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Juan José Saer



grande

Translated from the Spanish
by Steve Dolph

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Juan José Saer



grande

Translated from the Spanish
and with an Afterword
by Steve Dolph

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For Laurence



Was it I who was returning?

—Juan L. Ortiz

*the solid things were gone, and only
what was transient remained.*

—Quevedo

*e vidi lume in forma di rivera
fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
dipinte di mirabil primavera.*

—Paradiso, XXX 61–63

Le cadavre exquis boira le vin nouveau.

—Abbreviated Dictionary of Surrealism

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TUESDAY

WATER SOUND

HALF-PAST FIVE, GIVE OR TAKE, ON A RAINY AFTERNOON in early April. Nula and Gutiérrez are approaching, at a diagonal, the corner of an open, nearly rectangular field bordered on one end by a mountain sparsely covered in acacias, and behind which, still invisible to them, the river runs.

The sky, the earth, the air, and the vegetation are gray, not with the metallic shade that the cold of May or June brings them, but rather the greenish, warm porosity of the first autumn rains that, in this region, can't quite extinguish the insistent, overwhelming summer. Both men, walking neither fast nor slow, a short distance apart, one in front of the other, are still wearing lightweight clothes. Gutiérrez, walking ahead, has on a violently yellow waterproof jacket, and Nula, who hesitates at each step, unsure where to place his foot, a red camper made from a silky material with a slick and shiny texture that in his family dialect (it was a gift from his mother), they jokingly call parachute cloth. The two bright spots moving through the gray-green space resemble satin paper cutouts collaged on a monochromatic wash, the air the most diluted, and the clouds, the earth, and the trees the most concentrated grays.

Nula, because he'd come on business—to deliver three cases of wine, a viognier, two cabernets, a sauvignon, and four local chorizos ordered the week before—and planned to visit a few other clients that afternoon, had dressed somewhat carefully, and besides the red camper has on a new shirt, white, lightweight, short-sleeve sweater, freshly ironed pants, and shiny loafers that explain his cautious advance in contrast to the other's inattentive, sure step and constant chatter as he carelessly and noisily sets his muddy rubber boots on the saturated patches of grass bordering the narrow, sandy path or in the sporadic puddles that interrupt it.

The gray background lends the red and the yellow an almost extravagant, overwrought brilliance that intensifies their presence to the eye in the empty field while paradoxically, somehow, causing them to lose, to the mind, a good portion of their reality. In the desolate poverty of the landscape, the striking garments, possibly because of their price (the yellow one, although it's European and more expensive, nevertheless looks more worn-out) produce an obvious contrast, or constitute, rather, an anachronism. The excessive presence of singular objects, though they break up the monotonous succession of things, end up, as with their overabundance, impoverishing them.

Calmly, concentrating on each word, Gutiérrez holds forth with disinterested disdain, half-turning his head over his left shoulder every so often, apparently to remind his company that he's the one being spoken to, although because of the distance that separates them, the open air, the movement that disperse the sounds he utters and, especially, the forceful sound of the boots against the puddles and submerged weeds, in addition to the concentration demanded by the protection of his loafers and pants, Nula can only fish out loose words and scraps of phrases, but in any case getting the general point, even though it's only the third time he's met Gutiérrez and even though their first meeting only lasted two or three minutes. From what he gathered at a previous meeting, as he listened with surprise and curiosity at some length when he brought the first three cases of wine, when Gutiérrez talks, it's always about the same thing.

If Nula imagined himself summarizing those monologues in a few words to a third person, they would be more or less the following: *They—people from the rich countries he lived in for more than thirty years—have completely lost touch with reality and now slither around in a miserable sensualism and, as a moral consequence, content themselves with the sporadic exercise of beneficence and the contrite formulation of instructive aphorisms. He refers to the rich as the fifth column and the foreign party, and the rest, the masses, he argues, would be willing to trade in their twelve-year-old daughter to a Turkish brothel for a new car. Any government lie suits them fine as long as they don't have to*

give up their credit cards or do without superfluous possessions. The rich purchase their solutions to everything, as do the poor, but with debt. They are obsessed with convincing themselves that their way of life is the only rational one and, consequently, they are continuously indignant at the individual and collective crimes they commit or tolerate, looking to justify with pedantic shyster sophisms the acts of cowardice that obligate them to shamelessly defend the prison of excessive comfort they've built for themselves, and so on, and so on.

The vitriol in the sentiment contrasts with the composure of his face each time he looks over his left shoulder, with the calm vigor of his movements, and with the monotone neutrality of a voice that seems to be reciting, not a violent diatribe, but rather, in a friendly, paternal way, a set of practical recommendations for a traveler preparing to confront an unfamiliar continent. His words aren't hastened or marred by anger, not cut off by interjections or indignant outbursts; instead, they pass easily and evenly across his lips, interspersed here and there with a Gallicism or Latinism, and if they sometimes stop or hesitate for a few seconds it's because in the three decades living abroad, one of them, relegated by disuse to some dark corner of the basement deep inside himself where he stores the incalculable repertory that constitutes his native tongue, is now slow to rise through the intricate branches of memory to the tip of the tongue that, like the elastic surface of a trampoline, will launch itself into the light of day. His discourse is at once ironic and severe, spoken with a distracted intonation difficult to peg as either authentic or simulated, or if the almost sixty-year-old man who uses it does so to communicate either a contained hatred or rather as a solipsistic and somewhat abstruse humorous exercise.

With regard to their ages, Nula is in fact twenty-nine and Gutiérrez exactly twice that, which is to say that one is just entering maturity while the other, meanwhile, will soon leave it behind entirely along with everything else. And although they speak as equals, and even with some ease, they refrain from the familiar *tú* form, the older man possibly because he left the country before its general use came into fashion in the seventies, and Nula because, as a commercial tactic, he prefers not to use the *tú* form with clients he didn't know personally before trying to sell them wine. Their use of *usted* and the difference in their ages doesn't diminish their mutual curiosity, and even though it's only the third time they've met, and though they've yet to reach a real intimacy, their conversation takes place in a decidedly extra-commercial sphere. The curiosity that attracts them isn't spontaneous or inexplicable to Gutiérrez, although he's as yet unaware of the exact reasons for Nula's interest, the vintner's responses the day they first met seemed unusual for a simple trader, and his parodic attitude when they met again, as he mimed the typical gestures and discourse of a merchant, interspersed with discreet allusions to Aristotle's Problem XXX.1 on poetry, wine, and melancholy, enabled him to glimpse the possibility of a truly neutral conversation, which would be confirmed immediately following the commercial transactions of that second visit.

