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Tango

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Ethos of Melancholy

Para la familia Dickinson, que siempre estuvo.

What the tango says about Argentina, the nation that created it, illuminates aspects of Argentine behavior that have long puzzled outsiders. In many foreign minds, the Argentine tourist, the Argentine military, or Argentine politicians and their followers conjure up images that at first glance seem to convey arrogant aggressiveness often carried to extremes outsiders find inconceivable. What foreigners do not realize is that both public posture and private introspection constantly confront Argentines with excruciating questions about their own identity. Are they civilized or barbarian? European or Latin American? a respected nation or a banana republic? an independent agent or a pawn?

Answers to these questions would not seem to be forthcoming from a dance defined as the tango is by the world outside of Latin America. In the popular image of the tango, Valentino or a counterpart, dramatically dashing in bolero, frilled shirt, and cummerbund, flings a partner backward over the ruffled train of her flamenco costume. One or another holds a rose. Out of this Andalusian vignette of total surrender to music and passion emerges the idea that tango lyrics express similar exuberance. Even when the words tell of lost love, treacherous fate, and an unjust world, a romantic hero supposedly sings them, gesturing flamboyantly to broadcast his sensitivity.

In dramatic contrast, in the classic Argentine tango, closed-faced men practiced the dance with each other and then, fedoras pulled down like masks, gripped women against rigid torsos sheathed in sober double-breasted jackets. Their feet, though subject to the same grim control, executed intricate figures all but independent from the rest of their bodies. Far from flamenco ruffles and roses, Argentines had invented the tango in the brothels on the edges of Buenos Aires as it thrust its slums ever further into the pampas at the turn of the century. The dancers demonstrated their skill by being able to perform like somber automatons, providing them with psychic space to contemplate a bitter destiny that had driven them into themselves.

The tango reflects this Argentine ambivalence. Although a major symbol of the Argentines' national identity, its themes emphasize a painful uncertainty as to

the precise nature of that identity. For Argentines, this dance is deadly serious. In the tango, as in their personal lives and their politics, they tend to dwell on real or imagined affronts. In response, they attempt to seek out and affirm self-definition. They resort to elaborately staged behavior as a way of confronting the result of their search—a self-definition whose very essence is doubt. The tango proclaims this doubt and reveals the intensity and depth of Argentine feelings of insecurity, but it also insists that an aggressive facade should betray no hint that it could have arisen from an anguished sense of vulnerability.

Argentines who sing, dance, or listen to the tango today use it to think; hence its intimate, reflective quality. Argentine reflection is bleak. “We are a gray nation,” they say, often wistfully. Why this should be the case, making them so different from the neighboring Brazilians with their happy samba, the contrast Argentines most often evoke, they do not understand. Their literature and conversation endlessly pose the problem of identity, and they examine the tango from all angles in search of a solution. Sociologists study it, popular essayists scrutinize it, the intelligentsia listen to it in concert and debate it in lecture. Major writers such as Ernesto Sábato and Martínez Estrada have analyzed it, and Jorge Luís Borges not only studied tango themes but wrote tangos himself. The lack of roots in a pre-conquest indigenous culture, the post-1880 wave of immigration that left three foreign-born people for every native Argentine in Buenos Aires streets, the continually high proportions of men to women that contributed to Buenos Aires’ position as a world-renowned depot of the white slave trade, the nostalgia and resentment of newcomers when dreams of owning land became impossible to realize and other forms of success remained elusive—all these factors contributed to a bitter and insecure melancholy that Argentines recognize as a deep current in their culture.

Argentines know they are not given to exuberant emotion, much less to its display. Proudly in control, yet sometimes, for precisely this reason, trapped in themselves, Argentines channel their characteristic combination of inhibitions and introspection into a particular form of moping that amounts to a national institution: *el mufarse*. The mood relates closely to the tango. *Mufarse* involves bitter introspection, but beyond this, Argentines have a clear sense of self-indulgence when they give in to a *mufa*. It is a depression, but with a cynicism about the depression itself, an awareness that it can feel good to throw practicalities aside, have one of the demitasse coffees over which many a tango was written, and contemplate one’s bad luck and its universal implications. Tango fans in particular pass time constructing complex personal philosophies of life, suffering, and love—philosophies that surprise outsiders who do not expect such elaborate abstractions as common themes of popular culture.

