return a physics book to the library. The student was Gerardo Strejilevich. My parents hastily informed the institution that their son had been kidnapped and had remained disappeared since 1977. Unfortunately, since the student himself had not returned, the book could not be returned either. But universities will not allow these crimes to remain unpunished. They kept searching for my brother to the very end, and the case was eventually turned over to the police. When I applied for reparations, I learned that certain crimes in my country are taken damned seriously.

My lawyer, after the usual struggle with this unbearable heaviness of being, succeeded in cleansing my brother's posthumous record.

12 November 2000

Dear Nora,

I spent the entire afternoon in different human rights offices before I finally found the documents. The problem is the following: Gerardo was under surveillance because of a police report indicating that he was accused of fraud and was to stand trial before Penal Judge Number 31. It's dated 16 December 1980, and this is a "problem" because, as you well know, he disappeared on 15 July 1977.

III

My name a climbing vine
got tangled
among syllables of death
DE SA PA RE CI DO
gone
name never more
my name.

Devoid of subject
how do I conjugate myself?
how do I roam
the alphabet of my tears?
I was eyes probing yesterdays
I was hands clutching shreds
I was feet slipping
on electric lines.

How do I pronounce myself?
I was flesh among speeches
without exit without traces
of where or why
or when or until when.

You will never be able to say it!
Never say yourself, I thought.
But you will write,
Yes, I will write
thousands of gs of rs of os
vicarious doodles
children of my mouth
whirlpools of desire
that once were names.

I will write
black whips to subdue
certain untamed capital letters
smothering my blood.
I will resist you will resist
with first name with last name
the shameless language
of oblivion.

Final chapter?

Don't forget to forget the forgetting.

—*Juan Gelman,* Unthinkable Tenderness

A woman who'd been reading my testimony, Circle of Love over Death, *called up to say that she'd like to get together so she could give me a hug. She seemed very moved, and added, "Let's do it before I finish your book, otherwise I might not have the nerve." We met one morning, and she wanted to talk about the book. I wanted to talk about the hug. "You wanted to hug me because you were touched," I said. "You felt so stirred that you urgently needed to embrace the person telling you all those things. I want you to know that this is the hug that we were denied. Over and above the pain, the torture, the mourning, all the evil that they wrought, they didn't let us have even that."*

I know a girl who was in the same death camp as her brother, at the very same time. She survived, her brother did not. As long as she lives she's going to ask herself, "Why didn't they grant us one final embrace?" I hope that question remains alive for generations to come.

I cannot cling to the past; I have to let it pour out, in an avalanche of scenes and voices. I'd like to let it escape so I can air out that corner where I have so ill-fittingly lodged it. I want it to have a more bearable existence. Therefore, while in Canada, I decide to see a psychologist.

I spend a long time in the waiting room looking through ads for holistic therapy and rehearsing speeches before I'm ushered into the office of a guy who is the living image of a sixties intellec-

tual: round, wire-rimmed glasses, curly hair, forty-something. The choice could not have been more fortuitous for the occasion, I think, as I smile at him for lack of words.

He asks the standard question: "What brings you here?" I answer with a summary description of my case, in starts and stops, fumbling about, with some gaps, some chronological leaps of Olympic proportions, emotional ups and downs, ambivalence and oversights. Without going into excessive detail, I sketch an outline so we can proceed. I speak looking inward and am unaware of his reaction until, at the close of a lengthy monologue, my eyes alight on his.

"Are you crying?" I ask, as if to convince myself.

Yes, the doctor is crying. He has to take off his glasses and dry his tears, which shamelessly smear his face.

"It's not that bad, doctor, don't worry," I manage to mumble as I move closer to him and attempt to stem the pitiful flow of saline liquid.

Thanks to my first-aid, he composes himself. He gives me an appointment for another day, but not waiting for his diagnosis, I declare myself cured.

High up in the sky / immortal flag / a warrior eagle / full of pride / soars in triumphant flight / a wing of blue / the color of the sky / a wing of blue / the color of the sea. . . .

Somewhere between amused and perplexed, I find myself intoning patriotic songs learned in school. It's one way to ease distress. Now it's me up there, flapping up in the sky, flying south. Another trick is to chew on my obsessions, as if telling myself secrets, in order never to betray them.

I would wish to be like secrets / never to betray.
—Rainer Maria Rilke

Betrayal is something akin to opening the window of a prison cell: everyone wants to do it, but it's the rare person who actually succeeds. Those were Céline's words, and he should have known what he was talking about since he did it. Betrayal is easy. The challenge lies in finding the opportunity.

