The Surrendered

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II. Guilt

because I nourished you with this reality
half-cooked
with many poor flowers of evil
with this absurd flight skimming the swamp
ego I absolve you of me
labyrinth my son

Blanca Varela, “Casa de cuervos”

A guy came into the shop we had at San Marcos University and asked me, “Does Silvia Solórzano work here?”

“Yes,” I said.

“I’m here to inform you that she died this morning.”

“OK.”

We were both very serious. He peered at me uncomfortably from behind his black tortoiseshell glasses. I stared back at him silently, waiting to see if he had anything to add. He made no other gesture, said nothing more. He offered no condolences. He didn’t look sad. I didn’t show any emotion either.

It was a strange day. My cousin, who had enrolled with me at the university that year, came into the store and told me some funny stories. I think he invited me to his house for lunch or dinner. I told him I couldn’t make it, that I had things to do. I didn’t tell him what I had just found out. I was accustomed to not talking about such things.
All morning, my uncle and I kept going over what had happened, discussing it with the neighboring shopkeepers. “Yes, it was Señora Silvia. We saw her this morning on the news.” Everyone saw her but us, because we didn’t have a TV. My uncle went out for a while, hoping to find out more details. I stayed back at the store, thinking about the next steps I’d have to take.

It was overwhelming to think about what would come next. The police would show up at our house. I’d have to prepare the scene and hide anything incriminating. But, thinking it through more carefully, why would I have to hide anything now—books, fliers, documents?

What most overwhelmed me was having to talk to my extended family, having to listen to their laments, their complaints, or both—their fake tears. I stalled as long as I could before I went home.

I took a bus. I sat in the back. Since my glasses were pretty crooked, I took them off to rest my eyes. The bus and everyone in it were a blur. Feeling invisible because I couldn’t see anyone, I then experienced the most profound and real sense of relief I’d ever felt. I felt relief wash over my being, as if rest were more than just a word.

Finally! Finally, after so many years, my mother had finished dying. I’d never again have to wait up for her until dawn. I’d never have to ask friends or acquaintances about her after she’d been gone for days on end. There’d be no more jails, no more visiting her in prison, no more begging her to flee the country, no more sleeping with one eye open waiting to hear the sound of her footsteps at the door, no more hearing her scold our dog Jaky for barking when she’d come home. No more of any of it.

I must have felt all of this while sitting at the back of that rickety bus, alone in my little corner of the world. And while I was feeling all of this, at the very same time I was wracked with guilt. I wanted to cry to counter the relief I was feeling with some outward expression of pain. But I couldn’t. I had things to do. That’s how I’d been taught.

11 Is feeling relieved about my mother’s death—and then guilt for having felt relief—my own personal, intimate, psychological issue? Is it totally unrelated to the public sphere?

In part, I’d say, “Yes, it’s my own problem.” No one should feel obligated to take an interest in my personal drama. But, on the other hand, isn’t this relief, this burdensome peace, a thorn that no one wants to ac-
knowledge? Isn’t it a form of suffering that millions in the world have experienced and still experience whenever they’re forced into needing someone they love to die? Isn’t this, perhaps, an invisible yet pervasive institution of our modern world?

I remember a conversation about this that took place in a hillside home in Lima, with a woman whose hair was already gray at forty years old. While frying fish, she grunted, “I wish that he would just die already so that we can rest. I wish the damn guy would just leave us in peace.” She was surrounded by her children, who were all seated at the Sunday dinner table. I was a guest. The woman’s husband was in jail.

For those who’ve never experienced the misfortune of having someone close to them detained, the acronyms Dircote and Dincote probably mean very little—or maybe they just seem like part of the everyday vocabulary people use to talk about political violence in Peru. They’re terms that get bandied about all the time in everyday speech. But these terms are like pathways; if you go down them, they conjure experiences that lead to so many more words, sensations, or even smells that make them tangible. For detainees and their families, words like Dincote mean torment, fear, lawyers, pleas for help, desperation for someone to pull strings. They mean torture and knowing: knowing that they’re torturing your family member. They evoke blood and uncertainty. And when this kind of experience happens repeatedly, Dincote, like so many other state-sponsored agencies and secret police organizations that have operated around the world at different points in history (like the Naval School of Mechanics in Argentina or the National Intelligence Directorate in Chile), becomes part of a routine and a nightmare.1 Walking these paths wears down detainees’ loved ones.

