The Surrendered

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The Surrendered: Reflections by a Son of Shining Path.
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About These Texts

The nature of this document is somewhat undefined. In formal terms, it weaves together short texts that are both reflections and biographical notes about a violent era. Let’s call them simple, nonfictional texts so as not to complicate the muddled field of memory all the more.

Yet the content of these texts isn’t arbitrary. They deal with different aspects of my condition: I am the son of two parents who were militants in the Peruvian Communist Party, known as Shining Path, and who died in that difficult situation, murdered extrajudicially.

I’ve been writing these texts for a long time—for years, really. I shared some of the stories in a personal blog, the kind that gives a false impression that your life exists for someone else who might read what you’ve written. In my blog, I published the texts I thought were the least pathetic or that I hoped would raise the fewest questions—a useless precaution to take with a bunch of texts that, to be honest, went unnoticed.

I kept the majority of my writings in a folder on my computer without knowing that I’d ever share them, or how I’d share them. At a certain point, I thought about synthesizing them, giving them another form, and rewriting them with academic rigor. But I abandoned that idea. I’ll leave it to more talented people to do that. I didn’t feel comfortable with it, and I admit that I’m also incapable of it. But I did want to share, in familiar, personal language, some things that matter to me and that might serve a purpose or help someone else.

Because of how I’ve written these texts, the reader will sense repetition, contradictions, and half-formed ideas. But that’s the real style of this book. There are no finished proposals here, only reflections that have changed over time and probably haven’t gotten clearer.

I’ve written this book from a place of doubt, and it’s to doubt that it appeals. It doesn’t seek to debunk dominant truths about the internal war or the ideas people have about “terrorists” by proposing some different
though equally monolithic perspective. Nor does it wish to give a partisan view or justify violence by appealing to the complexity of certain actors’ experience so as to relativize their guilt.

Yet people do not write in vain, even when they don’t write clearly. I think there are experiences worth sharing—not to save those who lived through them from condemnation, but rather because sharing those experiences might have a positive moral and political impact. Sharing them can help make visible things people would rather brush aside. It can destabilize the unconscious pacts that shape our reality, our history of the war, and its meaning in the present.

It might be worth it to take another look at the guilty, the traitors, the criminals, and the terrorists and, by contrast, at the heroes, the activists, and the innocent—and even at those who are nothing, the spectators, those who view themselves as passive bystanders in this drama. It might be worth it to think about the language we use to talk about certain things. Might doing that affect our perceptions and memories and how we construct them? I’m not sure.

What I do know is that I’m writing this because it’s useful to air certain topics publicly, outside the intimacy of people’s homes. I think it can help others who’ve lived through similar situations to mine: the children of terrorists, those who’ve been militants in subversive organizations, or survivors. There are many people who’d like to speak out but don’t have the chance, people in less favorable situations than I.

I don’t pretend to represent anyone. When I write, I do it with only one rule: to be honest. I write as if I were writing for myself. And because I’m not unique, I hope there will be other people who see themselves reflected in these pages.

Many of these ideas, reflections, and intuitions—I’m sure the most interesting ones—are mine. They’ve been woven together over time through conversations with close friends. I don’t know if it does those friends any good to name them. Still, I’ll mention a few, with their permission.

Thanks to Tamia Portugal, who accompanied this process with wit and sensitivity and, in many moments, lent invaluable support; I cannot thank her with enough respect and affection. Thank you, as well, to my colleagues in the Memory Group, especially to my comrade Ponciano del Pino, who constantly inspires new ways of thinking about the
topics to which we’re both committed.¹ I’m grateful to my dear friends in the Memory Studies Workshop: they’ve supported and joined me in thinking about uncomfortable themes.² Thank you, too, to Marcus Lenzen, who, back when we were notably younger, encouraged me to write down some of my first stories. Thank you to Francesca Uccelli, for reminding me lately that exchanges of ideas are worth pursuing and that close relationships, mutual learning, and affection can weather any distance. Thank you to Goya Wilson, who in a key moment of doubt came to our aid, and to Martha Dietrich, who during several winters listened patiently, carefully, and intelligently to oral versions of these stories. A very special thank you goes, as well, to Rubén Merino, who graced the original Spanish version of this book with an afterword.

Thank you to my siblings for their patience and understanding. They, too, are part of this universe. They feel uncomfortable with an unrelenting past that, thanks to my doing, now returns and reaches outward to touch others.

And thank you to my parents. I don’t vindicate them in this book but rather remember them to help others, almost as if they were useful instruments for broaching certain questions and errors. With my feeble wisdom and dispossession of the truth, I’m hopeful that modesty and doubt can invite us to abandon our trenches and feel curiosity about the suffering of people who are different from us or even those we hate. Though they may be different, perhaps they aren’t so far removed from us: maybe a reflection of ourselves and an entire generation abides within those we call our enemies.

¹. The Memory Group (Grupo Memoria) was a space for academic exchange that, with the support of the Instituto de Estudios Peruanos (Institute for Peruvian Studies), organized more than fifty sessions from 2011 to 2013 to debate texts within the field of memory studies and on the period of political violence. Founded by Carlos Iván Degregori shortly before his death, the Memory Group was supported by José Carlos Agüero, Ricardo Caro, Ponciano del Pino, Carolina Garay, Sebastián Muñoz-Nájar, Tamia Portugal, Iván Ramírez, Vera Lucía Ríos, Gabriel Salazar, María Eugenia Ulfe, and Rosa Vera.

². The Memory Studies Workshop (Taller de Estudios de Memoria) brought together young researchers from the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos (San Marcos National University) and from 2007 onward held both academic and nonacademic activities to debate the period of political violence, primarily with students. Its members were Renzo Aroni, Keyla Barrero, Iván Ramírez, Erik Ramos, María Rodríguez, Gabriel Salazar, Madeline Torres, Katherine Valenzuela, and Natalia Yáñez.
In most cases, the scenes I narrate stem from direct experience. They deal with my family or with how I experienced (and still experience) situations the war thrust upon us. The protagonists of other situations told me their stories directly. I don’t pretend to reconstruct my past faithfully because, in part, my memories are shared; in some cases, my siblings tell different versions or variations of our experiences. Above all, facts are a starting point for sharing meanings and arguments, for reflecting on something quite elusive: the subjectivity of public life. I’ve changed names and places of the events I reveal so as not to implicate anyone I haven’t consulted in advance.