LAS RAMBLAS
If you’re from Barcelona, the first time you go to Las Ramblas you have your hand held. By your father or your mother, your grandmother or your uncle, your cousins or your older siblings. As you grow up, you will go back many times on the arms of friends, lovers, bodies you desire, people you have just met, or perhaps being led along by a cop. And yes, of course, eventually you will go alone. Searching for something, on the lookout for something, because there is always something to discover on Las Ramblas; it always offers you something you don’t want, and on occasion something you didn’t realise you needed. But that first time, you always have your hand held. It is a walk of initiation, of guardianship, which you will always remember, since one always ends up, one way or another, belonging to the place where people took your hand so that you wouldn’t get lost.

Let’s clarify something. There are some who call Las Ramblas “La Rambla”. According to the writer Carandell, it all depends on whether you are a monotheist or a polytheist.

“Las Ramblas” in Spanish, “Les Rambles” in Catalan. In my house, it seems we were polytheists.

The promenade, which traces an irregular shape along the edge of an old wall, is made up of five ramblas (shorter streets) – Santa Mónica, Caputxins, Sant Josep, Estudis, and Canaletes – and
two squares – the Plaça Reial and the Plaça del Teatre. Las Ramblas was the last section of a water course called the Riera d’en Malla (which flowed beneath nearby Calle Balmes). If we had stood here during the period of Roman domination, we would have been outside the city, and I think that state of mind still persists, somehow, on Las Ramblas. With medieval population expansion, it became a route along the edge of the city wall, after which it was, for years, a boundary between old and new Barcelona. Since the 15th century it has been an ideal location for markets and strolls. We Barcelonans do like a stroll, but preferably along a linear path; centuries have gone by and we still don’t have a very good understanding of what city squares are intended for. Many of those on one side or the other of Las Ramblas – Plaça Reial or Plaça Duc de Medinaceli, say – just like other spaces – the Boqueria Market or the Liceu Theatre – are the result of the confiscation of ecclesiastical property in the 19th century by Mendizábal and Madoz. The names preserved on the road signs of different streets in the area refer back to those convents and churches.

You had your hand held that first time, those first times, so that you wouldn’t get lost in the crowd of people trampling those waves drawn on the grey terrazzo paving, a veritable flood from Plaça Catalunya down to the sea, a great capricious swell.

Those arriving from the sea do it in the opposite direction, with the Columbus Monument behind them and the mountains on the horizon. The “here we are”, the arrivals, those who are here unofficially, those who want to be seen, all these are only a minority: post-war Las Ramblas was no longer the place for the bourgeoisie and aristocracy, now containing instead the vestiges of fear and survival, workers, crooks, go-getters, and the remains of the Ateneo, the Virreina Palace, the Liceu, the Café de l’Òpera, next to where the Verdaguer bookshop had stood, which they say introduced romanticism to the city.

The Las Ramblas which I came to know was the rough part of Barcelona, varying from section to section and transforming itself depending on the hour of the day. You only had to let yourself tumble down some of the arteries leading to or away from Las Ramblas to find new or second-hand records, books, clothes, sheet music, guitar strings, drugs, or sex. Everything depended on need, opportunity, and the time of day. Las Ramblas, ascended or descended, only just sprinkled by the sunrise, burning, with the pursued and the pursuers crossing in a hurry, the dabblers and the determined cantering or trotting. You don’t have to do the whole length of it: the first stretch can quite reasonably end at the Carrer del Carme, the next, leaving
the Boqueria Market on one side, on to the Liceu, and a third from there to Columbus at the end. There are three or four sections, each with its own name, but one invariably ends up keeling over, off the main thoroughfare, in the direction of Portaferrissa or Tallers, Nou de la Rambla or the Plaça Reial. It doesn’t matter. Las Ramblas was always an area of frontiers, of the savvy and the petty criminals, of the merchants and the ramblers. The Las Ramblas of the late 19th century, and up until the civil war, has not been better described than by Xavier Theros in one of his books: “Both families of the haute bourgeoisie and labourers of the lowest classes would stroll there, where the world of prostitution and crime came into contact with the world of influential dynasties, and where Catholics, spiritualists, Carlists, Esperantists, atheists, rationalists, Protestants, anarchists, conservatives, and Catalan nationalists walked side by side [...] La Rambla attracts everyone, mixes and muddles them together, lifts them up, and one might say that La Rambla belongs to us all and to each one of us [...] because it never becomes alien.”

