

"CHEJFEC'S LATEST WORK SHOULD BE TREATED AS A SIGNIFICANT EVENT." –PUBLISHERS WEEKLY ON MY TWO WORLDS

**SERGIO
CHEJFEC**

THE PLANETS

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY HEATHER CLEARY

PRAISE FOR
SERGIO CHEJFEC

“Without a doubt, Chejfec deserves greater recognition. *My Two Worlds* paves the way for the novel of the future.”
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BY SERGIO CHEJFEC

The Dark
My Two Worlds

**SERGIO
CHEJFEC**

THE PLANETS

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY HEATHER CLEARLY

 **OPEN LETTER**
LITERARY TRANSLATIONS FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF ROCHESTER

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*For Graciela Montaldo
Of all invisible countries
the present is the most vast*



BEGINNING

ONE

Dream, nightmare, truth. To Grino, the series played itself out like a promise rather than a dream. Days earlier he had woken to a memory, at the time still unreal: Sela's little legs, which suggested future beauty and inspired a desire inappropriate for her age, ruined by her fall. But dreams were insatiable, they always demanded more; according to Grino it was not enough just to dream them, they also sought some other form, a complementary action to rescue them from the confusion of the night. It is not only the dream, then, that took on a new inflection; real incidents—in this case, Sela's fall—were cast in a nocturnal light, revealing an enigmatic quality. It would be in keeping with the order of things for a ripe piece of fruit to fall to the ground under the force of its own weight, but the fact that the girl should tumble from the tree after he dreamt about her fall transposed the whole sequence of events, including the backdrop against which they took place, onto the realm of the fantastic: the causes outnumbered the effects. Grino often wondered about the power of his dreams: whether they simply reflected events or if, perhaps, they catalyzed them. A patio, a few flower pots, a fig tree, and typical tile flooring completed the scene; the bedrooms were off to the side, set back about three meters, and one meter further, half hidden by branches and cans containing the sprouts of future plants, a railing separated the patio itself from the area used for the clotheslines, the laundry room. Little by little, Grino had become accustomed to the details of this scene, in which the girl was one element; he had decided to call her Sela as soon as he laid eyes on her on his first day of work. Sela could reach the top of the tree in just a few movements, but she climbed slowly, stretching her legs so wide that Grino was afraid that at any moment her delicate body might be torn apart. After a while, she would disappear into the dense foliage, only to reappear further up, perched on a swaying branch. She would sit there for hours, like a sentry. The scene reminded Grino of a photo of a girl swim team lined up along the edge of an indoor pool, their heads covered by their swim caps and their legs exposed, poised to kick off a government-sponsored competition with their first dive. He had seen these images in magazines as a young boy, had thought about them until they began to feel like part of him: pictures of a row of bodies against a murky, dark background in which one might imagine people, but where there might only have been bleachers, or perhaps nothing at all. Since the water, too, was invisible, the swimmers appeared to be performing some sort of ritual, their joined hands pointing

downwards as though invoking a submerged deity. The caption of the photo read “The girls are grateful for their healthy development.” Watching Sela climb the tree, Grino would think: She climbed like a swimmer. Her legs reminded him of the bodies of the girls in the picture, but were endowed with all the darkness, danger, and urgency that the others, due to his youth and the nature of his photography, had lacked.

Something happens and the scene is transformed. The explosion is right on time. One can imagine the din of shattered stones, broken branches, the shifting of the earth that ends only when, paradoxically, it becomes clear that nothing is as it had been. Changes in nature often seem impermanent; they might be violent, even cataclysmic, but their effects spill out quickly as they fold themselves into the landscape and soon all is quiet again, which means it is time to begin anew. Nonetheless, years ago, when the news reported an explosion out in the countryside, beyond the city limits, I sensed that some aspect of those changes—not a before or an after, but a who, a how, and how much—would prove to be more intractable, though less perceptible, than the changes in the landscape.

It was an impassive plain, interchangeable: there is infinite countryside just like it. Only in the minds of its inhabitants and in the memory of the animals and that great expanse of dirt, stone, plants, water, and little else did the blast hover like a noise waiting to trail off. Few things seem more gratuitous than setting off an explosion in the middle of nowhere, but in this case the macabre disguised itself as meaningless or innocent, a banality, supplanting the true face of terror. (This turned the danger into something irrational, not because it was too much to comprehend, but because it made itself known by unfolding according to an unfamiliar order.) The article talked about remains scattered over a vast area. There is a word that describes it well: sprayed. Appendages sprayed, spread out in concentric circles from an unequivocal center, the site of the explosion. No matter which direction one went, one would run into remains for hundreds of meters, remnants that had become more than mute symbols fit only for an epilogue: bodies broken after having suffered, been torn into pieces and dispersed.

I looked up from the newspaper and toward the street. A taxi slowed, affectedly, neither coming to a stop nor advancing. I tried to formulate a thought: This is how we go through time, I said to myself, just barely moving forward. Aside from the lessons that could be culled from it, the taxi’s sluggish pace was meant, primarily, to give its passenger a moment. The man was eventually ready to pay, and the driver turned completely around to accept his fare in a gesture that seemed, if not overly obliging, at the very least contrived. Certain insights could be drawn from this, too, I thought. What I meant was that life proliferated itself through these events, while the text of the newspaper was something static, something that speaks of a seemingly inevitable past, a realm in which hope is extinguished, et cetera. While life and time marched forward in unison, branching out into infinite possibilities and consequences, the news stories that effaced the past and left us without hope were like a cynical grimace announcing what was to come, for example, that what once was light was about to fall into darkness.

Like many others, probably, I believed that I knew things the newspaper did not mention. In my case, the explosion had a painful history, which began with the abduction of M (M for Miguel, of

Mauricio; it could also be M for Daniel since, as we know, any name at all can reside behind letters. Several days passed between the abduction and its announcement, a length of time I do not dare try to calculate, partly because I am not sure that I could: those days were not days at all—they were a single, interminable mass of time, at once ephemeral and able to reproduce itself without end; in a cruel twist of fate, as they sometimes say, the pages of that newspaper offered the only possibility of an ending, if not in the form of a conclusion then at least as a cessation, a way of giving shape to the mass and thereby opening it up to an after.

