

The birth of the ability to narrate

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Abstract

I'm going to describe the appearance of an ability to narrate in the case of an adopted child with autistic traits. This capability has become possible, in my opinion, first of all following the late internal experience of the *continuity of existence*, closely linked to the experience of those *sensory envelopes* usually provided to infants by primary maternal care, which contribute to the construction of a *body self*. Despite her rejection of any kind of narrative, the adoptive parents have been able to tell her true story, accepted by her without any apparent problems. Within the psychotherapeutic relationship she could later recognize and process the dramatic unconscious *emotional truth* relative to that story. It started a new phase in which, after six years of treatment, she learned to talk about her real life and her new pre-adolescent relationships.

Keywords: *Continuity of existence, sensory envelopes, sensory, two-dimensionality, the body self, separateness, narration*

*It was so cold that year that their cries
froze in the air. It was only in the following spring
that one could understand what they wanted to say*
Rabelais

Introduction

Adopted children in their most intimate relationships, such as those with parents or therapists, encounter with terror the blind areas of the mind, the *voids* which they cannot make sense of, like fractures, abysses, which interrupt the *continuity of existence* (Winnicott, 1985): there's nobody who can tell them about their period of pre-natal life, the first small events after their birth, they feel as if they have been "robbed of their past" (Artoni, 2012).

The early traumas and lack of maternal care in the first year of life, often have devastating effects on the ability to assimilate experience in narrative form.

Some of these children use defences of an autistic type, that freeze the unthinkable anxieties, although often having healthy secret areas of the mind capable of opening up, albeit slowly, to significant human relationships. Many of them develop a *false self*, adapting themselves in an *adhesive* manner (1) to the environment of the adoptive parents, or even to the therapist in a desperate need to cling to something or someone that represents a *backbone* for them, (that exoskeleton, as defined by Bion), of which

they feel deprived, but with the risk of drying up their own creative potential. Some, as we shall see in the case of F., have developed the capacity of *resilience*, in response to innate or environmental factors, which are difficult to define, saving secret areas able to withstand the trauma, to allow a reconstruction of the severely damaged Self. (Cancrini-Biondo, 2012). In this case psychoanalytic treatment is possible, with appropriate adaptations needed to find a common language with the child.

In the initial stages, for a good length of time, the psychotherapist sustains the role of an *auxiliary I*, feeling that first of all it is necessary for the patient, to repair a *sense of body self* (Haag, 1992), so that the patient can simultaneously develop the capacity to tie *bonds* in the mind, in parallel with accepting body *separateness* (Tustin, 1990) and consequently the ability to narrate and communicate with others.

The sense of *continuity of existence* to which I refer is powered by the experience of those *sensory envelopes* (Anzieu, 1985) provided for infants by maternal care in the early months of life, which are missed, or insufficiently experienced, in the major part of children who are adopted (2), then transferred into a new culture, where they experiment, with suspicion, new smells, tastes, sounds, completely different from those of early childhood.

Adoptive parents cannot always be empathic with this reality - which is also sensed somehow through the malaise of the children - but that brings to mind their own trauma: that of not having been able to generate. It is difficult for them if they are not properly helped, to create a sort of *transitional area* within the family, in which the *mythic narratives* can grow about what is unknown about the previous lives of their children. Also the therapist has trouble to listen to these pre-verbal experiences expressed on a body level and difficult to reach.

Moreover, even for each of us it is difficult to listen to *parts of oneself* that have no language, in relation to a deep wound from the past, that somehow feel compelled to be taken into consideration (3).

In this paper I will focus on the problems that I have mentioned in relation to the impossibility to narrate, and the initial stages of overcoming that, in the case of an adopted child that I followed in individual psychotherapy.