A man discusses such philosophy or sings tangos about it with the understanding that he is an essentially sensitive and vulnerable being in a life that forces him to cover up these qualities with the facade of the experienced, polished, suave, and clever man of the world. The man of the tango, *el hombre tanguero*, is idealistic, but he is not *gil*, the argot for the stupidly innocent. He tries to avoid

revealing the naïveté inherent in the male sex, but the *quedirán*, the “‘what-they-will-say,’” obsesses him and he sees the rest of the world as mocking observers. He devotes himself to constructing the front that will obviate a smothered laugh or a wink behind his back. By contrast, the girl foolishly acts upon ideas that, if he had learned anything at all from experience, should long ago have been destroyed and relegated to their place as useless though forever-cherished childhood dreams.

The city and the women who live there most often waken the man of the tango from his dreams to the real nature of the world. The city center represents wealth, success, fame—a chance to climb the social ladder at the price of the human values left behind. But the emptiness of these goals provokes the tango’s lament for the lost neighborhood or *barrio* on the edge of Buenos Aires, where the sophisticated but disillusioned tango singer spent his youth. The tango developed during the years when Buenos Aires began to demolish *barrio* life as it pushed out onto the pampas, where no geographical limits stood in its way. Through the first decades of the 20th century, construction was the city’s major industry. Time after time the burgeoning city center obliterated its old limits. Asphalt and concrete covered the *barrios*, the neighborhoods that were half-city and half-country, where local soccer teams played in empty fields on weekend afternoons while families drank *mate* under grape arbors, and sweethearts arranged to meet in the evenings in entryways beneath the streetlamps. Tangos often sing of the man who comes back to his *barrio* with the hope that it might have escaped change.

Most of all, such a man returns to search for his mother and the values he deserted along with her when he was seduced by the city and its women. Ironically, the mother to whom entire tangos sing homage is in fact the first of the women to betray a man, by her very insistence on ideals that can never apply to reality outside her tiny home in the remembered *barrio*. So many tangos sing of betrayal by a woman, Argentines observe, that in Mexico the tango is known as “‘the lament of the cuckold.’” Man, the idealistic, dreaming innocent, is deceived and thus initiated in the ways of the world by Woman, the wily, unfeeling, vastly experienced traitor.

Women of the tango were themselves betrayed by the promise of better life in the city and often longed to return to the innocent cotton dresses they had worn in the *barrio* of their past. But many such women could reach for material success and fame only in the cabaret, a world from which there was no turning back to decent society.

Inevitably, men put their faith in these women, who became independent, powerful, and calculating creatures out for their own selfish ends. Inevitably, these beautiful but deadly women abandon the men they choose to exploit and move on to others who offer greater wealth and shallower spirits. The victims of the female sex find themselves helpless, destitute, and alone with no recourse but to sing the tangos that muse on their downfall.

You know it is the nature
of man to suffer.
The woman whom I loved with
all my heart
Left me with the man who knew
how to seduce her
. . . all the love which I
felt for her
She cut off with one slash of the
blade of her treachery.
And if perhaps one day she
might wish to return
To my side once more, I will
have to pardon her.
If a man can kill another for
jealousy
He forgives when love for any
woman speaks powerfully.

Sabe que es condición de varón
el sufrir.
La mujer que yo quería con
todo mi corazón
Se me ha ido con el hombre
que la supo seducir
. . . todo aquel amor que
por ella yo sentí
lo cortó de un solo tajo con el
filo de su traición.
Y si acaso algún día quisiera
volver
a mi lado otra vez, yo la he de
perdonar.
Si por celos un hombre a otro
puede matar
se perdona cuando habla muy
fuerte el querer a cualquier
mujer.

—J. A. Carusso
“Sentimiento Gaucho”

The only man who could resist city women and hold onto barrio values while conquering the sophistication of Buenos Aires and other world capitals was Carlos Gardel, whom Argentines unanimously praise as the greatest tango singer of all time. The features of “Carlitos,” who was killed in a plane crash in 1935, are still as familiar as the Argentine national colors, which often surround the face that smiles down on passengers from decals in taxis and buses. That face was one of Gardel’s greatest achievements. The illegitimate son of an immigrant washer-woman had taken care to leave no trace of his humble background or foreign origins in the calculated combination of dazzling smile, tilted hat, and impeccably arranged tuxedo. He incarnated the ideal of the Argentine as quintessentially urban. But he never allowed his urbane elegance to undermine his values or his loyalties. From the pinnacle of his success in the city center, he remembered the neighborhood friends of his youth, and he longed for Argentina while he triumphed in European capitals. Even more important, he resisted the glamour of the women surrounding him and remained faithful to his mother: Gardel never married, and his mother’s tomb adjoins his. Carlitos took the tango as song to its apogee, yet he restates more than an aesthetic ideal each time an Argentine listens to his recorded voice and pronounces the familiar saying, “He sings better every year.”

