



a single  
numberless

# DEATH

NORA  
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translated from the Spanish by Cristina de la Torre with the collaboration of the author

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*When they stole my name  
I was one I was hundreds I was thousands  
I was no one.  
NN was my face stripped  
of gesture of sight of voice.*

*My numbered nakedness walked  
in line without eyes without I's  
with them alone  
my alphabet bled dry  
by guttural chains  
by moans citizens of a country  
without initials.*

*Eyelid and blindfold  
my horizon  
only silence and echo  
iron bars and night  
only a wall with no mirror  
to give a wrinkle  
a grimace a perhaps.*

*Nothing but dead end.*

**We shall not permit death to run rampant in Argentina.**

—Admiral Emilio Massera, 1976

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'm the trophy of the day. A hide with hollow head, eyes of glass. The make-believe hunters step on me. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

This ritual exorcises my sins inside their temple: a green Ford Falcon with no license plates speeding through red lights up the wrong side of Corrientes Street. No one bats an eye. It's business as usual.

But it's not every day (or is it?) that the laws of gravity are broken. It's not every day that you open the door and four rooms are ripped apart by a cyclone that shatters the past and yanks the hands off the clock. It's not every day that mirrors crack and costumes unravel. It's not every day that you try to escape and the clock has moved, the door is unhinged, the window stuck, and cornered you cry through minutes that do not tick away. It's not every day that you stumble and fall hands behind your back, trapped in a night that tosses about shreds of daily life. Dizzy you whirl in a vortex of scraps of yesterdays and nows crushed by orders and decrees. You get lost amid chairs overturned, drawers emptied, suitcases torn open, colors blanched out, maps slashed, roads severed. You barely make out the echoes reverberating "You thought you could escape, bitch!" as an enormous mouth devours you. Familiar voices perhaps whisper, "She hasn't done

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anything, neither has he." But you are here, on this side, in this precarious body: soles tattooed on your skin, boots on your back, a gun at the nape of your neck.

"On your feet!" and you stand up, meek, confused, stunned, defeated, and you shriek, "They're taking me away, they're taking me away!" as claws of steel dig into your flesh. Shoved with impunity into the elevator at two in the afternoon, dragged out of the building, space vanishing under your feet. On the sidewalk you kick and scream against a nameless fate in some mass grave.

I hurl my name with every last fiber—with lungs, with guts, with legs, with arms, with rage. My name flails wildly on the edge of defeat. The animal trainers order me to jump from the high platform into the void. They push me. I land on the floor of a car. Blows rain on me: "Take that for screaming in Jewish, and this for kicking." And this and this.

"You Yid piece of shit, we're gonna make soap out of you." I'm a toy to be broken. *Step on a crack, break your mother's back.*

**Keep in mind that I have killed three or four people with my own hands.**—Admiral Emilio Massera

*A, B, C, D,  
Let's pray, playmates, agree.  
E, F, and G,  
Well, so shall it be.  
J, K, and L,  
In peace we wish to dwell.*

A chorus of voices against a background splotted with brilliant colors. Green, the hedge that separates my house from the neighbors'; white, the garden flagstones on which *the choo-choo train keeps on rollin' and rollin'*; red, the courtyard tiles, which sway as I swing; brown, the floor that stretches across the bedrooms. In the kitchen a silver smudge, the kettle; in the bath-

room a shimmering surface, the mirror for making faces; in my parents' bedroom the voile curtains, my party dresses; in our room the lamp, a globe round as *The Red Balloon*, a film we saw in school. The red balloon follows the boy everywhere, but mine doesn't know how to fly and just waits for me on the ceiling. It's well-behaved and very pretty, with leaves painted green and a butterfly perched in the middle. I always fall asleep counting the little leaves on my side. My brother has fewer because he doesn't take care of them. Tonight the balloon appears even rounder because our beds have been pushed together. Mama and Papa have gone out, leaving our mattresses side by side: our bed looks really big, just like theirs. We also have permission to watch TV until late if, and only if, we're good.

