

The
Absent
Sea

The Absent Sea

a novel by

Carlos Franz

Translated by

LELAND H. CHAMBERS



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For my mother, Miriam Thorud, actress.

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The Absent Sea

*For now in every exuberant burst of joyfulness
there is heard an undertone of terror.*

F. NIETZSCHE
The Birth of Tragedy

★ 1 ★

THE FIRST THING LAURA RECOGNIZED AS SHE GOT FURTHER INTO the vast barren flatness that surrounded the oasis of Pampa Húndida was the horizon of liquid air. The wall of trembling mirages on the desert horizon lay across the highway: a cataract of seething air flowing from the sky, scorched by the reflection from the salt flats (the remains of ancient salt marshes), and falling upon the bed of the ocean that had withdrawn itself a million years before. Beyond that wall of heat palpitating like newly hardened glass, Laura thought for a moment she could see enormous faces, gigantic human figures, distorted mouths that were screaming in her direction, appealing to her, begging her or reproaching her for some inaudible thing, the ache of a desertion as prolonged as the million years that have elapsed since the seas evaporated from those plains. It was as if the very bulwark of the liquid horizon itself were howling at her.

Laura half closed her eyes, struggling against those phantoms invented out of the fatigue of this return journey which had now been going on for more than twenty-four hours. First, Berlin to Frankfurt, then flying through the night to Buenos Aires, from there the jump to Santiago, and last the connection to the northern mining city where she had rented this car, which at 85 miles an hour was now pushing into the fiery heart of the desert. Driving with one hand while rubbing her feverish eyes with the other, she felt as though she were losing control of the automobile, that the steering wheel was shaking, that she was veering from a straight line (again for an instant she saw imprinted on the retinas of her memory the blood-colored horse, the thoroughbred, stretched out in full gallop, stumbling, then falling, rolling on the plain...).

When she opened her eyes fully, Laura had to jerk the wheel slightly to keep from going off the road. And the moment she did so she experienced the clear, physical sensation—the very one she had felt one night two decades ago—that she had just crossed the line of the

horizon. She had plunged into the wall of liquid air trembling on the horizon, pierced it through from one side to the other, gone completely to the back side of the sky, where her past awaited her (where we were waiting for her).

"Where were you, Mamá, when all those horrible things were taking place in your city?" Recovering control of her vehicle, Laura once again recalled that letter from Claudia, full of questions like this, that she had received in Berlin three months earlier. That letter, now packed in her briefcase along with her passport, used airline tickets, and the thick bundle of her reply, the one that had taken her three months to write—three months!—only to be reminded once again, upon dating a postscript to it in midflight, that the only true reply to her daughter would be this very return. That the only valid reply was to approach with open eyes those distorted silhouettes howling—in audibly—on the shivering horizon and to push through it on the way to her encounter. As she had just done.

Joining a line of other vehicles signaling that they wished to turn off toward the oasis, Laura returned to thinking about this lengthy missive of reply residing in her briefcase. In it she related to her daughter the secret history of her life, the tale of who she had been before her daughter was born, the story that she had kept to herself and from which she had protected the child—the story she had refused to accept and thus protected herself from for twenty years. She had written it in such a free and complete manner that not only did she manage to bring about the reawakening of the monsters sleeping in her memory but also the realization that she would be unable to simply hand it over on her arrival. For on the lengthy nocturnal transatlantic flight which had taken her southward in a counterclockwise direction (and the direction of our past), she had re-read her own answer and confirmed what she had gradually been coming to believe more and more as she was writing it: there are some questions you can only respond to with your life.

Thus it was that, on her arrival at the Santiago airport four hours earlier, after a tight hug with this daughter whom she had not seen for a year and a half, instead of immediately handing her the sheaf of hand-written pages in that briefcase as she had expected to do—although something died inside her every time she thought about it—, instead of putting the story she had been holding back from Claudia

into her hands, Laura separated herself from her daughter to go directly to the domestic flight counter. Before Claudia's astonished gaze, she purchased a ticket on the very next flight to the mining city in the northern desert, one for which there was scarcely even time to board, and checked in all her luggage once more.

Claudia, tall like her mother but with her hair dyed red and chopped off with a pair of scissors, watched her without understanding, or until she did finally understand; then she shook her head with an irate, desolate expression that combined all the disenchantment her mother had engendered in her. "When are you going to stop running away, Mamá?" she said. And without waiting for her to respond, without expecting an answer now nor even allowing herself to consider that this return might itself be a reply to the questions that she had asked in her letter of three months ago, she turned around and left the terminal without a good-bye.



