

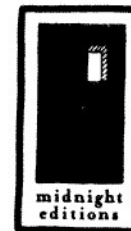
THE LITTLE SCHOOL:

Tales of Disappearance & Survival

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Benja's First Night

They gave us quince jam and cheese today, a small piece. I saved the cheese: there were too many good things together. I'd been dreaming of something sweet for so many days! But not this way... When the guards give us a "treat" they say it is to "celebrate" the capture of new prisoners. There was also music today, the radio blasting, to screen the cries. Now Benja is standing by my bunk bed. The guard has tied his hands to the end of my bed. I remember his untied hands setting free all those leaflets on the streets of Bahía Blanca, his easy laughter and childish face, his deeply furrowed brow when we discussed politics. We called him Benja because, like the Benjamin of Biblical story, he was the youngest of the group. We never got to know each other very well, a few meetings... I think the two of us once wrote together on a wall: "Down with the military killers. We shall overcome!"

This afternoon when they took us to the latrine, I overheard a guard say, "Hang them upside down." It must have been the torture well where they dunk prisoners in putrid water for hours on end. . . . Poor little Benja! Now he looks so helpless, naked, his ribs sticking out. I'm sure he's hungry. He must have already been standing at the foot of my bed for over an hour. It's midnight now. By stretching my feet I can touch his frozen hands. . . . I wish I could protect him. Just a kid! The guard has already entered the room twice to torment Benja, saying he is bored and wants to "box a little."

I have some cheese and a small end of bread saved for tomorrow. . . . If I cut them into little pieces, then put them between my toes, I can pass the bread and cheese to Benja. The blanket is covering my feet; the guard won't see me. It's too bad I didn't save the quince jam! I cautiously stretch my leg to reach his hands; he bends his head over his tied hands and chews carefully. I've already told him there isn't any more.

"Sir," Vasca calls, "Sir. . . ."

Abuelo strides into the room.

"Can I have some water?"

He leaves and comes back with the water jug.

"Sir," Benja calls out, "Can I have some water?" My bed shakes and I hear a strangled moan.

"Do you want water? Take this!" Another punch. I wish this coward was beating me instead. Now he leaves the room. I can smell the smoke of a cigarette he has lighted. It will last five minutes and then. . . . The smoke is in this room. . . . I'm sure he's coming on his tiptoes so we won't hear. My bed

shakes again and my whole body contracts in rage and impotence. . . . Something must be done. . . . I have to think of something to stop this. The guard feels almighty, yet for some reason I believe he's afraid: deep down he must have some memory of justice. But that's not what matters now; what really matters is that he stop beating Benja. . . .

The break lasts a little bit longer this time. Now, I hear him coming again. Through the peep hole in my blindfold I can see his shirt: "Sir," I call out, raising my voice so he doesn't suspect I can see him.

"What do you want?" I pretend to be startled at his quick answer.

"Is there any bread left?"

"No." Patichoti, who quickly catches on, says, "Sir, I have some bread left. Can I give it to her?"

He, Patichoti, has some bread left! I can't believe it! In the morning after the change of guards, we'll do the same thing to return Patichoti's bread. Right now the main thing is to make time pass, to delay the blow. . . . It must be 4:00 A.M.

When the guard brings me the piece of bread, I suddenly tell him, "I bet I can arm wrestle with you and win." I bend my arm, my hand open, my other arm almost glued to this one because today my wrists are tied on a short string. I wait for a slap that doesn't come. Abuelo places his elbow alongside mine and squeezes my hand. Lying on the bunk, I press my feet against the bed's iron frame. I know I have good abdominal muscles and that will help me. As tense as an arrow, I clench my teeth in yet another last effort. . . . I've won! This dude can't believe it either, and he wants to try again. . . .

The second round was hard for him, but he's easily won the third. It seems that he's already bored and doesn't want to take a fourth chance. My arm is rather sore—a month has gone by without physical activity. But . . . What's he doing now? He's leaving. Let's see for how long.

An hour has passed. The guard approaches my bed again, and, luckily, starts boasting: "You thought you were going to win!"

"Let's have a return match!"

He accepts; the motherfucker's tired of boxing. Damn him, why doesn't he fall asleep like Pato, who guzzles down a lot of booze and drops dead? But this one . . . Two more rounds of wrestling. I can't feel my arm but I don't care . . . Well! He's won the third one. He's leaving now. Outside, I can hear the sounds of the early morning, the roosters and cows on a nearby farm. Peine brings Abuelo some coffee. They chat for a few minutes and now Abuelo is coming back. For God's sake! How long is this going to last? The guard screams to Benja: "Stand properly!" He unties Benja's hands and makes him lie on the bottom bed. While I take a deep breath, I can almost hear my friend's bones pushing one another, finding their places in his body.

The guard goes to the iron grate and shakes it. He shouts: "Corridor." The door opens and closes immediately. The guards switch posts. It's 7:00 A.M.; a new day has just begun at the Little School.



Telepathy

Whether it was for better or worse that telepathy didn't work, I still can't tell. I tried it several times. My main goal was to get in touch with my family. However, it could have had unlimited applications. The first time I tried it was the day we ate a slice of meat and a potato for supper. The dish, an exquisite combination that deserved a better setting, slid down my digestive tract with astonishing speed. So it was probably hunger that triggered my curiosity for the extrasensory world. I started by relaxing my muscles. I thought that my mind, relieved of its weight, would travel in the direction I wanted. But the experiment failed. I was expecting that my psyche, lifted to the ceiling, would be able to observe my body lying on a mattress striped with red and filth. It didn't happen quite that way. Perhaps my mind's eyes were blindfolded, too.

The following day I tried again. It was in the afternoon, after I woke up alarmed because I couldn't remember where I had left my child for her nap. I opened my eyes to a blindfold that had already been there for twenty days. That reaction made me realize that at the edges of my mind I still believed I was free.

If only I could reach further. If I wanted, I could find a way to control my mind, to make it travel, escape, leave. It was an order. I received so many orders:

Sit down! Lie down! On your stomach! Hurry up! I needed to summon my brain: *Come on! Take off! Get out!* I had a mission. Anyway it was probably better that my mind didn't obey me. Had it followed my orders, I would have sent my mind to find out what my future held, and when it returned to inform me of the number of bullets it had found in my corpse, I would not have had any peace. I didn't have any peace now either, just the hope that there still remained a share of air for me to breathe in a future freedom.

I made my third attempt at telepathy this afternoon. I used another method. I tried to imagine my parents' house on Uruguay Street: my mother and her paintings in the small back room, my father making tea in the kitchen, my brother bent over a book. The sunlight...the trees in the backyard. "I'm okay," I repeated in my mind. "I'm alive. I'm alive. I'm still alive." Closing my eyes tightly, making a fist with my hands, gritting my teeth, I said, "I'm okay. Listen, I'm okay." My mom continued painting, daddy stirred his tea and Daniel turned one more page in his book. In the backyard the trees swayed. I didn't see any of them: it was just the imagination. They did not hear me either. My feet tickled with an urge to run away.

I guess it was at that point that I opened my eyes. Through a peep hole in my blindfold I saw Hugo's legs; Bruja had just brought him back from the shower. He was wearing a dress, to the amusement of Loro, who guffawed at the sight of Hugo trying to climb into his bunk bed. A while later they brought another prisoner dressed in a lady's nightgown. The guards said that there weren't any more pants left. I couldn't continue my telepathy exercise because of the laughter and humiliation clinging to the air like an annoying smell. In any case, I had been unable to get through.

Then I suddenly realized that for a short time I'd had the certain knowledge that one of my grandfathers had just died.



Toothbrush

Five days ago Vaca, a fat, humongous individual (not Gato-Vaca, I could never see that one), brought a can of insecticide and sprayed us. After a while he entered our room again and put a gun in my mouth. "It's loaded," he said. "You're scared aren't you?" I didn't move. Maybe this is why the whole business of the toothbrushes seemed so absurd. The fact was that a few minutes later he appeared again and gave us each a toothbrush and toothpaste.

"From now on," he solemnly announced, "you'll brush your teeth once a day."

I waited with impatience. I wondered how they would conduct that ceremony. It had been more than a week since we'd touched water. The method of "dry cleaning" our hands had reached sheer perfection. We'd discovered that by wetting our hands with saliva and rubbing them, the dirt came out curled in small threads. To brush our teeth without water

could be an unprecedented innovation in the Universal History of Hygiene.

I inspected the brush and toothpaste as if they were objects from another planet. That evening, after supper, the guard circulated a jar of water and a can where we could spit after rinsing. By then, I'd been able to read the label on the toothpaste: Argentine Military Labs. The following morning they just left us the brushes. It was the same morning they washed the floor with the pine-scented deodorant. Afterward, the visitor came. I saw the military boots passing close to my face, and the knees of the dark green uniform. That very evening they changed the method of brushing our teeth: After taking us to the outdoor latrine, they made us stand in the backyard in rows of four and spit. Yesterday evening I fainted out of weakness while I was waiting my turn. Today, at noon, they took away the brushes.

A while ago, Vaca entered our room and pointed a gun at my temple. I felt the cold of the metal. "It's loaded," he said. "Are you scared?"



Bread

... Give us this day our daily bread,
the one that, yesterday, you took away from us.

A Latin American's Lord's Prayer
Mario Benedetti

In this climate of overall uncertainty, bread is the only reliable thing. I mean, it is the only reliable thing besides the belief that we have always been right, that betting our blood in the fight against these killers was the only intelligent option. We don't know when it is time for screams, time for torture, or time for death, but we do know when it is time for bread. At noon we wait to hear the sound of the bread bag sweeping the floor, that smell purifying everything; we wait to touch that bread: crunchy outside, soothingly soft inside. We wait for it so we can either devour it with greed or treasure it

with love. One day I was given two extra pieces of bread and an apple. I kept them under my pillow. That day I felt rich, very rich. Every now and then I lifted the edge of the pillow to breathe that vivifying mixture of scents. By the time that happened I'd already been at the Little School some three months.

In the beginning, when I was a new arrival I almost didn't eat. I passed my portion of bread to other prisoners. I did that until the fellow in the bunk on top of mine told me to stop. He told me to eat so I wouldn't lose strength. But once, when I still wasn't desperately hungry, and lying on that mattress made me unbearably impatient, I cut twenty-five little pieces of bread and made twenty-five tiny balls out of them; I played with the balls, rolling them around in my palm. Vaca passed by, and noticing such an unusual activity, he asked:

"What's that?"

"Little bread balls."

"What for?"

"To play with."

He kept silent for two minutes while he meticulously calculated the danger level of that toy.