The first meeting didn't last more than two or three minutes. Dripping wet, Gutiérrez emerged from his swimming pool and walked toward him across the neat lawn with the same indifference with which he placed his bare feet, Nula recalls, as he shows now, the rubber boots stepping through puddles that interrupt the path, or onto the wet weeds that border it. Nula had been recommended by Soldi and Tomatis, among others, and had spoken to him, Gutiérrez, on the phone the day before to set up the meeting for eleven thirty. Because this took place a few weeks before, in March, it was still summer. In the harsh, radiant morning sun, Nula watched Gutiérrez advance toward him from the white rectangle of the pool, itself framed by a wide rectangle of white slabs on which sat three wicker and canvas lounge chairs—one green, one red-and-white striped, and one yellow—all inscribed on a smooth, green landscape bordered at the rear by a dense grove, and flanked, beyond a stretch of green

earth, by the white house on the left and on the right by a pavilion with its obligatory grill and a shed that likely contained tools, bicycles, a wheelbarrow, a lawnmower, and so on. *I don't know if it was actually Gutiérrez, but whoever built it must've been inspired by those California houses that, from what I've learned on television, are made for people who've succeeded in life thanks to some righteous or dark arts,* suggested Tomatis the day he recommended Gutiérrez as a client. It actually wasn't such a luxurious house, but in any case it was definitely the most expensive in the area around Rincón, and even though Nula had never been to California he'd seen a lot of the same shows growing up, and as he took in the assemblage as Gutiérrez, dripping wet, approached him, he realized that, as usual and possibly for purely rhetorical purposes, Tomatis had exaggerated.

Instead, what surprised him was Gutiérrez's physical appearance. He'd expected someone elderly but this was a vigorous man, with a flat stomach, with proportioned angles, tanned by the sun, and whose gray hair, as neatly cropped as the lawn surrounding the swimming pool, and abundant russet gray body hair, which must have been black in his youth, sticking, because of the water, to his cheeks and shoulders, arms and legs, increased rather than diminished the impression of physical vigor, so much so that, considering the contradictory situation—less luxurious house than anticipated and a younger owner than imagined—Nula thought for a few seconds that he'd come to the wrong address. The contracted and somewhat deformed shadow that, owing to the height of the sun, gathered at the feet of the approaching man could have indicated, in an indirect way, a somewhat more complex inner life than his appearance and the conventional tranquility of the setting it moved through suggested.

—I didn't know how to let you know that I couldn't meet you today, after all, Gutiérrez had said. And Nula:

—Clearly it's the time for taking the water and not the wine.

Gutiérrez had laughed, shaking his head toward the pool.

—Not at all, he said. What happened is I received an unexpected visit this morning.

Just then Nula realized that although Gutiérrez had left the pool the water sounds continued. Someone, invisible from where he stood, was still splashing and swimming around. At that moment, a fluorescent green one-piece, its shoulders bent, with that same abstracted, preoccupied manner, tanned and maybe slightly more solid than five or six years before, the body of Lucía Riera, which Nula had come to know so well, was emerging up the metal ladder from the side of the pool closest to the house. Without even looking at them, Lucía had thrown herself onto the green canvas chair next to the pool. Gutiérrez had followed Nula's surprised expression somewhat worriedly, and a shadow there seemed to suggest that an explanation of some kind was called for.

—Don't imagine anything irregular, he said. She's my daughter.

The customer is always right, I get it, Nula had said later that same night to Gabriela Barco and Soldi at the Amigos de Vino bar, where he'd run into them—they changed bars frequently for what they called their “work dates”—*it comes with the territory and, thanks to my stoic indifference, costs me nothing. But I actually know Lucía Riera, married to the doctor Oscar Riera and separated for some time I believe. It's true that I lost touch with her for several years up until this morning, but I know perfectly well who her parents are, though I never met them. A man named Calcagno, a lawyer, was her father—he died several years ago—but her mother, barring evidence to the contrary, is still alive. It took effort not to punch Gutiérrez in the teeth when he told me she was his daughter, and I wasn't just furious but stunned too, because I couldn't believe he'd lie so blatantly, and I was even a little embarrassed that he'd dare do that to me. He must have sensed something like that in my face because he got serious and polite and solemn and said he'd walk me out. We left it that I would call him to set up another visit, something that, obviously, I don't intend to do.* Nula stopped, satisfied he

conveyed his indignation, but when he looked up he saw that Soldi was avoiding his gaze. After a few seconds, Soldi looked him straight in the eyes and, somewhat sheepishly, said, *And yet there are those who say that it might be or at least could be true. You should probably look for something else to get me indignant over.*

And so, out of curiosity, Nula had called Gutiérrez again the following week, and they set a date and time for the second meeting. In a sense, the practically imperceptible incident, which didn't quite mean anything in particular for either, but drew them both for a few seconds from the neutral and conventional territory where mercantile transactions are understood to take place, had made them mutually interesting and enigmatic in their own way, something that both took silent note of during the short telephone conversation when they set up the second meeting, and which they took pains to conceal when, several days later, they were once again face to face. The wine sale took place quickly—a case (six per) of viognier and two of cabernet sauvignon to start, plus four local chorizos—and once it was settled, the bill and the check signed and the receipt in Gutiérrez's hands, they took up a conversation that lasted more than two hours, on various topics that had little or nothing to do with wine, and during which, every so often, Gutiérrez elaborated his serene, disinterested soliloquies about *them*, the inhabitants, referred to with ironic disdain, of the rich countries he had lived in for over thirty years. They had sat down on a bench at the back of the courtyard, under the trees, after touring the property inside and out, though its details, if they sparked Nula's interest from time to time, seemed invisible to their owner. Their respective biographical details, which certainly interested them, did not form part of the conversation, at least in a chronological way, although every so often some personal element cropped up or was taken into consideration, like for example the medical and philosophical studies that Nula abandoned in succession, and his project, before selling wine, writing his *Notes toward an ontology of becoming*, or the reasons (never clarified, and cited as a means of formulating an aphorism rather than an actual confidence) that had propelled Gutiérrez abroad: *I left in search of three chimeras: worldwide revolution, sexual liberation, and auteur cinema.*

Finally, at around four thirty today, without calling, Nula had brought the wine. He parked the dark green station wagon in front of the white gate at the main entrance, just as Gutiérrez, coming out of the house, was preparing to lock the front door.

