Adrián N. Bravi, *Adelaida*

Nutrimenti 2024
English sample translation by Richard Dixon
pp. 77-96

Who knows whether Adelaida, before the military coup, had realized the world around her would disintegrate within a few months. She had no doubt that her children were fighting to build a country that was better, fairer, free from oppression. But she knew it would come at a very high price and that all her loved ones were at risk. The grip was tightening ever more, and it was difficult to break free from the web the regime had woven tightly around her, a web of silence and control that had spread throughout the country. She, and every mother like her, certainly dreamed that they would find some way out of that inferno, even one of escape or surrender.

Then, once the dictatorship was in power, they killed Carlos Goldenberg, Mini was no longer to be found, her friend Haroldo Conti had also disappeared, leaving a note with a flower inside, together with a copy of his novel *Sudeste*, on which he had written in Italian: *Forever your Haroldo*. David Viñas and many others, including his son Lorenzo Ismael and his wife, left the country and moved abroad.

Just before that fatal year of 1976, her mother María Teresa Valeiras had also died, at her home in San Fernando. At that point, her dreams of salvation began to fall apart one by one. She couldn't resign herself to accepting that all those she loved, those who hadn't been tortured or killed, were being forced into exile, while she was still alive, like a last survivor with all her hopes and dreams dashed. She often felt she was halfway between life and death, not knowing what would become of her. Maybe it was this uncertainty that gave her the strength to go off and find protection… that moment when you find yourself on that halfway point from which you can think about your loved ones and feel guilty about not having done enough to look after them, or you wonder why Tyche, goddess of fortune, had chosen not to barter your fate with that of your children; and however closer your life approaches death you still lie awake at night behind the closed shutters and think obsessively about what little you have left. Those shattered lives are now in your hands, in your recollections, in the folds of clay that you will model and in the colors of the pictures you will paint, for yourself but also for everyone else. They will take on another form of existence, so to speak, and you have decided to carry this form all the way, at the cost of turning your back to the world and leaving, while knowing that the way of exile has no path, because you have to grope your way forward, like on a dark and treacherous route (it only seems as if you're walking a straight line, whereas you realize over time that the line you are following is taking you through a labyrinth that leaves no prospect of return).

In Euripedes' *The Phoenician Women,* when Polynices returns home from exile, his mother Jocasta asks him what is worst about living away from his own land, with no home. The greatest difficulty for an exile, her son replies, is the loss of *parresia* which, according to Foucault, is a word used for the first time, by Euripides himself, to indicate the right to express your own

opinion, or the courage to speak the truth without fear. Therefore, an ability to act against power, against tyranny, and against every form of despotism, and for this very reason considered to be dangerous, subversive, and to be stamped out by whatever means. It follows that, in every regime, *parresia* is kept under surveillance and controlled by those in power, as Plato explains in the *Republic*: the tyrant must eliminate those who freely express their own thought.

In any event, as Adelaida left her country behind her (that of Argentina which, from being a country of exile, soon became a place for exiles) she was thinking about Euripedes' chorus of women who tell Helena: *I know what you feel: but it's best to endure the misfortunes of existence as best you can*. I like to think that this advice would remain with her forever, for no one knew better than she how to accept the fate that the gods had in store for her.