Delivering something to a detained family member in prison; getting someone to pass your family member a note, some clothes, some medicine, some food; preventing their disappearance: these things bring solace. It was this kind of absolute, vicious torment that snuffed out young Eliézer’s ability ever to enjoy life again. Following a long battle to sur-

vive, Eliézer’s father died just a few days after the detention camp where he was being held was liberated. It was as if Eliézer were channeling the words of Elie Wiesel: “I did not weep. It pained me that I could not weep, but I had no more tears. And, in the depths of my being, in the recesses of my weakened conscience . . . I might perhaps have found something like—free at last!”

So this relief, this guilt, this burden that you feel when someone you love finally dies, is not just a personal matter. It’s a side effect of impotence and fear, a sign of affect’s failure in the face of brute reason. Thousands of families around the world suffer this fate, this dilemma born out of love. And love should, in fact, be part of the public sphere, especially when love is terrible.

12 It doesn’t smell like her. It’s her moment to shine, and it no longer smells like her. And she had such a particular scent.

The flowers, the signs, the coffee, people greeting one another: she would have hated all of it. But here she is, subjected to the whole family, to a sham ritual acted out by people who grudgingly loved her.

She died just last night, but she already seems like an abandoned corpse, as if touched by a decrepit and tired death.

Right next to me, someone mutters her name. It’s strange because people talk about her as if she were an alien, something foreign, a plague.

I’d like to leave, but convention dictates that I stay. So, I stand in the corner observing what I perceive to be a theatrical troupe improvising blindness: they don’t see her wounds, her crushed nose, her broken fin-

2. Wiesel, Night Trilogy, 130.

3. Elie Wiesel’s novel and Primo Levi’s narratives are unavoidable catalogs of horror, but even more so of the ways in which common men become evil and lose their souls. Survivor guilt becomes a distinguishing mark. How can one speak gravely about modest suffering in the face of horror? What does one gain by showing off minor scratches in a sea of wounds far older than oneself? The history of horror leaves us tongue-tied when we try to tell our own little dramas. But we know: there can’t really be scales of suffering because each experience is unique and a body gets destroyed only once. Yes, we know that. But people feel something like shame in sharing their experiences with those who truly suffered.
gers. She died of death—that’s all! Her blood stains are shrouded in secrets, and by the jokes people tell at wakes, and by the blue doilies strewn about the room.

There she lies, drying up like an awkward mummy.

It might seem like I’m crazy, but at that moment I know . . . I know . . . I know that by some force of inertia her body is still repeating what she was dreaming yesterday—when defeated and exhausted by torture she dreamed of death. I can’t stand it. I want her to get up. I want all these people to leave, to leave us alone. I’d love to have the courage to scream, “Get out of here! Cut the charade! I know you’re all happy now: the ‘dead woman walking’ is really dead! The cursed one, the terrorist, the bitch—is dead! At long last! You don’t have to be afraid anymore! So, get out of here! There’s no need to wait around to see if she comes back to life!”

But I do nothing. I just look at her there dreaming in echoes.

Like an idiot, a coward, I close my eyes to see if by magic I can locate her in the darkness—to see if in my mind I can sing a song to her on a Paraguayan lagoon, or promise her that I’ll be all that she dreamed I’d be.

But there’s no magic here. There’s nothing more than noise in this room, and this heat, and hands patting me on the back. It’s absurd, I know. I know. But I still feel. I feel. I move toward the exit with my eyes closed. I manage to avoid condolences, and arms, and sweat. And I search for her.

But I don’t find her. Not yet. So we can rest. So that she never again has to dream that dream, or any other. So that for once she can be just like any other normal person.

So she can rot. In peace.

13 I met him on one of the trips I took while working for the TRC. We visited many communities back then. They were all similar, each full of nearly carbon-copy stories. Women would stand in long lines to give their testimonies. The men and the authorities would tell their official stories. But occasionally something unique would happen: an authentic moment that would undo the spell cast by such tough work.

Maybe it happened because we were more or less the same age. Maybe
it was because I told him some things privately, or because I gave him a book. I don’t know. Juan showed me the graves where they had buried both the Shining Path militants and his neighbors who had joined Shining Path. It was the community secret. They had killed those neighbors to prove to the military that they were not terrucos.