—I have the order, Nula said as he stepped from the car. Were you heading out?

—On an expedition in the area, replied Gutiérrez. Looking for an old friend. Escalante. Do you know him?

He'd never heard of him. According to Marcos Rosenberg, he lives in Rincón, on the outskirts of the town, but on the city side, about three miles away, and Gutiérrez had decided to invite him to the party he was planning to throw on Sunday and to which he was thinking he, Nula, might come to. Nula looked at the greenish sky and the dark horizon and, without saying anything, had laughed sarcastically.

—I would also like to order some more wine, knowing the habits of some of my guests.

And so, after carrying the three cases from the station wagon to the kitchen, Nula filled out another order: more white wine, more red, and more local chorizos. When they came out to the front gate, Nula looked at the heavy sky and said:

—Actually, the walk is tempting, even though it's definitely going to rain and I have a couple of clients waiting for me.

In fact, he regretted it the moment he began speaking, but the quickness and frank satisfaction of Gutiérrez's response immediately erased the fear of having shown his feelings too openly: Gutiérrez's sincerity neutralized his own. They still didn't know each other well enough to be spontaneous, and

their reciprocal attraction stemmed from what they hadn't figured out about each other: Gutiérrez's dubious paternity and, in addition to the sudden emotion he showed when Lucía emerged from the pool, Nula's singular conversation, blending, sometimes without a clear dividing line, commerce and philosophy.

When they reach the upper right corner of the rectangle they've been crossing at a diagonal, the bright yellow spot and the red one that follows it start up the mountain covered with acacias, at the same pace as before, neither slow nor fast, in a straight line toward the river. There is no path, but the ground is almost pure sand, so not much grass grows among the trees, and the rain, rather than softening the earth and forming puddles or wet layers of mud, had packed it down, and the two men walk on ground so hardened by the water that their footsteps hardly leave a trail. Clumps of pampas grass, gray like everything but the yellow earth, lay across the sandy ground, though when they reach the river, the vegetation of the island, on the opposite shore, some fifty meters away, seems more green, and the sand on the slope more red, a brick-like red that's almost orange from the sand mixing with the ferrous clay, in contrast to the pervasive grayness: the river, lead-colored and rippled, darkening with the afternoon at the end of a rainy day that hasn't once seen the sun.

—Southeast, Nula says when they reach the shore, pointing at a downward angle toward the leaden water and the waves that crest its surface in the direction opposite the current. His voice, as though issued from someone else, sounded strange to him, not during its fleeting sonorous existence, but the soundless vibration it left in his memory as it faded, perhaps caused by the silence that had taken hold after the sound of the scrape of their steps on the sandy earth had disappeared. The soft breeze from the southeast is only perceptible on the water. Or maybe Nula and Gutiérrez can sense it on their faces, but, accustomed to the inclemency, they don't notice what they feel. Each of them surveys the landscape with the same withdrawn expression he might have assumed had he been alone in this deserted place, the details each observes not coinciding with the other's, each of them assembling the island therefore in his own way, as though it were two distinct places, the island, the sky, the trees, the red slope, the aquatic plants at the riverbank, the water. For several seconds, Nula's thoughts are absorbed by the leaden, rippled surface, each of the identical, curling waves, continuously in motion, that sweep and form an edge which could best be represented not by a curve but rather, more precisely, by an obtuse angle, seeming to attend the visible manifestation of the becoming that, by presenting itself through repetition or a counterfeit stillness, permits the coarse heart the illusion of stability. For Nula, who often catches himself observing the same phenomena that once occupied his *Notes*, the island ahead, the alluvial formation, is proof of the continuous change of things: the same constant movement that formed it now erodes it, causing it to change size, shape, and place, and the coming and going of the material and of the worlds that it makes and unmakes is nothing more, he thinks, than the flow, without direction or objective or cause, of the time that, invisibly and silently, runs through them.

—See that? They're all the same, he says.

Gutiérrez looks at him, surprised.

—The waves, Nula says. Each one repeats the same disturbance.

—Not the same one, no, says Gutiérrez, without even looking at the surface of the water. His gaze passes curiously over the island, the air, the sky, darkening from the fading light and from the mass of clouds, a denser gray, that have been moving in from the east.

Gutiérrez doesn't seem to notice that Nula is watching him openly, as though he were concentrating on what he sees less because what surrounds him is particularly interesting than because moving his gaze over the landscape allows him better access to what's happening inside himself.

What little Nula knows about him makes him an enigma, certainly, but with a touch of irony Nula tells himself that ultimately even the things that are familiar to us are unfamiliar, if only because we've allowed ourselves to forget the mysterious things about them. *Quantitatively*, he tells himself, without a single word corresponding to his thoughts, *I know as little about him as I do about myself*.