One evening Adelaide told me the incredible story about how she had crossed the border into Brazil during her escape from Argentina at the end of 1976. However much suffering the flight from her home city had caused her, she enjoyed telling the story and joked about this journey not just in terms of how she crossed the frontier but how it affected her whole life. It's a story I had heard in the past and now, as I write these pages, I find it confirmed in a book called *Nadie olvida nada*, written by her dear friend, Héctor Anabitarte, with whom she took part in the *Frente Liberación Homosexual* (FLH). A few days after Mini's disappearance, after she had heard that her niece Inés was safe with the Goldenberg family in the United States and her son Lorenzo Ismael had fled to Mexico with his wife, Adelaida hurriedly packed her things and set off too. She knew she couldn't stay in Buenos Aires and that her days were numbered. The military authorities knew about her: they knew she was an artist, that in the past she had fought in the ranks of the *Partido Comunista Revolucionario* (PCR) and the FLH, that she was the mother of two *montoneros* and had frequently given shelter to those involved in guerrilla activities (one evening during a military round up, an arsenal of weapons had been found in her house, hidden there by Carlos Goldenberg and Mini). They started looking for her, she was tipped off by her brother, and decided to leave the country straightway so as not to fall into the hands of torturers. We can imagine her driving along the Panamerican Highway and through the city of Garín, which the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias* (FAR) had occupied six years earlier, then heading north along National Highway 14 that skirts the river Uruguay. When Goethe comes to the end of his second stay in Rome in April 1788, knowing that he must leave the city, he remembers the lines of *Tristia* in which Ovid describes his last night in Rome when he was forced to abandon everything, including his loved ones, before setting off into exile, for Tomis, in Pontus: *My face is now still streaked with tears.* Goethe imagines the Roman poet's homesickness filled with anxiety, there on the remote Black Sea coast, far from everything. The Russian poet Osip Mandelstam, who refers to Ovid's exile in his own *Tristia*, much later in 1922, writes: *I have learned the science of goodbyes / in nocturnal tears, head bare*: and further on he asks: *Who can know what farewell to expect / in the word goodbye.* Well, maybe this was what Adelaida thought as she drove along National Highway 14 leaving Buenos Aires behind. She was travelling with Alberto Alba, a Buenos Aires editor who had published many works including *El frasquito* by Luis Gusmán, *Sebregondi Retrocede* by Osvaldo Lamborghini, Mempo Giardinelli and Raúl Santana. They left in an old vehicle packed with belongings which they abandon before crossing the frontier. They were worried about what awaited them at the customs post. They feared they were already on a wanted list, and in fact they were.

Adelaida and Alberto Alba slept that evening in a tourist hotel and, next day, loaded their things into a taxi that took them over the frontier. As they chattered with the taxi driver, to allay any suspicion, Adelaida said they had been recently engaged and were running away from

their respective families, neither of which approved of their relationship (Adelaida had turned nineteen just a few months before but looked much younger, and her travelling companion was just over forty). The taxi driver was touched and reassuring: “Don’t worry,” he told them, “I’m a policeman. I’ll get you to the other side, with me you certainly won’t be stopped, you’re as safe as houses.” Adelaida and her companion gripped onto each other. They could hardly have done worse than fall into the hands of a cop. They felt at the mercy of fate, and as the cop, making a little extra money as a taxi driver, passed through the check point, the other policemen stopped him to exchange a few words, ignoring the two customers sitting hand in hand on the back seat. Once across the border, Adelaida and Alberto asked to be dropped off as far away from the frontier as possible, at a bus station. Once out of the taxi they thanked the man and shook hands while he wished them well.

It took five days for them to reach Rio de Janeiro. *I don’t know what I’ll do, it’s the first time I’m travelling without a plan, I have to leave and I’m leaving for the sole purpose of continuing to live,* she writes in a letter. Argentinian exiles regarded Brazil as a country of transit. Although it had been governed by a military dictatorship since 1964, there was still a margin of tolerance for personal liberties.

Having then reached the capital they shut themselves up for a week in a boardinghouse: *I haven’t yet left this cheap guest house that I found straightway. I’m taking it gently… All my affairs are in pieces to the point that it would now be impossible to resolve this simple conundrum… Anyway, I don’t know what I’m doing here,* she writes to her brother less than a month after her daughter’s disappearance. From the boardinghouse she went to live at the house of friends who were also exiles. The friend who looked after her was Delia, a seamstress. Adelaida helped her with various chores: *The news from the local newspapers about Buenos Aires is disastrous, as always. It’s important for me to be with fellow citizens with whom there’s some understanding and nothing to be explained. By working together, we help each other. It’s trust and determination that unites us.* The letters of that period talk of financial straits and difficulties, and there’s a recurring picture of Adelaida who feels herself floating in the air or like a balloon tossed by the winds in whatever direction. She complains sometimes about having no news of her son Lorenzo Ismael who is in Mexico, nor of the Goldenbergs, to know how Inés is. Then, when she receives a message from her son or from the Goldenbergs, she is full of enthusiasm: *I’ve had a beautiful letter from my son,* she writes to her brother*, with a beautiful photo, he with his crew cut and his wife with long black hair: two kids like they used to be, with just the same enthusiasm*. On other occasions she writes: *Inesita is the center of my life. I’m therefore obsessed, on the one hand, about Inés’s fate and the role I have in her life and on the other hand about my daughter, since no one can reconstruct what happened*. It is 21 February 1977.

