Buenos Aires: The City as a Chart, Chronicles and Tales. Translation of *Primeros Dias Porteños* by Anna Kazumi Stahl

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Beginning in Buenos Aires

Arriving in a city having prepared oneself neither cartographically nor linguistically is a fortuitous minor disaster, an apprenticeship left to the hand of fate. Events occur sequentially but without any apparent syntax and lacking their normal coherence. Words express a certain music. Roads form a maze. Gestures return to their primal state of corporeal movement, although one always suspects a profusion of possible meanings. Everything happens as in the eye of a storm.

You have to know what the eye of a storm is. I know what it is. For I come from a land of hurricanes, the only kind of storm that has what is known as “the eye of the storm.” The winds begin on the high sea and keep accelerating: they take the energy from the water and start to spin in opposing directions at the same time. A natural dynamo is created which generates and expels so much energy that a hollow is formed in the centre. It is empty, a negative space surrounded by a deafening gale. Nothing happens inside the “eye”; it is carried along by the gigantic whirlwind. And the silhouette drawn by radars shows a perfect oval and two big arms or tails that stretch out along opposing curves, becoming narrower toward the tip, like eyelashes.

I came to Buenos Aires for the first time in the winter of 1988 and from

the beginning it provoked a very strange impression of dislocation and anchorage. Something perhaps analogous to a hurricane. But benign.

I suppose there are clear and objective reasons for having found myself in a state that could be called “confusion” during that initial visit here. In the first place, Buenos Aires was an unexpected destination. Today (twenty-two years later) I also describe it as fortunate. Nevertheless, at that moment it was only the former: unplanned, unforeseen, even—in some ways—inconceivable.

It goes like this: I had applied for a scholarship to go to Mexico, which meant crossing only one border located no more than a few hours by car from where I lived in California. From an academic perspective, the objective was to trace Asian immigration in the region. I was also motivated by the possibility, before, during, or after, of doing an intensive Spanish language course. I didn’t know a word of the language, but even so, I wanted to broaden my studies of literature and of migration to Latin America.

It was probably for this reason that I was immensely gratified, on receiving a letter from the Latin America Studies Summer Travel Grant Program in the first days of May, to spot amongst the usual standard formulas, the words “scholarship granted.” And at almost the same moment, I was surprised and disturbed to come across the scholarship description “to undertake research in Buenos Aires Argentina.”

I think I must have stood there frozen on the doorstep of my house for quite a while with the letter in my hand, until it finally dawned on me: I had won the scholarship, but nothing else I had planned remained intact. I was not going to the place that amongst several I had inquired about and chosen. The place to which I had also made several calls to clarify details of the Spanish course, such as timetables, payment arrangements, housing and others. No. Now I was looking at a destination that was remote, almost inverted. Buenos Aires, Argentina. I stared at that name and nothing came to mind. Nothing, except isolation and distance and other abstractions of that kind. After a few minutes—and, I admit it somewhat meekly—I managed to call to my mind a vision (vague, unsteady) of a point in the lower reaches of the terraqueous globe of my childhood. Worse than an abstraction. A portent of lapse, carelessness, indecision, squandering, disorder . . .

To top it off, I had to depart in less than a week. (It was a departure for a family trip, previously planned and unchangeable, to spend six weeks with my relatives in Japan. The consequence was that on my return I would have not even one day of rest before leaving again to take up the two-month scholarship in Buenos Aires.)

And so it was, that towards the end of June 1988, I arrived in Buenos Aires still without having learned a word of Spanish, without having changed

any money, and having equipped myself with nothing more than the folder of immigration documents—papers which I had collected and had stamped at the Argentine Consulate on Powell Street San Francisco in a frenzy that lasted the whole day of May 9. Nothing more than that. From that moment on, exhausted and blinking in the still bright sun of the California summer evening, I would not again open that folder. Only the passport would issue a helpful reminder during the long journey in May and June 1988; every time I had to pass by the counter of some official, a page in the middle would hit me in the eye (the Argentine visa covered almost two pages, and was three times the size of the Japanese visa.) The words were big and bold: *Visa—Permiso de Ingreso al País—Estadía Temporaría, República Argentina, sello, sello, firma, sello, Consulado Argentina, San Francisco California, Estados Unidos de América* and *el 09 del 05 de* 1988. It's true that between the 9th of May and the 24th of June (my arrival in Buenos Aires) I saw this entry permit several times. I saw it, but it conveyed nothing to me. It did not translate into an expectation, into the link in a plan or in a syntax, nor into a story line. The simple truth, is that I landed at Ezeiza Airport with no clear idea of where I was.