But proof is not enough. War has its own logic and breeds so many complex situations. The army tortured and executed fifteen townsmen on the public square; they took others away and killed them in a nearby village. And they did this because they “knew” that those people were terrucos, terrorists, and that despite any argument to the contrary, the community had been a base of operations for Shining Path.

Juan tells me that reparations aren’t that important to them, that they’ll be fine, but that above all they want one thing. He asks me to request that the TRC help them reconcile with their brothers from the Ichu community, so that the Ichu will forgive them. The rest of his compañeros, the community leadership, agree: let the TRC help us.

My comrades and I get ready to push on to another community along our route. But just as our truck is about to leave, Juan insists. His Spanish is perfect, almost urban. He has an anxious look on his face, as if his chance were slipping away, only to be lost among piles of documents and testimonies. “Please, let the TRC help us convince our neighbors to forgive us. Help them understand that many of us were forced to do it—or that we did it without knowing much. I was just a kid back when Shining Path made us kill our neighbors. Ever since then, the Ichu hate us. And we’ve repented.”

Juan walks for a while alongside the truck. I don’t know exactly what to say to him. I understand that he needs peace, that his conscience needs calming. Knowing that other people justifiably hate him doesn’t keep him from living, yet it marks him. I say something to him, spout off some formulaic response culled from the lexicon of human rights. But I know that they’re just useless words.

14 Words make it repeatedly clear: they were terrorists, criminals, assassins, the worst thing that has happened to this country in all its history. The TRC is clear about this, too: the main group responsible for the Internal Armed Conflict was the Peruvian Communist Party—Shining Path, which declared war on the Peruvian state and caused the greatest
number of deaths, the majority of them Quechua-speaking indigenous people. It was the worst bloodbath in the republic’s history.\textsuperscript{4} I chat with a couple of former Shining Path militants who are now part of MOVADeF. They admit to certain errors, but they have justifications for their actions at the ready. They’ve had years to work out those justifications while in prison. How can we blame them? They have to go on living somehow. They can’t survive with a past that brings them only shame. Their personal stories must be saved from disgrace.

One guy pounces on me. He says we should go to the prison on Sunday because there’s someone there who was with my father when he died—right up to the end—and he has something to tell me. I tell him I’ll think about it. Then he invites me to write something for a journal he publishes. I tell him it’s not a bad idea, and I give him a few copies of the poetry book I wrote.

Former Shining Path militants don’t believe anything that discredits them. They don’t believe in the TRC or the NGOs. They tell a bunch of highly detailed anecdotes to prove that the massacres attributed to Shining Path were really perpetrated by the army. “We wouldn’t have been so dumb as to do that!” they say. They even downplay a major event such as the Tarata Street car bombing, which happened right in the heart of Lima’s Miraflores neighborhood; they call those killings a stroke of incredibly bad luck. “The explosion shouldn’t have happened in a residential building; it should have happened nearby at the bank. That was the worst thing that could have happened to us,” they say, annoyed. I mention the death of the Afro-Peruvian feminist and community organizer María Elena Moyano, her body treated with terrible scorn. They acknowledge that her death was an excess, an error, but say that she deserved it. “Everything they say is a lie. We didn’t kill like they did, like the reactionaries did!”\textsuperscript{5}

\textsuperscript{4} These were the first and main conclusions of the TRC and were detailed in its Final Report.

\textsuperscript{5} The Tarata bombing and the assassination of María Elena Moyano are the two best-known terrorist acts that Shining Path committed in Lima. These events showed the capital’s inhabitants just how brutal the group’s actions were. On Tarata Street, in the residential neighborhood of Miraflores, Shining Path placed explosives that practically turned a building into rubble, leaving twenty-five dead and 155 wounded. They killed Moyano, a notable leader within the legal Peruvian Left, in front of her children and in her own neighborhood, Villa El Salvador. They later blew up her body with dynamite.
Even though I didn’t plan to do it, I calmly tell them, as if reciting from memory, about my own experience working with the TRC. I tell them briefly, but with lots of examples, that Shining Path *did* kill and that the killing *was* terribly brutal. They can choose not to believe the TRC, but why won’t they believe me or the people who told me about what Shining Path did? The quieter of the two guys replies, “We didn’t know much about what was going on in the countryside.” Then the other one adds, “You might be right, but we’d have to verify what you’re saying.”

