A MILONGA FOR TWO

By Alexander and Nicole Gratovsky

A shifting sequence of fragmentary pictures, like a slideshow:

… a sunny beach, encircled by mountains, at sunset on Ibiza in August. The newly appeared Gotan Project's music, drifting over the bay, imitating the slow rhythm of the surf. The track of a phosphorescent swimsuit, dazzling the eyes.

… nervous fever in the outskirts of Brussels the day before the project, and Daddy dancing the tango almost entirely alone – for all of us – to put an end to the insanity and in some elusive manner set everything in the right perspective.

… our temporary apartment close to the Jardin du Luxembourg. An open door leading onto a balcony and, standing with his back to it, Richard Galliano, focusing intently on caressing the buttons of his accordion. The response aroused by the movements of his fingers resonates at the cellular level.

… Lisbon, surprisingly empty in summer. In the evenings, musicians taking exquisite delight in languishing on the terraces of the cafes. The tango sensed in the fado, in the same way that Spanish words are sensed in the Portuguese ones.

… a sultry New Year's Eve in Singapore. A hypnotic, exquisitely oriental party that could have been directed by Wong Kar-wai – graceful movements, semi-darkness, the sensual music of an *orquesta tipica*, dresses that follow every slightest curve of the figure.

… musicians in tailcoats at the Caffè Florian on the Piazza San Marco in Venice. The Libertango just two steps away from the water that still hasn't drained off the square yet, so far revealing only a small patch. Sergio says it's impossible to dance the Libertango in public. But here…

… Paris again. In the squares and on the embankments we write a brazenly tangoesque novel, inventing for it an androgynous author with the unisex name Alex Forain. He gets the idea of inventing a strange science – tangology. He starts living an uncontrollable life of his own, the novel comes off the presses, and we realize that we are characters in it.

… an artist friend who fled from our house outside Moscow, leaving a note of apology: "watching someone dancing the tango so intimately is unbearable".

… the deck of the boat chartered in order to spend two weeks with dolphins. Damn it, the decks were specially made so that feet wouldn't slip on them, and at the same time – they sway about… Nighttime, out between the sky and the sea – the closest shoreline is twenty miles away – with just a few lanterns illuminating the small, heaving square of teak on which we are turning *enrosques*. The "dyadic cyclone" is all about how to twist two slim threads together into a strong cable.
A bright, bi-coloured fandangle on the wrist of God.

And finally, Buenos Aires – the "good wind" that has blown everyone you could imagine here… Fine-chopped city quarters of Armenia, China, Italy, Uruguay – Babel. Wide pants, the colours black and red. A rapidly, irresistibly growing sense of identification with the *porteños*. A city surprisingly less reminiscent of Paris than of the old, lost Moscow, which, it seems, never really existed. Dusting off memories of childhood.

… Pablo racing his jeep through La Boca at night, scattering the wandering tomcats and drowsy policemen among these houses that have never been repaired – this was where it all began, this was where the brew was concocted

… huge windows in dried-out wooden frames, through which large, warm drops force their way in when it rains. Clattering heels hurrying by under windows brushed by the leaves of the trees. Car headlights lash soundlessly at the walls. The room smells of rain and warm asphalt.

… this is a thoroughly artificial dance. “Pure merde raffinée”, according to a maestro of our acquaintance, who cannot imagine life without it. Every song reeking of heart-rending yearning for filthy La Plata, which no one ever really sees, because what is there to look at there? Contrived nostalgia, draped over… what? Melodramatic histrionics

– a local variety of bland white rice that mitigates the unbearably pungent, spicy heat of the cosmic cuisine, to provide at least a little protection for the exposed nerve endings that are inevitable when two people meet, already knowing that this will end sometime soon, and not yet believing that it will never end.

… the legendary milongas: the vast hangar of the Sunderland Club, lit by fluorescent strip lights, the elegant Art Deco of La Confiteria Ideal, the basement setting of La Viruta, indistinguishable from a nightclub – at the start of the night, there’s no room here to swing a cat. At that hour this is a “social dance”, a midnight-hour escape from loneliness. An urgent desire to be embraced. But as three o’clock approaches people get tired and go home. And the hour of the dancers arrives … The moon in a jasmine shawl visited the gypsies in the smithy …

… La Cumparsita at the hour “between the wolf and the dog”, when at any moment it can start to grow light and the streets are turning cool and fresh. We climb the creaking staircase, afraid of waking the neighbours. In the pre-dawn twilight, the stiletto-heeled shoes are dropped beside the bed. Oblivion. It was written in French and is sung in French: *court, le temps semble court – short, how short seems the time, now the night starts counting down … your finger slips along the lines of my heart … and I am lost in oblivion*

Convencernos que somos capaces...
“Let us agree that we are able
to be ourselves, stand tall, without a backward glance.”
Convencernos … “Let us agree.”

