GOOD WINDS CHRONICLE: CREATIVITY, METAPHOR, AND LIFE

WRITING

by

Adrian McKerracher

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES (Cross-Faculty Inquiry in Education)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA (Vancouver)

February 2014

© Adrian McKerracher, 2014
Abstract

This dissertation explores a range of metaphors that can be used to understand the concept of creativity. Each metaphor presents a different way of imagining what creativity means and what it means to be creative. Based on my doctoral fieldwork of interviewing fiction writers in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I emphasize the search for metaphors as a foundational literacy tool that allows the learner to consider multiple perspectives of a single concept. Drawing on Lakoff and Johnson’s (1980) seminal work in *Metaphors we live by* and merging it with Paulo Freire’s (1970) notions of praxis and critical literacy, I use personal narratives to explore how considering diverse metaphors for creativity opens new possibilities for meaning-making and understanding. Situated in the dynamic tradition of life writing, I use these narrative accounts, or chronicles, to explore and examine the complexity of the concept of creativity. The result is a polyphonic account of fieldwork that blends content and form, combining research on metaphor and creativity with creative writing about metaphor. I conclude that metaphor offers unique possibilities for thinking creatively about creativity, and emphasize that knowledge is an experience of context whereby the greatest learning often happens at the margins of curriculum.
Preface

This research project was identified, designed, carried out, and analyzed entirely by the researcher, Adrian McKerracher, in consultation with my Dissertation Supervisor and Supervisory Committee. I also conducted all the interviews and did all of the translations (Spanish to English).

This study was approved by the UBC Behavioral Research Ethics Board. The Ethics Certificate number is H12-00972.

At the date of submission, no part of this dissertation has been published elsewhere.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... ii

Preface ........................................................................................................................................ iii

Table of Contents ......................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgements ..................................................................................................................... ix

Dedication ..................................................................................................................................... x

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................................................................ 1

  Creativity, metaphor and learning through life writing ............................................................. 1

  Literary life writing .................................................................................................................... 3

  Fragmented knowing .............................................................................................................. 4

  Why Spanish? ......................................................................................................................... 6

  Why Buenos Aires? .............................................................................................................. 8

  The interviews ..................................................................................................................... 9

  Structure ................................................................................................................................ 13

Chapter 2: Methodology ............................................................................................................... 15

  Creativity is metaphorical thinking ...................................................................................... 15

Chapter 3: Literature Review ...................................................................................................... 22

  Why metaphors for creativity? ............................................................................................... 24

  A preliminary archive of metaphors for creativity ............................................................... 26

  Creativity is madness ......................................................................................................... 26
Creativity is possession .................................................................................................................. 28
Creativity is evolution .................................................................................................................. 31
Creativity is incubation ................................................................................................................ 34
Creativity is illumination .............................................................................................................. 36
Creativity is divergence ................................................................................................................ 38
Creativity is recombination ......................................................................................................... 39
Creativity is investing ................................................................................................................... 39
Creativity is seeking versus creativity is finding ........................................................................... 41
Creativity is regression ................................................................................................................ 42
Creativity is an algorithm ............................................................................................................. 43
Creativity is a place ........................................................................................................................ 45
Creativity is an amusement park .................................................................................................. 47
Creativity is breaking a boundary ............................................................................................... 48

Emerging themes: Ideas are objects ............................................................................................... 50
Creativity is an organism .............................................................................................................. 52
Creativity is flow ............................................................................................................................ 54
Creativity is democratic attunement ............................................................................................ 55

Literature review conclusion ...................................................................................................... 57

Chapter 4: Good Winds Chronicle ............................................................................................... 59

Searching for metaphors for creativity in Buenos Aires ............................................................... 59
Creativity is a purge ....................................................................................................................... 59
Creativity is a guide ....................................................................................................................... 61
Creativity is fate ............................................................................................................................ 64
Creativity is an invitation ............................................................................................................. 64
Creativity is a declaration ............................................................................................................. 65
Creativity is a monologue......................................................................................................................68
Creativity is doubt .................................................................................................................................70
Creativity is a residency .........................................................................................................................75
Creativity is mentorship .........................................................................................................................78
Creativity is pretense ..............................................................................................................................84
Creativity is a workshop.........................................................................................................................87
Creativity is finding parallels ..................................................................................................................91
Creativity is a scavenger hunt.................................................................................................................93
Creativity is a bubble...............................................................................................................................104
Creativity is meditation ..........................................................................................................................109
Creativity is patience ..............................................................................................................................113
Creativity is contrast ...............................................................................................................................116
Creativity is saying yes ...........................................................................................................................117
Creativity is exile.....................................................................................................................................123
Creativity is a choice ...............................................................................................................................126
Creativity is communication..................................................................................................................130
Creativity is a challenge ..........................................................................................................................134
Creativity is a turn ...................................................................................................................................136
Creativity is loneliness ............................................................................................................................140
Creativity is a fragment ............................................................................................................................142
Creativity is a show .................................................................................................................................144
Creativity is memory ...............................................................................................................................146
Creativity is common ground ..................................................................................................................147
Creativity is a party .................................................................................................................................150
Creativity is a confession ..........................................................................................................................153
Creativity is a conduit...............................................................................................................................156
Creativity is a combination of moments

Creativity is a rhizome

Creativity is flight

Creativity is a sanctuary

Creativity is a fractal

Creativity is a rumour

Creativity is theft

Creativity is fear

Creativity is translation

Creativity is a change of scene

Creativity is recognition

Creativity is an image

Creativity is transformation

Creativity is a song

Creativity is dance

Creativity is an exercise

Creativity is trust

Creativity is a tradition

Creativity is vulnerability

Creativity is an exhale

Creativity is protest

Creativity is a rhythm

Creativity is gratitude

Creativity is a departure

Creativity is letting go
Acknowledgements

This project was made possible by the support of my family and friends.

Thank you to my dissertation supervisor, Dr. Carl Leggo, for encouraging creative and personal work in the academy, and to my dissertation committee, Dr. Norman Amundson and Dr. Anthony Clarke, for their thoughtful comments.

I am indebted to the writers I met in Buenos Aires, Argentina, who generously shared their time with me. They are Guillermo Martínez, Mariana Docampo, Juan Diego Incardona, Vanesa Guerra, Oliverio Coelho, Mercedes Araujo, Pablo Katchadjian, Matías Capelli, Leonardo Oyola, Ignacio Copani, and Javier van de Couter. I am especially thankful to Gloria Fonseca Carrion, Mercedes Pagalday, and Carolina Orloff for their support and friendship, and to Eugenio Francisco Gastiazoro, who gave me a home away from home.

I am grateful to have received financial support for my doctoral studies from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Liu Institute for Global Studies, and the University of British Columbia.
For my brother, who travels with me everywhere
Chapter 1: Introduction
Creativity, metaphor and learning through life writing

What is creativity? Creativity is such a complex, diverse, and polysemic concept that it is hard to know how to make sense of it. What does it mean? How can someone ‘be creative’?

This project explores a range of metaphors that can be used to understand the concept of creativity. Each metaphor presents a different way of imagining what creativity means and what it means to be creative.

These metaphors were generated in a very particular way and in a very particular place, but the process is repeatable with other concepts and in other millieux. The outcome, however, will always vary depending on the particular lived experience of the researcher. In order to explore different meanings of creativity, I went to Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I interviewed fiction writers about their creativity process. I asked them about their experience of writing, how they worked through ideas, and what difficulties they encountered. I was interested in the narratives of their experience — I wanted to hear their stories of writing stories. Only at the end of each conversation did I explain that I was interested in metaphors. I didn’t want our talk to become too focused on generating the metaphors themselves because I was most interested in the ones that arose naturally through the course of their narratives.

At the same time that I was doing the interviews I was finding my way around Buenos Aires, a city that I had wanted to visit for years. I followed recommendations that people had made before I left Vancouver and I met with friends and acquaintances that lived there. I repeated a refrain that would guide me to what I hoped to find — any time someone asked what I was doing, I told them I was there to meet writers. By the grace and generosity of a network of
friends I was able to discover not only the conversations I had hoped for, but also the city I had dreamed of.

Each interview meant that I had a place to go and someone to meet — a reason to be there — but I learned as much or more from the experiences I had along the way. It was as though the interviews were stations through which I passed, with the space between them giving me a glimpse of the landscape around me. My own life and the life of the city opened up in those intervals as opportunities to reflect, explore, consider, and create. To keep track of my experiences and impressions, I kept a daily journal: first in the form of little notes that I scribbled during the day on notebooks that I kept in my pocket, and then in a longer work that I typed each night, expanding on the notes I had taken. The result was a 25,000-word, 90-page chronological account of my impressions of doing fieldwork about creativity and metaphor in Buenos Aires.

When I returned to Canada and considered my research, I was surprised by how important the journal was to me. I thought I had gone to Buenos Aires to interview writers; in the meantime, my own life had continued to unfold — inspired, challenged, and invited by all the things that had happened between, around, before, after, and among those interviews. This reminded me of Mary Catherine Bateson’s (1994) work in Peripheral vision: Learning along the way, in which she writes about being attuned to the movement and changes around an object of focus. She uses a metaphor to describe this ability to observe peripherally: “the best way to catch the movement of falling stars is at the edge of vision” (Bateson, 1994, p. 104). So too with a research questions that moves the researcher into the territory of the unknown, learning from the rich ephemera of personal experience that happens along the way. This emphasis on the periphery acknowledges not only the informal nature of much learning (Bateson, 1994), but also it recognizes that any research question is supported by an entire life of complex feeling and
activity. Writing about these peripheral experiences becomes a vehicle for sharing not only the research but also the personal context of that research — a glimpse of the ideas as they are situated in a life. The result is an encounter with a person, not just a theory, which at its best can lead to a more empathetic meeting with difference (Nava, 2007). As Bateson (1994) writes, “because we live in a world of change and diversity, we are privileged to enter, if only peripherally, into a diversity of visions, and beyond that to include them in the range of responsible caring” (p. 12).

As I reflected on my fieldwork, I considered how to celebrate the ways in which daily, emotional life had superceded, or at least paired with, the interviews I had done in Buenos Aires. Undoubtedly, the journal was incomplete. Many impressions were missing, as no written account can totally recreate a lived experience. I set to work expanding the details of different days and nights, adding to them from memory just as I had done with the notes I had first taken, this time with an eye for literary narrative. In this way my experience of Buenos Aires unfolded many times, first into the scrawled notes in my pocket, then into the journal, then into the literary vignettes that give life to this dissertation.

**Literary life writing**

I call this kind of research literary life writing. There is a long tradition of life writing as a pedagogical and reflective practice that explores and examines the personal meaningfulness of lived experience through the act of writing (see Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012; Hasebe-Ludt, 2010; Hasebe-Ludt, Sinner, Leggo et al., 2010; Sinner, Leggo, Irwin et al. 2006; Chambers, 2004; Eaken, 2004; Jolly, 2001; Richardson, 2001). Here I’m interested in developing an appreciation for life writing’s literary qualities, that is, I seek to attend to certain possibilities for aesthetic beauty in writing about one’s life. Literature, for example, reminds me that there are
many ways to tell a story. A single moment can be recounted in dozens of ways, from different perspectives and with varying moods. The literary form of the travel chronicle is well suited to my goal of recounting and reflecting on insights and experiences in a foreign terrain. While a traditional chronicle usually adheres to the ‘chronos’, the chronology of events, these narrative vignettes reflect the fractured chronology of memory. In this way I prefer the Spanish term for travel chronicle, *crónicas de viaje*, which seems to accommodate more rumination, uncertainty, and wonder.

**Fragmented knowing**

My accounts of research into creativity and metaphor are episodic. This is a reflection of the jotted notes that were the first written incarnation of my fieldwork, and more importantly it is an acknowledgement of the fragmented nature of memory. The scenes overlap, fall away, imagine, interpret, retrace, and forget. In terms of form, only the fragment makes room for all the things I don’t know. The result is inspired by the fragmentary works of German cultural theorist, literary critic and memoirist, Walter Benjamin (1892-1940), and his *One-way Street* (2009), his *Archive* (2007a), his *Berlin Childhood around 1900* (2006), and *The Arcades Project* (1999). I have secretly always wished that Benjamin had combined the structure of *One-way Street*, which offers a compilation of aphorisms and insights into daily expressions of modernism, with “A Berlin Chronicle” (2007b), which conjures tender and subtle moods through memoirs of youth. In my project I sought to carry one across to the other, bringing the memoir to the fragments to make something new.

Each vignette is titled with a metaphor, beginning with “Creativity is…”. The pairing of metaphor and narrative is not arbitrary. As Amundson (2010) writes,
We conceptualize (frame) and re-conceptualize (reframe) our lives on a regular basis; this process involves language and dialogue with those around us. Not surprisingly, metaphors play an important role in the process of meaning and knowledge construction in life and career (p. 2).

What the reader encounters in these pages is an effort to frame and reframe the concept of creativity in as many diverse — and in as many creative — ways as possible. Each narrative and metaphor pairing represents another possibility for understanding creativity and being creative. As Amundson (2010) later writes, “story and metaphor are woven together into an integrated whole. To work effectively with stories one has to have a good understanding of metaphor” (p. 9). I would add that the inverse is also true: to work effectively with metaphor one has to have a good understanding of story, because story gives context to metaphor without robbing it of the figurative qualities that are its greatest strength. In this way, metaphor and stories mutually assist one another. For example, there is a kind of metaphoric tension between each title and scene — each one is carried across to the other to make something new, to affect the way they are interpreted. The titles on their own would not be capable of expressing so much life; and the stories, on their own, would lack the unity that metaphor gives them.

The fragments themselves create another kind of tension. Their meaningfulness often arises as much from their context as from their content, how they are situated among other fragments. For example, the narrative vignettes are interspersed with excerpts from the interviews I conducted. These scenes of dialogue inform and nuance the narrator’s understandings of prose writing and calibrate the efforts of the dissertation itself. The juxtaposition of fragments suggests that the site of meaning is often between the objects of focus — in the periphery — so that the space between the title and the story and between the stories
themselves is where the wisdom of memory and forgetting are acknowledged. This offers opportunities for insight, which, in Bateson’s (1994) words “refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another” (p. 14). What’s more, the productive tension between the vignettes presents another way of considering metaphor by carrying one meaning across to another. In the interval, in the carrying, one is engaged in the creative act of metaphor making (see Zwicky, 2010; 2003).

This polysemic text suggests a way of knowing that is diversified, generative, and situated in experience. It argues that knowledge is an experience of context. When Benjamin (2007b) writes of reminiscence as “a space”, as “moments and discontinuities” (p. 28), it seems to me that he is acknowledging the only way to write about the past, namely, by embracing the incompleteness of memory and of language. To compose an account of fieldwork in such a way that it presumes to be complete implies that there is little left to add or imagine. However, allowing a fragmentary recollection — which to me is more faithful to how recollection behaves, in fragments — manifests the form of memory more honestly, acknowledging the space between the remembered scenes and suggesting how knowledge and understanding take place at the margins of focus.

Why Spanish?

I conducted my research in Spanish, my second language, in order to be more attuned to the ways that language affects experience. In Peripheral visions (1994), Bateson describes witnessing the slaughter of a goat during a religious celebration in Tehran, and as she watches, she describes to her young daughter the different parts of the goat’s anatomy until she realizes that she’s never actually seen this before, either. She realizes that she is extrapolating from what
she knows of other animals and of human anatomy but this precise experience is new to her. She writes,

> Just as I could say, ‘That’s a heart, that’s a lung,’” we go through life, saying, ‘I must be in love,’ ‘Oh, this is seasickness,’ ‘This is an orgasm,’ ‘This is a midlife crisis’.
> We are ready with culturally constructed labels long before we encounter the realities. (Bateson, 1994, p. 4)

Part of the utility of working in another language is that it helped me become more aware of these categories of expectation. In a language that one is still learning, those labels are moved around and redefined, resignified and adjusted with each new experience, experience that is otherwise “structured in advance by stereotypes and idealizations, blurred by caricatures and diagrams” (Bateson, 1994, p. 5). I find a liberating naiveté in living in another language. The history of the words weighs less and feels younger. What’s more, I feel hyper-alert to not only the content of language but to the experience of language itself. I can feel my mind encountering a word or a sentence, and I can witness the transformation of a thought into speech and back again. My relationship with language becomes the most prominent mental experience during that time.

Working in a second language also alerts me to contrast and difference, an important element of observation and reflection. Bateson (1994) writes, “seen from a contrasting point of view or seen suddenly through the eyes of an outsider, one’s own familiar patterns can become accessible to choice and criticism” (p. 31). Being able to see contrasts, similitudes, and parallels is integral to making metaphor as well, which relies on finding shared identity between two separate entities. No doubt I would have learned a lot from doing this same project in English, but I might not have noticed the aspects of language and experience that I take for granted.
This begs questions about translation, especially of the interviews, which took place entirely in Spanish. Some of those translations into English might seem rough or awkward. This is to retain something of the experience of those original conversations in Spanish, which, because of different semantic conventions, can evoke unique meanings for non-native Spanish speakers. I have reserved quotation marks for words that were said directly as they were written — direct quotes — while italics are used for words that have remained in Spanish. Translations into English are written in the same register as the narrative prose to suggest that they are expressed through the voice of the narrator and therefore are not exact replicas of the original speech.

Translation is not only a practical consideration, but also a philosophical one. When the meaning of a word is carried from one language to another, it is transformed. In this transformation, new insight is possible, based partly on the tension between the two separate identities. Translation entails a philosophical method that expands the meaning of a concept because it is no longer limited by a single way of being considered (see Ruitenberg, 2009). Just as metaphor makes something new by conveying meaning across identities, so does translation create by bringing meaning from one language to another.

**Why Buenos Aires?**

There were professional, personal, and pedagogical reasons for choosing Buenos Aires as the site of my research. Argentina generally and Buenos Aires particularly has a rich literary heritage. Wikipedia, for example, that bastion of aggregated conclusions, describes Argentine literature as “one of the most prolific, relevant and influential in Latin America” (“Argentine literature”, n.d.). From 1940 to 1960, Buenos Aires was the centre of Spanish-language publishing worldwide (Williams, 2010). It has been speculated that in Buenos Aires there are
more books sold per capita than any other city in the world (Nawotka, 2011) and in 2011 Buenos Aires was designated World Book Capital by UNESCO [n.d.]. In 2001, the Argentine government instated la Ley del Fomento del Libro y la Lectura (The Act to Promote Books and Reading: CADRA, n.d.) which provides subsidies to support publishing and reading, and recently, the municipality of Buenos Aires passed a law that allows writers over 60 years old to apply for a pension (Romero, 2012). Coupled with bookstores that are open until after two and sometimes three o’clock in the morning and dozens of literary salons and workshops on any given night in the city it’s hard to imagine a more literary milieu than Buenos Aires.

Moving towards more personal reasons, Buenos Aires was the home of the two writers that first alerted me to literature’s potential and inspired me to write and to imagine, Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar. I wanted to experience the city that they had animated for me with their work. What’s more, because of the city’s largely European heritage, I could visually blend in, making it easier to meet local writers. And finally, I had a network of colleagues and acquaintances in Buenos Aires that connected me to a literary community.

The most personal reasons for choosing Buenos Aires, however, will come out in the telling. To put it simply, I wanted to know if I could belong there. With the city’s reputation for nostalgia, melancholy, solidarity, and creativity, I believed that I could find a place for myself, a routine, and a community that I had been looking for all over the world. Buenos Aires seemed like a place that I could learn from, a place that could teach me things about who I was and how I wanted to be in the world. In the end, it was.

**The interviews**

I conducted eleven interviews with new and established writers, each of whom signed consent forms allowing me to use their words and their real names in this dissertation. I
interviewed writers because I want to be one myself. Four of the eleven interviews emerged as most potent, most rich in metaphor and most articulate in their delivery. I have focused on those transcripts and interspersed the narrative vignettes with excerpts and analyses from our conversations as part of the polyphonic text.

The first interview was actually with the singer-songwriter Ignacio Copani (b. 1959), who is the author of more than 1200 songs and has played to audiences of thousands in Argentina and throughout South America. Mr. Copani’s daughter went to school with a friend of my brother’s; this friend contacted Mr. Copani on my behalf before I had much chance to explain my project. Mr. Copani invited me to his home where we talked in his studio office about the process of writing lyrics and their relation to music.

The second interview was with the writer-director-actor Javier van de Couter (b. 1975), who has acted in over a dozen films, including the award-winning Un año sin amor [A year without love] (2005) and who has written for four TV series as well as written and directed two feature length films, including the award-winning Mia [Mine] (2011). I was connected to Mr. van de Couter by the Director of the Vancouver International Film Festival, whom I had contacted before leaving for Argentina. Mr. van de Couter and I met in a bookstore café and talked about his decision to move to Buenos Aires from the provinces, the role of collaboration in his writing process, and the satisfaction he gets from working with stories.

The third interview was with Pablo Katchadjian (b. 1977) an experimental writer known for his “[cultivation of a poetry of the absurd]” (Camara, 2012). For example, one of his works, El Aleph Engordado [The Fattened Aleph] (2009), takes the title story of a work by Jorge Luis Borges and adds words between the sentences to ‘fatten’ it from the original 4000 words to 9600 words.

---

1 “El cultivo de de una poética del absurdo” (Camara, 2012), my translation.
words. Although only 200 copies were printed of the first edition, the work prompted María Kodama, the widow of Jorge Luis Borges and the executor of his writing, to publically accuse Katchadjian of plagiarism (Camara, 2012). His other work is similarly experimental: in Martín Fierro ordenado alfabéticamente [Martín Fierro ordered alphabetically] (Katchadjian, 2007) rearranges the famous epic poem by José Hernández called El Martín Fierro by placing the first 2316 verses in alphabetical order. I met Mr. Katchadjian at a café in Almagro where we talked about writing as a trance and the meaningfulness of absurdity.

The fourth interview was with the celebrated novelist, short story writer, and essayist Guillermo Martínez (b.1962), author of Acerca de Roderer [Regarding Roderer] (1993) and Crímenes imperceptibles [Imperceptible Crimes, published in English as The Oxford Crimes] (2006), among many other works. I was connected to him through an acquaintance that had been working on a book about him. Excerpts from my conversation with Mr. Martínez are featured in this dissertation.

The fifth interview was with the translator, novelist, and short story writer, Mariana Docampo (b. 1973). Since 2011 she has been the director of “Las Antiguas”, a publication dedicated to reintroducing women writers from the past to a contemporary public. She is also the co-founder and organizer of the International Festival of Queer Tango in Buenos Aires. I was connected to her through a colleague who had translated some of her short fiction. Our conversation is also interwoven through out this text.

The sixth interview was with crime fiction writer and contributor to the Argentine edition of Rolling Stone Magazine, Leonardo Oyola (p. 1973). I was connected to him by one of the instructors of a weekly seminar I attended in Buenos Aires on contemporary Argentine literature.
Mr. Oyola and I met at a bar in Boedo where we talked about solitude, aging, and tattoos, all in relation to writing.

The seventh interview was with novelist and short story writer Juan Diego Incardona (b. 1971), author of *Objetos maravillosos* [Marvelous objects] (2007), *Villa Celina* [Celina Village] (2008), *El campito* [The little camp] (2009), and *Rock Barrial* [Neighbourhood rock] (2010) and the coordinator of the literary activities of the Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos [Our Children Cultural Space] (ECUNHI) with the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo Foundation. An acquaintance in Buenos Aires who had done research on contemporary Argentine literature connected me to Mr. Incardona. Excerpts from our conversation appear throughout this dissertation.

The eighth interview was with essayist, short story writer, and psychoanalyst Vanesa Guerra (b. 1965). I was connected to her by Mariana Docampo, one of my earlier interviewees, when I asked for other people who might be interested in conversations about creative process in writing. I met Ms. Guerra at a café in Palermo where we talked about the origins of language and the mental activities involved in creativity. That conversation is also featured in this text.

