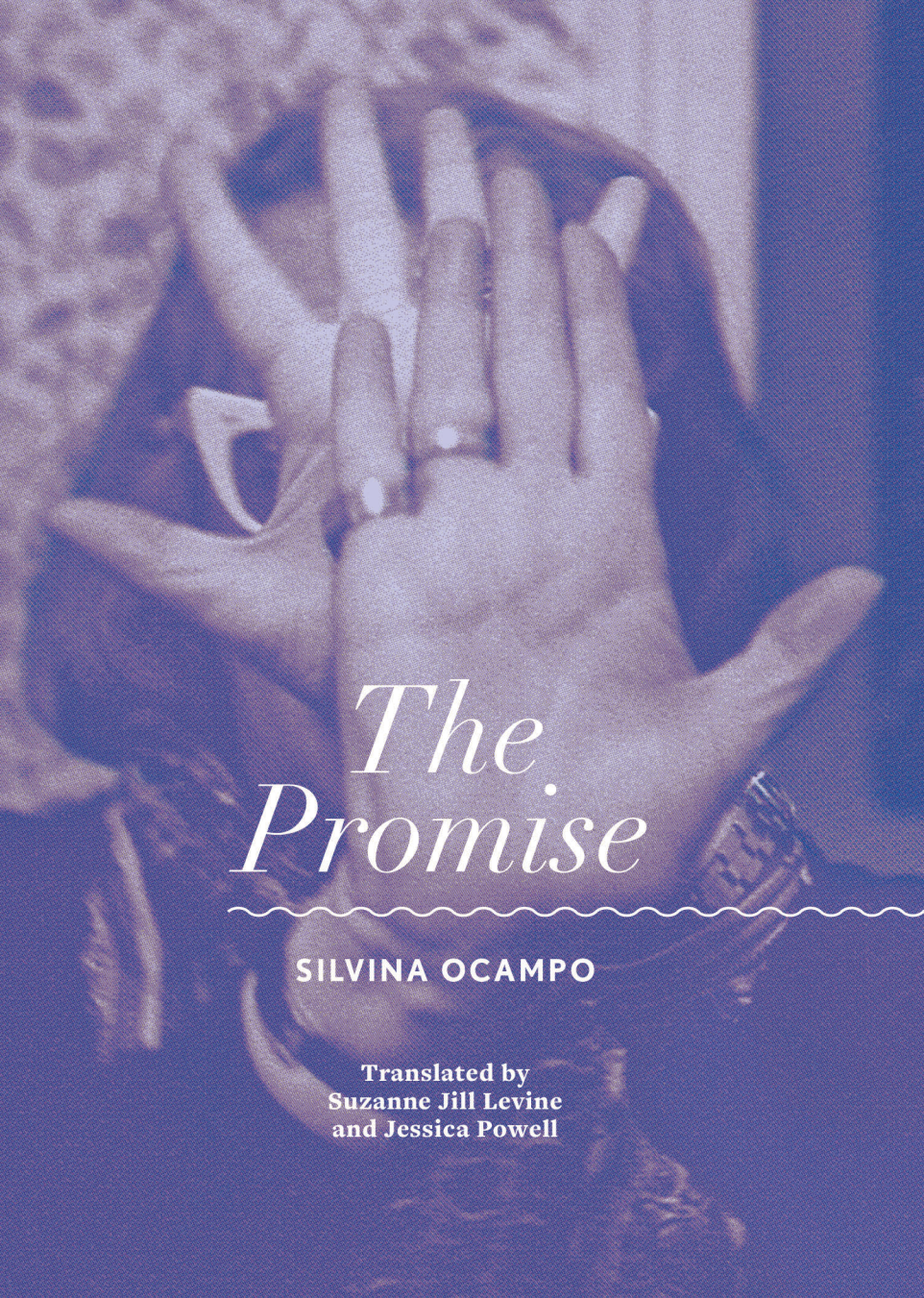


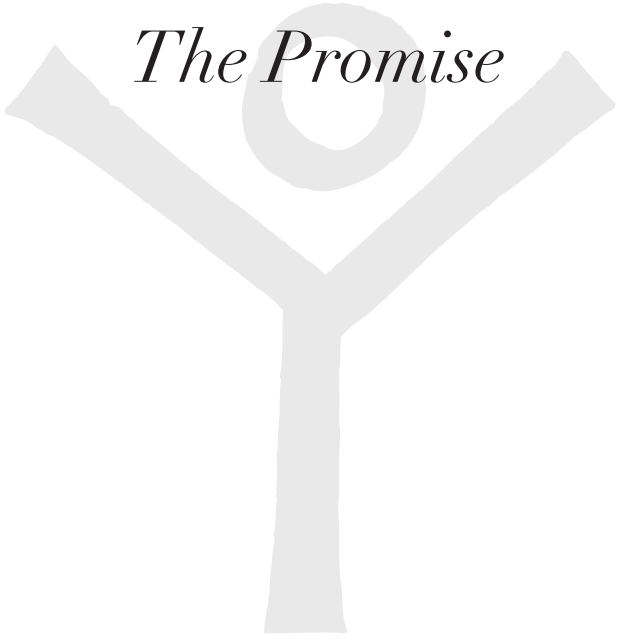
The Promise

SILVINA OCAMPO

Translated by
Suzanne Jill Levine
and Jessica Powell

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

The Promise



This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

The Promise

SILVINA OCAMPO

Translated by
Suzanne Jill Levine
and Jessica Powell

This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

City Lights Books | San Francisco

Copyright © 2019 by the Heirs of Silvina Ocampo
Translation copyright © 2019 by Suzanne Jill Levine and Jessica Powell

All Rights Reserved.

First published in Spanish as *La promesa* in 2010.

This work was published with the sponsorship of the "Sur" Translation Support Program administered by the Argentine Republic's Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Worship. / *Obra editada en el marco del Programa "Sur" de Apoyo a las Traducciones del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores y Culto de la República Argentina.*

Cover photo of Silvina Ocampo by Pepe Fernández, courtesy of Mariana G. Fernández of @archivo_pepefernandez
Cover design by Elizabeth Knafo/Noctiluna Design

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Ocampo, Silvina, author. | Levine, Suzanne Jill, translator. | Powell, Jessica, translator.
Title: The promise / Silvina Ocampo ; translated by Suzanne Jill Levine and Jessica Powell.
Other titles: Promesa. English
Description: San Francisco : City Lights Books, [2019] | Translated into English from Spanish. | Summary: "A dying woman's attempt to recount the story of her life reveals the fragility of memory and the illusion of identity"—Provided by publisher.
Identifiers: LCCN 2019027247 (print) | LCCN 2019027248 (ebook) | ISBN 9780872867710 (paperback) | ISBN 9780872868038 (ebook)
Classification: LCC PQ7797.O293 P7613 2019 (print) | LCC PQ7797.O293 (ebook) | DDC 863/.64—dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019027247
LC ebook record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2019027248

City Lights Books are published at the City Lights Bookstore
261 Columbus Avenue, San Francisco, CA 94133
www.citylights.com

This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

FOREWORD

It is painful to finish something. Why mark it like Beethoven, who wastes five full minutes on final chords? His whole oeuvre is impregnated with that final concern. I don't like conventions, that a novel need have an ending, for example.

S.O. to Noemi Ulla
Encounters with Silvina Ocampo (1982)