I gave you the opportunity, Roberto, the eccentric publisher of philosophy journals with whom I watered my twenties so we could grow chairs and shelves and dreams and laughter. Betrayal is easy. It's enough to draw those tacky curtains sold at a time when the world was still rose-colored for us. In the semidarkness of maturity all cats are gray. Youthful ideals are much too shiny: they seem laminated, see-through now. Truth is murky, and the sooner you come to accept it, the sooner you can get on with business.

Money makes the world go 'round, the world go 'round . . .

Pity that we romantics, choked on the dimensions of our feelings and the volume of our emotions, should lose the measure of time. One must make haste. The only remedy for sadness is a fast read: a bird's-eye view, swifter than deception itself. It's not so hard; deception works at a leisurely pace, and watered only infrequently, it takes years to bloom. But it finally bears fruit, huge heavy fruit that falls from its own weight. Mine falls in the form of words that sound like tears against walls of silence.

You're Samsa

The walls of the apartment on Corrientes Street are made of silence, of bricks defiantly fighting off the dampness that corrodes them. Four missing people make for seven empty rooms in which dust and oblivion exist side by side. Wearied by so much

neglect, absences shroud themselves with the cobwebs that adorn mounds of objects. When they bolt and run down the endless corridor, I catch them in my room in Vancouver and twirl them about in the air. Moths that perish, crashing into the lightbulb of my insomnia, troubled for not having given you a chance.

But I did give you, Roberto, enough occasions to disappoint me. The fault lay with our glorious youth, or rather, with believing in it. Those twenties of ours, brimming with duets of laughter, liberally seasoned with extravagant meals on apple crates. Warm cushions embroidered with complicity. Such images cloud my vision, but as our figures dissolve, I'm able to see that the metamorphosis was already in progress. You are Gregor Samsa, Kafka's beetle, and you're not exactly in an early stage of metamorphosis.

12 January 1979

Dearest daughter,

Since you asked for news of Roberto, I'll tell you a story. This morning he came by to take me to lunch. While we were eating, I talked about how man is able to change matter with the aid of a mathematical formula, that is, by means of an idea derived from it.

He mentioned an idea of his for manufacturing envelopes in which letters would arrive sooner, and without any waste of paper. He was so absorbed in the topic that he lost track of time and had to rush off. He flew out, as usual, on the wings of his briefcase. He didn't wait for the bill.

Papa was mistaken, Roberto. You had it in you to wait. You waited for Shush and Sarita to die. Then you offered to take care of things, that is, to oversee the sale of the apartment. Our home was sold, and you flew out as usual, on the wings of your briefcase. Flights on stuffed briefcases stay low; such piles of bills don't let you soar.

Open sesame

High up in the sky . . . I've got to stop singing: the plane that's bringing me back to my own story stops in transit. It lands in Santiago, Chile: "52°F, clear skies." I'm walking past a window that reads "Passport Control" when a voice, far less friendly than the accent, stops me in my tracks:

"What are you doing in Chilean territory?"

The official throws the book at me, threatening me with regulations and the technical meaning of the word *transit,* which by definition excludes the act of going through passport control and entering a country.

How do I explain that I'm lost in memories of walls and metamorphoses? My reflexes save me: I whip my professional badge out of my purse, like an actor in one of those Hollywood series wields a weapon, swiftly and not without a touch of irony.

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The magic wand, the certificate of success, printed, of course, in an English designed to make bureaucratic eyes glitter. Open sesame. Unaware that my title of doctor is not the kind that cures, he reacts with a welcoming smile. Everything will be smoothed over without any glitches. "Follow me, doctor, no problem."

Fortunately, I'm no longer a lump that can be shredded with sharp and cutting statutes.

I let myself dissolve into the sticky magma of passengers who drift by, into the imprecise horizon of the landless. I go back to my assigned seat, in the assigned airplane, from the assigned country, and fill out the assigned customs form. But on takeoff I discover a disconcerting piece of information: today is not the seventeenth, my lucky number, not even the twenty-fifth, to which

my superstitious logic has assigned second place. I'm arriving on an unlucky date! Landing on the twenty-fourth is dreadful, an offense to my much tattered existential calendar. Even numbers ruin my complicity with dates, leaving me and the country out in the cold. So it comes as no surprise, after landing on solid ground, that telephones are out of order, that taxi drivers buzz around like flies, and that a pair of winter boots protect my feet from 86°F and 80 percent humidity. Blame it on the twenty-fourth.

