# Foreword

## *Of Memory's Literary Sites*

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It could have taken place almost anywhere. But for a few names and allusions, *Steps Under Water* could refer to experiences under any one of the dictatorial regimes that uniformed the Southern Cone. Beyond Latin America, readers who have experienced oppressive regimes will nod in sad recognition of this tale of resistance and survival. Yet Alicia Kozameh chose to disregard the openness of her novel with an epigraph that, as she acknowledges, "seems redundant." In saying so, she clearly admonishes us to tread cautiously on a context that traverses her own life. Based on biographical material and a composite of the author's *compañeras* in prison, this novel retrieves a cross section of Argentina from the mid 1970s to the early 1980s. Set in days and nights of lead and sorrow, of violence and institutional bankruptcy, Alicia Kozameh's fractured texts come together in a voice that evokes and, at once softly and stridently, attests to violations of human and legal rights. Written with a

clear sense of purpose, the novel renders an eloquent homage to survival and to the memory of the victims.

By the time Isabel Martínez de Perón (Isabelita) was flown out by helicopter from the Pink House to a southern destination, Alicia Kozameh had already been imprisoned for six months. She would remain a political prisoner, first in her hometown of Rosario and then in Buenos Aires, until late December 1978. A militant in one of the organizations that sought to change the nation's social order, Kozameh was among the "lucky," among the "legal" prisoners who did not join the ranks of the thousands of disappeared. For prisoners, political consciousness and organizational discipline were a source of solidarity and pride, of resilience during beatings, of resourceful skills to endure their daily fare behind limitless bars. For the political prisoners, even in the jails that held common criminals, the 1976 coup would have a different meaning.

The event of 24 March 1976 relieved—or so many of its supporters initially thought—a vast segment of Argentine society from the nightmarish chaos that characterized the disheveled reign of Isabel Perón, of José López Rega, and of the terror squads of the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance. Right-wing terror, officially sanctioned terror—it was claimed—surged to forestall the so-called terror from the left, from organizations such as the leftist Peronist Montoneros (formed in 1968), the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP, active since 1971), and other, smaller, liberation forces. Dramatic social polarization, indigence, and injustice as root causes for violence did not seem to enter the equation in launching an all-out war against those who attacked or were perceived to attack the established order. "Subversives" was the generic term applied to the guerrilla

forces by the very same accusers who subverted institutions, that is, the legal and ethical foundations designed at the inception of the republic and sanctioned by the 1853 constitution to sustain the nation.

By the time the coup took place, most of the guerrilla forces had been defeated. The authoritarian regime that ruled until 1983 sought to assure the establishment of a new economic order on the death and torture of thousands of dissidents, innocent bystanders, the changed identities of children born to the disappeared, the silence and acquiescence of a population that reaped financial benefits and said in unison of the taken, *Por algo será* (there must be a reason).

In order to understand the magnitude of these events, a brief recollection of a few names and events is necessary. The first name is that of Juan Domingo Perón, the elected populist general who ruled from 1946 until his overthrow in 1955, and who continued to influence Argentina's political life from exile and, once back in Argentina, even beyond his death. Perón's overthrow was not the first military action against a civilian government nor, as Argentines learned to expect, the last. Juntas traditionally claimed that their actions were forced upon them to defend their country's "national, Western, and Christian values" and, given their own transitional character, to guarantee the eventual restoration of a true democracy. Since 1955, and for a number of years, the military also aimed to prevent the return of Perón and his Justicialista party to power.

A retrospective look at the last thirty years clearly suggests that the 1966 coup that overthrew President Arturo Illia and brought General Juan Carlos Onganía to power was a major step in the socioeconomic as well as the political transformation

of the country. It was during Onganía's regime, and particularly as a result of the 1969 popular uprising in Córdoba (the Cordobazo), that the country became even more cognizant of increasing and all-pervasive levels of violence that would climb to dramatic new peaks in the following years.

Negotiated political alliances and a certain commonality of purpose in the restoration of civilian rule between the military and the political parties, including Perón's representatives, led to a "Gran acuerdo nacional" (Great national accord) and eventually to the election of Héctor J. Cámpora. Throughout this period, and for years to come, the internal debates within Perón's following did not spare bloodshed. Perhaps the most eloquent evidence of the polarization among those who invoked Perón and Evita, and who ranged from the extreme left to the extreme right, was manifested in the violent eruption that greeted Perón's final return to Argentina on 20 June 1973. On 12 October Perón and Isabelita assumed power as president and vice president of the republic. In the midst of growing violence and internal conflict among Peronista followers, Perón was publicly rebuffed by Montoneros and the militant Peronist youth (*Juventud peronista*).

When Perón died on 1 July 1974, the reins of power reverted to his widow and to her close confidant, the president's private secretary José López Rega, commonly known as "el Brujo" (the sorcerer). The Senate acted to forestall the institutional collapse of the nation by imposing Italo Luder as provisional president. During his brief presidency, and while attempting to restore some semblance of constitutionality, he formalized the armed forces' actions against the guerrilla movements. Politics and military action became increasingly intertwined and public

opinion was once again being readied for a coup to reestablish order.