The line of vehicles belonging to the pilgrims on their way to the annual religious fiesta in Pampa Hundida extended almost a kilometer in front of her, but it was halted now next to an out-of-the-ordinary roadside billboard for the city: a devil in neon lights whose illuminated arm indicated a direction perpendicular to the Panamerican Highway (or to reality). Signaling when it was her turn to take the off ramp that led to the oasis, Laura saw loaded buses, ramshackle taxis, mud-covered trucks with smooth tires and passengers being carried in the open air of the truck bed like cattle, like prisoners of war. Prisoners they may have been, but their faces were filled with hope, radiant with jubilation, even after crossing the desert. Exasperated by the bottleneck that was holding them back within sight of their destination, pilgrims by the dozens, entire *cofradías*, religious fellowships, were jumping out of their trucks, which were hardly moving anyway, and advancing on foot, animated and inspired by the first sounds coming from their attendant orchestras, half walking, half trotting, borne along by the enthusiasm of their surroundings.

Filing along next to her car, amid the dust they were raising and the white splendor of the sky, the glittering of bronze instruments and thunder from the bass drums, Laura saw—or her eyes still feverish after the sleepless full day's journey thought they saw—Spanish con-

quistadores, gypsies, Indians dressed as totemic animals, jaguars and condors, blacks covered with painted rubrics, feathered warriors native to the jungles beyond the mountains, figures with powdered wigs as if from some centuries-old court, mythological demons come down from the high plateaus... a disparate, bewildering, arbitrary crowd; beings who were coming not just from other provinces or countries but from a prior time and world, out of a necessity anterior to themselves—but which had always been the mainstay and protector of them all.

Imprisoned in this line of vehicles, enveloped by the hordes, Laura felt that she too, like this aching and festive humanity, was coming to beseech and to celebrate, to plead and to dance; that she was coming in order to hear in the voice of the multitude—their own voices—the voice of someone else. She too had come to listen, to hear, in the voices of the survivors, of the witnesses and the instigators (the voices of those who that night twenty years ago had pushed her toward her destiny), another voice... Perhaps her own, the voice she had repressed—the one that had once sung in unison with the steel—perhaps...

But in any case, not the voice of certitudes, not the voice of reason, but the voice of a passion. Because it was becoming more and more clear that this exhausting journey from Berlin was a parabolic flight; the immense parabola of this plane which had descended to the south, crossing six time zones and more than sixty parallels and seventy meridians, was, and not only physically, a descent to the other face of the earth, to the opposite of certitudes, to the intuition of a passion that those contagious booming and rattling drums were driving home, joining their sleepless rumination to the rhythm of cadences infinitely more ancient than that of any theory. Hearing those whistles and drums and panpipes and rattles, Laura realized that she had not merely traveled from Europe to South America. She had not merely come from the Northern sky to this other one, its opposite, where the horn of the waxing moon, when it should appear, would show itself as the reverse of the one there. What she had done was to trade the apparent harmony of her professorial chair in philosophy for the polyphonic turmoil of the fiesta where she had agreed to hand down judgment on the incomprehensible. From philosophy to fiesta.



Three months before that return, in her office in the Department of Philosophy at the Freie Universität in Berlin, lost in thought and staring out the window without noticing the timid spring weather which was beginning to green up the birch trees surrounding her building, Laura had cast her lots. She had done so without allowing time for fear to disguise itself as prudence when she picked up the telephone to call long distance the Minister of Justice, don Benigno Velasco. Her old law professor, her protector, the one who had launched her judicial career at twenty-two years of age, she having just recently received her law degree, by succeeding in having her named secretary of the court in Pampa Húndida. That remote tribunal, where from the outset she had filled in for a perpetually ill judge with such brilliance that in less than two years they had given her the post in her own right. She became the regular civil and criminal magistrate, the youngest in the history of the whole system. Just one of the things that went on during those years in the early seventies, in the middle of that “Chilean way to Socialism,” that bold and stormy period when it seemed as though the future had arrived and youth owned it all. Before the goat’s song was heard and the far-away palace had gone up in flames and her youth with it, before Allende, the suicidal president, had sacrificed himself, and before that sacrifice had caught up with her (and with us too, seated just then before the smoking ashes of our sunset).

