SAVAGE THEORIES

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POLA OLOIXARAC

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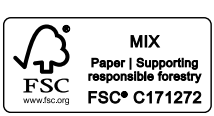

For Maxie and EK

All collaboration, all the human worth of social mixing and participation, merely masks a tacit acceptance of inhumanity.

—*Minima Moralia, 5* (trans. E. F. N. Jephcott)

This thing of darkness I acknowledge mine.

—*The Tempest* (V, i, 275)

Translator's Introduction

Roy Kesey

Most of the action in *Savage Theories* takes place in the Argentine capital, and most of the main characters are children of the Years of Lead, AKA the Dirty War, the decade (give or take) of state-sponsored terrorism in Argentina during which the military government and its right-wing death squad allies hunted down left-wing dissidents, guerrillas, students, journalists, and trade unionists, among others. That savagery darkens the novel's present, but it is hardly the book's only spilled blood. *Savage Theories* can be read as a history of a very specific sort of violence: the kind that is formative, for individuals, for cultures, and for our very species. It examines how the relationship between predator and prey evolved across millennia, how it was transmitted across generations, and how it helps us to identify the very moment in which the human race began.

The novel's titular theories create displacement in a wide range of fields. Anthropology gets first turn, followed by marine biology, psychology, biochemistry, and linguistics; there is an

obsession with film, with pop music, with painting and photography. Mostly, though, the novel sprouts from ground fertilized with political philosophy, with nods to, among others, Sun Tzu, Hobbes and Montaigne, Marx and Freud, Spinoza and Leibniz, Wittgenstein, McLuhan and Althusser.

Occasionally those nods are head-fakes—passages purposefully and pointedly misquoted—which brings us to the matters of voice and tone. The novel works primarily in a satiric key, and everyone comes in for their licks, but even the characters who live mainly for the pleasure of feeding their own bitterness and jealousy—which is to say, most of them—eventually find some measure of grace. Moreover, it is a satire shot through with a certain big-hearted love (and, let it be said, with sex that runs the gamut from pleasantly disturbing to delightedly transgressive). And it resides in language that ranges fluidly from transparent to scientific to philosophical and back again, with occasional plunges into the darkest depths of poker-faced academic doublespeak.

If I were going to include a paragraph about "the greatest challenges I faced as the translator of this work," this is where it would go, but I suspect you're already getting the picture. There are endnotes, which I tried to keep to the barest minimum, and failed. Should you happen to be in the market for information on the punning titles of Argentine porn, or clues to the historical-geographic curiosities of Buenos Aires and environs, or long loose translations of Montonero cadence calls, you are very much in luck.

It is a great privilege to be writing this note, much as it was a privilege to spend so much time inside Oloixarac's work, and, even more so, to be the first translator to bring her into English at book-length.

SAVAGE THEORIES

Part One

1

In the rite of passage practiced by the Orokaiva communities of New Guinea, the young boys and girls are first tormented by adults who crouch hidden in the foliage. Pretending to be spirits, the adults pursue the children, shouting, "You are mine, mine, mine!" They drive the initiates onto a platform similar to those used for the slaughter of swine; there, hoods are drawn over the heads of the terrified children, leaving them blind. They are led to an isolated hut deep in the forest, where they are made witness to the torturous rituals and ordeals in which the history of the tribe is encoded. Anthropologists have confirmed that it is not uncommon for children to die in the course of these ceremonies. In the end, the surviving children return to the village wearing the same masks and feathers as those who'd first threatened them, and join in a wild boar hunt. They are now not prey but predators, and they too shout, "You are mine, mine, mine!" Similarly, among the Nootka, Kwakiutl, and Quillayute tribes of the Pacific Northwest, it is wolves—that is, men in wolf masks—who torment the children, driving them

at spearpoint into the dark heart of the rites of fear. When the ritualized torture is complete, the children are taught the secrets of the Cult of the Wolf.

The life of little Kamtchowsky began in the city of Buenos Aires amid the violence of the Years of Lead, in the late 1970s; her earliest memories dated to the return of Argentine democracy known as the Alfonsinist Spring. Her father, Rodolfo Kamtchowsky, came from a Polish family that had immigrated to the city of Rosario in the 1930s. Rodolfo's mother died quite young, and he was sent to live with his aunts—the only man in the house. As early as primary school, he demonstrated an exceptional gift for abstract thought, and his fourth-grade mathematics teacher, who'd been to university, spoke glowingly of his capacity for formal innovation. When little Rodolfo brought this news home to his aunts it frightened them a bit, but they nonetheless decided that when he turned thirteen they would send him off to the capital to continue his studies.