I should say that I lacked then, as I do now, any proof that M was in that explosion. But I was not, I am not, in a position to ignore the possibility. Imagining him among the dead served little purpose; in fact, it served no purpose at all. Nevertheless, it was a thought that insinuated itself time and again through association: what once pulsed with life, its own form of abundance, that is, his body, a combination of liquids, nerves or whatever all of that could be called (a typical presence to which the world has grown accustomed and is widely taken for granted, the habit of leaving life unspoken); the thought of something that had been inexhaustibly alive until that moment, the organic life of a body now emptied of its substance, took the shape of an idea marked by necessity, perhaps even by fate.

The pit opened by the memory of M was slowly covered over—days, then weeks and years—by the desolation left in the wake of barbarity. Unlike those of other transgressions, the effects of this crime do not fade immediately, in the short or long term, or ever. A deathly patina covers the faces of the living, their features become a shield against unsuitable gestures, emblems or examples of absence of faces; these grimaces are eloquent precisely because the living, overwhelmed by the evidence before them, chose lassitude and dissimulation. (Now I will speak of my country.) I have always had the feeling, when walking anywhere in Argentina, but particularly in Buenos Aires, that I was doing so among people who, surprised by the intimacy of their relationship with death, choose cynicism as their form of atonement (when sincere repentance is such a simple act).

As a result, what follows is a story without an end. Perhaps within the sphere of evil there is a need to complete unfinished stories. When I say the sphere of evil, I am not referring to some sort of absolute complicity, but rather to the fact that its victims, though they belong to the realm of good, have been cast into another—the dominion of evil—by virtue of being victims. Since we know that good may be limitless, perhaps within the sphere of evil the need to bring stories to their conclusion becomes urgent. Maybe this is why I thought of M's abduction when I read the news of the explosion. The time between those two events was an exercise in panic during which I imagined the cruelties I had suffered, prior to the moment of that equalizing blast, which ended both life and horror. Looking at the newspaper I imagined that, after those interminable days, reason—though it was a childish and abominable sort of reason—had finally prevailed: his annihilation, of which the abduction was one part, had been fully realized.

I read the story three times, then found myself transfixed by its title. It would be an exaggeration to say that I was thinking about something, but I was not thinking about nothing, either. If there is a moment that precedes the formation of a thought—a moment in which one's consciousness tries to make way for an idea but is impeded by the sheer number of details involved, a moment in which a future thought takes the form of a dream, an involuntary impulse—if such a moment does exist,

experienced it for an inordinately long time. So long that I jumped when the waiter came by to empty my ashtray, startling him. The title read: "Explosion in P." I stared at it without taking in the words; the paper covered with disorganized blotches of ink, like when one stands in front of a mirror and sees the glass instead of one's reflection. The newspaper said that, for a few hours, the locals had heard trucks speeding up and then stopping; unusual noises that somehow failed to draw anyone's attention. (If it had happened during the day they would have seen the whole thing, but since it was night everything appeared to be in order; night is the embodiment of the clandestine, which in this case allowed many to turn a blind eye.) It had seemed like some sort of public project, roadwork, maybe. Engines running at capacity, something heavy rocking back and forth, banging against metal. Sometimes the trucks could be heard dumping their loads of rubble, the stones flowing out of the trucks like a solid, dissonant stream. Then the activity began to subside, and little by little the noise tapered off until at some point in the middle of the night everything seemed to return to its indifferent state of normalcy. And yet, as would be proven shortly, the process had already been set in motion and was gaining momentum. Having forgotten the trucks, all were shocked by the explosion. Silence spread among them until the following night. (The silence itself was a sign; expressed physically it would have been a grimace, an acknowledgment of the lack of explanations and also a means of excusing the violence. The people's faces.)

A silence less enigmatic and drawn out than the one adopted by M's parents. Despite its eloquence, which did not deign to utter a word, it was a silence composed of gestures as emphatic as blows with a stick. I never fully grasped the meaning of this silence, though I tried in vain several times to understand it. One could say that the absence of the child produced an emptiness in the parents, who lived their lives inside a sphere of glass bombarded by signs from the outside world. Because of the transparency of their enclosure, its interior was visible to all, despite the fact that M's parents felt and acted as though they were living on the dark side of a planet composed of their own pain. They were comfortable in their anguish and consoled by their own desperation. The outside, generally defined as "others," "things," or just "the world," which had always seemed somewhat adverse, revealed itself after what happened to M, to be openly hostile. As a form of self-defense in the face of so much adversity, they chose to fade away, to become transparent. But the truth was that they were still being observed, perhaps more than ever.

I admired the fact that a drama so intense would, for them, be silent. It was not the hermetic isolation that usually imposes itself after a tragedy, the form of autism adopted by the victim, or the open display of fear and self-pity exhibited by friends. More tangibly, it was the melancholy silence behind which his family would hide, as though each of them were fulfilling a predetermined and accepted religious role that originated in the distant past. But this obedience, because it was born not only of personal conviction but also of their very nature, unfolded against a backdrop of confusion. In this way, even though they did not hear it, the explosion that ended their son's life was still a shock to them, I thought as I sat in a café—a pizzeria, rather—on what was then avenida Canning. It shocked them still. Like stones in a pond, the waves of the explosion reached M's family, actually gaining force as they traveled rather than tapering off, as they would have under other circumstances. Of all the dangers involved in going near M's house, one of the most painful was confessing to his parents

and his siblings, without actually saying anything, that chance had been on our side, that of his friend and not on his. This arbitrary act of evil grieved us as though we were his kin and left us in his debt. I was our martyr, not because his sacrifice was intended to bring about our salvation, but because we were marked by his death. This is why some days I think of him as though he were divine, assigning him impossible powers, worshipping his memory. Though his existence is slowly slipping away from me, becoming abstract, it continues to be the most vibrant, certain, and immediate thing I know.