Upon arriving at her office at the university, late in the morning, after turning it all over in her mind while walking in the Tiergarten—pursued from on high by the gilded angel on its towering column—she had decided to call her former professor who was now a brand-new minister. The previous night she had spent re-reading her daughter’s letter which had posed that question, the one that had been hounding her now for the last three months, and throughout her return trip over half the world: *“Where were you, Mamá, when all those horrible things were taking place in your city?”* She had read it once more and then added some pages to the reply that she had been scribbling away at for some days.

But that night she finally realized two things: to answer Claudia would involve revealing to her daughter what she had prevented her from knowing, since there was no other way to explain the unexplainable; and a response of that nature, she saw now, ought to be handed to her in person. At that moment, as if someone must have been beseech-

ing her from afar, her hand stopped above the paper on which she was writing, she recalled something and went back to look over her daughter's letter. And there it was, that bit of information that Claudia had mentioned casually in passing and that her eyes had read several times without accepting its whole significance: the position of Judge in Pampa Hundida was vacant. The former magistrate had died suddenly some two or three months back and a replacement had still not been designated. Claudia had brought it up to drive home her point, that not even fate wished to see justice in Chile. But Laura understood instantly that this vacancy, this void, this window looking out over the abyss had been opened up for her, and that from it someone (perhaps the owner of those eyes saddened not by what they had seen but by what they were going to see) was looking after her and was calling her.

The following morning she spent those three hours walking around the Tiergarten—under the intent vigilance of the gilded angel high on its column—until the earth, revolving on its axis, had synchronized with the schedules in her former country. Then she went to the university and called the Minister of Justice in Chile.

“Do you want to renounce your post in a German university, walk away from the prestige you have won in Europe? Does the author of *Moira* wish to come and bury herself in that forlorn oasis, that puddle in the desert...?” her former professor had asked her—or was it a reproach?—caught between his incredulity and his pleasure at having been sought out.



This puddle in the desert... The file of vehicles moved forward a little more along the off-ramp, for a moment drawing her away from her thoughts. When she came to a stop once more, this time on the new overpass in the form of a cloverleaf that crossed over the Panamerican Highway, Laura caught a glimpse of the shrine city to which she was returning. Under the midday rain of fireworks she made out the hollow of the oasis impregnated by the vineyards and the orchards, the fertile hollow in the hardened hide of the Plain of Patience, a transversal ravine that dropped about thirty meters—and that was all—below the line of the horizon. But that was enough to give the place its name, Pampa Hundida, because seen from a distance, at ground level, it disappeared like an optical illusion or a mirage, and all that remained was

the ever sleepless plain, the iridescent patches of the quartz in the salt flats, the horizontal vertigo. From the height of that overpass, packed with vehicles sounding their horns and pilgrims singing as they surged past, Laura again experienced the surprise, the sensation of the phantasmagorical in that green spot on the barren desert, the irregular layout of the city. Here and there amid the trees along its streets appeared the radio antenna, the solid shell of the Hotel Nacional, the several buildings of three and four floors each that surrounded the Plaza de la Matriz, and right in the center, the basilica with its single belfry and its white, lunar cupola, that reminder of the incandescent desert sky. The church was smaller than she had remembered it, but still gigantic for the size of the town.

And next to Pampa Hundida, some two kilometers to the north of its urban boundary but situated above it on the vast, uninhabited area of the smooth plain, as if it were another world, were the ruins. The ghost town of the saltpeter works, which later on was the prison camp and still later became a ruin once more, replicated the living city like a dry mirage or an omen. Or ominously, like a premonition: its barbed-wire perimeter, its radial barracks buildings, the abandoned theater with its roof gone and rotted out with solitude, the prehistoric carcass of the old steam plant with its reddish iron framework bubbled by rust, the very tall chimney which later on served as a watchtower, now eaten away by holes (that hollow bone played like a flute in the wind, disturbing us all night long, calling out to the sleepless citizens of Pampa Hundida with its moaning sounds like those of a dying animal: *toooooot...*)



After the minister had gotten off the phone three months ago, Laura sat a long while with the receiver in her hand, hearing the *toooooot* of the phone line reminding her of something. When she finally hung up in her turn, she swiveled her chair toward the window that gave onto the university's park. The forest copse began just a little ways beyond, the trees were thickening, greening up. While springtime was just arriving in Berlin, down there in her former country the autumn was coming in. But not in the uninhabited sections of the Atacama; never in the driest wasteland on the planet, which had only one season: sun. To go back to the other side of the world, to the antipodes from which

she had come two decades earlier... It was a transparent, frigid day outside, and only a few staff people traversed the walkways between the modern, functional buildings of the university, watched by the deer that suddenly showed their twitching muzzles, their velvety antlers, among the mossy tree trunks.

