half a month before Alfonso XII's first complete government crisis in 1879, dawn was breaking along the edge of the Granada mountains. The cry of a new life filled the silence in the heart of the city and moved the soldier waiting patiently and expectantly, unleashing his joy.

That vital cry was the immeasurable certainty that his surname was on the road to immortality. As though he could extend his own life through the child, he gave him his own name: Emilio, foretelling a promising future without being able to imagine how promising it would be.

What would destiny hold for his child? Would he become a great architect? A great engineer? The thoughts of a father overflowing with happiness wandered in those first moments of his son's life, without the faintest glimpse of what Emilio Herrera Linares would become.

The loyal soldier, peripherally involved in both world wars and a leader in the Spanish Civil War, prime minister of his country's government-in-exile, would leave his enduring mark in the pages of History as a pioneer of world aerospace engineering.

Two Steps from the Moon focuses on the life of Emilio Herrera Linares. Through personal research, the narrator discovers Herrera’s rich and accomplished life, as well as his relationship with his wife Irene and their children. The story culminates in a posthumous tribute by Neil Armstrong, who presented a piece of the Moon to one of Herrera’s collaborators in recognition of his contribution to space exploration. (Biographical story)

TWO STEPS FROM THE MOON

Carmen Martínez San Bernardino

You wonder where you should begin this story. Perhaps a date of birth would be most appropriate. From what you discover, Herrera Linares was born on 13 February 1879. Curiously, he also died on the thirteenth, though in September. Over several weeks, you research his life. You listen to lectures and watch documentaries, always in snatches, always in stolen moments. You study pictures and look closely at his face. He always seems serious, always absorbed in his thoughts, in his projects. There are pronounced shadows beneath his eyes, and a neatly combed moustache above his lips. He looks a stout man, and you imagine a straight, upright back and a confident, elegant gait. You imagine a powerful voice, exquisite manners, a penetrating and ever-curious gaze.

A wealth of information comes your way about his long life. You scribble dates and places on paper, distinctions and honours, a multitude of praises woven into the account of his extraordinary adventures, of his inexplicable neglect. An intense life, you think. Intense and full. And as you come to know the man who until now was a complete stranger to you, you feel admiration awakening within you for someone who dreamed of travelling beyond the clouds, beyond what his eyes could see. This stranger, who is already becoming a little less strange, dreamed of crossing the sky and setting foot on the Moon.

You sense that, even as a child, Herrera Linares learned to walk with his gaze lifted from the ground, from solid earth, from the familiar. Apparently, it was his father who awakened

his longing to fly. Surely that child could not then have imagined that one day he would travel in a balloon to observe the rarity of an eclipse. Nor could he have imagined, in those early years, that in time he would invite his wife to sail through the sky, the two of them in a biplane. How fortunate the beautiful Irene was that day. She was the first Spanish woman to rise so high and pass through the clouds. On reflection, how fortunate they both were. What could be more beautiful than sharing a dream with those we love?

These days, in those stolen moments, you read somewhere that Emilio and Irene had two sons: Emilio and José. It does not surprise you that Emilio was a pilot. Nor that José became a poet. Indeed, the pieces of this puzzle seem to fit perfectly. It makes sense that one son should inherit his father's vocation and his grandfather's interests. It also makes sense that the other should try to express the unattainable through words and verse. How could a poet fail to be born of a man for whom our earthly globe was too small? And José was no ordinary poet, no. He too, a writer of the Generation of '36, reached the heights of Spanish letters and won the National Prize for Literature. His brother Emilio, the pilot, however, died young during the civil war, while flying over Belchite. They say his body was never found, and that thought moves you and draws you into the mystery. Who knows? Perhaps that young life was reduced to a handful of ashes. Perhaps the wind carried them away to prolong a flight for ever interrupted. And now, at this moment, having reached this point, you wonder how much sadness lay in the seriousness of Herrera Linares's face. How much longing and nostalgia there must have been, after his son's death, when his eyes gazed at the Moon in the darkness of every night. You find it admirable that, despite that immense loss, Emilio Herrera Linares never abandoned his endeavour. His wish to reach the Moon was undoubtedly too great. Since childhood, it had grown with him, like his arms and legs. That was why he designed his suit, the so-called stratonautical suit. Once you have written it, you look at that word, stratonautical, and pause over it, as though its syllables had led you to the marrow, to the heart of a path, to the crossroads where a direction is chosen. You write it and repeat it aloud, and suddenly you seem to have crossed the barrier of reality into the world of adventure, as though this stranger's life were that of a character created by Jules Verne himself. You write it and can readily place it in the pages of a novel whose hero spends sleepless nights inventing a strange contraption in which to sail through the immensity of space. And there is more: it seems more literary still to learn that Herrera invented the first spacesuit and tested it in the family bathtub. You even find it amusing. Touching, too. Apparently Irene, the same woman who bravely accompanied him on that biplane flight, would watch him walking through their home dressed as an astronaut. You reflect that she must have been an extraordinary woman, surely beyond

astonishment. You would not want to forget her, and you become increasingly convinced that she deserves at least a few lines. For she, more than anyone, probably encouraged every initiative, every experiment, every sleepless effort of Emilio's. You suppose that a dreamer's partner must necessarily be a dreamer too, someone always able to fan her companion's wings. But might she have disguised herself as a practical woman? You do not know, and will never know, for she truly is a stranger to you. Yet you imagine that there must also have been much of her in every advance, in every step towards the distant, enigmatic Moon. And there must have been something of her in their sons, in the pilot as in the poet, something of her in the flights and in the verses.