On the phone a voice rattles off the refrain of the national folklore: "Imagine, I couldn't even file a complaint because they were all out of forms at the police station!" My legs go soft in a wordless collapse. Just give me but one firm spot on which to stand, and I won't rock the boat! A newspaper and magazine stall comes into view. To camouflage my thorough state of bewilderment, I stare intently at the merchandise. Let's see if I can still read Spanish.

> TODAY is the seventeenth anniversary of the military coup of 1976.

Either I can no longer read and my imagination is playing tricks on me or I do know how to read and, for the first time in my disconcerting life, the *milicos* are giving me an unintended satisfaction.

> HUMAN RIGHTS organizations are calling for an open-mike radio session to be held at the corner of Diagonal and 9 de Julio from 8:00 A.M. to 8:00 P.M.

The most auspicious of seventeenths! I savor the news:

> "THE COUP was an unavoidable act that had the support of practically all Argentine citizens, and little opposition except from subversive elements of society," stated the second president of the regime that began in 1976, Roberto Viola. Despite being found guilty of grave human rights violations and sentenced to 16 years in prison, cut short by the amnesty granted him and other military chiefs from that regime by President Menem, Viola affirmed that during the years known as "The Process" there was no governmental terrorism: the expression "institutionalized terrorism" simply does not fly.—*Clarín,* 24 March 1993

I'm shocked, not so much by the stern tone in which the uniformed voices speak as by the fact that they continue asserting themselves so smugly. Such an overbearing mode should have gone out of style. Of course, you never know with fashion. The times when each season featured just one or two distinctive colors are over; now anything goes, even khaki. Since I've just landed, I'm taken aback by this permissive style; let's hope I don't catch it and get used to it. Even though it would require years of training, it's an achievement that demands continual practice in order to be good at it. Among the people who gather around me at the newsstand I perceive nothing of the old rage, of that former simmer that words more subtle than these could easily have turned up to a boil twenty years before. They don't even bat an eye. But wait! A matron in her fifties is reaching absentmindedly for a copy of *Clarín*. The bill that she hands the clerk will give her access to the mischief of our teachers of semantics and to the exchange rate of the dollar, though that is not precisely a hot topic these days since lately the peso and the dollar float together like Siamese twins. I concentrate my hopes on the woman, expecting her blood to boil when she notices the headlines and reads over the article. Damn, was I wrong. The woman merely asks for change.

> IN ORDER TO BELONG to the Amnesiacs' Club, no special talent is necessary, not even any great lapse of memory, be it sponta-

neous or caused by blows, by the aging of the arteries, or by poor blood flow to the brain, because our point of departure is the fact that from the moment of birth we're all amnesiacs, particularly those who think they do remember.—*Peri Rossi, "El club de los amnésicos"*

Always Coca-Cola

We're not all amnesiacs. We, the so-called survivors, are going back today to the grounds of the Athletic Club. Long ago I thought I glimpsed the gate through a keyhole. There are no keyholes now, just this barrenness criss-crossed by roads. In the now empty lot the wind stirs up clouds of dust around a café with red-and-white market umbrellas that read "Always Coca-Cola." That makes sense: if there's always Coca-Cola, there will often be Athletic Clubs. Coca-Cola forever, an essential ingredient for Athletic Clubs. That sign is worth a whole volume of political economy, my feet are saying as they tread over clumps of impotence. An impotence that launches a string of rhetorical questions: Is it still the same space? If there are no stairs, no peepholes, no guards, if the walls are gone, if cells and corridors lie buried under the merciless whir of expressways, then is it still the same space?

"It used to be a club, and now it's become a road. Pretty symbolic, right? They demolished it and paved a road in its stead." A road paved over our bodies suspended in a space that's no longer ours.

But there's always a "but" after the full stop: as the hours go by, the here-and-now starts to belong to us. Subtle, telltale signs emerge, keys to a landscape that at first looks banal. A sign reads, "This is the site of the Athletic Club." People are writing on the neighborhood walls, "Murderers." They play music.

Compañeros / *We've come here today / to tell stories / because they never could / vanquish our memories. / It was twenty years ago / on a very dark night, / one 24th of March / that the dictatorship began.*

Amnesia-erasing hands labor, and the bricks begin to speak. The walls start to reflect white kerchiefs, spray-painted signs begin to demand justice. Even though it looks nothing like my yesterday, the place starts to make some sense.

