

## **Praise for Silvina Ocampo:**

‘Few writers have an eye for the small horrors of everyday life; fewer still see the everyday marvellous. Other than Silvina Ocampo, I cannot think of a single writer who, at any time or in any language, has chronicled both with such wise and elegant humour’

Alberto Manguel

‘Silvina Ocampo is, together with Borges and García Márquez, the leading writer in Spanish’

Jorge Amado

‘She lived a little in the shadow of her sister Victoria on the one hand and of her husband, Bioy Casares, and Borges on the other. She was an extravagant woman when writing her stories, short and crystalline, she was perfect’

César Aira

‘Ocampo wrote with fascinated horror of Argentinean petty bourgeois society, whose banality and kitsch settings she used in a masterly way to depict strange, surreal atmospheres sometimes verging on the supernatural’

*Independent*

‘Ocampo mixes unembellished narration and dark, fantastic elements into a heady cocktail’

Lit Hub

‘Why has Ocampo remained a hidden treasure to English readers? ... She stands alongside Tanizaki, Dinesen and others as one of the most imaginative and innovative short-story writers of the twentieth century, and among the finest practitioners of the genre in any language’

*Asymptote*

'Ocampo's technique is beyond all reproach ... sometimes we have to stop and reread a sentence, as if our disbelief has been suddenly tickled awake. This is a reaction we have to many of her stories: do we wake or dream?'

*Guardian*

'Iconic ... a writer of powerful imagination, drawing on paradox and ploy, perpetual subterfuge of the expected. Her world is peopled with the fantastic, the innocent perverse, the strange or numinous in everyday life. Time is a rubber band and, in a single sentence, ghosts and alternative worlds superimpose'

*Granta*

THE IMPOSTOR  
AND OTHER STORIES

SILVINA OCAMPO (1903–1993) was born to an old and prosperous family in Buenos Aires, the youngest of six sisters. After studying painting with Giorgio de Chirico and Fernand Léger in Paris, she returned to her native city – she would live there for the rest of her life – and devoted herself to writing. Her eldest sister, Victoria, was the founder of the seminal modernist journal and publishing house *Sur*, which championed the work of Jorge Luis Borges and Adolfo Bioy Casares, and in 1940 Bioy Casares and Silvina Ocampo were married. The first of Ocampo's seven collections of stories, *Viaje olvidado* (Forgotten Journey), appeared in 1937; the first of her seven volumes of poems, *Enumeración de la patria* (Enumeration of My Country) in 1942. She was also a prolific translator – of Dickinson, Poe, Melville, and Swedenborg – and wrote plays and tales for children. The writer and filmmaker Edgardo Cozarinsky once wrote, 'For decades, Silvina Ocampo was the best kept secret of Argentine letters.' *Silvina Ocampo: Selected Poems* is published by NYRB/Poets.

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JORGE LUIS BORGES (1899–1986), a giant in Latin American letters, wrote numerous books of poetry, fiction and essays, and was a prodigious translator of authors such as Kipling, Woolf, Faulkner and Poe. He was a regular contributor to Victoria Ocampo's journal *Sur*, and a frequent dinner guest of Silvina Ocampo and Adolfo Bioy Casares. Over one of their legendary conversations, the three friends came upon the idea of editing *The Anthology of Fantastic Literature*, which was published in 1940.

# THE IMPOSTOR AND OTHER STORIES

**SILVINA OCAMPO**

Translated from the Spanish by  
Daniel Balderston



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## INTRODUCTION

WHAT WE have in Silvina Ocampo is a writer of the Big Bad Wolf school. In 1979 her forty-two-year body of work was denied Argentina's National Prize for Literature. "*Demasiado crueles*" (far too cruel) was the verdict of that year's panel of judges.\* It wasn't Ocampo's poetry the judges were talking about—she'd won notable poetry prizes in previous years. Perhaps her alternately burning and freezing dislocations of perspective are slightly more orthodox in the realm of poetry, where to some extent we half expect to lose our footing and find something startling in the gap between verses. In Ocampo's poem "A Tiger Speaks," having briefly surveyed episodes of interaction between humankind and other species in the first stanza, the tiger begins her second stanza with the remark: "We never managed to agree / about man's true nature."<sup>†</sup> The tiger's tone awakens ominous awareness of a class of gaze that passes over the deeds of human beings and finds little humanity in them. It could be that poetry is more readily accepted as a natural vessel for long-distance dispatches of this kind, no matter how precise or orderly the poem's technical form. Short stories tend to be received quite differently: certain structural assurances are demanded, some guarantee