Between 1988 and 1989, besieged by the illness that would darken the last years of her life, Silvina Ocampo laboriously devoted herself to correcting and finishing *The Promise*, the novel she had been working on sporadically since the mid 1960s.[1] During that long period of almost twenty-five years, she had gone through several cycles of writing, abandoning and resuming once again her work on this book. Nevertheless, its existence as "work-in-progress" was never completely secret, at least beginning late in 1966, when it had been announced in a brief journalistic note stating that Silvina Ocampo "is

1. The earliest draft that has been found, titled "En la orilla del sueño" ("On the Shores of Sleep"), is preserved in a notebook where there are also sketches of poems from *Amarillo celeste* (*Sky Blue Yellow*, 1972) and a letter in which the author refers to the death of her husband's father, Adolfo Bioy, which occurred in August 1962.

This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied, or used in any way without prior written permission.

currently working on a novel which still does not have a definitive title."[2]

In 1975, in response to an epistolary questionnaire, the author revealed one of her preliminary titles for the novel—"The Epicenes"—declaring that it was "the best I've ever written" and stating that "according to my calculations it will be finished by the end of next year."[3] In an interview published three years later, she described it as a "phantasmagorical novel" and confessed the difficulty she was having in trying to finish it "because the main character is endlessly telling us things; something is making this woman talk on and on, telling one thing after another. It's a promise she has made and that she keeps so as not to die, but one can tell she is dying."[4] This brief summary of her plot provides a key to reading *The Promise* under the guise of a posthumous autobiography and at the same time anticipates, with tragic irony, the conclusion that would join in a similar fate, ten years later, the main character and her author.

The Promise is the longest work of fiction by Silvina Ocampo, hence demanding of her, to judge by the numerous preliminary versions, a greater compositional effort. Structured as a series of linked stories, it takes its form as a "dictionary of memories" that the nameless

2. "Vida literaria" ("Literary Life") *La Nación*, October 9, 1966

3. Danubio Torres Fierro, "Correspondencia con Silvina Ocampo (Una Entrevista Que No Osa Decir Su Nombre)" ("Correspondence with Silvina Ocampo (An Interview That Dares Not Speak Its Name"), *Plural*, no. 50, November 1975, pp. 57-60.

