

SHADOWS ACROSS FROSTED GLASS

A Juan José Saer Story Translated By Matthew Lansburgh

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For Biby Castellaro

Time is so complicated, yet so simple! Now I'm in the living room sitting in the rocking chair, and I can see Leopoldo's shadow in the bathroom while he begins to undress. It seems so simple to think about right now, but when I face the expanse of that now, I immediately realize how weak memory really is. Memory is a tiny little part of every now, and all the rest of that now is nothing but memory's illusion—darting and fleeting too quickly to ever really grab hold of. Take, for example, my right breast. During the now when they first cut into it, how many other breasts were slowly growing on other chests less worn than mine by time? And in this now when I see the shadow of my brother-in-law Leopoldo cast upon the bathroom door's glass and I bring my hand toward my empty brassiere, stuffed full with a fake cotton breast, there to cover over all the scar's whiteness, how many hands are moving, full of trembling and delight, toward how many other living, tingling breasts? That's what I mean when I say that so much of the present is memory and that time is complicated, even though thinking back, it might seem so simple.

I am the poet Adelina Flores. Am I the poet Adelina Flores? I'm fifty-six years old and I've published three books: *The Lost Road*, *Light Faraway*, and *Unbearable Darkness*. Now I can see the shadow of my brother-in-law Leopoldo cast huge across the bathroom door's glass. The door faces our sitting room, not the living room, and only by chance—since it's closer to the front door I left open to get a little air—did I bring the rocker to this spot where I'm now slowly rocking back and forth. The rocking chair creaks softly. I couldn't stand my room, and not just because of the heat. That's why I came here. It's impossible to stay penned in between books covered in dust during these hot January afternoons. Susana has gone out. She never leaves, but today she said her right leg was hurting and she had to see the doctor. That's why she got up before six. Rocking slowly, I can see the way Leopoldo unbuttons his shirt, carefully taking it off, turning around to hang it on the bathroom hook. Now he's starting to unbutton his pants. I notice my hand clenching the fistful of cotton inside my brassiere, and I pull my hand away. I've seen cities and countries leveled and rebuilt, people transformed completely, but I've never been able to stand the sudden flatness of that skin. I've realized that often it's what changes in someone that allows them to continue as the same person. And that what remains intact in us can change us for the worse. Leopoldo is casting strange, moving shadows across the frosted glass, now that he's leaning to take off his pants, bending down to pull his first foot free, straightening up afterward, bending down again to pull the other foot out, then straightening up again.

("Shadows" "Shadows across" "When a shadow across glass" "I'm seeing No.") That kid, what was his name? Tomatis. He once told me what he thought of me, at the panel on the effect of literature on teenagers. I never wanted to be in the spotlight at that university. But my editor came to me and said: "Don't you think if you got out there and gave a couple talks *Unbearable Darkness* would have a better chance of selling, Adelina?" That's how I ended up sitting there facing a packed house. Hundreds of faces were watching me, waiting for me to utter something in that room, so cold and full of echoes. Tomatis was sitting at the opposite end of the table. I gave a short talk, although the sight of all those people left me tongue-tied. (Leopoldo straightens his pants carefully, holding them up by the cuffs to find the crease. Afterward he folds them and drapes them over a hanger; I see him.) When I finished speaking, Tomatis burst into laughter. "Ms. Flores—" he said, trying to suppress his guffaw with mock seriousness, "—has reeled off some charming tidbits about the state of human affairs. Too bad it's hogwash. What I want to know is when Ms. Flores last set foot outside her house?" The mob staring at me started to laugh. I didn't say one more word; when the panel ended and we went to the dinner hosted by the university, Tomatis took the seat next to me. He spent the whole time rambling on and on, laughing and smoking and drinking. At one point, he turned to me and said, "Don't you think screwing is where it's at, Adelina? I sure do. That's the problem with all you fossils: you haven't screwed enough, or in your case, not at all. You know what I mean? I've heard you're missing a breast. No, I'm not drunk. Or, if so, more lucid than ever. Admit it! You lopped it off yourself—didn't you, Adelina? Look, you seem like a real sweetheart. You even have a couple of sonnets that can cut the mustard. Excuse my frankness, but that's the way I am. You should screw more, Adelina, you know, break out of that fourteen-line straightjacket of yours—because archaic forms like that are like chastity belts; so break out and start something new! I'm dead set on seeing you tear free, Adelina! You, over there, pass me that bottle of wine. Thanks." I remember the place exactly: a restaurant downtown with red-and-white checkered tablecloths, covered in dirty plates with pieces of uneaten fish and half-empty bottles of red wine. Now Leopoldo has taken off his underwear and is looking at them. He leans over to drop them in the dirty clothes hamper, on the side of the bathroom over by the tub. I can see his shadow—huge, but still in proportion, spread out across the frosted glass of the bathroom door next to the sitting room.