Yes, you are ever more convinced that Herrera's life held a great deal of life: many friends, many disciples and a good number of collaborators. Among the various names around him, Albert Einstein's naturally catches your attention. So does Alfonso XIII's. Those two men held an important place in the adventures of our Emilio Herrera. With Einstein he shared his horror at the terrible consequences of the dropping of the atomic bomb. Both foresaw its impact; both felt the suffering of others. As for King Alfonso XIII, how could you fail to be struck by the fact that he presented the engineer with the golden key to his chamber? It meant that Herrera enjoyed the monarch's complete confidence. The truth is that this symbol, this golden key, takes you once again into a world that seems not real but fashioned from the imagination of storytellers. A golden key that opened the king's private chambers, the place where secrets and treasures were kept! But, forcing yourself back down to earth, you remember that Alfonso XIII's name was closely linked to the difficult decision Herrera had to make. When the civil war broke out, Emilio, a Catholic and a monarchist, joined the Republican cause. The king advised him to do so. And he obeyed. Once again, Herrera awakens your admiration. For he was a man of integrity who kept his word. Perhaps those traits, too, were carved into the apparent seriousness of his face, into the bags beneath his eyes. The truth is that Herrera remained faithful to what had been freely chosen at the ballot box. A man forged in loyalty could have done no other.

Herrera the dreamer, the man who wanted to go beyond the clouds, had to leave his country and travel far away into exile. Part of his life was spent in Paris, the City of Light. You discover that he lived there very modestly, in a fifth-floor flat with no lift. It is curious. This man seemed destined for heights. In that Paris flat, he scraped by in great hardship beside his devoted Irene. According to the accounts, he was once visited there by men posing as journalists. In reality, they were undercover NASA agents. Once again, the incredible, the literary and the fantastical

slip into this engineer's life. The Americans wanted to learn everything that restless, gifted mind held. But Herrera knew how to refuse a contract that would have been highly advantageous. It would have been different if the Spanish flag could have flown on the Moon beside the American one. Then he would certainly have been willing to collaborate. Otherwise, no, absolutely not. And no was his final word on the matter. He also said no to the Nazi government. A yes was unthinkable. A man of such stature could not ally himself with the lowest of the low, with the merciless cruelty of those who crushed millions of innocents beneath their boots. And once again, you find yourself admiring this forgotten, unforgettable man: the first to cross the Strait of Gibraltar in an aeroplane; the man who was president of the Republic in exile; who built the wind tunnel; the son of a science-loving engineer who illuminated the beauty of the Alhambra; the same man who foresaw the Moon landing; who aspired to explore the stratosphere in a balloon; who devised the suit that would give rise to the astronaut's. So much life in the long life of the unforgettable Herrera Linares.

Little by little, as the lines of this inexpert, disordered account unfold, as you follow Herrera's footsteps around the world, you draw nearer to Geneva, the city where he died an old man. Our engineer died two years before humankind reached the Moon. How strange the fate of dreamers is. He, who had invented the pioneering suit, who had smoothed the path towards that unattainable satellite, never saw those black-and-white images watched so often on our screens. Yes, fate is very strange. And you cannot help wondering what Herrera would have felt had he seen them on the television in his home, there in Geneva. They say that, before death, a whole life flashes through the dying person's mind. You wonder, then, whether with his final breath Herrera saw himself dressed in his suit, wrapped in its protective layer, his head covered by the helmet, at last treading the longed-for surface of the Moon. Who knows whether his memory recalled what he had never lived? Perhaps the dreamer had one final dream before sleeping for ever. Perhaps.

A little piece of the Moon reached the hands of one of Herrera Linares's closest collaborators. It was presented to him by Neil Armstrong, the American astronaut and engineer, commander of the Apollo 11 mission, the first man to walk on the Moon. In this way, Armstrong paid tribute to the Spaniard who had made his walk on the satellite possible. He knew well that without Herrera's work, without his determination, the mission would never have become a reality. Yet the tiny Moon rock, too, arrived too late. Herrera was no longer there to hold it between his fingers, to gaze at it with those eyes that had always looked upwards.

In your modest research, you uncover another mystery, another novelistic phenomenon to add to this incredible story: the lunar souvenir disappeared and was never found. Just like the body of Emilio, the son Herrera taught to fly, whose ashes you imagine joining the clouds that drifted over Belchite. Now you think of it, perhaps in his final dream the engineer Herrera Linares dreamed of being reunited with his son Emilio in the immensity of the sky, together at last, two steps from the Moon.

All the Skies interweaves memories, dreams and letters around Irene and Emilio Herrera, a married couple whose lives unfolded among balloons, kites and the skies of different lands, where the air symbolises freedom, love and hope. The narrative combines the poem Emilio dedicated to Irene with memories of their travels, their exile and their poetic and scientific legacy, culminating in a final letter in 1969, when she celebrates humankind’s arrival on the Moon, recalling that this achievement also owes a debt to her husband’s legacy.

ALL THE SKIES

Nuria Peramos Díaz

I drew all the skies, I dreamed all the moons. My heart, rocked in a balloon, is stardust; my feet, free, are the air of new clouds. Together we shall rise, Irene, to an ethereal place where worlds and names weigh nothing. All air, no earth. Your arms, my wings; your laughter, my sail. Our playful flight will forget every map. Clouds, you and I, Irene; my horizon your brow, your arms my wings. And your lilting voice, Irene, a kite of radiant light.

For Irene, from Emilio. Geneva, September 1967.

His father's words, spoken by her, moved José.

"I kept it in my desk, Mother. It was Father's last wish that I should give you this letter."

Irene could not stop crying, but her tears comforted her. Her soul hung from an invisible thread that drew her upwards. She felt herself embraced from an immaterial realm.

"Your father was a poet too. He wrote his dreams in a fathomless notebook: the skies. He taught me to fly, as you well know. I was the first woman to fly. What I would give to make that biplane journey again. We were two birds, José. We had to live 'backwards', but your father and I were always free. Our life was a happy flight despite the turbulence; integrity travelled beside us."

She gave a gentle smile. Her gaze dissolved into the air, and memories flowed one after another in a quiet voice, while her eldest son listened attentively.