Captives of geography, our past is shaped by the city. That earlier city is still our doorstep. The multicolored fabric of extraordinary vastness, woven of shortcuts and straight lines intersecting at outrageous angles, imposed itself as the backdrop of our sojourns. But its surface, known conventionally as the real and as resistant as a scab of asphalt and cement, lost something in M's absence; it was reduced to belated shadows and reflections projected onto that other city, the one etched into the past. The true present faded into the distance, and the city itself, built from substance designed to withstand the effects of time, dissolved into a nucleus of disorder. This degeneration of the city, which spared only the traces of the two of us, making M's absence even more pronounced, devastated me and left me silent for months. It was another who could speak, not I. For weeks on end the days refused to pass; as I walked I could feel the presence of some remote power, older than time, that kept me from knowing my own destination. It happened in all sorts of situations. And yet the city was not empty; it was full of people who were able to carry on as though nothing had happened. Things like "the 100 neighborhoods of Buenos Aires" and "the Queen of the Río de la Plata" would still come out of their mouths. To me, these phrases revealed, just as more explicit ones did, the spread of misinformation and falsehoods. Nothing escaped, nothing was spared; they even afforded the dead a part in this scene, if only to turn their backs on them. It was a jumble of words in which the memory of its inhabitants was invoked only to be decimated.

He met M when the two had just grown out of childhood. Several years before the abduction, they sealed the friendship with a classic rite of communion: they exchanged portraits. (It was more than a fad, but not as deeply rooted as a custom; the youth of the time were of a particular sentimentality that combined emotional impulses with a nonconformist—and often heterodox—attitude. Although this could be said of adolescents in general, at the time this energy was directed toward the unification of tastes, opinions, and ideas. They often spoke of whether they could be considered to be under the influence of the masses; they were young, but they were also foreign; they were amphibians. Inhabitants of a secondary nature, they adopted beliefs in a way that immediately exposed them as inauthentic, or mildly or profoundly out of place—depending.) M's portrait was an enlargement of a part of another photo, taken on calle Humberto I, in the neighborhood of San Telmo. The magnification of his face blurs his features and the rough grain of the photographic paper lends him a dramatic, if somewhat less than spontaneous, expression; his open mouth reveals his distinguishing feature: the hollow of a missing incisor. Partly because of the enlargement process, and partly due to his expression, his face seems on the verge of forming a grimace; almost, but not quite, due to the very circumstance that produced the effect: the false proximity of the camera.

Before giving it to me, M wrote the phrase “buffeted by the wind” like a title or an emblem on the back. I turned the photo over and saw him: he was standing on a fence and holding on to the railing precisely as though he were being buffeted by the wind. In the interest of simulation, someone else might have pretended that he were leaning out over a precipice or some other thing one might expect to find on the wrong side of a fence, but M had chosen the least likely option: a vague idea of questionable representability. Of all the scenarios he could have depicted, his expression hinted at the violence of imagined gusts of wind and his grip on the bars, which were barely visible, spoke of an incredible force.

The day we exchanged pictures, M declared, “I don’t believe in photographs.” He did not say this to detract from the exchange, but simply to express that, in his opinion, photos did not have any documentary value whatsoever, and for that reason he doubted that they could carry a complementary emotion. As was often the case when he spoke, his words were aimed at refutation rather than persuasion—nevertheless, I was persuaded. I looked at him without understanding: where, if not toward the traces of our lives, private or shared, could we direct our emotions, apart from other people, I silently wondered. M did not hear me, but went on speaking as though he were responding to my question: Photographs are evidence of a momentary reality, inherently archaic and out of place, he repeated (in different words); but for this very reason they are also useless as documentary records. Relics as soon as they are processed, they are mute, a bridge between the past—the circumstances depicted in the photo—and the present—the moment of its viewing. And what is there between the past and the present? he asked, raising his voice. Nothing, just a chasm open at your feet; if we believe in photos to be auxiliary truths, either truth itself is nonexistent or reality needs no proof. As we know there was no wind and that fence is just a collection of posts so thick you can barely tell what they are. The weather that day no longer exists, and the noises we heard have long since faded. We’ll keep these photos as talismans, but not as proofs. “Let’s keep these photos as talismans, but not as proofs,” he repeated, as though the words were a prayer or a line of verse, trying harder to convince myself that the occasion demanded. I could sense, in this insistence and excess, a religious undertone of guardianship. Something between protection and adoration, at least; if the figure in the photo no longer existed, and neither did the sounds of the street or that particular palette of light, as is the case in any place and time, that afternoon the secret value of the image, the photo, lay in its power of conservation rather than in the representation of an origin. Years later, my photo would lack the protective qualities he had tried to assign to both. But “my photo” was not my portrait, but M’s. Just like “his” was not his, but mine. Which of the four photos retained that power? His in his possession, mine in my own hands, the picture of me that he held on to, or his in my possession (which I still have)?

After the abduction, I took refuge in the house of a friend who had the same name as M. I met my mother from time to time in a nearby café; she wanted me to leave, I didn’t respond. My mother would smooth her hair and ask how long I was going to go on like this. I remained silent. Then she would begin all over again; the same dialogue repeated two or three times in different words, followed by the same silence. Then, with a sudden movement, which in its swiftness conveyed both annoyance and concern, she would take out a little money and tell me that she would not be able to go on offering

it for long. I am sure it was not easy for her to come by, but the supposed tact of calling “offering” what was so obviously “giving” seemed both unnecessary and inappropriate; it was the introduction of courtesy into a situation that rendered courtesy trivial, even insulting: the circumstance, as she herself acknowledged with her concern, simply did not allow for social graces or attempts at elegance. How, if not like alms or a tip, was that money handed over to me? I was in no position to turn it down, but she insisted on the word “offering” time and again; in a way, the care with which she tried to protect my supposed pride showed just how far apart we had grown, how divergent our paths had become. It was on one of those days—when I would walk from café to café, my mania fueled by fear, exhaustion, and boredom—after seeing my mother, that I read about the explosion in the newspaper.

M lived on a street that was divided in two by the railroad. Whoever wanted to cross the tracks had to do so by following its old-fashioned walkways in the form of an S, which would force them, precisely, to slow down. The house was thirty meters from the tracks; cars hardly ever drove down his block, which was lined with trees and façades so similar they seemed indistinguishable, interchangeable. To get to M’s house, one had to walk down a long hallway that extended almost to the middle of the block. Every few meters a door would appear on the right—these were not only similar, but in fact completely identical. His family lived behind the fourth. The door opened on to a patio, which was the nucleus of the house. There were a few plants and large flowerpots in it, which at first glance seemed to be scattered about at random. M’s room was reached by climbing a narrow staircase that rose up from the patio next to a large sink and doubled back above it (so closely you had to stoop over to reach the wash). I remember my surprise looking down for the first time through the steps of iron grating, just like the ones found on countless railroad bridges. M should feel lucky to have his own room, I thought the first time I visited, especially one so isolated from the rest of the house.