At this moment, only that shadow is right now, and the rest of my now is nothing but memory. At times, that memory, so different from now, can make you burst into tears. It's horrible to think that the only things that seem real are nothing but shadows. If I think that at this very moment sunbathers are walking under the winsome trees in Parque del Sur, I know that that thought isn't now, but only a memory. Because at this very instant there might be not a single sunbather in Parque del Sur, or if there is, she might not be walking under the trees I'm thinking about; there's even a chance they're all lying on the sand at the beach, or swimming out in the water, while the setting sun turns the lagoon red and two boys throw a baseball back and forth. What I want to do now is imagine girls,

freshly bathed and perfumed, walking arm-in-arm in groups of three or four through neighborhoods where boys, huddled together on the corner, watch them pass by. I can see the streets downtown full of bumper-to-bumper traffic, I can see Susana going down the steps of the doctor's office, one at a time, careful not to hurt her leg. It's as if I were here and everywhere else all at once. So complicated, yet so simple! I turn my head slightly and look at the patio screen. I can make out the windows behind the curtains and the last light of the afternoon filtering into the living room through the long, green curtains. I can also see the armchairs, empty and abandoned—how often Susana, Leopoldo, and I used to sit and talk in them!—covered in a dull floral pattern. The flowers are green and blue against a white background. There's a dark lamp standing next to one of the chairs. I brought Mother's old rocker out from my bedroom to sit here—I'm rocking back and forth slowly—so the air from the streets could come across the living room and caress my body like cold water or perfume. Now that I'm not looking at the bathroom door with its panes of frosted glass, I wonder what shadows are being cast across its surface. Leopoldo's nude body no doubt—Leopoldo's naked body!—but in what position? Are his arms raised up high? Is he scratching his chest with both hands? Running his fingers through his hair? Leaning back slightly to see himself in the mirror? It's horrible, but that now, so close by, is nothing more than a memory; and if I turn my head again toward the door which faces the sitting room, the now of the armchairs with the floral covering, empty and abandoned, and the curtains through which the afternoon light is filtering, won't be anything more than a memory. I'm turning my head; now. Leopoldo's shadow has disappeared. He's probably sitting down, going to the bathroom. (“I see a shadow across a pane of glass” “I see” “I see a shadow across a pane of glass. I'm seeing.”)

In the empty glass you can only see the diffuse glow of the electric light burning inside the bathroom. It's one of those terribly hot January days full of light like ash; there isn't a cloud in sight, but the light is ash-colored, as if the sun had died long ago and the thing traveling to our planet were a reflection of the light's corpse. My gray dress and gray hair seem to reflect the light's dampness and death, throwing off a putrid halo; even after I've taken a bath, sweat still covers my skin, so white and lined with veins you'd think I was made of quartz. My arms are resting on the curve of the rocking chair's wood. With time, if I'm still alive, I'll turn the color of the rocker itself—yellow and lustrous and polished by time. Time does that—polishes and simplifies and preserves what's immutable, reducing everything to its most simplified form. People say time destroys things, but I don't believe that. Time simplifies. Things that are fragile, like one's flesh, turn to dust; they disappear, but things made of stone or bone endure, becoming smoother and clearer with time. Now Susana is probably walking slowly down the white marble stairs in front of the doctor's office, holding on to the handrail to keep the weight off her sore leg; now she's made it to the street and she pauses on the sidewalk, not knowing which direction to go, because she doesn't go out very often and she's always getting lost in the middle of the city; she's wearing her blue dress, her glasses (the glasses that make everyone think she's Adelina