The first lucky break occurred on Friday the 6th of May: I ran into a friend in the already empty corridors of the faculty. And since she, a history student, spoke Spanish, I told her the unusual story of my scholarship to Mexico, which was now sending me to Buenos Aires. It turned out that she was just about to go to Buenos Aires herself on an internship for the northern summer. From June to September she would work in the office of an important newspaper. She would be in the heart of Buenos Aires every day, a few metres from the presidential palace. She said this emphatically, in a way I was unsure how to interpret. But I didn't ask. We agreed to meet up there and perhaps share a rented apartment. She also knew of a language school which she assured me was "the best in the world." I looked at her in bewilderment. We weren't close friends, but I knew her enough to know that hyperbole was not one of her characteristics. She was from Chicago and her name was June Stevenson. She was serious and hardworking: she had been a waitress and then a reporter to pay for her studies; she preferred history to arts, documentaries to television, campaigns for the Democratic Party to sit-ins, and the La Peña Cultural Center to the Oakland Down Home Blues.

My friend did not know where she was going to be staying by the time I arrived more than six weeks later. We agreed to communicate with each other through the American Express office (at that time it still offered the service of keeping any letter that might arrive for a card holder for seventy days). June would send me her details to the AMEX office in Kyoto so that I could locate her in Buenos Aires when I arrived at the end of June.

I had a few more days in California—I had to obtain the visa, buy the ticket and meet with the professor who would supervise my research when I returned. The professor gave me several copies of a letter of introduction that I could use to make contact with writers and academics in Buenos Aires. She also gave me a list of names (with telephone numbers) to get started. I looked at the numbers, the names, and the streets and experienced a slight giddiness. It was not totally unpleasant. But it was unsettling. It was as if what I could see before my eyes might suddenly turn into tissue or gelatin. I put the piece of paper away, thanked the professor and left. Two days later, I boarded the plane for Tokyo.

23/06/1988, Thursday

I walk along the aisle of the bullet train between Kyoto and Tokyo. I arrive at the carriage where I am seated with my mother. We have been in Japan for the six weeks we had planned, although not all the time together: I explored the north and the south, other islands, little villages, mountains; and she went to the kabuki theatre, to the kimono shops, to the cemetery to clean her father's grave. However we are together now and we are leaving. I go with her to catch her flight home. And then, three hours later, I get on the plane. The itinerary reads *Tokyo-Los Angeles*, *Los Angeles-Miami*, and finally, *Miami-Buenos Aires Argentina*.

Yes, I am finally going to that place or that quasi-place, I would have to say, there still being nothing else in my mind except papers and stamps and innumerable letters and odd numbers. And I feel relief, because I will be able to convert that cloud of confusion into a clear and concrete understanding, into a way of knowing.

23/06/1988, Thursday

We take off from the runway at Narita and gain altitude with surprising speed. As the airplane turns, it provides me with a sweeping view of the flat urban space, a grey-speckled monster on the surface with blue tiles that sparkle like lapis lazuli, and an occasional glint when a rice-field catches the light of the sun. I have a window seat, a restricted space, but one that I find welcoming: all one could need is within arm's reach—a book, a light, an air vent, headphones for the radio, a magazine, a blanket and a small nécessaire with toothbrush, moisturising cream and other items for personal hygiene. How would it be to live in a cubicle barely bigger than one's own body, but with the same shape? And to never have to leave it? A uterus, or a sarcophagus? No. Neither one nor the other. A uterus and a sarcophagus and an airline seat and an armchair. All of them vehicles for migration.

24/06/1988, Friday

They wake us for breakfast. It is dark outside. They switch on the cabin lights and a voice announces that we are a few minutes from Buenos Aires. They tell us the date and the time: it is Friday the 24th of June and the local time is 6.50 in the morning.

The plane shakes. Everyone remains silent. I see some people make the sign of the cross.

I get up and obediently follow the others as we go towards the exit. The other passengers take coats out of the external pockets of their hand luggage. Where is mine? In the brown case that I hurriedly packed in another hemisphere and which, to top it off, is stored in the underbelly of this gigantic machine.