Rodolfo was a happy child, but very shy. He spoke little, and at times appeared not to hear what was said to him. When the time came to move to Buenos Aires, he was taken in by yet another aunt, who lived across the street from Lezama Park. He enrolled at the Otto Krause Technical Institute, and later earned his engineering degree in record time.

Neither his timidity nor his chosen field had done him any favors in terms of meeting girls. In his engineering courses there had only been two female students, and he hadn't really considered them *girls* as such—they were rather dumpy, almost

misshapen, much as his own daughter would one day be. It soon become clear that fate and inclination had obliged him to be heterosexual, monogamous, and faithful. It was thus only natural that as soon as Providence brought him a woman (one belonging to the set known as "Girls"), Rodolfo would cleave to her, much as a certain type of mollusk swims freely through the ocean before driving its muscular appendage down into the sediment like an axe, its shell or mantle equipped with the ability to line the mucus-coated appendage with layers of calcium, though of course the lining will at some point disintegrate, and the mollusk will once again be adrift between death and the ocean's depths.

When he first spotted her, she was walking along Corrientes Avenue: a short, dark-haired young woman in a tight turtleneck sweater, her black eyes lined in black, mask-like. Though Rodolfo had known of similar sets of empirical data, impressive only because of how perfectly generalizable and thus ordinary they could become, there was *something* in the moment's avalanche of concrete detail—perhaps the way the pleats shifted beneath her buttocks, perhaps the bus ticket protruding from her back pocket—that he perceived as supernatural. *Something* beyond what he'd come to expect of this world. This passageway between a set of environmental data and his individual, untransferable status as eyewitness to it, as synthesized into the phenomenon of "her," led him to experience a sense of decisiveness. He followed her down the street as if keeping watch over her. Then he noticed that others were watching her too, that an awareness of her was spreading, and as he came to understand the *worth*, in some sense, of his target, he likewise understood that she couldn't possibly be oblivious to the fact that he'd been following her for at least

ten blocks. Of course, this latter thought was of no importance whatsoever to the present stage of the process—he had already intuited its programmatic nature—and he resolved to stop thinking altogether.

Then a miracle occurred: it started to rain, and Rodolfo was carrying an umbrella. The young engineer quickened his pace. His heart filled as the young woman laughed a bit distractedly and accepted the protection he offered. They stepped into a bar called La Giralda to warm up and dry off; as Rodolfo had hardly gotten wet at all, he concerned himself exclusively with warmth, and blushed a bit, but she didn't seem to notice. She peeled off her wet sweater, giving Rodolfo a glimpse of her flesh-colored bra, and he hid his erection by sitting down as quickly as he could. They ordered hot chocolate, and she wolfed down a few croissants.

Later that same afternoon, caught up in the flood of chatter and delighted with his newfound and apparently innate ability to talk to the girl and imagine her naked simultaneously, Rodolfo told her that the aunt with whom he lived in Buenos Aires had said that his other aunts, the ones who lived in Rosario, had had to work as prostitutes to provide for him. The girl was a sophomore psychology major; she responded languidly that in fact Rodolfo believed that his own mother had been in that line of work. The girl gazed at her reflection in the window, practicing her Evenly Suspended Attention, then glanced at Rodolfo to gauge his reaction. His mother had died of cancer, and in her final years she'd been unable to rise from her bed; stunned, he took a bite of the chocolate-covered churro in his hand, and let his thoughts drift.

The following day he went to the university to look for her. The Psychology Department was divided into two areas

of study—"psychosocial" and "humanistic"—both housed in Philosophy and Letters. Like Rodolfo, the future mother of little Kamtchowsky belonged to the first generation of middle-class youth to throw itself more or less en masse into the market for higher education. In 1968 the Psychology Department produced twice as many graduates as it had the year before; its explosive growth continued, peaking in the early 1970s at more than four hundred graduates per year. When the Peronist party returned to power, the university gutted and rebuilt all of its departmental programs, the course offerings now influenced by the entire spectrum of Marxist doctrine. Many once-mandatory courses became optional, and in 1973 the department's plan of study was reoriented to emphasize the field's social aspects, in particular its communitarianism and fieldwork. The new approach downplayed the importance of professional training through coursework and curricular obligations. Marxist epistemology determined that the main priority should be support for popular struggles; the specific obsessions of fields less reliant on partisan imperatives were given second-tier status at best. Enrollment rates had grown precipitously, and forty-five percent of the new female students chose the psychology department, where women outnumbered men by a ratio of eight to one.