Las Ramblas is a pretext for serendipity. You don’t know what you’re looking for until you find it, and it turns out that what you find is what you needed: an umbrella, a bracelet, a relative who wasn’t supposed to be there, or a fix of some dodgy substance.

And as a teenager, you would descend into the vices of Barcelona as the poet Gil de Biedma depicted them, with your eyes like saucers and ears like radar dishes because there was a persistent, sometimes tumultuous background noise there, a load of holey ships in the Sargasso Sea, end-of-line products, laughter, a desire to live without a dampener pedal or safety net – haste, anxiety, glory in defeat and glory in glory.

You went to Las Ramblas because you wanted to go from your neighbourhood to Barcelona, to clear your head, to have fun, to blur the lines between yourself and others. When people from outside Barcelona came to visit, you would take them to Las Ramblas because you were proud of it. It’s simply a street full of people who are aware that they are on Las Ramblas, and that is what makes it special to walk
along. It’s hard to explain: accumulation and tolerance. Nobody feels rejected, nobody is strange, nobody is an outsider on Las Ramblas.

At the age of 14 I was walking along Las Ramblas with my girlfriend and not much money. I was drawn to books and even more drawn to the idea of seeing myself buy a book, of taking it home, and of no longer having to read those which my uncle had left me after he died. I knew nothing about books or authors beyond what I knew from school. In one of the kiosks which were dotted here and there on Las Ramblas, I saw two whose titles struck me. I only had enough money to buy one, and I chose *Twelve Proofs of the Inexistence of God* by Sébastien Faure. I suppose such a pamphlet seemed astonishing to me, aware as I was of being watched by my girlfriend, whose mother still made her go to mass every Sunday. But it was the title of the other book which tormented me to such an extent that I asked my mother for money and the following week returned to the same kiosk to get my hands on *The Flowers of Evil* by Charles Baudelaire. A horrible edition in which the translator had made the lines rhyme, but which nonetheless opened up an unfamiliar world before me. Years later, hearing Marc Almond tell Paloma Chamorro on the TV programme *La edad de oro* (The Golden Age) that his records were not sad, that Lou Reed's Berlin
was sad, sent me searching through the second-hand record shops on Carrer Sant Pau (just off Las Ramblas) for said album, finding a copy on which the first track was scratched, but I didn’t care. The same shop sold books of lyrics, and I bought the one translated by Alberto Manzano in which he mixed verses from Lorca’s *Poeta en Nueva York* (Poet in New York) with Reed’s. Everything fit together.

The *Discos Castelló* record shop was where I had bought my first records: one which I chose just for its cover, *This Charming Man*, the Golpes Bajos maxi single, and McCartney II (I think). All of this on Las Ramblas. The idea that God didn’t exist, the albatross and the carcass, voluptuous furniture, the giantess, Baudelaire, Caroline putting her fist through the window pane and cutting her wrists, having her children taken away, Jim beating her, love between junkies, love between extremes, bending and staring at their feet as they walk, Lou and Lorca, crocodiles with yellow eyes scooped out of their sockets with spoons, where heroine bubbles, and Brecht and Golpes Bajos’ Germán Coppini warning you not to look people in the eyes... and that guitar which sounded like a merry-go-round, that feeling of sliding on the car’s leather seats, and Macca forever lost with Lennon dead. It wasn’t half bad, that journey to Las Ramblas which you came back from with new and unexpected spoils.