Laura looked at herself reflected in the office window, her image doubled in the glass. She got to her feet, measuring herself as she had once been measured (but her measuring then had been her downfall). How would she measure up this time? She wasn't young any more, but she wasn't bad. Forty-four years, and she carried them very well. Her long legs, flat belly, and a bust that she kept high with one hour daily in the gym and another with yoga. Only a single streak of gray, obstinately retained without coloring it in her mane of long, naturally black hair, shiny and straight like that of Asian women, told with defiant honesty her true years. "Who are you keeping yourself up for, Laura, if you don't have any boyfriends?" her acquaintances in the gym would ask her, with that malicious admiration of forty-year-olds. And she would only smile, mysteriously. She had known for a long while the power that her lack of desire to wake up by anyone's side in the morning could give a woman, and she used it. However, she explained herself with vague references to a biography that she kept back jealously: she had been a young mother, which was to her advantage, with a single daughter and only twenty-four years of age. Scarcely five more than Claudia was now.

Turning back to her desk, Laura once more read the letter she had received the day before. The letter that was so full of questions coming from the other side of the world, from the other side of time, from the other side of her life. She examined the girl's smooth, emphatic handwriting, touched by Claudia's exasperated struggles with Spanish grammar. She loved her daughter and felt proud of her in the patient, alert fashion of parents of rebellious children. The girl had inherited the mother's height and profile, and—very much in spite of herself and her mother's advice—her primary vocation for serving justice, a vocation that some time back Laura herself had given up in favor of philosophy... "For theory, Mamá!" Claudia had corrected and reprimanded her. Naturally, because she had also endowed her with her character, her unshakable distrustfulness in the face of the excuses we give ourselves in order to survive. And Claudia could not tolerate

that her mother would do philosophy. That is, according to her, Laura should be thinking about situations she could be doing something about. “And if what you’ve been thinking about can’t be put into action, then it’s not worth the trouble to think about, Mamá. With so many urgent things happening now in the world...” Perhaps that is why the moment she was old enough, the moment she had finished high school, Claudia had returned to that country which she was unfamiliar with but which was nevertheless her own, to study Law. “The profession that you abandoned, Mamá! But with me it will be different, I want to serve justice, not theorize about it, and do it in a place where it’s worth the trouble, not here in Germany, where they have everything. I want to fight for the poorest and most defenseless people in a poor and defenseless country. To make a difference in the world!” She wanted to go to a “young and innocent country, where it is still possible to have ideals.” To consider your country young and innocent, thought Laura (although she didn’t say so to Claudia), was the oldest tradition in those regions, the only one conscientiously maintained.

“I don’t want justice in theory, like yours, Mamá, I don’t want reason but passion.” She would go to study at the University of Chile instead of being a student at the Freie Universität in Berlin, where everyone would remind her of her mother, who had made herself famous in the Philosophy Department with her prophetic and pessimistic course on Tragedy—which, among other things, anticipated the fall of the Wall—and then with her book, *Moira*. Now it was a little more than a year since Claudia had marched off to that country she insisted on calling “my country.” She had assimilated immediately, as though she had always lived there, and she even spoke Spanish with an accent that was hardly out of place, so that you could scarcely say she was a foreigner. For months now, Laura had no longer tried to dissuade her, to bring her back. It was evident that she had failed in her effort to maintain the distances, to erase her own tracks, to get her daughter rooted in her own voluntary exile. That “return” of Claudia’s to the country in which she hadn’t even been born was her own defeat, her own collapse in that lengthy enterprise of flight and forgetfulness initiated two decades before. Her daughter, in some unexpected way, had developed an instinct for the path of return. An instinct, an intuition, an invincible curiosity.

After Claudia left Berlin they called each other by phone perhaps

twice a month. Or at least, Laura called Claudia, because her daughter would let two or three weeks pass without doing so and then would reproach her mother for trying to control her life, for not understanding her, and they would always end up arguing, for she had nothing to tell her mother that she could really understand, she said, and so she would shut herself up in her stubborn adolescent reticence.