"It's okay," he said solemnly, and left, probably convinced that I was one step closer to madness. You were wrong, Mr. Vaca.

Bread is also a means of communicating, a way of telling the person next to me: "I'm here. I care for you. I want to share the only possession I have." Sometimes it is easy to convey the message: When bread distribution is over, we ask, "Sir, is there any more?" When the guard answers that there

isn't any, another prisoner will say, "Sir, I have some bread left, can I pass it to her?" If we are lucky enough, a deal can finally be made. Sometimes it is more difficult; but when hunger hits, the brain becomes sharper. The blanket on the top bed is made into a kind of stage curtain that covers the wall, and behind the curtain, pieces of bread go up and down at the will of stomachs and hearts.

When tedium mixes with hunger, and four claws of anxiety pierce the pits of our stomachs, eating a piece of bread, very slowly, fiber by fiber, is our great relief. When we feel our isolation growing, the world we seek vanishing in the shadows, to give a brother some bread is a reminder that true values are still alive. To be given some bread is to receive a comforting hug.

One day I peeked under the blindfold and saw little Maria Elena. I made up a silly poem for her: *María Elena/sweet and small/sitting on her bed/eating some bread/Two little tears/slide down her face/People will never learn/of María Elena/sitting on her bed/eating some bread. . .*

Once Pato was blind drunk and I wanted to pass some bread to Hugo, who was on the bed in front of mine. Pato refused to answer my calls. I decided to do it myself. I called Vasca.

"What?" she whispered.

"Look at me!" I got out of bed and tiptoed the four steps that separated me from Hugo's bed. I left the piece of bread by his face and went back. It was the first, and last, time I got up that way, illegally. I felt as if I was returning from an adventure, and my heart beat crazily. The operation had taken two seconds.

"But . . . what are you doing?" asked Vasca, half amused

and half shocked.

"If he's seen me," I replied, "he'll think it's all part of his *deltrium tremens*." We laughed, feeling like accomplices.

There are also stories about bread crumbs. When we blindly look for them on the mattress, to devour them, the tiny crumbs hide and, several days later, they are the occasion for a rare event, an event that—provided it isn't accompanied by blows with the rubber stick—can even be labeled entertainment: the "shaking" of the beds. First, we remove the crumbs from the mattress; after that we shake the blanket and, while dust and crumbs are flying around, we wave our arms as if—with blanket and all—we can take off from the ground. After that we lay the blanket on the bed, smooth any folds and put back the pillows. Under the pillow is the lunch bread. It is then time to wait until our hands are bound again, and afterwards to lie down and slowly eat that piece of bread that reminds us that our present is a result of our fight—so that bread, our daily bread, the very same bread that has been taken away from our people, will be given back because it is our right, no pleas to God needed, forever and ever. Amen.



The Small Box of Matches

Alicia," called Vasca one morning while Pato was in the other room changing the prisoners' blindfolds.

"Yes. . ."

"How are you?"

"Okay, and you?"

"What about your tooth?"

"It's resting."

"How come it's resting?"

"They gave me a small box to keep it in overnight."

"Hah! You can't complain now. . ."

"Well, let's say I'm resourceful."

This small box of matches is my only belonging. Sometimes I own a piece of bread, and once I even had an apple. But this box is my only non-edible belonging. Now I keep my box under the pillow. Every so often I touch it

to make sure it is still there, just because inside that little box is a piece of myself: my tooth.

When I hit my tooth against the iron grate it didn't hurt very much; it only made my lips bleed. When the dentist had originally fixed my tooth six years ago he told me, "This is going to last twenty years." To tell the truth, the tooth that broke the other day wasn't mine. The tooth, made of acrylic, with a metal point, was permanently attached to the root canal. It fell out when I was coming back from the latrine and the guards pushed me against the iron grate.

My mother locked herself in the bathroom to cry when my real tooth broke. It happened at an amusement park when I was twelve. I did not have it repaired until I turned fifteen. Then, along with that acrylic wonder that closed the embarrassing window of my mouth, came my first boyfriend, Roberto. It was in that age of perfect teeth that I started to feel it was okay to flirt, to want to be pretty. Now the acrylic wonder sleeps inside this *Ranchera* brand match box and I'm convinced that, with my eyes blindfolded, I deserve at least a mouthful of teeth.

Do I want to look pretty for the guard, the torturers? I hope that what really matters to me is to be whole. . . meanwhile, I'm being destroyed. To be whole is to keep my tooth, either in my mouth or inside the match box, my sole belonging. My mattress could be removed, should they find me talking, as they did to María Angélica some nights ago. They could take my bread away. But the tooth. . . it's a part of me. If the guards realized how important the tooth is for me, they would seize it.

"Your recipe doesn't work," I managed to tell María Elena the other day. Hers was an ingenious solution. She had told

me to fill the hole in the tooth canal with bread and to try to stick the metal point in it. I tried several times, but the metal wouldn't stick to the bread.

The following day, after giving it much thought, I had engineered another solution. I had asked for, and finally obtained, some gauze from old blindfolds, which I wore as a belt. I took a thread out of the bandage and wound it around the metallic point, completely covering it. I realized with relief that the tooth remained secured. When I took it off some hours later, the thread smelled rotten. I discovered the smell could be prevented by removing the tooth for eating and replacing the thread several times a day. That way I added one more activity to the short list of things I did to combat boredom.

My tooth helps keep my mind busy. I must remember to take it out when the guards beat us so it doesn't pop out. Fortunately, I didn't have it in the day Bruja hit me on the head with a two-gallon tea pot. It was lunch time and he had said that I was spilling my soup. The day I fainted in the backyard, by the latrine, I had already removed my tooth at the first sign of dizziness. When I finally recovered, Chiche was slapping my face. He said it was to help me recover. It was lucky that I had pulled my tooth out in time.

I was always afraid that the tooth would slip out of my pocket, so yesterday, when I got this little match box from one of the guards, I felt more relaxed. Now, while I hold it in my hand, I peek at the familiar red letters on the blue background of the box label. *Ranchera*. The rough edge for lighting the matches tickles my fingertips. Its smell of burnt phosphorus animates me again. I remember once, when I was pregnant, I smelled something burning. I turned my



The Denim Jacket

When I got into that denim jacket the night before yesterday, I felt really protected. It was like snuggling in my mother's arms when I was a little girl. This was the first time I felt safe since the military arrested me. Earlier that night I'd been trembling out of rage and impotence because they had taken away Benja and María Elena, Braco and Vasca. To kill them, I was sure. I felt that even my bones were frozen the night before yesterday. It was April 12th; today's the 14th and the denim jacket is still magic. But maybe there's no reason to believe in magic. After all, Vasca, who used to wear it, was taken away.

The jacket is thick, with pockets I can't put my hands in now that they're tied together.

The night before yesterday I asked for a blanket and they brought me this jacket. I immediately recognized it. I put it on and breathed deeply. The burden on my heart shattered

into a thousand pieces that are still running through my blood today, a thousand drops of bitterness. I immediately recognized the jacket. While touching the thick fabric and the cold metal buttons, I recalled the times when I peeked under the blindfold to see Vasca. Then I cried again. That was the night before yesterday, after they'd taken her away. To kill her, someone had told me. The day before yesterday was April 12th. I hardly slept that night.

Yesterday morning they brought my husband in the room. They handcuffed him to the next bunk bed. They had arrested us on January 12th, three months and two days ago, and this was the first time they had ever put us in the same room. But it's not because I saw my husband that I talk about the magic of this jacket; it's rather a feeling of protection.

This is what happened: Yesterday the guards watched us very closely so we couldn't talk. They tried to trick us so they could catch us. They rattled the lock, pretending they were leaving the room, but we knew they stayed inside because we could smell cigarette smoke in the hall. Yesterday, I looked at my husband from under my blindfold; he was in what used to be Graciela's bed. Graciela has been put out in the trailer until her child is born. I watched him all day long: the dirty blue t-shirt, the arm that extended into his handcuffs, his hair very long, the white blindfold on his eyes. I cracked my knuckles and he responded by doing the same. I don't know whether I'll love him again, but yesterday we didn't talk all day long. The guards came into the room to joke. . . they were having fun.

"Look at them, they're on a honeymoon," Peine told Bruja.

"If he could, he would hump her brains out!" Bruja chuckled.

Meanwhile, I was caressing the denim jacket, feeling the magic of its protection. Later Chiche, the shift supervisor, dropped by. He was feeling magnanimous because he'd come to talk to his prisoners. His city accent sounded more arrogant than ever. He was also puzzled, "Why are you so sure she was killed?" (I'd been telling all the guards that I knew they were going to kill Vasca. Yesterday morning I'd been interrogated on that topic. "Well," they'd warned me, "don't ever repeat it.")

"Where did they take her?" I answered with another question. I remember the exact tone of the guard's voice when he told me, "I looked in the files. They'll take you to prison, they'll kill her." But I was not crying then.

Chiche leaned on the edge of my husband's bed.

"How did you two decide to be subversives?"

My husband said something about going to the university, where you get involved in politics.

"I went to the university myself, however. . ."

"You became a Fascist," I said. I think the denim jacket had infused me with some of Vasca's courage.

"What!?" he asked, amazed.

"I said that you became a Fascist at school." I waited for the blow but it never came. I heard, instead, a sarcastic laugh. He left the room. That was yesterday, April 13th.

Today I waited all morning for a chance to talk. I was under the impression that the vigilance had relaxed. There are only three of us left inside this building. Who knows how many remain in the trailers? When the guard left after lunch, I first heard the iron grate and then I heard the guard talking in the corridor. I waited a long time. There was no doubt that he'd gone.

"We can talk," I whispered.

"It seems so . . ."

"He left a little while ago."

"Did they bring our child with you?"

"No, she remained at home, crying. . . I shouted so the neighbors were alerted. I don't know what happened after that."

"Did they go to my parents?"

"I don't know. . . they went to our house and then to your job. Didn't you hear when I screamed so you could run away?"

"No, I was in the back of the store; when I realized they were there it was too late. They were armed to the teeth."

"You didn't hear either when I shouted to you at army headquarters, did you?"

"No. . ."

We exchanged a few words in that short while. I can't remember all that we said, but I recall he mentioned that he'd liked the meatballs I had cooked the day of our arrest. . . Meatballs! Our last meal in freedom, no blindfolds on our eyes. . . no blows. . . Suddenly we heard steps in the room. When had the guard come in? He was right there.

"Were you talking?"

"No, sir."

"You were talking!" screamed Peine. And they took my husband out of that room. I heard how they beat him. Afterward, the guard came and started to hit me with the rubber stick. Then, the magic power of the denim jacket came true: the blows almost didn't hurt. It was not the jacket's thick fabric, but Vasca's courage that protected me.