Flores) and the black things she wears on her feet with the fat, stubby heels and the construction-boot laces; she looks around like she's stranded, not sure which bus to take, while people dressed in summer clothes hurry along the sidewalk, in the twilight full of honking buses and cars. Susana turns her head, and, without the slightest trace of irony, takes her fingers from the spot on her lips where she mechanically positioned them, affecting a contemplative pose; slowly, decrepit, arthritic—now that she's remembered where the bus stop is located—she begins to walk toward her new destination. A kind of fever has taken the city hostage, looming overhead—though she's oblivious to it—during this terrible month. The fever is deaf, subterranean, motionless, penetrating, like the ashen light that descends upon this gray city from above, smothering us with its sticky glow. (“I see a shadow across a pane of glass. I see.”) I see Susana slowly making her way through the thick air, heading toward the bus stop where she'll wait to catch the Number Sixteen home. That is if she's already left the doctor's, because there's a good chance she hasn't even been called yet and she's still sitting in the waiting room reading a magazine. The ceiling in the waiting room is high; I've been there hundreds of times, very high, and the arrangement of wooden chairs around the middle table with its magazines and ashtrays is too small and fragile in relation to the height of the ceiling and the size of the waiting room, which I know was meant to be the vestibule of a house.

(“Something I loved” “I see a shadow across a pane of glass. I see,” “Something I loved” “turned shadow, cast” “turned shadow and cast.” “I see a shadow across a pane of glass. I see.” “Something I loved turned to shadow and cast.”) I can hear the soft, even creak of the rocker. I'm used to spending hours rocking back and forth slowly, my head leaning against the chair's back, staring straight ahead at a point in the void, without seeing it, in the bowels of my room, surrounded by books covered in dust, hearing the old wood creak as if I were listening to my very own bones. For thirty years I've listened, from my room, to the noises of this house and of the city, like streaks of colored sound accumulating on a blank horizon. I hear a sudden pull of the toilet's chain, the sharp rush of water, the subsequent clinking and gurgling of wet metal and porcelain; then water running through the pipes, filling the tank again. Leopoldo's shadow reappears through the door's frosted glass; he turns so I can see his profile; he is looking at himself in the mirror. Is he going to shave? I see him run his hand over his face. He's stayed fit for so many years, but weakness and frailty are starting to set in. As I rock back and forth, moving forward and backward, he seems first to approach me and then to move away. The first time he came to our house for me, but it was Susana he married. Everything is painfully literary. (“In the obscure reflection.”) It was a relief, after everything that had happened. But the first two years, before they got married and Leopoldo started working as a publicist for the city paper—the first publicist in the city, I think, and that made him a real groundbreaker—those first two years we had a ball, without stopping a single minute, coming and going night and day through the city, in winter and summer, until one day, the day whose entire eve we spent at the beach, Leopoldo came home and asked Father, after dinner, for Susana's hand.