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\* "In an interview with Patricia Klingenberg in March 1980, Ocampo reported that she was denied the National Prize in 1979 by judges who felt her stories were '*demasiado crueles*.'" Quote from Cynthia Duncan, "Double or Nothing in Silvina Ocampo's 'La casa de azúcar,'" *Chasqui: revista de literatura latinoamericana* 20, No. 2 (November 1991).

† *Silvina Ocampo: Selected Poems*, selected and translated by Jason Weiss (New York: NYRB/Poets, 2015).

that if and when an event or an idea throws us off-balance, by the end that balance will be restored, or at the very least the tools for its restoration will be within reach. And so “far too cruel” was the verdict on Ocampo’s short fiction, some of the best of which is collected in this book. It’s true that aside from their narrative technique of tripping you up and leaving you on the floor, Ocampo’s stories narrate the inner lives of heartless children, half-mad lovers, and assorted others who lean out of the pages to speak to us with all their anomie showing. Here’s the narrator of “Friends,” for example, sardonically noting the external resemblance between a surfeit of grief and a light smattering of gaiety: “Nearly the whole town was in mourning; the cemetery looked like a flower show, and the streets sounded like a bell-ringing contest.”

As readers of Ocampo we follow the first Red Riding Hood, bypassing that initial pretense of going among the leaves of a book or a forest in search of kindly, tidy wisdom from the type of grandmother nobody ever really had. No, there are voices we follow knowing full well that we’ll be led astray. I’m tempted to call Ocampo’s readers Red Reading Hoods, but I can well imagine your scorn. In her stories characters negotiate the entrapments of time, which rewards relentless determination, or at least doesn’t punish it. In “Icera,” a small girl from a poor family decides not to grow any bigger than the biggest doll in the doll department of a toy store near her house; her efforts to keep her material wants small face a setback after Icera’s four-inch growth spurt, but that addition of four inches to her height is the full extent of her physical growth between preadolescence and middle age, and we leave her being packaged up happily in a blue cardboard box intended for the transportation of an expensive doll. The narrator doesn’t invite us to wonder at or worry about this turn of events; there’s a level on which Ocampo’s stories are matter-of-fact reports of the everyday traffic (outgoing) between the mind and the world.

Ocampo airily collaborated with her immediate contemporaries, co-editing anthologies and writing a short, charmingly off-kilter murder mystery called *Where There’s Love, There’s Hate* (1946) with

her husband, Adolfo Bioy Casares. Bioy Casares is the author of one of the twentieth century's most ingenious and affecting works of fabulism, *The Invention of Morel* (1940), and part of the fun of reading a book co-authored by this superlatively well-read couple lies in trying to guess which parts were written by Bioy Casares, which parts were written by Ocampo, and which parts were written by one impersonating the other. Her novella *The Topless Tower* (1968) is an adventure diligently narrated by Leandro, a boy who finds himself trapped in a painting. Being trapped in the painting isn't his only problem; his intellect frequently gets ahead of him and even as he describes his surroundings and encounters he underlines certain words that he uses but doesn't yet understand ("lugubrious," "macabre," "cynical"); these notations serve as reminders to look up the meanings later. Here Ocampo's fondness and flair for nonsense literature in the vein of Lewis Carroll is palpable. (*Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There* is, after all, a book-long chess game.) There are few other writers who can apply such abstract mischief to narrative without stripping it of its human flesh. If Ocampo's solo fiction continues to elude canonization within Argentine literature, it will be because the tradition that Ocampo seems to work within is that of the visionary whose sensibility crosses plural borders.