Since childhood she had wanted to go up in a balloon, an unusual longing among girls of her time. Irene was lively and daring, "a mischievous little calf", as they called the girl when she met her future husband. She treasured, unchanged in her memory, the slow, peaceful landscape of the balloons in which Emilio already dreamed of flying; the countryside steeped in an almost painterly atmosphere where everything seemed to rise, heedless of gravity. She would take off her beautiful dancing shoes to run wildly among the balloons. The vast field of aerostats gave her a sense of absolute freedom that she could never recapture beyond those lands.

Beneath Guadalajara's fiercely blue skies, the tethered balloons greeted them gracefully, waiting for hands to release them from the ground, eager to taste lighter air. They did not share the vocation of the lavender flowers or the sunflowers that, bound to the earth, swayed contentedly.

Emilio had left Granada's skies behind, having scarcely explored them, but he remembered the colours of certain sunsets at the San Nicolás viewpoint. The adventurous boy would often forgo his night's rest, preferring to dream awake, perched on the tower of the family home. From there he watched with devotion the snows of the mountains and the magical fading of the stars as dawn broke over the Alhambra. Emilio carried with him the lush gardens and old courtyards, the scent of white jasmine and roses; he could hear the fragile voice of fountains whispering in little cobbled squares, where the water played at being a child or fell languidly asleep, imitating some ancient tune in the afternoon's torpor. His pockets were full of magic and ingenious experiments;

etched for ever in his memory were the Italian arias his sister played on the piano and the brilliant pages with which Jules Verne had enriched his spirit. As though it had been written, he had to leave that first sky behind to shape his future beneath the same sky as Irene.

So many, so many skies there were for them both... All the skies awaited them; they were destined to stitch them together and weave a new one to share. The strings of those brave balloons were already threading the pathways of the air.

"I shall take you to La Alcarria, Mother. One day we shall return to the Castilian countryside. Our sky is not in Geneva. Here the air is made of tin, heavy and dark."

"How far behind us the lands of La Alcarria lie, Petere; yet I am always there, in the gentle green of its hills. Cercedilla, too, sleeps far away. What a childlike wind it was that flew our kites! Do you remember how Father made them? The most favourable winds blew there for us."

Emilio Herrera's kites became famous in Cercedilla. In summer, children and the poets and painters who withdrew into the mountain's intimate embrace came to admire those striking ladies of the air; some youngsters called them by name, for Don Emilio and his wife christened each one according to what it inspired in them: Ventura, Sacromonte, Eclipse, Triana, Atlántica... José and his little brother Emilio enjoyed decorating the kites with coloured ribbons that streamed in splendid tails. José, an apprentice poet, would often write verses on the ribbons as messages. Sometimes Irene, too, attached a secret wish which, sent up into the sky, she hoped would come true.

"Of course I remember, Mama. I shall never forget the day Lunera became caught in the dense trees beside the stream. Whenever we returned to the course of my Guadarrama, I searched for her without success. I had tied to her a little poem called 'Zap!', the mischievous word the child-wind would turn around; 'zap', the word that frightens wars away and summons paz, peace."

"Lunera was one of my favourites, dear Peterete. Because we are people of peace. How different our lives might have been if that kite had travelled far. If I could hold Lunera in my hands today, I would embroider on her the dove of your friend Rafael from Cádiz, and we would hoist her like a flag. And if your father had seen her, he would surely have joked about taking her to the Moon or using her for his spacesuit cape. Can you imagine? A kite of peace in space, flying above hatred and differences. God knows Emilio Herrera's heart was as immense as the universe itself, generous towards humankind."

“I wish I had travelled to China with my beloved Alberti, Mother. Far from wars; besides, the people there are great friends of kites. Lunera was lost, torn apart in a sea of branches, as though somehow she wished to foretell what would happen to my brother: a young, brave body brought down in the air.”

When an air-route study took them south, Irene and Emilio fell in love with Seville and its skies. It must have been Triana, the kite, who carried up the ribbon bearing young Irene’s message. Five years had passed since their wedding, and she was still waiting for the honeymoon flight in a free balloon he had promised her. As though time had stood still, that excitement remained undimmed; Irene was able to live the most unforgettable moments of her life. Emilio had commissioned a beautiful balloon for the occasion; it wore Irene’s favourite shades of blue, mauve and pink. Her name was written in enormous letters across its billowing envelope. An experienced pilot, Emilio took care of all the preparations; he had chosen the brightest day, the most welcoming sky. They were not alone in the basket: a kindly breeze clothed in the rich scent of orange blossom enfolded them. The Giralda watched them from below, small but proud amid its thunderous concert of bells. Like Irene, the white city shone, radiant and festive. To surprise his wife still further, Emilio planned to continue the adventure with a journey in a monoplane.

“Good things have happened to us in the air too, José. I learned a great deal from your father. You were very small when we left you in Aunt Pa’s care. Father wanted to surprise me with something very special. After the balloon ride I had dreamed of so much, a monoplane journey from Seville brought us happily to Marrakesh. I assure you there are good human hearts everywhere, and I could recognise them; that was what I thought when, on reaching the Moroccan city, I caught sight of the Giralda again, or so it seemed to me from the heights. We human beings are not so different. Seville’s blue was the same in those skies and seas.”

“I believe you, Mama; yet I have not found that colour here in Geneva. You and I shall return to the south, to Andalusia. As Pablo, my little Picasso, said in Paris: ‘Blue is in the south’, that blue which nourishes the souls of us artists.”

“I remember as though it were yesterday the first time Father and I visited Paris; it was on our honeymoon. Since we always wanted to climb as high as we could, we went to the very top of the Eiffel Tower. I conceived you in Paris, my darling. I would never have imagined we would later live there in such a long exile. In those days we knew we had one another; we learned that our true homeland is our family.”