Until suddenly, surprisingly, Laura had received that letter. The first letter in the year and a half they had been separated, the first one since Claudia had left for the country she knew nothing about. Even before opening the envelope, merely by glancing at the postmark with the name of Pampa Hundida enclosed in a violet-colored circle, Laura knew what it contained. And she realized that the time of hiding herself had come to an end. The distant scales which once, twenty years ago, had remained suspended—the little trays precariously balanced with the needle at a draw with amnesia—were beginning to lean irresistibly toward the past. That letter came from the other side of time, from a lost world, from a ghost town. In it her daughter told of her decision to go there to get acquainted with the father with whom she had never had any contact, and she described her bus trip north to the oasis of the shrine city of Pampa Hundida, her arrival at this very crossroads in the desert.

And in detail Claudia told of the week she had spent lodged in the same house where her parents had lived before separating, in the very room that would have been hers had she been born there and not in exile. The long sleepless night which she spent conversing with the man whom she couldn't get used to addressing as "Papá," with Mario, the boxes full of books and objects he had allowed her to look through and which contained the things her mother had left behind when she departed. The things which had been forgotten or hidden (what is the difference?).

And straightaway, as if the dikes of distance, silence, and solitude that Laura had attempted to set up had suddenly crumbled all at once, her daughter put the questions hanging between them, one by one, with the pitiless freedom concerning the past that only those display who lack one, culminating in that "*Where were you, Mamá, when those horrible things were taking place in your city?*"



The line of vehicles was moving again. They had finished crossing over the highway and come back down to ground level, and the caravan, with Laura's car in the middle, dropped progressively into the fertile furrows of the oasis. The desert remained above them, totally disappeared. One might begin to believe it was nothing more than a dream, except for the white splendor of the sun reflected by the salt pans against the midday sky. The crowd was getting less dense, the walkers were on the same footing as the vehicles on the narrow local roadway, the penitentes would jump from the buses and greet each other. They gave comfort to those other pilgrims who had arrived on foot, those who were in need of shade or water, the flagellants who were falling to their knees because they had promised to cover the distance to the shrine in that fashion, all the while lashing at their backs and paying off their pledges from the year before.

By the side of the road which had been slowly descending, Laura noticed a small cart with its shafts in the air, and no horse nearby. Beneath its meager shade, three old women dressed in black, with kerchiefs tied around their heads, were selling woven objects of llama wool, sweaters, scarves and the like, with indigenous motifs worked in. Seated on a blanket stretched out on the ground, they were winding the wool off of huge balls, spinning it onto their spindles, knitting it, and offering their wares for sale.

Still a little further down, in that sluggish gradual descent toward the floor of the city, the caravan came to a halt once more, this time for good. The heat in the eroded ravine below the level of the desert where at least some breezes were able to blow was becoming insufferable. Laura opened the window, but it wasn't enough and she had to get out of the car. On doing so, she felt nauseous as if from sea-sickness and remembered that, except for her brief stopover in the Santiago airport, she had been sitting, travelling, for more than twenty-four hours. She leaned against the car, feeling that the sun in its aureole of fine dust raised by the pilgrims was passing over her like a hand, glazing her with sweat, recognizing her. The cloud of reddish *chusca* dust was getting into her nostrils, her eyes, staining the world to a color much like that of blood, as if someone had ground up a gigantic scab from a dried wound until it became reduced to that impalpable fine, reddish powder the crowd was kicking up. Slumping against the car, Laura saw the supplicants that were going past and outdoing her, dis-

guised as mulattos, gypsies, cowboys and Indians, with their mended, patched clothing, their masks with a single gold tooth. She recognized their acrid odors.

On the other side of the mass of humanity that was parading by, she could barely see a clearing in a grove of tamarugo trees and in it the camp of a large *cofradía* of hundreds of penitentes who were meeting in this grand annual pilgrimage and embracing each other. One group of those pilgrims—from the south, most likely—was beheading a live sheep, strung up by its hind legs from a tree in order to drink the blood that was gushing out directly from its neck, the *ñachi* ritual, sacrificial, tepid, before butchering the animal with an axe...

Laura saw the blood falling down and blending with the reddish dust, the *chusca*, the color of blood itself, the earth that might be pure dried blood, the testimony of an immemorial sacrifice, anterior. She felt like retching uncontrollably. She wanted urgently to get out of there. But the bottleneck was absolute and at that moment the only escape—the only refuge against the sheep's blood that was falling on the blood-soaked earth—seemed to be the scant shade of the cart where the old women were knitting, a little further back. Laura attempted to get through the ranks of the pilgrims but one of those flagellants who were flogging their own bare backs moved into her path. The man was scourging himself by throwing the many-tailed whip over each shoulder, alternately, rhythmically, without showing any pain but simply intensity, concentration, in a fit of ecstatic joy. As he passed in front of her Laura could clearly hear the crack of the leather on living flesh, and she saw the little drops of blood that were blossoming at the edges of the bruises (and which evoked those other carnivorous flowers, their tangles, their indecipherable hieroglyphs which nonetheless, at one time, she had thought she had figured out...).