Like Emily Brontë, Ocampo was a younger sister whose literary vision takes its own unruly path away from that of her elder (in Ocampo's case this elder sister, the revered writer and critic Victoria, was her first publisher). Love is as fearsome in an Ocampo story as it is in *Wuthering Heights*; emotion has a way of sealing us into a charmed circle that makes us incomprehensible to everyone who stands outside it. This kind of circle shrinks and shrinks until even the beloved is impossible to read clearly, and then finally we're unable to even pretend to understand our own thoughts. At times Ocampo's characters speak to us as if under the influence of a truth drug that won't permit them to simplify the expression of their motivations. In "Autobiography of Irene," a malicious act is motivated by panic—how else can a teenage girl govern a tempestuous inner

life that turns her regard for a beloved teacher into something that feels life threatening, an emotion one could drown in? “[One] day, crying because I already knew how mistaken and how unfair I could be, I made up a slander against that young lady, who had only wanted to praise me.” We also see a similar blurring of psychic attack and defense in “The House Made of Sugar,” in which, having ignored his wife’s superstitions, a man watches the logically impossible repercussions of his actions drain the stability from his marriage with a petulant malevolence that may remind you of a small tyrant who punishes her parent’s disobedience by holding her breath until she loses consciousness. At the end of that story we can only agree with the narrator’s summation: “I don’t know who was the victim of whom in that house made of sugar, which now stands empty.” From time to time a form of comic relief is derived from Ocampo’s invitation to view love, romantic or otherwise, from a position of amused disgust—in “Lovers,” a heavy date for two of Ocampo’s characters consists of the joyless, mechanical overconsumption of cake accompanied by “shy conversation on the theme of picnics: people who had died after drinking wine or eating watermelon; a poisonous spider in a picnic basket one Sunday that had killed a girl whose in-laws all hated her; canned goods that had gone bad, but looked delicious.” In “The Guests,” a gift box is found to contain “two crude magnetic dolls that couldn’t resist kissing on the lips, their necks stretched out, as soon as they were within a certain distance of each other.”

Like William Blake, Ocampo’s first voice was that of a visual artist; in her writing she retains the will to unveil the immaterial so that we might at least look at it if not touch it: “there are voices that you can see, that keep on revealing the expression of a face even after its beauty is gone,” the protagonist of “Autobiography of Irene” tells us. Blake began with drawing, but just as she tells us in her own words, Ocampo was a painter, an increasingly frustrated student of the cubist Fernand Léger (“Nothing interested Léger except the design of his paintings”) and then the proto-surrealist Giorgio de Chirico (“I fought with Giorgio de Chirico and told him he sacrificed everything for the sake of color”), until she turned to writing as

her own particular means of transforming reality. I consider this when the imagery in Ocampo's stories slides between the concrete and the abstract, recalling Blake's spectral embodiments, the ones that rise and float and walk alongside solidly hewn stars and beasts with the look of living stone. When I read "Visions," a short story of Ocampo's in which a bedridden woman awaits death (or recovery), I see Blake's brutal light, rays that blast through all other colors to center and re-center his paintings and illustrations. "Beauty has no end or edges. I wait for it," Ocampo's narrator says. Either this presence called beauty has an innate power to change us as it approaches and recedes, or it is our own functional creation, an ever-shifting evocation of those moments beyond language when we get closer to and beat an abashed retreat from whatever it is that drives consciousness. Always within reach, yet always mysterious, is this essential self, leading Ocampo to end her own preface to this book with the question: "Will we always be students of ourselves?"