4. María Esther Vázquez, "Con Silvina Ocampo" ("With Silvina Ocampo,") *La Nación*, September 10, 1978.

This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

narrator recounts as she is dying, drifting in the ocean after falling off the ship on which she was traveling. The persons she knew throughout her life parade, erratically, through the theater of her memory, many of them receiving only a brief biographical sketch that, for the most part, becomes an autonomous story, complete unto itself. Others belong to a continuous single story whose branches cover most of the novel. Her choice of this concentric structure, open to multiple digressions and interpolations, is not surprising in one who asserted that she had chosen the short story form "out of impatience" and who made a literary creed of concision and brevity. Freed of the constraints that a linear development would have imposed upon her, she could devote herself to the independent and concentrated invention of episodes, which could then be inserted in the text without altering the proliferating architecture of the whole. Nevertheless, those alternating narrative levels doubtlessly required an intricate embroidery of episodes—which helps to explain the novel's point-counterpoint movements—and also necessitated the arduous process of writing she sustained.

Over the years, during this prolonged labor of editing and assembling, *The Promise* underwent at least two substantial modifications. The first was the extraction of sixteen of its episodes, which the author included as stories in the volume *Los días de la noche* (*The Days of Night*, 1970)[5], although she included one of them, "Livio Roca," in both works. Shortly afterward, she undertook a labyrinthine

5. They are the following: "Ulises," "Atinganos," "Las esclavas de las criadas," "Ana Valerga," "El enigma," "Celestino Abril," "La soga," "Coral Fernández,"

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

story of discordant passions among two women, a man, and a young girl, whose features and man's name—the archangelic "Gabriel"—appear to have given rise to the discarded title *epicene*.[6] This story, from a screenplay written in the mid '50s entitled *Amor desencontrado* (*Misencountered Love*), is the only one the narrator takes up again, circuitously, throughout the course of her tale.

The present text is the last version of *The Promise* found among the author's papers. The manuscript, in a file folder with the definitive title on its front cover, consists of 152 typewritten pages, upon which there are a few scattered corrections and additions in Silvina Ocampo's own hand. As with the majority of the author's manuscripts, this text was typed up by Elena Ivulich, her secretary for more than forty years. As a general rule, we have only altered the author's syntax or punctuation when it was necessary in order to assure the full legibility of the text; in a few instances, however, it was necessary to consult the earlier drafts—handwritten and typed—in order to resolve transcription errors. At the same time, it's worth clarifying that the repetition of some scenes, with slight variations in the narrator's point of view or in the characters' identities, adheres to the novel's plan, as evidenced by a note handwritten by Ivulich, inserted among the pages of the manuscript, in which she indicates the location within the text of some of these re-writings and adds that they are deliberate because "the memories are recurrent."

"Livio Roca," "Clavel," "Albino Orma," "Clotilde Ifrán," "Malva," "Amancio Luna, el sacerdote," "La divina," "Paradela," and "Carl Herst."

6. Another of the preliminary titles was *Memoria de la ciudad perdida* (*Memoir of the Lost City*).

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

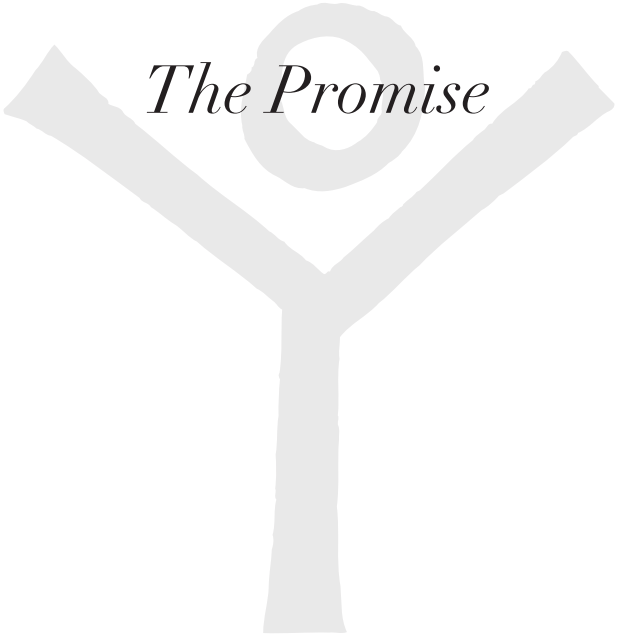
Independent of her declared aversion to endings governed by literary convention, the author did not leave precise indications that could confirm whether or not she considered *The Promise* finished. Nevertheless, the vertiginous dissolution of the narrator's consciousness, recorded in the last stretch of the novel with increasing lyrical exuberance, corresponds to the author's succinct description of its phantasmagorical plot. Those final pages of *The Promise*, written by hand on loose sheets of paper, with intricate and faltering strokes, are also some of Silvina Ocampo's final pages. In them the author and her protagonist appear to share, at moments, the same voice.