I get to the door of the airplane and right there, at the threshold, I notice an opening between the metal fuselage and the rubber of the folding corridor that they have extended from the building. I look through the gap and I see a dark grey sky, barely hinting at a dawn and I feel cold (cold!) and I smell something else. It's an odd smell, but pleasant, dense and metallic, heavier than the usual metallic smells, and strangely sweet. What is it? (For several years I would associate this smell with the city of Buenos Aires—always with pleasure—at least until later when by chance I would discover the true source: it is the lead in the gasoline here.)

I leave the arrival hall of the airport. June sees me and I see her; we greet each other enthusiastically, with a hug and we head towards the exit doors.

The taxi is painted black, with a yellow roof. We sit in the back and June provides the driver with directions in a fluent and masterly Spanish. The sun irritates my eyes. I rub my hands, bring them together and blow to make them warm. We get on to a busy highway: some of the cars are old models, with untidy bodywork. There are big trucks for fuel and for milk and others, small and rickety, which carry workers or tools, barrels and cables. Suddenly, from an elevated ramp, the city appears—it is the first time I see it—and it is a sea of greys and silvers, unruly and vigorous. Then we come off the ramp and the panoramic view disappears. I think I will go to sleep. June chats with the taxi driver in Spanish. I have some clips for the frame of my spectacles, an old pair that I bought in Germany. I look for the case in the backpack that I am carrying and I find them: the facades, the asphalt, the fragment of visible sky turns dark green.

We arrive. Not at a house or an apartment, or a tent or a guesthouse, or refuge of any kind. We are right in the centre of the city: traffic, horns,

cement and neon. I barely manage to catch a glimpse of the sign at the intersection; it seems like a miracle, but I catch the names of the streets: *Carlos Pellegrini* and *Corrientes*. We are in the centre, says June and then I record in my memory *centre* together with *Carlos Pellegrini* and *Corrientes*, but these words remain there unconnected, like seeds in a summer squash: I have the coordinates but they are indecipherable, impossible to locate in a bigger syntax, an urban logic. I almost make this observation to June, but I think better of it and remain quiet. Because I am afraid that if I say this, she will immediately buy me a map. And I don't want that. I would prefer, while I can, to do without one. I recall the impression I had when we were going along the elevated part of the highway: the city like a grey sea, choppy, at times gleaming and suddenly opaque, but above all changeable, unsettled. Is this Buenos Aires? Will I be able to harness this impression once I have understood the urban system? I silently promise myself to take the city in small doses.

Only a few days earlier, in a street close to the centre of Kyoto, a foreigner had chosen to unleash his complaints on me. "The signs are in Roman letters in the centre, which is good because you can orient yourself, so there's no problem. But you go one or two blocks in any direction, a couple of blocks out of the centre and the Roman letters disappear. What's that about eh? Do you know what I'm saying? Do you see what the issue is? It means that they don't *want* us to orient ourselves. It's anti-foreigner. Anti-tourist!" He had raised his voice and his face was red. The Japanese passed us on the sidewalk without showing any emotion. They left us in peace. But he was frustrated. Now in Buenos Aires I remembered him and thought: "What luxury it is to not need to orient myself today. What luxury. What luck."

June indicates to the taxi driver that he should stop just beyond Corrientes. She pays him with an impressive bundle of small coloured notes, so many that my Japanese guilt makes me assure her that as soon as I change some dollars, I will give her my share of the cost. She laughs and says: "Agreed, but it's not as expensive as you think."

June is going to take me to a place nearby to get some Argentinean currency: *australes*. She walks quickly and throws nuggets of information my way which, if I manage to take them in, I also memorise. "Change only what you need for the day. Every day the rate changes so it's best to change according to your immediate needs and not plan for the future." "Never change money at the airport. They'll kill you." She also explains to me: "We came here first before changing money, because it's Friday and already after midday, you have to change money and I wanted you to meet the director of the language school."

24/06/1988, Friday

We walk along Corrientes and leave behind the other avenue which, although a cross street, is clearly the principal avenue, from any point of view. I scan it in the light, as pristine as a laser, in the 9am sun on a diaphanous June morning in Buenos Aires—I squint because (1) I don't have good sunglasses for a rapid and efficient appraisal of the area and (2) I have just travelled 20,000 kilometres in 36 hours (approximate numbers) and I find myself standing with my bag before the widest and most complex avenue that I have ever seen, and which I can barely even begin to conceive as such (that is, as a single avenue rather than a circuit that includes two or three). When my friend and only guide turns half way around and heads off in the opposite direction, I look over my shoulder towards that main boulevard: so many lanes, so many monuments, so many traffic lights, so many flower beds in the centre.