The residence, which was nothing special in itself, took on an enigmatic quality the moment M’s family moved in. It was not just the building or the apartment, as I will explain later on, it was also its location. Even though it was in a mostly Jewish neighborhood, the house was in an area that was not considered as such. The proximity of the two, as is often the case, made the differences between them even more pronounced. The opposite can also occur, as it did with my family, which did not live in a Jewish neighborhood but drew little attention just the same. Invisible from the street, in an area that seemed strange to my inexperienced mind, M’s house was ensconced within the very heart of the block, surrounded on all sides by other houses and other families. This confinement, which shaped the family’s daily activities, proved that “confinement” was not really the right word for it; more accurately, it was an excessive form of cohabitation and a different sort of abundance, though it was foreign to me. It was the realm of the diverse, the disparate. I should say that the “geographic” oddity of the house represented only my first concern; a second arose when I met M’s parents, who spoke without any particular accent. I still remember my surprise at hearing his father speak; his language was unquestionably that of Buenos Aires, utterly *porteño* in usage and intonation, and was, of course, more emphatic than my own. My admiration mingled with suspicion. I had always seen a foreign accent, especially a Yiddish one, as a perceptible mark; because of this, I viewed its absence as a profound ethnic limitation. The way I saw it, a foreigner displayed greater abundance than a local did.

through his speech, the outward sign of a nucleus that affirmed his identity.

There are, in life, passing moments and pivotal ones—some can be both at once, some, only one or the other. This lack of an accent was one of these: not passing, but pivotal. If the condition of being Jewish were a hollow meant to be filled with distinguishing attributes, in those years I considered flawed speech to be a fundamental element of the mix. We had been taught to set our sights on this and it is well known that everyone else was doing the same. I sensed, in the lack of an accent among M's family, a diffuse sort of danger, which did not attach itself to anyone or anything in particular; in the worst case, it suggested a threat, in the best, a mistake—the destruction of that which separated them from the rest of the world. The world thrives on difference; it is from this difference that we learn. In this way, language and geography came together in M, highlighting his enigmatic surroundings and forming a complement.

I'll now mention another thing that was important to our friendship: the railroad. The tracks became our territory. To M and his friends, a stroll through the area was an exclusive activity; it meant walking, separately and guided by individual routine, along streets and homes that offered up their hidden corners without resistance. They killed time looking for oddly-shaped rocks, pulling weeds from the sides of the embankments, poking around the fences and walls at the furthest ends of the lot. Over the years, this place would become another shared emblem. I would take the train into Buenos Aires every day from the outskirts of the city, often traveling the same route along which M would walk. As I passed his house, I would stick my head out the window and look back at the short, tree-lined block, its cobblestones in perpetual shade. We spoke with great composure about the trains, not with a sense of admiration that could deteriorate into enthusiasm, nor from a desire to expand upon any meager technical knowledge of the subject, but rather paying particular attention to the details which were often questionable, as all details are, in an attempt to understand them as part of a real—and apparently unattainable—whole: the one represented by trains of metal, glass, and leather that crisscrossed the city, more noisy than they were fast.

When the world is so dark that the truth seems beyond our reach, it is best to create an efficient though illusory, system that allows us to represent it as though it were real. These topics of conversation, then, were assured their longevity not only by the fact that the trains were a part of both of our lives, but also by the monotony of those lives, a rut into which we gradually fell. I would mention things I had seen, M would describe others. He would tell me, for example, that the bells of the corner near his house had rung the whole afternoon, that there must have been something wrong with them. I, for my part, would listen, think about what he was saying, and remember, for example, that I had been delayed an hour near Ramos Mejía station. The car I was in—as always, the last—was blocking the street. I could see the frustration of the drivers as they looked out at the obstruction that was arbitrarily blocking their way; they must have thought that it would have made no difference to the train to have stopped a little further along. And maybe they were right, I said, the fact that the last car of the train was exactly as wide as the street made it seem like something that had been done deliberately, maliciously. M thought for a minute, and then asked if there were many people on the train. “On what train?” I replied. The train I said I was on, he explained. I answered him with a wave of my hand that signaled “like this,” when what I had wanted to convey was “you know” or “the

usual,” meaning that I could only speak for the car I was in; as I described to him in detail, the car was about half full but many of the passengers, myself included, were standing, which allowed me a better view of the street. It was no problem for the people riding bicycles or traveling on foot, I continued, they went around the back of the train and crossed the tracks carefully. The drivers of the cars sighed as they watched people on foot pass them by; they were slaves to their vehicles, and they rested their arms on their steering wheels in a gesture, I repeated, of both resignation and impatience. Sometimes a few of them spoke; a pedestrian pointed into the distance.

After thinking for a moment, M wanted to know: Were the crossing gates lowered? “What gates?” asked the other. “The crossing gates, the ones you were just talking about,” he answered. “I didn’t see anything about any gates.” “Where you were stopped,” he said. “How did he know about the gates?” the other asked himself, not expecting a response: he looked at M without understanding and answered with a gesture, a widening of the eyes—the train was in the middle of the street, how could they not have been lowered? Even the bells, which had been meant to announce the train’s passing, were a platitude and, in some respects, a failure: there it was, stopped in view of everyone. The fact was that the train was full; everyone was pressed together without room to raise their arms. The noise from the alarm, coupled with the lack of space and the closed windows, provoked a general sense of drowsiness, except among those who shouted things like, “We’re going to be here all night,” “Keep your hands to yourself,” and jokes of that nature, before letting out a guffaw. M, listening to the commotion all afternoon, had come to the same conclusion, although by an opposite and incomplete route: it seemed obvious to him that the bells would sound when a train passed, and so he assigned the error to the fact that no train was passing: the cause of the commotion was unclear, but the fact that there was no train coming was an obvious mistake. “But what was the mistake?” asked the other. “What mistake?” replied M. The mistake of sounding the alarm without the train ever passing; was the error of the train or the alarm? M replied that he couldn’t know, just as he couldn’t know who was obvious about the situation. In the other’s account, he continued, it was different, both train and alarm were implicated, the error was obvious. All afternoon M had watched his neighbors lean on their windows, as if they might identify the cause of the alarm by doing so, but they could not; he had also noticed the care with which the few pedestrians had crossed the tracks. He had not gone down to walk along the tracks—the way they wound through the terrain there, the bells were the only way to know a train was coming. Later that night, they stopped ringing. It was a moment like any other, but different because it marked a change. The other’s train had also suddenly begun to move, without warning. Many of their conversations were like this, a vague compendium of news from the railroad. From the comments of the other, M learned about the curve of the tracks at Villa Luro, harder for diesel engines than for electric trains to take, just as the other discovered the nicknames that M and his friends had for the engineers.