Sometimes exile was sweet; the Herreras enjoyed frequent walks through the Tuileries Gardens, especially when their grandchildren came to visit,

Petere’s children. The children laughed as they imitated the Montgolfier brothers and listened with delight to the story of the cockerel, the sheep and the duck that went up in a balloon. They also revisited old stories about Grandfather Emilio, such as the time when, in a balloon basket, he came down abruptly on the trees of Guadalajara and jumped to the ground as though nothing had happened. The future belongs only to the brave, and the Herreras firmly took charge of theirs, as though piloting an airship.

They made their Parisian home in a modest flat; it bore no resemblance to the Granada mansion where Emilio had grown up, or Irene’s luxurious house in Guadalajara; nor to the couple’s home in Madrid. The staircase wound on and on to the fifth floor. In a way, it reminded Irene of the endless climbs to the Giralda’s bell tower, during which she had laughed so much at Emilio; in those days her husband had been no nimbler than she was.

“I agree. Our family has always been our true homeland. You and Father are my children’s homeland too. Do you know? Your grandson Emilio still treasures one of the kites his grandfather made for him in Paris. One summer afternoon on the beach at Antibes, in the company of friends, Picasso spontaneously drew a dove in the sand. When little Emilio saw it, he asked him to copy it on his kite. It already had a name, for Father knew what he would call it before finishing it: he had the idea of naming it Concordia. Your grandson ran proudly along the shore, his little arm raised, holding the very long string; the sky, too, seemed proud of that snowy-white kite. Concordia was a dove tattooed with another dove. We saw her fall into the water, but she was unharmed, and remains just as she was that day; she could take flight at any moment.”

“Concordia was the perfect name. In years to come the world will know that Emilio Herrera dreamed of harmony among people. I would very much like that kite to pass to my grandchildren’s children, to the children of your children, José.”

As though sensing that the thread of her existence was growing shorter, Irene often revisited her balloon journey with Emilio, but also reread the poem he had dedicated to her. After reciting it for the last time, she decided to write a few lines to her son. Aunt Pa would see that they reached his home in Geneva as a postcard.

I have learned that today, at last, humankind has reached the Moon. Your aunt and I have raised a glass of champagne to Father’s dream. Always remember that this feat was possible thanks to your father. Humanity will remember his contribution to Science, though few will understand his suffering and devotion. Last night I dreamed of him. Father was looking at me from a balloon basket. He was waiting for me so that we could rise together, as he says in his letter, to a place where

nothing weighs anything. It was a beautiful sunset in Guadalajara, and above us, high in the sky among the clouds, Lunera was watching us.

My dear Peterete, take very good care of yourself, and of Carmen and my grandchildren too. Your mother, Irene.

Madrid, July 1969.

The Spaniard among the Stars evokes the figure of Emilio Herrera. The story blends memory and imagination: from preparations for the flight cut short by the Civil War to exile, where he continued to work in silence, watching his ideas being used without acknowledgement in the spacesuits of other powers. It concludes by affirming that, although Herrera never touched the stars, he mapped the path for others to do so.

THE SPANIARD AMONG THE STARS

Hugo Castillo

The file was at the back, almost hidden, as though it had spent years evading anyone’s gaze. On the faded label, a name was barely legible: Herrera, E. I did not know why I stopped there; perhaps by chance, perhaps because forgotten names always exert a secret pull.

I opened it without expecting much. Yellowing papers, calculations in blue ink, drawings of an impossible suit. A kind of flexible armour with valves and tubes, a glass helmet that seemed taken from a Jules Verne novel. There were letters too, newspaper cuttings and a black-covered notebook. I opened it carefully. On the first page, in sloping handwriting, it read:

“Tomorrow we shall rise to where the air breaks. May God grant me calm, for neither science nor the uniform knows how a heart beats at twenty thousand metres.”

The pen strokes still seemed to tremble. I passed my hand over the paper as though caressing a relic, and a stale smell of cardboard and damp filled the archive. But then something changed: the cloud of dust became something else. It no longer smelled of a basement, but of damp earth, petrol, grass freshly crushed beneath hurrying boots.

For an instant I doubted myself. I closed my eyes, and when I opened them I was no longer there. The notebook had ceased to be a document; it had become my present.

The ground was cold that morning. Dew stained the hems of my uniform and earth clung to my boots as though it wanted to keep me in the world of men. A few metres away, the balloon awaited its awakening, spread across the grass like a white animal ready to fill with the breath of the sky.

I have checked every valve in the pressure suit, every seal, every screw. The engineers look at me with the anxiety of those placing their faith in a single man. I too am trembling, but it is not the air I fear: it is oblivion.

The helmet is on the table, round and gleaming, still misted with dew. When I put it on, I shall know that I am cut off from the world, that the only thing keeping me company up there will be the beating of my own heart.

Some mutter that it is madness. That Spain has more urgent needs, that there is no money for dreams. But I know that today, for a few hours, we shall carry the flag higher than ever before.

The mechanics move around the balloon like monks around an altar. They unfold it carefully. The metal cables shine like veins in the faint light of dawn.

I breathe deeply. The air smells of petrol, rubber and early morning. I hear the hum of a pump filling the balloon. A murmur runs through the crowd gathered at a distance. Journalists, onlookers, soldiers. Barely a few hundred, yet I feel the weight of an entire country on my shoulders.

I look towards the horizon. Low clouds still cover Madrid like a veil. I know that up there the sky is darker, almost black, and that if all goes well I shall see the curvature of the Earth. There is no pilot in the world who has not dreamed of that.

I place my hand on the helmet and close my eyes for a moment. I do not pray, but let my mind silently repeat the only thing that matters: let there be a record, let them know that Spain went to touch the sky.

When I open my eyes again, I shall no longer be a man on the grass. I shall be merely a speck suspended in the air. And, if luck is with me, I shall be the first to hear what the silence of the stratosphere sounds like.