I mentioned in a previous article "The discovery of the inner world through a fairy tale" (Gamma function, 2006), how autistic and psychotic children learn the ability to narrate in small *workshops of fairy tales* (Lafforgue, 1995), in which they experience first of all the *sensory envelopes* present in the setting of the therapy room, like soft pillows, a hard bench, the face and voice of the narrator etc., envelopes that provide those sensory experiences of pre-verbal containment, necessary for the development of thought (Anzieu, 1985 Houzel, 2010). The same tale is told for many months or even years, since the young patients usually take a long time just to learn to focus on the visual

expressions of the narrator, linking them to the musical sound of the narrator's voice, before they can understand the contents of the story.

As a result of this experience I think I can say that the first assumption of the ability of narrating is the perception of the *continuity of its own existence*, that is created, as I said before, through the construction of a *body self* and acceptance of *separateness*.

In many experiences of psychotherapy with adopted children (Artoni, 2012) therapists find that most of them have no interest in studying history at school. My little patient who gladly heard narratives of fairy tales - declared herself allergic to the study of history – she only wanted to hear tales which told the story of a woman who became pregnant and the birth of her child. These themes represented a fixed point for her and she listened to them very carefully, rocking in her chair, as if waiting to be able to imagine something of that missing part of the story of her childhood.

The small patient whom I intend to talk about in length, Flaminia, 7, vigorously halted all tales, even before beginning to listen to them, as if she was terrified. She would learn her true history during the second year of psychotherapy from her parents, when she would be 9 years old, which she had accepted with apparent complacency, but as I later understood came with an unconscious rejection.

Taking excerpts from some of her psychotherapy sessions, which lasted six years, the slow and tortured evolution of her ability to think and to tell is revealed, that is, the ability to weave the threads of her mind, on the initial void of her existence.

First meeting with Flaminia

F. was adopted as a 1 year old in a country from South America, by an aging couple who could not have children.

The parents related in the consultation sessions, that the little girl could not sit-up by herself in the orphanage when they went to look for a child to adopt, nor turn in the bed alone. However they sensed from some clue that I can't describe, her potential for development, her intelligence and willingness for rapport and accepted her how she was. After a few months, following consultations with doctors and trying therapies of every kind, F. in their home began to grow both physically and mentally: she developed a good appetite, curiosity and an archaic ability to communicate with others. The neuropsychiatric that they had taken her to had diagnosed "pervasive developmental disorder" (4). Flaminia, despite everything began to flourish, like a plant still alive that has been put into a new pot with new soil and nutrients. She learnt to walk after a few months, and then to talk after a few years, with the help of a good psychomotor skills specialist and a speech therapist. However mysterious fears continually slowed the development of F's learning skills and made life around her difficult: they were fears related to items expelled unexpectedly from the body, such as vomiting, a cough, or a

sneeze, the meaning of which seems to have emerged years later. She had particularly great difficulty with defecation; only after a few months of therapy did F. begin to go to the toilet more regularly.

The parents emphasized that F. could not hear stories of any kind, from which she seemed extremely frightened: she even prevented them from watching films on TV, that she preferred to keep constantly switched off. She was followed pharmacologically by a neuropsychiatric because she was always very agitated and slept badly.

When they brought her to me, in the institution where I work, with the prescription of two psychotherapeutic sessions a week, Flaminia was 7 years old and attended the first elementary class. A team was created, which was a great help in my hard work with her, consisting of the neuropsychiatric from the school, and the psychotherapist colleague who followed her parents. We met every now and then, often with the participation of the parents.

In the first session F. appears as a tall, thin girl with uncombed hair that falls in front of her face. She fidgets continuously and walks around the room as if she needs to unload an unbearable tension. Alternating between smiles and grimaces, she speaks in an echolalia fashion, but gives the impression of understanding when you speak calmly to her. She doesn't always return glances, only later will this be possible. Her *delayed echolalia* is to repeat scolding phrases to the letter, explanations and descriptions of herself, that seem mechanically recorded from the speeches of adults, with the same tone of voice, or sometimes copied with her own shrill voice, in which there is only the pronoun *you*, in so much as it's addressed to herself. However, this echolalia also seems to reveal a secret ability to see herself in others, as if to learn who she is: it is striking that these phrases are used by her at appropriate times, indicating her intelligence, as if she was using ready-made tools at the appropriate time. Her scribbled drawings were for the most part of the body, or circular spirals.