For a university graduate, the statistical probability of interaction with either a professional psychologist or one in training was thus extremely high; nonetheless, this was Rodolfo's first time. Never before had he received the look of scientific condescension native to a mind that is forever tracing deep connections between unscientific postulates and the world itself. Psychoanalytic jargon allowed both respectable professionals and those en route to

respectability to pepper their vocabulary with genital references that would have been out of bounds even in openly lowbrow entertainment contexts such as cabaret shows. Government censors could close striptease joints and ban certain films, but psychoanalysis was perceived as a sort of linguistic vanguard, a close cousin of "freedom of thought," and the members of its lexical entourage had managed to insert themselves into the moist cavities of the middle class.

The key to the enthusiasm with which society had embraced the field was undoubtedly its medical origins—its very existence was justified by its alleged ability to alleviate pain. To Rodolfo, the constellation of words that calmly orbited the anal and vaginal orifices seemed indescribably mature and daring, unlike anything he'd ever known (and in this sense much like love); the implications left him all but priapismic. The young woman often let her eyes fall closed as she spoke, interlacing her speech with significant pauses. She seemed intelligent, but it was impossible to know for sure. When she spoke earnestly of the Oedipal myth, of Little Hans and the *vagina dentata*, of autoerotic mothering in Melanie Klein, Rodolfo hid his surprise as best he could and scrutinized her face, trying to determine whether or not there was, beneath all the eyeliner and mascara, a member of the lettered elite who actually took all this nonsense seriously. It seemed reasonable to him that between the demands of romance and those of political militancy, she wouldn't have time to get a real degree. Each time she spoke of the passion of the people's struggle, of mobilizing the masses from below, of shattering the shell of the individual once and for all, Rodolfo got such a hard-on that he could

have filled the mouths of all those rebel Marxist woodcutters in Chaco with proteins and fatty filaments, each last one *Made in Kamtchowsky*. And somewhere in the course of one of these interludes, little K was conceived.

2

As the sexual tussle that would result in the birth of little Kamtchowsky was getting underway, another Argentine—a psychiatry student and philosophy TA—was awarded an *ad honorem* post caring for teenage microcephalics at the Montes de Oca Colony. Slovenly and socially awkward in person, pretentious on the page, Augusto García Roxler's natural habitat was the shadows of academia. His future as one of the foremost theorists in his field was so much in doubt as to be quite literally unforeseeable; he prowled through the scabrous libraries of the Department of Medicine, blind to everything but his own ideas (and what he took to be prodigious signs proving their validity), living as if walled off from the rest of the world, and in particular from the majestic, blood-drenched corridor in which the great events of his time were taking place.

He was too shy to be openly pedantic and too nondescript to inspire any sense of mystery. His genius would remain hidden for decades; more importantly, when it finally filtered through—its

rays thin and tentative, the bony extremities of a blind man groping about in the darkness—it would only ever reach a single consciousness. Only one (the chosen one, the perfect one) would decide its fate. Only one would gather and sustain its battered photons, rebuild them, send them flitting spirit-like across the monstrous face of the facts. But before that, long before that, back when young Augusto was still spending his days measuring microcephalic crania and undressing oligophrenics and catatonics for his experiments, there was a book, and then a night, a single terrifying night, in which his theory caught its first whiff of the earth's crust. He was thirty years old, or perhaps a bit older, when he finished the first draft of what would eventually become his Theory of Egoic Transmissions.

The Theory's earliest progenitor had sent its first tentative shoots into the air back in 1917, when the Dutch anthropologist Johan van Vliet published an article in *Nature* describing a series of experiments on human subjects. An inveterate traveler and confessed admirer of Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Professor van Vliet saw no reason why his field of study should focus exclusively on wealthy Westerners, or on the proletariat of the remotest corners of Europe. He believed that in order to formulate an authentic theory of human psychology, a theory that would speak to the deepest modes of human action, it was necessary to work with elements taken from outside the process of choreographic adaptation known as Culture.