Ernesto Montequín
Translator, literary critic, and director
of the Villa Ocampo Center in Buenos Aires

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS
BOOKS

The Promise



This PDF file remains the property of
CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS

I'm such an ignoramus. How could I think of publishing this text! What publisher would accept it? I think it would be impossible, it would take a miracle. Though I do believe in miracles.

"I love you and promise to be a good girl," I used to tell her when I was a child, so that she would feel sympathy for me, and for a long time afterward whenever I'd ask her for a favor, until I learned she was famous for being an "arbiter of the impossible." There are people who don't understand that you speak to a saint as you would to anybody. If they'd known all my prayers they'd say they were sacrilegious and that I am not a devout believer in Saint Rita.

Statues and figurines usually depict this saint holding a mysterious wooden book in her hand, which she rests against her heart. I had not forgotten the detail of this pose when I made her the promise that, if I were saved, I would write this book and finish it by the time my next birthday rolled around. That date is almost a year away. I've begun to feel anxious. I knew it would be a great sacrifice to keep my promise. To create this dictionary of memories that are at times shameful, even humiliating,

This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

would mean revealing my intimate world to anyone and everyone. (Perhaps this anxiety was unfounded.)

I don't have a life of my own; I have only feelings. My experiences were never important—not during the course of my life nor even on the threshold of death. Instead, the lives of others have become mine.

Typing up these pages would be an arduous task, since I don't have the money to pay a typist, nor any altruistic friends who know how to type. Presenting the manuscript to editors, or to any publisher in the world who might refuse to publish the book, would mean sacrificing my sense of pride, since I would then be obliged to pay for publishing it with the sale of objects I value or with some menial work, the only kind of work I can do.

How distant are those happy days in Palermo with my little nephews playing on the swings and the slide, eating dime-store chocolates or chewy white taffy. Those times when I felt unhappy now seem so joyful, when my nephews would get their hands so filthy playing with dirt that when we'd return to my sister's house, instead of taking a bath or going to the movies, I'd have to clean their nails with Carpincho saddle soap as if they'd been down at police headquarters leaving fateful fingerprints.

Though I've always thought it useless to write a book, I now find it is something I must do in order to keep a sacred promise.

Three months ago, I boarded the Anacreonte bound for Capetown, to visit the less tedious side of my family: a consul and his wife, cousins who always looked out for me. Everything we want too much turns out badly or

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

never happens at all. I got sick and had to return as soon as I arrived, because of an accident I had during the trip over there. I fell into the ocean. I slipped on the deck where they store the lifeboats when I leaned over the handrail to reach for a brooch that had fallen off and was dangling from my scarf. How? I don't know. Nobody saw me fall. Maybe I fainted. I came to in the water, dazed by the blow. I couldn't even remember my name. The ship was calmly moving away. I shouted. Nobody heard me. The ship seemed more immense than the sea. Fortunately, I'm a strong swimmer, though my form is quite deficient. After the first shock of cold and fear had passed, I glided slowly through the water. The heat, the noonday light helped me along. I almost forgot my fearful predicament because I love sports, and I tried out all the styles of strokes. At the same time, I thought of the dangers the water could inflict upon me: sharks, sea serpents, jellyfish, waterspouts. The ebb and flow of the waves calmed me down. I swam or floated on my back for eight straight hours, waiting for the ship to return to pick me up. I sometimes wonder how I managed to nurture that hope: I honestly don't know. At first, I felt so much fear that I couldn't think, then thoughts entered my mind haphazardly: I thought of schoolteachers, noodles, movies, prices, theater productions, the names of writers, titles of books, buildings, gardens, a cat, an unhappy love affair, a chair, a flower whose name I couldn't remember, a perfume, a brand of toothpaste, and so on. Memory: how you made me suffer! I suspected that I was about to die or that I had already died in the confusion of my memories. Then I noticed, feeling a sharp burning in my eyes from the saltwater, that

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

I was alive and far from dying, since those who are drowning are happy, as everyone knows, but I was not. After undressing, or rather, being undressed by the sea in that way the sea undresses a person, with the hands of a lover, there came a moment when sleep or the craving for sleep took hold of me. In order not to sleep, I imposed an order on my thoughts, a kind of mental journey or itinerary I now recommend to prisoners or patients who cannot move or to those desperate souls on the verge of suicide.