For a long time I speak in third person both of her and of me and of all the characters of our conversations, as is done with very young children, to avoid the *I* and the *you*, which can be confusing.

From the first sessions I perceive in Flaminia an acute need for attention, and I feel the danger that she might lose her corporeal substance, even if only through my momentary mental detachment, almost as if a distraction was equivalent to an abortion, to be expelled from womb of my mind. This collection of thoughts, while F. spreads materials such as modelling clay on the table and floor, allow me to understand how precarious the assurance of the *continuity of existence* is in her, and the consequent need to adhere to something *two-dimensional*, such as a solid surface.

The unconscious and unspeakable pain experienced with each separation is expressed for a while, making her body sag, especially at the end of the sessions, or at the announcement of the holidays. After a few months I propose a ritual for the end of each session to prepare for the detachment, consisting of cleaning the surfaces together on which she has attached the modelling paste. This ritual contributed to the containment of its deep anguish that could not be achieved only by verbal language.

This *need to stick* is also present in her relationship with me, for a long time I feel to represent an *imaginary twin* to her (Bion, 1962, a), she always anxiously asks me to play the same games with her. Only much later will she be able to *play alone in my presence*.

Searching for forms to hold on to

Flaminia often asks to have a *keychain*, some *boots*, or to see a pair of *long johns*, objects that even the parents are at a loss to explain the significance.

In my countertransference I often feel a sense of fatigue, of claustrophobia, I struggle to think, to be *that live companion* mentioned by Alvarez. However, I begin to consider her repeated phrases as *forms* to which she clings (5) as to create fixed points, the buoys in the sea of instability and confusion in which she finds herself. I also consider the contents of the fears, (cough, hiccups, etc.) frequently repeated, and deprived of sense, as aggregates of known images, even frightening ones, to cling to.

New forms of aggregation, the appearance of writing

September 1st year

After a few months, on her return from her first summer holiday, the parents tell me that at home she is now going to the bathroom without problems. In a session in September, *in my role as the auxiliary "I", I encourage a game that happens by chance, that of making meatballs with the modelling clay, which usually she squashed on the floor, I say that today we'll pretend to prepare some food, that we can cook in the little saucepans. At the end of the session for the first time, she searches through the letters for the letter F. for Flaminia, arousing in me an intense joy.* Maybe the game of aggregating clay balls (note that she agreed to *pretend that...*), could, for her, become a different way to create new *aggregation points around which to feel cohesive*, together with a transformation of the poo - to another more evolved level already present in her - which begins to let go.

Flaminia could now look for the letter of her name, just like she could now start with her body to begin to appropriately use the anal sphincter. This sudden ability to learn, seems to me one of those clues that may have convinced her parents to adopt her and that fuelled their hopes, despite all her problems.

At the end of each session, in the following months, the *writing*, that is, the searching for the little letters, often reappears.

All this makes me think that the invention of the writing could have significance in taking her away from death, the undifferentiated, the memories of events or people missing. It was also a way in which merchants could create a more stable language for trade, coming from countries far away from each other. This was happening between Flaminia and I at that phase.

As one can imagine, these advances are not linear, but are marked by frequent, long regressions to her stereotypes and fixed ideas that reassure, paralyzing the processes in evolution, suddenly taking over, and reappearing frequently in other forms (as discussed below), when she realizes the emergence of unexpected feelings, or of the danger to grow.

For example (February 1st year, after 9 months of psychotherapy)

"After having cancelled in black the drawings she has done, she suddenly writes M for mummy. I comment that maybe she loves her mummy. Shortly after she breaks contact, as if she were tired, as if my words "to love" evoke in her emotions that are difficult to sustain at that time. She entertains with her stereotypes, such as swinging objects in a repetitive way, pulling faces. I understand only later that the experience of mentioning feelings - both good and bad - can for her be experienced almost as a deadly danger. My evoking them, however, has perhaps for me sometimes, the function of creating points of support to my sense of being lost.