But the day before was spectacular. It was a Friday; I remember like it was yesterday. Leopoldo came by to pick us up quite early, just after sunrise. Everything was white, just like us, with our white dresses and beach hats, so white I'm positive no one else in this god-forsaken city would be caught dead in a getup like that. I was taking along some poems by Alfonsina. (He's going to shave now, I'm quite certain. Now he's opened the medicine cabinet and he's looking inside for his razor ["in the obscure reflection" "across the transparency" "of desire"]. He raises his arms and begins to take out his razor and brush.) It was already December, but the mornings were still cool. I drove Father's Studebaker myself, and Susana was sitting next to me. Leopoldo was in the back seat, next to the picnic basket, covered with the white tablecloth. The air ("across the transparency of desire" "across a pane of frosted glass") was cool and clear, almost piercing as it rushed into the car through the open windows. In the rearview mirror I could see Leopoldo's face turned slightly toward the window, looking pensively at the river. We went out to a deserted beach, far from the city, on the Colastiné side. There were three willows leaning out toward the river—their shadows seemed transparent—and the yellow sand. We swam all morning long and I read them poems by Alfonsina: and when I got to where it says "The tip of the sky / will graze / the house of all people," I left them and went faraway, into a thicket of trees, to let myself cry. They didn't suspect a thing. Afterward, we spread out the white tablecloth and ate, chatting and laughing under the trees. We had prepared kidneys—Leopoldo loves organ meats—and things I can't remember now, and we left a full bottle of white wine in the water, just under the three willows, so the river would cool it off. It was the best moment of the day: the sun was tanning our skin and Leopoldo was tall and strong and full of laughter. Susana was extraordinarily pretty. The laughing and chatting were great, but best of all was the moment we chose to stop talking and everything went quiet. We must have stayed that way for more than ten minutes. If I pay close attention, if I listen, if I try to hear, unafraid that the memory's brilliance will wound me, I can hear—with piercing sharpness—the sound of our silverware against the porcelain plates, the buzz of our heavy perspiration in air so quiet and still it felt like the world was dead, the languid waves heaving themselves onto the shore to die on the sand. It felt as if I could hear the grass around us growing. And then, in the midst of that silence, our game of staring began. For at least five minutes we just looked at each other: serious, candid, tranquil. We didn't do anything else but that: stare at each other, Susana at me, I at Leopoldo, Leopoldo at Susana and me, terribly serene, and afterward nothing mattered to me; except around five o'clock when I returned, quietly, after having taken a walk alone around the island—I returned noiselessly to surprise them and make them laugh, because I thought they were still playing gin rummy—and, from the underbrush, I saw them embracing and I heard Susana gasping. I heard her panting voice: "Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. But she might come back. Come back and see. Yes. Yes. But she could come." I saw them clearly. He was lying on top of her with his swim trunks down below his knees. The part of his body which I'd never before seen was white and milky and smooth, and the thought of touching it, even once, made my stomach turn. At that moment something rustled in the underbrush and Leopoldo

bolted up, exposing Susana—who had let the straps of her bathing suit fall down past her shoulders, so it could move down her belly more easily—fully. Of course, I'd seen the untanned regions of Susanna's body many times, but when Leopoldo jumped up, almost stumbling with his swim trunks around his ankles, he turned in my direction—out of modesty—since the sound had come from the opposite direction. It was then that I saw it: enormous, poking out of a thicket of black of hair; I've seen it before on horses, but never pointing straight at me. It lasted only a second, because Leopoldo immediately pulled his trunks up and sat down, facing Susana. I couldn't see when exactly Susana put her bathing suit back on, arranged her hair, and picked up her hand of cards, but she was already waiting for him when he hastily slapped down two or three cards. I remained frozen for at least fifteen minutes, until I saw them completely relax, and I myself had regained my wits. Afterward we swam from twilight until the sky turned dark—sometimes I feel like I can still hear the splash of our wet bodies in the blue night—and the next day, Leopoldo asked our dear father for Susana's hand.

At this moment I can see Leopoldo using the brush to cover his face with foam. His hand moves in a quick circular motion. Now he lowers his arm, and the shadow of his face, through the frosted glass, reflecting the jumbled light from inside the bathroom, changes him: the shadow of the foam covering his cheeks looks like a beard's shadow, like a thicket of black hair. He raises his arm again and, with the tip of his brush, swabs his chin, several times—softly, almost meditatively; but the look on his face is beyond view. He puts the brush down and, a second later, lifts both hands, the razor in one, and begins to shave slowly, carefully. Slowly, carefully, Susana must herself be descending the white stairs leading from the doctor's office toward the street. She'll stop on the sidewalk for a moment to orient herself, because she rarely goes downtown. The movement of Leopoldo's shadow tells me he's shaving now—slowly, carefully; now he transfers the razor from one hand to the other and runs the back of his free hand over his cheek, against the grain of his whiskers, to feel how smooth his skin is. I know what he's going to do when he finishes shaving and taking a bath; he's going to carry the lazy chair out to the patio, between the flowerpots full of begonias and ferns and amaranths, and he's going to sit down in the middle of the patio; he'll stay there awhile, smoking in the shade; he'll say: “Are there any citronella candles left, Susana dear?” and afterward he'll start to hum a little. Every afternoon between September and March he does the same thing. After a bit, he'll pour himself his first vermouth with bitters, and I can always tell when he's going to fill his glass again, because the clinking of ice against the side of his glass warns me when he's almost finished. He will (“Full of confusion, suddenly scarcely”). I can feel my bones creaking in the rocking chair. Having just shaved and bathed, he's going to do this; he's going to carry the lazy chair to the middle of the mosaic pattern on the patio, the lazy chair made of orange canvas, after putting on his freshly washed and ironed pajamas, and he's going to smoke a cigarette before he (“I saw that he was blowing up” “I saw” “I saw the bursting open of a body and of a” “and of his” “the explosion” “I saw the explosion