They secured the suit with firm hands. Every strap, every buckle sounded like a warning bell. The rubber and pressurised fabric squeezed my arms and chest; the air inside was dense, heavy, as though I were already entering another

atmosphere. When the helmet was fitted, it abruptly silenced the murmur of the field, leaving only a metallic sound in my ears: my own breathing.

The men gave me the signal. I moved towards the basket suspended beneath the balloon, now towering above me, immense and gleaming, like a white moon swelling against the dawn. The sun was barely appearing above the horizon, bathing the fabric in a silver glow.

The first tug jolted my body. The crowd below stirred; some raised their hands in farewell. I responded awkwardly with a stiff glove that could barely move. Then came silence; the balloon rose with a gentleness that seemed impossible for so gigantic a mass.

At first we rose slowly, as though the air itself hesitated to let us through. But soon the earth began to fall away at a speed that chilled the blood. I saw the field shrink, Madrid's streets unfold like a board, the river stand out like a dark vein. The rooftops looked like toys, the people like ants.

The basket swayed gently. I felt a mixture of euphoria and vertigo. I adjusted the gauges: pressure, oxygen, temperature. Everything behaved as the calculations predicted. The suit was fulfilling its promise. Artificial air surrounded me, pressurised, while outside the atmosphere was becoming too thin for a human body.

The cold came quickly. The pressure suit creaked as the temperature fell, and a fine frost covered the visor glass, which I had to wipe with my gloved hand. Higher up, the clouds began to disperse: first grey and dense, then white filaments, and finally nothing. Only blue.

I paused for a moment to look. The sky was no longer sky; it was turning a deep shade, almost black, flecked with a brightness that was not clouds but stars. The sun, without the curtain of air, shone with a white violence.

I carried a notebook in my inner pocket. I drew it out with difficulty and wrote a single sentence: "The universe begins here."

The earth below curved gently. From there, the world looked immense, all-encompassing. A blue hemisphere, speckled with white clouds that seemed no more than brushstrokes. I felt my chest would burst, not from the pressure but from the certainty of witnessing something almost no human being had seen.

I gripped the railing. The wood was stiff with cold. The basket creaked, but held. Inside the helmet, my breathing became thunder, steady as a metronome marking the rhythm of the ascent.

I thought of Granada, of my childhood, of afternoons looking at the sky and wondering what lay beyond the clouds. I thought of the colleagues who had helped me design the suit, of the endless calculations, the arguments with the unbelievers. Everything converged in that instant: I, an ordinary man of flesh and blood, suspended between the earth and infinity.

The altitude brought me an unexpected calm. Up there was no noise, no politics, no war. Only silence, a silence that seemed an invisible ocean holding me up.

I imagined what would come afterwards. Higher flights still, craft that would cross the stratosphere, perhaps one day the Moon. It would not be me, but somehow I felt I was opening a gateway for everyone.

I took a small folded flag from my pocket. Clumsily, I fastened it to the railing. It did not flutter: the air was too thin. It remained still, rigid, as though posing for an eternal photograph.

Then I thought of the return. I had to descend, had to become a man again. I turned valves, adjusted weights. The balloon obeyed slowly, with the deliberation of a giant bending down.

As I descended, the vision of the Earth grew indistinct. The dark blue lightened again, the clouds reappeared, moisture struck the helmet in quick droplets. The cold eased, the air became breathable once more. And with every metre lost, I felt I was leaving behind something irretrievable: the privilege of having touched, even for an instant, the edge of the cosmos.

When I opened my eyes, I was still on solid ground. The balloon still slept on the grass, its valves unused, the helmet misted by the morning damp. Nobody surrounded or embraced me. Only the heavy silence of a country soon to split in two.

It is terrible to think that the flight never happened, or that it did, but only in my mind. It was the flight we imagined, the ascent we planned in every calculation and every drawing, the dream time snatched from me before I could start the engines. Nobody heard that silence of the stratosphere. Nobody else saw the curvature of the Earth from a Spanish balloon.

And yet I am convinced that one day they will.

The dream ended before it could really happen. The country split in two, and my projects broke with it.

The hangars stood empty, the calculation tables covered in dust, and the balloon that was once to lift us again was cut to pieces to patch leaks in makeshift barracks.

War understood neither skies nor science. Anyone who spoke of stars was branded a madman, or worse, a suspect. I remained faithful to the Republic because I believed loyalty was the least I could offer the land that had given me a name and a profession. But I soon understood that war destroys everything, even the firmest principles.

I remember a morning at Cuatro Vientos, shortly before I left Madrid. The field was full of makeshift trenches, and the aeroplanes that had once flown elegantly above the city were now burnt-out shells beside the runway. I approached the hangar where we still kept parts of the suit. I found a young soldier sitting on the box containing the pressurised gloves. He looked at them as though they were scrap. And perhaps they were.

The order soon came: evacuate. Some colleagues left for Valencia, others for Alicante. I gathered what little I could into a suitcase. I left the rest behind, like someone abandoning a burning house.

Exile began in silence, with the clatter of a train carrying me away from Madrid. Through the window I saw dry fields, villages motionless beneath the sun. Nobody waved. Nobody said farewell.

At the French border, a guard checked my papers with disdain. He did not understand that folder full of plans. Nor could I explain it: how could I sum up in one sentence that the future lay there, that those lines could clothe the men who would one day walk on the Moon? The guard merely shrugged and let me through.

France greeted me with hunger. Switzerland with indifference. In the cafés they spoke of science, of advances, of laboratories working in silence for the most powerful governments. I listened and nodded, but inside me a bitter certainty burned: my country would see none of it. It had preferred to fight itself rather than lift its eyes to the sky. On nights in cheap hotels, I spread the papers over the bed and checked the calculations. Once more I imagined the ascent, the silence, the curvature of the Earth. I wrote notes as though a team still awaited me the following day,

but when I closed the folder, all that remained was the murmur of the street and the smell of stale tobacco.

