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A Short Story

The sleepless one and the sad one are exhausted. They are passengers in transit in Albuquerque. They've traveled more than 12 hours; they've gotten on and off and changed planes and taxis and they've struggled with the language and it's been hell trying to make themselves understood (the intensive English classes had been worthless) and now they're waiting to board a bus that will take them to Santa Fe. They're finally on vacation. This is the first time they've crossed the Andes and left Chile. And the first time they've flown. The sad one suffered from vertigo the whole way and kept thinking throughout the entire flight that she was an angel from heaven. She told this to the sleepless one, who distractedly asked her what she'd said. The sad decided not to insist, not to interrupt the momentary joy of the sleepless one and to let the flight continue its rhythmic, gentle swaying toward Albuquerque.

But that was in the morning. Now it's midday and they're in Albuquerque and a guard is telling them that the tickets can't be bought here, that they have to get them at another station, the Greyhound bus station, two blocks away. Since their suitcases are heavy, they decide that one only one should go and purchase the tickets. The sad one stays behind. She looks around her: how ugly this place seems, how disappointing it is to be in a foreign country. She sits down on the first bench she sees. She's bored. She looks around again. She tries reading the billboards but doesn't really get the message. A few minutes pass and she finds herself conversing, or attempting to converse, with a man who has sat down near her. Her English is frankly lamentable. Listen to her. She wants to light a cigarette and she says "could you give me fire, please?" She sounds like a Mexican movie. The man realizes she is a foreigner and is delighted. "Of course," he says with excessive friendliness. "Where are you from?" they ask one another. "Chile," she answers. "Mexico," he says. "*Salud, amiga!*" he exclaims, in perfect Spanish, while he lights her cigarette. "*Salud!*" she answers in return, forcing herself to sound cheerful while she looks at him more closely. Now she notices that he is not alone. He's accompanied by a disastrous little boy in tears and a woman with a blank gaze. They are surrounded by packages, mostly plastic bags, not a single suitcase. It dawns upon the sad one that the couple is very poor. The man tells her they are returning to Tijuana after eight difficult months, that they didn't make their fortune in the US, that in fact, they haven't made their fortune in life. The vehicle taking them back to Mexico doesn't pass until 7 at night. It's 12:30 now. They're exhausted and distressed. The child is so hungry he could eat a horse, that's why he's crying so hard. The man wants to go buy some food but he has a problem: his wife is blind and he can't leave her alone with the packages. "Do you have money?" asks the sad one. "A bit," the man says, reservedly. Then he jokes "*Un poquitito*. A little, little bit." The sad one doesn't quite get it but something, she's not quite sure what, moves her. All of a sudden, she feels so sorry, so doleful, that she's on the verge of tears. But she controls herself and tells him not to worry, go quickly while I take care of your wife and your packages. The man

thanks her, he calls her an angel from heaven. The sad one is touched, embarrassed, she even blushes. But the man's already grabbed his son by the hand and is running down the street.

The sad one and the sightless one are alone. Multiple conversations surround them, conversations unintelligible to both. In Spanish, the sad one asks the sightless one if she likes this country. The sightless one says that, since she can't see it, she doesn't know if she likes it or not, but to begin with, she hates the place. "Oh," says the sad one, and drops the subject. The sad one is bored again. She lights another cigarette, smoking like an anxious prisoner. Now it's the sightless one who talks. "And you?" she asks. "And me what?" the sad one answers. "Do you like this country?" The sad one doesn't know what to answer. She's only been in this foreign place for a few hours, not enough time to form an opinion. She's about to improvise an answer when she sees the sleepless one hurrying back. A few seconds later and she's at the bench. They have to go right away, she announces, or else they'll miss the only bus to Santa Fe. The sad one explains the situation to the sleepless one, who asks sarcastically if she wants to spend the first night of their vacation in Albuquerque. The sad one gives in and they explain the situation to the sightless one, who bursts into tears out of desperation. The idea of being left alone there puts her in a panic. She's afraid she'll be robbed of all her belongings and never notice. Between the sobs, they pick out the murmured phrase: "I detest this place, I detest it, I detest it." They spend the next four minutes consoling the sightless one and, with difficulty, calm her down. The sleepless one has an idea: tie the bags together with a string and attach their suitcase keys to the end of it. That way, she explains, if the keys are jostled, they'll jangle like a bell. They give the string to the sightless one to hold like the reins to a horse and head off in a hurry. The sightless one smile and sobs at the same time. They can't tell if she's upset or surprised, but they don't stop to find out.