In his preface to this book, Borges writes that Ocampo "sees us as if we were made of glass, sees and forgives us. It is useless to try to fool her." I agree that Ocampo sees, but the all-consuming grudges held by her characters create an initial difficulty in discovering just where her mercy intersects with her clear sight—in "The Fury," a girl who receives a fish and a monkey as conciliatory gifts from her tormentor simply allows the poor creatures to starve to death. Here gentleness is merely a prologue to some truly dark deed or other. In "The Clock House," the role at a party of a hunchbacked man named Estanislao goes from guest of honor to victim—it's impossible to conclusively decide whether or not the child narrator is feigning incomprehension of Estanislao's fate or is genuinely innocent. Either way we readers are brutalized by the educated guesses the narrative leads us to make. The party guests propose that Estanislao's suit be ironed with its owner still in it; this occurs, and the commotion of this event is described in the vaguest and most chilling of terms: "Nobody was laughing except for Estanislao." After that our young narrator N. N. steps back and will not share in the resultant vision. Elsewhere Ocampo demonstrates that she understands, alongside

Emily Dickinson, that “The heart asks pleasure first / and then excuse from pain,” but this doesn’t prevent her sharp commentary on the eager adoption of strategies to excuse ourselves from pain. The narrator of “The Prayer,” a story of deadly weakness, notes the prevailing mood at the funeral of an eight-year-old killed by another eight-year-old: “Only one old lady, Miss Carmen, was sobbing, because she didn’t understand what had happened. Oh my God, how miserable, how lacking in ceremony the funeral was!”

I think what Ocampo understands is that so many of our cruelties and treacheries are born out of a sort of rapt distraction; our memories don’t work very well and we try to kick-start them with reenactions, or new and wholly unnecessary treacheries that present themselves to us as reenactions. In “The Mortal Sin,” a household servant named Chango bids his employers’ young daughter to look through a keyhole into the next room, where he’ll show her “something very beautiful.” The girl does as she’s told, and what she sees is made ghastly by the insistent voice of a man in the next room, speaking with “a commanding and sweet obscenity: ‘Doll, look! Look!’” In this way the girl is made fully conscious of her gaze being manipulated for the pleasure of another, a pleasure that’s utterly indifferent to her own dissent. “I feel such sorrow when I think how horror imitates beauty,” the narrator tells us. “Through that door, Pyramus and Thisbe, like you and Chango, spoke their love through a wall.”

These stories seem to agree with Lewis Carroll’s *White Queen* that it’s a poor sort of memory that only works backward, after all. And the further back we look, the less time we have left to see. Even worse, no matter how long or faithfully we look along that line, it doesn’t go back far enough, there’s still something, something big that we’ve all forgotten—we can’t remember what exactly we’re all supposed to be to each other, what we have been, what we can be, and that makes us rough playmates. The living appall us; how can we be at peace with them when they insist on standing so insistently between us and our ghosts? As Armando Heredia explains in the story “The Impostor,” it would be better if we were less careless with

the influence we exert upon each others' experience of the boundaries between life and death: "our lives depend on a certain number of people who see us as living beings. If those people imagine that we are dead, we die." If Armando is right, then on a moment-to-moment basis the terms of the continued existence of any individual are far more fragile than we dare to feel. And like those of Ocampo's characters who make it to the end of the story without having been murdered by a thing as simple as a velvet dress, or strangled by a grip as powerful as the eddies of an infernal whirlpool, there's something to be said for counting yourself lucky to be a survivor of yesterday, today, and maybe even tomorrow.

—HELEN OYEYEMI

## PREFACE

NOT WITHOUT some feelings of reticence do I write this preface. An old, yet ever new, friendship binds me to Silvina Ocampo, a friendship based on the shared memories of certain neighborhoods in Buenos Aires, of sunsets, of walks across the limitless plains or along a river as quiet as the land, of favorite poems: one based, above all, on the understanding and kindness that Silvina has never failed to show me. Like Rossetti and Blake, Silvina has come to poetry by the luminous paths of drawing and painting, and the immediacy and certainty of the visual image persist in her written pages.