At any rate, I immediately have to suspend my visual inspection because I collide with several people with my case or with my body because I am not looking where I am going. Every thirty metres we pass a café and I look longingly through the large windows which reveal waiters circulating with trays filled with brews and bites. Sometimes, quite close on the table nearest the street, I notice a face lovingly inclined over a large steaming cup of *café con leche*. It is a bit like watching a film actually. But June continues onwards and, as if tied to her by an invisible (and inflexible) rope, so do I.

June stops and quietly asks me how much money I want to change. We have arrived at the *casa de cambio*. It turns out to be nothing more than a guy seated on a rickety stool on the pavement, with his elbow supported on the counter of what seems to be a kiosk without any products for sale and without any light: in fact, a couple of metres further towards the interior it becomes impossible to see who inhabits it and what happens inside. But I trust June. The guy lights a cigarette and June speaks to him, conducting the initial negotiation in rapid and precise Spanish; the man, impassive, looks at her and waits until she finishes. Then he answers her, with few words but with determination. It seems like a hymn or a verse taken out of context and applied for more immediate purposes. The language sounds in no way like anything I have heard June use, nor like any Latino who I have met in California or Texas. In fact, although I have no experience in the area, it seems to me more like the Italian that I heard during my backpacking trip from Brindisi to Venice. June snaps me out of my ponderings: How much money do I want to change? I am about to answer when she whispers to me in English "A little. Only what you are going to spend today, the rate changes almost every day." I am perplexed. OK. I change only a moderate sum and I receive

a surprisingly thick bundle of notes. So much? June silences me with a brief gesture and we leave. We turn back towards the main avenue. I see *El Obelisco*. I say to her: "Guide me a little. How much does a coffee or a coke cost?" She answers "Fifteen for an espresso, twenty for a coffee with milk. A complete meal is less than ten dollars. That's about right for this morning, at 9 o'clock. But let's see how much it costs at 7pm, not to mention tomorrow or the 30th of the month." All these numbers have already made me dizzy. Exactly one block before the intersection of the avenues where we got out of the taxi, June turns to the right and takes the side street.

I follow her, with the case on wheels creaking behind, like a talkative pet. We pass the exterior of a cinema with a porn poster on display. We pass a *panchería* selling its hotdogs. A newspaper stand. Another *casa de cambio*. And shops with names such as: *Cerrajería*, *Librería*, *Santería*, *Dietética*, *Marroquinería*—more signs that I can read but not understand.

At the next corner we come to a pedestrian mall. The people walk in the middle of what could be a pavement which cars travel over. I love this feeling of surprising distension. She approaches a business that is wide open, with counters and tables packed with records, CDs and music cassettes. Despite the hour (other businesses are still shut), they have put a folkloric song on at high volume with drums and flutes. Instead of going into the record shop as I had supposed, June approaches a panel with doorbells close to an entrance that I hadn't even noticed. She rings the bell for the first floor. "Here is the best Spanish school that you will find anywhere in the world." Perfect—I think—like a ring on a finger. There is the sound of a buzz, which I discover releases the lock. The door opens.

We climb up a long and narrow staircase. It is in half-light. There is only a faint illumination that is filtered by darkened glass panes, almost as if they were muddy. What is this strange dirtiness, black but translucent, like smoke or dust? I experience an almost violent contrast with what had been the bright sun of the morning outside: fresh, happy, bearer of good omens and new beginnings. I do not like this temporary space, a passage for the transition from below to above, from the street to the interior. I would have hurried my steps, but June is in front of me and I don't want to make her trip in this semi-darkness. I continue as before, but now without looking at my surroundings. I feel moisture, even though, of course, there is no water. I smell it as well; the walls smell of moisture.

We get to the first floor where a wide landing awaits us, luckily with better air. It is pretty, painted sky-blue and decorated with posters which show scenes of the city: the port, a leafy garden, an urban landscape of skyscrapers. There is more light here; I turn my head and see they have exchanged the small skylight for stained glass and someone has cleaned it. June has

already rung the bell and a voice—or perhaps more than one—is heard from inside, and the door falls wide open.

I see a modest reception area at the front, illuminated by the already intense morning light that comes in through some windows that overlook Lavalle. My eyes are burning: I have not slept in three days (or that's how it feels), I stare at the floor so as to not make a gesture of rejection that could offend.