of a body and of its shadow” “Full of confusion suddenly, scarcely” “I saw the explosion of a body and of its shadow”). The cigarette's ember, the red tip, the open eye, plagued with insomnia, lacking eyelids, glowing hotter drag by drag. And when I hear the clinking of ice against the side of his glass, I'll know he's had his first drink and he's about to have his second.

Our lives are like strands of thread, like sewing thread, in which God himself ties a knot every so often so that, occasionally, we'll hit a snag. Or like straight lines, marked off with crosses every once in awhile, dividing various times in our lives. Crosses make sense, because crosses mean death. Father and Mother died in '48, one after another. Peronism took Father: it was something he couldn't bear. Mother gave in six months later, because she'd always followed him. “After our first year of marriage”—my mother told me on her death bed—“he never treated me with any respect. But what could I do without him?” I vividly remember wearing a gray tailored suit; Mother sat up and grabbed me by the collar and pulled me toward her; she wasn't that old, but her eyes bulged out, they were so wide open, and her face was full of wrinkles, though she wasn't that old. I'd never seen her like that. It wasn't that she was afraid of death. She'd never been afraid of dying. She started straining horribly and panting and fluttering her eyelids, her lips wet with slobber, and I realized she was trying to tell me something. She didn't manage to get it out. She died clenching the collar of my gray tailored suit and—(“now silence is weaving its old melodies”)—I haven't done anything else all these years but try to figure out what Mother was trying to tell me. It wasn't easy to pull her clenched fists from my collar; they were so tense and blanched that I could see the ferocious whiteness of the cartilage and bones in her hands.

When they cut off my breast twelve years later, I dreamed that I was trying to pull my mother's hands free from my collar (“even longer” “now silence is weaving its old melodies,” “even longer”) and that one of her hands yanked my breast off. She didn't take it to hurt me, but rather to protect me. The dream haunts me almost every night, as if it were weaving my life, mechanically and systematically, into fabric made from a single thread. I know that tonight will be no different. I'll wake up panting and sobbing hoarsely in my bed, alone, surrounded by books covered in dust, close enough to morning that only its proximity will steady my breathing. Everybody secretly knows what their own dreams mean, and I know that if Mother wanted to take my breast along to her grave, it was meant to be. We can only judge our actions in relation to what we've expected out of life and what it's given us in return. It gave Mother and me that morning—that knot, that cross—in which Father sat down to eat with us very early. It was the day after he joined the Peronist party. (“Now silence is weaving its old melodies” “even longer.”) Father was seated at the head of the table and he was so nervous we didn't dare talk to him (“which last longer”). He never talked to us when he was irritable. What always caught my eye was how white his face was, and how, nevertheless, a delicate array of tiny red veins had formed a complex network near his cheekbones. Father had his second cup of coffee, and afterward he leaned against the back of his chair and began to cough. His coughs were dry,

deep, cavernous, sibilant (“that last more than the body” “and than the shadow” “that last longer than the body and than the shadow”). First I saw the fly traversing the network of red veins above his right cheek, like a black sign moving across a maze of railroads drawn out in a map of red ink against tracing paper. I didn't call out “Mother. Mother”—without, for a single instant, taking my eyes off my Father's face—I didn't see how the fly began to move lower, with grace and ease, as if my Father's face were a rock, from his cheek to the corner of his mouth, finally moving into the gap between his lips. It didn't seem as if the fly had gone into my Father's mouth; it seemed as if the fly had traversed not my Father's body, but rather a stone replica of my Father, because by then my Father's cough had stopped and he was motionless.