M had always had a poor sense of direction; this led to a complete detachment from the geography of the city. It took him the same torturous effort to locate a point five blocks away, as fifty. His gaze would drift off and, absorbed, facing the abyss of which he felt a victim, he would finally ask, “How

do you get there?” Great feats of memory allowed him to go to familiar places; it was impossible for him to orient himself if he was forced to set out from anywhere other than his house. To his mind, space was a question without a clear answer. After more than six months of classes in our first year of school, he would still confess some mornings that he did not know how to get home: he knew which bus to take, but since he had forgotten its route he did not know where to get off. A corner two blocks from his house was mute, it said nothing to him. Experience told him that that it was part of the same city, but to his mind, it might as well have been at the antipodes. The names of the streets, like the streets and avenues themselves, did not say much to him either; his understanding of the city was tangled and confused, and therefore naturally unfathomable. Things could be anywhere: they could even occupy the same place, superimposed upon one another. This system, which seemed natural but was actually based on the extremes of absolute dispersion or absolute condensation, condemned him to perpetual uncertainty. One afternoon, on his way back from school, he fell asleep and didn’t get home until after midnight; the bus had an unbelievably long route, going as far as G. (Which was very close, in fact, to P; it might even have bordered the area where, it is my belief, his body would fall through the air just seven years later.)

Earlier, I referred to geography as question without an answer in M’s mind. This trait—which he was the first to admit: “Give me a map and I’ll read it upside down”—was equivalent to the mystery sensed in his neighborhood: an unusual, if not defective, sort of suburb. His lack of any sense of direction or spatial relation absolved him of all commitments. When it came to the area in which he lived, he could not be held responsible. I did not realize it at the time, but my uneasiness followed from ignorance. Later, as time passed and we remained friends, I would notice the natural feeling and steady rhythm of the neighborhood, which was strange in many ways but also so much like others in Buenos Aires. Everyone thinks of their block as the epicenter of daily life: they leave from and return to it every day. This sense of certainty about space fades as the perimeter grows until it becomes, depending on the individual, a ghostly image. Distance, in this case, is confusion; anything, as I said before, could be anywhere and everything could be everywhere, which is to say that any place could be anyplace. M had a limited radius of movement, which altered his perception, but since he also lacked a sense of direction, experience and routine often translated into greater insecurity rather than understanding.

Earlier I said that M’s abduction left us speechless (I should add that my world fell apart). I am going to recount the moment I found out. One afternoon I heard someone knocking at my front door, still, nothing seemed particularly urgent that day. I dressed slowly, wondering who it could be; when I neared the door the knocking began again. I opened the door reluctantly, only halfway. It was my neighbor, who was about to leave. As he turned he said impatiently, “Hurry up, now, you’ve got to call.” We started walking, him in front and me behind. It had been quiet inside my house, but out on the street everything was jarring. I tried to excuse the delay, saying, “For what it’s worth...” “So don’t give out the number,” he responded, and he was right. We got to his house and I walked... back along the walls; one burned from the hours the sun had been at work on it. I got to the kitchen, where they kept their telephone. Up to that point everything was normal, even predictable: the untended plants, the two old plum trees out behind the house, the smells of the kitchen, where they were just sitting

down to eat (my standard joke: I would be there in a minute). A friend was calling, to let me know. That's what he said: To let me know. This friend, named A, sounded like an idiot. How could he say "to let me know"? (Someone, someone else was speaking through him; he could not be saying that). He said he couldn't believe what he was saying (what he was letting me know). I could not believe him, either. Some of the details were absurd, fragmentary, unclear. We didn't know what to do, him on his side and me on mine, which was demonstrated by the silence we maintained for a few long moments before hanging up. I remember a parenthesis opening up as I put the phone back on the receiver; something was interrupted, for how long, I don't know. Some time had passed when I came around, but my neighbor and his family, who were waiting to eat, the bottle of soda water sweating on the table, were looking at me as though I had just hung up. Something had happened, they could tell, and they were waiting for me to explain it to them. The meal didn't matter; they could wait in silence for hours until I was ready to speak. I regretted the silence, and regretted in advance what I might say. I muttered something about the soda siphon, that it was getting cold; that the bottle was getting cold because the soda, as it warmed up, let go of the cold it had absorbed in the refrigerator. I had wanted to say something about the food, which was steaming (and actually getting cold), and tell them that I didn't want to bother them any further (this is what I was regretting in advance: that I would sound like my mother with her overly emphatic courtesy). I had wanted to say that the food was getting cold, but seeing the perspiration on the siphon, I felt utterly defeated: not only had something terrible happened to M, I thought, but on top of it all the sweat from the bottle was pooling on the table. And so, with those disjointed words I left, flustered and impatient, not knowing where I was headed. I went back through the house. I crossed the stone patio and walked along the wall, which was giving off a more intense heat than before. I stepped into the street and was pained to see that things were going on as usual, when the worst had come to pass. Everything expanded around me; time took on intolerable, immeasurable dimensions and nothing seemed to have an end. I went over what had happened; the notice from my neighbor, our conversation; I was ashamed that I had been so leisurely in the way I was dressed and so cavalier when I greeted the family. And, on top of it all, the worst thing imaginable had happened to M. Outside, the sun was hard at work. My mind was an intensely white screen, as bright as the chalky wall behind me. Strangely enough, my first impulse was toward calculation: I wanted to guess how long it would take the bus to reach the corner, how many cobblestones fit on one street, how much heat it would take to melt these walls, and the houses along with them, once and for all. These calculations were a way of stopping the advance of time, anyone could have seen that, but there was still a time that evaded me: it was the moment itself, in which something was beginning that I did not understand, something born of abandonment and also, although it sounds contradictory, a double life. (I mean that I felt M's life in danger within me; of the few duties and sensibilities he had chosen for himself, I decided to follow and complete the greatest number possible. It was a means of survival. Later on, I will explain how.)