As they leave the station, the sad one catches a glimpse of the man in the doorway of a bar. He's devouring a bag of potato chips like a hungry dog, while the boy has buried his face into a double cone of chocolate ice cream. The sad one feels the tears stream from her eyes. But the sleepless one says don't stop, hurry up. If they don't run, they'll miss the bus that will take them, finally, to Santa Fe. The sad one thinks she hears the persistent jingling of a little bell. How that sound perturbs her. She doesn't know if it's her piteous imagination or the sightless one seeking help. No, it can't be her, she says, trying to convince herself. But the sound persists. To keep from hearing it, she starts humming tunelessly to herself, a *bolero*, or even better, a *tango*, until she drowns it out. Now they are in the Greyhound station. The sad one would rather be at an airport, about to board a plane. The sad one suddenly feels like an angel from heaven. She's about to say so when she looks at the sleepless one, who seems so exhausted, with such dark rings under her eyes, that she decides not to break the precarious silence and instead, says nothing, benevolent, prudent, a bit sad.

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The Furious Wind of Time

I don't know whether the initial anecdote in this essay demonstrates a change in the cultural life of my country. I chose it because it describes a very unsettling as well as a fundamentally literary experience, and a political one as well.

The story began when I was writing my third novel. It was the beginning of the process in which one thinks and thinks schizophrenically, invents character profiles, creates situations and stories and writes more in the mind than on paper. Some minimal signs were circling in my thoughts: a turbulent relationship between a father and a daughter, a dark external context, the pressure of something atrocious remembered from the past, death. Each night I sat down at my computer and typed whatever came to me. The setting was still not precise, but it would come. What I did, essentially, was to convoke this place while I exercised my fiction muscle.

My apartment is small and there is a window where I keep my computer, directly in front of the lobby. I remember that there was a night watchman around this time that distracted me involuntarily. He was maybe sixty years old, fat, with skin blemishes from severe psoriasis and a cigarette permanently installed at the corner of his mouth (several times I saw him light a second cigarette before he'd even put out the first). The night watchman often had uncontrollable coughing fits that almost made him lose his breath, and frequently drew me away from the screen. It was horrible to listen to. The attacks lasted several minutes. A few times I even thought of calling an ambulance. But never did it because something about him disturbed me, paralyzed me somehow. So I only greeted him formally when I came in or out, maintaining a relative distance from him. He always left me with the impression that he wanted to talk, wanted to tell me something more than just, *hasta luego, señorita*.

One night it happened. I had gone out to buy a few beers at the liquor store on the corner and was ready for another session in front of the computer, assembling the primary scaffolding of the novel. Halfway on my way into the building the night watchman crossed in front of me and opened his mouth:

-Going to drink a little beer, he said with a smile creeping out of the corner where, the cigarette was balanced.

-Yes, a little beer, I got it together to respond, and tried to keep on walking. But it was impossible. The man got serious and began to explain himself without a second of vacillation.

-I can't drink alcohol because I take very strong medication. I take strong medication because I have psoriasis. I have psoriasis because my nerves are destroyed. My nerves are destroyed because my mind doesn't rest, my mind doesn't rest because I was a security agent. I was a security agent because I had no other options.

It's possible that these weren't his exact words, but I swear the tone of his chain of condemnations was identical. I remember it like a mantra. Never in my life have I seen someone so affected by guilt, so choked by the scars of a dark, ugly, mortuary past. I just looked at him with the two cold bottles of beer freezing my hands, my ears wanting to completely close out his voice. The watchman, however, kept on talking. He said so many things that night. He said he had been part of the Caravan of Death. That he'd actively served in the military until 1986, and that after he got in his car and revisited all the places he'd been with the Caravan. He said that in Yumbel, where later a mausoleum was built, there are several people buried. He said his superiors sent him out to confront supposed terrorists and he had to obey. That at the beginning he believed it all, but later he began to discover that it was an error. He said he'd been assigned to participate in the killings, that they had to shoot the prisoners in the mouth. He said his wife sympathized with the Left and went to Bolivia a short while after the Coup. They separated because she couldn't understand his actions at all. Now his four children live in La Paz with his wife and they know about his past. Sometimes they visit him, but he implores them not to ask about it. He also was a leftist, he said, he liked Allende (actually he said "el Chicho"), and he even voted for him.