Even what they know about him in the city is fragmentary. Everyone knows something that doesn't quite coincide with what everyone else knows. The ones who knew him before he left—Pichón Garay, Tomatis, Marcos and Clara Rosemberg, for example—had lost touch with him for more than thirty years. One day he just disappeared, without a trace, and then, just as suddenly, reappeared. From that group, the first to make contact with him, and completely by accident, had been Pichón Garay. *It was on the afternoon flight back to Buenos Aires, and he asked the man sitting next to me to change seats, he wrote to Tomatis a week after returning to Paris. (Pichón had spent a couple of months in the city, liquidating his family's last holdings, and in mid April Tomatis and Soldi had taken him to the airport, where he caught the afternoon flight to Buenos Aires, which at that time connected with a direct flight to Paris.) Before sitting down, he introduced himself. Willi Gutiérrez, did I remember him? It took me a second to place him, but he remembered everything from thirty years ago—El Gato's stories more so than mine, actually—and I'm still not sure if he knew which of us he was talking to. He said he saw us with Soldi at the airport, but he couldn't come over because he was checking his suitcase. He said you looked the same as always. For the fifty minutes the flight lasted he did practically all the talking, spouting off about Europe, and I learned that he's living between Italy and Geneva, but that he travels all over. His trip to the city lasted a day, of three in the country altogether. The afternoon before, he'd landed in Buenos Aires from Rome, slept at the Plaza that night, and the next morning had skipped up to the city to visit a house in Rincón that he was looking to buy (I didn't offer mine because it was all but sold), saying that he planned to settle in the area. That night he was staying at the Plaza again, and then back to Italy the next day. Our destinies, as you can see, are contradictory: he'd come back to buy a house, and I was there to sell one.*

According to Tomatis, the first people Gutiérrez had contacted when he moved into the house in Rincón had been the Rosembergs. *The first that I know of*, he'd clarified, *because from what I can tell he lives in several worlds simultaneously*. And Nula, who'd met up with Tomatis for coffee and to see him some wine, had responded: *Just like everybody else*. And Tomatis, in a falsely severe tone, said: *Don't get cute, Turk, I'm serious. He lived a double life before he left, one that even his closest friends didn't know about, and now he's come back to it*. Tomatis's suggestive tone apparently implied that he might know more than he was saying, and when, about a month later, after his first trip to see Gutiérrez, Soldi, in the Amigos del Vino bar, reluctantly hinted that Gutiérrez might not be lying when he said that Lucía was his daughter, Nula remembered the suggestion, but for now nothing quite makes sense as he stands on the riverbank, watching the leaden, rippled surface of the water, and his hand reaches into the camper's inside pocket for his cigarettes and lighter.

The real estate agent (who in fact was representing an agency from Buenos Aires in the transaction), a guy named Moro, was also one of Nula's clients. His assignment consisted in picking Gutiérrez up at the airport and taking him to see the house in Rincón, or rather on the outskirts of Rincón, at the north end of town, on the floodplain opposite the highway, where some new money had moved early in the 80s because they hadn't been able to buy in the residential section of Guadalupe, which other, wealthier people had bought up first and transformed into a kind of fortress, with private security and everything, blocking so many roads that the buses were forced to change routes. Moro figures that Gutiérrez must be very rich. Leaning toward Nula over the desk in his office on San Martín, like he was sharing a secret, a large map of the city hanging on the wall behind him, riddling

with different colored pins no doubt distinguishing the current states of the diverse property that his agency administered, Moro, rocking his comfortable swivel chair slightly, looking over his shoulder to check that no one was listening, though there wasn't anyone but them in the office, narrowing his eyes and lowering his voice, had hissed, admiringly, *I figure you'd have to measure it in palos verdes*—that is, by the millions.

The house had belonged to a cardiologist, a Doctor Russo, a public health secretary in the government that followed the military dictatorship. According to Moro, this Doctor Russo, who now lived in Miami, had been implicated in the disappearance of funds allocated to improving hospitals and the Public Assistance program, not to mention a shady story concerning bribes to pharmaceutical labs, and even as a businessman he'd been blemished in the eyes of the law, having served on the board of the Banco Provincial, where, after his tenure, something like a hundred million dollars had turned up missing, and not to mention the fact that the board members had passed around low-interest loans that were meant for poor people to buy a modest house somewhere, but which the board used to build mansions for themselves, some in Mar del Plata, and abroad even, in Punta del Este, in Florida, and in Brazil, north of Río de Janeiro, with the end result, according to Moro, that between the board and their rich friends all the funds for the preferential loans had been spent, and the hundred million dollar discrepancy caused the bank to go under, so none of them had to return the money they'd taken. A judge took an interest in the case, but the investigation went nowhere and anyway the responsible parties were already living in Marbella or Punta del Este or Florida. This had been the case with Doctor Russo, who'd sold the house in Rincón and a bunch of others around the country, bought according to Moro, with the money he'd made as a cardiologist and the dividends from his private clinic, and had left for Miami.

According to Moro, Gutiérrez's visit to the house didn't last more than ten or fifteen minutes. He walked through the interior rooms first—the six bedrooms plus the large living room, the bathroom, the kitchen, practically bigger than the living room, all of it on a single floor—and then, at the same speed, went out to explore the grounds, the grove at the back, the pavilion, the tool shed, and the swimming pool with nothing at the bottom but a puddle of muddy water where several generations of dead leaves were putrefying and in which a copious family of toads had taken residence. Gutiérrez spent the whole trip back to the city interrogating him about painters, about people specializing in cracked swimming pools, about the chances of finding a woman to take care of the cleaning, and about a gardener and caretaker, about someone who could fix the thatch roof over the pavilion, and so on, and so on, like the house was already his, and without uttering a single word for or against it—a place which he, Moro, knew hadn't been signed for in Buenos Aires—Gutiérrez spoke of it as though he owned it. To Moro he'd seemed like a nice enough guy, though slightly off: he was calm, quiet, polite, even, and he always had this friendly and somewhat distant smile pasted on his face. Moro said that he ended up feeling slightly uneasy, in any case, because everything he said or did, the usual stuff you do when you're settling a deal, seemed to confirm something for Gutiérrez, something he'd come searching for, and that ultimately he, Moro, realized that Gutiérrez was looking at him like some kind of museum piece or some exotic fish in an aquarium that he'd traveled thousands of kilometers to see firsthand. Moro told Nula that he'd been told by the Buenos Aires office to take Gutiérrez out to a fancy lunch at a place on Guadalupe where all the celebrities in the city, starting with the mayor, took important visitors, but that Gutiérrez said he didn't want to take up any more of his time, that he wanted to spend some time alone before the flight and would prefer to be dropped off near the grand house on San Lorenzo, a place that had its fifteen minutes back in the fifties, but which had turned into just another dark neighborhood dive. Nula knew the place well; in his last year at the university he and