A Beauty Treatment

If I'm not mistaken, today is April 16th. February makes me wonder whether I'm wrong; I can't remember if this is a leap year. If so, I've been here ninety-six days.

"Take a shower and shave your legs," said Chiche. Now I'm in the bathroom, ready for my beauty treatment. To shave my legs, for what? I sit down, crossing my legs as if for a T.V. commercial: *"The best beauty parlor in town, the most effective depilatory method, at the Little School. For neat corpses and Chiche's attention—the Little School, at its new location near army headquarters—is waiting for your visit!"* I'm in a good mood, which means that I'm in the mood for black humor. I start shaving. There's almost no flesh between the hair and the bones of my leg. My thighs are the same width as my ankles. The scar on my left leg, the one I got when I jumped over the backyard wall, is itching. My feet,

which haven't walked for so long, are as soft as baby feet.

Next door, in the kitchen, a T.V. set is on. The razor blade is drawing little paths on my right leg. Absurdity on top of absurdity. No, better not to dream the impossible, but... maybe they'll release me? They made Vasquita shave her legs before taking her away. Then, the thing to do would be to run, to run along the streets of Bahía Blanca. Barefoot. The one-flower slippers aren't any good for that kind of adventure. Barefoot, yes, but with my legs shaved.

"Have you finished?" Chiche shouts out.

"Yes, sir," I say and turn on the shower.

Today nobody shows up to look at me. Water makes me come back to life. Who would hide me in his house? I know these dudes are very capable of letting me go while having everything prepared for another group to kill me on the spot. When they transferred me to this place, they tried to convince me that the military had released me on the street and that they had caught me afterwards. "I might be blindfolded but I'm not stupid," I thought.

Will I ever get out? They should let me out of here soon or else the hair on my legs will start to grow back. Smiling at that thought, I turn the shower off. My eyes look back at me from the mirror. Human eyes. I feel like I haven't seen human eyes in so many years. My eyes get lost in the depth of the glass. The relief of not wearing a blindfold. Who knows? Maybe someday...

There is a poster by the mirror, a drawing of a blindfolded young man. Words and quotation marks frame his head: *bombs, Montoneros, E.R.P., terrorism, drugs...* The bottom of the poster reads: "*Youngster, do not let the wrong friends misguide you or you will be sorry.*" Absurdity... Now who are you to give me advice?

I'm putting on my dark red t-shirt when a guard comes in. He's wearing a hood that covers his face. I can't recognize his voice. New personnel are coming, I hope they take me out of here soon. Should they replace all the guards, it will be such a hard task to identify every single one again, to learn their quirks, their individual eccentricities, to distinguish each voice... He ties my blindfold rather loosely, then he binds my hands. I leave the bathroom. Door, corridor, iron grate...

"Sir, can I remain seated so my hair can dry?"

"No."

I hang my washed underwear on the back of my bed and lie down. Who would hide me in his house? People are scared and I look like a ghost... even with my legs shaved.

apartment upside down looking for a fire. Afterwards when I sat down to continue studying, I noticed a Ranchera match box sitting on the other side of the table; the smell was coming from that.

Now Pato enters our room.

"What's that in your hand?"

"A match box."

"Give it to me! Are there any left?" His voice shows stress. I feel satisfied. It's such a small triumph that fits in this little box. I stretch my arm and he snatches the box.

"Why do you want it?" He interrogates, relieved after seeing that its empty.

"To keep my tooth in, so it doesn't get lost." Reassured, he returns the box to me.

Pato screams: "Sit down!" While he unties our hands for lunch, I put the tooth in the box. The little match box will bring me trouble. Sooner or later a guard is going to decide that the box is a dangerous object in my hands. Right now it's my only possession.

Eduardo says that on a cell wall at the police station where he was tortured when arrested, someone had written:
"Take heart, my friend,
one day more is one day less."

EDUARDO GALEANO

DAYS AND NIGHTS OF LOVE AND WAR

TRANSLATED BY JUDITH BRISTER

FOREWORD BY

SANDRA CISNEROS

"IN DEFENSE OF THE WORD"

TRANSLATED BY BOBBYE S. ORTIZ



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The Windswept Face of the Pilgrim

Edda Armas told me, in Caracas, about her great grandfather. About what little was known, because the story began when he was already close to seventy and lived in a small town deep in the heart of the Clarines region. Apart from being old, poor, and ailing, her great grandfather was blind. And he married—no one knows how—a girl of eighteen.

Every now and then he would run away. He would, not she. He would run away from her and go to the road. There he would crouch down in the woods and wait for the sound of hoofs or of wheels. Then the blind man would walk out to the crossing and ask to be taken anywhere.

That is how his great granddaughter imagined him now: sitting astride the rump of a mule, roaring with laughter as he ambled down the road, or sitting in the back of a cart, covered with clouds of dust and joyfully dangling his bird's legs over the edge.

I Close My Eyes and Am in the Middle of the Sea

I lost quite a few things in Buenos Aires. Due to the rush or to bad luck, no one knows where they ended up. I left with a few clothes and a handful of papers.

I don't complain. With so many people lost, to cry over things is to lack respect for pain.

Gypsy life. Things are next to me but then they disappear. I have them by night, I lose them by day. I'm not a prisoner of things; they don't decide

When I split up with Graciela, I left the house in Montevideo intact. The Cuban seashells and the Chinese swords, the Guatemalan tapestries, the records and the books and everything else. To have taken something would have been cheating. All this was hers, time shared, time I'm grateful for. And I set out for the unknown, clean and unburdened.

My memory will retain what is worthwhile. My memory knows more about me than I do; it doesn't lose what deserves to be saved.

Inner fever: cities and people, unattached to my memory, float toward me: land, where I was born, children I made, men and women who swelled my soul.

Buenos Aires, May 1975: Oil Is a Fatal Subject

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Yesterday, near the Ezeiza airport, a journalist from *La Opinión* was found dead. His name was Jorge Money. His fingers were burnt and his fingernails pulled out.

In the magazine's editorial office Villar Araujo, biting his pipe, asked me, "And when will it be our turn?"

We laughed.

In the issue of *Crisis* now on the streets we published the last part of Villar's report on oil in Argentina. The article denounces the colonial statutes which govern oil contracts in the country today and it relates the history of the oil business, with its tradition of infamy and crime.

"When oil is involved," Villar writes, "accidental deaths don't occur." In October 1962, in a chalet in Bella Vista, Tibor Berény was shot three times, from different angles and in different parts of his body. According to the official report, this was a suicide. Berény was not, however, a contortionist, but a high-ranking advisor to Shell. He was also apparently a double or triple agent for U.S. firms. More recently, in February of this year, the body of Adolfo Cavalli was found. Cavalli, who had been a union leader for the oil workers, had fallen into disgrace. The loss of power had improved his thinking. Of late he had been preaching the virtues of the total nationalization of oil. He had, above all, a great deal of influence in military circles. When they riddled him with bullets in Villa Soldati, he had a briefcase in his hand. The briefcase disappeared. The press reported that the briefcase had been full of cash. Robbery had thus been the motive for the crime.

Villar ties these Argentine cases to other international murders that ree of oil. And he warns in his article, "If you, reader, discover that after writing these lines a bus ran over me as I crossed the street, think the worst and you will be right."

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News. Villar waits for me in my office, quite excited. Someone has called him by phone and in a very nervous voice said that Cavalli's briefcase contained not money but documents.

"No one knows what documents these were. Just me. And I know because I gave them to him. I'm afraid. I want you to know too, Villar. The briefcase held . . ."

And at that moment, click, the line was cut.

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Last night Villar Araujo did not return home to sleep.

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We search high and low. The journalists go on strike. Newspapers from the provinces weren't out today. The minister has promised to look into this case personally. The police deny having any information. At the magazine we get anonymous phone calls, giving us contradictory information.

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Villar Araujo reappeared last night, alive, on an empty road near Ezeiza. He was left there with four other people.

He had been given neither food nor drink for two days and his head had been covered by a hood. He had been interrogated about the sources for his articles, among other things. He saw only the shoes of his interrogators.

The federal police issued a communiqué about the affair. They say that Villar Araujo had been arrested by mistake.

Ten Years Ago I Attended the Dress Rehearsal of This Play

- 1 -

How many men will be yanked from their homes tonight and thrown into the wastelands with a few holes in their backs?

How many will be murdered . . .

Terror stalks out of the shadows, strikes, and returns to the darkness. A woman's red eyes, an empty chair, a shattered door, someone who will not be back: Guatemala 1967, Argentina 1977.

That year had been officially declared the "year of peace" in Guatemala. But no one fished anymore near the city of Gualán because the nets brought up human bodies. Today the tide washes up pieces of cadavers on the banks of the Río de la Plata. Ten years ago bodies appeared in the Río Motagua or were found, at dawn, in gorges or roadside ditches: featureless faces which could never be identified. After the threats came the kidnappings, the attacks, the torture, the assassinations. The NOA (New Anticommunist Organization)—which proclaimed that it worked "together with the glorious army of Guatemala"—pulled out its enemies' tongues and cut off their left hands. The MANO (Organized Nationalist Anticommunist Movement), which worked with the police, placed black crosses on the doors of the condemned.

At the bottom of San Roque Lake, in Córdoba, Argentina, bodies sunk with rocks are now appearing, just as in the area surrounding the Pacaya Volcano, Guatemalan peasants found a cemetery full of rotting bones and bodies.

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In the torture chambers the torturers eat lunch in front of their victims. Children are interrogated as to the whereabouts of their parents: the parents are strung up and given electric shocks so they will reveal the location of their children. Daily news item: "Individuals in civilian attire, faces covered by black hoods . . . They arrived in four Ford Falcons . . . They were all heavily armed, with pistols, machine guns, and Itakas . . . The first police arrived an hour after the killings." Prisoners, pulled out of jail, die "attempting to escape" in battles in which the army reports neither wounded nor killed on its side. Black humor in Buenos Aires: "Argentines," they say, "can be divided into the terrorized, the imprisoned, the buried, and the exiled." The death penalty was incorporated into the Penal Code in mid-1976, but each day people are killed in this country with benefit of neither trials nor sentences. The majority are deaths without bodies. The Chilean dictatorship has wasted no time in imitating this successful procedure. A single execution can unleash an international scandal: for thousands of disappeared people, there is always the benefit of the doubt. As in Guatemala, friends and relatives make the useless, dangerous pilgrimage from prison to prison. Some know where the bodies are, while the bodies rot in the bushes or

dumps. The technique of the "disappeared": there are no prisoners to claim nor martyrs to mourn. The earth devours the people and the government washes its hands. There are no crimes to denounce nor explanations to give. Each death dies over and over again until, finally, the only thing your soul retains is a mist of horror and uncertainty.