So why had he gotten involved in what he got involved in? He said that Pinochet brought order to things, that Alvaro Corbalan was the head of Operación Albania--- and coordinated the plan. He said he traveled with Sergio Arellano Stark to the north of Chile, that he has flashbacks, but he'd only been an inpatient once on the third floor of the Military Hospital (I gathered that that was where they treated people with psychological problems). He said he knew a fellow ex-officer that worked as a night watchman I don't know where, and that he went out shooting at night because the man believed he saw terrorists. He

said his problem wasn't so unmanageable, but every night he had to clean the floor or smoke or do something to erase it all--and to not remember. But in the mornings the memory returned and again he would begin to do things, anything, and he'd forget again. He said he lived in oblivion and he'd never told anybody all of this because it wouldn't have served any purpose. I'm not sure if it was my voice or only an illusion but I said that maybe it would have served a purpose. He didn't hear me and kept on talking. And so he told me that he'd been a major sublieutenant and that when he resigned they took him to military court. He was sure that they still watched him, that when he got off the bus he knew they were following him. He hadn't wanted to talk, he repeated, because there was no point, and because everyone is being watched. He said, insisted, that he hadn't told anyone about this.

Why are you telling this to me and not to a human rights lawyer? I believe I got my voice to say. "Doesn't it torment you to live with guilt? Don't you have nightmares?"

"Yes, niña" he said paternally. "It's like when an idea comes to you and you want to write it down and you stay in front of the computer at night for hours and hours. Fragments come to your mind, isn't it true? Well, the same thing happens to me. Little sparks of memory. It's not continuous."

The ice from the beers fused with my breath. This guy also kept watch over me. He watched all of us. How fucked up Chile is, I thought. How fucked up is this country that Pinochet and his false war left us. How did we become so crazy? An ex-security agent had just confessed his infamy to me and I found myself standing there, quiet, mute, somehow tortured by what he'd said. What could I have done? I don't remember exactly what happened during those next few minutes.

Maybe I drank down all the beer in one second inside my apartment, maybe I slept; it's possible, my mind remained completely blank. What I do remember is that after talking with some friends a few days later, processing the information rationally, I came to the resolution that the best thing to do would be to contact a human rights lawyer. But when I had decided to do it, it was already too late: one afternoon the man didn't turn up at the building and after that he never came back again.

And so I didn't react prudently or imprudently. I just acted, that's all. I fused this real character with the imaginary story stored in my computer, and the protagonist of the novel began to take shape. The prints of the night watchman

left their mark on my mind. It was in this manner that the furious wind of time articulated who the protagonist of my story would be: a guy with psoriasis, who smokes like a man who's dying anyway, that takes pills to sleep and to be awake. I knew it wouldn't be a pleasant exercise to cohabit with an ex-agent from security services for the several months it would take me to get the writing down, but what could I do? He was already there. After a few years of writing, I decided the novel was finished. I left it to rest for a couple of months, and when I returned to it, in the summer of 2001, I couldn't avoid it. I realized that the profile of the protagonist wasn't truly right, that I had been dissuaded by the shatteringly real situation, and a move in another direction was critical. So my protagonist ended up being an informer that acted out of cowardliness and not an ex-security agent.

This is the profile of the protagonist today. I should admit, it's true, that the basis of the character was undeniably that man, the night watchman. The mark of his words still remains and I hear them from time to time. Now the novel, *Cansado ya del Sol*, (“Already Tired of the Sun”) has a dark scar that I am exposing for the first time. The protagonist is a man that lives in oblivion. I'm not going to press on with the argument or with episodes from the book, but do I want to cite a passage that registers the vision of the co-protagonist, the daughter, with regard to this man. She says:

“You say there are things I'll never understand. That they were cruel times. That cough of yours, the trembling hands, that gray head are not artifices, I know. You can't go on hiding yourself behind your guilt; with that death you also died, father. I'm not one of those people who believe that one dies only when one dies. You say that if you protected yourself with silence it was so that you wouldn't kill me. I should thank you for it, you protest, and look, instead, what I do. My clean mind, not a single dirty idea. I was clean, clean, clean. It was how you molded me all these years: your discourse was always silence. I can see how blemished your skin is from postponing this outbreak for so long. I know how many patches cover your sheath; I know you've turned into a rag, a shredded, smelly rag, I know you kept on bleeding long past the lashings. There are things I will never understand.”