The range covered by her spirit is much greater than my own. The joys provoked by music and color, paradises barred to my memory as well as to my curiosity, are familiar to her. I would say the same of the things of nature: flowers, vague names when I come upon them in Latin and Persian verses, signify something precise for Silvina, something precise and beloved. The universe I live in is opaque because it is purely verbal; in hers, the senses take part in all their delicate variety. Our literary preferences do not always coincide. I am moved by the epic, she by the lyric and the elegiac; she is not drawn so much to the *Chanson de Roland* and the harsh sagas of Iceland as to Baudelaire, a poet I venerated in my youth, or to the idylls of Theocritus. She also likes the psychological novel, a genre whose slow pace I reject out of laziness.

It is strange that it should be I, for whom telling a story is the attempt to capture only its essential elements, who should present to English readers a work as wise, as changeable, as complex, and at the

same time as simple as this collection. I thank the gods for this happy fate.

In Silvina Ocampo's stories there is something I have never understood: her strange taste for a certain kind of innocent and oblique cruelty. I attribute this to the interest, the astonished interest, that evil inspires in a noble soul. The present, we might say in passing, is perhaps no less cruel than the past, or than the various pasts, but its cruelties are clandestine. Góngora, who was a normal man and a fine poet, makes fun of an auto-da-fé performed in Granada because it offered the modest spectacle of only one person burned alive; Hitler, an atrocious man, preferred the anonymous horror of the secret death chambers to the spectacle of public executions. Today, cruelty searches out the shadows; cruelty is obscene, in the original meaning of the word.

Silvina has a virtue that is frequently ascribed to the ancients and to the peoples of the Orient, only infrequently to our own contemporaries: clairvoyance. More than once, and not without feelings of apprehension, I have felt hers. She sees us as if we were made of glass, sees and forgives us. It is useless to try to fool her.

Silvina Ocampo is a poet, one of the greatest poets in the Spanish language, whether on this side of the ocean or on the other. The fact that she is a poet elevates her prose. In other parts of South America, the short story is usually no more than a simple sketch of daily life or a simple social protest, or often an unhappy mixture of the two; among us, in Argentina, it tends to be the product of an imagination granted the fullest freedom. The book I am introducing is a clear example of this.

Groussac and Alfonso Reyes have renewed the intentionally verbose and sententious Spanish style with the help of the precision of French; Silvina Ocampo has understood their lesson and has constantly improved upon it in magical works.

—JORGE LUIS BORGES

## AUTHOR'S INTRODUCTION

AM I AN outsider or a liar, a giant or a dwarf, a Spanish dancer or an acrobat? When you write, everything is possible, even the very opposite of what you are. I write so that other people can discover what they should love, and sometimes so they discover what I love. I write in order not to forget what is most important in the world: friendship and love, wisdom and art. A way of living without dying, a way of death without dying. On paper, something of us remains, our soul holds on to something in our lives: something more important than the human voice, which changes with health, luck, muteness, and finally, with age.

What will be left of us in this world? Sentences instead of voices, sentences instead of photographs. I write in order to forget scorn, in order not to forget, in order not to hate, from hate, from love, from memory, and so as not to die. Writing is a luxury or, with luck, a rainbow of colors. It is my lifesaver when the water of the river or the sea tries to drag me under. When you want to die you fall in love with yourself, you look for something touching that will save you. I write to be happy or to give happiness. I, who am unhappy for no reason, want to explain myself, to rejoice, to forget, to find something others might find in Ovid in my unhappiness or in my other self.

Palinurus exists in writing, and sleeps in my heart as if in the blue water of the sea. Andersen's mermaid has a beautiful voice I never heard. When I call on the Guardian Angel in my language, he is more beautiful than life itself.

Sometimes you can tell the truth about little things only by not

writing. On a white sheet of paper I have been sketching a hand for some time; it is my hand that sketches words. I have loved painting since childhood.

Writing is having a sprite within reach, something we can turn into a demon or a monster, but also something that will give us unexpected happiness or the wish to die.