LET US AGREE that this is not a dance. Or rather, it is dance to the extent that it is dialogue. One more way for us to talk to each other – without words, beyond words. People nearby realise

that what they are seeing is a supremely important conversation, but they can't hear a single word, they can't grasp the sense or how it is conveyed, and that makes them feel uneasy … HOW you dance is primarily a matter of WHAT you dance. There's no point in dancing nonsense.

LET US AGREE that the Man leads. No equality of rights, that's all make-believe. All the choices are his. All the mistakes are his. He draws the woman in space, he dances her through time. She is the medium and the method, he is he is the creative artist.
The Man leads… but it is the Woman who inspires his movement. Ignites his passion. The meaning is in her. The orientation lies in her. Without her there is no one to lead, nowhere to lead them and no reason to lead. She *is* the meaning.

LET US AGREE: this is not a man and a woman, but what is between them and above them. In architecture this is called the integration point – it lies somewhere outside the building, it is indiscernible to the ordinary eye, but it is what holds and binds together the entire creation (and the whole of Creation). The invisible axis of the swing.
An exercise in managing gravity: it's impossible to stand like that or move like that, it's a violation of the laws of physics, we would have fallen separately, if not for you, if not for me.

LET US AGREE that the show, the performance, the ballroom tango is not what it's all about, since that is for an audience, and not for us two, since it does not have the elusive, unrepeatable quality of the unique moment, it has all been learned off and rehearsed. The leaping and gesturing of gymnastic exercises, performed by mechanical dolls to amuse the public – what could be more boring for the two of us?

LET US AGREE that it's not a matter of technical dance figures, of how complex and fine-honed they are, it's not a matter of technique at all. It's a matter of one single movement. Of the start of the movement. And its continuation. The true Master is not the one who performs these or those pieces of fancy footwork the best, not the one who knows more of them, he simply does *this* step right here differently – the step that is NOW. All the movements that can be learned off are unimportant. The meaning lies in HOW YOU DO THIS STEP NOW, because in actual fact, you can't do anything else. And no matter how long we have studied, again and again we study the same thing – after everything that has happened, we learn again how to walk…

LET US AGREE that technique is the same kind of flimflam as denial of technique. It quite simply has to be there, and this is so obvious and natural that there is nothing to discuss. You have to know the alphabet in order to put words together on paper. A couple must be able to sense each other. Technique is the outcome of numerous instances of despair, illusion, repetition – the agonizing scoring of furrows into the brain. Until you make the neurons dance in a new way.

LET US AGREE that the more we hurry things, the less likely we are to have time for everything. "When I'm hurrying, I slow my movements down." There are three minutes. The hint has been given: "three minutes with reality". There is lots of time. The pauses between the ticks of the second hand can be stretched out into enough time for a movement to be completed, in those pauses you can toy with the embellishments without hurrying – and have time for everything. Say everything and do everything…

LET US AGREE that we would make very poor honour guards. Fortunately, we are incapable of marching. A step is a controlled fall. Mass is energy. L-left. R-r-right. It is conceived and happens somewhere in the region of the solar plexus. Everything is conceived and happens somewhere there, all we need to understand is that this is the only way it can be. Show us how a couple dance, and we can guess how they spend the rest of their time.
The movement does not start from the foot. For a step, the foot is absolutely unimportant.

LET US AGREE that the hand is of no importance either. There is no need to lead each other by the hand. To "lead with the hand", "to manipulate". Push or pull. Then what do we walk with, what do we lead with?
We need to realise that this woman cannot do anything else – it's not a matter of will or choice, but of preordination. Morphic resonance is a physical given, an unambiguous coincidence of frequencies. Here the woman is led on in the way that gypsies lead away horses – without the use of force or hands, with an invisible and irresistible magnet.

A journey through a reality in which, when people part from each other as morning approaches, they say "baila mucho" – "dance a lot". *I cannot believe in a God who doesn't dance …* This is a kind of spiritual practise – prayer in movement. Intense, often with closed eyes. "We should consider every day lost on which we have not danced at least once!"
The bandoneón sets the rhythm of the heart. To dance to that is vulgar. The easiest thing of all is to strike the strong beat, but what lies between the jets of rain is more important… the usual

thing is to listen to the accented beats, but we like to listen to the gaps. There is space and air for us in them.

The etiquette of quantum nature: observation changes the behaviour of an object. Science's latest discovery (at last!): the eyes are not merely receptors, they broadcast… People invite with their eyes. They agree with their eyes. They reveal each other in this highly charged field of potentiality. Drawn to each other by the eyes, they meet already dancing.

There is only what we see. What we don't see, doesn't exist. *No existe*. The tourist from out of town, who doesn't live in this quantum world, who insists on using words and actions, instead of his eyes, does not exist. He is cancelled out. The space he occupies is considered empty. It can be danced in by anyone, with no fear of stepping on, brushing against, shoving. Parallel worlds do not intersect.