She spent each day worrying about whether her friends were still alive, or whether something had happened to them. Alberto Alba, after several months in Rio de Janeiro, decided to go back and face the situation in Argentine. Adelaida, on the other hand, realized she could no longer do that. By returning to Buenos Aires, she’d have no future prospect. She therefore waited, took small jobs, but above all she helped the family with whom she was staying, of whom she was fond.

During that time, exile became something quite new in comparison to past experiences. The Argentina population had never fled in such numbers from their own country. It began as a slow trickle during the years prior to the institutional breakdown, but immediately after, with the dictatorship, it turned into a genuine chaotic but continual flow of men and women escaping from repression and leaving their old world behind them. Some did so with their own means or with help from foreign governments, some through humanitarian organizations, but most, like

Adelaida, travelled incognito, with no official papers, and mostly in silence and alone. Although Argentina had had other experiences of this kind in the past, what was striking on this occasion was the vast numbers who were leaving, and this phenomenon continued throughout the whole period of the dictatorship. The diaspora, moreover, covered the entire geography of the world, in the sense that people were choosing any destination. It wasn't an organized phenomenon but consisted of so many individual choices. Having arrived abroad, exiles were forced to live homeless, knowing that they were part of a generation tormented by persecution, and traumatized by memories of torture and death. Exiles recalled their native country as transformed into an idealized Ithaca or into a wicked, depraved and hateful mother.

One day, in June 1977, Adelaida decided to go to the Italian consulate in Rio de Janeiro, where she was still living, to reclaim her Italian citizenship. She asked the consul to write to the municipal council in Recanati for the documentation. She needed a passport to leave Brazil and when she succeeded, after many months of waiting, she wrote: *It's all done, I'll be in Recanati in September. I have another six months in Rio to get rid of the nails, lightbulbs, pliers, and all the other things that make up my luggage* [...] *Now I will start thinking about what it means to go, what it means to leave and enter another country, even if, in reality, I cannot yet do it, but it's a possibility all the same and this gives me much comfort.*

She was sorry she couldn't do her pottery and couldn't have her own kiln, but she knew that sooner or later she would have one. She found herself in a kind of limbo. *I have learned to abolish time; I feel as if I'm still in Buenos Aires; everything deep down remains clear and precise,* she wrote to her father. She missed the humidity and the bustle of her city. She learned to her cost that the condition of an exile is reduced to the relentless enumeration of its drawbacks: from these shortcomings she would weave the fabric of her future. She carried on doing small jobs and for several months she went to live in a *gray box*, as she called it, a tiny room belonging to a Seventh Day Adventist woman she would never see, apart from when she had something to tell her. She could do nothing there, could neither cook nor wash dishes: *I'll make the most of my silence.* After a year and a half in Brazil, filled with anticipation but also with great uncertainty, she finally made the return journey, after half a century, to the country of her birth.

This time we see her more clearly – for exiles have been portrayed repeatedly since biblical times – as she walks with her shoulders bent by the weight of her luggage. She isn't carrying many useful items as she doesn't even know what she might need. She has two suitcases filled with mementos, crammed with objects scraped together in haste before her departure from Buenos Aires. She is now just over fifty. She has fine features, an elegant walk, wears lipstick, has a stern manner and two deep-set eyes that make her face seem heavy. She could be one of the many women forced to leave her country and to move elsewhere: a Sephardic woman who leaves the Iberian peninsula for Amsterdam after the Spanish kings have ordered the expulsion of Jews from their lands; an Odessan Jew fleeing from Germany in the 1930s; an Agota Kristof who after the Russian army's invasion of Hungary escapes to Switzerland; or the Afghan photographer and artist Fatimah Hossaini, forced to leave Kabul when the victorious Taliban entered the capital after the withdrawal of the western forces.

Adelaida knows that her life is no longer at risk, but she doesn't know what to expect in her new home, whether she can remain in Italy or whether she will be forced to leave again. "How many times do I have to start again?" she asks.