She had to lean against the car once more, overcome by the need to vomit. After doubling over to let her nearly empty stomach throw up—a yellow bile that fell on the reddish dust like another offering—Laura thought about the strange lucidity that swept over her in the midst of this spell of dizziness and that made her pay attention to this triple or quadruple harmony: the blood from the beheaded animal, the little drops of blood like flowers or grapes on the greenish frame of the flagellant's back, her own bile, all of it falling upon the reddish *chusca*, so fine, itself the dust of a scab on the colossal wound seething with

pain which was the world. A wound over another wound over another wound, all of them dripping down on the mother of all wounds...

"Do you feel bad, *mija*?"

Laura straightened up slowly, with the help of a huge brown hand that was gently kneading the pit of her stomach. One of the old women dressed in mourning, who had been spinning wool beneath the horseless cart, was standing beside her. Nonetheless, from close up, smiling at her with all her teeth flashing in her round face like a copper-colored moon, the woman did not seem really any older than she. Incredulous and confused, Laura inhaled—identifying it—the odor of fresh wool and lemon that emanated from that huge body. A distant, buried reminiscence, surging forth from the dust itself, materialized before her.

"You still haven't bought a horse for your cart," Laura finally remembered her.

And the other laughed, shaking her vast breasts (those tits "that drove her crazy" when she wasn't breastfeeding), "Ah, *mijita*, you still remember, when you left me still owing me the money for the horse. No, just think! That's still a problem."

"There's no work for midwives now, in this city?"

"It's all more modern now. Registered nurses come nowadays, you know. There's a new hospital. But for the old things, folks still come around. Meanwhile, I help myself out the same as always, with the wool from my llamas; you can see that. With my neighbors we still keep spinning it and knitting it. And the truth is, there are people who prefer the old things."

There was a silence. Or rather, it was as if the racket of the fiesta had come back to fill the space between them, the space occupied by the silence of the two decades since the last time they had seen each other. And with the silence the memory began to flow back. Laura saw herself on her back, naked, with her legs hanging from ropes, speaking to the abyss, or to the replica of the image that was fluttering above the vapor from the vessel boiling beside her. "*Where were you, Mamá, when all those horrible things were taking place in your city?*"

Suddenly Laura knew that she now had the beginning of an answer for her daughter, that it was deeply buried in her life. This return to Pampa Hundida was at least good for that. She had been there, she would tell her, hanging beneath that trepanned ceiling, screaming out

to the abyss. She had always been there. She had never ceased being there.

The midwife perceived, perhaps, the shadow of that memory on Laura's face, because suddenly she raised her thick brown hand, compassionately, and brought it to her cheek, caressing it.

"I thank you for remembering me, *mija*. Everyone forgets us midwives, have you noticed? Despite the fact that they all were in our hands first."

And then Laura saw her turn back toward her cart, making her way through the pilgrims, going toward her friends who were waiting for her. A moment before reaching them, the midwife turned back and shouted at her from the other side of the files of pilgrims: "You were never sorry, eh, *mijita*?"

Suddenly Laura felt a deep peace, similar to a well-earned weariness, which was coming over her. And it was no effort at all, nor did she even have to consult her memory, to be able to respond to her: "No, never."

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*C*LAUDIA, MY DAUGHTER, IT'S TWO IN THE MORNING IN BERLIN AND I'VE just gone into your room. I sat down on your empty bed, picked up the things you left on the nightstand when you went away, looked at the pictures in their frames—here you are smiling in the doorway of that cabin in the little town on the Wannsee where we spent our summers: you are five or six years old and naked, perhaps showing a bit of pink from the cold. Or is it that your skin is so new that it shines like the morning sky in the moments before it gets light? In another photo, some years later, I appear on the terrace of the same little hut, reading. You took me unawares and I'm not smiling nor did I even know I was being photographed. I believe I know now why you took that picture. I suspect it's the image of me that you must have seen most often during your childhood and adolescence, and for which you reproached me before going to Chile: near you but as if in another world, distant, always studying, always thinking, hidden behind all those books. I've looked among the pictures for one in which we appear together, and I've not found any. We were each alone, you and I. You would take my pic-

ture and I yours, but we never had anyone—I didn't want anybody else—who would take us together. This isn't the time to make any apologies, and I know you don't expect me to. You didn't write me for that reason. You've written me for an answer to a question that synthesizes all the others and precedes them, just as the embryo and the fetus contain the person that we will love and who will later on ask us questions of this sort: "Where were you, Mother, when all those horrible things were taking place in your city?"