As both artist and man, Gardel commands special concentration on his rendering of tango lyrics. But tango enthusiasts pay special attention to other singers’ renditions as well, even though the lines are often already so well known that all Argentines quote them as proverbs relevant to daily situations. Traditionally, Argentines will not dance to a tango that is sung. If they danced they could not attend properly to the music and lyrics, or hear their own experience and identity re-

vealed in the singer's and musicians' rendering of quintessential Argentine emotions. The singer of the tango shares his personal encounter with experiences common to them all. He does not need bold pronouncement or flamboyant gesture. His audience knows what he means and his feelings are familiar ones. They listen for the nuances—emotional and philosophical subtleties that will tell them something new about their guarded interior worlds.

When they dance to tangos, Argentines contemplate themes akin to those of tango lyrics, stimulating emotions that, despite an apparently contradictory choreography, are the same as those behind the songs. The choreography also reflects the world of the lyrics, but indirectly. The dance portrays an encounter between the powerful and completely dominant male and the passive, docile, completely submissive female. The passive woman and the rigidly controlled but physically aggressive man contrast poignantly with the roles of the sexes depicted in the tango lyrics. This contrast between two statements of relations between the sexes aptly mirrors the insecurities of life and identity.

An Argentine philosophy of bitterness, resentment, and pessimism has the same goal as a danced statement of machismo, confidence, and sexual optimism. The philosopher elaborates his schemes to demonstrate that he is a man of the world—that he is neither stupid nor naive. In the dance, the dancer acts as though he has none of the fears he cannot show—again proving that he is not *gil*. When an Argentine talks of the way he feels when dancing a tango, he describes an experience of total aggressive dominance over the girl, the situation, the world—an experience in which he vents his resentment and expresses his bitterness against a destiny that denied him this dominance. Beyond this, it gives him a moment behind the protection of this facade to ponder the history and the land that have formed him, the hopes he has treasured and lost. *Sábato* echoes widespread feeling in Argentina when he says “Only a gringo would make a clown of himself by taking advantage of a tango for a chat or amusement.”

While thus dancing a statement of invulnerability, the somber *tanguero* sees himself, because of his sensitivity, his great capacity to love, and his fidelity to the true ideals of his childhood years, as basically vulnerable. As he protects himself with a facade of steps that demonstrate perfect control, he contemplates his absolute lack of control in the face of history and destiny. The nature of the world has doomed him to disillusionment, to a solitary existence in the face of the impossibility of perfect love and the intimacy this implies. If by chance the girl with whom he dances feels the same sadness, remembering similar disillusion, the partners do not dance sharing the sentiment. They dance together to relive their disillusion alone. In a Buenos Aires dance hall, a young man turned to me from the fiancée he had just relinquished to her chaperoning mother and explained, “In the tango, together with the girl—and it does not matter who she is—a man remembers the bitter moments of his life, and he, she, and all who are dancing contemplate a universal emotion. I do not like the woman to talk to me while I dance tango. And if she speaks I do not answer. Only when she says to me, ‘Omar, I am speaking,’ I answer, ‘And I, I am dancing.’ ”

Paper Tangos

Here we will sing, así no más,
 the tangos of the exile of Gardel.
 And we will recount, así no más,
 the history of some paper tangos.
 The tangos of the exile of Gardel
 are tangos that are acted out in life—
 tanguedias that never come down from the marquee.

We will begin
 with letters of exile and of our country
 . . . Letters of exile come and go,
 bringing us emotions like daily bread:
 errands and news that give us
 the proof that everyone is still there

These notes try as well to recall San Martín
 and the exile of the great unfinished nation.
 All Latin American peoples have lived exiled
 inside or outside of their land

Exile is absence, and death, a prolonged absence.
 Who amongst us has not died a little?