More than a year later (May 2nd year) she will invent rituals with which she can contain this overwhelming experience of writing, running laps around the table and me, sitting there next to her, as if drawing an imaginary circle.

The perception of detachment, the continuity of existence

April 2nd year, the last before Easter. (8 years old)

I discover that together with an increasing ability to become aware of separations, Flaminia is beginning to have an initial perception of time, intrinsic to the development of a sense of a *continuity of existence*. Until this session to which I now refer, she had seemed deaf to my explanations about holidays and days of absence: for her there was no sense in *before or after*, the days of the week or the calendar:

"For the first time I feel that F. has understood that we will not see each other for a week, she listened to me with attention ... The mother on her return from the holidays tells me she has learned to read the dates on the calendar. She reads them every day, so as to count the missing days till the resumption of our sessions "

On her return from the Easter holidays the aggression towards me, in insults after the session, has taken the place of that which before she had expressed against herself in the drooping of her body: she has taken up with interest the use of swear-words, even without understanding them: *bitch* for example, and blasphemies of her own invention, with which she implicitly expresses to me her anger over separation, for the first time.

She enjoys to shock, and to evoke in others an aggressive reaction, such as the appearance of *no* in healthy children of around 2 years old. I do not know if she or I take the letters of the alphabet to write *bitch*. She enjoys this new game very much, and makes a lot of progress with her writing.

May 2nd year

The game of somersaults repeated several times indicates the awareness of her body, a new sense of *continuity*. She expresses the need to be watched. At the same time curiosity appears...

In the following month of June, alongside more direct expressions in which she is conscious of her aggression, the *I* and the *you* appear in our dialogues. From all this I sense an initial acceptance of *separateness* in her.

The story of her adoption.

During the Christmas holidays of year 2 the parents decide to use the occasion of a pregnancy of a family friend of theirs to tell Flaminia the truth about her birth. Flaminia immediately started asking questions, which had not happen before, "Was she in the mother's tummy before birth? Did she suck her breast?" Telling her this story was not only possible for the parents because they had begun to think that it was right to tell her the truth, but also because F. now *seems able to understand a narrative*: she had now learned what is the past and the present, although the idea of the future is still unthinkable for her. Following this she begins to make big improvements also at school. She tells her adoptive mother that she thinks her mother who left her at the orphanage must be dead, she declares that she does not ever want to return to her country of origin: that she is fine here with them. I sense only later that this reaction from Flaminia was perhaps an attempt to eliminate intense and intolerable emotions towards the image of her natural mother, but also to express a willingness towards the feelings of the parents, which she probably perceives in an unconscious way.

With time the meaning of her refusal to watch films or to listen to narratives of any kind becomes clearer:

For many months in the 3rd year (F. is 9 years old) the sessions are fixed with the idea of vomiting, which she imagines with a mix of with horror and strange excitement on a physical level. She always asks me *if I had been sick ... her mother had been sick ... can we draw the bowl for vomiting together?* These images become so obsessive that the approach of session with her provokes a real disgust in me, as if I had to deal with the stench of vomit.

But what did Flaminia need to vomit? What could she not digest on a deep level?

In games, in foul language and in her drawings emerge very real and intense thoughts in connection with an obsessive curiosity about the differences between the sexes, on

conception and birth, along with this obsession of vomiting. I wonder if this could also allude to a strong rejection of *her* birth, of *her* history, which extends to all the stories, or perhaps even an unconscious fantasy to *have been expelled*, vomited. The vomit also suggests that her interior space is not sufficient enough to host the confused and concrete thoughts from which she feels invaded and needs to expel.