a group of classmates would go there to learn to get plastered. The place wasn't actually that bad, just like the fancy place on Guadalupe wasn't that good. But he stopped himself from saying this because Moro was already saying that he'd seen him again that afternoon. At around four, he'd passed the estate agency without coming in, walking slowly along the shady side of the street, like people from the area did, gazing at the storefronts, the houses, and the people with a discreet look of indulgent satisfaction. According to Moro, he'd seemed happy, and since just then he was walking south out of the agency to visit a property they wanted to put up for sale, and since this was the direction that Gutiérrez was also walking, totally by happenstance and without meaning to he ended up following him for several blocks. Moro said that finally he, Gutiérrez, after looking at his watch, had gone into the arcade—even though there are five or six others, everyone calls it that, *the* arcade—quintessentially, because it was the first in the city to open, in the late fifties, and all the others, which are more modern, more important, and more luxurious, have to be referred to by their full name—and took a table in the courtyard. Moro sat thinking for a moment. He was just over forty, already pretty bald and with a bit of a paunch, well-dressed and friendly, a spontaneous sort of friendliness that had nothing to do with his business, but which actually came from his private life, because in fact he inherited the estate agency, a flourishing family business started by his grandfather and established in the area for over seventy years, meaning that, not having any financial problems of his own, he could lend a personal turn to business matters, reflecting in a disinterested way about people and what they did. There wasn't a block in the city, or in the neighboring smaller cities and towns, or likewise in the surrounding countryside, where you wouldn't find the proverbial signboard: ANOTHER (in red letters printed at an angle in the upper left corner of the white rectangle), in the center in larger, black letters MORO PROPERTY, and below that, in red letters again, FOR RENT (OR FOR SALE). And so whenever Nula would deliver his wine, the visits would last somewhat longer than with his other clients, although the sale of wine, because of the literary aura that surrounds the product, always overflows, to a greater or lesser extent depending on the person, into the private sphere. Nula was surprised to see him fall into such an introspective moment; from his expression, Nula could tell that he was trying to get his head around some unusual thought, something that he found difficult to put into words. Then he said, *When I was following him, I had this weird feeling I've never had before, and which, no lie, really bothered me. It was like we were walking down the same street, in the same place, but in different times. It occurred to me that if I walked up and said hello he wouldn't recognize me despite having spent the whole morning together, or worse yet he wouldn't even see me because we were moving through different dimensions, like in some sci-fi program.*

The day after his walk along the coast with Gutiérrez, Nula will see Tomatis at the southern end of the city, around six in the afternoon, behind the capitol building, and, stopping his car, will invite him in. *I accept*, Tomatis will say. *I'm waiting for the bus, but one that's full enough hasn't come along yet.* After exchanging some pleasantries, they'll end up talking about Gutiérrez, whose return to the city has, in fact, ended up causing something of a stir. Tomatis will tell him that, through his sister, he knows the couple—Amalia and Faustino—who work for Gutiérrez. The wife takes care of the house, the shopping, and the meals, and the husband the courtyard, the landscaping, the pavilion, the pool, and the garden. His sister relays the gossip from another woman, a sister-in-law of the first, who comes two or three times a week to help out around the house. Little things, purely circumstantial details (the couple is too earnest, according to Tomatis, to commit any sort of indiscretion) that Tomatis nevertheless interprets methodically and thus forms a general picture of the situation. *What I remember from thirty-some years back is that Gutiérrez left the city suddenly, that he stayed in Buenos Aires for a year, and that in the end the earth swallowed him whole. With other people who'd gone to*

Europe, to the States, to Cuba, to Israel, or even to India, we heard reports every so often, but with him nothing, not a single thing. It was like he'd died, gone missing, disintegrated, evaporated, dissolved into the impenetrable, innumerable world. Although . . . now that I think about it . . . hold on, let's see . . . yeah, one night, many years later, in Paris, Pichón took me to a party where I met this Italian girl who, when she heard where we came from, Pichón and I, told me she knew a Gutiérrez who was from the same city and who lived between Italy and Switzerland and wrote screenplays under a pseudonym. His name was Guillermo Gutiérrez, but she didn't know what pseudonym he used for the screenplays. I'd forgotten that detail almost as soon as I heard it, and now, suddenly, it came back to me. Actually, the Italian girl was wrong, Gutiérrez wasn't from the city. He came from someplace north of Tostado called El Nochero. His grandmother, who was dirt poor, had saved up some money with the help of the church to send him to school in the city. He went to a Catholic high school, and the moment he graduated, his grandmother died—it was like she'd been staying alive just to make sure her grandson was on the right track. He enrolled at the law school, where he met Escalante, Marco Rosenberg, and César Rey, and they became inseparable. The four of them formed a sort of political-literary avant-garde that didn't last long—besides their youth and their friendship they didn't have anything in common, not even politics or literature. Since he didn't have a penny, unlike the other three, who despite being older still had school paid for by their families, Gutiérrez started working, a little bit of everything, until his Roman Law professor, who liked him, took him on as a clerk in his office, where he was partners with Doctor Mario Brando, a poet and head of the precisionist movement, as far as I know the most hateful fraud ever produced by the literary circles in this fucking city. But on that count I suggest you consult with Soldi and Gabriela Barco, who are researching the history of the avant-garde in the province. I'll get off at the corner. Thanks for the ride. And Nula will answer, Not a problem. But what was it you were telling me about the couple that works for him? And Tomatis, with a studied gesture of indifference, will downplay its importance, while letting slip—unintentionally, of course—two or three melodramatic and mysterious little details: *This and that. Nothing really important. But if push came to shove I believe we'd find that those two, although they haven't known him long, would sacrifice their lives for their new boss.* And then, before getting out, he'll discuss the weather and other mundane things.