The ninth interview was with short story writer and essayist, Matías Capelli (b. 1982), who is an editor of the cultural magazine *Los Inrockuptibles* and has published two books, *Frio en Alaska* [Cold in a Alaska] (2008) and *Trampa de luz* [Light trap] (2011). Mr. Capelli is the host and director of Taller Lezica, a weekly writing workshop that I attended in Buenos Aires, which I learned about from the friend of the sister of an acquaintance. I spoke with Mr. Capelli in his home before one of our group discussions.

The tenth interview was with novelist, short story writer, and essayist Oliverio Coelho (b. 1977), who has been named by Granta Magazine as “One of the best of young Spanish-language novelists” (Granta, n.d.). Author of seven novels and a collection of short stories, Mr. Coelho is
also a regular contributor to *Clarín, La Nación*, and *El País*, the three major newspapers of Argentina, and is a friend of the instructors of a weekly literary seminar I attended. We met at a café in Boedo where we talked about the function of writer residencies and the way one experiments with an idea through fiction. I was touched when he gave me a collection of essays by Buenos Aires writers that he had recently appeared in, and found that I had had the good fortune of interviewing three other contributors already.

The final interview was with the poet, novelist, and lawyer Mercedes Araujo (b. 1972). Her first novel, *La hija de la cabra* [The daughter of the goat] won First Prize from the Fondo Nacional de las Artes en Argentina [The National Arts Fund in Argentina] in 2011 (Larrieu, 2013). Ms. Araujo was also a friend of Mariana Docampo, who suggested I contact her. Ms. Araujo invited me to her home in San Telmo where we talked about the connections between law, literature, and poetry.

**Structure**

There are five main parts to this dissertation. The first part is this introduction, which outlines some of the parameters of the project. The second part, “Creativity is metaphorical thinking”, discusses metaphor and its relation to creative or generative thinking. The third part, the Literature Review, offers a preliminary archive of metaphors of creativity, exploring the figurative expressions that have historically been used to describe and explain creativity, collected from a range of academic and applied fields from cognitive psychology to fine art. The fourth part, “Good Winds Chronicle”, is made up of literary life writing in the form of narrative vignettes, exploring the experience of interviewing writers in Buenos Aires, Argentina, about creativity and what it means to be creative. Through vulnerability, intimacy, and sincerity, I have tried to engage with the very question I asked of the writers I interviewed, namely, to tell the
stories of my experiences with creativity and let the metaphors rise through them. A final chapter reflects on this project and invites further thought.
Chapter 2: Methodology

Creativity is metaphorical thinking

Metaphor, semantics tells me, is a noun. Configuring it as a noun emphasizes its remoteness from other nouns and divides language neatly into units — metaphors can be found, counted, and categorized. This emphasis on quantification in language is especially strong in Western languages like English. Many indigenous languages, for example, do not focus so heavily on the things of life or divide them up so decisively — instead, the relations between things is the emphasis (Cole, 2006; Hart, 2010), but the mere fact that I have expressed that thought in English has forced me into a certain epistemological orientation that focuses on the things again.

In this project I am interested in thinking about metaphor as if metaphor were a verb. Like most ideas, this is not a new one — Ricoeur (1977) remarks that Aristotle’s Poetics describes the capacity for “metaphorizing” (p. 23). Making metaphor is an active process, one requiring the conscious activity of the mind. When I learn to “metaphorize” or “think metaphorically”, I learn to use metaphor towards realizing my experience in language. This is a foundational skill in learning to understand the ways in which metaphor shapes my conceptual frameworks (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980).

Learning to think metaphorically entails learning to see resemblances (Ricoeur, 1977). But resemblances between what? If I look only at language, then the resemblances occur “between two signs”, as Derrida writes (1974, p. 13). But metaphorical thinking is also a way of considering the dynamic tension between language and experience. The irony and the limiting factor of what I’m saying is my means of expression itself — I’m saying it, and so I’m still propping up Derrida’s idea that language makes everything into a sign. The distinction I am
making is one between language and [experience], with square brackets around experience to suggest that it is a stand-in for a phenomenon beyond what is written there. All words are signs in relation to a world of experience — not necessarily stable and constant signs, because the meaning of words changes and varies with their use, but a system of relations holds them in a temporary but useful formation.

So I have language and I have experience, or sense. How do they interact? Language and experience are not the same, but they affect each other. When I have an [experience] — again, with square brackets around it to emphasize that the word is a place holder — and I wish to convey that experience into language, I bring it into something other than the experience itself. In other words, I carry it over. The act of bringing experience into language is one of conveyance, and it reflects the etymological origins of the word ‘metaphor’, from the Greek *metapherein*, ‘to transfer’, or to bring beyond (Radman, 1997). It is also an act of translation, from the Greek *translatus*, meaning ‘carried across’.

Derrida (1974) writes, rather hypnotically,

Thought happens upon metaphor, or metaphor is the lot of thought at the moment at which a sense attempts to emerge of itself to say itself, to express itself, to bring itself into the light of language. (p. 32)

While sense emerges through language and into language, it emerges by language, too, becoming the expressive aspect of itself through its self-reflexive engagement with the words that bring it into being. I have an experience and it is outside of language. In order to express that experience, it must emerge in language. Derrida’s passage suggests the very sensation of that emergence; his sense emerges right before my eyes. The sentence itself transforms from abstraction into the concrete expression of language. The sentence is a mirror of this process,
beginning with the word “thought” and ending with the word “language.” It mimics the way that experience emerges into words.

Conveying experience into language is not such a linear process, however. When I speak about my experience, I am reflecting upon it. I am considering the experience itself and my experience of language as I have come to know it. I imagine, for example, that an experience is surrounded by a thick cloud of words, like flies, that buzz and hum around anything that has happened to me. Around some experiences there is only one word; around others there are hundreds. There are other things I can’t imagine saying. The amount of words is never fixed. Because each person has a uniquely calibrated experience of language — no two people have experienced a word in exactly the same way — nobody sees the same pattern of words buzzing around an experience, although, because of the shared nature of language there are many words in common. The same word may refer to starkly different experiences for each person who uses it but the conventions of language can mask these divergencies. When I express my experience, I am making a choice — I am choosing from words as I know them a match of ‘best fit’ for the experience I would like to convey. There are many more options available to me than the ones I take up. There is a certain comfort and ease in knowing that phrases like “this sucks” or “she’s great” are available to me, and that they convey simple but useful meanings. But there are other words that might reflect my unique calibration of language more precisely, and the one who chooses those words brings a special nuance of his or her experience into language for others to share in.

Learning to think metaphorically entails learning to see resemblances between experience and language (Ricoeur, 1997). For Aristotle, (1997) the ability to work with metaphor was “the mark of genius” (p. 47). Metaphor-making needn’t be reserved for an elite, however. It is akin to
a mindfulness that awakens one’s awareness to the varied ways that experience and language are configured. Just as I search outwardly among words to make a metaphor (in speaking metaphorically), I also search inwardly to find resemblance between language and my experience (in thinking metaphorically). Thinking, then, becomes a metaphorical act.

If this sounds like a lot of work, that’s because it is. But since language is something that I take up nearly every day of my life, and since it constitutes one of the influences that exerts itself over how I think, which in turn informs how I act, I can’t help but feel that it is a worthwhile challenge.

Not all speech must be a revolutionary poetic act, even though all speech has revolutionary poetic potential. For example, so-called ‘dead metaphors’ are a useful way of conveying meaning. The phrase dead metaphor is, ironically, a metaphor itself. It refers to a metaphor that has “lost the vigor of youth, but remains a metaphor” (Manuel Goldman, in Radman, 1997, p. 38), metaphors that have become so commonplace that they are treated as if they were literal. A phrase like “I see what you mean,” for example, relies on the metaphors UNDERSTANDING IS SEEING and IDEAS ARE OBJECTS although it doesn’t necessarily entail ocular visibility. Nietzsche believed that philosophy was founded on dead metaphors (Kofman, 1993); Derrida (1974) seemed to agree. One’s familiarity with dead metaphors doesn’t preclude, however, the potentiality of contributing innovative metaphors to describe experience.

Consider “the legs of a table” or an expression like “bottle-neck”. It is difficult to describe them without the metaphors that we rely on. Looking to other languages can breathe new life into what can seem at first like a dead metaphor: in French a skylight is un puit de lumière — “a well of light”. In Spanish to give birth is dar a luz — “to give to light.” Both of these are conventional formulations in their own language but from an English perspective they
are richly metaphorical and novel. They may be so-called dead metaphors from one perspective but for an outsider they offer new ways of understanding experience. There is something refreshing about a table that has legs, as if it were an animal, or a road that narrows the traffic as if it were in a bottle (or a bottle that has a neck as if it were a person). These metaphors are used as symbols, as labels, to be attached to a thing or an event as a way of saying something about them that is, ideally, meaningful (Radman, 1997). Even though they are conventional, they still animate speech in productive ways. It is my feeling that there is no such thing as a dead metaphor, only metaphors that we fail to notice or fail to appreciate. Perhaps it is more apt to say that it is not the metaphor that has died, but our sensitivity to it has. Considering alternative metaphors for the concept of a ‘dead metaphor’ opens up new ways of thinking about this complex and common linguistic phenomenon.

In any project about metaphor, it is important to consider the ways in which metaphor is used as a metaphor in itself (Kofman, 1993; Pinker, 2007; Radman, 1997; Ricoeur, 1977). When Norman Goodman (in Radman, 1997) writes that metaphor “is a matter of teaching an old word new tricks” (p. 148), he is being clever in two ways: first he is supplying a definition of metaphor, and second he is doing it with metaphor itself, in this case the metaphor METAPHOR IS AN ANIMAL. Similarly, when Derrida (1974) writes that metaphor “dwells in a borrowed home” (p. 18) he is suggesting that METAPHOR IS A PERSON. In other words, metaphor is being used to describe and define metaphor. The foundational tools for articulating metaphor are metaphorical (Derrida, 1974), such that explaining metaphor requires a whole cluster of other metaphors around it, metaphors like vehicle, tenor, frame, focus, modifier, source and so on (Radman, 1997). Even ‘concept’ is a metaphor (Derrida, 1974). In this way metaphor is constantly subsuming and replacing itself, never really resolving into literal language and
existing forever in the ephemeral world of the figurative. No matter how rigorous the analysis of metaphor, there always remains outside it the metaphor for metaphor. Lakoff and Johnson (1980) insist that this proves that all thinking is metaphorical, and that seeing beyond metaphor is impossible. After all, there is no way to make metaphor literal — “there is no non-metaphorical standpoint from which one could look upon metaphor” (Ricoeur, 1977, p. 18).

Even if I cannot see beyond metaphor — relying here on THINKING IS SEEING — I can come to an awareness of the metaphors that surround me by thinking metaphorically. I can become conscious of the way metaphor functions as a conceptual framework, and, by a cocktail of agency and responsibility, I can come to know my own role in affecting those conceptual frameworks. Just as meditation and mindfulness are practices that allow me to become aware of thinking, relying on consciousness to acknowledge how consciousness behaves, so can I become aware of metaphor and how metaphor behaves. In doing so, I learn to let go of my fixed attachments to a set way of seeing the world and come to accept that things could be otherwise.

Reflecting on experience and language must be engaged outside of what is written here for what is written here to have any meaning. Language, because it is always conceptual, metaphorical, a world of signs, is never equal to experience in itself. Speaking moves me because it reminds me of experience. Sometimes it seems much clearer to pass over the world in silence. My solace, however, comes from believing that language constitutes a kind of experience, too, an experience of the world of a different but related order, so that experience and language are mutually enriching. This belief makes me want to live well, attuned to what I say and do.

By thinking metaphorically, by reflecting on my unique experience of language and of experience itself, I can come to see that metaphor mediates my engagement with the world.
Through that awareness I can use metaphor in more constructive, exciting ways than I had thought possible before. I can affect the dynamic tension between two worlds, the world of language and the world of experience, which spin and spin beside each other. With earnest, reflective work I can bring them together in a way that has never happened before.

This project is a demonstration of what I mean by metaphorical thinking, focused on metaphors for creativity.
Chapter 3: Literature Review

The Argentine writer Julio Cortázar (1963) has a short story called “Letter to a young lady in Paris”, which describes a man with the mysterious habit of vomiting up rabbits. Although it is an awkward occurrence for the narrator, he is unapologetic and spends the story devising ways to keep the rabbits hidden in his study while taking care of a friend’s apartment. In his pragmatism he explains that it is “no reason for one to blush and isolate one’s self and to walk around keeping one’s mouth shut” (p. 37), but that there are simple practical considerations to take into account, like how to keep the rabbits from nibbling at his books.

Cortázar’s story evokes a very specific and perhaps unique metaphor for the creative process, one that in this case comes unbidden, usually when the narrator is alone, and requires some effort to conceal. That metaphor could be summed up by the phrase CREATIVITY IS VOMITING RABBITS. To expand the scope of the metaphor a little further, one could say CREATIVITY IS INVOLUNTARY DIVULGENCE. This is just one way of conceptualizing creativity through the use of metaphor.

There are, as this dissertation illustrates, multiple theories of creativity. Some believe that creativity cannot be analyzed because it is simply too mysterious (Weisberg, 2006, p. 4). What many researchers do agree on, however, is that creativity is everywhere, in all disciplines and professions (Gaut, 2010, p. 1034). From a psychological perspective, research in creativity began in earnest in 1950, with Guilford’s presidential address to the Association of American Psychologists (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009, p. 2). Since then, creativity studies have spread to take up careers, conferences, books, and entire journals dedicated to understanding the widespread impact of creativity on the world around us. Inevitably with a subject as capricious as
creativity, no single definition has emerged. While acknowledging the overlap that affects many domains of creativity, Singer (2011) writes,

the portmanteau language that we all use in this area does the work of communication in too many scattered ways for us to think that any single, rigorous, totalistic statement of necessary and sufficient conditions can account for every instance [of creativity] alike. (p. 23)

These “scattered ways” of thinking about creativity no doubt affect the experience of creativity itself (Bellingham, 2008, p. 118). As the discussion below suggests, each metaphor illuminates a different aspect of creativity’s composition, experience, or context, and each one suggests important implications for how creativity can be understood.

Creativity researchers often distinguish between different kinds of creativity. C-creativity is usually reserved for the activities of so-called creative geniuses, like Leonardo DaVinci or Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, while c-creativity refers to quotidian creativity, like the baker who comes up with a new cookie recipe based on ingredients he or she happens to have in the cupboard (Kozbet, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). Much early research focused on the glamour of C-creativity but it risked representing creativity as inaccessible to the masses (Bellingham, 2008). More recent studies have explored c-creativity and its manifestation in the everyday, especially in areas like problem solving (Gaut, 2010). Interestingly, there may be a cultural explanation that helps understand the differing emphasis — cultures that are more individualistic than

---

2 Conveniently, the Polish language has two different words for these branches of interest in creativity: tworczosc (“eminent creativity marked by distinguished achievements”) and kreatywnosc (“everyday creativity, conceived as a personal trait”) (Lubart, 2010, p. 269).
collectivistic are more likely to emphasize the character traits of certain creative geniuses and ignore the context or other factors that might affect them (Lubart, 2010).

Other distinctions in creativity research are made between historical and psychological creativity (Boden, 2009; Gaut, 2010). Historical creativity refers to a creative act or product that no one has ever thought of before, while psychological creativity entails an act or thought that has never occurred to the individual before, even though others may have already considered it.

Although there is no single definition of creativity that all researchers and practitioners agree on, there seems to be a general consensus (at least among many researchers) that creativity has two main aspects — novelty and quality (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010; Lubart, 2010). Even these two basic elements are difficult to define. Novelty, for example, is heavily influenced by context. Even if novelty could be decisively pronounced, being novel isn’t enough, since there are so many insignificant ways of being novel. Rolling over in bed in the morning, for example, even if no one has ever rolled over in that precise way in the history of humanity, doesn’t seem particularly creative. Quality, then, becomes an important modifier, but quality in terms of what?

As these definitions are puzzled out, other researchers suggest a systems approach to understanding creativity, acknowledging that creativity is contextually determined and thus depends on the tradition around it — and if tradition is socially configured then creativity must be social, too (Gaut, 2010). This gets played out in art galleries, where a curator or a panel of experts passes judgment on what has both novelty and quality (and value, an economic modifier that will be discussed below).

**Why metaphors for creativity?**

If creativity can “reside” in a person, a process, a product, or a place (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010, p. 468), or even in multiple interactions between any of those, how is creativity
to be studied? Weisberg (2006) describes historiometric methods to examine creativity over
time, whereby the impact of war on creativity is studied through statistical means, and considers
how many years it takes for someone to create a “masterpiece” in their field (the study found that
an average of ten years of “preparation” was required, although the definition of what constitutes
a masterpiece still seems elusive). The advantage of such a study is that the data is drawn from
exceptionally creative people, and thus they might have a rare insight into what creativity is; the
disadvantage is that there isn’t much data from such “geniuses” available (Weisberg, 2006, p.
82-3). Another method is to conduct “in vivo” investigations of creativity (see Perry, 2005),
which involves asking creative people what characteristics they believe they have in order to get
a sense of what constitutes a creative person. Additionally, one could conduct personality tests
on creative people to understand their formation. The advantage of this method is that the
participants are responding for themselves and are therefore experts of their own experience; the
disadvantage is that the study can’t be compared with the results from creative people that are no
longer with us, like Picasso or Beethoven. Note, too, that these studies are all aimed at
identifying qualities of creativity or of the creative person, which in itself configures a certain
objectified relationship with creativity (either you have it or you don’t) but they don’t investigate
how people negotiate creativity as a relationship or a process. With this in mind, a responsible
survey of conceptualizations of creativity must be interdisciplinary, because the scope and
presence of creativity is interdisciplinary. Choosing one approach risks mistaking one aspect of
creativity for the whole phenomenon (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009).

What I offer as a way of examining the multifarious conceptualizations of creativity is a
survey of the metaphors used to describe creativity. Examining metaphors allows us to
understand the underlying assumptions and preoccupations that affect the way we think about
creativity (Moran, 2009). This will help sift through the complexity of definitions by using the language of metaphor as a tool for comparison and understanding. By teasing out the metaphors that different theories of creativity rely on, I suggest how broadly — and how specifically — creativity is represented and treated in western philosophical and psychological thought. This project inverts Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco’s (2010) call for research that tests metaphorically oriented theories of creativity with empirical work. Based on my belief that explicit knowledge is always built on tacit knowledge (Moran, 2009), I draw on empirical work to extract and examine the metaphors that shape them. I “balance a rigorous empirical approach with metaphorical aspects (which can help illuminate and communicate not-yet-experienced possibilities and insights)” (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010, p. 41). What underlies the exploration of metaphors for creativity is the similarities between metaphor and creativity: in many ways, the problem of creativity and how it works reflects the problem of metaphor and how we come to find one thing in another (Miall, 1983).

A preliminary archive of metaphors for creativity

Creativity is madness

Can creativity be explained in rational terms at all? The metaphor CREATIVITY IS MADNESS, espoused in different forms by Plato and Kant, would suggest that it cannot (Gaut, 2010). Plato would say no because creativity is the gods acting through us, while Kant would say no because explanations require terms and rules, and “beautiful art” is the domain of genius. Since the genius does not know where his or her ideas come from, the beautiful art of creativity cannot be explained.

In classic Greek mythology, creativity was the work of the Muses, nine of them, who each presided over a different domain of art or science (Weisberg, 2006). There was a muse each
for poetry, dance, astronomy, history, and so on. The muses were the daughters of the great god Zeus, and their work was to breathe the stuff of life into the hearts and minds of mortals, creative life, so that when we say that we have “been inspired”, we mean just that — we have breathed in what the muses have to offer (Singer, 2011, p. 106; Weisberg, 2006, p. 90). What exactly did the muses offer? They offered ideas, new ways of seeing the world, which could then be expressed through new works of art. In this way, creative ideas were considered gifts, which mortals could only humbly accept. This had powerful implications for the connection between mortals and creativity — it implied that creativity didn’t belong to mortals at all, even if they were the ones who stayed up late to chip at stones or mix paints. It certainly wasn’t something they could control. To be creative in ancient Greece was to submit to the muse, to the daughter of Zeus, and to have one’s thoughts inhabited by hers.

Plato was fond of reason, and naturally this kind of intoxication made him uncomfortable (Gaut, 2010). To be so taken by a muse was to embrace the irrational, and chaos with it. For him, inspiration was a kind of madness (Gaut, 2010), which laid the conceptual foundation for his claim that poets should be banished from the Republic because their work was only an imitation of reality, a form, and not an ideal (Plato, 1948).

Aristotle, however, was not nearly so distressed by the implications of creativity. Instead, he embraced them. For him, creativity was a virtue, and virtuous behavior was motivated intrinsically, not instrumentally (Gaut, 2010). He combines this human virtue with the admission that the “instinct of imitation” (which was so upsetting to Plato) “is implanted” (Aristotle, 1997,
p. 5) — another metaphor that suggests that creativity is displaced, lying somewhere outside of the human vessel, at least in its source and origin.

**Creativity is possession**

The metaphor CREATIVITY IS MADNESS constitutes a kind of possession — a mortal could become temporarily inhabited by the ideas of a muse, and that could fuel his or her expression of art. Depending on one’s perspective, that possession could appear as madness (see Plato) or virtue (see Aristotle). The metaphor CREATIVITY IS POSSESSION further articulates this disassociation between the creative person and the force that drives him or her.

The two most likely forces of possession are the angel and the demon (Bellingham, 2008; Hirsch, 2002). The angel shares some similarities with the Greek muses, in that both are descended from the divine and both animate the creative force from outside the artist. In this case a subset of the CREATIVITY IS POSSESSION metaphor arises in the CONDUIT or MESSENGER metaphor, whereby the creative person is seen to be a vessel for divine action (Weisberg, 2006). The famous German composer, Mozart, for example, allegedly claimed to be taking dictation from god as he laid scribbling verses in his bed (Singer, 2011). In a rare explanation of his creative process, Mozart wrote that he “received” his ideas in their completed form, and merely had to write them down. His ideas, it seemed, arrived to him perfect, and the drafts of his manuscripts reflect this purity – there are remarkably few revisions (Weisberg, 2006).

---

3 Such a displaced concept of creativity would take some pressure off of the career-creatives of today, who feel that creativity is all their responsibility — perhaps a lot of angst could be avoided by returning to the ancient Greeks, who could not take credit nor be ashamed if their work did not succeed. After all, it was the work of the gods, not theirs (Gilbert, 2009).
The etymology of the word “angel” provides some insight into the relationship between the artist and the creative force that drives him or her. The Greek word “angelos” literally means “messenger” (Bellingham, 2008, p. 87). The angel, then, like the demons I’ll discuss below, acts as a messenger between two worlds, bringing divine inspiration to mortals in the throes of artistic creation (Bellingham, 2008).

The connection between mortals and angels is not an easy one to maintain. Like the ancient Greek muse, it is the angel that is truly responsible for the art that people make, and so an artist must struggle to keep them close. This struggle, this “wrestling with the angel” (Singer, 2011, p. 52), may be critical to the creative process, which comes easily only for fleeting moments of reverie and then casts one off, back into the mortal abyss. What this evokes is another metaphor, also a subset of CREATIVITY IS POSSESSION, and that is CREATIVITY IS COMBAT — one must struggle with the angel and with the demon in order to fuel the creative work, for if the angel abandons the artist, the artist is left with only the mundane.