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But Guatemala was the first Latin American laboratory in which the "dirty war" was carried out on a large scale. Men trained, guided, and armed by the United States implemented the extermination plan. The year 1967 was a long St. Bartholomew's Day massacre.¹

The violence had begun in Guatemala years before, when, one late afternoon in June 1954, Castillo Armas' P-47s had filled the sky. Later the land was returned to the United Fruit Company and a new Petroleum Law, translated from the English, was passed.

In Argentina, the Triple A (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) made its public debut in 1973. If in Guatemala the "dirty war" was unleashed to brutally stamp out the agrarian reform and then expanded to erase this reform from the memories of the landless peasants, in Argentina the horror began when Juan Domingo Perón, from the seat of power, dashed the hopes he had raised among the people during his long exile. Black humor in Buenos Aires: "Power," they say, "is like a violin. It is held by the left hand and played by the right." Afterward, at the end of the summer of 1976, the military returned to the presidential palace. Wages are now worth half of what they were. The unemployed have multiplied. Strikes are banned. The universities have been returned to the Middle Ages. The big multinational firms have regained control over fuel distribution, bank deposits, and the sale of meat and grains. New trial legislation allows legal disputes between multinational firms and Argentina to be handled in foreign courts. The foreign investment law has been eliminated: the multinationals can take away whatever they please now.

Aztec ceremonies are held in Argentina. To which blind god is so much blood offered? Can this program be imposed on Latin America's best organized workers' movement without paying the price of five cadavers a day?

The colonel insults and beats him. He lifts him up by his collar. "You're going to tell us where you were. You're going to tell us everything."

He answers that he lived with a woman in Montevideo. The colonel doesn't believe him. He shows the photograph: the woman sitting on the bed, naked, with her hands on her neck, her long black hair slipping down over her breasts.

"With this woman," he says. "In Montevideo."

The colonel grabs the snapshot from his hand and, suddenly enraged, bangs a fist on the table and yells, "That bitch, that motherfucking traitor, she's going to pay for this. She is really going to pay for this."

And then he realizes. Her home had been a trap, set up to catch men like him. And he remembered what she had told him, one noon, after they had made love.

"You know something? I never felt, with anyone else, this ... this joy in my muscles."

And for the first time he understands what she had added, with a rare shadow in her eyes.

"It had to happen to me someday, didn't it?" she had said. "I know how to lose."

(This happened in 1956 or 1957, when Argentines who were hunted down by the dictatorship in that country crossed the river and hid in Montevideo.)

The Universe as Seen Through a Keyhole

Elsa and Ale sat side by side in class. At recess they walked hand in hand around the schoolyard. They shared homework, secrets, and pranks.

One morning Elsa said she had spoken to her dead grandmother.

Since then her grandmother had often sent them messages. Every time Elsa ducked her head underwater, she heard her grandmother's voice.

After a time Elsa announced,

"Grandmother says we're going to fly."

They tried it in the schoolyard and in the street. They ran around in circles or in straight lines until they collapsed in exhaustion. They had several bad falls jumping from the railings.

Elsa dunked her head and her grandmother told her, "You are going to fly during the summer."

Vacation time arrived. The girls' families went to different beaches.

At the end of February Elsa returned with her parents to Buenos Aires. She made the car stop in front of a house she had never seen before.

Ale opened the door.

"Did you fly?" Elsa asked.

"No," Ale said.

"I didn't either," Elsa said.

They hugged each other, crying.

Buenos Aires, July 1975: Returning from the South

Carlos had gone far away. He had been a hotel cook, beach photographer, occasional reporter, man without a home; he had vowed never to return to Montevideo.

He is in Buenos Aires now, without a cent to his name and carrying a tattered and expired identification card.

We owe each other many words. We go to the coast on the weekend to catch up.

I remember having listened, with childlike awe, twenty years ago, to the stories of his wanderings as a jack of all trades around the eastern rice fields and the sugarcane plantations of northern Uruguay. I had felt myself to be a friend of this man for the first time. It had been in the Tupé Nambá cafe off Plaza Independencia. He had a guitar with him. He was a minstrel and a poet, born in San José.

Over the years he earned a reputation as a troublemaker. After his return from Paraguay he got drunk often. He spent a year locked up in a concentration camp in the Tacumbú quarry: the scars from chain lashes on his back never faded. They had pulled out his eyebrows and mustache with a knife. Every Sunday the soldiers ran races astride the prisoners, who wore bits and everything, while the priest sipped tea under an ombú tree and clutched his belly with laughter.

Tough and quiet, Carlos was hard on himself and with his eyes searched out enemies in the cafes and bars of Montevideo. At the same time, he was the delight of my children. No one was better at telling stories and nonsense and not a clown in the world was as able as he to make them roll on the floor in laughter. Carlos came to our house, put on an apron, and cooked chicken à la portuguesa or dishes he concocted for our pleasure, because he was not a big eater himself.

Now we were returning from the coast, headed for Buenos Aires, several hours on the bus without sleep and talking and he spoke about Montevideo. During the entire weekend neither of us had mentioned our city. We couldn't go there; it was better to remain silent.

On a sad note, he told me about Pacha.

"One night I came home quite late and lay down without making noise or turning on the light. Pacha wasn't in bed. I looked for her in the bathroom and in the room where her son slept. She wasn't there. I found the dining room door closed. I went to open it and I realized: on the other side of the door there were blankets on the floor. The next morning I waited for her in the kitchen, to drink *mate* with her as usual. Pacha didn't say anything. Neither did I. We chatted a bit, the usual—the nice or lousy weather and the tough political situation shaping up or please pass the *mate* and I'll turn over the tea so it doesn't get washed out. And when I returned at night I found the bed empty. Again the dining room door was closed. I put my ear to it and thought I could hear her breathing. Early the next morning we sat in the kitchen to drink *mate*. She didn't say anything and I didn't ask. At 8:30 her students arrived, as usual. And that's how it was for a week: the bed without her in it, the door closed. Until early one morning, when she passed me the last *mate*, I said, "Look Pacha. I know it is very uncomfortable to sleep on the floor. So tonight just go to the bed. I won't be there." And I never went back.

It Is the Time for Ghosts: I Call Them, Pursue Them, Catch Them

I draw them with dirt and blood on the cave ceiling. I look within myself with the eyes of the first man. While the ceremony lasts, I feel that in my memory the entire history of the world can fit, starting with that first chap who rubbed two stones together to get warmed by the first little fire.

The System

I was fourteen or fifteen years old and worked as a messenger in a bank. I spent all afternoon running up and down stairs with mountains of files in my arms. I stood in a corner, like a little soldier, at the beck and call of bells, lights, and voices.

The board of directors of the bank met on Fridays, on the top floor. During the meetings the directors would have coffee several times. I ran to the kitchen to make the coffee. If there was no one around I would boil it, to give them diarrhea.

One Friday I came in with the tray, as usual, and found the big room nearly empty. Neatly placed on the mahogany table were the files bearing the names of each director, and around the table sat the empty chairs. Only Sr. Alcorta was seated at his place. I offered him coffee and he didn't reply. He had put his glasses on and was reading a piece of paper. He read it several times. Standing quietly behind him, I looked at the rolls of pink flesh around his neck and counted the freckles on his hands. The letter was the text of his resignation. He signed it, took off his glasses and remained seated, his hands in his pockets, staring into space. I coughed. I coughed again, but I didn't exist. My arms were getting cramps from holding the tray full of coffee cups.

When I returned to pick up the files and take them to the Secretariat, Sr. Alcorta had gone. I locked the door and opened the files, as I always did, one by one. In each file there was a letter of resignation just like the one Sr. Alcorta had read and reread and signed. All the letters had been signed.

The following Tuesday the board of directors held a special meeting. Sr. Alcorta was not invited. The directors resolved, unanimously: first, to withdraw the resignations presented the previous Friday; and second, to accept Sr. Alcorta's resignation, thanking him for the services rendered and lamenting that new obligations were making demands on his invaluable abilities.

I read the resolutions in the minutes book when they told me to take it up to the General Manager's office.

The System

... that the computer program that alarms the banker who alerts the ambassador who dines with the general who summons the president who intimidates the minister who threatens the director general who humiliates the manager who yells at the boss who insults the employee who scorns the worker who mistreats his wife who beats the child who kicks the dog.

of them. She went around exchanging insults with some; others she told, for the first time, that she loved them.

Someone would open the cell door and offer her oranges. Then the door would close again.

When night fell she would sing:

"Eres alta y delgada ..." ["You are tall and slim"]

"Sing that again," a voice would ask, from the cell above.

And she would sing it again.

"Thank you," the voice would say.

Every night the voice would ask her to sing that song, and she never saw the face it belonged to.

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"It's been several nights now," she tells me, "since I've dreamt about the machine. Since I saw you. You know what? Sometimes I'm afraid to sleep. I know I'm going to dream about that and it scares me. I'm also frightened, still, by footsteps on the stairs. I was awake when they came. I never told you. I heard their steps and I wanted the walls to open up and I thought: I'm going to jump out the window. But I let them take me away.

"Are you going to talk or not?" they said.

I don't have anything to say.

"Strip her."

"They gave me so much electric shock in my mouth my teeth were loosened. And here and here and here. But in the bathtub it's much worse. You know, I could never again swim underwater. I can't stand being without air underwater.

"They pulled off my hood.

"The boys say you're hot stuff," the top officer said. "And I'm going to let them have their fun."

"A guy came in and got undressed. He flung himself on top of me and started to struggle with me. I looked at what was happening as if I were someone else. I remember that on the radio Palito Ortega was singing. And I told him,

"You're pathetic. You can't even do it by force."

"He punched me a few times.

"Another guy came. Big and fat. He took off his plaid shirt and his undershirt.

"Looks like you're a wild one. With me you're not going to get away with anything."

"He finished undressing and threw himself over me. He bit my neck and my breasts. I was very far away. I felt cold air escaping from my pores.

"Then the officer in charge came, furious. He kicked me around the floor. He sat on me and buried the butt of his revolver between my legs.

"Later he called me a 'whore' because I didn't cry."