The country we left no longer exists.

“How did it occur to you to make a tanguedia, as you call it?”

“He said to me, ‘If you play the saxophone, stay here in Buenos Aires. But if you play the tango on the bandoneon, go to Paris.’ ”

“What am I going to do in Paris?”

“The tanguedia. The Exile of Gardel.”

“But what is the tanguedia?”

“Something that tells what is happening to us here in Buenos Aires.”

“I said to him, ‘But that is an enormous risk. . . .’ ”

“He said, ‘The decision to be is always a risk. To live in Buenos Aires is a risk. But to leave is also a risk. The triumph is to hold out, to remain united here as well as there.’ ”

“And so his strategy of risk began to develop: It is necessary to invent a culture, a poetics of risk.”

—Fernando Solanas
 from *The Exile of Gardel*

The arrival of two new statements of the tango, the film *The Exile of Gardel* and the Broadway sensation, *Tango Argentino*, provided a special focus of self-reflection for expatriate Argentines in mid-1987. *The Exile of Gardel*, in which Argentines exiles sing and dance out fragments of their broken lives in Paris, was directed in 1985 by Fernando Solanas, famed in Argentina as director of one of the most controversial political films in Argentine history, *The Hour of the Furnaces*, which was clandestinely shown during the Argentine civil war of the 1970s. *Tango Argentino* displayed a history of tango dance and song that has

proved a surprise international hit. For Argentines, *Tango Argentino* brought together their most evocative tangos and became a statement both of their unique heritage and of its emotional and artistic hold on audiences worldwide.

Expatriate Argentines insisted that I see the film and took care that I met singers and dancers from the review. The film's tanguedia—with its paper tangos and letters of exile—like the classic tangos themselves, has no end. All call for a response that in itself is a cultural configuration of thought. How could I best evoke the density of accruing and changing cultural meanings in these new statements of the tango and responses to them? How better than to structure my thought into one of the responses demanded by the cultural form itself? The danger of self-indulgent reflection is recognized by Argentines themselves as inherent in the form, but it is the form and its responses—and their meditations on exile, identity, cultural vitality, gender, and the various forms of death—that I intend to explore, not by analysis of the form but through an enactment of a response.

A Paper Tango

For many years I have been sending and receiving letters of exile; as I write this, the last has come under the door: I do not want to open it. Under the door, the way letters come in Buenos Aires. I am writing a letter of exile for those who told me of a film of exile that speaks of the fate abroad of the tango, their song of loneliness and frustration, written after one exile, during another, and before yet another. These letters of exile become equated in the film with paper tangos. Paper tangos form tanguedias, rather than tragedias; they are parts of other tanguedias that will never find an end while our children confront yet another exile in their life without a country. Like the rest of the world, but our glimpse of our exile, fragmentation, lack of form and lack of an end to our story came early.

You made enormous efforts to contact me about the *Exile of Gardel*, but because we could find no time together, it was alone that I finally screened the tape. It seemed nevertheless particularly appropriate to be alone as I watched image after image of person after person turned thing by the denuded solitude of exile. This is the exile of the tango, the song to loneliness, the exile of everything deeply Argentine, the exile of the solitude of the South. But the song has sung not only of an exile outside but also inside, an exile that already existed before the exile: the exile left his country for the third time when we left Argentina. As children of immigrants unsettled in our lives or selves, Argentines find themselves in exile three times distant from themselves, and they can no longer remember when they did not exist in an enormous tunnel of mirrors. I made notes. I had to write very rapidly: with no time to stop to recast phrases to speak of "them," the notes like the film talk of "us." Or they are fragments without subjects, where "the tango," and "letters of exile," and the parents and "children of exile," and the exile itself are presupposed to exist in the context of Argentine experience that we share and in reference to those who do not understand but on whom we rely for media, space, and the confrontation of their misunderstanding in order to express ourselves.

I took the notes home. I looked at them just like that, as the film says, *así no más*, on paper. And *así no más*, I saw suddenly that they were and were not my own life. With the difference that I went to Argentina to study its culture and, passing for an Argentine, I confused even myself. At first we were all students, I just one among many, who were exploring our Argentine identity. The university closed the night I arrived, and we formulated our questions together. Everything I heard served me finally, as it served you, to analyze, again with the difference that this was not only my personal life but my professional task. Yet, after ten years surrounded always by Argentine life, slowly on the edges of my mind my analysis became my experience. And so I studied the tango, but also I danced it in the provinces and I listened to it in the capital, and I used it as a language to think and communicate my Argentine experience.