I began my itinerary of memories with names and even biographical descriptions, down to the last detail, of people I had known in my life. Naturally, they didn't emerge from my memory in chronological order or in the pecking order of my feelings for them, but instead appeared in a capricious way—the last were the first, and the first were the last, as if my mind couldn't obey the dictates of my heart. In my memory, some people appeared without a name, others were ageless, others from a time when I didn't know them, others without the certainty that they were real people and not ghosts or inventions of my imagination. I didn't recall the eyes of some of them, the hands of others, and in the case of others their hair, their height, their voice. In a way, like Scheherazade to King Shahryar, I told stories to death so that it would spare my life and my images, stories that seemed to never end. I often laugh thinking of that illusory order I invented that seemed so severe when I put it into practice. Sometimes I was surprised by the vivid presence of what I was imagining, formulated in a single phrase, like a vignette inserted at the end of a chapter or introducing the book's most important pages. Naturally, the order is

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file contains the property of
City Lights Books, and may not be
reproduced, copied or used in any way
without prior written permission.

respected in a different way when it's only in the mind rather than written down on the page. As far as possible, I will try to reconstruct in these pages the order or disorder that I constructed with such difficulty in my mind, from the moment in which I glimpsed in the water, as if through a glass window, a sea turtle resembling the tailor Aldo Bindo, which made me recall, through a whimsical association of ideas, Marina Dongui (behind the window of a fruit store), who, like him, had a beauty mark on her left cheek. I began to enumerate and to describe people:

MARINA DONGUI

Marina Dongui, the fruit seller, was the first to appear involuntarily before me in my memory. Blond, fair-skinned and jittery, she would come to the door of the fruit shop whenever I was passing by with my brother, to wink at him. Her breasts were like large fruits overflowing her décolleté, and my brother would pause to look at her—but what am I saying?—not at her but at her breasts, and not at the navel oranges, which were very expensive.

"Miss Marina, how much are the oranges?" my brother would ask.

"The price is right here," she'd say, indicating the label with a plump hand and, picking up an orange, she'd display it with a caress and an indecent smile certainly meant to provoke my brother, who's a handsome lout.

Beneath her blue skirt you could make out the mark on her thighs where her girdle squeezed too tightly. The skin on her bare legs was very smooth and white, turning to a splotchy red damask down near her shoes, which were always black, with spiked heels.

CITY LIGHTS Books
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

"Miss Marina, give me half a dozen oranges."

"Why oranges, when they're our least favorite fruit?" I'd protest, feeling the sting of jealousy that pitiful Marina provoked in me.

The humiliation of jealousy is not being able to choose the object that arouses it.

My brother Mingo would approach the counter without listening to me and there, a vein protruding on his forehead that appeared only when he was worked up, he'd corner her against the crates while she was tallying the total on the piece of paper she'd then use to wrap the oranges, taking advantage of the occasion to feel her up. It was a fruit relationship, perhaps symbolizing sex. But I'm getting away from the task I've set myself, that is, to describe people and not situations or relationships.

I've forgotten my brother's face; I can't even remember the color of his eyes, striped blue and green like glass marbles.

Sometimes too much love makes it difficult to remember.

But whom did I love?

ALDO BINDO

Aldo Bindo was short, fat, and pale, and spent his Sundays horseback riding. His glasses shone on his face like a shop window; he had two tufts of hair on his elongated head, one curly and blond and the other straight and white. He was ageless. With a measuring tape draped like a shawl around his shoulders, he would run out of the back room of the shop when told that I was waiting for him. I'd already have put on the tailored suit, and, kneeling at my feet, he'd look at me in the mirror,

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file is the property of City Lights Books. It may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

covered in pins. Often he'd take my measurements all over again as if he didn't already know them. With a pencil that was down to the size of a fingernail, he noted the measurements on a piece of brown wrapping paper he always had at the ready on some chair. As he took my chest measurements, he would touch with satisfaction certain protuberances on the lapel that were both expertly and indecently placed, such details being pertinent to his profession. When he measured my hips, he'd impatiently loop the tape measure around them and then let it fall as if disappointed, releasing one end and catching it with the other hand, and then wind the tape around his neck again. His wife, beside the mirror, her soft white face like a shapeless loaf of bread, passed him the pins and chalk. Sometimes she'd be taking a seam apart with enormous scissors so that he, like a master chef with a ball of dough, could skillfully take up the pieces of cloth and pin them back together to adjust a pleat without actually improving it. He would furrow his brow and, when he had a cold, he sneezed with a sound that was contagious, even over the telephone. His hands seemed to prefer placing sleeves, lapels, and buttons on the bust of a jacket, anything near the breasts of his clients—provided they weren't too elderly. He'd wheeze. He'd pant: the hem tormented him. Just applying some lines with chalk was not enough to release him from his responsibility; he used the tape to measure the hem all the way down to the floor. The shoes he wore always creaked. It never occurred to me that he had feet with toenails or with toes stuck inside those impenetrable shoes. One day I ran into him on the beach and didn't recognize him from a distance, but when he