But Tomatis will only tell him these things tomorrow, at around the same time, after another cloudy day that, as it ends, will nonetheless allow fragments of pale blue, faintly red from the last rays of an already disappeared sun, though still clean and luminous, to shine through the breaks in the gray clouds that high winds will begin to disperse. For now, though, as he takes a cigarette from the pack and brings it to his lips, the air and the rippled surface of the river, both an even, leaden gray from the double effect of the dusk and the increasingly low, dark clouds, remain in shadow. Two meters away Gutiérrez, his silhouette sharply outlined against the darkness, over which his bright yellow waterproof jacket glows with an attenuated splendor, seems absorbed by an intense memory or thought, so much so that his arms, separated slightly from his body, have stopped in the middle of a forgotten movement. Less than a minute has passed since they stopped at the edge of the water, but because they've been silent, separated from each other by their thoughts, time appears to have stretched out, seeming to pass not only on the horizontal plane that their instincts recognize, but also on a vertical one, to an inconceivable depth, suggesting that even the present, despite its familiar brevity, and even along its unstable, gossamer border, might actually be infinite. Gutiérrez, apparently remembering that Nula is with him, returns to his open, slightly urbane manner, and smiles.

—I was time traveling, he says.

—And I was riding the present, trying not get bucked off that wild bronco, Nula says.

—Which luckily can sometimes be a gentle mare, says Gutiérrez.

—If we keep developing the metaphor, we're going to end up in the zoo.

—Screenwriters are contractually obligated to use the primary local material. In London, it always got to be cloudy, and don't dare forget to fill the Sahara with camels, says Gutiérrez, a quick spark of retrospective disdain in his eyes. And, bringing his hand to his forehead, he rubs at something as he raises his head and looks up at the sky. A drop, he says.

—Two, Nula says, touching his nose while scrutinizing the dark clouds. Looking back down around himself, he thinks of his red camper, his white pullover, his new shirt, his freshly ironed pants. He looks at his loafers, where a rim of yellow mud has formed along the entire perimeter of their soles, and a few stains of the same yellowish substance have stuck to their insteps, and he makes two or three involuntary gestures, at once ambiguous and contradictory.

Gutiérrez watches him openly, laughing, as if his misfortune amused him, and then, deliberately reaching slowly into an interior pocket of his raincoat, the wide and open kind, like a marsupial pouch that some of those coats have, he withdraws an umbrella with a short handle, where he presses a metal button, and the canopy of smooth and glowing fabric divided into seven different colored sections unfolds with a sharp sound, sudden and exact, and a perfection that approaches the theatrical. The sections of the canopy represent the color spectrum, red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet, with identical segments, and the composite of the two men and the umbrella form a multicolored blotch that is clear and mobile and that stands out sharply against the gray background darkened by the double effect of the clouds and the dusk.

Nula, slightly stupefied, takes in the umbrella's multicolored apparition, but he doesn't rush to shelter himself under the canopy's limited circumference, typical of the shelter offered by collapsible umbrellas, despite their price. Nula's reticence to seek the protection that placing himself shoulder to shoulder with Gutiérrez would offer has two motives: the first is that for now he's sensed only a few sparse and scattered drops that couldn't yet be called an actual rainfall or even a spitting one, and the second is that just as the multicolored canopy is unfolding, giving the impression that the two phenomena had been synchronized deliberately, in one of the pockets of his camper his cell phone has started ringing. Moving a few steps away mysteriously, he puts back the cigarettes and lighter that he'd just taken uselessly from his pocket. (He actually smokes very little, but he tends to carry a few cigarettes to share with clients, though today, he can't really tell why, he feels a stronger urge to smoke than usual.) Nula pulls the cell phone from his other pocket, and, with a subtle gesture of apology toward Gutiérrez, turns his back to him as he brings the phone to his left ear and answers the call. Gutiérrez observes him patiently but skeptically, isolated within the imaginary cylinder that the umbrella's circumference projects toward the sandy ground, forming an illusory refuge from surveillance, and when he moves his arm slightly and the multicolored circle shifts onto an inclined plane the ideal shape to contain him becomes a truncated cylinder.

Although for a man of almost sixty, however well he keeps himself up, youth tends to seem insolent, and although Nula's full and virile twenty-nine years, the fastidiousness of his clothes, and his apparent self regard seem overly manifest for his taste, Gutiérrez watches him indulgently, almost with pity, thinking that the energy the young radiate—so stimulating that, subjugated by it, they confuse it with the essence of their own singularity—they might not actually deserve. The indulgence is erased when Nula, turning around, raises his voice and makes two or three comical faces in his direction, shaking his free arm as he explains to the person on the other end (later he'll explain that was his boss) that, because he's with an important client (and he extends his arm and wags his index finger at Gutiérrez with an exaggerated and complicit smile) he has to cancel the two appointments for

has for later in the afternoon. Apparently, the person on the other end of the line lets himself be easily convinced, and from the things he says, Gutiérrez realizes that Nula, without having to insist much, but by the sheer effect of his communicative euphoria, has induced his boss to call the clients and reschedule their appointments for the same time tomorrow. Nula shuts off the apparatus and, stowing it in his pocket, takes two or three decisive steps toward Gutiérrez.

—Free as the wind until tomorrow morning at eleven, he says when he reaches Gutiérrez's side. And he turns his head sharply upward again because suddenly and silently a dense rain has started to fall. With two hops he reaches Gutiérrez, claiming for himself, in a tacit way, a portion of the meager protection offered by the umbrella.