"Where were you, Mother...?" I'll tell you where I was. But to do it I'll have to knock down a wall, or jump over it, put the spurs to that dead horse of my memory—that purebred horse I rode one day—and force it to leap into the abyss that lies just beyond... (Where a pale young man is waiting for me, the one who, all these years later, beneath the fig tree that the stars covered with frost, still continues to demand my help.)

I shut my eyes and then open them again, and suddenly I see the child that I was twenty years ago. I see her above that reflection of this forty-four-year-old woman seated at her desk in front of the huge dark window that looks out over the corner of the Savigny Platz where you played as a child, over the arches through which slip like ghosts the shadows of the linden trees the spring is just now beginning to bring into bud. The image of the person I am now and the one I used to be are struggling to get the better of each other, they take turns, and finally the past wins out (the past always beats us out): the girl-magistrate of Pampa Huidida, the one I used to be, appears in the glass and looks me in the eyes: Where have you been all these years? She reproaches me too, like you do: Why did you abandon me here on this plain of phosphorescent saline wastes? Why did you leave me in the hands of that being whose name cannot be pronounced, because it means "he who brings the light?"

The soldiers arrived one October noon, a month after the coup d'état of 1973, raising a cloud of chusca all along the road toward the oasis, for it was still a dirt road then—and now it's been turned into a modern highway, you tell me in your letter, paved with asphalt by the general prosperity. The caravan of military trucks, adorned for camouflage with irregular stripes like a tiger's skin, split in two at the entrance to the city: one column went around the oasis as if to put it under siege, remaining on the higher ground of the pampa in the area of the ruins of the old nitrate works, which we know as the Plain of Patience ("we know": I'm just beginning to write these memories and discover that I still belong there, that I've never left the shrine city). Meanwhile the other column entered along the principal avenue and came to the Plaza de la Matriz, stopping in front of the municipal offices.

I tried to resist going there, to keep myself firmly in my place, lashed to the mast of my duty in the tribunal's chambers, but it was useless. A curiosity, or a premonition, stronger than myself—or was it the premonition of force itself?—dragged me toward the Plaza de la Matriz where a hundred or so persons had already gathered beneath the scorching sun, the noonday sun of justice (never was there a more appropriate expression: of justice).

Two canvas-topped trucks blocked off the streets at the corners of the Plaza. Soldiers had jumped out of them and taken up positions. When I got there in front of the alcaldía, the Town Hall, a Jeep was parked there with a silvered horse trailer hitched to it, at the foot of the staircases beneath the emblazoned portico and the iron balconies. I remember, Claudia, how I stared at that horse trailer. At the beginning, without understanding what it was all about, and afterward, even more perplexed, while allowing the smell of the horse and its dung, the violent animal stench, to fill my nose—even ten yards away from where I was standing it reeked of acidic urine, already putrid. And then I heard it, I heard the invisible beast stamping and snorting, kicking at the metal walls of its prison, while through the barred windows the foam from its desperate lips could vaguely be glimpsed. I recall that I felt nauseated, I felt there wasn't enough air; it must have been the heat of the midday sun and the crowd surrounding me, but I could only think, stupidly, about the animal shut up inside that narrow metal cage, about the temperature it must have reached inside, about the irate whinnying that suddenly cut short the welcoming ceremony the new civil authorities had prepared.

And then I saw the commanding officer: tall, angular, impatient, wearing the short blouse of the cavalry units, not listening to the ceremonies and but turned instead to face the trailer holding the horse—his horse—and clicking his tongue trying to calm it down at the same time he was threatening it, whipping at his leg with a trainer's short riding crop in his gloved hand, while he watched those of us gathered in the plaza—as if he were calming and threatening us too with his clicking tongue and the riding crop.

I just now said I saw him, Claudia, that I saw this officer, but it's not enough. It would be better to say that I approved of him, that in him I was sanctioning an abject impulse, a premonition of the abjectness (abjectness, which comes from being put to shame) that I had been suffering ever since receiving the news of the military coup a month before. In this cavalry officer I was giving assent to the dark premonition besieging me, and I began to understand what I had come to be feeling ever since the very day of the coup: guilt.