Sometimes I think the real stratosphere was not the one I wanted to reach in my balloon, but this: the void of exile, the rarefied air where one breathes nothing but memories. Ever since, whenever I see a balloon rise at a festival, or a photograph of astronauts wearing suits that follow my same logic of pressurisation, my skin aches a little. Not because they stole it from me, but because I no longer have a country to which I can offer anything.

Lake Geneva stretches out like a cold mirror. I walk slowly along the shore, leaning on a stick I never wanted to need. The air here is clean, too clean; it smells of neither petrol nor damp grass, nor does it hold the electric hum of an aerodrome at dawn. It smells of exile.

In the afternoons I sit on a wooden bench and close my eyes. Then I hear again the hum of the balloon inflating, the mechanics' footsteps on the grass, the distant cries of the onlookers. Everything returns. And for a few seconds I am once again the man who saw the curvature of the Earth.

I know there will be no return. I shall never again tread Granada's soil or smell the orange blossom in spring. Yet I disavow nothing. Science taught me that nothing is wholly lost: energy is transformed, dreams change hands.

It comforts me to think that, in some laboratory, young engineers are studying suits like mine. That perhaps, when an American or Soviet astronaut opens his spacecraft's hatch and floats into the void, he will do so thanks to a seed we planted in Spain before the war stripped us of everything.

I do not know whether history will remember my name. But I know that, although I never touched the stars with my hands, I set down the path for others to do so. And that, in the end, is enough.

Back in the library, I carefully closed the notebook again, as though afraid the words might escape. The archive smelled once more of dust and damp cardboard, and the magic of the 1935 airfield faded like a dream on waking.

I remained silent for a moment. Outside in the street, cars passed, unaware that a piece of history rested within. Nobody seemed to remember him. Nobody knew that Spain had had its own astronaut before the word existed.

I searched the database. There he was: Emilio Herrera Linares. Engineer, military officer, inventor of the stratonautical suit, precursor of spacesuits. Exiled, forgotten, dead in Geneva in 1967. And yet recognised by NASA as one of the fathers of space exploration.

I looked again at the plans. They were not scribbles: they were a bridge. A design ahead of its time that had survived wars, borders and silences. The dream politics had tried to bury had ended up travelling further than any balloon.

I closed the file and returned it to its place. Before leaving, I stroked the faded label, as though saying goodbye to an old friend. Outside, Madrid's sky was clear. An intense, clean blue, as though still waiting for someone to claim it.

I stopped at the door and looked up. I thought of that man, of his misted helmet, of his heart beating at twenty thousand metres. He had not needed to leave the stratosphere to make his mark. He had done so through the faith that dreams, though interrupted, always find another body, another age, another sky.

And I understood that Emilio Herrera had already conquered the air.

The Air Does Not Forgive tells the story of Emilio Herrera and the creation of his stratonautical suit at Cuatro Vientos aerodrome. Amid trials, errors and improvements, war interrupted his dream, forcing him into exile, where he continued to work in silence while watching other countries develop spacesuits based on similar ideas. Years later, fragments of his work—a visor, a screw, a notebook—resurface in museums and in the memories of those who worked alongside him, showing that his legacy was not merely an invention, but a method founded on patience and collaboration. The text concludes that, although the air does not forgive, it respects those who know how to speak its language and, sooner or later, gives back what was offered to it with precision and faith.

THE AIR DOES NOT FORGIVE

Sebastián Tugores Ramis

Cuatro Vientos smelled of rubber and hot metal. Outside, the June sun baked the hangars’ sheet metal; inside, the air was sewn with stitches of oil and chalk. Emilio Herrera brushed the suit’s brass ring with his knuckles and listened to the hollow little tap that echoed his own patience back to him.

“Again,” he said.

Tomás, the draughtsman learning to look at the world through compasses and ruler, tightened the cylinder valve. The suit grew taut; the rubberised fabric creaked like a filled sail. The elbow bellows rounded out, the fingers grew clumsier. On the pressure gauge, the needle rose a little, trembled and held still.

“Breathe,” Tomás ordered, unaware that he was addressing a superior as a doctor would a patient.

Herrera inhaled. The air reached him filtered through soda lime, with an aftertaste of damp plaster. The circular visor—thick glass, hand-bevelled in a headlamp workshop—turned the world into a fishbowl where everything was both nearer and farther away.

That suit was no fantasy: it was method. Years of reading, calculations in the margins and nights of a pen scratching paper. The air does not forgive, he thought; that was why one had to negotiate with it: press it, and it crushes you; let it go, and it empties you.

Dozens of tests had already taken place in the hypobaric chamber—a cylinder repurposed from military use. A mechanic from Madrid, with hands of petrol and bread, had

fainted on the third; he came back ashamed and eager to try again. A tailor from Lavapiés devised a pleat to stop the fabric bunching when the torso bent: “It’s like dressing a bullfighter in the middle of a fight, Don Emilio.”

One day, to check the seals, they raised the pressure too high. The silence inside turned hostile: heartbeats pounding at the temples, a buzzing that threatened to tear the ears off. The volunteer staggered out, tears falling involuntarily. Herrera recorded the incident without drama: the valve holds, but the man does not. Then he congratulated him: “You have given us a piece of data no book contained.”

That was what the suit was: different trades united by a single dream. To dream up high. To dream without the body bursting.

“Does the wrist still hurt?” Tomás asked.

“It doesn’t hurt, it protests,” Herrera replied, closing his fist inside the glove. “A little more.”

The needle rose another millimetre. Herrera raised his arm. He imagined an umbilical cord descending from a white balloon, swollen with pure gas. He imagined the sharp silence of the stratosphere, where every heartbeat rings like a bell.