Without really knowing why, Gutiérrez, who likes every kind of rain, prefers that silent kind, without storm or wind or thunder or lightning, and which forms gradually, almost surreptitiously, out of low, dark clouds, so loaded with water that, from this excess, they split, suddenly, and empty themselves upon the world. In general, it will fall in the afternoon, and, often, after the warm spell of a wet day. Indifferent to Nula's somewhat ostentatious irritation (he's almost pasted to him, and shuffling his feet impatiently, seems to want to incite him to keep walking), Gutiérrez watches it, not in the sky, which has brightened a bit and where the drops, despite their size, are invisible, but rather on the plants, on the yellowish ground, on the river, where, as they collide, after an incorporeal flight in which they seem to cross an extrasensory void, they rematerialize. Gutiérrez's senses perceive the rain across the deserted expanse that surrounds them, while his imagination projects it over the contiguous and distant spaces they have crossed and that, despite their imaginary provenance, are complemented by and confused with the empirical plane that surrounds them. What he perceives from the point in the verdant space where they find themselves, his imagination likewise assigns to the entire region, where, for the past year or so, after more than thirty years away, he has been living. And he thinks he can see, in the leaves that shudder silently as the drops fall, in their impacts with the yellow earth, and, especially, in the agitation that the drops cause as they cover the rippled surface of the river over an infinite number of simultaneous points, the intimate cipher of the empirical world, each fragment, as distant and distinct from the present as it might seem—the most distant star, for example—having the exact value as this, the one he occupies, and that if he could disentangle himself from the grasp of this apparently insignificant present, the rest of the universe—time, space, inert matter, living matter—would reveal all its secrets. Gutiérrez senses that Nula has guessed his thoughts, or has inferred them from his demeanor, and so has suppressed his annoyed gestures, opting instead for what appears to be sincere patience and calm. He allows himself a few seconds more, and then, giving Nula a gentle push on the elbow, urges him on.

They advance in silence, a bit faster than before, but, from their demeanor, they don't seem worried by the effects of the rain on the expensive clothes they're wearing, and Nula especially, thinking Gutiérrez, after having postponed the mercantile obligations for that afternoon, no longer seems interested in the state of his shoes or the pulchritude of his red camper. Actually, because the multicolored umbrella is too small to cover them both completely, the rain now soaks not only the lower parts of their bodies, depending on their position and according to the rhythm of their stride as they hike over the rough terrain (from which the path has disappeared), but also cascades over the edges of the canopy onto their shoulders. The bright and mobile blotch that travels along the riverbank is startling, because of this very brightness, against the uniform gray of the landscape.

This is the exact impression that comes across, fifteen minutes later, to the inhabitants of the first ranches that, on its outskirts, a dispossessed stretch of land they seem exiled to, nonetheless marks the edge of the town. Many surprised faces mark their arrival under the rain from the sleepy and utter

misery of the settlement, the only variation from the tedious and inescapable exclusion where poverty relegates them. Ten or fifteen shacks of straw, branches, cans, bags, and cardboard—refuse from the nearby dump—half falling apart or possibly never completed or more likely repaired and reappointed every so often with the haphazard and heterogeneous material offered by that same trash heap, constantly at the edge of collapse and in any case inadequate for living or even dying in, crowded together in a barren field among four or five sparse trees so ragged that they seem infected by the poverty, and where a mess of knickknacks, busted chairs, dismantled wardrobes, rusted grates, broken toilets crumbling among the weeds, paper and plastic bags twisted and half-buried in the mud, trunk animal and human excrement, leather, bones, and dead branches litter the narrow space between the structures, and where three or four chickens and a dozen dogs, all of them rawboned and afflicted, wander around. At the back of a plot of untilled ground, two thin horses, indifferent to the rain, nibble at the yellowed grass. The filthiness of the ground stretches over the fifteen or twenty meters to the water. The smell of rotten fish, of sewage, and of carrion rises from the riverbank, and the earth is covered with dirty paper, cardboard disintegrating in the rain, broken bottles and rusted cans, ash clumped together by the humidity, and even the carcass of a dog, hardened and dried despite the rain soaking it, a carcass whose owner, in the previous weeks, had managed to suffer, die, rot, and dry out again, so that, at its death, what it left behind will end up as dust, returned to the earth, or as bones forever.

Some of the shacks are shaded near their doorways by a kind of eave propped up on a pair of twisted poles and under which a rickety chair, old crates, or a stack of two or three trunks serve as seats. Outside one of the shacks, a double car seat, on the ground, leans against the partition that frames up the entrance. The poles of an abandoned garden, in the open ground where the settlement ends, point, in parallel lines, toward the gray sky. Both adults and children watch them as they pass. Some come out of their shacks and stare openly, but, apparently, without interest. The multicolored anachronism they comprise—contrasting with the immense gray-brown blotch of the settlement which also stains the vegetation, the animals, and the people—seems to activate slow, rusted sensor mechanisms in the inhabitants, consigned to some remote corner of their mind by lack of use. Gutiérrez, raising his free hand, offers a generalized greeting as they pass that the others fail to acknowledge, or acknowledge only later, behind the curtain of rain, when they have already passed and can no longer register it, not from suspicion or timidity, and much less so from aggression, but rather from stupor, from indecision, from indifference.

—I feel like a sideshow freak, Gutiérrez murmurs. I wish I'd never been born.

—It's not so bad, Nula says, also in a low voice, prefaced by the same short, dry laugh that, as he emits it, he realizes he uses only with Gutiérrez, meant perhaps to display a self-control that, in fact, is far from authentic. But I know what you mean, he adds. My father was convinced that the real problem with the world isn't poverty, but wealth, and that's why he had to die.

Turning his head suddenly, Gutiérrez observes him carefully, but all he finds is Nula's profile because Nula, as though he hadn't noticed anything, continues looking ahead, into the rainy space that separates them from a crop of saturated trees.

—Someone *over there* traded in his car, and so your father had to get murdered, mutters Gutiérrez, turning back toward the trees that obliterate the horizon at the end of the landscape. And, after a short pause, the litany, which Nula could see coming, starts up again: *who've ransacked the planet and now seem determined to do the same thing to the whole solar system, all so that they don't have to resole their shoes and instead buy themselves a new pair every month; who build luxury resorts in the poorest areas so they can water ski and scuba dive and get a tan in the middle of winter and stay*

bungalows that simulate a primitive existence but where they serve all-you-can-eat breakfasts and lunches that Roman orgy-goers would be embarrassed by, and especially at night when they go clubbing and swap wives and then complain when the locals kidnap a handful of them that they never hear from again, they, who would ravage everything to see their privileges maintained or amplified and are inclined to do the same over the ruins of the whole universe simply from the voluptuousness their dominion arouses. And Nula, with resigned irony, thinks, Yeah, but he bought himself Doctor Russo's mansion, two kilometers from a shantytown, and, according to Moro, you'd have to calculate his fortune by the millions.