The two guys leave happy. They’ve also recorded my voice, astutely, and they can take that recording of us wherever they want. It’s obvious that they want to talk, to speak out, even to be questioned, but by someone who understands something of the language they speak, of the pressures they feel, of their grief.

I stay there thinking for quite a while, doubting if I should write about this encounter or share it in my blog or on the internet. I decide not to share it, like the majority of my writings. I can’t sit down, take an objective distance, so I simply describe this conversation that took place over coffee as if it were any old Lima scene.

What’s missing is my part. And I’m not sure if I’m ready to express it clearly. Shining Path’s brand of justification doesn’t do me any good: their rhetorical escape mechanisms, their ideological formulas, their discrediting of the NGOs and the TRC. I’ve worked with those groups. I’ve been a human rights activist since I was really young, and I’ve been so wholeheartedly.

I know it’s true: I know that the thousands of atrocities that Shining Path committed as the cost of carrying out its revolution are real. I know that the end was foreseeable, that the revolution blinded Shining Path and made the group prioritize the future good over the present good. I know that they were sick with hunger for justice—that an excessive hunger for justice drove them to hatred, and that a thirst for change drove them to destruction. Perhaps the MRTA leader Alberto Gálvez Olachea said it best, even though he wasn’t a Senderista himself: “We wanted change immediately.”

That’s what defined Shining Path, I think, at least partially.

6. Alberto Gálvez Olachea was an MRTA leader who was released in 2015. In his book, *Desde el país de las sombras* (2009), and even before, Gálvez has constructed a
I know that my parents were part of that world. I know that during the operation in which my father was detained for the last time, a police officer was killed. I don’t know if my father fired the shot. It’s hard for me to imagine. But I also believe that it could have been possible. My father was a decisive, courageous guy. But that police officer was a poor man, a worker who assuredly got frightened while chasing the car in which my father and his comrades were fleeing. The bullet must have hurt him, burned him, paralyzed him while he thought about his family, as his short, twenty-something-year-old life slipped away.

The police officer’s family no longer has him by their side. They’re just a widow and orphans. Like us. How can I ask their forgiveness? Should I ask their forgiveness?

15 I’m sure of it now. It wasn’t just us, her children, who implored my mother to get out of the country. Everyone knew they were going to kill her. Many of those around her had died or been detained. Police and army vigilance became sloppy and scandalous. Intelligence agents would barge into our little store at the University of San Marcos; brazenly, they would eye us up and down and then leave. They’d even come dressed in uniform. One afternoon, a tall, burly guy showed up wearing a light gray uniform. He saw us. My mother was seated there typing some student’s homework on her old typewriter, and I was standing next to her, dictating. The guy said something like, “Yeah, it’s her.” We shot him a look, and then he left.

Some of her close friends, the ones who weren’t involved in the Party, also warned her to get out of the country. A good, young man, a very dear friend who was part of Shining Path but who had the foresight to get out before they killed him, also advised her to go. “Flaca, why are you still involved in this shit? It doesn’t make sense anymore. You know that.” That young man managed to get out of the country; he’s still alive, and we still love him from afar, but we don’t contact him.

discourse in which he takes responsibility for what he did during the years of political violence and takes distance from the motivations and methods to which he subscribed in what he calls his fervor to change things and combat social injustice. His testimony and reflection are important because they aren’t simple: they’re imperfect, they contain arguments and counterarguments, and they’re painstakingly constructed. However, he hasn’t yet found interlocutors willing to make the same, equally imperfect effort to communicate.
Some friends of my mother’s friends who worked for an NGO and who knew her from her days in the legalized, radical Left, before she joined Shining Path, also told her to go. They held her in high regard and, despite their political differences, offered to help her find a way out. Some of our family members encouraged her to leave, too. But she’d respond to them with few words, asking them to make sure her children were cared for, to make sure nothing happened to them.

Some of my mother’s Party comrades accused her of preferring to raise children instead of giving herself fully to the revolution. She didn’t pay them any mind. The problems she faced, for years, because she chose to raise a family are really complicated; the moment will come to think them through more fully. Whenever I would ask her to leave—at every chance I got, every so often—she’d simply smile and say, “Don’t worry about it.” Then she’d say things like, “What’s going to become of you kids?” That would infuriate me. I’d tell her that we were all grown up and that we’d know what to do.