Gerardo has chosen the program. He always gets his way because I'm younger. He's watching a fight: mounds of tense muscles tearing into each other, blows flying back and forth. I'm scared, and he takes advantage of this to tease me. He stands there making faces: he pulls out his cheek with one hand, pushes up his nose with the other, sticks out his tongue, and leaps to the chase. If I hide under the sheets, he turns out the lights and lunges to devour me. If I try to escape, he blocks the way. I yell, I hit, I push until I break free and run. I run out the front door. I run away to anywhere.

The dark, empty lots don't scare me. I get as far as the cemetery without catching sight of any ghosts. I rush across the street and knock on a door. A pair of arms lifts me up. When I realize what I've just done my legs begin to quiver. The grown-ups fuss over me, and I smile, safe, high up in their arms. I twirl round and round, endlessly, like the butterfly on my globe lamp.

"I fooled you, I fooled you, nani nani boo boo." I left you all alone, and now it's you who's going to be scared to death. You're gonna have an asthma attack. *Good night / Sleep well / Thank you /*

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*Same to you / You're welcome / Good night.* Tonight no one's gonna answer because I get to sleep with them.

Gerardo bothering his little sister, Gerardito lifting her onto his shoulders, Nora upset because he pulls her hair, Norita giggling when he tickles her.

"Shhhush! Be quiet or we'll get a scolding!"

Cat and dog chasing 'round the yard, hiding under the porch, scuffling all over again.

*Bring the knife / ring the bell / when you die / you'll go to hell.*

Twenty years later, in 1977, the country is different. Our house has changed too. Black, the balcony railing, my mutilated garden; gray, the half-closed shutters, shadows of imaginary trees; brown, the floor that stretches across the apartment; white, the door-frame, our final stage set.

"Look out the window and check to see if I'm being followed," you say, carefully holding the words by the edges to keep them lighthearted.

"What's the use? Here we're living under a dictatorship, and you play hide-and-seek with the bogeyman."

You get angry and leave. I look out to see if they're following you. I see no one. Nor do I see you again.

**In order for Argentina to achieve internal security, as many people as necessary will have to die.**—General Jorge Rafael

Videla, head of the military junta, 10 October 1975

I saw her today at the Plaza Dorrego flea market, among pigeons, tango dancers and accordions, little toy musicians forged out of old forks and spoons, phonographs, antique coins, sheets embroidered by great-great-grandmothers, old stamps, and tourists. Right next to the well covered with small picture frames containing advice for parents, she sits surrounded by her ever-present paper flowers, wearing sandals and a hat adorned with petals in

reds, lilacs, yellows, blues, and greens. The spectrum of her many years settled at the very center of this Sunday.

"If you don't tell me they're pretty, you'll have to pay a toll," she chides an audience that, eager for endearments, photographs her as if she were some kind of celebrity. "When I was a teacher, I didn't give a hoot for principals, inspectors, report cards, bells, anything institutional. I was always rebelling against all the silly rules, against the whole system." She flashes her broad smile, rearranges wisps of hair, and adds, "Now I wear a flowered hat and they accept me, even if I'm eccentric, which only goes to show how stupid this society really is."

During geography lessons she never hung up the maps. Instead, she spread them on the floor so the whole class could walk on them. "We went to Europe together, we bundled up for the South Pole, we lay in the Brazilian sun. Those kids got to know the world with me."

Teacher and sweet little old lady. Her flowers, she warns us, are for seducing men. "Just give some to the one you like, sit back, and wait. It never fails."

That's how she got herself a lover, since she's never been married. The only ones who get to hear her story are the privileged few who, like me, arrive at her house without paying the toll. In her bedroom, framed by the curving branches of twining floral arrangements, I spot the picture of her beloved, his aquiline nose under the inevitable military cap. It is the ex-Commander-in-Chief himself, General Jorge Rafael Videla.

"He offered me several positions, but I refused them all. I'm not an opportunist, like those madwomen in the Plaza de Mayo, those *locas* who go around making demands. They want to become famous on account of a few missing agitators. There weren't that many, you know, and besides they were all guerrillas." She has it straight from the horse's mouth, General Videla,



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whom she loved for twenty-five fleeting and glorious years. "He knew nothing of the murders; he was betrayed by his own men. He told me so himself when I visited him in jail."