The System

The denunciation of a dictatorship's crimes doesn't end with a list of the tortured, murdered, and disappeared. The machine gives you lessons in egoism and lies. Solidarity is a crime. To save yourself, the machine teaches, you have to be a hypocrite and a louse. The person who kisses you tonight will sell you tomorrow. Every favor breeds an act of revenge. If you say what you think, they smash you, and nobody deserves the risk. Doesn't the unemployed worker secretly wish the factory will fire the other guy in order to take his place? Isn't your neighbor your competition and enemy? Not long ago, in Montevideo, a little boy asked his mother to take him back to the hospital, because he wanted to be unborn.

Without a drop of blood, without even a tear, the daily massacre of the best in every person is carried out. Victory for the machine: people are afraid of talking and looking at one another. May nobody meet anybody else. When someone looks at you and keeps looking, you think, "He's going to screw me." The manager tells the employee, who was once his friend,

"I had to denounce you. They asked for the lists. Some name had to be given. If you can, forgive me."

Out of every thirty Uruguayans, one has the job of watching, hunting down, and punishing others. There is no work outside the garrisons and the police stations, and in any case to keep your job you need a certificate of democratic faith given by the police. Students are required to denounce their fellow students, children are urged to denounce their teachers.

In Argentina, television asks, "Do you know what your child is doing right now?"

Why isn't the murder of souls through poisoning written up on the crime page?

I Had Never Heard about Torture

Fifteen years ago, when I worked at the weekly *Marcha*, I interviewed an Algerian student leader. The colonial war had ended during those days.

At first the Algerian didn't want to talk about himself. But as time passed the barriers began to drop and he told me his story—fierce tears of triumph after seven years of struggle. He had been tortured in the Cité Améziane. They had tied him to a metal bed by his wrists and ankles and had administered electric shocks.

"Your heart disappears, your blood disappears, everything sways and disappears."

Later they took him to the submersion tub.

They shot him in the temple with blanks.

Eight officers raped a comrade in front of him.

In those days I did not suspect that torture would become a national custom. I did not know, fifteen years ago, that in the prisons and barracks of my country blackouts would occur because of the excessive use of electricity.

Once in Montevideo, I was eating *fainá* with beer at the corner cafe by the university when I saw René Zavaleta come in.

René was very thin, just arrived from Bolivia, and he talked incessantly.

The Barrientos dictatorship had imprisoned him in Madidi, a military fortress lost in the middle of the jungle. At night, René told me, you could hear the jaguars and the hoards of pigs, which advanced like a cataclysm. The air was always heavy with heat and dark with mosquitoes, and the river made dangerous by sting-rays and piranhas. To enter the hut you had to club the bats to death.

Every day the political prisoners were given a fistful of wheat and half a banana. To get more food you had to stoop down to wash the corporal's feet.

The soldiers, who were also in Madidi as a punishment, spent their time looking up in the sky for a plane that never arrived. René wrote love letters on request. There was no way to get them to girlfriends, but the soldiers liked the letters René wrote and would keep them and every now and then would ask him to read them.

One day two soldiers destroyed each other with their fists. They fought to the death over a cow that had a woman's name.

Then René told me the story of what happened to a friend in the Chaco War.

The System

— 1 —

A famous Latin American playboy doesn't quite make it in his lover's bed. "I drank too much last night," he explains at breakfast. The second night he attributes the failure to exhaustion. The third night he changes lovers. After a week he goes to consult a doctor. A month later, he changes doctors. Some time later, he begins psychoanalysis. Submerged or repressed experiences begin to surface in his consciousness, session after session. And he remembered:

1934. Chaco War. Six Bolivian soldiers wander about on the highland plateau looking for the other troops. They are the survivors of a defeated detachment. They drag themselves over the frozen steppes without seeing a soul or having a bite of food. This man is one of the soldiers.

One afternoon they discover an Indian girl minding a flock of goats. They follow her, knock her down, rape her. Each of them has a turn.

It's the turn of this man, who is the last. As he lies down on the Indian, he notices she is no longer breathing.

The five soldiers stand around him in a circle.

They stick their rifles in his back.

And then, between horror and death, this man chooses horror.

— 2 —

It coincides with a thousand and one stories of torturers.

Who tortures? Five sadists, ten morons, fifteen clinical cases? Respectable heads of families torture. The officers put in their hours of work and then go home to watch television with their children. What is efficient is good, the machine teaches. Torture is efficient: it extracts information, reaks consciences, spreads fear. It is born and it develops the complicity of a black mass. He who doesn't torture will be tortured. The machine accepts neither innocents nor witnesses. Who refuses? Who can keep his hands clean? The little gear vomits the first time. The second time it grinds its teeth. The third time it becomes accustomed and does its duty. Time passes and the gear's little wheel speaks the language of the machine: hood, electric prod, submarine, stock, sawhorse.¹⁶ The machine requires discipline. The most talented end up taking a liking to it.

If the torturers are sick, what about the system that makes them necessary?

When Rodolfo was gunned down, the first shot hit your mouth. You leaned over his body and you didn't have lips to kiss him.

Afterward ...

One by one the loved ones fell, guilty of acting or of thinking or of doubting or of nothing.

That bearded boy with the melancholy gaze arrived at Silvio Frondizi's wake very early, when no one was there. He placed a bright red apple on top of the coffin. You saw him leave the apple and then walk away.

Later you learned that the boy had been Silvio's son. His father had asked him for the apple. They had been eating, at noon, and he had got up to get the apple when the murderers had suddenly broken in.

Buenos Aires, July 1976: Long Trip Without Moving

Rhythm of the lungs of the sleeping city. It's cold outside.

Suddenly, a commotion can be heard through the closed window. You dig your nails into my arm. I don't breathe. We hear blows, curses, and a long human wail.

Afterward, silence.

"Am I heavy?"

Sailor's knot.

Loveliness and slumber more powerful than fear.

When the sun shines in, I blink and stretch with four arms. No one knows who owns this knee, whose elbow or foot this is, whose voice murmurs good morning.

Then the two-headed animal thinks or says or wishes:

"Nothing can happen to people who wake up like this."

The Universe as Seen Through a Keyhole

In those days everything was gigantic. Everything: the stone house on top of the hill, the path of hydrangeas, the men who came home, on the road, when night fell. Wild strawberries grew nearby and the earth was red and looked good enough to bite.

You went down to the city to go to six o'clock mass with Grandmother Deidamia. The yards and the recently paved walks smelled of summer freshness.

Grandmother Deidamia kept in a bureau, wrapped in lace, the umbilical cords of her ten children.

"All the nudity comes from Buenos Aires," she said when you came back from the capital in short sleeves.

Grandmother Deidamia had never had a ray of sun strike her face and she never uncrossed her hands.

Seated in the shade in her rocking chair, hand upon hand, Grandmother would say,

"Here I am, being."

Grandmother Deidamia's hands were transparent, blue-veined, and very long-nailed.

The Universe as Seen Through a Keyhole

You stole a lily from the vase. You took a deep breath of its fragrance. You crossed the yard and the summer heat with slow little steps, the tall flower raised in your fist. The cool tiles in the patio were a joy to your bare feet.

You reached the faucet. To open it, you got up on a bench. The water fell over the flower and your hands and you felt that the water was sliding down all over your body and you closed your eyes, dizzy with so much inexplicable pleasure, and then a century passed.

"My thoughts fell, Mother," you explained later, pointing to the drain on the floor. "They fell down and went in there."

Buenos Aires, July 1976: When Words Cannot Be More Dignified than Silence, It Is Time to Keep Quiet

- 1 -

We are obliged to submit our galley proofs and manuscript pages to the presidential palace.

"This doesn't go in. Neither does this," they say.

This is how our last meeting with the military went.

Vicente and I had gone.

After discussing the material for an hour, we talked about Haroldo Conti.

"He is an editor of *Crisis*," we said, "and they have kidnapped him. Nothing more has been heard. You tell us he hasn't been detained and the government doesn't have anything to do with it. Why don't you let us publish the news? A ban on this news could give rise to slanted interpretations. You know that abroad there are a lot of people with the wrong idea ..."

"Do you have any complaints against us?" the captain asked. "We have always treated you correctly. We have received you, we have listened to you. That is why we're here and that is our function in the government. But we warn you. This country is at war, and if we were to meet each other on different terrain, the treatment would be quite different."

I touched my companion's knee.

"Let's go, Vicente. It's getting late," I said.

We walked, slowly, through the Plaza de Mayo. We stood for a long time in the middle of the plaza without looking at one another. There was a clear sky and a commotion of people and pigeons. The sun made greenish flashes on the copper cupolas.

We didn't talk.

We entered a cafe, to have a drink, and neither of us dared say, "This means that Haroldo is dead, doesn't it?"

For fear the other would say,
"Yes."

- 2 -

The magazine is finished.

In the morning I get everyone together to talk to them. I want to seem firm and talk hopefully, but sadness escapes through my pores. I explain that neither Fico nor Vicente nor I have made the decision; circumstances have decided. We do not accept humiliation as an epilogue to the beautiful adventure that has brought us together for more than three years. No one makes *Crisis* bow down: we will bury her erect, just as she lived.

- 3 -

I empty my desk drawers, full of my papers and letters. I read, haphazardly, the words of women I loved and men who were my brothers. With my finger I caress the telephone that had brought me friendly voices and threats.

Night has fallen. The compañeros have left a few hours—or months—ago. I hear, I see them; their footsteps and voices, the light that each one gives off and the vapor that remains behind when they leave.

- 4 -

At the newspaper *Época* in Montevideo, it was the same. You walked into that little kid's editorial office and felt embraced even when it was empty.

Ten years have passed—or an instant. How many centuries make up this moment I'm now living? How many airs form the air I breath? Times gone by, airs blown past; years and air kept in me and from me, multiplied when I sit down and put on my magician's cape or captain's hat or clown's nose and I grip the pen and write. I write, that is, prophesy, navigate, beckon. Coming?

Tattered backdrop, ship, makeshift circus. We all worked out of faith, of which there was an excess: no one got paid. Every now and then a girl would drop by to give us liver pills or shots of vitamins. We were young and eager to do things and speak out: we were happy and stubborn, contagious.

Once in a while the government would close us down and dawn would find us at the police station. We received the news with more relief than indignation. Every day we didn't publish was a day to get money together so we could come out the next. We would go to the police headquarters with Andrés Cultelli and Manrique Salbarrey and at the door we would say good-bye just in case.

Will we be out today? We never knew. Midnight passed and the agencies had removed the teletypes, for lack of payment; they had cut off our telephone, and our only radio fell and broke. The typewriters didn't have ribbons and at 2:00 a.m. we went out in search of rolls of newsprint. All we would have to do was to go out on the balcony and wait for a love drama to unfold on the street corner, but we didn't have film for our cameras either. We even had a fire that wrecked our shop machinery. I don't know how *Época* made it to the streets every morning. Proof of the existence of God or the magic of solidarity?