I, like you, lived years whose only continuity consisted in receiving and sending Argentine letters. Like many of you I studied abroad, in Oxford with Argentines and taught by Argentines, all of us bringing our minds to bear on Argentina. Like many of you I also married a member of a community that called itself foreign, regional, and Argentine, all at the same time. Tied to the Asturian Patagonian Argentines, I struggled to keep contact with Hungarian Argentines and Jewish Argentines and English Argentines who “came from” the capital: *porteños*. Or perhaps it was only our enormous families that kept us apart. The only one of all our friends who did not have the backing of such an identity was I myself, and so I wanted my child to have the only identity of which I could conceive: we returned to Buenos Aires so that the child of two foreigners with flimsy documents would be born on Argentine soil, by law irrevocably Argentine.

Argentina was our country, Patagonia, our home where the child was taken to “know” [*conocer*], but our work, like that of almost everyone else, took us “outside.” So all of us began again to write letters from different points on the globe, and we met in London, in Los Angeles, in Mexico, in the airport in Rio, in congresses in Paris, in order to exchange *dulce de leche* in its blue cans, Sugus candies for the children, and shoes for letters and photos that began their long journey back. And, carrying *dulce de leche*, Sugus, and shoes whose leather above all permeated our suitcases with Buenos Aires, we came to know friends and uncles and grandparents and great-grandparents and children of Argentines in Asturias, in Italy, in Valencia, in Miami, in Rochester where other photos were on show in which children already grown had once looked at a camera from Tucumán, or Río Gallegos, or, of course, Buenos Aires. Bit by bit the interchange began to include rumors and memories and fears of terror in the country, and for all of us, in our minds flickered moments of fear that had touched us in Buenos Aires: when someone stopped momentarily in the gesture of serving wine as the sound of machine guns reached us—and then without knowing what to do, continued serving the wine in silence; or when a baby was in danger with no way through the police cordon that had us trapped inside a city block with a bomb no one knew where; or when there was no more news of a friend.

Sometime in those years as I came and went from Argentina, still asking the same questions—sometime in those years I stopped expecting answers, although

always expecting letters, from Argentina. The second exile began for me as it had begun for others in other years and other generations. For me and for other Argentines, who had been children of immigrants, the second exile came after a first. In the first exile we had left one reality for another reality in Argentina. The second exile in Argentina itself was the growing consciousness that Argentina did not offer a reality: Argentina itself reflected back to us our doubts. The tango of the film and the tango in Argentina sings to the vast doubt, the *sin sentido* of the culture—which, as it negates, can also affirm the task of inventing life anew, offering all possible options and with them the exhilarating sensation of crisis. It is, I used to say, a culture of doubt; we needed to build monuments to doubt. In the film, as in the third exile, where we are alienated in many painful ways from Argentina itself and even at times from each other, our culture has become one of risk—the risk that the exile always relives, searching for a reply, an ending that may not exist, inside or outside Argentina.

So we were all exiled two times, and then three. Each of us confronts yet another exile in our children: What does my son remember of Buenos Aires? When will he return? What will it be like if he speaks in a language other than the Spanish I speak to him? What will I tell him when he learns other words, another history, another music? But then all Argentines have always learned “another” language, “another” history, “another” music. For all of us our exile is our mirror.

All of this is in the notes. But what can I do with these notes, these reflections in another mirror where I suddenly see myself and you? Now we are no longer students. Now I ask questions of the questions that we posed together, we are perhaps no longer looking for the answer together. If we are not, what right do I have to say that I understood what I have just seen? My dilemma, my life, is the continuous frustrated attempt of the exiles, like us years back and like the film today, to get a dial tone in the public telephones to speak from Paris to the River Plate. I have been in those telephones in Paris. One said, in blue letters over the French graffiti, in the booth in 1979, *Las Malvinas son nuestras*.