I picture them embracing under embroidered sheets, the military cap—as pure and pristine as his ideas—on the night table, the very dawn when Gerardo was plucked from his bed for subversive activities.

HE IS NOT, in essence, a political man. He will very likely carry out his duties in the same style that has characterized his leadership in the Army: a low profile, carefully measured steps, a moderate approach, nothing rash.—*La Opinión*, 19 March 1976

**We conduct our operations between one and four in the morning, when the subversives are asleep.**—General Acdel Vilas

Gerardo is taking part in a relay race for first graders. The spectators are clapping. On your marks, get set, . . . go!

Gerardito sprints to the front of the pack. Suddenly he stops, turns his head 180 degrees, grins, and waves: Mama is there. He takes off again at top speed but comes in last. He bursts into tears.

Gerardo is in high school but still does not wear long pants. He's a year ahead of his classmates.

Gerardito wants to be an orchestra conductor, but his parents convince him otherwise.

Gerardito is a troublemaker and always gets caught.

Gerardo is smart but slacks off.

Gerardo changes schools after being expelled. He has more demerits than hairs on his head.

Gerardo has knee surgery to avoid the draft.

Gerardo goes to college. He does not have a job.

Gerardo speaks out at political rallies at that damned university.

Gerardito has a girlfriend and sneaks her into the house to spend the night.

Gerardo churns out political fliers on Papa's typewriter. Gerardito is fun, clever, friendly, and a real daredevil.

Gerardo writes too much:

In our country there is an orchestra composed of:

The Great Orchestrator: Mr. Bourgeois.

Conductor: John D. Repressor.

Musicians: field and factory workers, with special appearances by some middle-class players.

The music, composed in Buenos Aires, is divided into three movements:

economic (imperialism vivace)

social (jailhouse andante with molto state of siege)

political (fugue in fraud major)

Gerardo is being watched. He does not sleep at home.

Gerardo supports violence from below and challenges violence from above.

Gerardo lives in fear because he's being followed.

Gerardo reflects:

Suddenly it's clear to you: a flash of awareness that you're not forever. As if they'd casually taken a chunk out of you and then scornfully warned you, "Watch out, kid," hinting that like it or not, slowly but surely, they'd continue chipping away at you until there was nothing left but ashes.

Gerardo almost certainly never killed and certainly never kidnapped anyone.

Gerardo has almost certainly been kidnapped and is almost certainly dead.

**I never heard from him again.**—Nora Strejilevich, *Nunca Más*

*Milicos / we have no fear / what did you do / with the ones who disappeared?*

In 1984 the freshly restored democracy is greeted with waves of chants, slogans, pleas, and demands that flood the streets and pierce the darkness, slicing it into infinite planes of sound.

*No mistakes and no excess / you're murderers / all milicos / in the Process . . .*

Chants fill the void—that concept you could never get me to understand. And now I have nothing to give to you, who so often spoke to me of lines and points in the space-time continuum, not a plane, a vector, a line, not even a grave. I fill the void with voices, which at least distract me from so much blood, with letters that throb to the touch. I can write only vowels and consonants that barely invoke you. Words, only words remain. Your name is bodiless, fleshless, your name is weightless, your name is remorseless—your name.

I spot the corner where marchers are gathering, but before I can take a step you cut in front of me. I bump into your first name, into our last name scrawled across a shameless strip of white cloth. Your black letters sting my memory, and my legs take on a will of their own. I stand there, rooted before your one-dimensional scream.

*Bring the knife / ring the bell / when you die / you'll go to hell.*  
My ragged guilt gets entangled in these rhymes.

Tears elude you, hover about you. I need to get a window on this vast truth. I seek a perspective, a frame to hold up my burden. Nothingness is as difficult to grasp as the principle of uncertainty.

*Return them alive and punish the guilty . . .* Chills run down my spine and I'm unable to join the chorus of voices. Silently, I register the words: *In some woods of northern lands / the weather*

*was icy frost / let's just send the milicos out there / and have them all get lost.*

There's a clatter of cymbals and drums. Graciela is at your side, your ethereal girlfriend, who floated to the swaying of her straight hair and tiptoed down the hall of our house in her pajamas. Your strategy for not getting caught, so carefully planned, disintegrated before the family banner of authority. The verdict was swift: banished from the house for a week, exiled for disobedience. In a few hours the sentence was reduced to a mild injunction against bringing her back.