Although the story I've just told gives extraliterary information, I believe it is intimately related with other themes that come up as part of the vocation of narrative writing. One of those is that of creative processes. I think no creators in any area can dismiss the environment that contains them. Unless, of course,

they live in a crystal bubble (a situation in which it would prove difficult to create). Context inevitably will leave its mark. In one-way or another, it will be there. The Chilean writer José Donoso argues that every novel (like a person) has a particular biography, unique, distinct from others. I would add that this biography is always linked to a time and a place specific to certain periods or moments of the author's life. I recall another episode that happened shortly before the one related to *Cansado ya del Sol* that is tied to the biography of my first novel, *En Voz Baja* (and with a fragment of my autobiography as well).

It occurred at a literary colloquium held in several schools in the south of Chile. There was one question that the students repeated for all four of us writers. "How much longer are you going to write about the Coup?" One of the writers said until it is no longer a relevant subject, another counter-asked, both evasive and naive, "I wrote about the Coup?" Another, more willing to elaborate an answer, said: "Until you, the new generation, begin to write about another subject of our collective history." I was the last and I stopped and wrote *En Voz Baja* to answer the question. The truth is that none of the novels to which those students alluded have a rigorous political focus. But, yes, it's touched upon in some tangential way. I didn't live 1973, or rather I lived it but was too young to understand it. But one also lives things through postscripts and what washes up afterwards. In my novel, the Coup is significant in as much as it is the agent who is responsible for the internal fracturing of a family's ties. The Coup serves as a symbolic element, and it could just as well have been the fall of the Berlin Wall, May of 68, the attack on the Twin Towers, or even a less attention-getting oppressive factor, such as the relocation of a community to construct a hydroelectric plant. I am talking about any event that marks a before and an after for the people that inhabit that place.

In the novel, the greatest disloyalties aren't produced in "political" territory but rather in family life, between people who've been in the same camp. The breaks and losses have more to do with human conduct than with contingencies. We're talking about the private wounds, the fractures that aren't taken into account in public statistics of affected victims. The subject that traverses this discourse is the subject of loss (of innocence, of eras, of utopias) the fragility of ties and generalized betrayal. Of disloyalty as a daily gesture, to principles, to people, to memory.

While I was writing *En Voz Baja* (*In Low Voice*), I ran across a column in a local paper by a journalist whose name I don't recall. I only remember one sentence

from the article: "in the end, we were all a little crazy." It seemed to me that this phrase affectionately summed up what was happening to the characters I was creating.

And more than just to my characters, but to those who had once existed. The story of Amanda, the protagonist, was the pretext, the disguise, to attend a private party and bring a few devils to the surface. When I started this project, I didn't know exactly what story I was going to tell. The sentence in the newspaper helped me scratch the surface. We were all a little crazy, very crazy, too crazy. Themes like betrayal, the fragility of ties, or infamy began to impose themselves on the story. I never intended to make a rigidly political novel.

Guido Camu, a journalist friend, told me once that Amanda was me. And although something of that is right on, it's not entirely true because the protagonist doesn't write books, and because she's adolescent and naive. She sees how life unravels, how big and small things come apart, without any chance of stopping them. Amanda is fascinated by a story by Rodrigo Fresán --- although in truth; it is me who is fascinated with it-- about a girl who goes to the beach with her friend and her friend's parents. The protagonist is a virgin and the friend is attracted to her but he's timid about it. He observes her from beneath the umbrella, stretched out on the sand, and fantasizes about taking off her red bikini that delineates her delicate curves. There is military chaos in the country. and the parents receive a call from the Capital that the girl who is with them has been left an orphan. The friend's father feels like shit and I don't know why, perhaps to feel even more like shit, he seduces the girl. She says afterwards that it was sensational. She didn't know what happened with her parents, and what she had just done didn't hurt, she says. "It's as if a butterfly tickled my stomach," she explains, "as if I died happy and in slow film." I don't remember what else happens, but the father's reflections conclude the story, saying that "this is only the beginning of something that's coming, and there is nothing more fucked up than to carry on wanting to forget what still hasn't happened." Amanda reads this phrase and knows that it hides something so microscopic yet universal that she can't stop thinking about it. Perhaps Amanda has been as crazy as those that have gone away, those that wanted to be heroes, those that remained in hiding, those that put on ties, those that toasted, those who saw through the window how life was changing the landscape before them.