June introduces me to a grey-haired, happily plump woman, who greets me in the unexpected dialect, although the tone transmits a universally recognisable warmth. From an office in the right hand corner—it had been blocked when the main door opened—a huge young man appears: he smiles and extends me his hand. He does speak to me in English. He is D. the Director of the language centre. June announces that she is going to leave us together to speak in private, and will take the opportunity to do some errands. And she leaves.

D. takes me to his office, a modest space (but with big windows that look out on to the street). The entire wall is lined with books. I listen to him (he presents the institution and the teaching staff and explains their methods), and I observe that the books are all dictionaries. There must be more than twenty languages represented. I try to count them. Some are difficult to identify. There is Armenian and Korean. There is Ancient and Modern Greek. There is . . . suddenly he says something to me in a way that catches my attention. He has said a phrase in the unusual Spanish and he repeats it to me. I smile at him. He again formulates the same sequence of syllables in the other language. I tell him in my language that I don't speak a single word of Spanish and that is why I have come to the office of a language centre. Instead of indulging me, he says—translated into Spanish—the phrase that I have just enunciated: "Not a word of Spanish". And I understand it. I understand it perfectly. I repeat the phrase, and in doing so I am aware that I contradict myself. And now the whole situation, my situation, is turned around, transformed—by a trompe l'oeil. For me it is a beginning, a step in the right direction, where before there was a dark opacity of non-communication.

The bell rings (a racket capable of beating the music from the store down below). It's June, her voice a frightening shout that comes out of the little speaker on the reception desk.

She doesn't come up. I go down via the gloomy stairs. In my hand I carry a piece of paper with a program of my classes. It is a supporting document—no matter how fragile—that my life will have an order and a meaning whilst I am here. I feel my body is floating several millimetres above the asphalt and I cannot make contact with any step I take. It is not apparent to others, but patently obvious to me, to the point that I suspect I might lose

contact with the tiles, remain out of reach of the door handles, or the cups, the books, everything.

June takes me to eat something hot. (I don't remember the place but I do remember the food: a strange dish, nothing more than *arvejas* with some tomato and a boiled egg on top.) It gives me comforting warmth, it anchors and calms me. Then, we get in a taxi that takes us for a tour from which I take nothing that might serve for an eventual cartographic orientation. Except that—on passing through a roundabout bordered by parks—I realise dusk has fallen. Whereupon, we come onto a curved street adjacent to a plaza filled with trees that are lush, despite it being winter. The buildings on this street (which is quite short, no more than two or three blocks) have gloomy and bleak facades. There is barely a reflection of the lights of the taxi in the glass or the chrome of any entrance.

Meanwhile, my friend comments "How incredible!" (with a laugh and a snort). "Where else would there be a view of the American Embassy and the Municipal Zoo from the same corner?" I am speechless, without an answer, perhaps because I can't envisage an urban zone like the one she describes, or simply because I can't see any point in doing so right now, in these circumstances. The idea of an arrival predominates in my mind, of a final destination, of an encampment even. Besides, the car has caught my attention—it was going at a slow speed when it took this bend but now I can't help but notice that the things outside are passing ever more slowly. It is almost as if the world's clock is running out of battery, as if the air is getting heavier and won't let the vehicle pass. I feel that the wheels are hardly turning, barely and with great effort and I wonder: "Why haven't we stopped?" I am disoriented—then suddenly June's voice resonates in the cabin, a shrill staccato. "*Aqui-qui-qui*. *Aqui*!"

Outside the vehicle (it is now motionless), I see a grey building. It is another in a series of grey buildings along the block. What's more, in the twilight—which has fallen with surprising speed—I observe less a building than a silent combination of rectangles, some more and some less dark than one would expect a building to have, of cement, black granite or dull glass.

But suddenly I have a new clarity about the situation—to the side of the entrance I see a white oval hanging on a column. It carries cursive numbers printed in black. And I understand: June must have given him the exact address. We have arrived then. We are at the door of the destination, of the stop, of the refuge.

(Later I will see that these ovals are ubiquitous in this city, not only on the old facades but also on the modern: they all have these cursive black numbers. And there is another detail that has always intrigued me and I have always liked: instead of being flat, with or without the minimum embossing,

they are convex—the street addresses in Buenos Aires come with a paunch, a belly, drunk or pregnant.)

I finally understand the current situation; the driver has reduced the speed of the vehicle to try to decipher the numbers on the panels as he passes and June has signalled to him that we have already passed the place she had indicated.

So much escapes me, yet happens right before my very eyes.