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

adjusted his wife's beach wrap about her shoulders, I shouted, "There's Aldo Bindo!" and ran over to greet him. Smeared with suntan oil, his face shone with happiness, but where was his measuring tape? He could do nothing without his measuring tape, right? A few minutes later, as he spoke admiringly of Mrs. Cerunda, I saw that he was using his big toe to sketch a measuring tape in the damp sand.

In those days I fell in love with the sea as though it were a person. At vacation's end, before returning to Buenos Aires, I would kneel down crying, to bid it farewell.

ALINA CERUNDA

Alina Cerunda was pretty despite her seventy years. Anyone who says she wasn't is a liar. However, old people always look like they're in disguise, and that ruins everything. I have it on good authority that she never bathed. But she looked clean, with impeccably coiffed hair, styled in a pouf even when she slept. I've seen Alina Cerunda in bed, like a painting. Surrounded by small balls of yarn of various colors, as if in an unsavory nest, she knitted darling little dressing gowns for newborns, or booties with pom-poms for the ill or the elderly. Often I would watch her, a veritable guardian angel of nutrition, as she made crème brûlée and flan, ladyfingers and *alfajores*. Tall and thin, with white and blue hair like birthday cake trimmings, I consider her among the most beautiful of women. Sometimes her eyelids can become red with fatigue; on her, weariness is a pigment that makes her eyes larger. If she were my mother I'd have her portrait done by a skilled painter and hang it in the most conspicuous place

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

in the house. What a family keepsake! Her green eyes matched the color of her collar, which was also green.

But why do I remember so many things that do me no good? How tedious it was to be with Alina Cerunda! And why am I thinking about her now? Could it be a bad omen?

GABRIELA

Just like that time when I was sick, and after being in bed for forty days I missed my bed, now I miss the sea. Ah, the sea. "The sea full of masculine urgency." Whose line was that? Gabriela, oh how beautiful she was! Her eyes were the color of the sea.

In a mosaic inside the Basilica of Saint Apollinaris, in Ravenna, the archangel Gabriel has big astonished eyes, gently curling hair parted down the middle, a small and slender nose, a well-defined mouth with the corner of the lips turning downward on the right side, a mild expression and a saintly halo over a rounded and not very long oval face, a white tunic and two large wings. Poor Irene had clipped the photograph of that mosaic from a magazine, first to jot down an address on the other side of the page, then, because she liked it, she kept it under glass for eight years in her single room. She used to say that she had looked at that image absent-mindedly many times during her pregnancy, never thinking that her daughter would look so much like him. She was frequently surprised that Gabriela wasn't a boy, didn't have wings or a strange frock like the one in the image. It became her habit to call her Gabriel, to shorten the name a bit and because she liked saying Gabriel better than

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF is licensed to the purchaser for personal use only and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

Gabriela. She recalled the years of her own childhood in Spain, so different from Gabriel's. That she'd been born in Spain seemed like a dream to her. She wasn't aware of the feeling of neglect that she sometimes inflicted on her daughter, and believed that she herself had been the most neglected girl in the world. She was three or four years old when her mother remarried, to a man who didn't want to endure the presence of someone else's children. They lived in Ginzo de Limia, a poor and isolated village. In less than nine months, her mother abandoned Irene and her sister, who was older. They begged in the street. They were given shelter in the attic of a brothel and received the leftover food at the end of each day.

It was sometime later, when she found out those women were prostitutes, that she appreciated the kindness (it had seemed natural to her then) that they had shown her and her sister. She vividly remembered a particular woman who would always step out on the balcony to take the fresh air, even in winter when snow was falling. She held Irene in her arms when she cried, like a mother would. When Irene had to leave that house (which she had begun to feel was her home) because her repentant stepfather had sent for them, she cried for that woman as she'd never cried for anyone. The time she spent in her stepfather's house before sailing for Argentina was brief. One day, the most memorable, her drunken stepfather tied a rope around her waist and swung her from the first-floor balcony until a crowd of villagers gathered, none of them daring to say a thing for fear that the man would drop her. Entertained by the game, she hadn't realized the danger she'd been in.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

Everything else was erased from her memory and came back as memories of baby teeth, the first day of school, Buenos Aires, the different people, the flat landscape, the river everywhere, the difficulties of life in the home of the aunt who had taken her in, the changes of childhood, her clothing becoming too small, life's many lessons (how to wash your face, brush your teeth, get dressed, eat, urinate and defecate correctly), adolescence, coming of age. Upon discovering love, she believed in its fleeting salvation. News of the death of her mother (a death that was never explained), who had lain for twelve hours in the snowy woods and, by some miracle, had not been devoured by wolves, tormented her. As if that weren't enough, sometime later, her husband abandoned her to run off with another woman, and then there was Gabriel, Gabriel, Gabriel and Leandro . . . but Gabriel most of all.