For his *Ad intra res cogitans* experiment—its title was taken from that of his diary—Johan van Vliet organized a small

expedition to Dahomey, now part of Benin, in West Africa. At the time, Dahomey was relatively accessible for European travelers, thanks to its two-hundred-year history as a producer and exporter of palm oil and slaves for the White Man. France had recently overthrown the country's last native dynasty; the consul general (who happened to bear an extraordinary resemblance to Voltaire) gave Van Vliet directions to a Fon encampment that lay en route to the northern jungle. Two of Van Vliet's disciples—Dr. Fodder and Dr. Fischer—had recently arrived from England. As they stood in line for quinine pills at the consular infirmary, Van Vliet, eager to get into the jungle as soon as possible, forced himself to thumb slowly through an old copy of *Le Figaro.*

The Fon people treated them kindly, gave them campsites with good views into the bush, and provided them with smoking materials. The Fon believe not in a single, all-powerful God, but in a spirit-world that is complex and unstable, and shortly after arriving at the encampment, Van Vliet—a genuine pioneer in psychological experimentation—began skulking about wearing nothing but a loincloth. He smeared mud all over his flabby academic flesh so as to move about "unseen" at night. He walked barefoot at all times, and spent hours staring at the moon (which seemed much bigger and brighter than it had during his expeditions to the North Sea, where he'd been researching conflict theory in sea spiders). At times he fell asleep seated there on the porous soil, his notebook still in hand. He took notes using ink made of resin, palm char, and bone ash, and one day while mixing up a batch he befriended a small monkey with almond-shaped eyes. As he anxiously studied the language of the Fon, he quickly learned that of the birds, and set up a provisional academic office

complete with all his notebooks high in the branches of a topped tree that had once been home to a family of bushbabies.

At this point in history, psychological theory was having itself quite *un moment*. In 1917, Alfred Adler had concluded his fifty-two page work on homosexuality, showing the phenomenon to be the result of an inferiority complex toward one's own sex. In 1920, Sigmund Freud published his *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). Three years earlier Jung had arranged for a private printing of the seven sermons to the dead he'd written and ascribed to Basilides of Alexandria (*Septem Sermones ad Mortuos*), and in 1926, Burrhus Frederic Skinner, having recently decided that he possessed neither the talent nor the experience a literary career required, abandoned his dream of becoming a fiction writer and applied to do a PhD in psychology. Inspired by Bertrand Russell's commentaries on Watson's behaviorist theories, Skinner's earliest experiments on pigeons ("'Superstition' in the pigeon," 1947) were followed by others of subtle mechanistic design applied first to individual human beings, and then (albeit only in theory) to massive groups (a territory previously considered the exclusive domain of utopian literature); these mega-groups lived in communes where the children were raised according to a strict creed of operant conditioning and various other protocols of social engineering.

Given this context of psychology on high boil, and the fact that Johan van Vliet didn't belong to any of his field's prominent schools of thought, it will come as no surprise that his radically original projects were dismembered by the jaws of time without ever putting up a struggle. In fact, amidst the murky circumstances of Van Vliet's disappearance into the jungle, Time's appetite left the new theory

headless. One of his disciples, Manfred Fodder, who'd managed to get the results of the African sojourn published in *Nature*, was eventually absorbed into the Skinnerian hordes; the other, Marvin Fischer, continued to impart the master's theory at occasional conferences until finally giving up and joining the legions of Otto Rank—who, in 1926, was excommunicated by none other than the Father of Psychoanalysis himself for the sin of "anti-Oedipal heresy."

In spite of their firsthand experience of Van Vliet's genius, neither Fodder nor Fischer was capable of serving as medium for the Dutchman's voice when seated at the wide oak tables of academia. Neither had his gift for the sort of edge-of-your-seat conceptual theater that might impress their fellow intellectuals, most of whom had given the man up for dead. Neither knew how to summon the murmur of Van Vliet's singular theory up through the sublunar language of workaday academics. A man with a theory is someone who has something to shout, but a dead man with a theory requires a séance, and even then his spirit is a wad of half-chewed bread lolling about in the medium's mouth, occasionally pushing back against the teeth but certain to disintegrate and destined to be spit out. The academic presentations given by Fodder and Fischer came out sounding like the bleating of two goats lost and alone in the far hills. Translated into English and German to accommodate the ears of their colleagues, the content resembled the strange unintelligible wailing of a newborn, at best indistinguishable from other theories. The year after Rank's exile began, Fischer published *Cerebral Response and Egoic Transmissions: An Introduction.* He and Rank met regularly to discuss their respective hypotheses, but it wasn't long before Fischer passed away, leaving no philosophical descendants.

* * *

The Montes de Oca Colony (founded in 1915 as the Coeducational Asylum-Colony for the Retarded) is located in the district of Luján approximately eighty kilometers from Buenos Aires, and its grounds cover two hundred thirty-four hectares. The patients live in a group of buildings surrounded by vast green spaces—woodlands of elm and acacia, of cypress, of river oak and eucalyptus—interspersed with immense open meadows that stretch to the horizon, on the edges of which are a series of bogs and pits into which the patients sometimes fall to their deaths. Days and even weeks can pass before the scavenger birds begin to circle above the site; at other times it is the asylum's guard dogs who suddenly appear chewing on shreds of clothing and human bones. In either case the proper form is promptly filled out to document the disappearance.