Just as one struggles with the angel, one struggles with demons, too. Perhaps nowhere is the demon more eloquently — and even elegantly — evoked than in the Spanish poet Federico Garcia Lorca’s essay “Juego y teoría del duende” [Theory and play of the duende] (Lorca, 2007). The origin of the word “duende” could be derived from “duen de casa”, or, lord of the house, (Bellingham, 2008, p. 69) which hints at the possession metaphor mentioned in this section. But the duende is much more ephemeral than a lord: according to Lorca (2007), the duende is “a force, not a labour, a struggle not a thought” that gives rise to the most raw and authentic form of artistic creation. The force of the duende comes from inside, “from the soles of the feet” (Lorca, 2007) and engages the artist most readily in the act of performance (dance, song, theatre) where the performer is at once consumed and possessed by “dark sounds”, by the
haunting specter of death that animates life, especially palpable in Spanish culture. The struggle with the *duende*, then, is more personal than the struggle with the angel, for while the angel animates the creative process from without, the *duende* works from within, constituting a struggle with one’s own self (Bellingham, 2008). This struggle allows one to transcend the usual limits of that self to encounter the dark force beyond life. Engaging with the *duende* takes the artist to the illuminating and dangerous limits of possibility (Bellingham, 2008). Here, the artist struggles to achieve what cannot be — unity, purity, and immortality — as a way of expressing his or her anxiety about the limits of what is (Bellingham, 2008). This transcendence of the self through engaging the darkness of the self is clearer in Lorca’s own words, who said he was looking for “a technique to go beyond technique, [one that] ruptures the geometry of [its] own imposing forms” (in Bellingham, 2008, p. 110), a technique that is, in fact, “not form but the marrow of form” (Lorca, 2007), allowing the artist the rapture of a struggle with death itself. Because of the desperation entailed by a contest where the stakes are so high (art at the border of death), the creative struggle is not only anxiety ridden, but violent (Bellingham, 2008). Here another subset of the CREATIVITY IS POSSESSION metaphor can be named: CREATIVITY IS VIOLENCE, or even CREATIVITY IS DESTRUCTION.

The violent possession of the creative act is well-expressed in concrete metaphorical terms by the author Annie Dillard. In her book *The writing life* (1989), she describes one morning when her typewriter begins a cacophonous chatter while she is away in another room. The machine, it seems, had taken on a life of its own and is clacking and churning with heat — the keys slam and hammer while pages fly off the roll like a leaf storm. The seizure calms when she reaches the typewriter. “Now I know it can happen” she concludes (Dillard, 1989, p. 64). What Dillard evokes is the wild abandon of the possession metaphor for the creative process.
The work seems to come from somewhere else — indeed, the author isn’t even in the room. This disassociation is similarly reflected in the story by Julio Cortázar, mentioned above, where the rabbits come unbidden, of their own mysterious production, and the author’s project is simply to decide what to do with them. An exploding typewriter, a vomited rabbit, and a struggle with an angel or a demon all suggest that the creative act is somehow disassociated from the artist. This has implications for the role of artist, who is limited to serving as a conduit for powers beyond him- or herself. What it suggests is that creativity entails a kind of surrender, too, along with a struggle, so that external force can take up residence in the inner workings of one’s art.

The metaphors so far (madness, possession, surrender) are often gleaned from lyrical first person confessions of the creative experience from artists like Mozart or Lorca. From a cognitive psychological perspective, those metaphors could constitute a classical view on creativity. After all, from a scientific perspective, the main criticism of such testimonials is their fallibility — there is no way to know if they accurately reflect the experience they evoke, or if they were generated for some performative purpose. Also, the memory used to summon them is scientifically unreliable when people try to recount their experience. For example, the authenticity of Mozart’s testimonial, mentioned above, has been questioned — it’s not certain that he was even the one to write that he “received” his notations from god — that thought may have been attributed to him by someone else (Weisberg, 2006). All we can know for certain is the fluidity of the music in the work that survives.

**Creativity is evolution**

For the scientist who is dissatisfied with lyrical testimonials, the theory CREATIVITY IS EVOLUTION draws on a Darwinian vision of traits and selection as they operate in species and aims it at understanding the creative process in individuals. In the biological application of
Darwin’s evolution, species diversify through the blind process of mutation. Traits that improve a species’ survival are selected for, and the organism that exhibits that trait passes it along to its next of kin when it reproduces. As applied to creativity, evolution is taken up as an explicit — although not often acknowledged — metaphor entailing two stages that reflect those of biology: (1) the blind generation of ideas, and (2) the selection of the best fit, depending on the needs of the project (Gaut, 2010; Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010; Weisberg, 2006). The evolutionary theory of creativity entails that people who are more productive — that is, that have more ideas — will have a higher rate of success. They will be better able to select an idea for its best fit to their creative work (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010).

Two important criticisms arise from the implications of an evolutionary theory of creativity. First, some have argued that it over-emphasizes the role of chance in the creative process (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). While it is true that chance is an important factor in creative work, there are other factors, too, such as the commitment to develop an idea in spite of resistance. Second, ideas are not universally viewed as separate entities that lie dormant, waiting to be selected for elaboration or “fit” with a larger project (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). In other words, not all understandings of creativity view ideas as disparate but combinable units.

The evolutionary perspective helps to explain how creativity might take place in the thought process of an individual artist. A more explicitly biological focus looks at why creativity evolved in the first place. Here the species is the focus instead of the organism, and some interesting subsets of the CREATIVITY IS EVOLUTION metaphor arise. One theory is that CREATIVITY IS AN EVOLUTIONARY SPANDREL (Gabora & Kaufman, 2010). This view turns creativity on its head, suggesting that the creative arts are in fact purposeless, at least in the evolutionary sense. The kind of creativity that leads to aesthetic performance is an offshoot from
more practical and survival-ensuring traits. The linguist Steven Pinker (in Gabora & Kaufman, 2010) refers to art, music, humor, fiction, religion, and philosophy as “cheesecake and pornography — cultural inventions that stimulate our senses in novel ways but do not improve our biological fitness” (p. 290).

An evolutionary perspective that champions creativity a little more enthusiastically is the metaphor CREATIVITY IS SOCIAL ADHESION, which suggests that by experiencing art together (like cave paintings or an enticing rhythm beaten out with a stick on a log) people form bonds of community (Gabora & Kaufman, 2010). By another evolutionary perspective, people are drawn to creativity as a demonstration of fitness (Gabora & Kaufman, 2010). This could be considered the CREATIVITY IS SEXUAL MOJO metaphor. Extending from this metaphor is the view that we are biologically predisposed to procreate, which affects our creative drive, too (Gabora & Kaufman, 2010). By the same compulsion that makes us want to have children (to continue our genetic legacy in the biological sense) we are wont to be creative, to make art (to continue our cultural legacy in the ideological sense). The throes of creative passion are akin to our urge to reproduce. Just as we are inclined to act altruistically to people who share our genetic make up, we are inclined to act altruistically to people who share our cultural make up, too. We are invested in proliferating our cultural selves through creativity and art, just as we are interested in proliferating our genetic selves through sex and reproduction. This perspective could be considered under the metaphor CREATIVITY IS DISPLACED PROCREATION.

The last metaphor in this sequence suggests a way beyond the CREATIVITY IS EVOLUTION metaphor, even though it paradoxically relies on an evolutionary metaphor to describe it. This is the view that CREATIVITY IS TRANSCENDING THE BIOLOGICAL SELF. It suggests that the creative act is the pursuit of a “halo of possibility”, putting aside
concerns of biological survival (where possible) and working towards the development of a more complex cultural self (Gabora & Kaufman, 2010, p. 292-3). Although it presupposes a biological framework, it configures creativity as a glimpse beyond biology, as a chance for a higher self.

**Creativity is incubation**

Sometimes it is best not to think about creativity. Perhaps there is a certain limit to how much one can do towards developing a creative idea so long as it remains in conscious thought. The writer Ernest Hemingway (1964) said that he wrote each day until the afternoon, when it was time to go and do something else, like visit the race track or take a long walk. It was during this time away from the writing, he believed, that the writing worked itself out so that he had something to write the next day. The key, he said, was to work hard on the writing until a certain point, and then know when to leave the writing and not think about it all. In his memoir *A moveable feast* (1964) he writes,

> It was in that room too that I learned not to think about anything that I was writing from the time I stopped writing until I started again the next day. That way my subconscious would be working on it and at the same time I would be listening to other people and noticing everything, I hoped; learning, I hoped; and I would read so that I would not think about my work and make myself impotent to do it. (p. 13)

The philosopher Bertrand Russell had a similar belief, claiming that if you worked hard on a creative project, or on problem solving of any nature, it was best to put it aside at some point and do something else. The problem, he believed, had usually been solved by “the unknown forces that operate ‘underground’” (Singer, 2011, p. 49) by the time he returned to it.
This view is evoked by the metaphor CREATIVITY IS INCUBATION (Weisberg, 2006; Funke, 2009; Bellingham, 2008; Singer, 2011; Miall, 1983). It suggests that creative ideas come when you let them sit in your unconscious for a while. A few reasons for this are posited. The mathematician Poincare suggested that conscious thought allowed only one mental process to be engaged at a time, while in unconscious thought many processes are simultaneously active (Weisberg, 2006). Another perspective suggests that creativity “arises” not necessarily from shifting the creative project from conscious thought to unconscious thought, but that the tension between conscious reality and unconscious drives are what lead to creative insight4 (Bellingham, 2008).

An extension of the CREATIVITY IS INCUBATION metaphor appears in Funke’s work (2009), where he suggests that the stage of incubation during a creative process wards against “mental infection” (p. 15). Although the author doesn’t explore the implications of this metaphor any further, it suggests that a healthy mind is a creative mind, and it requires knowing how to care for an idea so it can survive to further stages of development.

Other efforts at understanding what is happening below the surface of the CREATIVITY IS INCUBATION metaphor lead to Mandler’s notion of “mind popping” (in Bellingham, 2008, p. 28). This is his term to describe what happens when an idea is let to lie in the subconscious for a while and thereby is solved. It suggests that an idea in the subconscious can be considered without boundaries, and that by incubating it the mind may “pop” out of old habits of thinking. Similarly, we forget our preconceptions about an idea that has been submerged below conscious

4 Bellingham’s (2008) choice of verb “to arise” suggests that the creative force is still somehow buried or submerged, which hints at a stronger connection to the subconscious than he may have been aware of.
thought and its solution is no longer “blocked” (Gaut, 2010, p. 1035). Incubation needn’t just take place for a single idea alone; instead, ideas can incubate alongside many other ideas (Miall, 1983). One may also incubate “a mood” that may then be conducive to creative insight.

The metaphor CREATIVITY IS INCUBATION in fact fits into a larger sequence of stages that were articulated in 1926 by the cognitive psychologist Graham Wallas (in Miall, 1983; Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010; Bellingham, 2008). Wallas’ model suggested that the creative process passes through four distinct stages: preparation, incubation, illumination, and verification. The linearity of his model has since been criticized, suggesting instead that they are “fluid” stages (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010), but the titles of each stage still emphasize their scientific origins.

Notice here that the metaphors “incubation” and “illumination” are mixed. At first it would appear that they have little in common with one another. Incubation draws from a medical, biological domain while illumination draws from a visual or aesthetic domain. In English at least, these two concepts don’t seem to overlap in any obvious way. But if we look outside of English to Spanish, the mixing of those metaphors doesn’t seem so incongruous. In Spanish, the phrase used for the English expression, “to give birth” is “dar a luz,” as mentioned above. Literally it means, “to give to light.” It’s a poetically rich image, and it draws on both metaphoric domains of incubation and illumination. The biology of giving birth is combined with the visibility of light. In giving birth to an idea or a person, one is merging two ideas that English has separated but Spanish has combined.

**Creativity is illumination**

Creativity can also be understood as seeing. In an interview cited in *The Guardian* newspaper (Filloux, 2011), the late Steve Jobs said, “When you ask creative people how they did
something, they feel a little guilty because they didn't really do it, they just saw something. It seemed obvious to them after a while.” What Jobs implies is a metaphor of illumination, whereby new insight into the project is revealed. This illumination can come after a certain amount of incubation has occurred or it may simply occur the first time someone sets eyes on the problem. It implies that people at certain moments of creative insight, “can detect clearly and directly something others have to squint to see” (Singer, 2011, p. 67). Illumination of this sort occurs when all the preparation stages are resolved and a reinterpretation of knowledge is allowed, implying new relationships, the disappearance of anomalies, and seeing the project in a new light (to continue the luminous metaphor) (Miall, 1983).

Another way of understanding this view on creativity is just that — that creativity implies a certain view, a perspective, and that the creative contribution is one of perceiving the challenge from a new angle (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). Such a new angle may not come after staring and staring at the same words or the same image. Indeed, the idea may need to be incubated, as described above — transitioned from conscious thought to unconscious thought so it may emerge, on its own, into the light of creative resolution. The counsel of the poet Ralph Waldo Emerson is useful here, who suggested that creativity doesn’t come from staying at home or from travelling but from transitioning between the two (Bellingham, 2008). Similarly, the epiphanic gestalt of a creative process might reveal itself more readily if its mental pursuit is engaged in transitions between the dark (unconscious thought, or incubation) and the light (conscious thought). This suggests that creativity involves transitioning between spatial and mental domains.
Creativity is divergence

Here, however, my search for metaphors of creativity takes a different turn — and in that very turn, another metaphor is revealed. In 1950, when the president of the American Psychological Association gave his annual address, he advocated research not just on intelligence, but on creativity, too (Weisberg, 2006). According to his speech, creativity required new ways of thinking, and this meant breaking away from the past. It also meant being sensitive to problems — if someone is dissatisfied with a tool, they may try to devise a better one; if someone sees no inadequacies with a tool, they won’t. The implied metaphor of creativity that was being promoted here was CREATIVITY IS DIVERGENCE, meaning that creativity required thinking in a way that went against convention, thinking that took a different turn. It implied coming up with alternatives to the present and expanding the notion of normal.

A neologism that was coined to articulate what was going on in this process of divergence is “geneplore” (Gaut, 2010, p. 1035; Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010, p. 32). It is a compound word made from “generate” and “explore”, suggesting that the creative process entails coming up with as many divergent ideas as possible and then exploring their potential. Under its surface, it implies that CREATIVITY IS A HIGH QUANTITY OF IDEA OBJECTS, a trend that influences many metaphorical formulations.

---

5 One way of stimulating the creative potential of divergent thinking is through “exposure to multiple cultures and/or multiple languages” (Lubart, 2010, p. 274). Such exposure enhances knowledge by providing contrast.
Creativity is recombination

The flip side of the CREATIVITY IS DIVERGENCE metaphor isn’t difficult to imagine. Here, creativity is the ability to put things together. According to William James (in Moran, 2009) creative genius arises from seeing connections that others can’t. One aspect of this metaphor suggests similarities with the CREATIVITY IS ILLUMINATION metaphor explored above, since both emphasize the act of seeing or the importance of perspective, but here another aspect is featured: one is not simply seeing, one is seeing connections. Creativity under this metaphorical model, then, is an associative process, one of generating “unfamiliar juxtapositions of familiar ideas” (Boden, 2009, p. 237). The more remote the associates are, the more original the combination tends to be (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). One’s ability to access diverse ideas becomes an important foundation for creative potential, because having diverse knowledge would provide more to draw on in the search for remote associates (Miall, 1983). Some of the most interesting questions regarding creativity and recombination arise through computational processes: can the combinatorial work of a computer be considered creative? (Gaut, 2010). Through the generation of diverse units of data, computers are capable of sorting for these remote associates that are deemed original and creative products of human potential. The algorithmic process that arrives at these remote associates constitutes another possible metaphor for creativity.

Creativity is investing

So far many of the metaphors explored here have suggested that IDEAS ARE OBJECTS, and that the greater the number of ideas one can generate the higher the probability of arriving at a creative outcome. Here I want to turn to another trend in metaphor making, and that is that IDEAS ARE CONTAINERS. In this case, the metaphor is one of investing, whereby creativity
entails “buying low and selling high” when it comes to putting one’s time, energy, and skill, into ideas (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010, p. 477; Weisberg, 2006, p. 100). Although the investing model of creativity was developed in the late 20th century, economic metaphors have been used to describe the workings of creativity long before that (see Aristotle, 1997). CREATIVITY IS INVESTING entails taking risks by investing one’s attention in marginalized and unpopular ideas and developing them until they mature into something desirable. It requires that one move towards ideas that are under-used or under-acknowledged and dedicate one’s self to those, which entails a kind of defiance of what is already considered creative. Inevitably, one risks social alienation when one turns his or her back on the crowd – sadly, they may suffer derision and be cast out of their domain (Sternberg, 2009). The key to the investment metaphor for creativity is to persevere through alienation, committing to the marginalized idea because of some personal belief in its worth, trusting that its very exclusion from popularity now is what lays the foundation for its value in the future.

First, the CREATIVITY IS INVESTING metaphor emphasizes a socio-economic configuration of creativity. It provides a model for how creativity fits into human society, and how creative people behave as members of that society, but it doesn’t address creativity as an individual process. It’s useful for understanding a portrait of a society in which some people behave creatively, but it suggests little about what those individuals actually do to develop an idea of low value into one of high value. This is not a shortcoming of the theory; it merely points out the theory’s scope.

Second, CREATIVITY IS INVESTING suggests a high level of awareness for the individual who considers the creative act. According to the investment theory, creativity is largely a decision, one that is possibly based on a lot of empirical research, in order to determine
which ideas are unpopular and which ones have potential for higher value. CREATIVITY IS INVESTING entails making these rational assessments and then committing to following through on the results of one’s findings. This doesn’t mean that creativity is only a process of finding unpopular ideas and sticking with them (which would not be true for all unpopular ideas — some ideas remain unpopular no matter how much work one puts into them) but it does point to the important role of reason, lucidity, and assessment in the creative process. The CREATIVITY IS INVESTMENT METAPHOR suggests that one may decide to generate new ideas and examine them (Sternberg, 2009). To this end, creativity constitutes an act of will as much as an act of intuition. It also implies that creativity is a risk taken in the interest of gain.

Creativity is seeking versus creativity is finding

The metaphor above has a socio-economic scope — it suggests how creativity can be traced through human society as the increased value of marginalized ideas. The twin metaphors of “seeking” and “finding” shift that scope to one of personality. Is there a certain type of creative person? The seeking versus finding metaphors suggest that there is.

Many researchers agree that CREATIVITY IS A SEARCH (Hirsch, 2002; Miller, 2000; Bellingham, 2008). In a general sense, it is a search for meaning in existence. When it comes to personality, however, there may be two diverging ways of going about that search. In creative practices, there are seekers and finders. Although it sounds at first like finders are just better at their job than seekers, that’s not the case. The distinction is meant to help understand two ways of going about a project. Seekers are those who experiment with where they are going. For them, creativity is often a frustrating process. They do minimal preparation before beginning a project and usually show a long, slow but steady improvement in the quality of their work over their career. On the other side of the typological spectrum is the finder. Finders have clear goals for
their creative projects and often do detailed preparation before beginning. In contrast to seekers, finders can easily decide when a project is finished because they know what they wanted in the first place. The career arc of a finder is often characterized by radical changes in style once a certain project or form of creative work has been deemed completed by the finder (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010).

The seeking and finding metaphors can also be represented by two other metaphors: CREATIVITY IS BEING KICKED (and using one’s aesthetic judgments to elaborate on that kick) versus CREATIVITY IS TAKING AIM (and therefore knowing what one is aiming at) (Gaut, 2010). Seeking (responding to the kick) and finding (taking aim) could be categorized as propulsive vs. finalistic theories of creativity.

What’s useful about the CREATIVITY IS SEARCHING vs. CREATIVITY IS FINDING metaphors is that they emphasize two different ways that a creative project may be undertaken. Both may lead to great original works, but those works arise from different creative processes. These metaphors also suggest the importance not only of resolving problems but of finding problems worth resolving. While it seems at first that problem solving would be considered the acme of creativity, problem finding is a further foray into what creativity looks like (Kozbelt, Beghetto, & Runco, 2010). It suggests that the creative person is not simply someone who can find new solutions for old problems, but may be someone who can search the domain for meaningful questions, or questions that have the potential to bear innovative results, thus blending the investment metaphor with the seeking metaphor.

**Creativity is regression**

The seeking and finding metaphors above suggest ways of going forward into the creative process. But what if creativity is really about going back? According to Freud, creative
thinking was to be attributed to primary process thinking, which is connected to the id of our personality (Weisberg, 2006). Because primary process thinking gets layered over with the secondary process thinking that we acquire through aging and experience, we might not be aware of what our id is thinking. Freud believed that creative people are those who can continue exploring their primary process thinking long after childhood (when it typically expresses itself) and use it towards novel ways of solving problems in their adult lives. The theory that CREATIVITY IS REGRESSION is presented in Singer (2011) as a myth about creativity, suggesting that it is outdated and no longer useful, although I suspect it that it will continue to circulate as a metaphor even if it is no longer valuable as empirical truth.

The metaphor is useful on another level, however, for it makes room for the possibility that CREATIVITY IS PLAY. By this metaphor, the creative act is linked to the ability to recall childhood forms of make-believe and to bring them into creative projects in adulthood. The physicist Richard P. Feynman, for example, insisted on starting projects again on his own so that he could render diagrams in a way that he felt was satisfying. He insisted that his method of engaging with research problems was pure play (Singer, 2011).

**Creativity is an algorithm**

An algorithmic metaphor of creativity extends and develops the earlier idea that CREATIVITY IS RECOMBINATION. Where the recombination metaphor sketched the creative process in broad strokes as one of combining remote associates, the metaphor CREATIVITY IS AN ALGORITHM adds detail to that model by suggesting the mechanism (metaphor intended) for the ways in which THE MIND IS A MACHINE. Through an algorithmic process, the theory goes, the mind is able to anticipate future outcomes based on cause and effect principles that extend from knowledge of existing conditions (Merrell, 2006).
By this view, all processes of mind, creative or otherwise, are knowable as algorithmic processes of recombination. If something so new and novel arises that it is inexplicable by the algorithmic model, it can only be attributed to (1) algorithms that are not yet understood, (2) chance, or (3) “dynamic chaos” (itself a semi-algorithmic theory, if an unresolved one) (Merrell, 2006, p. 121).

The mental machine that performs this algorithmic work is far from perfect, nor is it even entirely visible. There is no single act of creation, but rather a long engagement — a struggle even, to recall the angel and the demon — over time. According to Singer (2011), “the relevant [creative] process is usually more of an endless enslavement to inevitable difficulties rather than a single or all-resolving Eureka-like determination” (p. 66). This view of a frustrated creative engagement runs counter to Plato’s belief that the artist begins with a vision of truth or beauty and tries to manifest that vision to the best of his abilities (Singer, 2011). Still, both Singer and Plato hint at a mechanistic, instrumental engagement with the creative process, even if that machine is prone to break-down or mechanical failure.

There is a great comfort in the algorithmic model of creativity, for it makes room for logic and reason in what too easily gets represented as a whimsical process. Indeed, creativity is serious stuff, and nothing says ‘serious’ like machines and algorithms. There are, however, some important criticisms of the CREATIVITY IS AN ALGORITHM model. If, as Plato claimed, the artist begins with a vision and tries to get that vision down as well as he or she can, how are we to account for the deviations that the artist takes along the way towards reaching that goal, deviations that might otherwise be considered creative except that they are not fixed to the original vision? These shifts in treatment that can often arise during the creative process are still creative — in fact, they may be the most creative part (This echoes the CREATIVITY IS DIVERGENCE model discussed above). If creativity is to be understood as the transformation of
a vision into a thing, or (in Plato’s terms) the expression of an ideal in a form, then it seems that much of the creative process is still left out. The algorithmic metaphor for creativity assumes a causal relation among different stages of the creative engagement, but if those causal relations are limited to what is already fixed and determined by an algorithmic formula, then it could be argued that the result is not really that creative at all (Merrell, 2006). The counter argument, however, is a turn to creativity of means and creativity of ends. One can know the end and still be creative about how to get there (Gaut, 2010). Still, it is fair to suggest that the metaphor CREATIVITY IS AN ALGORITHM has trouble accommodating the metaphor CREATIVITY IS DIVERGENCE — algorithmic creative may still entail divergence, indeed it may incorporate divergence into its formulation, and thus lead to thinking that diverges from the norm, but it doesn’t sit very well with thinking that diverges from the algorithm itself.