He did not say so, but that gesture answered every joke: “What for? Who would want to go so high?” He carried on. He preferred to draw the sky in numbers rather than leave it to jokes.

They switched off. The needle fell like a sigh. As they unscrewed the neck ring, the smell of rubber mingled with the fresh air, and the hangar smelled of a school playground after rain.

Rosario, the seamstress who had learned to sew rubber while singing lullabies, came in with a flask.

“Coffee,” she announced, “and some news.”

“What news?” Herrera asked.

“I’ve reinforced the knees with English raincoat fabric. It weighs the same and lasts twice as long. And I’ve changed the thread: twisted silk.”

Herrera looked at her with the admiration reserved for someone who solves a problem that has no name.

“The air does not forgive,” he said, and clinked his tin cup against hers.

That summer, Madrid was a city of engines, newspapers and errands. At Cuatro Vientos they negotiated over parts, argued about the precise shape of an elbow, debated whether the seam mattered more than the seal. Nobody spoke of politics aloud; the background noise was different: that of an idea striving to become fact. A date had been set for the ascent, with supplies of gas, ropes and medicines.

“Up there everything is slower,” Herrera explained one afternoon, as the light lengthened between the hangars. “Even thought. That is why you must go up knowing what you are looking for. Take vague questions up with you, and you will come down without answers.”

The day the visor glass arrived, Rosario laid the panes on a cloth as though they were consecrated wafers. Herrera did not touch them at once. He sat down, allowed desire and fear to argue for a while, then stroked the edge. “When everything is ready,” he thought, “this will be a door.”

The night of 17–18 July brought a different humming. It was neither engine nor rain; the sky was clear. Early in the morning, a messenger entered the hangar.

“Things have happened in Africa,” he blurted out, his mouth stained with ink.

Nothing more was needed. The language of grave events needs no grammar.

“Close everything,” Herrera ordered. “Anything too heavy, take apart.”

They would not defend it with weapons. Theirs was another war: to keep that way of looking at the sky from being lost. They loaded boxes, dismantled frames, hid what they could. Rosario angrily gripped a bag of rivets as though they were broad beans. Tomás, pale, held the visor against his chest.

“What now?” he asked.

“Now, live,” Herrera replied. “And do not forget.”

Years later, in an attic in a foreign country, Herrera opened a box. The brass ring peeped out from newspaper wrappings. Three screws were missing; the glass was intact. That tiny miracle seemed to him a sign.

He had no hangar. He had a table, a notebook and letters to strangers who shared a language: that of measured air.

The winters were long, the rooms small. At the corner market they sold chestnuts whose smoke smelled of childhood. Sometimes, folding a sheet of writing paper, he saw himself young again, in Madrid, measuring with a tape the circumference of a neck that was a world.

There in France, he taught physics in cold classrooms, with pupils who looked at him like a wise castaway. He spoke of pressure, of gases, of how the vacuum is nothing yet devours everything. Afterwards, he would stop at the municipal library and ask for manuals he already knew by heart, simply to keep the habit. Exile, he understood, was also a method: beginning again without permission.

“Do you remember explaining the silence up there to me?” Tomás wrote from another frozen city. “I have found a workshop that knows how to make seals. If you agree, we could begin again there.”

Begin again. Not go back: begin again.

On a crude radio he heard the news of a man who had crossed the sky and returned. Another day, that a country planned to walk on the Moon. The newspapers arrived late, but brought photographs that were a new alphabet. The spacesuits looked like cousins of his Madrid suit: ring joints, tamed folds, unforgiving couplings.

He claimed no kinship. He wrote in his notebook: “None of this would have been possible without seamstresses, turners and stubborn efforts that never appear on postage stamps.”

When he returned to Spain, a young technician at the Air Museum recognised him and wanted to show him a storeroom.

“Look.”

On the top shelf, in a wooden box with a number painted on it, lay the visor. The brass ring gleamed beneath the light bulb.

Herrera did not touch it at first. He looked around: propellers knotted with time, maps with routes in amber ink.

“Would you mind if...?” the technician asked.

“No. Go ahead.”

He held it. It weighed just enough. The glass was clean. He brought it to his face without closing it, like someone playfully stepping for a moment inside an old possibility.

“Thank you,” he said, handing it back. “Keep it as a tool, not a whim.”

“A tool?”

“Yes. Its work is not finished yet.”

That final summer, he called himself tired for the first time. On his balcony, the air smelled of hot stone and old radios. He took out a box of photographs. In one, taken at Cuatro Vientos, he stood with a hand on his hip; beside him, Rosario was laughing. In the background, the folded balloon looked like a sleeping whale.

He kept that photograph out. He propped it on the table. He wrote: “The air does not forgive, but it gives back. Not to those who ask, but to those who persist.”

The doorbell rang. It was Tomás, his greying hair like the rings of a tree trunk. Under his arm he carried a parcel wrapped in paper.

“Open it.”

It was a grey-covered volume: Tests and Designs for a Stratonautical Suit. Inside were reproductions of those drawings that had travelled through boxes and attics. In the margins, notes signed “T.” and “R.”.

“There had to be a record,” Tomás said.

“Not for me.”

“For those who have not yet framed the question.”

Herrera closed his eyes for a moment. He opened the book at random: a drawing of the wrist, with leather seals and a missing screw. In the corner, Rosario’s handwriting: “Try twisted silk; strong, and it doesn’t chafe.”

“Rosario ought to be on every plaque,” he said.

“They will be made,” Tomás replied.

Autumn. In a provincial gallery, an eleven-year-old girl looked at a suit displayed in a glass case. It seemed strange to her that a suit for a person should resemble an insect’s

armour. She read the label: “Stratonautical suit. Project for an ascent into the stratosphere. 1930s.”

“Did they go up?” she asked.

The teacher hesitated. She chose the simple truth:

“Not as planned.”