She leaves the Brazilian coast behind her, and after a voyage of several days, she reaches the port of Genoa, the same port that had seen her father's departure for the first time sixty-five years before for Argentina. Then, slowly, still weighed down by her suitcases, she slowly walks

toward the exit. I like to think of her repeating the words of Mandelstam: *Who can know what farewell to expect / in the word goodbye.*

There are different ways of coming to terms with personal pain, especially when it's a pain that consumes a whole society. There are those who decide to come together and demand justice, like *Las madres de Plaza de Mayo*, who from 30 April 1977 began meeting in the main square of Buenos Aires, in front of the *Casa Rosada,* to protest peacefully in support of their *desaparecidos* children; there are those who embark on an armed struggle; Adelaida, like so many others, had decided to leave the city and go first to Brazil and then to Italy. *I wrote to the Red Cross, to Amnesty International, even to the Pope. I went to Switzerland and to Spain, then no more. As a mother, I thought through certain things from another perspective. I decided that what had happened was not a generational disaster but a political and military defeat. For this reason, I feel the death of our children with great pain: I know that they died because they achieved something, they fought for a better world*. Her way of resisting was this: to leave the country and save herself. She didn't do it to abandon her past. Quite the contrary, she carried with her all the wounds that history had inflicted on her and was trying only to move forward from that grief. She had no alternative. She needed to work with her hands, to get them dirty with clay, to give form to the ghosts that were suffocating her. She knew that pottery would help her, even if, on her arrival in Italy, she had to wait to become the artist she had been.

There is not a single object, however small, that doesn't bring out her need to work, her passion. Modelling clay was an inner need, an obsession. For her, the practice of art, the urgency of the creative act, always working; it was more important than the work itself. And she did it by starting from a wound, far away from her most intimate affections, from that city that had suddenly been transformed into an openair prison and into a sentence of banishment, inflicted by circumstance. Despite this, she never lost her playful irony. There was never a seriousness of expression in her face or in her work. She expressed herself always *With light hands*, to quote the title of an essay by Cristina Campo, a writer she particularly admired.

Her life, like her death, was the result of her own history, a reflection of her past. Indeed, we might say it was moulded by dictatorships – first Fascist, then Argentine – in the same way that she moulded the characters of her plaques and her sculptures. She inherited the pains of history and carried them with her, embodying them in the silence of her single room in the courtyard of Sant'Agostino, never going after anyone, neither gallery owners nor art critics. She sought no recognition. It was enough for her to be at work, modelling her objects, not worrying where they would end up. She was more interested in the process than in the object itself. Once the work was finished, it might just as well vanish. She sought no kind of approval. Her aesthetic research which, nonetheless, goes beyond the drama of history or the sublime in art, cannot in any event be separated from the moral value of her vision over those years. She knew well that all stylistic research provides a glimpse of our own time.

Her imagination belonged to another language, inside which she hid all her intimate thoughts, love, delusion, and despair, and this was why Adelaida had difficulty speaking Italian. She preferred to remember her past in the language of Buenos Aires, even if those memories were often painful, and to mitigate them she used Italian. The path of exiles is never straight, as she knew well, and there isn't even a stopping-off point, because stopping off suggests another journey.

I sometimes wondered how Adelaida imagined her own path when she reached Recanati. The political and social upheavals in Argentina had tangled her own inner world into an inextricable knot. Did she know she would remain in Italy forever and never see her children or her father again? Where would Adelaida have wanted to die? I don't think she could have imagined herself

in a cemetery with her photograph in an oval marble frame. She certainly didn't want a stone over which people could mourn her. Maybe she dreamed of joining her own children through her absence and feeling close to them without a tomb – like the father of her children, David Viñas, who before his death asked for his ashes to be scattered on the Río de la Plata, "to be close to my children", he said. Bodies scattered in the communion of their immateriality. And there weren't just his children among those missing and those who had gone. The court of absences was populated with friends, relatives, comrades, and fellow activists. Adelaida was learning to share her life with their ghosts, or rather, she was learning to accept them, to embrace them. She built an inner altar where each day, while kneading clay or writing, she was searching for the face of her children, perhaps through the portrayal of their executioners, perhaps through the cleft of a stone; it was always the two of them, Mini and Lorenzo, who came out in quite different ways. She gave voice to her hands to fashion the pain which had become her destiny. She lived every moment without losing the slightest opportunity to evoke them in her solitude. Her children were not just a private memory of what had happened – their infancy, youth, armed struggle – but represented a whole cross-section of history. The memory of them, apart from the individual aspect, became a political matter.