Perhaps it is because I started out in this city without orientation, going around in circles in various areas without a compass, without even knowing where north was. Perhaps that is why, until this very day, twenty-two years later, I still think of Buenos Aires as a circular, serpentine city (perhaps convex?). What I mean is, a city with curves in place of squares, a complex of twists and turns, bends and loops, of general frills instead of right angles, straight angles and grids.

Three years after that winter of initiation, on returning to Buenos Aires to study for one year at the University of Buenos Aires, I will for the first time see—with a mixture of horror and childish disbelief—the water rise in minutes at the intersection of *Ciudad de la Paz* and *Echeverria*. I will see the cars—parked or in motion—slide and begin to sail, floating with no contact to the asphalt or the road.

When the flood recedes, the vehicles end up in odd positions, badly oriented, like toys forgotten during a sudden nap.

Amusing, the city that resists squares. Perhaps it is upset with its own urban condition, for having that situation forcibly imposed on (or against) another older, more fundamental nature. In this case, if it were so, Buenos Aires would be similar to my hometown, that strange and beloved New Orleans, city of hurricanes, of voodoo, of carnival and tombs and feasts.

June helps me with the bag. She pays the taxi driver and we move to the curb, to the corner in reality. She complains between her teeth; I don't catch what she says or the language she uses. She takes out some keys and I hear the tinkling of small metal objects banging together. I look ahead because from up in the corner the light of a street lamp burns and I see up there something that disturbs me. The street is called John F Kennedy. The side street has a more natural name (because it is foreign): *Cerviño*. It is disconcerting to find myself here in a street with this name, so much so that I am about to ask June: how can this be so? But she beats me to it: she growls, almost barks, rummages in her handbag until she extracts a lighter. I have only just noticed the cigarette that she is holding. My mind rewinds to the days in California: June smokes? Instantly I feel sure that I have never seen June smoke, but the thought is weak and vanishes in the face of the facts. Although bothered by the street sign, I am distracted by the sight of

June. She takes quick puffs, grabs with strange intensity the bunch of keys and says to me seriously “I have something to tell you.”

What she tells me is not so scary. She is in love. And the guy lives in Brazil. The previous week he invited her to move in with him over there, and she is nervous but she will go, yes, yes, she will take a plane and go and live with him, just like that. She looks at me with bright eyes that squint because of the closeness of the thread of smoke that rises from her cigarette. I give her a smile. It seems great. I tell her: “You have to take risks in this life, it seems very good to me.” But she shakes her head. “I am leaving tomorrow,” she says and then adds “Forgive me.”

(I never understood this apology. June left me the apartment in Kennedy Street with the final week’s rent already paid. She arranged with a friendly family to host me for the rest of my stay, July and August. She put me in contact with a half dozen English-speaking *Porteños*, personal friends, and they all welcomed me with warmth and openness. Even today, I still count on those first friendships. And she released me into this city to navigate its rowdy entirety on my own. I never understood this apology because it was an act of kindness. But of course June would have seen me from outside, with a colder or more rational objectivity—and so, it must have seemed to her that I lacked orientation.)

25/06/1988, Saturday

The day following the arrival, I wake up in an unfathomable half-light. Is it day or night? I am in the apartment that June has rented above the curved street close to a zoo. I remember seeing the name on the sign on the corner. Suddenly the name John F Kennedy fuses with John Kennedy Toole in my mind, but at least I am conscious of being confused. What time can it be?

I get up and see my case open on the floor. It is full, the contents only barely disturbed. The container for items of personal hygiene remains poised with delicate balance on some bundles of folded clothes. I take the container and go out to the passage. I was going to the bathroom, but a faint illumination at the back draws my attention. It is an internal apartment, on the second floor, a height that in my country would be the third. There is a corridor, two rooms and a bathroom; the kitchen is at the back. The walls and the ceiling seem to reduce or concentrate the air; the apartment is a box, a module, the worst that urban planning has produced. A weak light enters from the back and I walk towards it. I pass a gas heater. It is switched off but still emits heat and I stop beside it for an instant. It has a particular smell and I suddenly remember the gas heater of my childhood. I look at the sides of the appliance, first to the right, then to the left, and I find the valve on the wall. When I was small—I remember with unexpected clarity—they instructed me that

the valve to the heater must always be closed when you leave the house or go to sleep: always close the heater valve.

In the kitchen, I discover that June has left coffee in a glass jug. There is also a note: she has gone out to do errands and will return later.