One afternoon, weeks after the explosion, I ran into his mother on calle Acevedo. She was distracted, not looking where she was going and wrestling with her bag; one of those that can be used either for shopping or as a briefcase (I remember because it seemed very large to me, empty; a flaccid weight hanging from her arm). This woman, about whom I knew so much, seemed to know very little

herself. The dense trees formed a tunnel of shadow, the exact center of which was occupied by her weary approach. Her disarray did not surprise me; it was the outward sign of a trait shared with something, many would say with someone, that was irrevocably absent. Beginning with M, I had noticed certain attributes in each member of the family, the presence of which affirmed that they belonged to the same clan: disorientation, dishevelment, and a particular vacillation that persisted even after they had made a decision. M's mother remained true to her nature, but there was a nuance to her demeanor that had not been there before. I did not realize it at the time; I only came to recognize it much later, thinking about that encounter in the course of one particularly long night. This new trait was not something commonplace, but a profound weight; it was the mark of accelerated aging. I am not referring to the signs of her pain, which were evident. To say it in a direct and slightly arbitrary—perhaps even fallacious—way, one sleepless night my mind happened to linger on the memory of that encounter, and the obvious truth that had been hidden finally dawned on me: the body of M's mother was smaller that afternoon; she had been reduced. On Acevedo I had only noticed something strange which, coupled with the familiar, became mysterious. This union of the *strange* and the *familiar* was, I believe, the first effect of the tireless labor of M's absence. The familiar accommodated the strange, and the strange took over the familiar. The former absolved the latter, and the latter pardoned the former. (The familiar was M, the strange, death.) When I saw her, almost at the end of the block, I said "There is R, M's mother," and nothing happened. I recognized her gait, the family's shared demeanor of tribulation and bewilderment; I thought about the son and was saddened by all that familiarity, which had been divested of its origin and purpose. What was I thinking as we approached one another and I tried not to look at her? I remembered the number of times M and I had walked down that street, on that very block and in that same direction, and lamented that chance had brought his mother and me together in that moment. Our paths crossed. She did not see me and I did not stop her, and we passed one another. To speak with her would not only have meant interrupting her distraction—her momentary unawareness of evil—and restoring the absent image of her son, but also drawing attention to a disruption imposed by circumstance; for these reasons, I did not.

Yet it is also true that it was a mistake not to face her. A mistake and, if it does not sound inappropriately elegant, a gaffe. It was to turn my back on M, who had brought about the encounter (I don't mean this only in a figurative sense). Mute, with his mother already behind me and probably on her way home, I immediately regretted what I had done—or, rather, what I had not done. So I ran wanting to make it all the way around the block—Padilla, Gurruchaga, Camargo—and force a new encounter, which this time would be unequivocal. Despite the fact that it was planned, and something of a ruse, it was more real and natural this way. Distracted, I turned the last corner and saw her walking toward me, as I had moments earlier, watching me. Now she, too, was ready to acknowledge me. Sometimes we need to shield ourselves from spontaneity in order to endow our actions with a measure of truth. Never before that afternoon had I seen a face that showed so much, forgetting modesty, fear, and precaution. A face with nothing to hide and nothing to offer: that was the face of M's mother. Her eyes, fixed on mine, clouded over intermittently, giving her smile an air of melancholy. (We were standing face to face, waiting for who knows what.) All of a sudden, I realized that she was possessed by a deep conviction: that of having lost M forever. This idea, which at the

time I myself did not dare to consider, surprised me. I admired this awareness, the certainty of ~~because—though morbid—it followed the logic of a profound sense of peace.~~ Yet, strangely, I was unmoved (I felt neither agitation nor grief). She was convinced of the fate of her son: this could be discerned in the veil of uncertainty, of vacillation, that shields people after a loss. Waves of stupefaction swelled from the cobblestones in the street and the trees along the sidewalk. M's mother seemed to be at once a child, an old lady, and unquestionably a grown woman. At last the tears came—this, too, was inevitable—and before saying goodbye she asked me and, through me, the others, to stop by and see them now and then. Again I found myself at a loss for words. I thought that she—whom I could say nothing, knowing nothing, particularly about what was going on inside her—demonstrated a remarkable, substantial wisdom by asking that we visit her “now and then,” mainly because she broke the silence from which I had been unable to free myself. As I clung to her shoulders, I understood that it was of secondary importance whether this wisdom was born from her experience, her intuition, or some other thing; what mattered was that it was wise. Some time passed this way, the street also in silence. Then we each continued on our way; some things, at least, had returned to normal. After a few steps it occurred to me to watch M's mother as she walked away. I imagined that her back could tell me something, who knows, that it might have something to add on a different way of communicating. But I stopped myself before turning; I had the feeling that I was about to ruin something, and that this something was not secondary, but rather meant a great deal. She was only a few meters from her, still within the danger zone that exists between people: R might be able to feel the weight of my gaze from behind her, and doubtless would have considered it crass that I would stop to look at her. She had inspired me to run around the block, that much was clear, and it was she who had rescued me from silence as we embraced. If it had not been for M's mother, I thought as she walked away, we would have remained joined, fossilized there on the sidewalk like one of those statues that commemorate a foundational moment.