And I don't know why, when I see photographs of her, her eyes, the folds of her clothing, her sensual looks or her smile (which often seem to express more sadness than joy, as if she were predestined to an uncertain and cruel future)… well, those black and white photographs of the 1950s or 60s make me think that the history of Argentina is all concentrated on that face of hers and has chosen hers on which to be represented, impressing tragedy, death, exile and love on those eyes at the same time.

Looking at the buildings along Corso Persiani in Recanati, she realized straightway that things change more slowly here, in comparison to large cities, where change is always happening. She had no clear recollection of her childhood in Recanati – she was only four when she left – but knew that the streets and alleyways were the same as those she had walked with her father, her mother, her grandmother. "I don't know how long I will live," she said, "but until my dying day, if I remain here, I too will be immortal, like these buildings." She wrote to her father: *My exile in Recanati has been paradoxical: I'm cut off in the place where I was born, and which I didn't know.* In another letter to her father, on 20 June 1978 (while Argentina was on its way to the World Cup finals and the country had gone football crazy), addressing him formally as she always did, she wrote: *When I arrived in Recanati the first creature that came to greet me was a black dog, just like the one in one of your pictures… As you can imagine, being the daughter of Lorenzo Gigli here in Recanati has its advantages.*

It was 4 June 1978 when the black dog came up to welcome her, the same dog who would keep watch over her through the years and which, when I think of her movements and expressions during her long period in hospital, she would continue stroking, as if it were still there beside her. She would sometimes also recall this chance meeting during dinners with friends at her house. They were dinners at which we talked about everything, and which generally ended with several empty bottles on the table.

On her arrival at the port of Genoa she went to look for a taxi (she didn't even consider the problem of arriving by train or bus): "I have to get to Recanati," she told the taximan. With her she also carried slowness and the marks of time. In a letter from her father which she had in her pocket there was an old address she had to go to when she arrived, that of her childhood friend Fausto Urbani. When the taximan replied: "Well it's not exactly around the corner, it'll take hours and hours," Adelaida handed him the letter, saying: "This is where I have to go."

Two days after her arrival she wrote to her brother:

Dear Lorenzo,

All is well. I died of fright. When I left Rio, I cried as I hadn't done for a long time, for many reasons. I was shut up in the ship's cabin for a week. Then I went out. I made friends with a German knight errant, a romantic sort, rather bumbling. At Genoa we spent the whole day together, and he could sort out all the problems that had been worrying me over baggage and documents. Then it was easy to get to Recanati. I'm fascinated by this place… but I realize it's difficult living in a city where everyone is watching, small and clean, just as we imagined it.

Lorenzo Aleandro, Adelaida's brother, was a well-known architect whose work can still be admired: his many projects in Buenos Aires include the extension of the River Plate stadium for the 1978 World Cup, where the final between Argentina and Holland was played out on 25 June. It was thanks to him that Adelaida could look for support and have news of what was happening in his country.

During those years of her arrival, there weren't many who chose to go and live in Recanati but, even though it was a city *where everyone is watching*, she fitted in easily. She often wrote to her father and gave him brief descriptions of the people she met: *Yesterday, in the street, I met Marchese Ceccaroni* [who was the potter and artist Rodolfo Ceccaroni], *I saw his pots, they are most enchanting, a humble and respectful love for his country. I like them, they mark a sentiment. He's grown very old, seems like a sigh.*

She spent the first two or three years moving from apartment to apartment, to Porta Marina, then to Monte Volpino, then to Monte Morello, until the local council, in exchange for several important paintings by her father, let her live rent-free in the apartment overlooking the courtyard of Sant'Agostino where she remained until her admission to hospital.

In a poem which, like most of her things, has remained unpublished, she wrote:

Qué claras las campanas de San Agustín
gruesas y sinceras
antes de caer la noche del otoño
llamando o jugando solas.
Qué lúcidas las campanas de mi claustro
rosadas, voladoras.
Estoy acá, papá, en mi casa
estoy acá, en mi pueblo.
Allá quedaron los hijos inmortales
amantes inquietos y consumidos.
Allá quedó la Gracia.
Acá estoy papá
arañándome la cara y con los zapatos nuevos.