I warm the coffee and milk and hold the large cup between my hands, enjoying the aroma and the slight steam. Meanwhile, I look through the square of glass, which is the only window the apartment has. *Rear Window*. The view is of three high and anonymous walls sprinkled with windows, all of them as stingy as the one I have in front of me. They are close, but at the same time the distance is enough to allow a certain brightness. A thread of light falls from above. The place seems like a vertical tunnel, marked by the boundaries of four towers confronting each other in close proximity.

June arrives, bringing bread and *media lunas*, as well as a big plastic bag that smells of soap and has the word *Pompas* printed on it, or something like that. She is about to depart, but everything she has done transmits the idea of an arrival. She is preparing for her arrival to another place.

It is time and June leaves in a whirlwind of bags, packets and nerves. I say goodbye from the door of the ground floor, and I notice now that the day is cloudy and fresh. June gets in the black and yellow taxi and we wave to each other.

When I go up to the apartment I see that June has left a dictionary of Argentinian Spanish, a street guide for Buenos Aires and the half empty packet of cigarettes neatly ordered on the table.

Still 25/06/1988

It is Saturday. The weekend stretches out ahead. The rest of June stretches out ahead. The Spanish classes don't begin until the first of July. These four days that remain in the rental contract turn into shapeless hours, days without any particular character. Inside the apartment I rest, isolated from any concepts of dates, timetables. I stay quiet. I wait while the molecules of my body—that I have felt too scattered and strewn by the commotion of the travels—reassemble and coordinate themselves once more.

From time to time, I go out for a walk around the area. I admit that the street guide beckons me and I glance at its pages on more than one occasion. It's that I feel a certain remorse for thinking that I *must* guide myself with a map, that *it is not good* to walk around here without even knowing where I am going and in relation to which historical points of interest. But it is in this chancy, absurd, perhaps idle and irresponsible manner, that I look around Buenos Aires these first days. I cross to the plaza out the front and I stand among the trees that I now see are stout, solid, with thick swaying branches and lush crowns even in this lean season when they have been

left devoid of leaves. Between the highest and thinnest branches I catch a glimpse of the grey clouds of the winter sky. In summer then, there must be a double sky: one green and near, the other (the true, the literal) covered and distant, almost imaginary. I walk along a path of little stones that are orange-coloured and delicate. They must be bricks I think, because when stepped on they leave dust as well as fragments. The moisture in the air enhances the fragrances and I smell the fallen leaves, the earth, the bark of the trees. I also sense the dense, metallic smell of leaded gas. There is even a hint of more organic odours, like faeces and animal skin. And there are waters, more than one type of water—the surrounding landscape is lacking signs of water close by, nevertheless these aromas persist: of a lagoon and of stagnant water, of channels that are perhaps subterranean, of currents held back perhaps by a dam, and everything is suffused by the very intense smell of a river.

25-30/06/1988

The dates merge and become a single long and uncertain journey. But this is a comforting uncertainty: it reconstitutes my body and mind. There is little sun and it does not rain. There is simply a subdued quality, peaceful—as if I am wrapped in cotton wool for days and nights. I walk in one direction and then another, and wherever I go, late or early, the carpet of fallen leaves, bare grass and orange-coloured stones diminishes and disappears. The plazas that surround the apartment lead in all directions to cement, to large tombs and avenues with different moods: to one side there is a very wide thoroughfare with several lanes, and traffic lights hanging up high, the dignified buildings showing off white balconies and elegant closed shutters. On one occasion I see a marvellous oddly-coloured Ferrari pass by: a clear blue, so clear that it seems like a transparent trail, a vapour that I saw and that then disappeared.

When I walk on the other side, I find an avenue that is narrower but more energetic. Or rather, it is a more industrious avenue than the other. It yields with care to the heavy traffic; it hosts minibuses and commercial trucks, various automobiles, ambulances, taxis, *colectivos*, including a few horse-drawn vehicles (I see them more when night falls), decorated carriages that I assume have done a trip in the park or the zoo and other smaller carts without decorations and unpainted, carrying cheap goods, or so it seems, because hanging from the wooden wagon are old pots, frames, bars, toilet seats, iron, and remnants of cloth or carpet. The sound that the horses' hooves make when they strike the asphalt changes when it leaves the avenue. I follow curiously: they make a tac-a-tac on the side street and when I arrive I see it is paved with cobblestones. I lift my gaze, it is already getting

dark, and the cart is moving away, quite overloaded with square stones. Few cars go by. The moist air creates misty halos around the already-lit street lamps and emits a warm, golden illumination. A street made of granite cubes. The same granite that, when polished, shines on the facades. The fantastic city, incongruous and approachable at the same time. I feel an unexpected relief, as if, after quite some time—even without recognising it—without breathing easily, suddenly I am free, rested. Might it be that the Anglo-Saxon insistence on arming oneself with mutual exclusivity, the intolerance of juxtaposition, mixture or any kind of paradox, is wearing off?