In the end, she never left. Instead, she wound up paralyzed on a Chorrillos beach, riddled with three bullets. It’s in that same place where I still envision her, serene, her blood mingling with the ocean, in a scene that plays back in my mind on loop.

For a long time, I’ve been fighting the guilty feeling that comes from thinking that my mother exposed herself to a lot of risk for her children. Even in the worst moments that our family experienced during the war, the times were few and far between when she’d leave to seek a safe haven. She’d always come back, find work, and put food on the table for us. The police would locate us, come to our house, wake us up, point her out, root through our meager belongings, our clothes, our books. They’d threaten to take her away, but they wouldn’t do it. I’m not sure why. Then we’d go to another house, at least for a while. My mother became the target of much criticism: “Leave the kids, and go into hiding! Abandon the shitty P, and flee the country.”

7. Shining Path’s members could be quite different from one another, constructing their militancy with their own baggage, characteristics, needs, and margin for action. To think of Shining Path militants only as bloodthirsty, vengeful beings, or as unknowable, deprives us of the chance to understand better a time that still touches the present. Research such as Asencios’s La ciudad acorralada (2017) helps our understanding.
I know that with her decision not to abandon us and to participate in the revolution part-time, she was watching over us, but at the same time her decision left us exposed. Both of these things were true. She couldn’t avoid it. She thought it necessary to change the world that left her indignant and distressed. But she couldn’t simply abandon us and let us become poorer than we already were.

I’ve thought about my mother for years. Why didn’t she leave? I think that, at least in part, it was because of her children. We didn’t ask her to stay. We didn’t want that guilt. And we told her so.

But I also think she didn’t leave because she just couldn’t do it—not just because of us, but because of inertia, in part, and also because she couldn’t imagine surrendering her life in such a monumental way. I knew her deeply. I know that she was like an open book—that she loved people, perhaps too much, if that’s possible. She felt other people’s pain to the point of suffering. By the early 1990s, she knew that Shining Path was a terrible mistake. But she couldn’t get out completely. Being part of that world was the only thing that gave sense to her life.

She wasn’t ready to surrender.

16 Shining Path killed thousands of people. Before they died, thousands of them were terribly mistreated. After they died, hundreds or perhaps thousands of their bodies were used as public spectacles, as part of a pedagogy of fear. We can still feel the war’s consequences in towns, in neighborhoods, in politics, in institutions.

Children shouldn’t inherit their parents’ guilt. It’s unjust. But they inherit it all the same, because justice is little more than a word. Justice has to be built through every human exchange. It’s not a categorical imperative.

When my well-intentioned colleagues talk about Shining Path’s monstrousness, I agree with them. But I know, at the same time, that they’re talking about my family—and about lots of friends whom I saw live fully and later die. It’s hard for me to remember those friends as monsters. But, yes, they committed atrocities, and, yes, they justified them.

When other concerned colleagues point out that something must be done to detain and keep tabs on Shining Path militants once they’ve been let out of prison, I basically agree with them because I understand their fears and anxiety—and because I know enough about the people who
are being let out to assume that they’ll organize again and will seek new political roles.

But I also know that when we study situations in detail, we uncover hidden meanings that grand narratives and fear tend to eclipse. I’m trying to say that the monsters from Shining Path may have had motivations for acting as they did—and those motivations could have changed over time. They also could have suffered in ways that were far from banal. In reality, within each monster is another thousand-headed monster, a complete fauna or bestiary. Every Senderista had his or her way of being in Sendero, and all Senderistas existed in tension with the institution that was Shining Path.

To restore substance to their lives, to put them in context, or to recover their life trajectories or their generational experience doesn’t mean justifying their crimes or promoting revisionism. I also don’t believe it’s simply about restoring their humanity. Rather, it’s about taking a hard look at who Shining Path’s militants really were. It’s about looking at them deeply and head-on to get to know who they were as real people in society. If you want to restore something to them—whether it’s their humanity or whatever else—that’s your own business.

I recently found an example of the complexity I’m talking about in a noteworthy book that circulated only among a select group of people. The author, who prefers to remain anonymous, took years to find an adequate form in which to talk about Shining Path publicly. His research is a kind of vindication. It’s work that deserves to be read more than once as a lesson in how to construct a legitimate place from which to speak. It also illustrates how long the road is to become an intellectual—and what the costs are.