***

How clear are the bells of Sant'Agostino
large and sincere
before the autumn night falls
they are calling or playing alone.
How bright are the bells of my cloister
pink, flying.

I am here, father, in my home
I am her, in my city.
Down there immortal children are left
lovers restless and consumed.
Down there the Prayer is left
I am here father
scratching my face and with new shoes.

She was a woman full of life; she managed to shrug off all that had happened to her in the past and start all over again. She spent her second stay in Italy coloring her wounds and arranging her luggage, her papers and all her secrets. She picked herself up and rewrote the story she imagined had come to an end a month before, tormenting her little 1960s Silver Read typewriter and getting through dozens of cigarettes which she left burning in ashtrays around the house. Over things she kept for a long while in the corners there was an old patina that she felt sorry to remove. She imagined that every speck had made an intergalactic journey before it arrived there, so that certain places she wouldn't dust. "Dust", she used to say, "is the only thing that can preserve the profoundness of things." She knew that one day she would be reincarnated through her papers and through those dusty sculptures that still conserved her fingerprints. In a story called *Los que no tienen razón* (*Those who aren't right*) she wrote: *When people die they leave more things than they had… the things left by dead people could diminish, but instead they multiply, they fill drawers and drawers and if those who survive don't burn them, they also take over the drawers of those who haven't yet died.*

A few days after my friend had introduced me to her, after she had been in Italy for over ten years, I went to visit her. She always had a cigarette in her mouth, though I later discovered that the doctors had told her not to smoke or drink due to certain anomalies which had appeared in her blood test results. Often, she told me, when she didn't know what to do or was anxious, she went to hospital for tests. The results were never within the proper parameters, but she never did anything about it apart from drinking some Ferro China Bisleri to compensate for the iron deficiency which emerged each time. She would allow some time to pass and when her moments of sadness or despair returned, she would retake the tests in the hope there would be fewer numbers in bold, though the problems remained. The red table on which she worked and ate, at the center of her one-room apartment, was always filled with books piled up waiting for something, and sheets of papers on which she made notes which she lost, written over by other notes.

"How are you Adelaida?" I asked.

"At this moment I wish I was like the character in this story," she said, showing me *The Other Sky*, a story by Julio Cortázar in which the central character lives in two different realities at the same time: he leads a monotonous life, strolls around a district of Buenos Aires, walks into Galleria Güemes, but when he comes out he finds himself in Paris, in Galleria Vivienne, close to Place des Victoires. He lives under two skies, that of Buenos Aires in 1945 and that of Paris at the end of the nineteenth century. "And I," she added, "would like to stay here in the present, walk across the courtyard of Sant'Agostino and find myself for a while in Buenos Aires." And when I asked how her things were going here, she replied: "I could say they were going well, but since I managed, yesterday, to break half a sculpture on which I was working, then I can say everything's a disaster… There was no reason why it should break like that…"

"But shouldn't destruction form part of your work and the whole creative process in general?" I asked, paraphrasing her beloved Alberto Giacometti.

How lovely, I like your optimism, but I was so upset, even if destruction does form part of the whole process… I can't wait to redo the tests."

I hardly saw any of her sculptures break by themselves without some good reason, but she would sometimes smash pieces that seemed already finished and no one could work out why she should want to get rid of them. She did the same with her poetry. She would write, filling sheets of paper with lines of verse, then staple them together to make them appear more complete. She looked enthusiastic as she leafed through the stapled papers, but a few days later, when she reread what she had written, she started crossing out and rewriting them again. Among her papers are pages covered with so many corrections that they become illegible. Indeed, there are few poems in her archive that have no crossings out. She rewrote her poems and stories over and over again, continually improving them. Sometimes she became confused and couldn't remember which was the last version she was working on. After several rewritings, as soon as she felt it was complete, she would happily forget it, since completion means the work is over and therefore of less value than a work in progress.