Creativity is a place

So far many of these metaphors have emphasized the personal, social, or process-based aspects of creativity. The metaphor CREATIVITY IS A PLACE highlights the geographic and spatial qualities of creativity and looks at the ways in which creativity is projected onto location. While the angel and the demon arise from poetic work and divergence and recombination arise from cognitive psychology, the spatial attributes explored here could be considered a geographer’s vision of creativity.

By varying the research emphasis from “creative person” to “creative situation” one begins to acknowledge the important role that environment plays in generating creative activity (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009, p. 3). Richard Florida’s book, Who’s your city?: How the creative economy is making where to live the most important decision of your life (2009), is based on this shift in focus, which sees the decision about place as foundational to creative
output. The metaphor CREATIVITY IS A PLACE relies on the expectation one has of that place, before or during ones stay there (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009). If one thinks of Chelsea in New York or Montparnasse in Paris, one might conjure up imagery and narratives about the creative culture of the place. For me that imagined creative milieu was Buenos Aires. The metaphor of creativity as a place evokes the notion that the places that represent creativity for us are based on what we assume their advantages to be. In other words, place becomes a kind of screen upon which we project our expectations (of creativity or any other attribute) (Meusburger, Funke, & Wunder, 2009). This notion is scientifically verifiable, too. Studies by Forster (2009) suggest the impact that “priming effects” (p. 219) have on people’s expectation of place: encountering one’s expectation of a place before even getting to the place can influence how that place is perceived.

What the metaphor of CREATIVITY IS A PLACE implies is a larger, encompassing metaphor, CREATIVITY IS AN ATTITUDE, because it emphasizes one’s feelings towards a place as being foundational to one’s experience of that place (Sternberg, 2009). It suggests that the spatiality of creativity arises out of a collective sense of expectation that individuals project onto the community. This perspective emphasizes that community over the individual, even though it is the individual projections that make it up (Bellingham, 2008). The community is the agent of the metaphor, the host of the projections cast upon it. This echoes the CREATIVITY IS CHANCE metaphor, which considers the socially determining aspects that make a place creative. At some point it is the collective projection of a place that ensures that it will deliver that expectation. Because I believed that Buenos Aires was a creative place, perhaps I was more inclined to notice creativity there, or even take more creative risks myself. In fact, Forster’s study (2009) goes so far as to conclude that even thinking about a creative place can lead to creative
thinking, so that thoughts of Buenos Aires while one is trudging through the Vancouver drizzle may also lead to new ideas.

Creativity is an amusement park

Here’s a fun one. The metaphor CREATIVITY IS AN AMUSEMENT PARK serves to address the consideration of domain. Is creativity transferable across domains? Are there many creativities — one for the composer, another for the mathematician — or are they fueled by something in common? Kaufman and Baer (2005) propose the amusement park metaphor to highlight some of the interdisciplinary overlap that goes on between domains of creativity.

The amusement park metaphor for creativity emphasizes a socio-cultural perspective. Its vision is not focused on the individual’s experience of creativity. If Kaufman and Baer (2005) were to shift the focus of their metaphor towards the individual, they could include the perspective of the person who attends the amusement park — how do they navigate the domains? How do they choose which ride they like best? How would they compare their experience of different rides? Instead the authors focus on the rules and design of the amusement park as a way of understanding the commonalities and divergences between creativity and specific domains.

For example, Kaufman and Baer (2005) suggest that the phrase “You must be this high to ride” (p. 321) can be used to understand the relationship between intellect and creativity (it can also be taken as a comment on the relationship between drugs and art). Kaufman and Baer (2005) emphasize that one must have a minimum level of intelligence, motivation, and a suitable environment in order to develop one’s creativity. This level varies depending on the domain — for example, higher intelligence is required for mathematical creativity than painting. However, after a certain level, higher intelligence makes little difference to creative potential, and in some
cases an extremely high level of intelligence may inhibit creativity because there becomes simply too much to draw on and the artist is overwhelmed (Kaufman & Baer, 2005).

Continuing the metaphor, Kaufman and Baer (2005) suggest the phrase “This is Tomorrowland — now where is Space Mountain?”, which alludes to specific tasks, or microdomains. Although I have never been to Disneyland, I infer that this refers to erroneous assumptions that are often made about domain similarity, suggesting that one kind of ride (at the amusement park) should be grouped close to another (in this case future-oriented) ride. A closer look, however, reveals that they are indeed separate rides all together, even though they may all still constitute some form of ride. Applied to creativity, it suggests that although domains are large, there are still specific skills required within them. One example of this is graduate school: while many people may be enrolled in the Faculty of Education, their individual research interests are divided along further specific lines. Similarly, there are many forms of writing, from journalism to recipe books to literary fiction, each with their own expertise.

**Creativity is breaking a boundary**

One of the most prevalent metaphors for creativity in the 20th and 21st century is the boundary metaphor (Moran, 2009). With exclamations like, “I just had a break through” or imperatives like “Think outside the box”, a metaphor of trespassing into a new territory or pushing beyond a border is evoked to describe creativity. It implies that creativity constitutes a kind of exploration beyond the familiar and involves breaking with the past (Boden, 2009). When we say, “Think outside the box” we mean, think beyond conventional ways of considering this problem, thus linking back to the CREATIVITY IS DIVERGENCE metaphor, while implying, too, that convention is a container.
The boundary metaphor, however, is explicitly territorial. It implies set limits to the spatiality of what is known, and construes creativity as rupturing that limit to encounter the mystery beyond. The boundary metaphor is politically derived — being able to redraw the map of territory, the map of what is known, implies taking new territory for one’s own (Moran, 2009). When a creative action ventures into unknown territory it plants a flag to show it has been there — the flag is creative work, the work that says, someone was here before and this territory is no longer savage; it suggests that this idea is no longer novel. The metaphor assumes limits to knowledge and suggests that dynamic action takes place at the margins, by trespassing beyond those margins into new and uncharted lands. In short, the creative person gets to redraw the borders of knowledge.

In spite of its popularity, the boundary metaphor obscures some important aspects of creativity that are worth mentioning. First, the boundary metaphor is focused on outcomes. It is a separatist view of creativity (Moran, 2009) that suggests that, like taking a colony, only the planting of new flags matters. It doesn’t matter, for example, how you got there or what happened along the way.

Second, the boundary metaphor fails to account for the ways in which circumstances are in flux — by only noticing the trespasses into new territory, the boundary metaphor isn’t sensitive to the way in which knowledge is constantly being reordered, reworked, recalibrated or rediscovered. To continue the metaphor, if all eyes are on the border, no one will notice the changes back home.

Third, the crossing of a creative boundary is usually only attributed retrospectively (Moran, 2009). The artist, or the society around him or her, looks back and realizes that a
boundary has been crossed. If, however, creativity can only be recognized in retrospect, it is hard to examine creativity as a process under this metaphor.

In terms of education, the boundary metaphor implies that knowledge means acquisition, entailing mastery of a domain or controlling a territory (Moran, 2009). The knower becomes lord of his or her territory in a grab for more land, more knowledge, acquired through creative skirmishes with the unknown.

**Emerging themes: Ideas are objects**

Here I want to pause to consider a pattern that has already been mentioned but not fully explored (boundary metaphor intended). In most of the metaphors listed above, creativity is configured as an object — either a possession in the form of an attribute, or a collection of many idea objects. In short, many of these metaphors are based on an underlying key metaphor of IDEAS ARE OBJECTS (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980). When the mathematician Henri Poincare refers to “swarms of ideas” from which he selects “the most promising ones” according to aesthetic criteria (in Gaut, 2010, p. 1035) he is supporting this metaphor. When Singer (2011) writes that the creative person is “in effect, a pack rat of creative possibilities made available to him by his sheer retention of vivid fragments amassed throughout the immediate flow of his personal life” (p. 64), he is supporting it, too. What emerges from these comments and the metaphors identified above is the sense that mental processes in general and creativity in particular are based on retrieval, association, synthesis, transformation, analogical transfer, or categorical reduction (Bellingham, p. 2008) — all metaphorical associations which suggest that ideas are things that can be quantified, isolated, combined, or developed.

For an example of how pervasive this quantification of thinking is, consider tactical ways of approaching a problem. These tactics can facilitate a creative process, helping the artist or the
problem solver view their challenge in new ways. He or she may be advised to “think backwards”, “turn the situation upside down”, “shift your perspective”, “put the problem aside”, or “question your assumptions”. Each of these tactics suggests a slightly different metaphorical engagement with problem solving on the surface (e.g. “think backwards” hints at retracing the causal chain of an algorithmic metaphor, while “put the problem aside” suggests the incubation metaphor) but many of them are still founded on the assumption that ideas are discrete objects that can be manipulated. What’s more, they configure the person who has the idea as separate from his or her own mental activity — there is an implied divide between the thinker and the thought, between the knower and the known. This may well be a product of the English language, which does well at separating language into nouns but has trouble articulating the relationships between those nouns (Cole, 2006; Hart, 2010). This staunch representation of ideas as objects isn’t all bad — believing that creativity exists in the same way that any object exists makes it easier to examine creativity just as one examines any attribute of the natural world (Bellingham, 2008). However, it is worth pursuing a little further the origins and implications of this commodification of creativity.

From the discussion so far, creativity entails being productive, not reproductive (Funke, 2009). If creativity simply reproduced what already existed one might be tempted to say it wasn’t creative. Instead, newness and novelty are valued (Kaufman & Sternberg, 2010). What emerges is an economic model of creativity that is much more pervasive than the investment metaphor discussed above. Instead, contemporary perspectives like those expressed in Florida (2009) imply that creativity is a commodity for trade in an economic market; at the same time, creativity identifies an entire “class” of society, giving the haunting impression that the so-called “creative class” can be enumerated and accounted for. Creativity in the “creative capital” market is defined
as that which can generate new products for the market, or new markets themselves (citing Florida, in Bellingham, 2008). The risk in commodifying a human characteristic is that people become instruments of a market. Creativity from a socio-economic perspective is reduced to market viability — all else gets left out of what counts as creative. Bellingham (2008) argues that the declining influence of grand narratives as a way of making sense of the world mean that we have turned to economic principles instead. The problem, however, is that treating creativity as an economic commodity renders life in a very limited way.

**Creativity is an organism**

The metaphor CREATIVITY IS AN ORGANISM emphasizes that creativity is a continual process of becoming (Merrell, 2006; Miall, 1983), requiring the active participation of the subject, who nurtures or gives birth to the creative work through the very process of working (Singer, 2011). The organicist metaphor of creativity implies a parallel metaphor: CREATIVITY IS TRANSFORMATION (Boden, 2009; Moran, 2009). In both cases creativity is viewed more as a relation than an outcome, one that involves reconfiguring a problem not only so that it can be seen differently (the CREATIVITY IS PERSPECTIVE metaphor) but so that it can become something different, too. According to Boden (2009), transformational creativity is the most valued form of creativity, above combination and exploration, because finding something totally new in what already existed is more exciting than bringing together two things that already existed. In terms of their impact on domain, Boden (2009) notes that transformational creativity is more common in the sciences than in the arts, because science relies more heavily on paradigms, while there are so many possibilities for combination and exploration in the arts that they are not yet out of style.
The metaphor CREATIVITY IS AN ORGANISM may be elaborated by making it overt. For example, Perkins (in Moran, 2009) writes, “an individual creative mind is more like a tended garden, in which seeds of memes are sown… and sprouting memes are subjected to selective weeding and cultivation” (p. 1). What this suggests is a genre of the organism metaphor, namely, a more specific formulation that CREATIVITY IS A GARDEN. Just as easily, however, the scope of the organism metaphor can be withdrawn to encompass biological concepts more generally: cooperation, interaction, birth, and growth may be applied to the development of ideas just as they are to the natural world. What the organism metaphor of creativity implies is an inside-outside process (Moran, 2009). It suggests that an idea is born to the individual and has the potential to grow bigger than they are, grow beyond the parent that gave birth to it. Contrast this with the boundary metaphor discussed above, which implies an outside-inside process, whereby one ventures into new territory and makes it familiar by bringing it into one’s self, into the realm of the known. The organism metaphor is a good antithesis to the boundary metaphor for another reason, too: while the boundary metaphor suggests that creativity happens at the fringes, the organic metaphor situates creativity at the centre. While the boundary metaphor focuses on outcome, the organic metaphor focuses on process. Although this contest could be reduced to the politics of territory versus the biology of organisms, each metaphor serves to emphasize different — but equally important — aspects of creativity.

One of these aspects highlighted by the organic metaphor is the experience of time (Moran, 2009). Because the organic metaphor emphasizes emergence and growth, it entails a process that occurs over time. With this acknowledgment of time as a constitutive part of creativity, one can begin examining the ways in which creativity is a process. In other words, the organic metaphor for creativity allows for a world that is in constant motion, constant flux or
change (recall that this was one of the main criticisms of the boundary metaphor, which presumed that nothing new was happening at home). To re-till the soil of the CREATIVITY IS A GARDEN metaphor, creativity as a process “operates through principles of time-dependant vitality comparable to those in trees and shrubs” (Singer, 2011, p. 56).

It is important to keep in mind that no metaphor operates alone. There are often multiple metaphors active at once that allow us to conceptualize the phenomenon of creativity. For example, a closer look at the creative process might reveal a series of many small boundary metaphors — small episodes of “break-throughs” that when viewed from a distance resemble a punctuated equilibrium that marks the growth of an idea (Moran, 2009). Conversely, the break-throughs that characterize the boundary metaphor may be a product of preparation and incubation, or they may be nurtured for a long time before they can be taken to the fringe.

**Creativity is flow**

Another process-centred metaphor for creativity is flow. It evokes what is perhaps the most satisfying state of creative immersion, when the artist or athlete is operating at his or her peak in total engagement with their activity. Flow can occur when the following criteria are met: the goal is clear; the activity itself seems to offer feedback; one feels that one’s personal skills are matched to the task; one achieves intense focus, a loss of self-awareness, and experiences an altered sense of time; and one feels that the work itself is intrinsically rewarding (Nakamura & Csikszentmihalyi, 2002). The flow metaphor for creativity emphasizes interactionism — it is not just a product of the individual, but of the relationship between the individual and his or her environment. This relationship entails maintaining a delicate balance between anxiety on one side and boredom on the other. Too far in either direction and flow will be lost.
Perry (2005) carried out a pertinent study of flow as it relates to creative writing. She conducted interviews with numerous poets and authors of fiction, asking them if they had experienced a sense of losing track of time while writing. This “losing track of time” was integral to how she identified the state of flow. Her study showed that many writers did indeed experience this form of flow, and from their comments she suggests some key ways of getting into a state of flow and keeping oneself there. More research in this area is still needed since Perry (2005) seems to have equated flow with losing one’s sense of time from very early on in her study. While this altered temporality is no doubt an important quality of flow, as described by Csikszentmilalyi (1990), it isn’t the only one. A more open way of evoking flow would be to invite descriptions of each author’s experience of writing. Still, Perry’s (2005) study inadvertently revealed other intriguing metaphors for creativity: the novelists’ responses included moving into the movie screen, peeling layers, and opening a faucet, while the poets’ responses named tapping into a vein, diving underwater, becoming part of some pulse, surfing the wave of transformation, and feeling one’s way into the skin of the poem.

**Creativity is democratic attunement**

One of the most refreshing and contemporary metaphors for creativity that I came across in my search was the metaphor of democracy. This was the central preoccupation of a master’s thesis written by Bellingham (2008) at the Auckland University of Technology. Bellingham’s thesis argues that creativity is best understood as a “democratic attunement” (p. 8), which is characterized by an awareness of the productive tension between traditional opposites like freedom and discipline, intellect and intuition, individuality and unity. It is typically assumed, the author argues, that these opposites are incompatible. Democracy, however, proposes a model whereby interacting with both ends of polar opposites is productive and even essential to a
healthy society. Bellingham’s (2008) argument unfolds by exploring this productive tension as “Janusian thinking”, or holding two or more opposing thoughts in mind without conflict (p. 46). Extending the democracy metaphor to creativity, the creative experience takes place simultaneously by “a bid for freedom and an application of discipline” (Bellingham, 2008, p. 56). In other words, the individual requires freedom in order to express him- or herself, but that expression must be situated in a context of discipline if it is to have any meaning. Bellingham (2008) summons Federico Garcia Lorca, from my discussion above, and cites his advocacy for “wild horses, flexible reins” as a model for the tension between apparent opposites in the creative act (p. 107). Only by maintaining both can creativity be personal and human. 

According to the democracy metaphor of creativity, the foundation of creativity is not fixed or even visible. It is almost as though creativity were a verb instead of a noun, harnessing the dynamic but indeterminate potential of opposites brought into tension with one another. Perhaps creativity is best understood as an energy, thus getting beyond its separateness from the world and instead helping to see it as a relation between things (Bellingham, 2008). For example, when Bellingham (2008) cites Nietzsche’s reference to two contrasting influences on humans descended from the ancient Greeks — Apollonian influences (sanity, security, level headedness) and Dionysian influences (instinct, intuition, transgression) — he is not suggesting that we should prefer just one or the other. Instead, creativity arises from the way in which these opposites keep each other honest and helps to maintain a balance. To recall an earlier metaphor, it suggests a simultaneous attention to the angel and the demon. The angel is what makes the demon demonic while the demon pushes the angel to higher virtue. The creative act is the productive response to the way in which opposites hold a person accountable to diverging but equally important values.
The main contribution of the CREATIVITY IS DEMOCRATIC ATTUNEMENT metaphor is to emphasize that creativity doesn’t happen at one of the poles, but by an attunement to opposites (Bellingham, 2008). The creative person, then, is one who carries out his or her work with a sensitivity to these opposites and navigates the productive tension between them. Richards (2010) writes that “the creative person is both more primitive and more cultivated, more destructive and more constructive, occasionally crazier and yet adamantly saner, than the average person” (p. 205).

**Literature review conclusion**

What I have collected here is a range of metaphors that are used to describe creativity. At first glance they can seem scattered — what unites them, if anything? Or are they a constellation of points that don’t overlap at all, and only converge on the single point that they evoke, this still-mysterious notion called creativity?

A common way of grouping metaphors is to divide them into mechanical versus organic themes. Here I have tried a different method. The first section (with the exception of the madness and possession metaphors, which I have placed at the beginning to reflect the historical course of thinking and writing about creativity) includes metaphors that configure creativity as an object or a thing. That is, they emphasize the noun qualities of creativity and try to understand where it can be found or how it can be coaxed out or what attributes define it. A further discussion of these product-centred metaphors could examine the extent to which they are driven by economic values. The second section is organized around more process-centred metaphors of creativity, or ones that emphasize the verb aspects of creativity like the relationship between a person and the world. Further research could examine the role of spirituality in this relationship.
Most efforts to group metaphors thematically, however, are fraught with complications. Explicitly or implicitly, describing one metaphor inevitably summons others along the way. Explaining how CREATIVITY IS DEMOCRATIC ATTUNEMENT suggests that creativity is also an energy; the metaphor CREATIVITY IS ILLUMINATION implies that it is also seeing, and suggests that importance of perspective. Other metaphors contradict one another — how many times did I write that a thought “arises” or “appears”? Each verb implies the workings of a conceptual framework that often goes unnoticed in the effort to describe an idea — to acknowledge each one would arrest the communicative properties of language, reducing the text to such self-reflexivity that it could say almost nothing. This should not be taken as a failure of language nor of this text. It is difficult to decisively divide metaphors into neat thematic categories. Each one reveals something important about the topic. Indeed, each metaphor “illuminates” certain aspects that are obscured by others (Moran, 2009, p. 16): in Merrell’s (2006) words, “[the mechanism metaphor] is capable of dealing with straightforward methods for problem solving; [the organic metaphor] introduces the importance of emergentism; [and objective idealism] ushers in the meditative, co-participatory role of the creator” (p. 128). In this way there are multiple facets to creativity — ways in which creativity is many different kinds of product and many different kinds of process. The purpose of this exploration is not to arrive at a singular understanding of creativity, but to acknowledge and celebrate the diverse ways it can be conceptualized. The next section presents my effort to find further metaphors of creativity by examining my own experience of doing fieldwork in Buenos Aires, Argentina.
Chapter 4: Good Winds Chronicle

Searching for metaphors for creativity in Buenos Aires

He who has once begun to open the fan of memory never comes to the end of its segments; no image satisfies him, for he has seen that it can be unfolded, and only in its folds does the truth reside. (Benjamin, 2007b, p. 6)

Creativity is a purge

I emptied my mind of English during the flight to Buenos Aires like I was shaking out pockets of coins that no longer had any value. I knew it was important to stop thinking in one way and start thinking in another way. I was strict about making rules for myself, for better or for worse, and especially rules that compelled me towards a place I wanted to go, namely, into a different kind of knowing, so I renounced English from there on in and insisted that it was Spanish only. That went for speaking, listening, reading, and writing, in that order. The penalty for breaking the rule was diffused and abstract, but no less real. I believed that every word in English slowed me down. It was the equivalent of stalling. It was a stoic streak that I had complained about at other times, thinking that I might laugh more if I could give it up, but it had gotten me this far and to me it was important.

I hadn’t spoken Spanish in a while. That good language and I had become estranged. I knew it was there, but it wasn’t with me in a daily way. I often think of language as though it’s hanging in the air around the people that use it, like little lights hung from trees, so that when I want to speak all I have to do is pluck some words and give them back to people — not necessarily their own words, but the ambient words that are shared among us, in our community. It’s also why reading is so important, because it’s one of the most well lit trees I know, showing
me the best of what language can do. This usually means that I can only speak a language when I’m in it. I have to be close enough to see the lights in the trees. I have to be able to reach them myself. Sometimes I’m embarrassed to tell people that I speak Spanish because, if asked in English, I can’t remember a word of it. It takes me some time to make the switch. A flight is a good place to start.

Unfortunately it was a slow switch. Forsaking English was the first step, as though my mind were a space that only had room for so much, an idea I disagree with in principle but in practice seems to help me understand what to do next in certain situations, but for the first half of the flight I was suspended between two languages with a mind that seemed empty.

Maybe if it had been totally empty it would have been more comfortable. Language, it seemed, was the beginning of judgment and it limited the openhearted experience of simply being alive in the universe, a notion that would come up later in one of my interviews. But there were always a few words left over rolling around on the floor of my mind, some in English, and then here and there, a few in Spanish. Some Spanish words came to me over the seats of the plane or down the aisle, or in hushed voices between the elderly couple that muttered next to me, just loud enough to make out the texture of the sounds but not the meaning. At times a fully formed Spanish word reappeared in the air, over the loudspeaker, explaining the altitude or the schedule of meals, and I collected those words like I was putting them in a little purse, the same one I had filled on other trips and reluctantly emptied each time I came back to English.

At first the words had odd shapes and they took up much more space than similar things I had known in English. One word in Spanish occupied about as much room as a dozen English words. Because I had forsaken my first language, none of the Spanish words were tethered to any counterpart in English. If they had a partner it was the accumulated experiences I had had of that
word, a personal history of language. Otherwise they existed on their own terms, alone, although soon enough they were grouped with others of their kind, also in Spanish. I wasn’t replacing one word with another, which was a slow way to think about language because it would have meant working through two languages at once, and also through the mysterious space between them that was like another language in itself. Instead the Spanish words had their own life, their own light, although it was more erratic, at times wild and bright and other times dull, than the English words that I’d renounced when I took my seat. The problem was just that I had fewer of them.