I glimpsed a flash of lightning in the sky, then another and yet another. If I were brave, how I would have loved to see a storm let loose. I closed my eyes. It rained a little. I opened my eyes again. The clouds were going away. Why won't they take me with them!

IRENE ROCA

Irene was not at all like her daughter. Irene had a joyful nature. Her even features made one think of a faded porcelain doll. Gabriela was waiting for Irene in Plaza Las Heras. She had followed her that day, which I'm remembering now as Irene's face comes back to me. She was so pretty dressed in green with that necklace of tiny pearls, and a pair of white gloves she carried in her hand like a

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
The PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

bouquet! Gabriela lost sight of her in a moment of distraction, in front of a tobacco shop where they sold marbles. I saw her sitting pitifully on a green wooden bench eating an orange and staring, without realizing it, at the door her mother had entered.

What do women do when they're not at home? When they were pure like her mother they devoted themselves to serious tasks, Gabriela might think. Then she'd think, as usual, about the sex act. What she desired most in the universe of her curiosity was to see a man and a woman doing it. She had seen cats, dogs, pigeons, *guanacos*, monkeys commit that act, but never human beings. Juancha, a schoolmate, had told her that it was lots of fun.

To make her way to that disorderly room, with books on the floor, socks over the chairs, half-open sacks of bread on a table, shirts tossed on the floor, Irene had crossed a vestibule with an interior door whose glass panes were red and blue, blue like the color of the ocean I'm looking at, then a courtyard with plants, birdcages and a lemon tree in the center. I knew that room. But how different was the place Gabriela imagined her in, engaged in mysterious occupations!

What was her mother doing? She thought of nothing else. Irene had told her that in the house she was visiting there was a mechanical bird that sang inside a glass cage with gold trim. Liar. How she lied to her. That glass and gold cage occupied a predominant place in Gabriela's imagination. It had turned into a palace illuminated by a thousand chandeliers, a palace where her mother wove beautiful cloth with her perfumed and kind-hearted friends.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

She crossed many rooms and gardens before reaching the place where he was waiting for her. There, in a kind of cloister, was an enormous fishbowl with fish covered in purple fins and tails. This was Valentín Masini's dry cleaners, where they never took Gabriela because the fumes of ammonium and other acids were not good for her health.

The sun lit up the mirror of a wardrobe with the face of a faun, bunches of grapes, and leaves sculpted into the wood; a tiger-striped cat slept on a simple bed with a peeling iron frame, while torn, dirty curtains waved in the breeze. I liked that room! Irene did too. Sitting on the floor, her elbow leaning on the bed, she would occasionally glance at the disorder, as if it bothered her, then return again to the book she was reading. Sometimes one of her brassieres or handkerchiefs would be left on the floor. I looked at them with such hatred the first time I found them, without knowing to whom they belonged. She, Irene, was part of that disorder, one of its makers and also one of its martyrs. Stretching like an idiot, she'd call out to Leandro in a shrill voice. Did she love him? Was that what love looked like?

Often I imagined this scene that tortured me so. He had told me about it. Not even the sea makes me forget it.

Leandro's muffled voice, from under the shower, would respond as usual:

"What do you want?"

He'd tell me in detail the silly things they'd say.

"I can't be a minute without you, my love," she'd always say to him.

"I'm coming," he'd answer, annoyed.

"Could you explain that matter of the synapses of the

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of CITY LIGHTS BOOKS, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

nervous system or about the extra-systolic pathways of the respiratory system?

"It would be better if they didn't exist," Leandro would reply, drying his face with a towel; none of it mattered to him, and he would add vehemently: "It would be better if humanity didn't exist, human beings are utter crap." As he entered the room his body gleamed like the body of the bronze statue in the museum that Irene had sketched in her adolescence. How well I could imagine him! He always seemed happy.

"Don't ask me to explain anything to you today. I have to go to the hospital. I don't have time for anything. I've got to leave right now."

"So early? Who are you going to see?"

"Nobody. Don't pester me with questions. I have to feel free, don't you understand? I can't be tied down," Leandro would answer as he dressed.