Their first conversation took place one afternoon a few days after they met, when the other asked him about the soccer field a few blocks from his house. “What field?” responded M; he was either distracted or had forgotten. The other had to clarify: “Club Atlanta’s stadium, it’s famous.” He wanted to know whether, given how close it was to his house, he could hear the goals, the chanting of the fans, or even the announcer. M said, with affected confidence, that he could; too emphatically to conceal a swell of pride. The other vacillated, saying that he had thought it would depend on the direction of the wind. Even if he lived nearby, he might not be close enough to hear everything. M conceded that of course he couldn’t hear everything, that wasn’t what the other had asked, but he did live close enough to the field to hear the goals and the chanting, regardless of the wind. When it blew toward his house he heard better and when it blew the other way, not as well, but he could always hear it. In any case, he continued, you couldn’t say that he didn’t live close enough: “My house is five blocks from the stadium if you follow the streets, but only two hundred meters if you follow the tracks,” he explained. The train was the clearest indication of proximity, perhaps even of contiguity, but at the same time, on match days the train’s whistle made it hard to hear the sounds of the stadium and so, he acknowledged, sometimes the distance wasn’t ideal. The other listened silently. The truth is

continued M as he walked, that even if they are playing an important game on a Sunday, it can be hard to hear anything if it's really windy. Of course, this has nothing to do with the distance; everyone knows that it is impossible to hear in strong wind unless you are very close, even right alongside.

When the match is over, M continued, the fans disperse right away along the surrounding streets. When you're still in the stands you don't notice this: the wait to leave the stadium seems endless. But, at the same time, a crowd has suddenly filled the street. This diffusion is similar to the way the chants and shouts, and noises of the multitude spread through the air, only slower, almost as if each of the spectators were going off in search of the final destination of his own voice. And so they set off on their separate ways. Even the tracks filled with people, the fans covering the whole embankment, walking as a single turbulent mass, surging like a scene from a proletarian epic. So, whether far away or nearby, I live in the stadium's zone of influence, which means hearing what can be heard. M wanted to end the conversation there, but there was still something the other wanted to know. It seemed that he understood this; before the other had a chance to ask him anything, he conceded that, despite its size and the shadow it cast, and the matches that were played within it, the field was not really the center of anything. The noise that swells up from the grounds and the silence—despite the match—beneath which everything seems submerged and that allows no indication from inside to pass, demonstrate the ambiguity of the gaping space, at once receptive and manifest, that is the stadium. The funereal silences that fill the air when the stands suddenly fall quiet imbues its rudimentary architecture with a sense of absence proportional, though inversely, to its size. At first one thinks about it and says, for example, Well of course the stadium is the center of the neighborhood, the place that gives life to its surroundings, the building that gives the neighborhood its character, and things like that, referring to the green patch of turf toward which all the surrounding streets and sidewalks seem to be oriented. But the opposite is actually true—the crust of the field is precisely that: an empty space erected on an arbitrary site.

They walked on. Game days, M continued, are saturated by an incongruous mood and sense of time. One hears the noises and is able to identify each one: the cries of joy and indignation, the encouraging cheers, even the gasps—sudden and unanimous—of disappointment or relief at a missed goal; you can hear the din but it is obvious that something fundamental is missing, something overlooked that could explain the cause of the noise and restore its meaning, like gazing out over a landscape in which a light shines so brightly from one point on the horizon that we are not able to see or understand the scene as a whole. Sometimes, the other heard him say, I'll be sitting at my front door and the fact that I am able to hear the fans seems unjustified; not unreal, but inappropriate, excessive for mere noise: the effect arbitrarily conjoins a single yet disparate, diverse, and even unconnected geography; a strategy of events meant to indicate that, as I sit on my front step, I am connected to something that is happening two hundred meters away. "Space abolished by noise," he concluded, struggling to wrap his left arm around a mass of folders and books held together by elastic bands. A few blocks later, at the corner of calle Sarmiento, each went off his own way.

Years later that same place, a mixture of neighborhood and suburb, a few blocks crossed by tracks fatigued by trucks, saturated with stores, family shops, and modest homes joined together in clusters

that same place would contain M's sudden absence as it had once contained his body, as contradictory as this might sound. What had been present until that moment was now gone. M wasn't taken from home; they took him from a friend's house. It could have been mine or anyone else's, but that day was his. This element of chance would color his disappearance with a sense of gratuitousness, which in a way undermined the dramatic quality of the circumstances. Many would say that the abduction of a political militant was unjustified but that causality, however cruel and murderous, was still at work. What happened to M, on the other hand, had been pure chance: an unlucky presence that had allowed happenstance to restore death to its final and inalienable place. The combination of political innocence and the coercive force of fate endowed M's disappearance with a sense of error or the failure of destiny, making his innocence seem to reflect back on his abductors, who one could, hypothetically, imagine blaming chance for putting M in their path.

The abduction was followed by a drama that was at once silent, private, and confidential. M's parents, unable to take even the slightest initiative to search for their son or to find out what happened to him, were left in a stupor. Eaten away by passivity, in the end they obeyed their fear, the conviction that it might be possible to save the rest of the family if they did nothing. To this day I am astonished not to have found M's name written anywhere; not in the lists made by organizations or in the press. I say to this day because right after the abduction I, like many others, threw myself into reading legal appeals, denunciations, documents, the testimony of the victims, et cetera. This lasted for years. After that, I simply waited for him to appear in some list or press announcement. I now find myself feeling a combination of fear and adoration: the effect turned back into the cause, M's name was split apart by silence and in this way was able to return to the state of pure incantation in which all names float until we claim them through use, assigning them to an individual. As is well known, it is a fine line that separates this from sorcery.

I am unable to break this pact between absence and reality, made with no one and among all, in which ambiguous words like memory, oblivion, name, and individual insert themselves, as though only half of M had lived on in me. The names of many of the victims are unknown; still, for those of us who knew him, his absence from the lists suggests an emptiness that calls into question his very existence. It is not as though seeing him in some index were necessary to confirm his time on earth, but it would have increased the density of his memory; no one has written his name or read it since. And there you have the anomaly, since this tends to happen with people who have been dead a long time, not with *recent* deaths. Around the time of that first conversation about Club Atlanta's stadium, about noise and distance, I remember the realm of ambiguity a student would enter if he were not included in the class list. Seeing your name there was not only a confirmation of registration, but a magnification of existence: it meant being something more or, occasionally, something different. The anxiety that would set in on those who did not appear on the list was the most convincing evidence of the hypothetical nature of their person. They had to make inquiries, change rooms, come back with signed papers. They passed into a limbo from which they could only be rescued, once they got their papers in order, by their appearance on the list.