Tango Argentino: Ballad for my Death

All of this, then, is what I think, at the same time that it is what I have learned I should think, when I hear the tango. But the mix of the profound and absurd that Argentines recognize as appropriate reactions to tango music, song, and dance implies beyond shared reality, highly personal experience. *Tango Argentino* confronted us with many of the most beloved tangos of all, performed one after the other and culminating, surely not by chance, in *Ballad for my Death*. Tangos are as different as listeners. But tangos, particularly this canon of tangos, present parameters for thought. The tango mines certain experiences and poses certain unanswered questions, but does so in the context of certain lives and certain historical moments. In order to communicate about the tango and about these tangos as ways of thinking about an individual life, I need to use an evocative strategy. This is no longer a letter: these are not thoughts addressed to anyone. They were of

interest to me in thinking through my life, as I understand reactions to tango often are to those who take them seriously. The communication of the thoughts that occurred to me upon hearing *Ballad for my Death* enacts the dynamic involved in this experience, the quintessential Argentine reconstruction of an individual confrontation with life. Better than any dissection of this reconstruction is its evocation through the one individual case I can best know, my own. Precisely because this case is not only highly individual but ultimately that of a foreigner in Argentina, it illuminates, again by parallel, the way Argentines can think about their own stories with their tango.

Why should it be that the sense that the tango makes has become so urgent to me as a person? Sometimes I think that I recognize myself in you because you first recognized me. How otherwise did it happen not only that for the most part I was mistaken for an Argentine but that when I received any notice at all it was because one or another or whole groups of you thought you saw in me quintessences of yourselves? At the very least you remembered a model you thought you must have seen somewhere recently, or often a doll that might have existed in your past. Sometimes you realized, apparently quite suddenly as you made an aside to someone that I was not supposed to overhear, that you recognized what had always been for you the ideal face. Others felt it clearly natural I ask about the tango as you concluded time after time that I had the appearance of a dancer. Sometimes an anonymous person who did not quite comprehend what it was that I was doing would nod in grave accord that it made sense to study Eva Perón because “you even look like her.” More sophisticated acquaintances would make a joke of this, or only tell me much later. Children still blurt it out to my face. Even worse, acknowledgeable now only because none of these experiences will ever occur again, were the repeated times in the provinces and even in the capital when people would expect me to know what to do when they, fishing in the past and the present to understand what it was that I evoked, would finally exclaim that after all they were seeing again just one more of the images of the Virgin Mary that had peopled their lives. I still carry with me the religious medals given to me because they looked like me. I don’t know what to do with them.

What kind of curious concatenation of physiological and psychological happenstance could have allowed this to happen? Perhaps the physiological coincidence would never have been noticed had it not been for the psychological circumstance: I was happy in Argentina. People told me that this was evident: my radiance evoked images of Madonnas, of Evita who looked like them, of models, of dancers and of dolls. And to this another physiological accident added: at 21 I seemed to the Argentines to be 15 at the most, and at 26, they guessed I was 18. People treated me accordingly. Possibly this would have happened to me in any country—possibly; I can only know that when it did happen to me, it happened in Buenos Aires. I was a favorite child of the city: it was the only moment in my life when merely by existing (in Argentine Spanish one *is* existentially [*ser*] rather than temporarily [*estar*] a scholarship holder; and at the same time, sometimes to my woe, one *is* a doll or the ideal girl child woman), I was continually *regalada*, “given.” People gave me banquets and gifts and offers of everything from flowers in the street to marriage.

So I recuperated a childhood that I could never know in what seemed a rather distant country that had never after all claimed me as its own. I could be taken in by family after family that fed me and dressed me and showed me off until I melted into one final family and disappeared.

As anthropologist, girl child, and madonna it was perfectly expectable that I should not know details and rules of earthly matters and that I should need instruction in them. So for a very long time very many people, whom on one level I knew I did not take seriously, laughed at what they admired but knew could not last, my simplicity. “This is wonderful,” I was told once upon breaking yet another bit of protocol of a rather formal culture, “You are totally uncivilized.” The less attention I paid to rules the more they liked it—to a point. At that point they gently took up the task of my education in their culture, because, after all, although I might be uncivilized I was asking for education in this culture that knew that I could not grow up without learning the rules, someday. Among the first things I learned was that I was by nature educated and refined, something recognizable in my mere physical presence and mannerisms. Stripped of the credentials of Harvard, Oxford, Fulbright, Ford, I carefully and literally took note that education is not learned, it is taken in with mother’s milk, and that what nature does not bestow, Salamanca cannot make up for.