Sometimes when I have a fever I hear this conversation, with their voices buzzing like bees. How salty the sea is!

"Idiot," Irene would say. She was the idiot and she knew it. She'd think *that "nobody" is worse than if it were somebody.*

Nino, purring, would come over and rub against Leandro's legs. He was a dreadful cat, with his face split by a black stripe, which Gabriela would have liked because he looked like a tiger, and he adored me.

"Not tied down," Irene would continue, "as if you could live without ties. You even carry on a relationship with that ridiculous cat. You never go to bed without saying 'Good night, Mr. Cat,' as if you were a little boy. This rug is full of fleas."

As he did with me, Leandro paid her no attention,

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

whistling as he looked at himself in the mirror. Irene's words seemed ridiculous to him, and her attitude unpleasant. Pathetically, Irene would suddenly go over to hug him. The sensual voice has meaning beyond the words uttered, but she seemed so disagreeably human to him, there in the mirror.

"Won't you explain about nerve synapses or the urinary tract? If you don't explain it, I'll never understand, not with the help of pictures or textbooks or even with hands-on practice," she'd say to him every day, playing the doctor. It was always the same, always the same.

"Irene, don't you think we're letting life slip through our fingers studying together like this? You'll never understand that there's not enough time to go sneaking around."

"Let's not start that eternal argument again. You've changed in the last two months, ever since you've been living here. I want to graduate, I want to have a profession. I want to study. I'm doing it for Gabriela. She's the only person who loves me. The only one!"

"Which do you prefer: to love or to be loved?" Leandro interrupted her.

He'd say the same to me, but I'd just smile.

"To love," Irene would answer.

"Love me, then."

Lying on the bed, Irene would embrace Leandro once again. He would kiss her passionately, the way he kissed me. The same thing would happen whenever she mentioned Gabriela. Leandro needed Irene to love another being that wasn't him in order to feel any interest in her. It is so overwhelming to be loved exclusively.

"Does she always follow you?"

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This file is property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

"She's probably on the corner. I don't dare to go out," Irene would remark. "She's so young, but she understands so many things! She's not like other little girls. Look at her, isn't she lovely?"

Leandro would adjust his tie and finish dressing, looking out the window at the girl on the street.

"Lovely," he'd say, thinking of something else.

For him, children weren't as marvelous as they were for me, they were a concoction smelling of milk and oranges, they were creatures from another planet—especially that Gabriela, or Gabriel, whose name, constantly changing back and forth from feminine to masculine like a hermaphrodite, was always on Irene's lips.

"Poor Gabriel," Irene would murmur, "sometimes I feel guilty."

"About what?"

"About everything," Irene would answer.

"Don't forget to lock the door and leave the key in the big planter in the courtyard. I have to go."

That was how it was, every day always the same, always the same.

"You're not even going to give me a kiss?" Irene would sigh.

"Didn't I kiss you enough?"

"Each of your kisses is a dream. Nothing seems real. It's as if I'm embracing you at the bottom of the sea and cease to exist. Later, when I'm alone, I still don't exist, but then it's unpleasant."

Uttering this sentence, Irene would feel that she had destroyed the importance of her feelings, and she had. Why explain them? Bitterly, she would hear Leandro's voice.

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.

"You're always so sentimental. What a pity!"

After kissing Irene again impatiently, mussing her hair, hurting her lips, Leandro would pick up the books that lay on the table.

These unpleasant scenes repeat over and over again. He's going to hate me, Irene would think. *When a man doesn't love you, his embraces become awkward. He has too many arms and legs, too many bones, elbows and knees. It's almost impossible for him to produce an orgasm. He used to slide over me like water, now he hurts me.*

She was right. Poor Irene, I alone understood her. Alone, alone as I am now, on a sea of relentless doubts. Dying is the only sure thing. Now I can finally die. But how to do it? It's as impossible as ever.

GABRIELA

Gabriela. I return to Gabriela. She was lovely, with a long slender neck, blue eyes, blond hair. I always said she could be in the movies; what she needed were connections; you don't get anywhere these days without connections. She lived for Irene.

Alone, she would wait for Irene, always in Plaza Las Heras. She had followed her that day, which I remember now, more vividly than other days. She was so pretty, dressed in green with that necklace of tiny pearls, and a pair of white gloves she carried in her hand like a bouquet! Gabriela lost sight of her in a moment of distraction, in front of a tobacco shop where they sold marbles. She sat pitifully on a green wooden bench eating an orange and staring, without realizing it, at the door her mother had entered.

What do women do when they're not at home? When

CITY LIGHTS BOOKS
This PDF file remains the property of City Lights Books, and may not be reproduced, copied or used in any way without prior written permission.