The girl rested her forehead against the glass. Perhaps, she thought, what mattered about going up was not getting there, but leaving an account of how.

“I want to make things like that,” she said.

Rosario, a woman sweeping the floor with a millet broom, smiled without looking at anyone, as though someone had spoken to her from a corner.

Tomás went to see Herrera on the last day. The doctor had left the room smelling of reassuring alcohol. The world fitted into the open window and a glass of water.

“How little air weighs, and how dearly it costs,” Herrera murmured.

Tomás placed an envelope of cuttings on the bedside table: a photograph of an astronaut, news of a mission named after an ancient god, a letter from a young engineer who had read the book.

“Put it with the photographs,” Herrera asked.

Tomás took a brass screw from his pocket.

“I found it in the old hangar. It’s from the wrist, almost certainly.”

Herrera held it up to the light. That tiny gleam held years, and the certainty that matter, too, preserves memory.

“The air does not forgive,” he repeated. “But sometimes it leaves crumbs.”

He closed his eyes, not to sleep, but to listen. Outside came the sounds of a cart, a woman calling a child, a fruit seller’s cry. Above, somewhere no one breathes without learning how, the air remained demanding and clean.

“Rosario,” he said.

“She is here,” Tomás replied. “She always is.”

Years later, the museum technician prepared a new display case. Beside the suit, a panel with enlarged drawings and a plaque: “A collective project. Design: E.H. Contributions: T., R. and the anonymous team at Cuatro Vientos.” He hesitated over the initials, but left a concealed sheet bearing the full names.

A group of aeronautical mechanics students filed in. One stood looking at the joint between glove and ring.

“And it didn’t break?” he asked.

“Everything breaks,” the technician replied. “The question is when and how.”

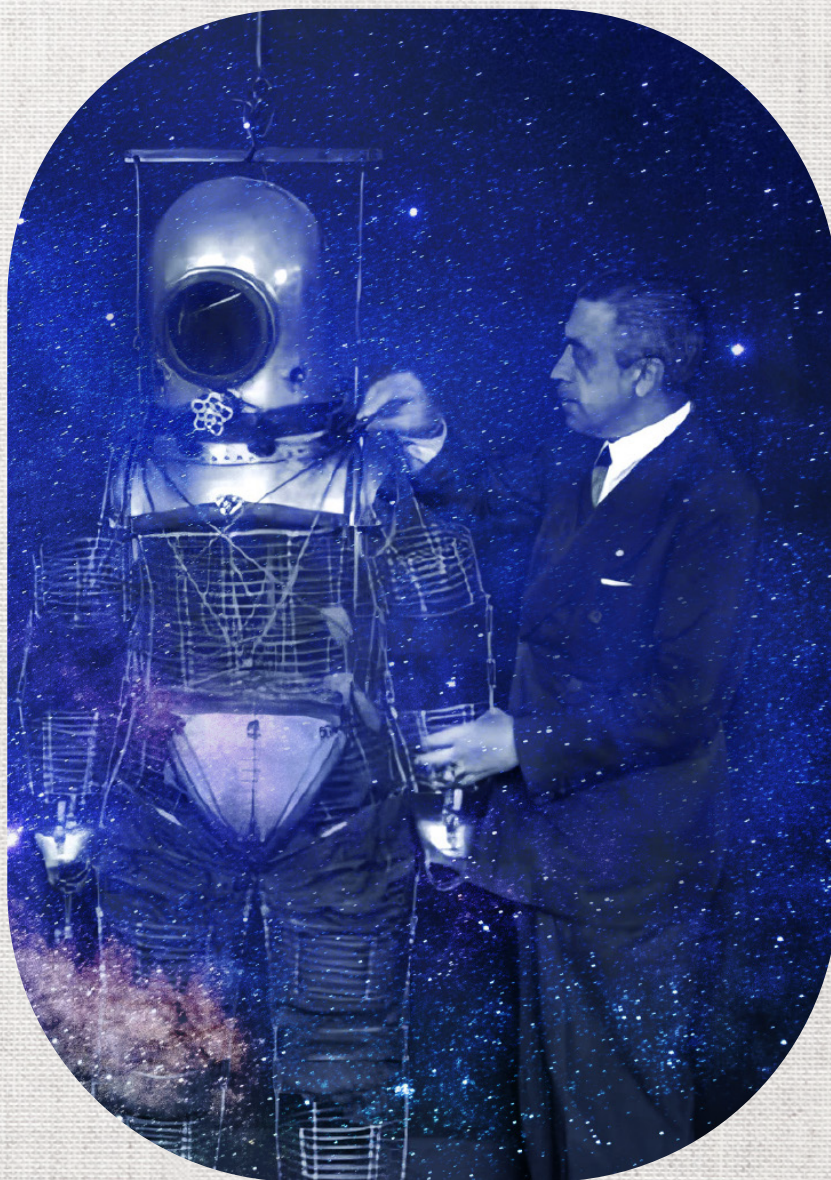
With his fingers, the boy mimed screwing an imaginary part into place. Another, quieter student took notes in a notebook: “Minimum tolerances. Needle. Circular glass.” He knew nobody would ask for them, but he wanted to keep them as one keeps seeds.

On the bus home, they said little. Two of them, however, kept gesturing with their hands, as though still screwing invisible joints together. They did not know it, but that afternoon they had received a quiet inheritance: the idea that air, too, is measured with patience.

Some stories have a moral, others a method. This one, if it has either, is made from the same materials as the suit: fabric that embraces, rings that yield, glass that lets truth through without distorting it. Someone reading it may think it is about a man; someone rereading it will know it is about a craft: proposing an honourable pact to the air.

The air does not forgive. But it respects those who know how to speak its language. And sometimes—not always, not quickly—it repays with interest what rose to ask it questions with the precision of a screw.

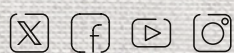




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