Now Leopoldo is shifting the razor from one hand to the other so he can continue to shave. When he leans into the mirror to see himself better, the outline of his shadow, cut vertically by the door frame, disappears and I can see the electric light's blurred reflection through the glass—like a black and white collage arranged concentrically in a pointillist design. I'm rocking gently in the rocker. I turn my head and see how the gray light filters into the living room through the green curtains, turning everything more pale. Empty armchairs are used to being occupied sometimes—but that's nothing more than memory. Getting up and going to the patio and lifting my head, I'd be able to see a piece of the sky emptying itself in the gap between the gray moss walls. Going out the door I'd see the empty street, treeless, lined with single-story houses, forming two straight lines, facing one another across the slabs of gray sidewalk and paved road. At night, the pavement almost sparkles in the glow from the corner's light. The insects spin around the bulb, blind and clumsy, colliding against the metal screen, dragging themselves afterward along the cement with their broken wings. I can see them in the morning, flattened against the asphalt by the tires of passing cars. At night I know how to listen for their humming. And when there were still trees on this block, that is when the shrill monotony of the cicadas would begin. They began separately, the first quite early, around five o'clock, and immediately I'd hear another, and then another and another, as thousands upon thousands began singing in unison. I couldn't stand it. Having given in, having come to live with them was already too much. I was constantly afraid of opening a door, any door, the bathroom door, the bedroom door, the kitchen door, and seeing him standing there with his thing right in front of me, bobbing heavily, sticking out from that thicket of black hair. Since then, I've never been able to look at him below the waist. But the cicadas really were just too much. Which was why I started getting dressed and going out alone when it got dark; I would always tell them I needed a little fresh air. First I'd cross Parque del Sur, with its lake of stagnant water, dimly reflecting the park's lights; I'd continue down the jagged side streets, and then take San Martⁿ downtown, pushing deeper into the lighted district each time; from there I'd circle the bus station and go by the amusement park, which faced the bus station directly, until they built the post office; I went as far as the pigeon house with its wire-mesh cylinder and pointed red cupola and I'd listen for a while to the nervous cooing of the birds. I never

risked taking the shortcut along the docks to get to the suspension bridge. I always took the bus or the subway. When I got off I'd walk the two short blocks to the bridge, feeling a crisp breeze from the river on my face and body. I loved watching the water rush by, with its strong, dark, turbulent current, sending up its cool mist, its savage, unforgettable smell, allowing me to forget the sound of the cicadas hidden amidst the trees and—"Ah"). I'd get back after eleven, my feet killing me; on my way back, walking slowly, each heel stabbing down at the sidewalk, I strained to hear whether any sounds were still coming from the trees up ahead ("Oh if only we were given a body" "Oh if only we were given a body" "even if it didn't last" "a sign" "any sign" "of feeling" "obscure" "obscuring" "Oh if only we were given a body even if it didn't last" "a sign" "any obscure sign" "Oh if only we were given a body even if it didn't last" "a sign" "any obscure sign of feeling" "I see a shadow across a pane of glass. I see" "something I love made of shadow and moving" "across the transparency of desire" "like across frosted glass" "Full of confusion, suddenly, scarcely" "I saw the explosion of a body and of its shadow" "now silence is weaving its old melodies" "which last longer than the body and the shadow" "Oh if only we were given a body even if it didn't last" "any obscure sign of feeling"). If I could make out their sounds, I'd turn back around and walk aimlessly, block after block, until dawn. Because sitting on the patio or lying in bed, under those dusty books, listening to that shrill monotony of those endless cicadas, was too much to bear, and it filled me with terror.