I walk up and down the path taking pictures. I want to settle the score with this elusive landscape devoid of any points of reference by capturing angles, curves, and planes that might evoke a memory. I won't resign myself to not penetrating the geometry of my past; I'm intent on making a record of it, but I lose. What I mean is, I lose the camera. Literally and irreparably, out of carelessness or by dint of sheer clairvoyance, I lose the camera, and with it photos, frames, focus. I'm left in a fog of uncertainty that the sound of my footsteps cannot overcome. Objects are sometimes wiser than people. My camera has left me with nothing but my eyes.

What do you see?

I see, I see. What do you see? I see splashes of emerald green above the gray cement. The green climbs up a column, and I see green leaves with cloud-colored shadows. The columns hold up the highway, the one that was laid out in 1978 to airbrush the prison camp and the cattle prods. But names cannot be paved over, I tell myself, nor can souls. Names and souls have shapes that I can make out, the papier-mâché figures on the columns. I see the shape of time in exhausted wrinkles etched onto faces with India ink. The shape of pain on blindfolds over disappeared eyes. The shape of anger in tempera-painted mouths that refuse to speak. The shape of power in arms and fists upraised in styl-

ized gestures. The shape of life in eyes open to the beyond. A bouquet of sculpted foreheads and profiles sprouts new green growth that reaches up to the base of the highway above and quivers in the breeze. They are the untamed spaces of history.

It's the birthday of our second skin, almost two decades old, and we celebrate it here, at the ruins of the Athletic Club. The laws of memory and of life demand our presence. That's why it seems appropriate to fill this space with wine, hugs, photographs, music, and poetry. Splashes of green blot out all possible blackness, and the apathy of the dust, while the wind plays in our hands. Hands that build a bonfire, fed by printed faces, profiles, and names of torturers consumed behind lengths of taut rope. Strange rituals beckon to us. A witch hunt? No. This is a party that breaks into cheerful songs and gathers around a barbecue while a paper nightmare goes up in flames.

I once ran into Julián the Turk on the street. He was strolling downtown with a kid on his shoulders. Perhaps for that reason I didn't feel like punching him. "Hi Tito," he called out to me. He dug one hand into his pocket, pulled out a pack of subway tokens, and said, "I'm really broke, man. Look here, I'm selling tokens to put some food on the table." I replied, "Do you remember what I told you once in the hellhole? You're like a condom, thoroughly disposable." He went on: "With all you know, you must've found yourself a pretty good job somewhere." I told him no, but that I was managing fine without his help. "I can refer you to some important people. You can say I sent you," he persisted. Then I asked him whether I should say that Julio Simón—his real name—or Julián the Turk sent me. "Julio Simón, you motherfucker, Julio Simón."

A path leads to the stage where emotions and festivities ebb and flow. A microphone says my name, not my code number but my name. And out of that name springs a voice that resonates despite myself, a voice that stands in front of me determined to speak its own text.

A CERTAIN PERVERSE MAGIC turns the key to the front door. Steps rush in. Three pairs of shoes practice a disjointed stomp on the floor, the clothes, the books, an arm, a hip, an ankle, a hand. My body.

I can almost touch people's eyes as they stare at me, stunned by this voice of mine that repeats

STEP ON A CRACK, break your mother's back

I turn the page; the paper rustles between my fingers. Am I the one who's reading and closing a circle? I'm a tightrope walker trying to keep my balance between present and past, remembrance and fiction:

THEY'RE TAKING me away, they're taking me away!

The secret road between my house and the Athletic Club becomes public, the floodgates open, words spill out. Voices from the past take over my body. I am, we are the poem:

murdered
my brother her son his grandson
her mother his girlfriend her aunt
her grandfather his friend his cousin her neighbor
ours yours us
all of us
injected with emptiness.
We lost a version of who we were
and rewrite ourselves in order to survive.

Words written so my voice can pronounce them here, in this place that is neither dust nor cell but a chorus of voices resisting armed monologues that turned so much life into a single, numberless death.

Glossary

AMIA. The Asociación Mutual Israelita Argentina (Jewish Mutual Aid Association of Argentina). Housed in a building that was subsequently bombed in 1990, resulting in the loss of eighty-six lives. State security forces have been accused of actively participating in this attack.