We were too young to regret our joy. At 3:00 a.m., when the job was done, we opened up a space between the editorial desks and played soccer with some paper wadded into a ball. Sometimes the referee could be bought off for a plate of beans or a black tobacco cigarette, and then the fists flew until the shop sent up the first copy of the paper: ink-smelling, finger-stained, just born from the mouth of the press. That was a birth. Afterward we walked arm in arm to the boulevard to wait for the sun. That was a ritual.

The prisoner had been in the Libertad jail for three years. One day he acted up or looked suspicious or some guard got up on the wrong side of the bed. The prisoner was sent to the punishment cell. There they call it "the island": incommunicado, hungry, asphyxiated in the "island," the prisoners cut their veins or went crazy. This man spent a month in the punishment cell. Then he hanged himself.

The news is routine, but one detail jumps out at me. The prisoner's name was José Artigas.

Street War, Soul War

Will we be capable of learning humility and patience?
I am the world, but very small. A man's time is not history's time, although, admittedly, we would like it to be.

The System

I recall something Miguel Littín told me five or six years ago. He had just filmed *La tierra prometida* in the Ranquil valley, a poor region of Chile.

The local peasants were "extras" in the scenes where there were masses. Some of them played themselves. Others played soldiers. The soldiers invaded the valley, and with bloodshed and fire, threw the peasants off the land. The film was the chronicle of the massacre.

The problems began on the third day. The peasants who wore uniforms, rode horseback, and shot blanks had become arbitrary, bossy, and violent. After each day of filming, they would harass the other peasants.

Street War, Soul War

How many times have I been a dictator? How many times an inquisitor, a censor, a jailer? How many times have I forbidden those I most loved freedom and speech? How many people have I felt I owned? How many people have I sentenced because they committed the crime of not being me? Is it not more repugnant to hold people as private property than things? How many people have I used, I who thought myself so marginal to the consumer society? Have I not desired or celebrated, secretly, the defeat of others, I who aloud claimed no interest in success? Who fails to

reproduce, within himself, the world that makes him? Who is free from confusing his brother with a rival and the woman he loves with his own shadow?

Street War, Soul War

Does writing have any meaning? The question lies heavily in my hand.

Custom houses for words, incinerations of words, cemeteries for words are organized. So we will resign ourselves to live a life that is not ours, they force us to recognize an alien memory as our own. Masked reality, history as told by the winners: perhaps writing is no more than an attempt to save, in times of infamy, the voices that will testify to the fact that we were here and this is how we were. A way of saving for those we do not yet know, as Espriu had wanted, "the name of each thing." How can those who don't know where they come from find out where they're going?

Introduction to Art History

I dine with Nicole and Adoum.

Nicole talks about a sculptor she knows, a man of much talent and fame. The sculptor works in an enormous workshop, surrounded by children. All the neighborhood children are his friends.

One fine day the mayor's office commissioned him to make a huge horse for the city plaza. A truck brought a gigantic block of granite to the shop. The sculptor began to work on it, standing on a ladder, hammering and chiseling away. The children watched him work.

Then the children went away to the mountains or the seaside on vacation.

When they returned, the sculptor showed them the finished horse.

And one of the children asked him, wide-eyed,

"But ... how did you know that inside the stone there was a horse?"

News

From Argentina.

Luis Sabini is safe. He was able to leave the country. He had disappeared at the end of 1975 and a month later we knew they had imprisoned him.

There is no trace of Haroldo Conti. They went to Juan Gelman's house in Buenos Aires looking for him. Since he wasn't there, they took his children. His daughter reappeared a few days later. Nothing is known about his son. The police say they don't have him; the armed forces say the same thing. Juan was going to be a grandfather. His pregnant daughter-in-law also disappeared. Cacho Paoletti, who sent us texts from La Rioja, was tortured and is still in prison. Other writers published in the magazine: Paco Urondo, shot down, a while ago, in Mendoza; Antonio Di Benedetto, in jail; Rodolfo Walsh, disappeared. On the eve of his kidnapping, Rodolfo sent a letter denouncing the fact that today the "Triple A" is the three armed forces: "The very source of terror which has lost its course and can only babble the discourse of death."

Dreams

You wanted a light and the matches wouldn't light. Not one match would light. All the matches were headless or wet.

Calella de la Costa, June 1977: To Invent the World Each Day

We chat, we eat, we smoke, we walk, we work together, ways of making love without entering each other, and our bodies call each other as the day travels toward the night.

We hear the last train pass. Church bells. It's midnight.

Our own little train slips and flies, travels along through airs and worlds, and afterward morning comes and the aroma announces tasty, steamy, freshly made coffee. Your face radiates a clean light and your body smells of love juices.

The day begins.

We count the hours that separate us from the night to come. Then we will make love, the sorrowcide.

If You Listen Closely, All of Us Make Just One Melody

Crossing the fern-filled field, I reach a river bank.

This is a morning of fresh sunlight. A soft breeze blows. From the chimney of the stone house the smoke flows and curls. Ducks float on the water. A white sail slips between the trees.

My body has, this morning, the same rhythm as the breeze, the smoke, the ducks, and the sail.

Street War, Soul War

I pursue the enemy voice that has ordered me to be sad. At times I feel that joy is a crime of high treason, and I am guilty of the privilege of being alive and free.

Then it helps me to remember what Chief Huilca said in Peru, speaking before the ruins. "They came here. They even smashed the rocks. They wanted to make us disappear. But they have not been able to, because we are alive, and that is the main thing." And I think that Huilca was right. To be alive: a small victory. To be alive, that is: to be capable of joy, despite the good-byes and the crimes, so that exile will be a testimony to another, possible country.

The task ahead—building our country—cannot be accomplished with bricks of shit. Will we be of any use if, when we return, we are broken?

Joy takes more courage than grief. In the end, we are accustomed to grief.

Calella de la Costa, July 1977: The Market

The fat plum, with its pure juice that drowns you in sweetness, should be eaten, you taught me, with closed eyes. The beet plum, with its tight, red pulp, is looked at when eaten.

You like to caress the peach and to strip it with a knife, and you prefer dull-colored apples so you can bring out the shine with your hands.

Lemons inspire your respect and oranges make you laugh. There's nothing nicer than mountains of radishes and nothing more ridiculous than pineapples, with their medieval warrior's armor.

Luisa Valenzuela

LOS MEJOR CALZADOS

Invasión de mendigos pero queda un consuelo: a ninguno le faltan zapatos, zapatos sobran. Eso sí, en ciertas oportunidades hay que quitárselo a alguna pierna descuartizada que se encuentra entre los matorrales y sólo sirve para calzar a un rengo. Pero esto no ocurre a menudo, en general se encuentra el cadáver completito con los dos zapatos intactos. En cambio las ropas sí están inutilizadas. Suelen presentar orificios de bala y manchas de sangre, o han sido desgarradas a latigazos, o la picana eléctrica les ha dejado unas quemaduras muy feas y difíciles de ocultar. Por eso no contamos con la ropa, pero los zapatos vienen chiche. Y en general se trata de buenos zapatos que han sufrido poco uso porque a sus propietarios no se les deja llegar demasiado lejos en la vida. Apenas asoman la cabeza, apenas piensan (y el pensar no deteriora los zapatos) ya está todo cantado y les basta con dar unos pocos pasos para que ellos les tronchen la carrera.

Es decir que zapatos encontramos, y como no siempre son del número que se necesita, hemos instalado en un baldío del Bajo un puestito de canje. Cobramos muy contados pesos por el servicio: a un mendigo no se le puede pedir mucho pero sí que contribuya a pagar la yerba mate y algún bizcochito de grasa. Sólo ganamos dinero de verdad cuando por fin se logra alguna venta. A veces los familiares de los muertos, enterados vaya uno a saber cómo de nuestra existencia, se llegan hasta nosotros

THE BEST SHOD

An invasion of beggars, but there's one consolation: no one lacks shoes, there are more than enough shoes to go around. Sometimes, it's true, a shoe has to be taken off some severed leg found in the underbrush, and it's of no use except to somebody with only one good leg. But this doesn't happen very often, usually corpses are found with both shoes intact. Their clothing on the other hand isn't usable. Ordinarily it has bullet holes, bloodstains, or is torn apart, or an electric cattle prod has left burns that are ugly and difficult to hide. So we don't count on the clothes, but the shoes are like new. Generally they're good, they haven't had much wear because their owners haven't been allowed to get very far in life. They poke out their heads, they start thinking (thinking doesn't wear out shoes), and after just a few steps their career is cut off.

That is to say, we find shoes, and since they're not always the size we need, we've set up a little exchange post in a vacant lot downtown. We charge only a few pesos for the service: you can't ask much from a beggar, but even so it does help to pay for maté and some biscuits. We earn real money only when we manage to have a real sale. Sometimes the families of the dead people, who've heard of us heaven knows how, ask us to sell

para rogarnos que les vendamos los zapatos del finado si es que los tenemos. Los zapatos son lo único que pueden enterrar, los pobres, porque claro, jamás les permitirán llevarse el cuerpo.

Es realmente lamentable que un buen par de zapatos salga de circulación, pero de algo tenemos que vivir también nosotros y además no podemos negarnos a una obra de bien. El nuestro es un verdadero apostolado y así lo entiende la policía que nunca nos molesta mientras merodeamos por baldíos, zanjones, descampados, bosquecitos y demás rincones donde se puede ocultar algún cadáver. Bien sabe la policía que es gracias a nosotros que esta ciudad puede jactarse de ser la de los mendigos mejores calzados del mundo.

them the dead man's shoes if we have them. The shoes are the only thing that they can bury, poor things, because naturally the authorities would never let them have the body.

It's too bad that a good pair of shoes drops out of circulation, but we have to live and we can't refuse to work for a good cause. Ours is a true apostolate and that's what the police think, too, so they never bother us as we search about in vacant lots, sewer conduits, fallow fields, thickets, and other nooks and crannies where a corpse may be hidden. The police are well aware that, thanks to us, this city can boast of being the one with the best-shod beggars in the world.

tr. Helen Lane

LOS CENSORES

¡Pobre Juan! Aquel día lo agarraron con la guardia baja y no pudo darse cuenta de que lo que él creyó ser un guiño de la suerte era en cambio un maldito llamado de la fatalidad. Esas cosas pasan en cuanto uno se descuida, y así como me oyen uno se descuida tan pero tan a menudo. Juancito dejó que se le viera encima la alegría —sentimiento por demás perturbador— cuando por un conducto inconfesable le llegó la nueva dirección de Mariana, ahora en París, y pudo creer así que ella no lo había olvidado. Entonces se sentó ante la mesa sin pensarlo dos veces y escribió una carta. La carta. Esa misma que ahora le impide concentrarse en su trabajo durante el día y no lo deja dormir cuando llega la noche (¿qué habrá puesto en esa carta, qué habrá quedado adherido a esa hoja de papel que le envió a Mariana?).