It was in the course of a stormy night here at the Colony that young Augusto, while reading in his pajamas on the cot in his small bedroom in the infirmary, first understood the implications of Van Vliet's theory. The realization coursed through his body like an electric current. Far too excited to sit still, Augusto threw on a shawl his mother had knitted and walked out onto the porch, which lay half in ruins. Rain filtered through the slats of the overhang; a sludge of water and splintered wood dripped down his face. He thought of Van Vliet's visage, of the pointy tip of the man's nose, of the flaring nostrils, a face more similar to that famous portrait of Hobbes than Augusto's own genetic *corpus* could ever have mustered, and now the Dutchman's shade watched him from the core of the night, both maw and wolf. The theory was practically unprecedented, and long misunderstood; more importantly, it had the sound of a precursor to Augusto's

own fantasies. The raindrops kept falling, and he opened his mouth to drink them in. He had in his hands the fetal tissue of intuition. Now he had only to flatten it against the throat of his beliefs, to beat down all other voices, to submerge, to expunge the outside world from his mind until his mission was complete. A flash of lightning set the sky aflame; the rain curtained his vision in all directions. Augusto dried his face, then let out a shout. A spectral figure was coming toward him up the gravel path.

The infirmary was set somewhat apart from the rest of the asylum's buildings (labeled Incontinent, Oligophrenic, Violent, Catatonic, Gerontological, Crippled, and Women, respectively); the evening curfew applied equally to patients and doctors, forbidding them from leaving their buildings unaccompanied at night. Lightning seared Augusto's vision, and his imagination's soliloquies bore him into space. The specter was now within meters of the porch on which the horrified Augusto stood: scrawny legs and pointed skull, some random John Doe drenched to the bone and white against the dark, still drifting toward him. The man's brain couldn't have weighed a whit more than 104 grams, the weight of Prévost's brain as described by Paul Broca in his study of murderers executed by guillotine ("Le cerveau de l'assassin Prévost," 1880, *Bulletin de la Société d'Anthropologie de Paris*, pp. 233–244). Augusto opened his mouth, but no words came out. The shawl slipped from his right shoulder; he stretched out his hand as if to control the man telekinetically. It was only Titín, one of the microcephalics. The rain washed down through the rags in which he was clothed; his filth-matted hair hung stiffly along the sides of his face. His eyes shot wide open, and a flash of horror lit Augusto's face; Titín screamed as his Pavlovian conditioning

kicked in and he began to remove his clothes. Augusto slipped quickly back in through his door, locked it, and double-checked all of the shutters to make sure they were properly latched. Outside, the storm raged ever stronger, lashed at the fields and graves, sent bolt after bolt down into the trembling trees.

The ideas that sprang into being as a result of this meeting of the three agents required of all theories (viz. the Precursor, the Theoretician, and the Victim) remained comatose for most of the twentieth century. Then, though no clear connection had yet been made between them, the hypothetical possibilities that had been created by their proximity to one another found, like the spirit gods of the Fon, the perfect body in which to make themselves manifest.

3

Beginning around age eleven, Kamtchowsky suddenly found herself in a series of classroom discussions wherein the teachers wished to know if the boys were masturbating yet, and whether anything milky came out when they did. The classes were co-ed, and everyone enjoyed them. The teachers, all women in their thirties, were careful to keep their expressions serious.

Thanks to some cosmic scheduling wisdom, sex ed and civics were part of a single course that most often came right after biology. The classroom slogan "Ask anything you want to know!" attempted to clarify the relationship between happiness and knowledge by tying the concept of "body" to that of "communication," an associative bundling that led in turn to the concept of "sexuality." The abstract notion of pleasure presented itself as the subset of thought contiguous to the action of estrogen and testosterone upon the students' bodies, as evidenced by the accumulation of fat in the girls' buttocks and busts, and the swelling growth of the boys' scrotal sacs. Sooner or later (and everyone knew it was coming) nervous

laughter would be followed by a furtive glance at a classmate, who would nod in turn, and from that point on it was simply a matter of "letting oneself go," especially for the girls, though there were no instructions given for the procedure in question.