Now the shadows across the frosted glass tell me that Leopoldo has finished shaving, because he doesn't have the razor in his hands anymore and he's rubbing the back of his hands gently over his cheeks ("like a smell" "savage" "like a smell"). There were crumbs, leftovers, wine stains on the red-and-white checkered tablecloth. It was a big room, and the cacophony of voices filtered into my numbed eardrums, which normally only register my own inner voices. I've been trying to listen to these voices for years, without knowing exactly what they are saying, without knowing whether they're even human. These voices aren't much more than a low murmur, really, a monotonous drone, echoing faintly beneath the world's real, audible voices, which, after all, are just a memory ("which lasts") shadows. He kept turning his back to me, turning his back and jabbering away, shouting almost, with the other guests. He acted like he owned the world. I would have taken him home with me that night, I would have undressed in front of him and, grabbing him by the hair, I would have yanked his head forward and, to make sure he knew how I felt, I would have forced him to stare directly at my scar—huge and white and full of knots and crosses—evidence of the shame that gnaws away at my core. Because in the same way that when we cry, we turn our pain, which is intangible, into something tangible, and when we stop crying, we turn that pain into memory, our scars stay behind to remind us of what it is that we've suffered. But not as a memory but rather as a sign. He wouldn't stop talking. "Really, Adelina? Don't you agree, Adelina? And how are you feeling? How should I be feeling? Fed up with everything, naturally. No, of course, God doesn't exist. If God existed, life would be nothing but a bad joke, like Horacio Barco always says: We're from two different generations,

Adelina. But I respect you. I couldn't give a damn what everybody else says and I know the forties generation is better lost than found, but you have a couple of poems which work splendidly. Some people say God himself wrote them for you, but I don't give a damn what people say. Listen to me, Adelina: start screwing more, even if it goes against everything you've grown up with." It was a night in the middle ("against all efforts"). It was a night in the middle of winter. Our breath had steamed up the glass of the restaurant's windows. And when we left each other on the street, fog was blanketing the city; it looked like steam, and the brightness from the street lights looked like humid, white dust, like myriad white particles gyrating in suspended orbit. A few moments after separating, the outlines of our bodies disappeared, fully consumed by the freezing fog. They took me to the taxi stop and Tomatis leaned toward me before slamming the door shut: "Nothing happens by chance, Adelina," he told me. "You alone compose your sonnets and your mutilation." Then he was lost in the fog, as if he had never existed. What disappears from this world is no longer missed. You can miss it during the moment, but not once it's passed. Sonnets exist but not mutilations: there are only empty passageways, which have never been entered, with a door occasionally banging back and forth in the wind, against the hard wood of the door frame; or endless deserts, yellow like the sun's surface, too excruciating for naked eyes; or last autumn's fallen leaves, rotting silently under a cavern of cold ferns, or papers, or the life-taking clink of ice hitting the sides of a diluted vermouth and bitters; but not mutilations. Scars, yes, but not mutilations. The taxi was crossing the fog, glowing and wet, and in its warm interior the driver and I seemed like the only live bodies between all the solid rock structures visible in the fog ("formations" "against all efforts" "against all efforts"). Outside there was nothing but fog; but I saw so many things in it that now I can only recall a few: willows leaning out over the water, casting a transparent shadow; hands clenching—the bones and cartilage pure white—the collar of my tailored suit; a fly moving into an open mouth, so hard it could have been carved out of marble; certain words read a thousand times, without ever understanding their meaning; millions of cicadas singing in monotonous unison ("of oblivion"), inside my skull; a horrible thing, full of nerves and veins, pointing straight at me, bobbing heavily from a thicket of black hair; a blurred image embossed on a diary's paper, shredded into a thousand pieces and cast into the sky by an insane fist. All this was visible on the walls wet with fog, while the taxi crossed the city. It was all that was visible.