Graciela's block letters are no longer as timid as in those early days. It seems that time—I was going to say life—has made her defiant, even bold. Now the letters are every bit as big as yours. But her last name, voluptuous and graceful, is better than yours at catching the eye: Barroca. It sounds like musical scales, brush strokes, poetry. Like a tragically beautiful destiny. A first-rate last name—her military legacy.

Yours, on the other hand, is thoroughly second-rate: an interminable Jewish name, one of those tongue twisters that drive the locals right up the wall. A mark of difference, in any case, and not of the best kind. It carries with it a pathetic onus exposed by a shift in the wind.

No wonder the members of the antsubversive unit seem so irritated with the former Navy man, Barroca, as they wait for Graciela in the dining room of her house.

"Why on earth did you allow your daughter to get mixed up with a Jew?"

Wrong premise: he had not allowed her. Everything had happened without his consent, much like this forced entry. His words were no longer taken as orders by anyone. He was finished. Even his military sixth sense could not detect that the commando group surrounding his house was not a guerrilla unit.

"Open the door or we'll blow up the house!" They're well

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aware that the owner is a minor officer, retired from the Navy. Therefore, with all due respect, they order him to come out, hands up.

*We opened the door and asked the men to identify themselves, to no avail. We had no choice but to come out with our hands up. That's when I saw that the windows in the back were smashed. Aside from those initial damages, they had planted explosives along the front of the house and threatened to blow it all up if the family did not comply.*

Poodle in arms, hair standing on end, heart skipping. A towel over the parrot's cage so it won't screech. At dusk the prey comes to the front door.

*The men were all in civilian clothes. There were eight of them, armed with automatic weapons, hand grenades, and handcuffs. My youngest daughter and I were blindfolded, put in different rooms, and interrogated at length about the habits of the whole family. They were looking for our daughter Graciela and presumed our house was a hideout for terrorists. She had gone to study for a test with a friend and returned home at 10 P.M. At one in the morning, after painstakingly searching the house, the man in charge approached my husband to inform him that they were taking her away for further questioning by a captain. They had found nothing. Still, she did belong to a Peronist student organization, a group founded by a career military man, Juan Domingo Perón himself. So what could they accuse her of?*

A swarm of machine guns guides her to the Ford Falcon without license plates. The family is advised not to go to the police with reports that would harm the officer's reputation. In a few days everything will be back to normal. Needless to say, unfortunate accidents do sometimes happen during these operations in totally unpredictable ways and, of course, against the wishes of the personnel involved.

*My husband filed a writ of habeas corpus, reported the kidnapping to the police (who informed him that they had explicit orders from the Army not to intervene), and went to the Ministry of the Interior dozens of times until he gave up, feeling that he was just being strung along.*

CASE 754. It has not been proven conclusively that Graciela Barroca was taken from her residence on ——— Street in the city of Buenos Aires and stripped of her freedom on 15 July 1977.

There were no eyewitnesses to the event, nor was the woman in question seen in any detention center thereafter. All we have on the case is the original report, given at the time of filing the writ of habeas corpus, but said report remains uncorroborated by any tangible evidence.—*La sentencia*

Your last name, Gerardo, seems to take up more and more space. An ever-expanding space that cannot be brought to order without generating entropy, as you would say. I am just now beginning to understand—the military, in their efforts to control chaos, are only deepening the disorder of the universe. Chaos control is carried out in accordance with a clearly stated doctrine and very systematic methods: dissidents are selected and removed from the social fabric. Preventive medicine. It is applied to me too, and it works.

**That day, 16 July 1977, after searching the whole house and removing books and papers . . . they took Nora.**—*Nunca Más*

The ride from my neighborhood to the death camp, the so-called Athletic Club, takes about fifteen minutes on Saturdays, when there's little traffic. The distance gets covered in a flash because the driver, a veteran champion of kidnap joyrides, floors it to 100 mph. When the tires roll over dirt, I realize we're here, in the only existing glacial circle of hell.