It was only natural that anxiety would permeate the classroom. Given this diagnostic, instead of cutting the students' vulgarities short, the teachers hardly even registered them; for the most part they merely furrowed their brows a bit, discouraging such comments while also dispensing a dose of sympathy, and even complicity. Punishment was left programmatically vague, as if it were some evil gas that prevented oxygenation from occurring within the pulmonary alveoli, and its absence thus allowed everyone in the room to breathe freely. The occasional loss of control or outbreak of violence could be foreseen, but not completely avoided. When necessary, the problem child would be asked to step to the front of the class; ever so sweetly, the teacher would make the student look like an idiot, thereby taking the royal scepter back in hand without feeling dictatorial. One teacher did however make the mistake of pushing a student too far. "All right," she said, "if you're really so fond of talking about your wiener, why don't you pull it out and show it to us?" The boy obliged, then peed in the face of a female classmate, whose giggling became a horrified gasp. (At the next PTA meeting, several parents were visibly upset; they spoke of a similar case that had resulted in post-traumatic stress disorder, the victim now incapable of drinking apple juice.) During recess that same day, Kamtchowsky went to the restroom and found her panties stained with blood. It was viscous, and dark, and difficult to rinse out. Back home, she put off telling her mother for several hours.

Night came, and with it her mother's reaction, wherein she mentioned that they hadn't named her Carolina because they were afraid that her classmates would call her Caca. Little Kamtchowsky's skin was indeed relatively dark, but it *wasn't because of that*, her mother hastened to add. The ominously empty hallways of the girl's mind began to fill with thoughts harboring the somber intuition that there was something repulsive, something really repulsive going on with her, and she had to hide it any way that she could. She suddenly understood that she'd known this since she was very young, because there was simply no way not to be aware of it, even if she couldn't quite explain what *it* was, not even to herself.

That same year, Kamtchowsky's mother decided that she was at last old enough to begin typing up the handwritten notebooks of her Aunt Vivi, which she—little K's mother—was hoping to get published. She believed that aside from their indisputable historical value, the journals were possessed of a fundamental authenticity evident in their use of the present tense, the untidiness of the hurried handwriting, and a certain lack of structural coherence. She asked her daughter to correct nothing but spelling errors. Kamtchowsky's suggestion that the project be accompanied by a raise in her allowance bore no fruit whatsoever.

Not long after Kamtchowsky's mother had gotten married, Vivi, her younger sister, had been kidnapped while handing out pamphlets in an Avellaneda factory. Rodolfo Kamtchowsky had accompanied his new bride as she made all relevant inquiries, but in truth there was little to be done. Vivi never reappeared, though there were rumors that she'd been seen in the Seré

Mansion, a secret detention center in Morón. She left behind a few flowery dresses, a broken Winco record player, and this multi-volume diary written in first and second person, wherein she described the events of her life right up to the week she was kidnapped. From the age of seventeen or so, most of the entries in her diary consisted of letters to Mao Zedong, heroic leader of the Red Army; she hid his identity by changing a single letter of his name.

The hardback, folio-size notebooks had been hidden in a leaky basement; they smelled pretty bad.

Dear Moo:

There's some weird kind of tremor in the streets, a sense of disturbance, of madness and the future. Life, it must be. They're not going to silence us, those sons of b------! These are some fucked-up days, Moo, black days. Both personally and politically. Things aren't going well with L.; it's hard not to feel like we're growing apart. I also think he's seeing another girl. I know that we've got an open relationship, and I feel like a hypocrite because it's not like I ever told him I wanted us to be one of those little bourgeois couples—if anything, I wanted the opposite. I always supported his militant opposition to the putrid values of society. We both reject bourgeois repression, and together we've chosen a new path, unswerving and brightly lit but full of thorns. I know that if at some point I can't stand it anymore, then all I have to do is get out of his way, and it will be over. But I can't, Moo. The truth is that I love him, and it hurts me, the way things are right now. I realize that

there isn't much I can do to change things, and that if I really want us to stay together, what has to change is my way of seeing the situation.

For example, the other day he came over, and we were getting along great, drinking mate *and talking, mostly about him. He told me that in his Local Party HQs he'd been reunited with a bunch of comrades from the Tendency, and everyone was very excited. I noticed that he was acting kind of weird, as if there was something he wanted to tell me, but didn't dare. I told him that he could trust me, that I would always be here to support him—I know, maybe it sounds a little cheesy, but that's how it came out. He took a wrinkled piece of paper out of his pocket, and read it to me:*

But what kind of Argentina is this?
The people came out to defend the government
they'd wanted
and the police swore at them, sent them running
with tear gas, flew
after them on motorcycles and in squad cars.
Not even Lannuse ever dreamed of this.
The magnificent youth poured into the streets
to show that spilled blood was non-negotiable,
that the most loyal Peronists could never be
prisoners,
that the people, victorious on March 11th
and September 23rd, could not be
forced to put up with all this, the officers

who'd repressed the people for eighteen long years
promoted for treating the people as if they were
the enemy.
The people regrouped and advanced once again.
The facts speak for themselves.