This vomit, and this refusal that lasts for many months are clarified when she begins to suggest games to me in which she is a small baby and I am her biological mother, proposals of games that are difficult to handle, but which resemble the *proto-narratives*.

The imaginary relationship with the natural mother.

March 3th year, (9 years old)

In this phase F. sometimes makes up games that break the monotony of fixed ideas, in which *we pretend* to cook together or *to be ladies*.

"She suggests a game in which she pretends to be a baby on my lap ... I let her sit on my lap and pretend to suck my milk. But suddenly she bites me, forgetting that we are pretending, I feel that to her I have actually become the mother who brought her into the world and then abandoned her. (or perhaps vomited, expelled with a coughing attack, a sneeze?) After stopping the game, I describe what happened between us, that perhaps she was telling me that she is angry with that first mother, that in her mind is still alive. Again the theme of vomiting, like a disconnected speech, or like to "vomit" my words, but I respond for the first time with an interpretation, thinking that she can understand me: the girl who wants to bite off the nipple of the mother's breast cannot digest it: it remains in the stomach and causes vomiting.

After a lot of confusion, with which she seems to express a renewed rejection of what I have said, she builds a house with pillows, "there, there was a lady." .. as if for the first time she has begun to tell a story ... "

From this moment there is a breakthrough in the ability of F. to gain experience of her thoughts in a symbolic form. It remains a mystery how this happens in the human mind. The theme of the home from this session lasts years in her games and her drawings: a space that belongs to her, which can have many meanings. (drawing no. 1)

Flaminia elaborates her story.

3rd year (9 years old)

The house of her fantasies slowly transforms, it becomes a castle and finally a ship, by some of my suggestions - promptly received by F. - I pop them in when her repetitiveness appears with which she seems to be trying to fill a devastating void (that void in the lives of all adopted children that cannot be filled, but on which we can only weave a subtle texture).

The house increasingly assumes the meaning of delimiting the spaces, which are enriched with the movement within a complex and interesting container. It seems to create in the mind of F. a possibility of delimiting *an inside and an outside*. She is inspired to draw more and more, even with rough strokes, the rooms, the furniture, the garden, the tool-shed, etc. For a long time there is always a place for the bowl to vomit in, which then gradually disappears.

The house lends itself to represent the awareness of her body, of her inner world, an initial acceptance of her adoptive parents' home into which she was received, and of the psychotherapy, having become the two key points in her life.

After a while she becomes passionate about a new game: that of the *imaginary journey*, which takes place together with anxiety and enthusiasm, always ending with the return home (6).

The next two years she alternates these two themes in her games: that of furnishing homes or imaginary castles, places of rest on our travels, and that, which prevails in a second phase, which focuses on travelling together on a plane, or ship, or car, or train, carrying suitcases with us and above all *the documents*. **The drawing no. 2** represents our ship that travels on the sea.

Both of these games, seem to me to be associated with the slow elaboration of her story.

Winter 5th year (11 years old)

In what she calls *Imaginations* there is always the issue of *documents* - very important to her, a new *fixed idea* - that we have to obtain for the trip.

I begin to think, much later, that these fantasies represent a way of organizing her *pre-history* with elements of the story from her parents *on the trip they made to go to take her*, the ups and downs related to having to wait for *the documents* to be able to adopt her, or her journey with them from South America to the country where they could live in the same house.

When in the game we have to choose a country in which to go with our imagination, she always categorically rejects her own: she will never return, nor will she ever learn that language. She doesn't answer when I ask her why. I have the impression that for her it is connected to something horrible, that she would definitely had to have *vomited*.

Fantasy and reality, the beginning of the ability to narrate

November 5 th year

At this phase real narratives appear in the sessions: *for the first time she describes to me in a realistic way something that has actually happened, that shocked her: a sudden flood at her home. She tells the story in an agitated manner walking around the room, her hair in front of her eyes, like the first session (but this time with great concentration so as to be able to explain), repeating phrases spoken by others, with the accent of her*

relatives. She seems to need to resort to the most primitive of tools, such as the echolalia language she had once used, so as to be able to transform into speech the drama of her emotions.