01/07/1988, Friday

I leave the keys to the second floor apartment on John F Kennedy at the front counter of the office that June indicated to me before leaving. I move to a more spacious dwelling, higher, brighter and more populated: the house of family B; of four members plus a maid, which occupies the second-highest floor of a tower in the wealthy suburb of Belgrano. There is a view of the river. (Yes, I finally verify that there is a river that cradles the city along a wide curve and which is broad and muddy in colour—but at this height I can't smell it, I don't smell anything, except a trace of Lysoform and the French perfume that Mrs B wears.)

I begin an imperious routine; although of my own volition, I find myself projected like a pinball. I will not be better oriented, and I will not set any cartographic objective, but I will travel the city extensively and every day. Each dawn of that winter of 1988 sees me pass by luxurious towers and large doors until I get to the handy commercial avenue of Cabildo. I catch *Colectivo 152*, which is white with red and blue stripes. I travel along a route that takes one and a half hours—until I see appearing on the horizon an old cement dinosaur with a dome and what seem like hangars: the Retiro Railway Central Station. I continue on foot and climb a steep set of stairs, uphill until I get to the top where Plaza San Martin opens up and, barely visible between the trunks and the branches, another maze of streets. I choose this route above all because of these majestic trees (I later learn that the name is *ombú* and that they are not trees but gigantic bushes: the roots don't go down; they stay on the surface, in view, accessible and muscular, conquering the surrounding terrain, breaking paving stones, steps and garden tubs, even forcing some park benches to lean over). I cross the plaza with its iron hero on horseback—both the animal and the man accompanied by multi-coloured doves—and from the array of paths that fan out from there, I choose the one for pedestrians. It begins there, in front of the *ombúes*, and it leads me to the only other pedestrian street that I know (or that I need to know for now), which is Lavalle. I turn to the right and walk among the office workers half-

asleep and doormen at the ready; the shutters of the businesses are down, that of the record shop as well, but I recognise it and I go straight to the door where June took me on the first day. I have classes, and at any moment of the morning the music from the shop on the ground floor may start. The teacher has to turn up the volume of the small portable cassette player she uses, a little old Sony, but solid and reliable. I pause at midday and go down again to the pedestrian street. Every day I eat in a different place and it calms me to not have to speak. I can barely order by asking for *un sándwich de queso y un café por favor* and pay by saying *la cuenta por favor*. And the day glides smoothly by, my mind calm. Sometimes I sit down at a table beside the window that looks out onto the street and I look at the people, workers or consumers, kiosk owners, police officers, motorcyclists, and I remember the advice that many people have now given me: "Don't change more than you need for the day, tomorrow the dollar will have already increased in value," and it seems to me that behind the scenes that I see, an alien and threatening murmur begins to thunder, a growl from the bowels of the city, or from the earth below the city. It reminds me of what preceded the strong tremors that I have experienced in California: first a serious growl and then the ferocious shaking—I wonder if it would not be analogous to this type of inflation, tremors in a chain, shock and aftershock. The idea takes away my appetite. How do they get used to it?

After lunch, I continue with the classes until the last one finishes at 5.30. I leave once more via Lavalle, with the light already receding. I always walk on the opposite side from the one I take in the mornings: I barely reach the end of the block before I see the distinct whitish monument of the Obelisk, with its traffic roundabout and bystanders: I slip into the flow of people and the current carries me. Between shoulders and elbows I cross that avenue, which is so wide that it is in reality three or four, with rests between each section. When I arrive at the other side, as if it were the other bank, I make sure to take the street called Corrientes and I walk with the street numbers rising. I visit bookshops. It is fascinating to see the printed pages, to see hundreds of letters and no words. With the passing of the weeks I begin to experience something unusual: every so often, as I contemplate the rectangle of little letters—the density of black points on white background with the ultimate effect of a specked grey, a word, that is to say, an idea that I understand and read, suddenly jumps into a view: day, song, road, cloud, door, man.

In some way, at that moment, the first days ended, a page was turned and I began another type of stay, less obfuscated, less unintelligible. But I never bought a map.

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