When L. stopped reading, he seemed overwhelmed with emotion. I spoke gently, said that we shared the same feelings of powerlessness. (It wasn't long ago that the crowds were chased out of Plaza Once—I hadn't gone because I was having my period, but L. went.) He interrupted me, saying, "No, baby, it's a poem, a poem that Silvina wrote. Boy, I shouldn't show you things like this—they're too intimate." I felt myself growing red with rage, Moo, I swear. I wanted to kick him right in the you-know-what. Why in the world would he show the poem to me if it was so intimate? Then he said, "I found out her real name by accident. But nobody else knows that I know, so don't tell anybody I told you anything." I could feel my face burning, as if I'd just eaten a whole bag of hot peppers. He calmly put the piece of paper back in his pocket. I was furious, but hid it by speaking as fast as I could:

"So, but why, why shouldn't you know her real name?"

"Because of our roles in the cause, Vivi, why else?"

He was dead serious this whole time. Then he got impatient with me, and a little while later he left. Forgive me, Moo, but what he read me was no poem. That the girl wrote the thing herself, fine and dandy, with any luck it doesn't even have any spelling mistakes

(here's hoping, anyway—I swear to god, most of these Peronists, it wouldn't surprise me to see them carrying signs urging us on to "Bictory") but where is the poetry in it? Okay, I get it, you're going to say that I'm judgmental, that I've got no feel for artistic freedom, the formless form, whatever, that I'm afflicted with that typical bourgeois blindness. (I'm happy to admit that the poem's lack of actual poetry could in fact be a good thing, like with the music of Stockhausen, which isn't, shall we say, all that musical.) But all of a sudden my mind was full of doubts. I bet if L. had stayed, I would have stared at him with absolutely no expression on my face.

I was in such a bad mood by then that I couldn't sleep, couldn't think, couldn't do anything at all. I was so depressed that I actually started paging through a copy of Siete Días *that we had there at the house. What a terrible magazine! But if that other thing was a poem, then this jeans ad in* Siete Días *is also a poem. (In the photo there are two guys and a girl, all wearing jeans with huge bell-bottoms, their makeup like something out of* Nosferatu.)

The ghosts
were seen appearing, luminous spirits
in the penumbra of nightfall.
They were young, and they laughed at the cold.
Because they felt the caress of their Levi's.
Soft as the light of the stars.
Warm as the glow of a campfire.

The ghosts were possessed
by the magical joy of life.
They had Levi's.
And they sang.
But the gray ones—those who believe that joy
has no place in this
world—they did not understand.
"Phantoms," they murmured.
And locked their doors tight.
The ghosts hadn't seen them,
had already disappeared,
singing, into the night.
Kept warm by the spell of their Levi's.

I'm not one of the gray ones—never was, never will be. I'll risk everything for the things that matter. I believe in my own inner world, and in my fight against the closed-off hearts of the bourgeoisie. I'm not about the individual as a solution. I'm all about the causes that affect the Third World, the poor and the working class, those who fight back day after day. I will not stand motionless beside the path, as Benedetti puts it, and no I will not calm down. Oh, Moo, I swear I'm trying to get my head around it, trying to accept the idea that L. and I are in an open relationship, but it's just so hard. Fine, we're all as free as you please, but it pisses me off, nothing I can do about it. The other day I went by the unit—mine, not L.'s, because if I'd gone by his we'd have ended up in a fight. So, they told me to sit down and wait, and a little while later a guy came in, dark-skinned, super

cute, long curly hair, big mustache. I was glad I was sitting down so he couldn't see that my backside's a little flat (I told you that already). He told me his name was Fernando—I wonder if that's his nom de guerre *or his real name. "Hi, Fernando," I said, "I'm Vivi." Well, in ten minutes it felt like we'd known each other all our lives. I felt so strange, Moo, as if the logic of my footsteps and the cipher of my days (the signs in my dreams) had carried me there, to that little desk, once and for all. Or maybe I'm being too dramatic about it—I was reading Borges at the time and his way of thinking about how events unfold is really contagious. Later I told L. about it over the phone, and he hung up on me—he didn't even believe me.*