The direct and unerring perception by one of us of the microscopic intention in an impulse emanating from the other. And the tenacious resilience of the response…
An attempt at compromise between telepathy and independence.
The living, breathing synchronicity of the interaction seems impossible. But both of our faces and our eyes are turned inwards. This is Chi Quong, Tai Chi, performed for the first time not alone, but as a couple, not as opponents, but as lovers. "Conspiracy" is breathing in unison. A personal practise that becomes a mystery because it extends beyond the bounds of the individual personality and ceases to be concerned with it.
An experiment in dissolving the boundaries between the two of us, the Taoist double fish, the Yin-Yang.
The transcendence of duality in unity.
Schizo-phrenia means "split soul". An experiment in curing schizophrenia.

The small talk of purists arguing at the tables. What are the "right" and the "wrong" kinds of music? The superficiality of Nuevo or the classical forties? Milonguero or salon?.. Ah, is it possible to mix them?
Piazzolla, who broke with the tango, only to come back and break the tango. Veron, who argued that the tango can be born from any music, provided that it is authentic.

Authenticity is not a dance category at all. It's an electrical concept. Something happens that is not governed at all by rules of any kind, and this elusive something is what matters most. Two wires touch. If they are insulated, there is no spark and no life.
A short circuit. A magical blend of deep meditation and carnal passion.
Passion … the *alchemical* fifth element.

Alchemy is the multiple repetition of identical actions in the hope of producing a new result (a clear sign of insanity). At a certain moment, when all expectations have been exhausted, revelation comes and it transpires that the essence of the experiment is not the transmutation of matter, but the transformation of the experimenter…

The condition of an alchemist's advancement is profound inner concentration, because a magician's aura influences the process. Become distracted and you'll get garbage, you'll have to start all over again from scratch.

Attentiveness – three hundred per cent of the hundred that exist for the uninitiated. To the pulsation of the rhythm. To your partner. To what is going on around you – in order to pass within a millimetre without touching a world that belongs to others. The way that dolphins gambol.

The True Man of *alchemy* is complete. The puzzle is an androgyne who was once cut into two parts, separated from himself, and only this practise of four legs and one heart reunites him, puts an end to this state of separation. The goal of the Great Work is an alchemical marriage, the achievement of this conjunction of elements, in which the sum of the components produces a new state of wholeness, possessing new qualities. Uroboros holding on to his own tail. Here the end coincides with the beginning. If this is not a portrait of a couple dancing, then what is it?

An "*alchemical* quality of consciousness is essential: without faith in the miracle, the magical elixir cannot be found. A search for your own unique recipe – a coda. "As within, so without". At what stage do you start sensing the rhythm of the vibrations and learn to equate those outside your skin with those inside it? At what moment should you discover your own new – genuine – name, which corresponds to this frequency and this perception? This Initiation. Who gives the new names, who confirms their authenticity? I confirm Yours. You confirm Mine. We confirm Ours.

And then there's that Flamel couple, who keep turning up in one place or another over the centuries. It's amusing, we seem to find ourselves in the same places as them. How many times we have discovered that they were literally here just recently, yesterday evening, an hour ago: that we almost ran into them … He with his invariable grey beard and she as stunningly beautiful as ever. They're laughing at us, as we would laugh at naïve, likeable novices who have imagined that they are masters of the Game. We drive away impossible conjecture with the question that spares our mental stress: How did we miss each other? Ocho – the Mobius strip. The symbol of infinity.

The structure of magic is like homeopathy, in which a few microscopic molecules, introduced into an organism, change it completely. When our hands touch, how many thousands of molecules are transferred from me to you? When we embrace, by how many millions are we changed? When we kiss? When we sleep, our bodies intertwined? On a day when have never parted? In a year? In two decades? Caressed by the same wind, slaking our thirst from the same cup, vibrating to the same music? There is nothing of myself left in me. For a long time already I have consisted of you. We share a common chemistry. You consist entirely of me. I *am* you. You *are* me.

The endless search for the tango that doesn't exist. Not anywhere, apart from in the tiny, cosmically huge space within our embraces. And, peering into it, into this vibrating void, permeated with power, we start to dance. At that instant the tango starts to exist. A search in which he who has found, has lost, and he who still seeks, already has.

The alchemical pentacle of a scarlet rose: five petals – five senses.
Five *tandas*. In each one, four melodies – the four alchemical elements:

FIRE. Lightning. Scorching.
WATER. Thirst. Fluidity.
AIR. Transparency. Sighing.
EARTH. The strength of weight. A point of support.

And present in each of the elements is an elusive fifth, the one that gives life to everything. Twenty melodies, one for each year. And one more dance, because at the very beginning of the new morning La Cumparsita always rings out. The one you dance it with is the one you wake up with the next day.