For many hours of the flight the Spanish I accumulated was a random mix of discrete objects. I picked them up one at a time and repeated them to myself to get used to their sounds again. There wasn’t much to work with at first. I kept coming back to the same words like a lumbering brute, ready to do something with them but not knowing what to do. Then, a woman in the seat ahead of me turned to the person beside her and said, *Casi llegamos*. It was a banal phrase, common and plain, something like “we’re almost there” in English, although more like, “almost we arrive”, at the same time that it was entirely different from anything English could express, not just because of the sounds and the syntax but because of its history. It had a place in a thousand years of speaking that was all its own. If it had anything in common with “we’re almost there” it was just that people tended to say them in similar circumstances. Something bent outward like my mind was a lens that I had thought was flat but turned out to be curved; things I thought I recognized slid and transformed along the surface. Where I was going was more than words. I buried all my English and laid the new shape of language out before me.

**Creativity is a guide**

A craggy man with a permanent scowl led me from the taxi stand to one of the cars that were waiting outside the airport. He reminded me of hatred, as though he had been living in hate
for so long his face had hardened into an angry spike that culminated in a sharp chin. I asked him how the day was going so far and I looked up at the sky, adding that it was a cold morning. Because my fate would soon be in his hands I wanted to make a connection that was more human than the crude transaction of paying him to do something he didn’t seem to want to do in the first place. I felt uncertain in taxis because I had no control over where they went, knowing in the end that they could take me anywhere and I wouldn’t realize it until it was too late. The craggy man looked the other way and muttered something as if the words were dribbling down his chin. At the other side of the parking lot he handed a pink slip of paper to one of the drivers and stood beside us. I was relieved that he wasn’t the one who would take me into the city. I greeted the driver and climbed into the back seat with my bag beside me. The craggy man spat on the ground and walked away. I wondered if I had failed some expectation, if I was making it obvious that I didn’t belong here just minutes after arriving. We left the airport and sped along the highway into Buenos Aires.

The driver and I talked enough to demonstrate that we were people with lives, then, when I could feel the aura of his family around him, his wife and his two kids, like they had softened the edges of his face and turned his big, hard hands into nothing more than the tools he used to eat his breakfast and drive this car, I let myself go quiet. I looked out the window at the growing buildings and the billboards that lined the highway. I had the feeling when I travelled that the world appeared just for me, assembling itself a couple of seconds before I got there and collapsing as soon as I was gone, so that I was needed in order to make all this exist. My dad’s vision of travel was gentler. He told me once that each place we go we leave a little candle that stays burning in the map of our minds, illuminating our memories of that place, so that our path
through the world is lit by nodes of light. He lingered over the phrase “nodes of light” like he enjoyed the way it felt to say it.

Looking through the window of the taxi, I was surprised by how familiar the city was. I recognized something about it even though I’d never seen it before. The apartments and the offices and the grey light of the sky played themselves out like they had always been there. It was like a candle had already been left burning for me.

We exited the highway and lowered suddenly into the neighbourhood of Constitución. I snapped back into my body after a feeling of dozing, getting ready to meet the city. I had heard that the area where I was staying was the Red Light district and that it had a reputation for crime, an opinion that my host would vehemently reject.

Acá estamos, said the driver, pulling over. Here we are.

Suddenly I was out, heaving my bag from the back seat of the taxi, resenting my luggage not for its weight but because it proved that I wasn’t from here. The taxi drove away, leaving me alone on a street in Buenos Aires as the whole city stretched out in every direction from where I stood in my own shoes. I crossed the street through the blue smoke of exhaust to the house number I had been given and knocked at the door. The dead bolt clanged. Victor, the father of a friend and the man I would live with, peered through a shadowy crack, a wisp of white hair hanging over the armadillo skin of his forehead, the lines of his face arranging warmly with a toothy smile.

Soy Adrián, I told him, I’m Adrian, but he didn’t seem to care and ushered me quickly into his tall, dark house.
Creativity is fate

On my first day in Buenos Aires I had only been walking for an hour when my heart stopped, which was another way of saying that it sped up so fast I hardly recognized what was happening. I had walked from Constitución to San Telmo, studying different people as I went — the men with their heads down, the women striding in tall shoes, a pair of hands that took turns tugging at the fingertips of leather gloves, old people aching with dignity — when up ahead, walking towards me on the same side of the street, was a figure I recognized not so much for its appearance but for the way it moved, some shapes that I knew from the back of my mind. Everything around it went blurry and seemed to shimmer. Even the figure itself felt ephemeral, impossible, walking without noticing me yet. Certainty spread up from inside me, the wacky logic of a universe that spoke this way, a language that only blurted out phrases like this every ten years or so, and it stayed on my body in the form of a big grin. As we walked towards each other, the woman ahead of me looked up, stopped in her tracks, and her mouth opened. Her eyes were two dark dots behind her glasses. ¿Adrián? ¿Pero cómo? She said when we hugged. But how? Within an hour of my first walk in a city of ten million people I had run into — by chance — a dear friend in Buenos Aires.

Creativity is an invitation

Gabriela was studying documentary filmmaking for two years before going home to Nicaragua. She was on her way to class and didn’t have much time. She invited me to join her and some her friends for dinner that night at eleven.
I spent the day wandering until my feet hurt, thrilled to be in this city and with plans so soon. Dinner was steak and wine and laughter. It turned out that one of Gabriela’s friends was Camila — I had been given her name and contact information from a friend in Vancouver. The city was converging around me. I explained why I was here, feeling the words come out in patterns that lurched and collapsed to suddenly reassemble outside my mouth. I’m interested in metaphor, I told them, as a type of literacy. I believe that we can learn to read the world by the metaphors we use to describe our lives. I want to understand how people use metaphor to describe a creative process. I put my hand on my chest like I was swearing an oath. What I want more than anything is to meet writers.

I can help you in that, said Camila. Come with me on Saturday, I go to a weekly seminar on contemporary Argentine literature. They are young writers themselves. I’m sure you can interview them.

Creativity is a declaration

It is hard to say where an education begins. Is it when I got on the plane in Canada and started making room for Spanish in my mind, shedding English to embrace another way of knowing? Is it when I set out to walk alone for the first time in a city where I had just arrived, running into an old friend by chance? Was it when she invited me to dinner? Or later that same night, on the stone steps outside a rooftop bar, where we told stories about the last ten years until four o’clock in the morning? One thing is clear: that by the time I asked if this was the beginning, it had already begun. None of these events — opening myself to language, venturing out alone, saying yes — occurred before my education began. It is convenient to get on a plane to learn something and then come home, just as it is convenient to take a class that has a start and end date. It puts neat markers on an experience. It makes the curriculum easier to examine. But a
certain interest drew me to enroll in this particular course on metaphor and creativity, just as I readied myself for the time in Buenos Aires while I was still in Canada. I wrote to friends who had been there, who knew someone there, who had relatives there that I could convey greetings or gifts to; I threw my net as wide as I could. I had read about it and had wanted to know it for years, thanks largely to the books of Jorge Luis Borges and Julio Cortázar, the first writers I read that made me want to write. I was primed for Buenos Aires. I had forgotten about it for years at a time, reducing it to a collection of sounds, a pair of words to mark some place (and nothing more than a place; it was not yet a map of feelings). It had come in and out of my life now and then around the name of a co-worker or a bottle of wine, but nothing stayed. Then, when I had the chance to go there, had the time and the money, I felt an inner shift as I made room for the idea of Buenos Aires and Buenos Aires made room for me. Suddenly nothing seemed more right than going. The place was a vessel for the things I felt I could learn there, and by travelling with a theme, with a particular question, I had a way to navigate what would otherwise be too wide, too open, too much. How do writers use metaphor to express a creative process? I moved through my curriculum by wanting to live the question.

Even though I’ve said that the beginning was gradual, with no singular start, there are moments along the way that stand out. There are many metaphors to understand these moments — they are turning points when one possibility branches off from another; they are Marcel Proust’s ‘privileged moments’, around which swirl the ephemera of rich memory; or they are the punctuations in Darwin’s evolutionary equilibrium, tiny scattered adjustments that draw an arc when viewed over time. Often these moments — of change, transformation, reorientation, and adjustment — take on new meaning in retrospect. Often they are a product of focus and they
emerge with an organic spontaneity as the teller makes room for them or emphasizes them. Often their privilege is a matter of perspective.

Just because every moment is eligible for privilege doesn’t mean that all moments can be privileged the same (I think of Orwell, and how all animals are born equal but some are born more equal than others). Privilege, after all, is privilege over. It occurs within a system of value and meaning, it relies on organization. Here, the privilege of certain moments over others is organized by my written account. My story of fieldwork in Buenos Aires is a collection of privileged moments.

The crash of the Argentine peso in 2001 is a good example of how one moment can be treated in different ways, depending on perspective. Plagued by years of dubious fiscal management, the national currency tumoured with inflation. A run on banks collapsed a weak system of loans. People lost life savings, retirement plans, and the value of their home overnight. I remember from Canada all I heard was “the crash”, as though it was one short, sharp impact that brought the economy to the ground, a violent noise and then silence. But in Argentina people talk of la Crisis, still a moment but one with an entirely different meaning. A crisis is a state of being; it is dynamic. It goes on until it changes. People struggle in crisis; they struggle through it. They emerge. Crisis is not a permanent state of affairs — at least semantically, a “permanent crisis” is oxymoronic. A crisis is relative to other possibilities; a crisis is in contrast to a better way of being. While a crash is narrow and acute, without before or after, lacking context, a crisis has hope for, or at least a memory of, how things could be different; a crisis has time in it.

Those moments — “the crash” or la Crisis — are markers in the life of the country and its people, markers among fields of other markers, each arranged in different constellations depending on perspective and interest. With that in mind I was choosing, or I was making room
for, the privilege of the following moment in the arc of my curriculum: the moment when I put my hand on my chest and declared, More than anything I want to meet writers.

Until then I was following steps, I hadn’t committed myself to the work, I hadn’t made the work happen. The declaration of desire was a moment of action. It became real by saying it out loud to others, and by the way that they took it up. No one said it was ridiculous. No one said I couldn’t do that here. The first response I heard, from Camila, was, I can help you in that. Saying what I wanted was leading me into the curriculum, into a city and a language.

**Creativity is a monologue**

At the dinner table with Gabriela’s friends I had launched into an eager summary of my project. Metaphor, I said, giddy, offers unique and valuable insight into how we see the world. The things we say frame our understanding. We say for example that we’re *luchando contra una enfermedad*, fighting against an illness. Are we really fighting? Do we want to be fighting?

I peeled back the layers of my project like it was an onion, my eyes burning as I got closer to what mattered most. That first layer was about language. It came from a phrase I had read by Paulo Freire: learning to read the word and read the world. I believed in the way that those two things, the word and the world, were bound up. And I believed that the way people used metaphor could show me not just how they were connected but how they could be transformed.

We speak in metaphors all the time, I said. They tell us clues about how we see our reality. If we could learn to reflect on those metaphors and ask ourselves, is this the metaphor I want to use? then perhaps we could reinscribe our experience. We could leave our invisible, sonic mark on the history of language and offer up the unique and transient poetry of our daily lives. We could read our experience by the metaphors we used to describe that experience.
All experience? someone was sawing into their steak.

For now, just one kind of experience. Creative experience, I said, getting closer to what the project was really about. I want to understand what creativity means. This word gets used all the time in classrooms and business meetings but what does it really mean?

Making something? someone said, chewing.

Yes, making something new? said another.

But how do we do it? I said. Can it be understood? Can we get any closer to mapping a creative experience? Is there such thing as a creative process?

Well — and by now I had put down my fork — It’s this and more. It’s many things all at once. That’s the whole point. And metaphor, friends — I felt like a hero — makes room for this multiplicity of meanings. There are all kinds of metaphors for creativity, and each one offers new insight into what creativity means, whether it’s algorithmic or combinatorial or regressive or a democratic attunement between opposite tensions. It turns out that we hold different ideas about the same moment in our minds all the time. Metaphor is perfectly suited as a tool for understanding a concept as nebulous as creativity because metaphor has no trouble accommodating cognitive dissonance. The whole foundation of metaphor is built on a premise that’s logically incoherent and yet we go along with it every day. Metaphor allows us to say A = B. Where’s the truth in that? And yet we say it all the time. When it comes to an idea like creativity, I would say we need metaphor in order to make sense of it. Creativity can’t be pinned down to mean just one thing. That flies in the face of creativity itself. Metaphor expands understanding instead of narrowing it down. So I am here to collect metaphors for creativity by interviewing writers about their creative process. Metaphors, I believe, are a generative kind of knowledge, and they are available to all of us.
I thought I could raise my fork at that point for emphasis but my hand was too sweaty. The fork clattered down the leg of my chair and I had to duck under the table to retrieve it. When I came up again my face was red and the waiter was asking if we wanted anything else or could he bring the bill. My companions nodded that the bill would be fine.

**Creativity is doubt**

Under the question I said out loud about how writers use metaphor to describe a creative process was another question that swam like a dark and terrible fish. It had the power to overturn me and leave me to drown in the wide space of mediocre life: was I a creative person?

For years I had been reading about creative people and trying to meet them. They seemed like a different species. I knew that creativity was everywhere but I wanted to know the people who had put their relationship with creativity at the centre of their life. How had they become writers? What beliefs about language guided them? What had they learned that I could learn from them? Could they unlock the secret meaning of my own life?

Years ago on a university exchange in Cuba I had repeated the phrase, I’m here to meet writers, dozens of times as if it kept me afloat. Whenever someone asked what I was doing that was what I said, until it led me to a book launch where I met the president of the Writers and Artists Union of Cuba. He introduced me to the editor of a literary magazine who gave me a phone number. Call this woman, he said. She can help you. I called, waiting so long in the hot sun of the phone booth that I forgot what I was doing and just watched people swish by on the street, the phone ringing and ringing in my sweaty ear, when finally a woman answered like she’d been running up stairs to get there. I had just enough time to tell her that I was a Canadian student and I was here to meet writers before she said, Look, I’m busy right now but come to this address at eleven o’clock on Thursday. Then she hung up. I skipped class that week and tried to
find the place she had told me. It was in Old Havana, a bell tower with a little bookstore tucked into the bottom and a pile of stairs at the back. I followed a man who I thought might be a writer — he had a lean, gentle face with a thin beard and his posture was low, wearing a bland shirt tucked into his jeans, and he carried a book under his arm. I tried to pretend I knew where I was going. We passed by crumbled rooms full of moss and other rooms full of broken chairs. I lost sight of him and just followed the sound of his shoes on the stone until I got to the tower where the bell would have been a long time ago, and in its place was a table with eight people talking around it. A freckled woman turned and said, You must be Adrián. I recognized her voice from the phone. Sit down, sit down, she said. I’m Reina, we’re starting. It turned out that some of the most prized writers of Havana met here every week to take turns giving talks to one another about some aspect of the literary life. This time a playwright was presenting on the challenges of translating a work set in rural France into a bucolic Cuban dialect. A farm in France doesn’t sound like a farm in Cuba, but somehow they are the same farm, she explained.

The bell tower was affectionately called La torre de libros — the tower of books. I skipped class every Thursday to join them. Soon I started asking the writers if I could meet them in their homes. I wasn’t drawn to them because of their books. I had hardly read any of them. I was drawn to them because of their lives. I wanted to know how it felt to live from the work of their mind meeting language. I showed up at their houses with a tape recorder and a bottle of wine and asked them questions that seem naive when written down but out loud were so sincere: where do ideas come from? How do you know when a paragraph is good? Is there such a thing as fiction? One conversation with the novelist and playwright Antón Arrufat stood out: he told me, citing his friend the late Virgilio Piñera, that a writer needs to learn how to hear himself but also he needs to learn how to write himself. Who was my written self? I wondered. I felt like I
didn’t know enough to know how to write. Maybe if I kept being around writers I would figure it out.

My interest in creativity started before that, too. I hosted a community radio show called the “Creative Experience” at CHMA 106.9FM in New Brunswick about the lives of artists — why writers wrote, what it meant to paint, what happened when people sang. Before that, when I was much younger, I idolized Walter Elias Disney — the man, not the empire or the tantrums — because he had found a way to make a living from his imagination. He had invented a world in his mind that eventually came to inhabit this world. He was living by his creativity.

I was fascinated by the lives of writers. I had listened to every episode of CBC’s Writers and Company for the past fifteen years. When I conducted my own interviews I tried to channel the host Eleanor Wachtel — how would she handle this moment? What word or absence of words might open up a story of this person’s life?

What I didn’t know yet was if I would always look at the lives of creative people from the outside.

What if I can’t do anything original? I thought. What if my most creative act is mediocre? What if my work is fluffy, light, and superficial? What if I’m nothing like my heroes? What if I’m not nearly as good as I want to be? What if I put my life into art and people reject it, find it cliché, pat, conventional, dull, done before? What if I have nothing unique to offer the world and it’s just me, another me, a me among the billions, winking into oblivion with no spark to illuminate even the patch of life I inhabit? What if I do nothing with my mind? Will it mean I didn’t participate in life? Will I have been a waste if I don’t express myself? What if I can’t find the strength to carry out my ideas — what if I’m too weak to deliver my own thoughts? And
what if, once delivered, those thoughts turn out to be ugly? They will be out, I will wish they never happened or that I had treated them better, but by then it will be too late.

It was much safer to investigate the lives of others than to consider my own. It was easier to ask writers how they had become what they were than to become a writer myself.

Creativity is a conversation with Guillermo Martínez

I had done three interviews with writers in Buenos Aires by the time I met Guillermo Martínez in a café in Colegiales. Over his career he had written five novels and dozens of essays and articles. He studied Mathematics at Oxford and, partly with the commercial success of Crímines Imperceptibles (2006a), which was made into a Hollywood film called The Oxford Crimes, he now writes full time.

Many people had already asked him about the connection between mathematics and literature. It seemed to me, though, that the question was often about the impact of mathematics on literature — how did mathematics inform the structure of literature? Did it lend it a logic, a system? In Martínez’s recent book of essays, Borges y la matemática (2006b), a non-fiction examination of the mathematics in the fiction of Argentina’s most internationally recognized literary forefather, Martínez cited Borges as referring to la cerradura y la llave, the lock and key, of literature and mathematics. I wanted to ask Guillermo Martínez if he thought it could be vice versa — could literature inform the experience of mathematics? Could the lock become the key?

There is a process of similar creativities in mathematics just as in literature, said Guillermo. What is it that a mathematician looks for? Or how does a mathematician proceed? He or she studies certain patterns, regularities that he or she sees in an ideal world, a world of ideal objects in the platonic sense. When he finds the cause or the mechanism that makes those objects, he codifies them in a text, which is called a mathematical proof. This has the intention
that whoever reads that text can reconstruct that world that he glimpsed, that he managed to
decipher, shall we say, at that point.

As Guillermo spoke, I looked for the metaphors in what he was saying.

…ideas are objects…
…objects are machines…
…the text is a code…
…the world is an image…

And what is it that a writer does? Guillermo continued. As a writer, one sees a moment of
rupture which gives a new dimension to a story, a story that is, until then, of a slightly liquid
medium, without structure, no? And later what one does by way of coded writing, is one gives
that story the necessary ligature so that an unprepared reader can follow line by line that text and
reconstruct the original world that the writer saw. So, as you can see, the two processes are, from
one point of view, similar.

…and a moment is a surface…
…and a story turns from liquid to solid…
…and a text is a blueprint…

Mmmmm, I said.

The mathematician with his proof and the writer with his text are both codifiers of
something they saw in the first instance, all at once, said Guillermo. It’s like when one sees a
complete scene, but the language comes successively after it, in the case of the mathematical
language as in the literary language. There is a semblance in the creativity.

As Guillermo spoke I thought of Walter Benjamin’s often-cited comment from The
Arcades Project (1999): “Knowledge exists only in lightning flashes. The text is the thunder
rolling long afterwards.” It seemed that each form of art was that long slow reconstruction of the epiphany when the total idea was glimpsed all at once.

Mmmm, I said again.

Creativity is a residency

My first meal at the house with Victor was charming for its awkwardness. I remembered his son telling me on the phone before I left Canada, He’s happy to have you there, I promise, and you can stay as long as you like. But my dad is super socially awkward. He drew out the sounds of those last three words for emphasis. I didn’t have a sense of what he meant by that until Victor met me in the door with his skittery, toothy smile swinging under the two sad lanterns of his drooping eyes. The lower half of his face was joyful but from the nose up he looked like he was sorting through the archives of the two dictatorships he had survived, so that he seemed to be laughing and in terrible pain at the same time. He was a man of habit who moved around the kitchen in almost complete darkness, the only light coming up from the blue flames of the gas stove as they breathed into the bottom of the shadowy iron skillet he used to grill the meat, and the only sound came from the shush of his slippers on the floor.

In the beginning I tried to ask him questions that seemed benign — How long have you lived in this neighbourhood? How cold does it get in winter? — and Victor made it clear with his face that what I had asked and whatever he could answer would have no bearing on the fate of the world or on who we were as people. He stammered, I don’t know, twenty years and zero degrees, then muttered to himself as he sliced tomatoes and cabbage for a salad, insisting there was nothing I could do to help except set the table.

Our meal, the same meal we would have every evening I was home — steak, salad, and half a bottle of wine — was lit by the day’s economic events as they were discussed on TV.
Victor squinted at the screen with his chin up like he was trying to see over a hill far away. I tried to discern whether he wanted to talk or if he preferred that I would vanish, or if I had, to him, already disappeared. I asked him about the newspaper he directed, a weekly Communist paper called Hoy, which came out across the country once a week. His focus came untethered from the TV as he got up from the table and darted around in the dark to bring me the latest issue. We finished the wine and ate mandarin oranges while we talked about his Masters degree in economics, his pseudonym during the dictatorship, his family’s flight to Brazil during the worst of it, the controversies and the endorsements of the books he had written, the quality of beef in the province where he grew up. Now at 72, Victor built his days around the weekly publication of the newspaper, collecting articles, writing e-mails, and on Tuesdays meeting with a few dedicated colleagues to do the layout before it was printed and distributed on Wednesdays. As far as I could tell he ate steak and salad and drank a cup of wine for lunch and dinner every day, and in the mornings he drank mate. I gave up drinking water years ago, he told me with a grin that was nervous and endearing. Then his face returned instantly to a furrowed look of concentration as though he was suddenly trying to decipher how I had appeared in his kitchen.

Guillermo Martínez

So now, Guillermo continued. There is also a very big difference between the language of mathematics and the language of literature, which is that the mathematical language is thought up so that any person reads the same thing in a mathematical text. That also means that it’s thought up so that an artificial intelligence, a robot, can check the ligature and in a way corroborate the truth of each of the steps that are elaborated in the proof. That is to say, the language of the mathematician is a language that tries to do away with all possibilities of
ambiguity. It’s the clearest and most transparent language possible, so that each expression has a
univocal meaning.

…logic is ligature…

…truth is a step…

…language is a surface…

…meaning is a voice…

Wittgenstein reflected a lot over this, Guillermo added. Until what point can this be
achieved. But in principle that’s the intention. That whomever reads a mathematical proof
always reads the same thing.

Meanwhile the literary language is almost the opposite. It’s a language that sometimes
needs ambiguity. We think for example of a suspense novel: the author at once shows and hides
in the same phrase, he intentionally looks for certain mistakes, he looks to leave in the semi-
darkness a few questions. So on one side it’s a language that has a quantity of ambiguities that
resonate on distinct planes with the reader, no? Or rather, one tries to transmit some things but in
an indirect form, in a form that sometimes isn’t so clear, because clarity sometimes ends in
didacticism in literary language.