Though they walk downstream, the direction the river runs is not indicated by anything on the surface but the tension created there by the many rough and parallel waves, riddled with thousands of projectiles of rain that pierce them as, pushed by the southwest wind, they encounter the resistance of the current. This tension is so uniform and the fall of the drops so regular that the rippled surface of the water seems less like a medium whose impulse is renewed continuously by the opposing forces that push it in contradictory directions than like a fixed, gelatinous substance that, because of some hidden tremor, trembles and vibrates constantly, and the drops that strike it, despite being always new, seem always the same, captured for a gray but distinct instant.

When they reach the grove and start to cross it, the tall crowns of the eucalyptus planted in rows parallel to the river—they have to turn away from the riverbank slightly as they approach the center of the town—shelter them from the rain, but at the same time the rain seems more real among the trees than in the open; the bark of the trees seems lacquered by the damp, and the ochre trunks, dark and shining where they're not covered with bark, soaked in water, make it more distinct, as do the drops that cascade from the branches, and the odor of eucalyptus that the water amplifies, and the soft but numerous sound that the drops, continuous and polyphonic, produce against the branches and the trunks, against the leaf bed rotting on the ground, against the earth. At their arrival, two or three toads motionless at the foot of a tree, stiffen and puff up from anxiety, from anger, or from fear, and they immediately flee with ineffective and clumsy jumps in various directions, while in the treetops a tumult of leaves and wings produced by invisible birds—of considerable size judging by the sound intensity—indicates that the presence of Gutiérrez and Nula has not gone unnoticed. As they leave the grove they are able to make out, beyond a narrow ditch so choked with weeds that it's impossible to tell if there's water at the bottom, the first houses, on the first streets, which apparently follow the straight line that the municipality assigned them, but, lacking sidewalks or gutters or even trees to mark the boundaries between street and sidewalk, are not yet fully streets; there are only a few isolated houses, built of unplastered brick or adobe, two or three per block, constructed along the outer perimeter of the rectangular territories that delimit the blocks, as in so many other towns, whose outskirts, though included within the urban space by the geometric design that demarcated the town before the town was chartered, before materializing into houses, streets, life—an abstract idea of the town, diagramed with a ruler, in the same imagination of those who projected it—are confused with the countryside. Where the sidewalks should be there are weeds that, in some cases, extend from the sandy street all the way to the edges of the houses; sometimes, because the inhabitants have pulled them up, but almost always because their simple coming and going has eliminated the weeds, a clear path of bare earth has been opened from the fence (when there is a fence) to the middle of the street.

The rain seems more mournful in the empty town than in the countryside or on the river, and though the houses are becoming more and more frequent as they approach the center, and, here and there, though it's not yet dark, some are lit up inside, these lights do not manage to give an impression of shelter or well-being. In the front gardens the plants drip water, and at the foot of each—hibiscus

(which in the area they call *juveniles*), roses, dahlias, chrysanthemums, and many others—lies a multicolored jumble of fallen petals flattened by the rain. Through one window, an old woman holding a forgotten *mate* in her hand meets their gazes but does not respond to their subtle greeting. In the side yards and rear courtyards, visible through screen doors or open gates, hanging clothes, propane tanks, blackened furniture, broken dishes, and brightly colored plastic toys, abandoned on the ground, shimmer with water. Finally they reach the town proper, but the neat cabins with their trim lawns and swimming pools don't lessen the oppressive feel, and not only from being empty in the middle of the week, because the ones that are lit up, with a new car parked out front or in a garage whose door was left open, and even those where they can see people coming and going through the windows, all secrete tedium, if not affliction. In many houses the flickering lights, caused by the discontinuity of televised images they project, make patterns that filter through the windows, despite the curtains and shutters being closed, and Gutiérrez and Nula, without making any comment, as they advance through the silence that accompanies the splashing of their footsteps, under the multicolored umbrella that looks like the yellow rain jacket and the red camper, glows dimly in the blue dusk, both guess, from the fragmentary sounds that reach them every so often—voices and music that retain their shape despite the lack of context and the distance—that in every house they're watching the same show, some afternoon soap opera no doubt.

Closer to the center of town, the sidewalks are fully formed, some are even made of brick, and on the streets immediately surrounding the square these are ancient structures, high above the street, bulwarks against the floods that, when they're heavy, Nula explains, can overrun even the highest sidewalks and flood the inner courtyards beyond. An illuminated doorway opens onto the high brick sidewalk and a uniformed guard—the watchman at the entrance to the police station—watches them curiously, slightly intimidated, apparently, possibly because of their expensive clothing, since it goes without saying that the wealthy inspire deference in the keepers of the peace and that they serve their pleasure. Gutiérrez stops suddenly, and Nula, realizing it only after a few seconds, takes two or three steps beyond the umbrella's protective canopy and stops in the middle of the sidewalk without turning around. From where he stands, he can hear the sound that the guard's shoes make as he comes to attention, the exchange of greetings, and the cordial and intricate directions that the guard's heavily accented voice gives Gutiérrez to Escalante's house.

—It's on the other side of the square, Gutiérrez says when he catches up with Nula and they resume their walk under the umbrella.

Nula doesn't answer, but as soon as they reach the next block, lowering his voice, fractured slightly by some violent emotion, he says:

—A few years ago, there were lots of people who crossed that doorway and never came out again.

—Your father? Gutiérrez asks in a low voice.

—No. He was killed in greater Buenos Aires.

They fall silent again. Now that the dusk has reached the edge of night, more lights are coming on around the square. And because the streetlights are still off, a last luminescence, somewhere between gray, blue, and green, causes porous and dark reflections to shine, here and there, off the wet objects. Inwardly, Nula senses Gutiérrez's confusion, but out of cruelty pretends not to notice it in order to prolong his discomfort, telling himself, almost reflexively, but immediately feeling guilty for thinking it, that Gutiérrez must have had it good in Europe while so many were tortured to death, defenseless and blind, in the town they're walking through under the rain. Nula realizes that his cruelty doesn't come from any sense of moral superiority, but rather from the brutal suspicions that have been plaguing him since the moment when Lucía, in that green swimsuit, had stepped from the pool.

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