Later, interest in the future appears, so far experienced only with anger for the wait, fantastic tales of how it will be when she *grows up*, that together, we have to represent like players in a theatre.

"Flaminia asks to play the game "of Imagination": we have to go out with the neighbours, friends of the parents. We have to dress up and put make up on (at this phase she is very interested in cosmetics.) In the game I go back to becoming an imaginary twin for her: I have to pretend to put makeup on like her.

As is often the case in recent times, this fantasy is interrupted from the sudden image of herself paralyzed in a wheelchair (a sort of dream-hallucination, which often repeats as if to paralyze some new thought that scares her, inherited from the autistic stereotypes of the previous years).

I tell her that she wants to paralyze time, deciding to be already big, and to wear make-up as if she was 20 years, but also to return to being so small that she doesn't yet know how to walk. She listens to me puzzled.

Flaminia restores the course of imagination, "after she came to my house, she asked to visit me and my husbands' bedroom and the bedrooms of my children. I, continuing to play, say that my husband has gone to work. She is disappointed: What a shame, I wanted to meet him.

Then she leaves me, still in the game to go alone to the bar in front of my house, I mustn't follow her, but wait for her. She pretends to talk and laugh with a young waiter at the bar, afterwards she tells me he is 19 years old and wants to court her.

In this game it seems that F. can imagine the passage of time that includes also the future (7), momentarily renouncing the defence of paralysis present in this terrible game of the wheelchair. (In **pic. No. 3** there is again the interior of a house, the one where she will be big, but with a wheelchair present)

In the following months the parents tell me that she has started to watch some films on TV. Often there are discussions between the parents and the daughter, dialogues that express her interest in her own story.

The awareness of her growth and of a future that she desires to achieve appears more and more.

April 6th year (13 years old)

For several months the games of imagination are increasingly replaced by the story of real things that happen in the present: what happened at school, with her peers. There is a wonderful session in which for the first time she tells me about her adoption:

Today, I realize that she has become prettier, her hair, well-cut, which for the first time in years doesn't fall in front of her eyes and her usual tics have greatly decreased. After getting past the lip gloss "secret" in the mirror, she ask me how long it takes to grow your boobs. Meanwhile she draws her school after having writing "Luca" several times, a child who spits and is dirty. She also draws the playground where they meet. I listen and I am thoughtful, I feel that she is becoming a teenager.

All of a sudden Flaminia stops these dialogues to tell me with much pathos, that when she was one year old mummy and daddy had gone to pick her up from her country in South America, from the institution and that they had taken her to Naples where they had made a big party with friends, with a beautiful cake on which was written "Welcome."

I want to conclude with this wonderful session, even though, at the end of the psychotherapy, a few months later, I know that many problems remain open. I hope that life will continue to help her, and that her mind is able to open other spaces in which she can begin to enrich herself also with the stories of other people, which so far she did not like to hear.

Conclusions

In this work I focused on how the shortcomings in the structure of the *body-self*, due to the insufficiency of *sensory envelopes* common to early childhood and the lack of stories about the early days of life, are related to the experience of *emptiness*, distressing in the minds of adopted children, an interruption of their *continuity of existence*. I have used as an example the case of a child with autistic traits, who rejected every kind of narrative; but who was able to partially recover this sense of *continuity* with the help of psychotherapy and the favourable environment in which she was placed, gradually coming out of a *two-dimensional situation* (Meltzer). The tormented unconscious elaboration of the story relative to her adoption drove both of them to get closer to the meaning of her fears, first expressed in *ghostly bodies*, then in games, always more similar to proto-narratives, in which the little girl expressed her *emotional truth*. She has been able to slowly build a *transitional area*, expressing her fantasies and telling the reality of her new life, notwithstanding the partial interference of her crippling fears, she has begun to open up to the future.