The 1976 coup was promptly named by its perpetrators "Proceso de reorganización nacional" (Process of national reorganization). The junta's bulletins and edicts clearly indicated that this time the armed forces would go beyond the physical elimination of the opposition. The body of the nation had to be preserved by extirpating the cancerous cells that invaded its core. Once opponents are removed from the category of human and denigrated to a diseased object, their elimination is not only possible; it becomes mandatory. The rationale that designed the "Doctrine of National Security" was all-pervasive. As outlined by the juntas, the goal was to forestall leftist inroads that threatened the national character, to shape the country according to the values espoused by their own conservative principles, to establish a new economic order, and, at the same time, align the country with the leading combatants against international communism. While the junta headed by General Jorge Rafael Videla confronted the leftist guerrilla movements—and while violence from other sectors continued to rip through the streets—the Minister of Economics José Alfredo Martínez de Hoz informed the nation of Argentina's new order.

The two most visible legacies of the dictatorship are its gross violation of human rights and, in another realm, one of the world's most calamitous foreign debts. Fractures within the armed forces, the border conflicts with Chile, and the Malvinas/Falkland war with Great Britain—these failed results of many of the objectives that the junta outlined upon assuming power would finally put an end to the grimmest period of Argentine history. The formal transition to democracy began with a call to

elections although throughout the period varying acts of resistance pushed back restrictions on civil liberties and censorship. Elections were held on 30 October 1983 and resulted in the unexpected victory of the Unión Cívica Radical's leader, Raúl Alfonsín and, consequently, for a brief time, in the resounding rejection of another Peronist government.

Among Alfonsín's most laudable accomplishments were the appointment of a National Commission of the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP), which issued its report under the title *Nunca más* (Never again), and the subsequent trial of the junta's members. These momentous events signaled, albeit all too briefly, the return of an ethical imprint on the governance of the state. Subsequent laws to curb the number of the legally accountable for violating human rights and other crimes, and a presidential pardon—issued, respectively, by Presidents Alfonsín and Menem—marred those accomplishments. Political closure was in order to appease the restless among the armed forces, to forge ahead toward the first world, and to be firmly aligned with the forces of progress under the banner of a triumphant neoliberalism.

No such closure, however, could be accomplished with the victims' families without a full accounting of the disappeared and the trial of those responsible for the criminal actions outlined in *Nunca más* and in the trial of the members of the juntas. No further attempts were made to heal the nation. Those who suffered directly, witnessed by organizations such as the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, could not be appeased; political prisoners were offered monetary compensation; the rest of the population—as the leadership astutely and accurately calculated—would soon move on toward the more alluring

specter of financial success or become more preoccupied with its own survival.

In spite of a recent reissuing of the *Diario del juicio* (Diary of the trial) accompanied by documentary videos, most Argentines are distant from stories that throw them back to the times of "victorious horror." Daily life, a political rhetoric that fills the present, and the fact that words uttered on those days carry a tacit accusation about a complicitous silence, suffice to explain such disregard for the country's recent history. Both temporal distance and the rationalization that violence had similar signs when it emanated from right-wing squads and state-sponsored terrorism as when it stemmed from guerrilla organizations (the misleadingly comfortable "theory of the two demons") also made it increasingly viable for the majority of the population to accept measures designed to leave atrocities and accountability as part of a past that (as many allege) has been overcome. Outbursts of indignation and ethical islands remain and will continue to exist, but these have been surrounded by the waters of expediency and cynicism.

Therein lies the significance of Alicia Kozameh's epigraph and of the novel's literary and historical importance. There can be no shortage of drama in a survivor's account but Kozameh's language renders excruciating pain in muted tones. It shifts from the deafening clang of tin cups against the prison bars to demand aid for an ill *compañera* to the soft tenderness of human warmth and a quiet slipping away into death. A discourse on ethics, on rights, is substituted by the begging defiance that makes life itself a challenge to arbitrariness.

Neither the core of authoritarianism nor the ideological tenets that led to the left's call to arms are evident in the novel. It

engages the aftermath, daily survival after defeat as victory is sought in the very act of staying alive, of not surrendering to the jailer's imposed order. Epic actions are absent; they are part of an unmentioned legacy. The greatest possible epic within the cell is to survive. To guard the words that express resistance becomes the sole guarantee for a day after.

The preservation of language, notably under these circumstances, attests to the defeat of the authoritarian mind-set that imposed categories of exclusion and acted against citizens tagged as disposable. Literature should not be charged with the awesome burden of chastising readers into guilt and burdensome recollections. Neither should literature completely neglect the testimonial voice of the times. Bridging these daunting tasks, *Steps Under Water* succeeds in leading us into a world that too many have unjustly known and that many more pretend to ignore. We are witnesses to the rejection of oppression, violence, and life, as well as to the perverse joy of inflicting pain, of plundering, of sacking lives, property, and the future.

Perhaps a literary text should not be burdened with contributing to the preservation of memory, but a nation must hold its past, and particularly its most traumatic history, as a trust for future generations. The women who survived the penal colonies, the reasons for the struggle that led to bodies censored through torture and death and to repressive silence, as well as their triumphant resistance, are part of a legacy that *Steps Under Water* engraves in our letters and in our minds.

The first edition of *Pasos bajo el agua* (1987) reproduced the notebook cover that Alicia Kozameh was duly authorized to keep in her cell. Guarded words, however, could never account for a world that was to be kept from a knowing or suspicious

public. Words that partake of the innermost intimacy of truth had to be hidden in the sole place that wasn't searched by prison wardens. In death and in life, the *compañeras*' bodies became safekeepers for memory and, for Alicia Kozameh, the renewed birthplace of writing.

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