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8. I asked some young anarchists at a meeting in downtown Lima if their desire to “contextualize” Shining Path wasn’t an intellectualized strategy for justifying the group’s actions. It’s difficult to use words like this because they’re like traps. Would it help to say that putting Shining Path in context is like casting the group against a background so as to bring its individual faces into relief more clearly and with greater contrast? Doesn’t context matter only for seeing oneself better, for scrutinizing an uncovered, exposed face without leniency? But, again, words trap us. No leniency? Is that what we’re after?

9. Even now, I won’t cite my friend’s work, to honor his wishes—because what a person can write in one context and share among friends can be quite uncomfortable to share beyond that inner circle.
In short, we have to get to know Shining Path’s militants in ways that go beyond stereotypes. This is because, ultimately, there were Senderistas, lots of them, who weren’t puppets, who weren’t merely pawns. They were children of their context, yes, but not just by-products of the structures of which they were a part. They decided to risk their lives in a war that no one had declared against them. Don’t people and experiences like those deserve intellectuals’ serious attention?

Such was the case of my parents and of the people I met from Shining Path. They had their reasons for being leftists, for being radicals like many others were back then. But they also had an extra motivation that was hard to see or apprehend and that fueled only a minority of people: they wanted to take up arms, to fight power with force. And why? The answer to this question always eludes me. It’s the question that haunted the historian Carlos Iván Degregori until the end of his life. Carlos Iván once said something like: “That’s what we haven’t done yet. We haven’t understood the people or why they did it. I’m not talking about general explanations. We more or less have those. I’m talking about understanding the people themselves, the Juans and Marías. They’re the ones I haven’t managed to understand yet.”10 Carlos Iván would get frustrated, like me, like so many others.

When the victims of human rights violations would tell me their stories or describe the resentments they harbored toward the army or Shining Path, when they’d tell me about the harrowing torture they’d suffered at the hands of either of these groups, I would concentrate the entirety of my being on hearing them, on giving them the only capital I possessed: my ability to listen so that they could exist. They and their stories could finally exist in the world because someone had heard them. After hearing them tell their stories so many times, for years, I never felt like they were talking about my family. I shared their suffering and indignation. I gave all of myself to helping them achieve—if not justice or reparations—at least the passing tranquility of knowing someone had accepted them. One has so little to offer them. But later, later when my work was done, I asked myself: What if they knew my parents had been in Shining Path? Would they have kept telling me their stories? Would they still be my friends?

What would I tell them then? That my parents weren’t monsters, that they had their motivations for fighting, that they had ideals, that they had urgent needs? If I told them these things, would that take away my parents’ guilt? The devil’s advocate could come back at me quite justifiably and ask, “Would these motivations have given your parents and their comrades the right to kill, to shoot, to burn, to break, to destroy?”

I don’t think so. Maybe it would have given some sense to their lives. It would have helped to open a place for them in history rather than expel them as outcasts, as if they were a nightmare or a plague. But, finally, my fictitious interlocutor—let’s call him the Peruvian rumor mill—might ask me, “Does talking about any of this benefit us in any way? Does it help us heal or bring peace to those left behind? Does it help society?” Whether this exercise is useful or not is, well, uncertain.

17 Twice I’ve asked forgiveness on my father’s behalf. They were both moments of confusion. It wasn’t as if I were harboring an urge to do so in my adolescence or youth. I did it without thinking. A bunch of minor events led me to do it—none of them dramatic. What’s more, my attempts at asking forgiveness were clumsy. On one occasion, I blindly wrote an email. The reply I got was cold, but proper. The person said I really had no reason to ask forgiveness, that what happened had nothing to do with me. “Please don’t contact us again. Thank you.” What did I expect him to say? Doing this didn’t make me feel better or worse. It just made me feel ridiculous.