The fact that I am a journalist is perhaps what makes me see reality as something inevitable, inescapable, and concrete, And I don't mean to say that

the creative path is like a photocopy of current events- Perhaps this is journalism, bad journalism. It is, however, a dangerous distance from the vocation of composing fiction. It's obvious that it isn't a writer's job to go about transcribing brute information. I'm not in favor of literary militancy, and I believe that it's necessary to avoid contaminating oneself with pamphlets. To utilize novels as vehicles for an "ism" (feminism, fascism, environmentalism) is an aberration. It is to give answers a priori and underestimate one's readers. There are filters and what one has to do is to work through them with metaphors, to encompass what's real (history, the past, the night watchman tortured by his tortures) from other narrative angles. Of course there are certain stimuli involved; a writer doesn't start from zero. And it's laudable and desirable to have one's vision contaminated with dates, with fragments of society to later dress them as fiction. Spoken words feed written words. Literature should steal from reality.

In a sense, this turned out to also be the exercise that initiated my second novel, *Ciudadano en Retiro* (*Citizen in Retirement*). When I began to write, I didn't really know the plot that would lead the story. During the first months, all that existed in my head was an empty protagonist. The only thing I was clear on was the narrative voice. It was my platform. I knew the speaker was a male, around forty years old, that he was condemned to something that had something to do with death. Slowly the protagonist began to take shape, and I was able to ascertain connections between him and the rest of the world and define the plot and scenography. It was then that I understood, among other things, that the protagonist should flee from a large city and establish himself in a place where he felt strange, a place that felt unfamiliar to him. I put together possible sceneries in my head. They always turned out to be little towns on the verge of rusting, like images in sepia photographs. They were towns that witnessed how a past of productive factories dries away- the busy sidewalks, the provincial pride. I compared these fictitious images with several real places I traveled to see.

I looked in the south, the north, around Santiago, until I finally determined what would be my principal references. It would be Campana, a town north of Buenos Aires (Argentina) where my father was born and where my grandparents are buried today. I stayed there for several weeks. Afterwards, I returned to Santiago and traveled again, several times, until the references came together. Once the story was halfway articulated, I gave the town a fictitious name: Retiro. Shortly afterward, I found out that there was a town near Chillán

with the same name. It didn't appear on the map I had and the trains didn't stop there, and even though it was like a ghost, it kept on existing.

There was the real past. So I got on a train that stopped closest to there and went to see this place with the coincidental name. It was eerie to be in front of a jail that said, in large rusty letters, the word Retiro. I had invented it, I'd made it into fiction, and all of a sudden, here it truly was, as if reality and the past were having a joke on me. My Retiro already had its profile defined, it's true, and this was not my Retiro. Because of all the notes I'd taken in Campana (the real town), Retiro really doesn't exist today except for in the pages of the novel.

It's a fact: we writers always function as references. The great challenge, I think, is that one doesn't become a marionette but rather someone who works in service to fiction. In a way, with greater or lesser awareness, there is something very difficult to eradicate - the function of memory that narrative texts establish in every era.

Ernesto Sábato says:

Memory is what resists time and its destructive powers, it's something like the shape eternity can assume in its incessant traffic. Memory, our mysterious memory, of what we are and what we were. Those who lack it, those men who have lost it like a formidable destructive explosion of certain profound regions, are tenuous, uncertain, flimsy leaves swept up by the furious senseless wind of time.

Memory is, definitively, what molds words. Memory is a tubercular old man suffering from guilt; it's a night watchman who tortures himself with his dark past, it's a country on the verge of craziness. Memory is that mosquito that buzzes every night in our heads and that will install itself, in one way or another, in every page of every book.