I studied painting with Giorgio de Chirico in Paris. I came to know the trials of artists, and the joys; I submerged myself in colors that reflected my soul or the state of my spirit. Also in Paris, after feeling that Chirico had given me all that he had to give, I went to Léger's academy: an enormous garage converted into a huge hall full of studios, where the students went with their paintings and their canvases, paper and pencils, and where a sad-eyed nude model sat on a platform, waiting for someone to sketch her. There I excelled as a student. Léger congratulated me, but that was not enough for me. I have retained his preference for design, even if his designs are inferior to those of any other painter's. Nothing interested Léger except the design of his paintings, lost among endless colors and brush-strokes that no other painter could imitate.

I fought with Giorgio de Chirico and told him he sacrificed everything for the sake of color. He would answer, "What else is there besides color?" "You're right. But color disturbs me. You can't see the forms amidst so many colors."

That is how I started to grow disillusioned. I drew away from a passion that was also a torture for me. What was left? Writing? Writing? There was music, but that was as far beyond my reach as the moon. For a long time I had been writing and hiding what I had written. For so long that I suffered from the habit of hiding what I wrote: as if God could heal me and give me a piece of good news that never came. The world is not magical. We make it magical all of a sudden inside us, and nobody finds out until many years later. But I did not hope to be known: that seemed the most horrible thing in the world to me. I will never know what I was hoping for. A beggar who sleeps under a tree without anything in the world to shelter him is happier than a famous man, a man known for his charm, for his

talent. What matters is what we write: that is what we are, not some puppet made up by those who talk and enclose us in a prison so different from our dreams. Will we always be students of ourselves?

—SILVINA OCAMPO  
*Buenos Aires, 1987*

THE IMPOSTOR  
AND OTHER STORIES



## FORGOTTEN JOURNEY

SHE WAS trying to remember the day she was born. She furrowed her brows so much that the adults interrupted her telling her repeatedly to un wrinkle her forehead. That was why she couldn't reach the memory of her birth.

Before they were born, children were held at a large department store in Paris; their mothers ordered them, and sometimes went in person to pick them up. She would have liked to watch the package being unwrapped, the box in which the babies were shipped, but she never reached the houses of newborns quickly enough. They arrived quite hot from the trip because they couldn't breathe very well inside the box, and that was why they were so red and cried incessantly, their toes curled up.

But she had been born one morning in Palermo Park making nests for birds. She couldn't remember having gone out of her house that day; she had the feeling that she had made the trip without a car or a carriage, a trip full of mysterious shadows, and that she had woken up on a road lined with trees that smelled like Australian pines where she had suddenly found herself making nests for birds. The eyes of Micaela, her nursemaid, followed her like two guards. The making of the birds' nests wasn't easy; they had several rooms each: they even needed a bedroom and a kitchen.

The next day, when she returned to Palermo, she looked for the nests along the road lined with Australian pines. There weren't any left. She was about to cry when her nursemaid said, "The little birds have taken the nests up into the trees, which is why they are so happy this morning." But her cruel sister, who was three years older than

she was, laughed, pointing with her linen glove at the Palermo gardener, a one-eyed man who was sweeping with a broom made of gray branches. In addition to the dead leaves he was sweeping up the last nest. At that moment, she felt like throwing up, as if she had heard the sound of hammocks in the backyard of her house.

Then time had passed, making the date of her birth seem desperately far away. Each memory was of a different baby girl, but all of them had her face. Each year she grew older the group of girls that surrounded her expanded.

Until one day, when she was playing in the study room, the daughter of the French chauffeur said, with atrocious bloodthirsty words, “Babies don’t come from Paris,” slowly adding, while looking around to see if the doors were listening, with unsuspected strength, “Babies come from the tummies of their mothers, and when they are born they come out through the belly button.” Who knows what other words dark as sin emerged from Germaine’s mouth, though she didn’t even pale upon saying them.

That was when babies started to appear all over the place. Never before had so many children been born in her family. The women wore huge balloons on their stomachs; each time an adult spoke about a newborn an intense fire burned across her face and she bent down to the ground looking for a ring or a handkerchief that hadn’t fallen. All eyes turned toward her like beacons lighting up her shame.