At this very moment ("And with this smell"). At this very moment Susana must be slowly, carefully descending the white marble stairs in front of the doctor's office. I can see her on the street ("and with this smell we identify"), in the gray twilight, stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, trying to orient herself ("the ground on which" "we ought to build" "the place where we get up" "ought to be the site"). She's wearing her blue suit, with its white seams, like bastings, around the large, square pockets and on the edges of the lapels. Her dark brown eyes, sunken into pockets of cellulite, like two raisins embedded in a lump of raw dough, shift back and forth nervously behind her glasses. She's trying to figure out where the bus

stop is. Leopoldo's getting into the shower now. He moves awkwardly and I can see his shadow totter, as if moving in slow motion. He's trying not to slip ("of the human house"). Susana finally figures out which way to go and starts walking, stiff from arthritis. She seems bathed in the afternoon light: the same gray light that filters through the green curtains and gathers on my gray robe, that envelops me, like a formless mass glowing faintly, moving backward and forward, glued to me while I rock back and forth. She's crossing the city's teeming blocks. I can make out the inaudible sound of her shuffling. The streets are full of people, of cars and buses. The sounds of the city mingle and blend together and drift up to the gray sky, dissipating. ("The place of the human house" "which is the place of the human house" "which is the site of the human house.") Now the stairs at the doctor's office are empty. The sidewalk in front of the doctor's office is empty. Susana flags down the Number Sixteen, and the bus stops to let her in. Susana strains to climb up. Someone helps her. Susana feels ("like we recognize with the") the hot exhaust from the motor on her face. She's thrown off balance when the bus jerks forward. Someone gives her a seat and she struggles to sit down, holding the handrail tight, losing her balance with every jolt of the bus, reeling, breathing in and out heavily, mumbling "thank you" distractedly, without knowing exactly to whom ("through the branches"). It was such a ("through the branches" "in the sunlight") beautiful afternoon, around five o'clock, when Leopoldo jumped up, turning toward me with his swim trunks down around his knees—his thing bobbing heavily, pointing at me—exposing the untanned regions of Susana's body. It wasn't Leopold's smooth, diseased whiteness, but her own dazzling whiteness. But don't think about it. Don't think about it. Don't think about anything. Look at the gray city—an ashen, putrid gray—shifting backward while the bus moves closer. Leopoldo turns on the shower and starts to soap himself. All of his movements are slow, as if he were trying to learn them from scratch ("morning skin in the sunlight"). As if he were trying to learn them from scratch and memorize them. He scrubs his chest, his arms, his stomach, and now both his hands move below his abdomen and rub with a delicate thoroughness; that is what his shadow tells me, moving across the frosted glass of the bathroom door. My bones creak like the rocker's wooden frame, polished and worn by time, while I move forward and backward, rocking slowly, bathed in the afternoon's gray light like the glow of an extinguished flame. ("And with this smell we identify" "which is the site of the human house" "like we recognize through the branches" "morning skin in the sunlight.")

Envoi

I know that what Mother wanted to tell me before she died was that she hated life. We hate life because we can't live in its midst. And we want to live because we know we will die. But what has a solid core—rock, or bone, something dense and tightly woven, something which can be polished and modified with a rhythm different from the rhythm of death—can't die. The voices we hear inside ourselves are incomprehensible, but they're the only voices we hear, and there's nothing else, except a few vaguely recognizable faces, and the suns and the

planets. I understand why Mother hated life so much. But I think that if that was what she was trying to tell me before she died, it wasn't to warn me, but to hear me tell her that she was wrong.

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ABOUT

Juan José Saer was born in Serodino/Santa Fe in 1937, the son of Arab immigrants. He studied law and philosophy and from 1962 taught at the Santa Fe Instituto de Cinematografía. He moved to Paris in 1968 and taught literature at the University of Rennes until his retirement in 2002. In March 2003 he was awarded the Prix France Culture. Saer's extensive literary oeuvre, which includes about twenty novels and collections of stories, is regarded as one of the most important in contemporary Argentinean literature since that of Jorge Luis Borges. Many of his works have been translated into several languages. In 1987 he was awarded the prestigious Spanish literary prize the Premio Nadal for his novel *La ocasión* (The Opportunity).

An elegant storyteller, Saer in his novels deals repeatedly with the morbid consequences of individual thought and action when political repression or human cruelty blur all links with one's own ego and disregard the criteria of social community.