Juan sabe que no va a haber problema con el texto, que el texto es irreprochable, inocuo. Pero ¿y lo otro? Sabe también que a las cartas las auscultan, las huelen, las palpan, las leen entre líneas y en sus menores signos de puntuación, hasta en las manchitas involuntarias. Sabe que las cartas pasan de mano en mano por las vastas oficinas de censura, que son sometidas a todo tipo de pruebas y pocas son por fin las que pasan los exámenes y pueden continuar camino. Es por lo general cuestión de meses, de años si la cosa se complica, largo tiempo durante el cual está en suspenso la libertad y hasta quizá la vida no sólo del remitente sino también del destinatario. Y eso es lo

THE CENSORS

Poor Juan! One day they caught him with his guard down before he could even realize that what he had taken to be a stroke of luck was really one of fate's dirty tricks. These things happen the minute you're careless, as one often is. Juancito let happiness—a feeling you can't trust—get the better of him when he received from a confidential source Mariana's new address in Paris and knew that she hadn't forgotten him. Without thinking twice, he sat down at his table and wrote her a letter. The letter. The same one that now keeps his mind off his job during the day and won't let him sleep at night (what had he scrawled, what had he put on that sheet of paper he sent to Mariana?).

Juan knows there won't be a problem with the letter's contents, that it's irreproachable, harmless. But what about the rest? He knows that they examine, sniff, feel, and read between the lines of each and every letter, and check its tiniest comma and most accidental stain. He knows that all letters pass from hand to hand and go through all sorts of tests in the huge censorship offices and that, in the end, very few continue on their way. Usually it takes months, even years, if there aren't any snags; all this time the freedom, maybe even the life, of both

que lo tiene sumido a nuestro Juan en la más profunda de las desolaciones: la idea de que a Mariana, en París, llegue a sucederle algo por culpa de él. Nada menos que a Mariana que debe de sentirse tan segura, tan tranquila allí donde siempre soñó vivir. Pero él sabe que los Comandos Secretos de Censura actúan en todas partes del mundo y gozan de un importante descuento en el transporte aéreo; por lo tanto nada les impide llegarse hasta el oscuro barrio de París, secuestrar a Mariana y volver a casita convencidos de a su noble misión en esta tierra.

Entonces hay que ganarles de mano, entonces hay que hacer lo que hacen todos: tratar de sabotear el mecanismo, de ponerle en los engranajes unos granos de arena, es decir ir a las fuentes del problema para tratar de contenerlo.

Fue con ese sano propósito con que Juan, como tantos, se postuló para censor. No por vocación como unos pocos ni por carencia de trabajo como otros, no. Se postuló simplemente para tratar de interceptar su propia carta, idea para nada novedosa pero consoladora. Y lo incorporaron de inmediato porque cada día hacen falta más censores y no es cuestión de andarse con melindres pidiendo antecedentes.

En los altos mandos de la Censura no podían ignorar el motivo secreto que tendría más de uno para querer ingresar a la repartición, pero tampoco estaban en condiciones de ponerse demasiado estrictos y total ¿para qué? Sabían lo difícil que les iba a resultar a esos pobres incautos detectar la carta que buscaban y, en el supuesto caso de lograrlo, ¿qué importancia podían tener una o dos cartas que pasan la barrera frente a todas las otras que el nuevo censor frenaría en pleno vuelo? Fue así como no sin ciertas esperanzas nuestro Juan pudo ingresar en el Departamento de Censura del Ministerio de Comunicaciones.

El edificio, visto desde fuera, tenía un aire festivo a causa de los vidrios ahumados que reflejaban el cielo, aire en total discordancia con el ambiente austero que imperaba dentro. Y

sender and receiver is in jeopardy. And that's why Juan's so troubled: thinking that something might happen to Mariana because of his letter. Of all people, Mariana, who must finally feel safe there where she always dreamt about living. But he knows that the *Censor's Secret Command* operates all over the world and cashes in on the discount in air fares; there's nothing to stop them from going as far as that obscure Paris neighborhood, kidnapping Mariana, and returning to their cozy homes, certain of having fulfilled their noble mission.

Well, you've got to beat them to the punch, do what every one tries to do: sabotage the machinery, throw sand in its gears, that is to say get to the bottom of the problem to try to stop it.

This was Juan's sound plan when he, along with many others, applied for a censor's job—not because he had a calling like others or needed a job: no, he applied simply to intercept his own letter, an idea none too original but comforting. He was hired immediately, for each day more and more censors are needed and no one would bother to check on his references.

Ulterior motives couldn't be overlooked by the *Censorship Division*, but they needn't be too strict with those who applied. They knew how hard it would be for the poor guys to find the letter they wanted and even if they did, what's a letter or two compared to all the others that the new censor would snap up? That's how Juan managed to join the *Post Office's Censorship Division*, with a certain goal in mind.

The building had a festive air on the outside that contrasted with its inner staidness. Little by little, Juan was absorbed by his job, and he felt at peace since he was doing everything he

todo lo posible por su carta—es decir por Mariana—le evitaba ansiedades. Ni siquiera se preocupó cuando, el primer mes, lo destinaron a la sección K, donde con infinitas precauciones se abren los sobres para comprobar que no encierran explosivo alguno.

Cierto es que a un compañero, al tercer día, una carta le voló la mano derecha y le desfiguró la cara, pero el jefe de sección alegó que había sido mera imprudencia por parte del damnificado y Juan y los demás empleados pudieron seguir trabajando como antes aunque bastante más inquietos. Otro compañero intentó a la hora de salida organizar una huelga para pedir aumento de sueldo por trabajo insalubre pero Juan no se adhirió y después de pensar un rato fue a denunciarlo ante la autoridad para intentar así ganarse un ascenso.

Una vez no crea hábito, se dijo al salir del despacho del jefe, y cuando lo pasaron a la sección J donde se despliegan las cartas con infinitas precauciones para comprobar si encierran polvillos venenosos, sintió que había escalado un peldaño y que por lo tanto podía volver a su sana costumbre de no inmiscuirse en asuntos ajenos.

De la J, gracias a sus méritos, escaló rápidamente posiciones hasta la sección E donde ya el trabajo se hacía más interesante pues se iniciaba la lectura y el análisis del contenido de las cartas. En dicha sección hasta podía abrigar esperanzas de echarle mano a su propia misiva dirigida a Mariana que, a juzgar por el tiempo transcurrido, debería de andar más o menos a esta altura después de una larguísima procesión por otras dependencias.

Poco a poco empezaron a llegar días cuando su trabajo se fue tornando de tal modo absorbente que por momentos se le borraba la noble misión que lo había llevado hasta las oficinas. Días de pasarle tinta roja a largos párrafos, de echar sin piedad muchas cartas al canasto de las condenadas. Días de horror ante las formas sutiles y sibilinas que encontraba la

could to retrieve his letter to Mariana. He didn't even worry when, in his first month, he was sent to Section K where envelopes are very carefully screened for explosives.

It's true that on the third day a fellow worker had his right hand blown off by a letter, but the division chief claimed it was sheer negligence on the victim's part. Juan and the other employees were allowed to go back to their work, though feeling less secure. After work, one of them tried to organize a strike to demand higher wages for unhealthy work, but Juan didn't join in; after thinking it over, he reported the man to his superiors and thus he got promoted.

You don't form a habit by doing something once, he told himself as he left his boss's office. And when he was transferred to Section J, where letters are carefully checked for poison dust, he felt he had climbed a rung in the ladder.

By working hard, he quickly reached Section E where the job became more interesting, for he could now read and analyze the letters' contents. Here he could even hope to get hold of his letter to Marianna, which, judging by the time that had elapsed, would have gone through the other sections and was probably floating around in this one.

Soon his work became so absorbing that his noble mission blurred in his mind. Day after day he crossed out whole paragraphs in red ink, pitilessly chucking many letters into the censored basket. These were horrible days when he was shocked by the subtle and conniving ways employed by people to pass on subversive messages; his instincts were so sharp that he found

intuición tan aguzada que tras un simple "el tiempo se ha vuelto inestable" o "los precios siguen por las nubes" detectaba la mano algo vacilante de aquel cuya intención secreta era derrocar al Gobierno.

Tanto celo de su parte le valió un rápido ascenso. No sabemos si lo hizo muy feliz. En la sección B la cantidad de cartas que le llegaba a diario era mínima—muy contadas franqueaban las anteriores barreras—pero en compensación había que leerlas tantas veces, pasarlas bajo la lupa, buscar micropuntos con el microscopio electrónico y afinar tanto el olfato que al volver a su casa por las noches se sentía agotado. Sólo atinaba a recalentarse una sopita, comer alguna fruta y ya se echaba a dormir con la satisfacción del deber cumplido. La que se inquietaba, eso sí, era su santa madre que trataba sin éxito de reencauzarlo por el buen camino. Le decía, aunque no fuera necesariamente cierto: Te llamó Lola, dice que está con las chicas en el bar, que te extrañan, te esperan. Pero Juan no quería saber nada de excesos: todas las distracciones podían hacerle perder la acuidad de sus sentidos y él los necesitaba alertas, agudos, atentos, afinados, para ser perfecto censor y detectar el engaño. La suya era una verdadera labor patria. Abnegada y sublime.

Su canasto de cartas condenadas pronto pasó a ser el más nutrido pero también el más sutil de todo el Departamento de Censura. Estaba a punto ya de sentirse orgulloso de sí mismo, estaba a punto de saber que por fin había encontrado su verdadera senda, cuando llegó a sus manos su propia carta dirigida a Mariana. Como es natural, la condenó sin asco. Como también es natural, no pudo impedir que lo fusilaran al alba, una víctima más de su devoción por el trabajo.

behind a simple "the weather's unsettled" or "prices continue to soar" the wavering hand of someone secretly scheming to overthrow the Government.

His zeal brought him swift promotion. We don't know if this made him happy. Very few letters reached him in Section B—only a handful passed the other hurdles—so he read them over and over again, passed them under a magnifying glass, searched for microdots with an electron microscope, and tuned his sense of smell so that he was beat by the time he made it home. He'd barely manage to warm up his soup, eat some fruit, and fall into bed, satisfied with having done his duty. Only his darling mother worried, but she couldn't get him back on the right track. She'd say, though it wasn't always true: Lola called, she's at the bar with the girls, they miss you, they're waiting for you. Or else she'd leave a bottle of red wine on the table. But Juan wouldn't indulge: any distraction could make him lose his edge and the perfect censor had to be alert, keen, attentive, and sharp to nab cheats. He had a truly patriotic task, both self-sacrificing and uplifting.