One morning, just out of her bath, watching the water swirling into the drain while her nursemaid wrapped her in a towel to dry her, she laughed and confided her horrible secret to Micaela. The nursemaid got very angry and assured her once again that babies came from Paris. She felt slightly relieved.

But when night returned, anguish mixed with the sounds of the street took hold of her whole body. She couldn’t sleep even though her mother kissed her over and over before going to the theater. The kisses had lost their power.

And it was only after many days and many long dark nights—the enormous clock in the kitchen, the empty hallways of the house,

the many grown-ups hiding behind doors—that she was lifted onto her mother's lap in the dressing room and her mother said that babies didn't come from Paris. Her mother spoke about flowers and birds, and everything mixed up with Germaine's horrible secrets. Still, she desperately believed that babies came from Paris.

A moment later, her mother said she was going to open the window, and after opening it, immediately her mother's face completely transformed: she was a lady in a feather-covered hat who just happened to be visiting the house. The window was almost shut, and when her mother told her that the sun was glorious, she saw the dark sky of night where no bird sang.

## STRANGE VISIT

BEFORE she would have lunch at a little table in the pantry and now she was allowed to have lunch at the big table. In the middle of the chatter, Leonor's eyes looked up through the windows searching for a bit of blue sky, but for the moment it was entirely covered with clouds. It was going to rain; she had been waiting for that day for a long time, because they had promised to take her to a house on the outskirts where she had only been once before. That was where a very tall man lived, isolated from the world perhaps by his height. He was a friend of Leonor's father and he had a daughter, two maids, and a gardener who lived in a tiny house with a spiral staircase. In the garden there was a tiny fountain with two conjoined tritons, with water coming out of their mouths, and a squat palm tree next to the wall of the house, and four rosebushes in double rows on either side of the path. Elena had incredibly black hair, and her face was so transparent that it was as if it had been erased; but all that was left of her hair was a very careful white knot, and her dress had five pleats in which Leonor's eyes got lost.

They had explored the house and the only thing that there was a lot of were hidden corners. They had gone up to the flat roof, from which it was possible to see the life of the neighboring houses, with retinues of clothes drying in the sun. They had hidden under the staircase and had grown weary when nobody came looking for them. They had peeked in the window of the study on the first floor where two men were talking, two men with faces as severe as their fathers', two men drowning in the seriousness of stiff collars and cigar smoke. Leonor, containing her laughter, squeezed her nose against the cold

glass; her eyes had to travel across the expanse of a white curtain and a Diana the Huntress to reach her father who was sitting on a brown leather sofa. He hadn't taken off his overcoat, and yet, with the same gesture of drying his forehead on very hot days, he rubbed his face with his handkerchief up as far as his eyes, stopping as if he were about to cry. The noise of a sewing machine wrapped the house as if in a hem of silence and the only sound was the moaning that tears must make in order to squeeze out of closed eyes. Elena's father got up and came running over to the windowsill. After a while they heard the voices rise to the level where they were. Elena took the hand of Leonor, who was afraid, and they walked toward the playroom as if ordered to play, though they didn't play. Elena gave her a little medal that she lost three times on the floor while taking it out of a drawer. They said goodbye without looking at each other, with a kiss that brought their cheeks close together in the air.

In the car, on the way back, her father scolded her twice, and Leonor no longer believed that he had cried. Along the edges of his eyes she had seen the hardness of his wrinkled forehead and she couldn't reconcile the two images—one seen through the distant scene of the curtain, the other so near and in a remote region thanks to his ill humor sitting there in the car.

Leonor thought about Elena. The table was full of laughter during dessert. The sky turned darker and darker, and rain as fine as powdered sugar was falling. Leonor saw her father shaking his head and thinking that they wouldn't be going to Elena's house that day, and she felt a great ocean like the ones they showed her on maps that held her distant from the face she wanted to reach, and which they had erased from her memory, the face of Elena.