All the same, I don't hold grudges—I went to see him, and gave him a copy of Libro de Manuel, *because we'd both always loved Cortázar, who's like some kind of talisman for us. I remember one time we went out for dinner at Pippo, and L. started calling me "Maguita," as in La Maga from* Rayuela, *then we went back to his apartment and made love and it felt like I was floating up in the clouds, loved for the way I am, cherished by the one I loved. Moo, just so you see the difference: this time L. tore open the gift paper, looked at the book, and said that it was garbage. That in this exact book Cortázar had lost his way politically, and even more so artistically. Or vice versa, depending on which matters more to you. But how can you know that if you haven't even read it, I said. L. is very intuitive but it's not like he's clairvoyant. "Well, you know, I was hanging out with Pelado Flores, and he showed me a couple of*

passages—totally pathetic," was the best lie that imbecile could come up with. I realized that he must have read that article on Cortázar in Crisis, *because he was just repeating the author's taunts—he spent the whole afternoon making fun of Cortázar and calling him a bullshit firebrand, acting like such a bully, as if he were lord and master of revolutionary truth.*

L. says that the hippy motto is total nonsense—why make love not war, if you can do both? "War is an aphrodisiac," he says. "It heats up your blood just like love. Plus it's summertime!" If he had kissed me right after saying that, I swear to god I would have led the people's insurrection myself—the Fifth International, pro-China and pro-Viet Cong, and you know what else? After that I would have nationalized everything, thrown all that Peronist nonsense straight out the window, a workers' insurrection pure and simple, government of the people. Oh, Moo! What I wouldn't give to have him between my legs again, and we'd do it slow, everything he wanted, and then we'd do it again!

At about this same time in Kamtchowsky's life, the Brazilian wave of Gal Costa and Maria Bethânia, of "Eu preciso te falar," of "Amanhã talvez" and Rita Lee's hit "Lança perfume," came to an end. An extensive marketing study determined that the wave's commercial success had been due mainly to a certain timbre in the treble equalization; apparently the sound engineers had set out to light up the same cerebral pleasure circuits that respond to cocaine. Against all reasonable expectations, the wave's popularity was

immediately usurped by César "Banana" Pueyrredón's pop ballad "Conociéndote," followed by a final twitch from the death throes of his career, "No quiero ser más tu amigo." Then Kamtchowsky's father left for Chile to manage the construction of a new factory, and she never saw him again.

The fifteen years that passed between her initiatory bloodshed and the beginning of this story proper were difficult ones for Kamtchowsky. It was all too clear that other people found her frankly unattractive, and her mother seemed to wish her dead. She suspected that she had no idea how to "let herself go," and soon proved this with Mati, a classmate who was quite ugly himself. Kamtchowsky tried to adapt herself to his rhythm; she parted her lips lasciviously, threw her head back. Some of the "sensual" moments were frankly uncomfortable, but she did her best to please.

Mati and Kamtchowsky spent most of their time rubbing their stubby little bodies together, then staring meekly at one another, waiting for *emotions* to occur, mirroring each other's expressions as best they could. The activation of their reproductive apparati was compulsively enriched by Mati's onanistic research. While most of what went on could clearly be termed *exploring* (an adventurous euphemism for all activities related to physical development), the bulk of their efforts went into the process of working through the script that begins with Curiosity and proceeds into the singular experience of Romance. In fact these were two separate stages—one instinctive and animalistic, the other human and rational—and the natural thing was to progress from one to the other. Loving and being in love were also important, of course, almost as important as homework. Mati

and Kamtchowsky generally got bored fairly quickly of all the thrusting and staring, put their clothes back on, and hooked up the Atari. Mati was rather chubby, with thick lips and bulging eyes that gave him the look of a stunned beetle; a few years later, during his growth spurt, his eyes would migrate toward the sides of his head, making him more of a tadpole, as if to indicate the potential that croaked softly within. That was also the period during which he discovered that he was ambidextrous in terms of jerking off and of drawing pictures with his pee in the urinals.

Kamtchowsky was strangely conscious of the fact that this relationship was no more than a test run for the future, and in general she let Mati have his way. She suspected that he acted as he did in order to seem cool, though he obviously couldn't pull it off; she wanted to caress his little gel-stiffened quiff, to say that he could calm down, that they would learn soon enough. Then, much as her father had discovered how to calculate Fourier series functions at the tender age of ten, Kamtchowsky made her own unoriginal and thus trivial discovery: that fucking consisted of a set of procedures which *could* be serialized. Given the constant acceleration of repeated motion aligned vertically inside her (glans [G] = force vector), the mathematical operation in question would result in Kamtchowsky lying beaten to a pulp against the wall with her skull pierced along its horizontal axis (the abscissa) as follows:

$$\mathrm{d} = \frac{W}{pGu^2 f\left(\frac{u\sqrt{G}}{v}\right)} \qquad \frac{1}{\cos(\pi)}$$