Notes

- 1) E. Bick introduced the term *adhesive identification*, taken from Meltzer and Tustin, to describe this type of defence typical of autism, in which experience has a two-dimensional character.
- 2) In the orphanages often the carers have to look after 10 or 15 children at a time and cannot provide them with these *sensory envelopes* that require an intimate relationship.
- 3) Claudia Artoni has given a moving account about her own personal experience of aspects of adoption suffered herself (2012).
- 4) The diagnosis of autism, or rather, autistic traits, as has been shown with psychotherapy, was appropriate for her. The defences of autism, such as detachment from emotions, stereotypes and adhesive attachment, had preserved inside of her a healthy but fragile core, of which I have already spoken. Tustin speaks of an "autistic protection" in his latest book, which has the function of protecting a residue of the healthy part of the personality.
- 5) This autistic behaviour of grasping forms (Tustin, 1990) is similar to that of infants who cling with a look at a fixed point, such as a lamp, or a shiny object, when the mother is absent.
- 6) Meltzer (1975) speaks of the concept of *circular time*, the *eternal return* present in tradition, in the cycles of nature, a reassuring concept in which there is no loss.
- 7) Meltzer (1975) speaks on this point of the conception of a *linear time*, that of the growth and the separation, where there is also the awareness of death.

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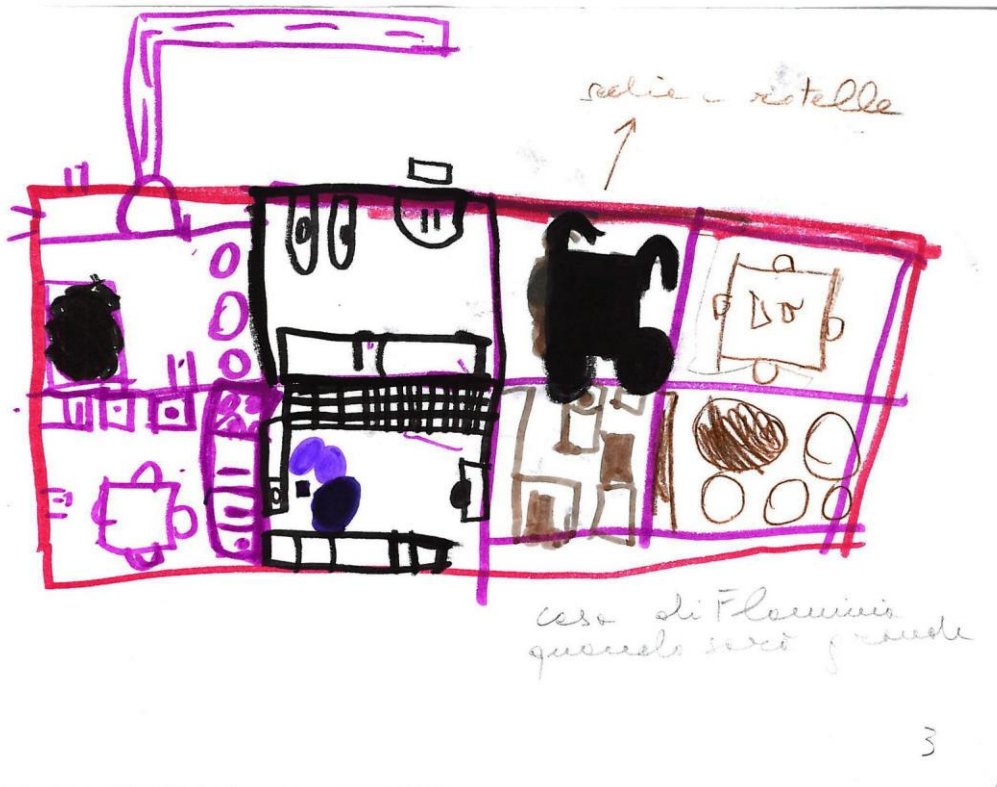
Pictures



Picture 1



Picture 2



Picture 3