Guilty of what, Mamá? you'll be asking me, Claudia, when you read this

letter. To attempt to explain this to you—to the extent that destiny can be explained—I'd have to tell you something about my previous life, my childhood and adolescence, and I will do so a little further on. For the moment, it's enough to say that the news of the military coup which toppled Allende caught me totally unprepared and defenseless. My first reaction was disbelief. Not out of fury, but from that perplexity one feels in the face of some natural catastrophe. The Palacio de la Moneda, the old colonial seat of the government of Chile that had given shelter to its longstanding democracy, had been bombed and set afire. Besieged by the flames (as if he'd been wearing a fiery halo), blowing off the top of his head with his own machine gun, the President committed suicide. The epic tale, which was on its way to changing his country from top to bottom, ended after a thousand days in a tragedy that the classic Greeks wouldn't have disdained: the king had fallen into the hecatomb of his own palace, a sacrifice to the uncontrollable forces that he himself had unleashed. The heap of rubble remained smoking for days. For anyone who cared to hear it, the he-goat's song (that's what tragedy means: "the song of the macho goat") could be heard amid the ruins.

Those first days after the military forces and their allies took control after burning down the presidential palace I spent in a kind of limbo. I would go to and fro along the shadowed lanes between my house and the tribunal offices in Pampa Hundida, attempting to conceal from my "fellow citizens" the external signs of my nausea, my bewilderment, my inexplicable tingling of guilt. I was afraid of meeting anyone I knew, of getting into a casual conversation. In the end, I continued to be the—recently named—regular judge of Pampa Hundida. What would happen now, I wondered, if anyone should come seeking justice from me? How would I respond to them? How could I explain that I didn't have any answers either, that none of my legal principles permitted me to even begin to understand what was happening? Although technically I still belonged to a system that remained independent, the Judicial, what were such technicalities worth when facing the knives of History? On the contrary, I was beginning to feel more and more—and this was devastating—that unless I were to do something, I myself would inevitably be representing the new order. But what to do? Resign? The idea crossed my mind several times. Nonetheless, I objected, to do that would be the worst of betrayals: now, especially now, I should remain in place even though my instinct was to flee. A feeling of imminence, that magnetic force with which destiny moves us from afar when it wants something from us, held me back. I felt necessary though useless. How innocent that other person still was who would be dead in a short while.

Thus, a shambles within but robust without, I would arrive at the courtroom,

pass behind the handrail, take my lofty seat on the dais, and question the statuette I had so proudly set up on a corner of my desk next to the law books. The statuette of the woman wearing a blindfold and holding her sword and her scales, the one I was given when I graduated with the highest honors of anyone in my generation, just a couple of years before—and which by that time already seemed like a pair of centuries. Suddenly, it seemed as though I were being weighed on those scales, with my ideals as a student on one of the little dishes and the premonition of this guilt in the other. The sword, for its part, was offering me the same reproach as my fellow citizens: Is it true that I would do nothing with it? True that I would let it rust and lose its edge? Suddenly it was all very clear: the law had been pulled to pieces, the legitimate authority had been demolished, and among those ruins the only thing left was me on my dais, behind the railing, completely alone: the only constitutional power that apparently had been respected. This Judge armed merely with scales and a toy sword, would she be capable of serving justice in those willful times just then beginning?

She already had a foreboding of the response to that question. The young woman was afraid, she was anticipating, that they would come to her asking for justice and that she would be guilty of denying them. Ah, if I had managed to be guilty only of that!



It was a silver-colored horse trailer, silver and blinding beneath the merciless noontime sun. Inside it the enraged—or maddened—animal was stomping, snorting, neighing. It was kicking against the metallic walls of its suffocating cell, trying to get out of there. And Claudia, its master, the one whom I accepted rather than merely observed, was consoling the animal and threatening it; this is crucial: he consoled it and he threatened it.

For some reason that I can't quite pin down, Claudia, but which has to do with that craven suspicion of guilt, while I stared at and "approved of" the officer with a riding crop in his gloved hand, I could not help being reminded of my father. From that moment, Claudia, and during the longwinded ceremony and absurd speeches that followed, I was no longer there. Instead I was astride a horse very far away, riding bareback in the rain along the shores of a lake, the way I used to do in my childhood. As if the animal that was stomping so frantically to get out of that silvered prison on wheels were my own memory (or perhaps something else within me, maybe that craven guilt) which was straining to get free of me.