It is also true that while many of us may have felt powerless or indignant at his omission from the lists of the abducted (first his body disappeared, then his name), his parents may have seen the

absence as natural or even necessary. After all, it was clear how little could be done about it. The accusations, investigations, and protests contributed to the collective reaction through which the victims were reborn and claimed their right to have gone on living. They also allowed the people to touch the horrific medium into which they had sunk. In the meantime, most Argentines, thrilled with questionable accomplishments like the 1978 World Cup and the 1982 war in the Falkland Islands, noticed too late that the flood of kidnappings, torture, and murder had unequivocally renewed the campaign against frivolity and barbarity; in the face of this, they chose to forget.

It is natural that, when confronted with this panorama, the complexity and meaning of which were beyond the average family, so many would choose resignation. M's parents did the same; on one hand because death was natural to them and, on the other, because their meager resources and particular lack of aptitude and personal connections left them not only without tools, but also without the reflexes to deal with the hardship that had been imposed upon them. What is more, at the time political violence and death hovered in the air; they were recognized as an everyday occurrence toward which many or few could feel aversion or horror—this did little to reduce its power; in fact, it had the opposite effect, preserving it as part of the normal order of things. This acceptance could have been a result of detachment, consent, or debasement, but either way it meant that death had proliferated through its use; a use that was sanctioned by endowing politics with a functional dimension, turning its morals back into action.

There is the incident that took place a few months after M was abducted. I was about to cross one of the typical, cramped avenues of Greater Buenos Aires, which were roads in the days before the area was populated and only later, with the spread of urbanization, ended up as very narrow avenues. There was no curb; the simulacrum of a sidewalk angled slightly toward the pavement, creating a formal space in which a bit of earth ate away at a fine layer of asphalt. The cars kept coming; I was waiting to let them pass before I crossed, when a hand holding a cigarette emerged from a car window, trying to burn me. I did not jump back, but managed to lean away and watched the bandaged hand, still holding the cigarette, return to the car a few meters down the road. There was a military base a few blocks from there; it was clear, despite its lack of markings, that the car belonged to the so-called security forces. I was not afraid, nor was I angry; again, typically, I felt nothing. Nonetheless, I saw how the coincidence of my crossing as they passed created, momentarily, the setting of a game, of order organized with ease and pleasure to which the rest of us submitted with a certain natural acquiescence at the dramatic and even more organized core of which M had met his end. That hand was accustomed to burning, and it found diverse, even incidental, opportunities to exercise the habit. Afterward, I crossed, but I did not forget what had happened. Once more it had become clear that chance is a condition of tragedy.

The relationship between M and the other was based on a mutual—though not always shared—time within which certain topics, interspersed with actions and events, were advanced through both conversation and silence. As I have written, the railroad was discussed throughout their friendship, but there were other recurrent topics that became more central over time, signs of harmony or danger, the marks of a shared identity. One Saturday morning, as they were going to the house of a classmate

M and the other saw a group of Orthodox Jews; all were male, men and boys, and they walked without any particular hurry. M said, pointing, that they were genuine, real Jews. "They're authentic," he murmured. "Who?" asked the other. "Them, the Orthodox Jews. Don't you think they're more authentic?" M replied. "Why would they be more authentic than us?" retorted the other. He made a gesture to signal his reproach; he felt slighted at his exclusion from a group to which he had been certain he belonged. "I don't mean that they are more Jewish," M continued; only that their condition has retained qualities that speak of a truth and not only of constraint, as in our case. Our nature is marked by loss, by absence; what is left of an abundance that is slowly becoming more remote and somehow exotic: the Yiddish language, the religious holidays, the dances, the food. They, on the other hand, signal a confirmation, affirm a continuity with every step; they operate in time, within the diffuse time in which sons are, in the future, mistaken for their fathers like a convergence of the self, a self-fulfilling prophecy. Their lives find meaning in repetition, turning it into constancy. "But," the other said, "what does repetition have to do with authenticity? It's true that repetition ends up becoming authentic, but that's not just a matter of repetition. On the other hand, how can you turn authenticity into a collective category? Yes, an observant Jew has an image that is easier to assimilate to Judaism than one who is not religious. One aspect of this is appearance (we are talking about them now because we were able to recognize them); no one would recognize us, though in some cases, like yours, certain features do help," the other asserted, avenging himself for M's earlier exclusion. "Every trait, whether visible or spiritual, shows its condition; a condition that is not necessarily religious," he continued. "The truth is, one could say someone is—for example—a gaucho, when he lives the life of a gaucho; when his experience aligns with the model, generally speaking. Still, it is possible to say that the further he gets from that model the less of a gaucho he is, and just as there may be a moment in which he is no longer a gaucho, there may be a moment in which one is no longer a Jew or an Indian or a homosexual. One simply isn't, or one is in a complete and absolute way one moment, only to find that one isn't, the next. There are also moments in which one is so little, where one is at the mercy of the slight pulse that keeps our hearts beating. Perhaps, then, Jews have a more flexible threshold of identity; more accommodating in one sense, but more implacable in another since someone might no longer belong to a congregation, without knowing it, or the congregation might include someone among its ranks who sees himself as an outsider." "I hadn't thought of all that," answered M, emphasizing the all, "but it doesn't seem like you disagree." At that moment the other got distracted: the bus lurched forward and the sidewalks, filled with pedestrians, slipped into the distance with the sole objective of avoiding scrutiny; he saw vague colors and reflections, neither whole nor essential; the side streets opened up to him only to close in on themselves like dark little wells. After a while M, noticing the silence, asked, "What were you be thinking about?" "When?" the other wanted to know. "Now," said M, "what do you mean, when?" "What should I be thinking about? Nothing," he answered. "The street." So M told a story that the appearance of the authentic Jews had helped him remember. It was an adventure plagued by imprecision, like all fables; or rather, it was a collection of precise imprecisions. This fairy-tale quality extended further still: M did not know how he came to know the story, which seemed not to have an author. At some point he heard it for the first time, yet he already knew all its principal details—just as he already knew its outrageous conclusion.

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