Club Atlético (Athletic Club). Name given to one of the five largest concentration camps. The others were Vesubio and Campo de Mayo outside Buenos Aires, La Perla in Córdoba, and the ESMA in Buenos Aires itself. Approximately 340 such clandestine prisons, which formed the cornerstone of the military regime, were set up around the country. But even police headquarters were used as torture and illegal detention centers at the time. Camps functioned in rural schools, old tramway warehouses, automobile repair shops, state offices, old provincial radio stations, motels under construction—and the list goes on. Numbers, therefore, cannot give the actual picture of the whole machinery of death.

The Club Atlético was located near the presidential palace. Its official name was Central Antisubversiva (Anti-Subversive Center). The acronym, CA, gave rise to the nickname by which it was commonly known (Andersen, *Dossier Secreto*). Survivors are currently negotiating support for excavations that will uncover the basement of the concentration camp. The proposal is to turn the spot into an open memorial to the victims of genocide.

CONADEP. The Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (National Commission on Disappeared Persons), established on 15 December 1983 by the first democratically elected government after the dictatorship. Its mandate was to "carry on active investigations in order to clarify the events relating to the forced disappearance of people within the country and to discover their eventual fate and whereabouts, as well as any other information relevant to what happened to them." It was also to "receive formal accusations and proof pertaining to these events,

which would then be handed over to the courts if it were found that criminal activity was involved" *(Nunca Más)*. The writer Ernesto Sábato was elected president of the commission. Its final report, *Nunca Más: Never Again*, was based on a selection and analysis of the testimony it gathered.

DAIA. The Delegación de Asociaciones Israelitas Argentinas (Delegation of Jewish Associations of Argentina). Accused of remaining silent during the disappearance of Jewish victims. The Jewish population in Argentina comprises 250,000 out of 34 million, or .735 percent, but it accounted for about 12 percent of the disappeared. Of course, percentages and figures in these cases are approximations.

Dirty War. An expression the Junta used to justify its methods. During the "Dirty War" the United States provided for military training and assistance. Martin Andersen states in *Dossier Secreto* that "the [United States] oriented the Argentine military professionally . . . , exposing them to American technology and methods. The aid offered the chance for improved communication with the Argentine armed forces, which had always influenced events in their country and had now become the dominant sector. This would promote and protect American interests and help ensure that matters of concern to the United States would get a hearing. It was business as usual at Henry Kissinger's State Department" (249).

ESMA. The Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (School of Navy Mechanics), originally the training center for lower-level officers of the Argentine Navy. Though it was under naval command, other military groups, including the Federal Police and the national prison authority, were also active there. The ESMA began to be used as a covert prison and torture center in May 1976. It was there that intelligence forces planned kidnapping operations, imprisoned those who were brought in, carried out interrogations under torture, and made decisions as to who was to be "transferred." "Transfers" were mass murders in which victims—drugged, but still conscious—were loaded onto military aircraft and then dumped out over the Atlantic Ocean. The Menem government wanted to have the center torn down and replaced with a park and a monument to national unity and reconciliation, a plan adamantly opposed by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who believe the building should be left intact as a testament to all who disappeared and died there.

Madres de Plaza de Mayo. Organization of mothers of the disappeared that still demands the return of their children and information about what happened to them. For the past quarter-century, from 30 April 1976 until today (although they are divided now into two separate groups), the Madres have met and marched every Thursday afternoon in the Plaza de Mayo, the main square of Buenos Aires and the financial, political, and religious hub of the city. The Junta and the media tried to dismiss them as *locas* (madwomen) during the time of the dictatorship.

Milicos. Pejorative nickname used to refer to military personnel.

Montoneros. A youth organization that formed an incipient guerrilla movement in 1968–69 and then burst onto the Argentine political scene in 1970, gaining increasing popular support. It was the armed wing of the Peronist Youth Movement (Juventud Peronista), and its members identified with the ideals of grass-roots resistance as personified by Eva Perón. They pointed to the revolutionary changes Juan Perón made during the time he ruled with Evita, representing a vision that differed from those of other left-wing organizations of the time.

NN: No name. From the Latin *non nominatus*. Corpses of thousands of *desaparecidos* were buried in mass graves labeled "NN" for anonymity.

El Proceso (The Process). The dictatorship described itself as the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional (Process for National Reorganization). This reorganization was based on the idea that a minority considered by the dictatorship to be subversive and non-Argentine because its ideals clashed with those of Western, Christian traditions had to be expelled from the social body.

Task Forces. Secret detention centers were run by the military, the police, and the Gendarmería (armed border police in rural areas). However, to ensure their clandestine functioning, it was essential to restrict the number of people involved. Consequently, antisubversive operations were placed in the hands of special task forces.

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