18 I sent some other emails back then to people who I knew had shared experiences with my father. I tacked on some formula like, “If my father caused you any harm or damage, I ask your forgiveness in his name.” I received only two replies. One of them said, “Your father and mother did a lot of harm to my family. I’m writing to you on my father’s behalf because he doesn’t know how to use email. We kindly request that you not communicate with us anymore. May peace be with your family.” The second one said something to the effect of, “Your father was a great friend. I have very fond memories of him and your mother. But it’s out of place for you to ask forgiveness in his name. Affectionately yours.”
The first reply made me think about that son, a man obviously bothered by my message and who lived his childhood in anguish because his family had been part of my parents’ circle of influence. They bred anguish within that circle, like a contagion of danger. They did it by asking favors of people, by asking them to store things, or by asking the most committed ones to give other Senderistas lodging or food. They’d use a kind of blackmail, saying, “You’re either with us or against us.” Or, “If you don’t do what we’re asking, you’re just like all the rest of them—just blowing smoke.” I can only imagine the fear they felt when those they were harboring got captured or when they saw on the news that my parents were in jail. They’d be thinking, “Now they’re coming for us,” or, “We’re going to lose our jobs.” The son’s response made me feel as if I had no right to keep bothering him about the past. It was a mistake.

The second reply made me feel ashamed. The woman who wrote back to me is a beautiful soul, someone capable of putting herself in another’s shoes easily, without drama, someone who had also done her fair share of suffering. Her response to me was an embrace. When I received it, it made me think that I shouldn’t have been so clumsy and naive, so out of touch. It was a matter of pride. There are embraces whose warmth leaves us naked. I would have preferred not to write anything nor to receive any response.

Words, they come and go. In the end, they cease to mean anything. They’ll be forgotten. Knowing that allowed me to forgive myself. But then I said to myself, “I’ll never ask forgiveness again.”

I’m breaking that promise now. But to ask forgiveness in this way is my right—not a form of humiliation.

I once wrote, “Children shouldn’t inherit their parents’ guilt. It’s unjust.” But, of course, they do. Guilt is complex. It takes many forms. It adapts because communities feel a need to blame someone.

My parents’ actions caused a series of chain reactions that continue to this day. Because they touched many lives, they affected people’s paths forever, mostly for ill.

My parents’ actions were diverse: they killed, they prepared attacks, they exposed women and men to harm, they weakened union and local leadership, and they affected families and their dynamics. My parents’
“work with the masses,” which I saw in action on more than one occasion, was like skilled seduction: they instilled hope for change in impressionable people. They’d introduce the P, little by little, like a secret entity, but whose presence could be felt, whose effects were real. To support the combatants’ work, that of the “people’s finest sons,” was seen as an act of great solidarity, generous and selfless, the best thing one could do because things really worth doing involved risk.

Like a virus—that’s how my parents acted! That’s how lots of humble women suddenly found themselves caught up in an enormous war game that went far beyond their comprehension. What happened to the people who were seduced? Where did they wind up? Where did they hide? What fears did they have to face?

The effects of my parents’ actions didn’t end with their deaths. The leftist girl who fell in love with my father after he was in prison, the one who later became his girlfriend, affected her family. She wound up in jail, too. Her children suffered because of her choices. Señora Sara, who helped my mother in the worst of times, had to flee our neighborhood, leaving her children poorly tended. One of them, “the Twin,” became a criminal and is now dead.

I don’t think these people were puppets (so many come to mind—the woman who made sausages and potatoes, my father’s coworker, the kids from school). They didn’t allow themselves to be manipulated clumsily. But my parents did intrude in their lives decisively. They were like activators: they tapped people whose skin was already sensitive to the touch. And what they brought with them was bad: death in the worst cases (as with Miguel and Juan, both rebellious kids, happy and full of energy), incarceration or uprooting from home in other cases (as with Héctor, an enormously talented physicist).

I remember the rage that one of my university classmates, a history student like me, felt toward a very erudite professor, who was a political extremist, and toward others like him. There were so many leftist extremists like that professor who, through their words and influence, indoctrinated their students and inspired them to terrible radicalization. The students then joined Shining Path, only to die, disappear, or rot in jail. The teachers lingered in their students’ lives as provocateurs and radical thinkers.

So many other leftist leaders fit this description! Many touted the language of revolution, the imperative to change, an awareness of injustice
and indignity (an inability to live peacefully as long as injustice pervaded every aspect of daily life). They preached the option to take courage and dare to fight with force. This is how they nourished sensitive and rebellious souls. To toy with young people in this way pushed them to the brink of an extreme decision. And many made that decision.

Leftist leaders did not make the same decision. Some of them kept irresponsibly preaching armed struggle until the destruction of the United Left destroyed them, too. We should forgive them as well. They were children of their times. They’ve now been defeated. And although some of them still walk around public squares and write in newspapers, they haven’t yet realized how ghostlike they’ve become.