His basket for censored letters became the best fed as well as the most cunning in the whole *Censorship Division*. He was about to congratulate himself for having finally discovered his true mission, when his letter to Mariana reached his hands. Naturally, he censored it without regret. And just as naturally, he couldn't stop them from executing him the following morning, one more victim of his devotion to his work.

tr. David Unger

LA HISTORIA DE PAPITO

Una pared delgada nos ha separado siempre, por fin sonó la hora de que la pared nos una.

En el ascensor no solía dar un cinco por él, ni en el largo pasillo hasta llegar a nuestras respectivas puertas. Él era esmirriado, cargaba toda la trivialidad de la estación Retiro hasta dentro de la casa: un humo de tren que empañaba los espejos de la entrada, algunos gritos pegados al oído que lo hacían sordo a mis palabras corteses: lindo día, ¿no? O bien: parece que tendremos lluvia. O: este ascensor, cada día más asmático...

Pocas veces él contestaba sí, no, indiscriminadamente, y yo sólo podía barajar los monosílabos y ubicarlos donde más me gustara. De él prefería esa libertad que me daba para organizar nuestros humildes diálogos según mi propia lógica.

(Otra cosa de él no podía gustarme hasta esta noche: sus espaldas caídas, su cara gris sin cara, sus trajes arrugados, su juventud tan poco transparente.) (Esta noche, sin embargo, hubiera debido estirar una mano a través de la pared y obligarlo de una vez por todas a aceptar nuestro encuentro.)

Al fin y al cabo fue culpa de él el estruendo que acabó con mi sueño. Y yo —Julio— creí que era a mi puerta que llamaban y daban de patadas y que abrí hijo e'puta me estaba destinado.

PAPITO'S STORY

A thin wall has always separated us. Now the time has come for the wall to unite us.

I had never paid much attention to him in the elevator, nor when we walked down the long hall leading to our respective apartments. He was self-absorbed, lugging along with him all the trivialities of the daily commute on the train—smoke that steamed up the mirrors of the entry hall, shouted conversations that stuck in his ears and made him deaf to my polite chit-chat: Pretty day, isn't it. Or more likely: Looks like rain. Or: This elevator, it gets more rickety every day.

A few times, he answered—Yes, no, indiscriminately. And I shuffled those monosyllables of his and put them where I pleased. I guess I liked the freedom he gave me to organize our little dialogues according to my own logic.

There are things about him I could not appreciate until tonight: his hunched shoulders, that gray face barely translucent, his wrinkled suits, his waning youth. (Yet tonight I should have put my hand through the wall and made him accept our bond once and for all.)

In the end, he was the one to blame for the uproar that woke me up. And I—Julio—thought they were banging and kicking on my door, and that Open-up-you-son-of-a-bitch was addressed to me. What did the police want with me, I asked

Qué tengo yo que ver con policífas, me dije medio dormido palpándome de armas a lo largo y lo ancho del pijama.

Tiramos la puerta abajo, gritaban. Entregate que tenemos rodeada la manzana. Y mi puerta impávida y supe que era al lado y él tan borradito, tan poquita cosa, ofreciéndome de golpe asistir a su instante de gloria y rebeldía.

No pude abrir mi puerta para verles la cara a los azules dopados por el odio. El odio de los que se creen justos es algo que está un paso más allá de la cordura y prefiere ignorarlo.

Me quedé por lo tanto con él de su lado del pasillo y pegué la oreja al tabique para saber si podía acompañarlo y no sé si me alegré al enterarme de que ya estaba acompañado. La voz de la mujer tenía el timbre agudo de la histeria:

—Entregate. Qué va a ser de mí. Entregate.

Y él, tan poquita cosa hasta entonces, ahora agrandado:

—No, no me entrego nada.

—Sí, entregate. Van a tirar la puerta abajo y me van a matar a mí. Nos van a matar a los dos.

—Vamos a joderlos. Nos matamos nosotros antes. Vení, matate conmigo.

—Estás loco, papito, no digas eso. Yo fui buena con vos. Sé bueno ahora conmigo, papito.

Empiezo a toser porque también a mi departamento están entrando los gases lacrimógenos. Corro a abrir la ventana aunque quisiera seguir con la oreja pegada al tabique y quedarme con vos, papito.

Abro la ventana. Es verdad que estás rodeado, papito: montones de policías y un carro de asalto. Todo para vos y vos tan solo.

—Hay una mujer conmigo, déjenla salir —grita papito—. Déjenla salir o empiezo a tirar. Estoy armado —grita papito—.

Bang, grita el revólver de papito para probar que está armado.

Y los canas:

myself half-asleep, searching all up and down my pajamas for a weapon.

We'll smash the door open, they shouted. Give up. We've got the whole block surrounded.

My door, unscathed. And I knew then that they were one apartment over, and that he, so blank, so forgettable, was now offering me his one moment of glory and rebellion.

I couldn't open my door to see the cops' faces, drugged with loathing. The loathing of those who believe they are right is one step beyond reason, and I'd rather not confront it.

So I remained there, and glued my ear to the wall to offer him my company, and I don't know if I was happy to discover that someone was with him already. The woman's voice had the sharp ring of hysteria:

"Give yourself up. What's going to happen to me? Give up."

And he, so forgettable up to now, now gaining stature:

"No. I won't give up."

"Yes. Give yourself up. They'll knock the door down and kill me. They'll kill us both."

"Fuck them. We'll kill ourselves first. Come on. Kill yourself with me."

"You're crazy, Papito. Don't say that. I was good to you. Be good to me now, Papito."

I start to cough, my apartment is filling with tear gas. I run to open a window, though I would like to stay with my ear pressed to the wall—stay with you, Papito.

I open the window. It's true, you're surrounded, Papito. Loads of police and an assault vehicle. All for you, and you so alone.

"There's a woman with me. Let her go," Papito shouts, "let her go or I'll shoot. I'm armed."

Bang! shouts the revolver to prove he is armed.

And the cops:

—Que salga la mujer. Haga salir a la mujer.

Crash, pum, sale la mujer.

No le dice chau papito, ni buena suerte, ni nada. Hay un ninaderío ahí dentro, chez papito... Hasta yo lo oigo y eso que suelo ser muy duro de oídos para lo que no resuene. Oigo el ninaderío que no incluye la respiración de papito, el terror de papito, nada. El terror de papito debe de ser inconmensurable y no me llega en efluvios, qué raro, como me llegan los gases que lo estarán ahogando.

Entréguese, gritan, patean, aúllan de furia. Entréguese. Contamos hasta tres y echamos la puerta abajo y entramos tirando.

Hasta tres, me digo, que poco recuento para la vida de un hombre. Padre, Hijo y Espiritusanto son tres y qué puede hacer papito con una trinidad tan sólo para él y en la que se le va la vida.

Uno, gritan los de afuera creyéndose magnánimos. Fuerza, papito, y él debe de estar corriendo en redondo por un departamento tan chico como el mío y en cada ventana se debe de topar con el ojo invisible de una mira telescópica.

Yo no enciendo las luces por si acaso. Pongo la cara contra la pared y ya estoy con vos, papito, dentro de tu pellejo. Dos, le gritan me gritan y él contesta: no insistan, si tratan de entrar me mato.

Yo casi no oí el tres. El tiro lo tapó todo y las corridas con pies de asombro y la puerta volteada y el silencio.

Un suicida ahí no más, papito, ¿qué me queda ahora a mí al alcance de la mano? Me queda sentarme en el piso con la cabeza sobre mis propias rodillas sin consuelo y esperar que el olor a pólvora se disipe y que tu dedo se afloje en el gatillo.

Tan solo, papito, y conmigo tan cerca.

Después de las carreras, una paz de suceso irremediable. Abrí mi puerta para asomar la nariz, la cabeza, todo el cuerpo, y pude escurrirme al departamento de al lado sin que nadie lo note.

"Let the woman go. Let her come out."

Crash, bang. The woman leaves.

She doesn't say, Bye-bye, Papito, or Good luck, or anything. There's a deafening nothingness in there, chez Papito. Even I can hear it, though it's hard to hear things that make no sound. I hear the nothingness and Papito's breathing isn't part of it, nor is his terror, nothing. Papito's terror must be immeasurable, though its waves don't reach me—how strange—as do those of the gas they are using to drown him.

Give up, they shout, kick, howl with fury. Give up. We'll count to three. Then we'll bust the door down and come in shooting.

To three, I say to myself, not much of a countdown for a man's life. Father, Son, and Holy Ghost, that's three, and what can Papito do with a trinity all to himself that ticks his life away?

One, they shout from outside, thinking themselves magnanimous. Be strong, Papito. And he must be running in circles in an apartment cramped as mine, at every window running into the invisible eye of a telescopic sight.

I don't turn on my lights, just in case. I put my cheek against the wall and I am with you, Papito, inside your skin.

Two, they shout at him at me and he answers: Don't try it. If you break in, I'll kill myself.

I almost didn't hear, three. The shot obliterated it and the astonished running feet and the splintering door and the silence.

A suicide right here, Papito. Now what's left for me? Just to sit on the floor with my head on my knees, hopeless, waiting for the smell of powder to vanish and your finger to loosen on the trigger.

So alone, Papito, and with me so nearby.

After all the scrambling, the calm following an irremediable act. I opened my door and poked my nose out, my head, my whole body, and I managed to sneak into the apartment next door without anybody noticing.

Papito poca cosa era un harapo tirado sobre el piso. Lo movieron un poco con el pie, lo cargaron sobre unas angarillas, lo taparon con una manta sucia y se fueron con él camino de la morgue.

Quedó un charco de sangre que había sido papito. Una mancha sublime del color de la vida.

Mi vecino era grande en esa mancha, era importante. Me agaché y le dije:

—Gríteme su nombre y no se inquiete. Puedo conseguirle un buen abogado.

Y no obtuve respuesta, como siempre.

Forgettable Papito little-nothing was a rag tossed on the floor. They nudged him a bit with their boots, trussed him on a stretcher, covered him with a dirty blanket, and headed for the morgue.

A puddle of blood remained that had once been Papito. A sublime stain, the color of life.

In that stain, my neighbor was great. He was important. I leaned down and said to him:

"Shout your name to me and don't be afraid. I can get you a good lawyer."

And I got no answer, as usual.

tr. Christopher Leland