And then I learned that certain political responsibility, certain family loyalties, certain human goals and expectations would be attributed to me as an adult. No one had ever gotten around to this in my own country—or perhaps I paid less attention there where I had not been a successful daughter and where I was not an anthropologist. But when I wanted to take account of matters—*cuando quise darme cuenta*—in Argentina, I was no longer an anthropologist there, either, I was a bride.

Along the way, and perhaps significantly for my new status, my mother had died. She died in California, but I lived out her death in Argentina. I remember the systematic reassurances of the dozens of relatives and acquaintances as they evoked the many deaths they themselves had lived. As I waited to cross the Straits of Magellan and then to continue North, as days ground by in Buenos Aires while the family and its contacts searched out a place for me on the overloaded planes taking Argentine tourists to their summer destinations, on the 36-hour flight that would finally take me landing in Santiago, in Lima, in Guayaquil, in Bogotá, in Panamá, in Tegucigalpa, in Guatemala City, in Mexico—during all this time I learned not to be afraid, to remember that all children see the death of their parents, to know that there were many people who knew how this happened and what to do. They were waiting for me in Argentina—very different from the bewildered, dumbstruck fragmented little group that my American family made while it waited two days more for my mother’s death and then dispersed again. All of this seemed to have occurred in Buenos Aires: the last comforting words I remembered hearing were those of an unknowing airline official, consoling me for what she thought was my natural reaction to leaving my country, “May your voyage not be a burden. You will come back to Argentina.”

So one by one I learned the lessons of adult life, before it closed over me, in Buenos Aires. The tango reminded me once again that I have lived so much of

life in Argentina that it seems more a state of mind than a country. The *Ballad for my Death* evoked this time around, in its music and its repeated names of places and experiences taken for granted in Buenos Aires, the sudden realization of human mortality that must come to everyone at some time or in some place. That realization came to me for the first time—in that sense really its only time because afterward I could recognize it—in Buenos Aires. It was in Buenos Aires; it was crossing and going away along a white street; it was crossing Santa Fé, la Plaza Francia a few blocks away in the dark; it was at dawn and at six—everything clear in my mind: the tea house, *el, Five O'Clock Tea*, one block from Santa Fé and another from Callao the last thing that I saw before entering the clinic where Martín was born. So that in this sense, in some real sense, I *will* always die in Buenos Aires just as I will always give birth in Buenos Aires. Second times for me are already imprinted with Buenos Aires. As I listened I had what must be a primordial sensation of recognizing something profound and commonplace that all human beings must feel but that I happened to feel in Buenos Aires.

I will die in Buenos Aires
 it will be at dawn which is the hour of the death of those who know how to die
 I will put away in my silence perfumed bitterness [*mufa*]
 of that verse that I was never able to tell you
 I will go a few blocks and there, there in the Plaza Francia like shadows fled from a
 tired ballet
 repeating your name along a white street, my memories will tiptoe away from me
 I will die in Buenos Aires
 it will be at dawn
 I will tamely put away the things of life
 my small poem of good-byes and
 my tobacco, my tango
 I will put over my shoulders to be warm all of the dawn
 my next to last whisky will not be drunk
 Tangoly, my elaborated death will arrive
 I will be dead on the dot when it is six o'clock
 In Santa Fé
 I know that on our street corner you are dressed in sadness down to your feet
 Alma mía, let us go, the day is coming, do not cry
 I will die in Buenos Aires
 It will be dawn
 I will be dead at six.

—H. Ferrer and A. Piazzolla
 from *Ballad for my Death*

Buenos Aires. Arbitrary city like all cities. My mother used to say that as a little girl she thought about all those Argentines going up and down streets so far away and she wondered if some day her life would have anything to do with them. Arbitrary city. But seen from Argentina, once there, a definitive point on the map. A point that made itself definitive on my map, the map I bought for my first journey south. That map is now covered with lines, coming and going in and out of Buenos Aires, erasing the city. Is it that my life erases Buenos Aires or that Bue-

nos Aires became my life? Arbitrary point, but not absurd. Not absurd like Villazón, Bolivia or La Quiaca, Argentina—where once I thought I might die, and where the thought made me desperate at the absurdity of dying for nothing in no place. It was not that I thought I might die in Buenos Aires: rather, it was in Buenos Aires that I knew for the first time that I shall die.

—*translated from the Spanish by the author.*