…knowledge is light…

…language is a series of resonating planes…

…ambiguity is opaque…

So from this perspective literary language doesn’t have clarity as its objective, said
Guillermo. Sometimes the objective can even be a certain half-light or darkness. The readers
resonate always in different ways with the text because they encounter the text with their
libraries, their sensibilities, and their different reading experiences. Two different readers in general absorb the text in very distinct ways.

…experience is a library…

…text is liquid…

I nodded, not wanting to blink in case I lost a word of what he was saying, even though my tape was recording. I felt like I was holding all of myself in the air with my eyes. The depth of the room divided into two planes, our clear table where we sat talking and the blur of everything else. All I wanted was to stay with his words, to keep them coming, and to do that I couldn’t look away. I didn’t consult my notes once. They seemed too far below. Something would shatter if I looked at them. It was more important to me to be completely present, to attend, as though I was two cupped hands full of water, brimming. I wanted him to know that I was nowhere else.

Creativity is mentorship

I owe my discovery of the word pordiosero to a charcoal drawing by Ricardo Ajler.

I had called Lidia a week before and asked if I could deliver a small gift that her friend, my tango teacher in Vancouver, had sent with me. We met for medialunas — half-moons, croissants — at a café near her apartment in San Telmo where she told me about taking care of her mother and about her son, who had moved away with his family, and about a place where I could take drawing classes if I wanted. The space around her eyes was tired but her eyes themselves were bright. We finished our coffees and walked slowly through Plaza Dorrego where Lidia pointed out the art she didn’t like and shrugged with her palms upwards in the air, rolling her eyes and saying, but what do I know?
She offered to meet again the next Sunday to show me an art gallery that she thought I would enjoy. That day we walked slowly to La Boca, talking about art and love, and about how our parents were inevitably our model of what a relationship looked like. Lidia asked if my parents were still together and I said yes, and that each time I saw them they seemed to be more in love. Que lindo, que bueno, she said wistfully. I said that sometimes I wondered if I would ever find that kind of longevity or if my relationships would always be measured in months or in a couple of years or if I might even give up on the idea entirely, defeated. She asked if that was the case and I told her that I was more or less in that frame of mind these days because I had just broken up with someone after two years together. She asked if we had lived together and I said yes. How was it? she asked. It was hard. Did you speak the same language? I said I thought we did but I looked inward to find myself and she looked outward. That’s another language, said Lidia. I said it was like trying to build a bridge between two distance shores and the thrill came from knowing that I could find myself on the other side, but then I couldn’t do it anymore because I hadn’t figured out how to recover in order to keep building the bridge and eventually it or I collapsed. It’s good that your relationships are like that, said Lidia, a few months or even a few years. At your age they are supposed to be that way and it’s good that you are moving around, coming to know yourself. It’s too much to get tied down too early, especially when your heart is open. I can see that you are a thoughtful person who is searching for yourself and I think you should keep searching.

We reached the port and walked beside the brown river to the Museo de Bellas Artes de Benito Quinquela Martín, the restored house of an autodidactic painter who had done well for himself ninety years before painting the lives of the men who unloaded the ships — the fires, the iron, the barrels they carried. Lidia and I wandered among the big work and found things to share
in what we saw, like the way he rendered the reflection of the sky or the red in the fires, using fat brushes and thick paint.

After sunset we took a colectivo back to San Telmo because Lidia said it wasn’t safe to walk, and stopped at the same café we had been to a week before. It was more crowded this time, maybe because winter had installed itself more obviously over the city in the interval, and there was only one table left empty at the back of the room. While we waited for our coffees I showed Lidia pictures of my drawings and some pages from my sketchbook. I think you should pursue this, she said, these drawings, apart from your studies. There is something here that you need to follow. I would like very much to draw like this but I am not much of a drawer, I am a painter. Look, she continued, there are two things that are important for good art, at least the kind of good art we were looking at in the gallery. You need to be a good drawer and you need to know how to use colours. I’m not very good with colours, I told her. Me, I am, said Lidia. I know how to stop before they get dirty. I always dirty them, I mumbled. Start with just two colours, she told me, and work with those until you understand them together. Then little by little you begin working with three, but leave that for later. Just two colours, I repeated. Like what you are doing with your charcoals, she said. They are very good, you can draw, you have that. I can see that you are shy to go to the drawing classes I told you about but know that I am pushing you, I am blowing a breath of air behind you to encourage you to go through the door, even though you are reluctant to do it. She filled her cheeks up with air and blew across the table. I put my hand to my chest to show how thankful I was for this kind of conversation. I was surprised by her clairvoyance, that she had known how shy I was to walk through the door of a building like the one offering art classes, or that she could see how important it was for me to look inward in order to find my place in the world. I know, she said, because I’m like that, too.
As I walked home to Constitución I could feel myself turning back to the city again, knowing that my real challenge lay somewhere ahead. I thought of the last room we had visited in the gallery in La Boca, which didn’t have any paintings in it but instead was filled with drawings. One of them was a street scene with buildings that seemed to be climbing over one another to be the one on top and a figure hunching into the street from the right side of the frame. The drawing was taller than I was and the figure’s face was the same size as my face, so that when I stood close to it I could see the lines that had been scratched deep beside his eyes to show his age. He was wearing a triple-pointed crown that made him look comic, but tragically comic, like a jester who had been banished from his kingdom that very night and was now wandering the dark city, bewildered. Then I had realized that there were three other figures in the drawing, much smaller, that seemed to be softened into the shadow of the walls, and all of them were wearing the same triple-pointed crown and had the same tired, urgent hunch like they were hurrying deeper into the drawing. High above them, on a broken bridge that spanned halfway across the street, the figure of a man was striding with long, skinny legs into the vacant abyss of the empty page. The drawing was called “pordioseros.”

It was the first time I had seen the word so its meaning to me was completely taken up by the image of the charcoal men with crowns. There was something of a reluctant wizard in their demeanor; they looked like they wanted to tell secrets. I repeated the word out loud to myself as I walked, softening the sounds with my mouth until I could open them up to see their parts, *por*, for; *dios*, god, and hold them back together again. The for-gods? The for-god’s-sake? The people-for-god? None of those seemed to fit. I felt the word slide from the mystical to the impoverished, from the residents of a magical city to those who lived on a street made of dry, black powder, but part of the word still clung to a feeling of dignity and asceticism. I couldn’t
admit to myself that it meant simply ‘beggars’, although that’s what any dictionary would tell me. They had crowns; they had a city of their own. I knew that nothing in English was the same as such a beautiful, complex word. *Pordiosero* was a point of convergence — or was it refraction? — for what I had seen in the drawing, what I could read in the dictionary, and what I could make from the words that were hidden within it, but it was also an ever-changing record of my experience of that word.

As I walked I tried to put this thought into my project, which I had struggled to explain to Lidia when she had asked. In order to understand the concept of [beggar], which was in square brackets to show that it was paraphrased from the experience of that idea of the word, I could look to the word “beggar”, in quotation marks to show that it is the word itself; but if I wanted to understand it even further, I could look for words that might be used in a similar moment, which is how I came to “*pordiosero*” and the concept of [pordiosero]. “Beggar” was not the same as “pordiosero”, but they communicated with each other because they both could be used in similar circumstances. An English speaker and a Spanish speaker might find themselves impoverished or living in a drawing by Ricardo Ajler and one would realize that they had become a beggar while the other would realize that they had become a *pordiosero*. The person who could be both beggar and *pordiosero* multiplied him- or herself, becoming more nuanced because he or she became the site where these different meanings touched. They brought one meaning beyond itself to another. In other words, they made metaphor.

**Guillermo Martínez**

Turning to my experience with creative processes, said Guillermo. Well, various things I see in the long term, no? First, that all my novels were initially short stories. Almost all. Of the five novels I wrote, four arose in the beginning from ideas for short stories. So I consider myself
by formation a short story writer. Almost all Argentinean writers initially start as short story writers. What I imagine before anything, what occurs to me before anything is a certain dramatic situation, and above all the moment that I call the moment of torsion or transition. The point of inflection in which the things that one can see in a certain way for, shall we say, the rule of law of the usual, of the quotidian, can turn in order to be seen in another way in accordance with certain fictional laws that have to do with possibilities for the dramatic, with a certain strangeness of the real, with, in the end, all that can appear in the literary world.

…a moment is a material that bends…

…familiarity is a breakable law…”

So that’s the moment that I see and also above all the ending, he said, which are like two questions that interest me. To assemble a knot of relations, the possibility of seeing things as though there were a kind of prism, and the ending. It’s not that the ending necessarily has to be a surprise ending, but it has to give a special density to all that came before. It has to resignify what came before.

…turning points and endings are questions…

…a prism is a knot of relations…

…a story is a weight…”

And later, he continued, many of the stories as I’m writing them start to reveal other potentialities. So for me, to write, the daily exercise of writing, the muscular part, shall we say, has to do with that species of tension that there is between the platonic idea that we were talking about at the beginning, the initial idea, and the potentialities, the bifurcations, which the practice of writing gives place to.

…writing is a body…”
As one goes along setting things up, said Guillermo, defining the characters, the first movements, there are options that close, that are roads that close. One realizes that one cannot advance perhaps in all the directions one thought, and meanwhile other options appear.

I thought of the short story by Jorge Luis Borges (1962) called “The garden of forking paths”. It occurred to me that the title didn’t only describe the labyrinth laid out by the character who flees his executioner, but it also referred to the process of writing in which the original idea divides in different directions by the act of generating the story.

**Creativity is pretense**

How do writers use metaphor to express a creative process? I realized that it wasn’t the question itself that was motivating me. The question was a vehicle that carried me around in the place that I wanted to be. I don’t mean that it was simply an excuse to be in Buenos Aires — if that were the case, why seek out the writers? Why go to the classes? Why attend the workshops? Why write the stories? Why forsake English and stubbornly insist on only Spanish? Why stay when I was lonely?

My declaration, *I want to meet writers*, was a cover for a complex confession: I wanted to be with writers, I wanted to understand the way that writers understand, I wanted to feel less alone in the curious suspicion that only stories made sense of life, I wanted to talk about how writing is hard, I wanted to figure out how they figured out how to do it, and one more thing — I wanted to express how much I cared about them by the way I listened. Why? Because when I heard writers speak — and here I’m generalizing widely, I know — and especially when I heard Latin American writers speak, and most personally when I heard *porteño* writers speak, I felt like they were understanding me. They were saying something that mattered to me, something that felt like my voice just a little. Of course not always and it was peculiar that such a feeling would
come to me from outside of my first language. But I was looking for writers because I wanted to belong, and there was a chance of that for me in Buenos Aires.

Guillermo Martinez

Look, said Guillermo. I am very slow to write. I console myself thinking that there is a time of vigil where one leaves these different possibilities to fight amongst themselves to see which ones survive and which ones bifurcate.

…writing is a vigil…
…time is a place…
…possibilities are competitors…

I wanted to ask him what he does during the vigil. And what is… I began.

This has to do, pardon me, he said, with the fact that I have been a chess player in another epoch, in my infancy.

I understood that from your first novel, I said, putting aside what I was going to say.

Yes. There is something of the game of chess, too. One has different strategies to carry a novel or a story forward, but many times they meet with options. The waiting time is often necessary in order to assess, until what point one is inclined towards a certain direction or towards another; until what point to carry a character forward, interrupt them, etcetera.

…writing is a game of chess…

Now, what was it you were going to ask me? said Guillermo.

I was going to ask you, what do you believe is your role when you are watching these options fight amongst themselves? Your role is to wait, or to push them…

Yes, said Guillermo. Then, No, no.

What’s your relationship to these options then?
It’s… this also occurs in mathematics. In mathematics one often tries different paths, mentally. It’s like carrying forward such-and-such hypothesis and it doesn’t work and carrying forward the next one and it doesn’t work either. One goes along trying different keys, mentally. And a moment arrives when one has tried them all and still the direction that one perceives is the correct one hasn’t appeared.

I thought back to the beginning of our conversation when I had asked Guillermo about the lock and key. I realized that the hypotheses that the writer tests out during the act of writing were like a ring of keys that could serve to unlock the secret of the story, as much for the writer as the reader.

So there is a moment of waiting, said Guillermo, between waiting and disappointment, when the head keeps thinking but in a more secret way, no? There is a kind of accumulation in which it seems that all the options have been tried but there are a few more, often much more subtle, that one must try, which at first glance don’t occur to one. So this time of waiting often has a lot to do with finding a solution that isn’t the most obvious, that is a more secret solution, that takes longer to appear.

…creativity is incubation…

…options are visible or invisible objects…

During that time, one is on the text, one is thinking things, but at the same time one is also listening to what it is that the text has to say, no? Of course this doesn’t have anything to do with the mystical nor with believing that the text talks by itself, no? Or that it’s going to demonstrate itself in a moment. Instead this has to do with being very immersed in the text, so in that moment solutions appear. When they appear, no? because many times they don’t appear and one continues on one of these paths that seems to one better. It’s not that all creative moments
are like this, but every once in a while one is met with a problem that seems solvable and after a certain time the solution appears.

...the text is a surface...

...the text is a liquid...

Mmmm, I said.

Creativity is a workshop

I had a coffee and wrote notes at Bar de Cao on Avenida Independencia until Gabriela came by. We took the subway to her class at the university, the A Line, which I had read was built in 1913, made of wood, and people still had to pull the train doors open with their hands. Gabriela told me that Julio Cortázar had lived somewhere along it, too, so that when Gabriela and I were seated side by side on the wooden bench and I pointed at the old leather strap that held the window down, I could say, maybe Julio touched that strap, and when Gabriela touched it after, I could say, now you have touched it with him, and together we could laugh about how history connects us.

In the class I felt hungry, then dizzy. Three hours of listening emptied my stomach and with it my concentration. I held on to the words that people said as though the room were water and language were the only thing that floated. When it was over, my face was exhausted from attending — nodding, smiling, laughing at the right times. I bought Gabriela a snack at a café across the street, glad to have something to offer. The conversation and the food revived me so that my Spanish improved and I was able to ride on top of my sentences again, like when I was at my best. Talking and listening in a group had always been hard for me; one-on-one I could hear as though every word were meant for me.
From the café I went alone to a taller for aspiring writers, a workshop that the boyfriend of a friend of a friend had invited me to. I stood below the door on a dark street where cars only rarely passed at the distant ends and I thought about crime. I buzzed the apartment number and a man’s voice asked me to wait because others were just about to arrive and he didn’t want to come down twice. I said it was no problem and scuffed my shoes on the broken sidewalk under the pale yellow streetlight, wondering briefly if it was better to stand in the light or the shadow, to show who I was or to hide it, and which one would keep me safer, when a willowy, thin woman joined me. I asked if she was going to the workshop and she said yes, you too? I felt myself opening up with a sense of leadership that I only know from moments when I glimpse the ways in which we are all outsiders, all a little scared and unsure, all wishing someone or something would make us feel at home. At that moment Matías, the voice from the buzzer, came down the stairs and let us in.

I was thrilled to be in this stranger’s apartment talking about what makes a good story, passing mate and eating biscuits. It was good to be in a fixed space when trying something new because I could find a place among the people that were there and know that that place wouldn’t vanish every time I moved. The writing group gave me a steadiness that I could relax into a little more each week. When we read a story together I could only comment on part of it while another part of it always remained in shadow. When I read in English I was seeing something beyond the words, like language was a wall made of a thousand tiny windows through which I could see experience made fresh; but when I read stories in Spanish I saw the windows themselves — partly because their frames were so pretty — and only with a focus that was both earnest and relaxed could I see what was beyond them, the bigger sense of place as it was glimpsed through language. In the best moments, though, which were also the simplest, I was able to hold my page
like everyone else, to read along with the story and to notice the astute comments of others with a nod and the wry ones with a smile. That, for me, was enough to feel at home, and when Matías asked me after a silent spell, Adrián, ¿qué pensás? Adrian, what do you think? I felt no flood of sweat or fear to hear my words come out. I was surprised, then relieved, then comforted to realize that I had something to say after all.

I wanted to walk home when the workshop was over but there was one section near El Once that people said was not safe. I took the subway, crossing the hour and a half that it would have taken me on foot in ten minutes underground, missing all of the city, the yellow light on the buildings in winter, the scarves and the clop of boots, then came up to the ground at San Juan station and walking the last blocks quickly home. Victor had already eaten but he sat with me at the table, smoking cigarettes while I chewed my steak and we talked about words I had learned. He told me different cuts of beef and teased me for what he called the monarquía de cartón, the cardboard monarchy, that we have in Canada. While we laughed I took clandestine photos of him with my phone and when I looked at them upstairs I realized that they made me happy, that seeing him made me happy, and having the pictures meant that I would have the chance to draw him as though drawing him were a tribute. Then my mind rushed back to something Gabriela had said at the café that afternoon: Why don’t you come and live in Buenos Aires for a while since you seem to like it here so much? You could write your dissertation and I could pass you my apartment when I leave in December or January. Grinning, I had told her how I was bursting with the dream city I could feel inside me and that part of me wanted never to leave.

Guillermo Martínez

How long should one wait? Guillermo said out loud, asking himself the question I would have asked if I had wanted to interrupt him.
In the end one must stop waiting and commit an error, he said. Or rather, elect a solution that you know is not the best but that permits you to continue ahead, no?

…writing is movement…

How do you know if there is a resolution for your story? I asked.

Well, that’s interesting. Look, I, perhaps with my experience as a mathematician, have a sensation that there is also a certain predetermined platonic form for each fiction that one thinks up. Or rather, one goes along approximating this form, in spite of knowing that one is postulating each phrase one’s self, until a moment when one perceives that one is in tune and that things are going well, when the fiction generates as if it were an autonomous mechanism. In a certain way, it generates its own responses and its own solutions.

…a story is a machine…

…writing is tuning…

…creativity is discovery…

And it’s not totally absurd to think of it this way, Guillermo added.

I didn’t say it was! I laughed.

No, I say it because I think of it from the point of view of the rationalist that I am, because when one formulates laws it’s like defining a game from those laws, no? In some ways it’s like the story adjusts itself to these initial laws that one postulates at the beginning of the fiction, no? It’s curious because sometimes one has the sensation that he really arrived very close to what can be done with the account, yet one sometimes stays with the sensation that another person with a different focus would have written a better story, no? using the same materials.

…writing is a game with laws…

…form is fate…
…a story is an arrangement of objects…

…completion is a place…

Creativity is finding parallels

Most days I walked up Avenida Callao and crossed at Corrientes. That intersection felt like the centre of the city but whenever I arrived to it I was forced to decide if I would go east or west, since I didn’t know how long I could stand still on the corner letting the city pass by me without feeling lost, purposeless, and used up. I preserved myself by constantly moving. For the first few days I always turned east towards the obelisk that stood distantly at Avenida 9 de Julio, moving towards it at first directly then, as I felt more courageous, taking side streets north or south while still wending my way in its direction to pop out on the avenue at different points but always with the obelisk in sight. Such a monument seemed to mark the centre of the city and as long as I knew where it was I would not miss anything. As time went on and I walked further from the obelisk I always had it in mind like a pin holding the fabric of the city in place. When I was more comfortable in Buenos Aires, though, I avoided the centre since it seemed too predictable, not to mention too hasty and impersonal, and the life of the city that I wanted to know extended along the streets away from it.

It was the same with language itself: at first I had to search for its biggest monuments. I had to find the places that were the heart of its use — I had to understand the obelisks and the Avenida Corrientes of Spanish. I was pulled to this centre of the language just as I was pulled to the centre of the city. The peripheries of both were lost on me. I wasn’t sensitive to their nuances, their quieter spaces, and to dedicate myself to them seemed like an overly-meticulous project when there were such big signals of life mixing and exchanging at the centre.
By the time I could predict what I would find on Avenida Corrientes before I even got there, I had already begun choosing the streets that lead away from it. It began when I walked west, away from the obelisk, feeling at first that I was leaving the city behind, having no idea how far it stretched ahead of me. The trees overhead stooped to embrace the street and there were more second-hand bookshops then those faded away and became boutiques, restaurants, cafes and office buildings. Pavement widened or divided around billboards and apartments; sidewalks broke apart. I recognized other avenues that crossed perpendicular to the one I was on. In my mind they were markers that I could lay down in the mental map I was writing, moments where what I had thought was unknown in fact crossed with something familiar, a street that began near my house and passed through where I was now — busier, peopled with a different class of fashion, or calm and empty — so that the logic of the city felt safe and wild at the same time. It was as though these continuations of streets I had crossed in other parts of the city were proof that I would not get totally lost, that I could find my way back as long as I knew where to find a few of the major avenues. All I had to do was pay attention to how I had gotten there and notice what was ahead, not necessarily so I could retrace my exact steps, which I refused to do, but so that my map of the city grew denser, more personal, with every foray.

It was the same with words I had heard before that appeared in new sentences — I could use what I knew to explore the wild geography of the language. And if I got lost in language I refused to repeat myself and instead tried to find a different way to what I had wanted to say. By the end of my time in Buenos Aires I only went to Corrientes as a meeting place, since the intersection with Callao was an easy landmark. I was no longer drawn to the obelisk, no longer needed it to orient myself, having realized that it was a false centre to a city that was diffused all
around it. At its busiest places the noise of the city masked its subtleties. Language was happening at the outskirts, where streets I knew were crossing ones I’d never seen before.

**Guillermo Martínez**

Guillermo told me about an essay by Ricardo Piglia in which the author wrote a story as Hemingway would have written it, then he wrote the same story as Poe would have written it, then the same story again as Chekhov would have written it. And then there is a sensation, Guillermo said, once one has read enough, when one says no, I’m not going to write this in this way because that’s how so-and-so would write it.

…creativity is finding a personal voice…

Do you believe that there is a ‘Martinezian’ world? I asked him, wondering if his own work had become a larger reflection of a singular self.

Well, a big part of my efforts, novel after novel, is to try to do different things. But yes, one goes along conforming. I always say that the tradition one has to be most careful about is that of one’s own books.

Mmmm, I said.

Or rather, in writing a book one learns a quantity of things about how to write this book and various similar ones.

I laughed, seeing suddenly that each book was an escape from the one that preceded it. Each work had to flee from its family to make its own family elsewhere.

…the safety of patterns…

**Creativity is a scavenger hunt**

On Saturday morning I followed the directions Camila had given me and walked to El Once where I buzzed at the address of the seminar. Camila had already texted me twice to ask if
I was close, having offered to meet me nearby so we could arrive together, and a third time to say that the wind was too cold and she would see me inside. I arrived panting, torn between the courage to apologize and the cowardice of running away and not going to the class at all, when Alejandro, one of the instructors, came down and let me in. As we walked up the three flights of stairs to the room he told me in a thin, high voice that seemed to be holding back the flu or a ghost, that Camila had explained a little about my project, that he hoped he could help, and that I was welcome to interview anyone I liked. With our shoes echoing on the old marble he lead me to a tall room marked by frosted glass doors, where six people, including Camila, were huddled around a wooden table facing a young bearded man with lofty eyebrows who was drawing a line in erasable marker across a whiteboard. Camila winked at me and I nodded my apology, begging forgiveness to the group for being late, a phrase that has always been more accessible to me in Spanish than in English, conveying all of the dignity I would wish of it without sounding baroque. Alejandro, now seated, smiled with his hands folded in his lap, still wearing his jacket, while Vicente, the other instructor, holding the marker vertically like a candle, waved away my apology and said they were happy to have me before resuming his timeline of significant Argentine publications dates from 1970 to 1990.