I remember the time when the Argentine poet Arturo Carrera came to Recanati to present a collection of poems in Italian published by Sestante. After the presentation, Carrera and I went to visit Adelaida. She was pleased that he was there in her home. They spoke about many friends they had in common, about her ex-husband, about Ricardo Piglia, about Martha Eguía, known as Beba, about Nira Etchenique. At the end of the evening Adelaida, in her enthusiasm, wanted to give Arturo one of her sculptures. It was the head of a woman wearing a bow and with tight colored lips, as if she were smiling. She said she had done it thinking of Nélida Fernández, known as Nené, who in *Boquitas pintadas* by Manuel Puig writes letters of grief to the mother of her ex-fiancé, who has gone to a better life, and imagines what would have happened between them if their relationship had continued. There, Adelaida would spend much time working on what she did, would give it all her energy, would invest much of herself, and then all it needed was a small gesture or a sudden enthusiasm and she would be rid of it.

"I'm sorry that one of your sculptures broke… Can I ask what you were working on?"

"On a series of heads and masks," she replied, pointing to the heads on a small table. Some seemed to resemble the forms of Andean sculptures, while others were inspired by literary personalities or people connected with her past. All of them, however, were done crudely, with few features, The women were luminous, with delicate features, even when they seemed in pain: a femininity that carried personal courage. They had a distinctive feature that was easily recognizable also in her drawings, a look of compassion, which expressed much feeling. Her portrayals of men, on the other hand, appeared with shrunken or gloomy faces, especially when they were soldiers, and here they were caricatures, with deformed noses and sunken cheeks. This could be seen from a series of plaques, some of which hung in one corner, which she called *The Argentinian General*, done in 1980, when she learned about the death of her son.

Among the heads she was working on, for example, there was one that depicted the Marqués de Bradomína, the main character in Ramón del Valle-Inclán's tetralogy *Sonatas*. He had a large, curved nose and looked like a caricature. She stood up and took hold of it. "Valle-Inclán described his alter ego Marqués as ugly, Catholic and sentimental." I took the sculpture and turned it around, to study its haughty manner and the eyes that pointed upward, looking at no one. As I was putting it back on the table, she turned to look at me: "You have large hands, I hadn't noticed before, open them wide," she said. I did as she asked. She held them between hers and studied them carefully: "They look powerful, older than your face. How old are you?"

"Twenty-five."

"My children were about ten years older than you, but they were your age when they disappeared – Mini twenty-two and Lorenzo twenty-five, the same as you."

Once she had finished with my hands, she put a finger to my chin to examine my profile: "Let me see, turn your head that way." I did as she asked. I don't know what she saw, we carried on talking, but she seemed to be elsewhere, continued thinking with some other thought or elaborating something, a picture or a movement, and as I spoke, she drew a face without looking at me, on the inside cover of a book she had on the table.

Once she had finished the sketch, she told me that she and a friend, Enrico Trillini, had found a house in the country for a workshop: "One of those remote abandoned farmhouses with no road, no electricity, no water or gas… It's got nothing, it's beautiful… Enrico has found a bulldozer and has been busy over the past few days making a road and organizing the services." In a letter to her brother, she wrote: *The workshop is cut off, in the hills, surrounded by cornfields… Fantastic. It has nine beds. May God help us.* That workshop, Contrada Montefiore 66, which is still going, would soon become her favorite refuge, where she went to work each day. During the summer, with Enrico, she did pottery courses that lasted several days. She never showed much patience toward the people who went there, and Enrico often had to intervene when she grew tired of explaining, or bored. But she had great charisma, and everyone respected her just the same, and loved her work. "The most difficult thing about this work is not about modeling a good shape – nearly everyone can do that, but they need the perseverance to carry on and to look for their own voice. In the workshops you can learn quite well how to work the clay, but not how to model. That depends on you alone, it has to become your necessity."

During the same period in which she opened the workshop she learned, in her own way, to drive a yellow Fiat 126 which she used to drive back and forth between her house in Recanati and the workshop in the countryside. *I'm slowly learning… All is fine until the driving instructor starts giving indications and telling me what to do, then I start to get scared. In the end I leave the steering wheel and just fuck off,* she writes to her brother. Driving was never her strong point. When she gave up trying to park, which happened fairly often, and she couldn't find anyone to park for her, she left the car wherever she could, pulled out a piece of cardboard from under the seat, and stuck it on the dashboard. On it she had written: *Broken down*.

(Translated from the Italian by Richard Dixon)