The single portable heater that was balanced on one of the benches did little to warm the room but the cold wood and the air that was almost chilled enough to show my breath added to the sincerity I felt in being there — it was as though the cold made us heroic for spending our Saturday in class, choosing lectures on the Argentine novel over… what, I couldn’t imagine. In this way it’s hard to say if it was the topic itself that thrilled me or if it was the fact that we had all come out for it, that talking about novels was worth a Saturday, that warmed my heart and made me want to read and understand everything. I learned later that Vicente and Alejandro had
been instructors at the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters at the University of Buenos Aires. Their work there had since changed or ended — I didn’t ask, but either one was common — and they had started this weekly seminar on contemporary Argentine literature. The group of students, which ranged in number from five to fifteen depending on the day and the time of year, had followed them to this unmarked room for the kinds of conversations that had started at the university but could become something else off-campus. There were readings, but no assignments. The fact that we were there on a Saturday for no institutional credit, paying a small tuition to buy coffee, pastries, help the teachers and contribute to the room, seemed like evidence enough that what was offered had its own intrinsic reward.

I kept my jacket on because of the cold and because everyone else had kept theirs on, too, and I felt like I had found a posture and a placement of my hands in my pockets that reminded me of the people around me. I watched as Vicente quickly filled in the map of trends as he understood them in the literary landscape of *el Proceso*, the euphemism for the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, and later when he made a reference to Bakhtin he looked at me to ask if I was following, if this was okay or was he talking too fast.

*Adrián, ¿me segís o hablo muy rápido?*

I felt the excitement that I knew from hovering at a level of understanding where all of me is in the present, all of me is summoned for the current idea and, to my joy and surprise, I am keeping pace with it just barely. *Todo bien,* I said, All good. But Bakhtin and literary theory in Spanish! It was no shock to the language itself nor to anyone else in the room, but because I experienced all of them from outside it was a shock to me to be somehow in the scene, in the room and the language and part of the conversation. Ideas took shape and rolled ahead of my mind to re-form at the fingertips of my understanding — I brushed them and they rolled again to
take new shapes, some of them even changing colour as they moved. I was racing with the lightness of air while sitting on a cold wooden bench with my hands in my pockets.

¿Te gustó? Camila asked me when we were standing outside. Did you like it?

I didn’t know what to say. Yes! Would not have been enough, although I said that just in case it was as far as I could get. Yes, I told her grinning, as though inside I were spinning as much from what had been said as for the fact that I had been there to hear it. Me alegro, she smiled, That makes me happy, vanishing all too quickly down the street to do errands.

For each class of the seminar there was a novel to read, and each novel had to be found somewhere in the city. The first book on the list had been published thirty years ago and had not been re-released. I looked for it at the used bookstores on Avenida Corrientes, hoping that I would be able to find it on my own since asking the shop owners for it out loud seemed like a betrayal of the belonging I could maintain if I didn’t talk. It wasn’t only that I didn’t want anyone to know that I was not from here or that I wanted to maintain the charade for as long as possible, but that I didn’t want to realize it myself, either. As long as I moved up and down the shelves, flipping through spines, tilting my head sometimes to read a title or pulling something down to leaf through it, I was behaving the same as anyone else in the store. If I belonged to them then I belonged to me. But as soon as I spoke, even if what I said was clear and true and proper, I would hear a tiny tremble in my voice that was the symptom of a deeper uncertainty. My fear wasn’t just that I might say it incorrectly, but that I was blind to particularities that I would never know how to see — that I might say it perfectly and still be wrong. The feeling of belonging was a carefully conducted performance whose most challenging audience was myself, although my gaze was steadily on those around me for clues as to whether I should leave the
stage or allow myself to stay. If I believed that they believed me, then I believed me, too, and I belonged.

In the first shop, when I couldn’t find what I was looking for, I waited for a space to clear around the shop owner’s desk. A grey haired man with a drooping nose was leaning with his elbow on the counter, tilting his head to the side to say something to the shop owner while they both looked out at the sidewalk where the sound of umbrellas raked along a single, low hanging branch near the doorway. I did circles around the table of books, looking at the spines as though I was peeling back layers each time I went around, finding different titles every time I passed. I felt like I was unwinding something, turning a machine by walking in circles, looking down at its centre where names and words took shape. On each pass I reserved part of my vision for the man at the counter, hoping he would leave so a space would widen where I could slip through and speak out loud to the shop owner. I pulled a book from the table and flipped through it for its ink and paper. For a second as I held it I saw in my mind the city of Buenos Aires as a dot on a high aerial map, one that was drawn by other trips to South America when I had held books in other countries, and the moments when I had noticed where they were published condensed like an accordion puffing sound onto the words, ‘Published in Buenos Aires’. I felt myself falling into the map, farther and farther down until I was standing in this bookshop holding a book that was published in this very city, the heart of publishing for an entire continent. I stood among the words, *Publicado en Buenos Aires*, like they were written on every street.

Another man in the shop approached the counter and asked for a book by Walter Benjamin; the owner nodded and pointed to the far side of the room. I practiced the way the man had spoken, putting my book in the place of Benjamin’s and trying to match his intonation.
The man with the grey hair and drooping nose showed no sign of moving from the counter. I stood beside him as casually as I could and asked the owner for the novel. The other man swiveled his head to watch this peculiar voice. He blinked; I could feel him blink. *No, no lo tenemos,* the owner shrugged. We don’t have it. The two men stared out the doorway again. I left through the space where they were looking. An umbrella scraped the branch.

I asked for the novel silently to myself as I walked along Corrientes until I reached the next shop, repeating the words with my tongue moving inside my still lips, not wanting to appear crazy, wanting above all to appear familiar. I went straight to the counter to ask instead of stalling at the shelves or hovering over a table. Waiting only made it harder. I found that if I used the momentum of the street to carry me to the counter it was easier to let the words tumble out. I thought of a cricket pitcher winding up, trotting before the throw. The sentence was my ball.

The glue in the copy I found had dried up in the thirty years since it was published. The yellow pages fell apart like a deck of cards. I was pleased that it was so destroyed by time and use — or just plain heat, I suppose, from a season I had never known in this country — that I had to wrap it with an elastic band to hold it together. It seemed like proof of travel that connected me to readers I had never met. I read it hunched over in cafes and cross-legged sitting up in bed. I was earnest and determined, plowing myself across the pages, although my commitment was more to the act of reading as an homage to literature itself than to the book I was holding. I wanted to be inside the language of the story, to hear meaning and experience come through me by way of the book, but I didn’t get much out of it. Even when all the words made sense there was always some larger picture that I couldn’t see. I was reading it, sometimes very smoothly and even with the twitch of a smile at certain phrases, without understanding it. Or maybe I was understanding its parts without understand its whole, which was still for me a genre of
understanding, but I wanted more. The book was like a friend who had snubbed me. I felt rejected and bitter. If it wouldn’t make room for me then I wouldn’t make room for it.

I was not the kind of reader who moved across the territory of every new sentence with a dictionary in hand. I paused when I came to a word I didn’t know but it was more of a rolling stop, like coasting through an intersection at four o’clock in the morning when no one is around — a gesture of effort, a chance to look left and right before proceeding without giving up much momentum. I believed in the pleasure of reading — if I didn’t enjoy reading then I was doing it wrong. This meant finding something about the writing that pleased me. Sometimes it was nothing more than the shapes of the letters and the word on the page. In those moments writing was a visual object, the text making a particular wall of scaffolding up the height of the page. Otherwise it was a word, a sentence, a way of speaking that I had heard and could hear in my mind as I read it, like the writing had brought that voice to life or the voice had brought the writing to life, I couldn’t tell which and was pleased either way. If there was nothing in the writing then I looked for pleasure in the act of reading itself, in the stillness and the inward gaze and in the sincerity it projected. I believed that a young man reading a novel in the window of a café made the world a better place. Even when no one saw me, when I was reading alone in bed late at night — the later the better — I believed that the city was improved by my act. Reading was a gesture of strength, of gentle self-reliance; it was evidence that one could be alone without being lonely. And whenever I saw someone reading I was relieved to know that their thoughts were somewhere else, out of reach, that they were exhibiting a wild, quiet freedom.

I had finished a little over half of the first novel when it was time to discuss it in the seminar a week later. With my heart racing and my fingers numb from the cold, from nervousness, or from skipping breakfast, I made a single comment that began with a sentence I
had copied out earlier while reading. I cited the page number and was honored by the quick sound of rustling as other people travelled through their books to find it. Vicente stopped wagging his white marker and listened while I talked. I was flattered and embarrassed to be occupying this silence with my voice, a silence that had widened precisely because of my voice, making a space and filling it at the same time. Seconds later when it was over Vicente said, *Si, muy buena lectura*, good reading, and continued my comment in his own words. He added a detail to his timeline on the board and flipped the marker in the air while he talked. I breathed out into a room that I had joined, like the conversation was a heavy truck hurtling past and I had moved close enough to be pulled along by the wind that travelled with it. From the middle of the table I chose a pastry to celebrate.

The next book was still in print. I found it at El Ateneo, one of the most glorious and spectacular bookstores in the world. The store had been converted from an opera house. The main floor, the balconies, and the box seats were filled with books; the stage had been set with a café hung with long velvet curtains. I understood very little of the second book’s tone, except for a few descriptions of swamps and disease that thrilled me because of how vividly they appeared, but in the class I realized that I hadn’t understood much of its plot, either, since I seemed to have invented an entirely different story than the one we talked about. From our conversation I learned that the author relied on irony to make socio-literary critiques in the form of novels; I already knew that irony and comedy were the last sensibilities one learns in a language that isn’t one’s own. Instead though, I let myself enjoy the abundance of natural nouns that happened to crop up in the book — every paragraph seemed to be full of birds, trees, and grass, things I couldn’t get much of in the city. These nouns were, as their linguistic category determined, objects, they were things I could cling to as I moved through the abstraction of the sentence. My eyes found them
and held onto them. The more objects, the easier it was to stay up. Verbs, too, were the next best thing that kept me afloat and allowed me to travel along on top of the story without sinking. But story, at best, was all I got. Only rarely did I feel the work’s poetry, the rush of air that lifted me clean beyond the things and the doing into another way of being with language, a way of being beyond language, that a turn of phrase could deliver. If I stopped to smile at what I had read it was as much because I had really read it, and not just imagined it, so that the smile seemed to be coming through the words and expressing itself on my face in a rare moment when the text and I had merged. Then the text would separate from me and I would lurch along its surface again.

The other books I found in smaller shops in Palermo. My favorite shops were Librería Lilith, which Camila had recommended and where she knew the owner; Eterna Cadencia where I had my second interview; and Crack-up, named, I assumed, after F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous essay. The search for bookstores and books was enough to fill many days and when I found a shop I liked I would stay a long time, then dream up excuses to go back the next day or the day after. The books in Buenos Aires were beautiful, with smooth, matte covers, substantial paper, and confident ink, produced by editorials of every size. Their appearance was modest, which gave them dignity, and none bore gushy endorsements. They were not advertisements, they were books, and because they were “just” books they penetrated deep into the aura of what a book could be. They were honest and true; the books of Buenos Aires seemed archetypal, simple enough in their design to be universal. I had felt the same about books in Paris. With the reading list for the seminar and for the writers I hoped to interview I had good reason to find, open, hold,

---

touch, smell, and even read many books all over the city. These peaceful routines could have kept me happy for a long time.

Then one evening, walking back from Palermo along Avenida Santa Fe, I crossed the street and stepped onto the sidewalk just in time to feel everything freeze. It lasted less than a second but it was like the whole avenue held its breath. The silence broke when I felt more than saw an engine tear through the dusk with two boys on a motorcycle riding hard against the traffic while blue lights on screaming sirens came after them on two other motorcycles. Cars swerved and wailed their horns at the shadow of the boys passing through them. The boy on the back of the motorcycle held on to the driver with skinny arms and a white t-shirt that chattered like a crazy flag in the wind. Then they were gone.

The city felt different after that, as though what had always been there had finally asserted itself. I walked home aching with what I knew: that a chase like that could only end when someone made a mistake, turned too fast, risked too much, outdid himself to outdo the other, and either the boys or the police would sail over the traffic once and for all to smash themselves for a purse or a wallet. Then for some reason I thought of their mothers, the mothers of the boys and the mothers of the police, one at a time in separate worlds that never met except through their sons on a night like this, none of them knowing where their boys were at that particular moment, and the news that would bring one of them to the floor in the doorway of her house. I saw the desperation in the driver of the boys’ motorcycle even though I couldn’t see his face, how alive he was at that moment, how terribly free; and I saw how scared the boy behind him was, holding on to his friend, wishing, I imagined, that he could get off and say “Time out, it’s too much, I can’t do this anymore.”
In my mind the motorcycles kept circling the city all night, that split second repeating on every street I knew until hours and hours had gone by and nothing had changed, everyone was still free and alive, so that in the morning when I heard sirens pass by the house I was sure it must be them.

**Guillermo Martínez**

You said earlier that in fiction, like in mathematics, there is a glimpse of the ideal world. What do you see in this glimpse? I asked.

In my case it’s as if there were certain points through which the novel is going to pass, as if they were stations, said Guillermo.

Ah, I said.

So I know that a few things are going to happen to the protagonist in his infancy, after that, some other things are going to happen in his youth, and he’s going to end in this way. To give you an example, when I was writing *Crímenes Imperceptibles* (published as *The Oxford Murders* in English) I knew how the ending was going to be, I imagined how the two protagonists could find each other, I imagined something of the beginning, how they were going to arrive to the city, but obviously I didn’t imagine all the intermediate incidents.

…creativity is a journey….

…knowledge is a station…

What is it that pushes you to do it? I asked. Because you already know how it ends, you already know the important steps.

No, but it’s still very far from having the necessary internal connection. Or rather, why would he go from here to here? Why would he pass from this station to the other? In other
words, it’s like having the bones of the structure and it’s lacking everything that gives life to the narration.

…a story is a body…

But is there something that motivates you to complete it, to make the work, and not leave it without finishing it? I was thinking of how many times I had abandoned projects before they were done, as if they had outrun me and left me behind.

Yes, Guillermo said. Well, at that early point there is very little, no? It’s very inarticulate. For me what motivates me in all cases is to see all there was in this story. I know that there’s going to be this and this and the ending is going to be this. But, well, all that there is in a story for me is what goes in the middle, practically, no? It’s the life in each one of the sections. That’s the story. It’s not the ending that justifies everything, nor is it the beginning, no. The life of the story is in all sides.

…a story is a life…

Then Guillermo’s voice hesitated, the only time in our two-hour conversation that he seemed to be searching for words.

It’s not exactly… I don’t know, in truth, what motivates me… it’s odd, no? It’s the sensation that I have a story that’s worth the shame, that the best I can do is try to write it, this type of….

He trailed off. I don’t need much more motivation than that, he said. I always wrote. I feel sick when I don’t write.

**Creativity is a bubble**

Then, just like that, a good day ballooned to the surface without warning or trace. As I consider it now the space around it seems to widen, taking on the colour of grey like surveying
the rooftops of a city at dusk, when suddenly this wild ribbon of bliss unfurls upwards from one of the streets. It started with three hours of writing in a café — my first short story in Spanish, then suddenly, a glimpse of my second. I had the sensation that no other place but this one existed. I was sitting in the only café in the world writing the only story there was to tell with the only pen in the only notebook.

When it was time to go it was time to go: the certainty struck me and I folded up my things without hesitating, rested and thrilled with the knowledge that I had already worked that day. What mattered most to me was the energy of what I had gotten down — not the story itself, which I would care less and less about until, after months had passed, it embarrassed me — but the experience of moving something into the world. I walked as though every turn took me deeper into the city and into myself. The focus of writing had launched me into a street that seemed to have been built for my discovery.

I arrived just in time to hear the last of the free music that played three times a week at the Centro Cultural San Martín. I couldn’t stop smiling as the sound soaked into me. When it ended I tumbled out onto the street again, moving as though I had somewhere to go, when really all I wanted was to move in and out of the thick crowd on Corrientes, slipping between the shoulders of strangers. I bought drawing supplies: sticks of charcoal and the long roll of paper that Lidia recommended. It occurred to me that there was no better proof of belonging than walking with a long roll of paper — what tourist had such business here? I clutched it like it meant as much as an Argentine flag. Later I went to the butcher near the house and bought two kilograms of beef for Victor and myself. As I asked for the cuts that Victor had told me, I heard a note of his voice in mine. It fortified me and made it easy to stand by the counter as the butcher traced his knife through the red meat like drawing lines with a pen, the steaks leaning one on top
of the other on the wax paper. I watched his thumbs, his knuckles and his fingers, their thickness, and how softly the big knife moved. That evening I walked to San Telmo for my first tango lesson with Estela. My teacher in Vancouver had recommended her. The class was open to anyone but this was winter so no one came but me. We spent an hour drifting over the tiled floor of a café basement. For the length of one song, one tremendous song that I felt more than heard, as though in fact the room were totally silent and there was nothing but the brush of our footsteps to tell us what to do, we walked as one person. It was the simplest thing, just walking, but walking so much together that each time I stepped forward I was moving into air that was charged with the life of another person. Tango is a dance that is made with two feet, said Estela. One foot from the man and one foot from the woman. If there are four feet, there’s a problem. For a song I knew what she meant. I walked home, made dinner with Victor, and later fell asleep thinking: there is so much here for me to learn, which is to say, there is so much here for me to feel.

That day stays streaming quietly upward, a plume of joy among others that in their moment were steady and grey — at least that’s how they were in the moments I chose to write them down. Now I have the legacy of the words I made when I was there, the notes in my journal, which I use as chances to trust that such ecstasy was real. How is it that some of these feelings rise so high above the stretch of time? In that moment when the goodness of the day seemed to coalesce into one decisive approval, saying with the way that I felt, *Everything is wild and right*, I was infinite — only my body contained me, and even that seemed ready to burst. The momentum by which I tumbled into Avenida Corrientes from the Centro Cultural was the same as the momentum that tumbled into me from the focused act of writing.
Now, months later, I can only summon that feeling by writing my way back into it. I revisit my notes and burrow into memory with these words. I have to trust that such a day really happened, that it really was so good. There’s no sign of it on my body now, no scar or mark, no residue except the invisible trace that feelings leave on existence — that day passed like a feather across the palm of my hand. My notes tell me it was good and so I try to celebrate it in the way I write it, I try to keep true to the celebration I believed in then, one day at a time. Each of these little days calibrates my larger sense of the city, just as words come together to make a language.

It takes more than words to make a language, though. It was the experience of those words that mattered to me most. In Buenos Aires a new word appeared to me at a distance, opaque and hard. On first encounter I could see it, note its location, but had no idea what was inside it. It was a pebble hovering in the air just out of reach. Then as I came to know it — and by know it I mean that I began to see a context around it that was described by the circumstances in which I heard it used — it opened. It was no longer a stone; it had more in common with an exotic fruit covered in a grey peel, with red soft pulp inside, and knowing it meant turning the peel inside out. When I thought of words as stones I saw that they were carefully arranged, mostly in lines, along a page or in the air when people spoke; when I thought of words as fruits I saw that language was the juice from squeezing them.

Guillermo Martínez

Would you say that what you are doing is creative? I asked. Do you use that word?

Yes. Of course, said Guillermo.

The word doesn’t bother you.

To the contrary. I am a defender of the idea of originality. To be creative is to achieve something that in some point hasn’t been done before. A creative person for me is essentially a
person who can find a new angle, a new form of seeing the world, a new form of writing some things. Italo Calvino also has a very interesting essay that’s called “Mundo escrito y mundo no escrito” [The written world and the unwritten world], no? Part of creativity for me is to widen a world that hasn’t been written. To find a way to tell what hasn’t been told. But also to tell it in a different form and with a different angle from what has been told. So creativity can be in distinct aspects of literature but for me it is the number one attribute that I use to judge a literary text.

…the contrary is a place…
…ideas are fortresses…
…creativity is seeing…
…writing can widen a world…

To play a text? I said, hearing jugar, “to play”, when he said juzgar, “to judge”.

To judge, Guillermo said flatly.

Pardon me, I said.

When I read as a reader, Guillermo continued, I have to have the feeling that the writer in front of me is creative, is profound, is intelligent. There are various questions, no? But the first is the question of creativity, which one perceives immediately. Or rather, if I see that it’s more of the same, if you know that you have seen it before… this plays a lot with the question of reading, of the reader just as much as of the writer. The more reading one has done the more it costs to be surprised. But one perceives immediately at once where there is a certain literary density, no?

…surprise is an investment…

…quality is density…

Mmmm, I said.
It’s curious, this experiment, said Guillermo. The turn has touched me to be a judge in different literary competitions with other writers who are very dissimilar in terms of their literary preferences, but when the moment arrives to say of the hundred works presented which are the four or five best ones, we all coincide on the same ones. We can differ after, if we give the first position to this or this or this, but there are always four or five works out of every hundred, no? Four or five out of a hundred that emerge on their own, that shine by themselves, that you immediately recognize, here is a writer. You realize because of a quantity of errors they avoid and because of questions they present with a certain ability, that this person knows what they are doing, that they have read, that they avoid such-and-such error and in exchange they achieve such-and-such things. It’s something impressive in that sense.

…a turn is a touch…

…a moment is a movement…

…opinions are paths…

…mediocrity is a container…

…creativity is luminescence…

Mmmm, I said.

Creativity is meditation

*Soy Adrián*, I said into the gold coloured buzzer on Calle Chile in San Telmo. A woman let me in and brought me upstairs to where I unrolled my mat and waited for two others to set up. The teacher explained that she would begin the recitation and I could join whenever I felt ready. She showed me how to sit and gave me a piece of paper with Sanskrit words written on it. Some of the words had a dozen letters; some had even more. The other people closed their eyes and had no piece of paper. The teacher started chanting.
At first I had no idea what to say, what noises I could possibly make to participate. I let two cycles of the chant go by. When I thought I understood how the first line began and could hear it approaching like a bus coming around the corner, I launched into it but I was so surprised by my own voice that I broke away from the sound as it went past me. When it came back to the start again I joined in, this time bending into the first vowels and faking it through the middle to clip a solid consonant near the end of the line. They passed again and I managed to flex my voice inward at the start of most words to meet them and fall away in the wide space of their middles where I couldn’t make anything out. Some words I noticed were not the words themselves but the space between them, so that the word was made more by how the sounds got there than what they did once they had arrived. There was one sagging junction in a long trough of vowels that passed again and again without me, so that I grew to expect it every time it got closer and knew that I would fail it.

The other voices didn’t stop together to breathe but they each held at their own same place, so that the pauses were scattered over the chant in a rhythm, as though each person had found their way to add silence to the one big voice in the middle that we were making together. My own breaths came at different times so that I felt ambushed by the sudden need to inhale and had to pull off to the side of the chant while it went on without me, circling around to catch up with it later at a pass that I recognized. This chase went on for half an hour and I grew to resent the sound of my own voice, the grainy, nasal drone that shuddered out of my skull, until one quick moment when everything aligned and I found myself on the inside of the sounds. I travelled through the space of the chant with the other voices like we were all one. I was no longer reciting the phrases of the chant; the phrases were reciting me. They were carrying me along. They were making themselves around me, through me, by, with, and because of me, but
somehow beyond me, too. Sounds spoke themselves freely. The words already existed; I was bringing them to life by reciting them. The rhythm of language was doing its work and I just got to listen.

The teacher rang a tiny gong when it was over. I could hear our voices passing by in the distance like we were still reciting the chant in the next room, loops of sound falling over the city. My own voice was strange to me, unfamiliar, when I finally spoke. It had been transformed. Gracias, I said to the teacher, dismayed by my lack of momentum and strength. The loops of sound were out of reach.

Guillermo Martínez

Do you believe that any type of creativity can be taught? I asked.

Not exactly that the creative part can be taught, said Guillermo, but yes, one can teach one’s self a quantity of errors that one shouldn’t commit. And yes, one can stimulate oneself to find, for example, different paths to respond to the question. One can attempt exercises of this type. There are variations of the same story. Look, in A thousand and one nights it appears like this, in Chinese traditions it appears like this, in Argentine literature it was done this way… to follow what is called the forms of fiction. Something like what Piglia did, or what Borges does many times.

He continued.

Part of the oeuvre of Borges is that, no? to trace a class of fictional problematic in distinct cultures and then develop his own example. I believe that one can give exercises to kids something of that style. Look how this story is like this, like that. After reading four, five stories that are more or less similar in their essentials, now think of a variant that is not any of these, that is personal. So there’s an exercise in creativity with respect to tradition, no?
...history is a pattern of lines...

...creativity is a variation on the past...

I call that creativity, said Guillermo. It’s not the new for the sake of the new. Instead it’s the new that confronts a quantity of things that have already been done. The new has to struggle in intensity, in profundity, in subtlety with all that has been done behind it.

...creativity struggles with tradition...

As Guillermo talked I watched as any tiny desperate act of creativity I could think of was faced with a mounting wall of better works, the dozens that I knew and the thousands that I had never heard of, as though everything I could do would be obliterated by the indomitable crush of history. When would I know enough?

I pulled my body up with my eyes. Something in me waned. I knew I would stay as long as Guillermo let me, until he gave me a sign — an increased frequency of looks beyond me, or the posture of leaning back with both hands on the table, elbows locked, ready to push off; or something even quieter, like a tired sigh that comes through the eyes when the rest of the day, the things to do next, start to take shape in a face. I would vanish the instant I detected boredom. Until then, I dug for caffeine in the image of my body, hearing myself an hour from now calling back to me to keep going, stay present, this will only happen once.

That demands a profound consciousness of what already exists, I said.

Clearly, said Guillermo. Like a floor. That’s how science is done. Or rather, what is creativity in the sciences? It’s to find the solution to a problem. But on top of that it’s to maintain all the anterior responses. One can’t contradict the anterior. The new theory of physics has to explain a phenomenon that hasn’t been explained, and conserve all the anterior explanations. There is something of that in the creativity of literature, too.
Creativity is patience

My first drawing class at the Estímulo de Bellas Artes was a pedagogical disappointment but a personal success. The teacher was more interested in making long strings of words that he looped over and over my drawing, telling me things I already knew. He spun an epic monologue about how the eye is drawn to contrast and I was trapped nodding at him, realizing that a yes or no question would wind him up again and even a pre-historic grunt would inspire him to adjust my drawing with what he meant, narrating everything he did. As he talked at me I glanced back at my drawing to suggest that I wanted to keep working but he talked faster and moved his hands in the air with greater vigor until I said, finally, Well, I’m going to continue now, and forcibly went back to my work. He talked for a while longer and later drifted to another student’s easel where he wrapped a similar spool of words around her work, although she managed to keep drawing while he did it.

The sense of success came from marching boldly into the studio as though I really had the confidence to be there, taking a drawing board from where they leaned against the wall, adjusting my easel, arranging my charcoals, and drawing the naked body that was reclined on the cloth-covered wooden boxes in the middle of the room. At first I was nervous, facing the certainty that my drawing would fail, so I began quickly in order find out if it was going to work or not — the failures usually announce themselves early on. When it seemed that what I was drawing would be human in the end, I relaxed and felt the weight of my arm in my shoulder as it drifted over the paper. It was good to be in this focused room, to have something to do that did not rely on words. When I left the class, I sent Lidia a text. ¡Fui! was all it said. I went! Right away, she sent back her congratulations.
On Lidia’s encouragement I went back for another class with shorter poses and a different teacher. This instructor, a muralist, was a trudging, heavy man with wisps of white hair above his ears who relied much less on words than the previous teacher. I watched him spend ten minutes beside another student’s easel, looking at her drawing and looking up at the model, then back at the drawing again, sometimes even studying the face of the person drawing as though in it he expected to find the missing link between the life before them and the image on the paper. Typically I dreaded that kind of silent critique. I filled all the empty space with every horrible thought they might be thinking about my work, and at its worst it could compel me to start spewing defenses. But as the teacher came around to my easel to stand beside the weak shapes I had started to conjure I felt a different calm that I derived from knowing that I was somehow outside of the work I was doing. It might have been because it was not my language, not my city or my country, not my way of doing things, that my body relaxed just enough for me to realize that it was tense and I could say to myself, Adrián, tranquilo, he’s just a man with experience, so that when the teacher broke the silence by pointing at what I had drawn, asking me to look closely at the woman who was posing and consider that the angle of her neck was not in line with the angle of her spine but in contrast to it, I could smile and say, Tenés razon, You’re right, without shame or apology.

The teacher always arrived late. I imagined him leaving his home at the time when the class was supposed to begin. The other students seemed to know and understand this and arrived just a few minutes before he did, in time to set up. At the beginning of class I met a woman who showed me where the drawing boards were kept and demonstrated the way that a chair could be used as a low easel in case I didn’t feel like standing. When it was just she and I she was kind and helpful but when the room filled up I found her abrasive, although the other students
dismissed her fondly. During the break she got into an argument with the model, who at that time was warming up with her jacket on and drinking *mate* with her legs crossed, munching a biscuit. The woman I’d met at the beginning of class believed that everyone was entitled to the same rights, which meant that everyone should be limited by the same restrictions, too, including the President of the Republic of Argentina. It’s unjust that the president’s children get to travel in a helicopter, she spat. If we are all equal then we are all equal. The model, who was less than half her age, said that was ridiculous and sure, we can say we’re all equal but of course the president’s children are going to have privileges that we don’t have. The woman shouted at her saying it was wrong and unjust and what kind of country was this, when even the youth wouldn’t listen? The girl shouted back at her like both women were trying to put their hand on top of the other’s hand in a tower that would never be out of the other’s reach. None of the other students looked surprised by any of this — in fact we kept passing the *mate* and eating biscuits while they argued. I was pleased to be part of this familiarity and no one seemed to notice that I was there. The women calmed a little and the model was polite but exasperated when she said, look, *señora*, I’m listening to you, I’m listening to you, but the woman kept shouting at her, Listen to me! Listen to me! The model said, I’m listening but the world doesn’t work like that, to which the woman said, well what kind of world do you want to live in, then? The model shook her head and made a tisking noise. Back to work, then? The instructor yawned.

*Guillermo Martínez*

Every person has a life to tell, said Guillermo. That life will usually be their own. It will serve them once. If he or she had a life full of adventures maybe he or she can take two or three novels from that, but they can’t go further than themselves. This is how it seems to me.
Absently he lifted his spoon from beside the empty coffee cup and put it back down again. The tiny silver clattered. The interview was coming to an end.

There are two main sources in the history of literature, don’t you agree? he said. Literature, and one’s own life, or the life to which one has access, which may belong to family, friends, etcetera. To me it seems that creativity passes a little beyond all of this, beyond the immediate, beyond a chronicle of one’s self.

…creativity is transcendence of the self…

…the self is a territory…

I conveyed all of my attention through my eyes, saying nothing.

Unless, Guillermo added, what one has to say is said in a form that hasn’t been said, no?

[Translation of a conversation recorded in La Tienda Del Café de Avenida Elcano y Conde, Buenos Aires July 11, 2012]

Creativity is contrast

After the interview I got more and more giddy as the distance increased between Guillermo and me. As soon as he was out of sight I practically leapt in the air. A stupid smile bent onto my face like a wire trap with a stiff spring. I covered my face with my hand, then gave up and beamed at the street, which now blurred and swirled. Our conversation was a jittery explosion of hope in my memory, carrying me forward, lifting me off the street. The words were spoken to me! Little me! I felt like I had won a prize for existing.

Later I thought of the choices Guillermo Martínez had mentioned in his description of a creative process. Was my path avoiding errors or moving me through them? Had I considered the ways this same moment had been handled in history and, having weighed each of them, was my
response personal and true to myself? Did I, let alone my work, have any density at all? I moved to kick a pebble that was balanced on the edge of the sidewalk and missed.

**Creativity is saying yes**

At the end of one of the drawing classes the woman who believed in equal rights and equal restrictions for all asked where I was from. Vancouver, Canada, I told her. So you speak English, then? When I told her I did, she took me by the hand and walked me across the room to a tall woman with a smile that flickered like an old film. She explained to me that this woman had been coming to the drawing class for months but didn’t speak a word of Spanish and so could I translate for her.

When the tall woman heard that I spoke English all the lights in the theatre of her face lit up and she almost cried. She hugged me and kissed me twice on the same cheek. She said that everyone was nice to her in the class but she couldn’t talk to anyone. Her name was Rita and she had been here for two years, from Australia. Her husband was a tango teacher and she had danced with him one night in Sydney and “that was that”. She shook her head wistfully. You must come over for dinner, she told me. I felt strongly that I wasn’t there to speak English but I was grateful for her generosity in a city full of strangers. I imagined what it would be like if I had been here for two years and still could not speak a word of Spanish and how I would feel a wall go up around me every time I went to the store or walked along the street or came to this class. Her solitude seemed gigantic. I saw that she was both courageous and terrified to be here the way she was, bewildered that the time had passed so quickly and that she had grown smaller and smaller inside herself. Her drawings, which were superb, appeared to me as a way of speaking about the world in the only voice she had. At the same time, they were a way of looking inward. It occurred to me that it was the same with writing — looking inward to comment on the world.
Two days later I walked to her house in a neighbourhood I had never been to before. It was nine o’clock and the streets were dark. I quickly realized that I was lost. I had studied a map as I always did before going anywhere, nudging my route through the city with my eyes, choosing the streets I knew by watching the names light up in my mind. With each familiar word I saw a picture of the sidewalk, the street, some buildings, and an aura that shone as if from the hearts of the people who I remembered walking there; other streets, meanwhile, had no memories attached to them except for the names themselves, from other times when I had seen them on a map. As I walked I wondered if maybe I had looked at it too hastily and had only counted the number of streets, thinking, just four streets after turning right and then I’ll see it. I believed that the name of Rita’s street would slide into place as though declaring its own truth because I was looking for it, because she had said it to me, like the name itself were expecting me, but all I saw were buildings and shadows and trees without leaves.

I had a map with me, too, in my pocket, but I was concerned about appearing lost. Actually being lost was less threatening. In fact if I could be lost without anyone knowing it but me then I was quite content. I took it as a sign of belonging. But to be lost and look lost was another matter, and possibly a dangerous one. I was surprised by how many places I had been in the world without being accosted, a safety I attributed to a simple practice of walking with intention and not gawking at everything I saw. But there was no more obvious a declaration of not belonging than standing on a sidewalk, looking up and down the street and then up and down another street, holding a map. I learned to lean in a doorway if I needed to check where I was on paper — get off the sidewalk, position myself on a step, put my back to the wall, preferably not right under a street lamp because then my bewilderment was practically a theatrical spectacle, but off to the side so that the light fell across the page from along the wall. If there was another
step behind me then I hitched one foot up in a way I had seen other men do. I speculated that if something bad were to happen on a busy street, it was more likely to be pick-pocketing, which wasn’t really that bad compared to violence. If something bad happened on an empty street, though, violence seemed inevitable. Why go to all the trouble of being sneaky for a little reward when you can be direct and get more? I looked around the streets that night and glumly concluded that I was alone.

I glanced up at the buildings that made the corners of the intersection, trying to find the tiny blue sign that would tell me what street I was on. I was squinting in the dim light when I heard footsteps catching up to me from behind. Without looking to see who it was I turned down the street to the right and walked as quickly as I could without seeming scared. I remembered what one of Gabriela’s friends had told me when I was going back to Constitución late one night: *Cualquier cosa, corre.* If anything happens, just run. *Eso es el único consejo que te puedo ofrecer.* That’s the only advice I can offer you.

The footsteps followed me onto the same street. The other person’s shoes made a scuffing sound that echoed on the empty, lamp-lit walls. I crossed to the other sidewalk and used it as a chance to strain my eyeball all the way to the side of its socket, trying to see who was behind me without turning my head. He was about forty years old with hunched shoulders. His hands were stuffed into the pockets of his black jacket. I saw him look over his shoulder behind him the same way I had done. When he crossed to the same side of the street as me I felt my legs flood with energy. It was like my muscles were filled with light. My hands were sweating and an invisible weight seemed to be pressing down on the back of my neck, above my spine, like something would strike me there any minute and send me sprinting. The footsteps stopped a few paces behind me and I heard the jingle of keys. A door creaked and the shoes scuffed twice in
succession on the steps before the door creaked again and he was gone. The light from my muscles pooled in my knees and my shoulders and didn’t go away.

Then, up ahead, something pounded against the wall and a group of quick shoes roughed the dry street. I couldn’t see what it was through the trees and the shadows cast by the lamps. The same sound pounded again against the wall and there was a sliding noise. Someone had fallen. A young man’s laughter bent upwards through the dark. I summed up my feelings in a popular repetition of nouns that I muttered under my breath in English: Shit shit shit shit shit shit. And then I walked towards the sound.

Why towards it? At what point, I wondered, would I really turn and run? Would I always wait a minute longer, a minute longer until it was too late, believing right until the end that there was always a possibility that everything would be fine? I kept walking because I hadn’t stopped walking, because momentum seemed like the only thing that would get me out of where I was. As I think of it now, when reflection expands time over that moment so that I can examine it, it seems so simple to stop, turn around, walk back, return up the hill or else if I must continue then go down a different street. But the boys had already seen me.

There were four of them, about sixteen years old, playing soccer in the empty street. The ball struck the wall of the opposite building and made the pounding noise again. Their game was centred around the other sidewalk, enough room for me to pass behind them. The momentum carried me beneath alternating tree shadows and lamplight. None of the boys looked up. I passed them, turned left, giving in somehow to everything that could happen next, going down the hill to whatever the city had in store for me. Another man came up the hill against me. I felt my stomach tense and my shoulders relax. I thought of myself as liquid. He passed, breathing hard because of the hill. A car drifted along the street below. I crossed behind it and when it was gone,
I leaned my back against the wall and hitched one foot up on the step to remove my map. Above me on the wall there was a house number and street name. I laughed. It was Rita’s house.

**Creativity is a conversation with Mariana Docampo**

The interviews were getting easier. I was becoming more comfortable with my role of hosting the conversation, leading it, although I rarely knew where it would lead. I always felt like an imposter at the beginning of the interview but I had resolved to play the part, trusting that something within me would rise to the occasion and help me put those doubts aside, allowing me to enjoy the work. The moments when an interviewee talked felt like an allowance. I couldn’t rest completely then, because I had to be ready with the hands of my mind outstretched to catch a part of their speech that I could then bring back to them later, saying, look, I found this, what do you think? plus there was the wild weight of maintaining eye contact that had to be regulated between hyperbolic intensity and myopic ennui, having to keep a gaze that was alive and waiting; attentive and present; balanced on an edge in the air from which I would fall into the next word they said if I leaned just a little bit forward; but otherwise when the interviewee spoke, I could hold. I could swallow. I could blink. It was the only time I noticed that I had a body.

Luckily, talking with Mariana Docampo was such a pleasure that two hours flew by with insight, laughter, and my hope that we would get to be friends.

In one of the stories of Mariana Docampo’s most recent book, *La fe: Relatos* [The faith: Relatings] (2011), the narrator remarks:

| *Comprendí en ese momento que las palabras eran un límite para la comunicación entre las especies.* (p. 88) | I comprehended in that moment that words were a limit for the communication between species. |
I started by asking her if that limit wasn’t just between species but between people, too.

Did I put ‘species’? or people? Mariana said, surprised. Well, yes, I believe so. I believe that the language for being able to express one’s self is very precarious. It’s the only thing we have. Well no. It’s not the only thing. We have other manners, we have gestures, we have other things. We don’t only have words. It’s one of the modes, not even the most efficient mode, for me to make you understand.

She paused as if she was catching up to herself. Her shoulders went up and down in a sigh.

I think a lot in relation to language, and in general in what I write there is a lot of reflection on language and on the limits of language. In principle, it’s one plane of the universe and of social relations. We communicate with what we can and we have certain conventions. But I believe that it all could be something else. That everything could be interpreted absolutely in another manner.

She gave me an example.

It happens in discussions with one’s partner, she said. Someone says something, but the language is very limited. I say this, the other person says otherwise, and in reality one has to account for thousands of other variables that surround what is being said in order to be able to understand it. One has to be thinking of much more than only what is said. So yes, for me language is a limit.

For me, in general, she added, relatings are doubts. What interests me is to put in question what is said. That in some moment the reader distrusts all that one is saying in the relating.
Creativity is exile

Rita brought me upstairs to a warm, well-lit parlour hung with her paintings, most of which she had brought with her from Sydney. “I haven’t felt motivated to paint since I came here,” she said. “Now it’s just the drawing class.” The house had twenty-foot high ceilings and a narrow hall lead from the parlour past two bedrooms into the kitchen. Everything had been renovated so that the trim of the windows and doors was made of deep, burnished wood and the curtains, which were thin enough that I could see the yellow streetlights through them, were mounted on brass fixtures that looked old and new at the same time. It felt like the house had been given a fresh start, like it had been resuscitated from what at one time years ago had looked like a steady decline towards death. I could imagine it crumbled and full of shadows. The abundant light had chased away the past.

At the back of the kitchen a steep, winding staircase lead up to a studio where Rita’s drawings from the class were piled loosely on a table and there was a large brick *asado* where Rita’s husband Manuel was turning pieces of chicken on the grill. Rita had told me he was from Paraguay so I greeted him in Spanish, wanting to pay tribute to the language that was hosting us both, him for a lifetime and me for just a few years, to acknowledge that there was something synonymous with being a guest in a language and being a guest in someone’s house, but he replied in English. His voice and his face matched each other perfectly like they were both made of leather. He put down the metal pinchers he was using to turn the chicken and gestured with a slow hand towards the door that lead out onto the patio. We stepped outside into the night. The *asado* had been ingeniously designed so that it could be tended from inside the studio in the winter and from outside on the patio in the summer. Rita brought out two glasses of wine, one
for me and one for Manuel, but Manuel shook his head. Rita told me that they danced out here in the summertine. Everything she said sounded sad.

At dinner I asked them about Rita’s drawings and Manuel’s tango classes. I wanted to make sure that each of them found it to be a pleasant evening, even if it might be pleasant for different reasons for all of us. When they told me what they had paid to buy the house two years ago I put my fork down and had another drink of wine and laughed. “You could not buy a one-bedroom basement apartment with that money in Vancouver,” I said. “Nor in Sydney,” said Rita heavily.

It was the only time in two months I spent an evening in the English language. At first I felt like I was breaking a rule and someone would catch me but soon enough the words came easily, too easily, and maybe that’s why I never did it again until I was back in Canada. Part of why I was in Buenos Aires was to get deeper into language, burrowing or peeling back layers, so that I could join it from the inside. Speaking English felt like time spent elsewhere, taking me away from the reason I was here, taking me out of the city entirely. It was part of a different project, one with a different timeline.

More than that, though, I believed that language was not just a series of words about the world but a way of being in the world. Knowing that way of being required commitment and a certain measured loneliness. I had to find myself in Spanish and not give up. By speaking English I went rushing back to a version of myself that had been formed by a long relationship with the language I was born into. My relationship with Spanish, on the other hand, began more recently. I had come into it consciously.

At first my English seemed halting. It occurred to me that I was speaking it with an accent, not my Canadian accent or a Spanish accent but as though English were my second
language. My sentences were box-shaped. There were discernable spaces between my words. I made compact sentences without sub-clauses. I said things like, “This is what I know,” and “you are generous and good”, taking up a directness that I rarely have when I have had time to adjust to English. I pronounced all the sounds that should be pronounced, which might be why I sounded foreign to myself.

My voice reminded me of a traveler speaking English, someone who had lived in many countries for whom none of them felt like home. Maybe it was a kind of international English. It might have been because Rita’s accent was Australian and Manuel’s was a mix of Paraguayan and Australian and I was caught somewhere in the middle, another constellation in the thousands of ways that English can be spoken and still be English.

Through the course of the evening, my English changed with wine and practice. Soon I was talking out of control — not that I was talking a lot, because one can say a lot and still mean what one says, having strong ties to the words and their private meaning, but out of control in the sense that I spoke without certainty. I was using words as I remembered using them months ago but now they felt unreliable from lack of use. It seemed dangerous to communicate so fluidly. I tried the words on like trying on shoes, looking at them down the length of my body, turning them this way and that or walking around the room in them, only realizing after I had said them that they were too tight, too flappy, or that they squeaked. The language felt pinched and spacious at the same time. There was too much room to move around inside it. I couldn’t find its edges, and so eventually had to hold myself back from sprinting all over the conversation. I was shaken by this other way of being that seemed to belong more to the words than to me.

I quickly understood that what I could offer my hosts in return for their warmth was a hospitality we could share, that of being hosted by language together. It would have made no
sense to speak Spanish there — that was the very exclusion that Rita encountered every day she ventured out — and I could forgo the chance to discover some aspect of myself by knowing Manuel in Spanish. Strangely, though, it is hard for me to remember what we said that night, other than a few phrases, since a language that comes easily goes easily, too.

With kisses on the cheek and embraces in the doorway I was out into the street again. It was midnight. Rita had told me which way to go. When I asked if it was safe they glanced at each other. “Yes, yes, it’s safe,” said Manuel. I hurried across the street, turning once to wave back at them as they stood at the window, and climbed the empty hill up to Avenue San Juan. I was bursting when I reached the bright lights, suddenly thrilled by the generosity of strangers and by a city where such a welcome was possible. I called Gabriela, who was just coming out of a concert with a friend, and told her, tuve una noche maravillosa y no quiero que se termine. I have had a marvelous night and I don’t want it to end. I felt the familiar presence of the language that had been growing inside me since I got there, the language that built the city as much as stones and cement had. Gabriela laughed and told me where to meet them.

**Creativity is a choice**

I was discouraged with the drawings I did in the class. I wanted to be open to the instructor’s comments and his way of working, which relied on finding just the right line in the very first trace of the charcoal along the paper, while my own practice involved blocking out large areas of light and shadow and revisiting them many times in search of a balance across the page. Eventually it became too much to start from the beginning as though I were learning to draw all over again. I could only handle being a novice at one thing at a time and I had chosen language first. Maybe another time I would choose drawing.
Shortly after I stopped going to the classes I ran into the instructor on the street. He was walking ahead of me on the narrow sidewalk, teetering in the wind. Part of me wanted to turn around and walk the other way before he saw me because I was ashamed that I had given up on the classes, but another part of me believed that it was rare and good to run into someone I knew in a city of ten million people and that I owed it to the circumstances to say hello.

_Tanto tiempo, joven_, said the instructor without slowing down. So much time, young man. We walked side by side for a few steps. At that moment I could see the many walls he had painted as a muralist flash upwards behind him, as though the murals were extending from his wispy hair. I felt the colour blue and sunlight on the paint and could see the texture of the bricks. Then they vanished and the streets were full of loud grey cars again.

Although I had no desire to return to the class I wondered for a moment if I could interview the instructor, perhaps include him in my project, since it would be good to hear about the metaphors he used to describe the way he drew and, selfishly, I knew that he was famous. A young woman had come to one of the classes, at first I thought, to draw or learn to draw, but she cleaned up her easel and put away her materials before the class was over and waited until the instructor sighed, _bueno, hija_, what questions did you want to ask me? at which point the girl produced a note pad and wrote down his short answers, nodding constantly. I imagined that I could get a better interview than that because I was not from here, or that he would grant me more than a person of my qualifications deserved because I was a foreigner, which was a kind of wild card since nobody knew what connections I actually had to offer outside of the country. But the thought of interviewing him, a thought that occurred to me as an image of a conversation imbued with a sense of privilege, suddenly weighed me down and seemed like a lot of work. He didn’t like to talk, after all, and I already felt apologetic for not continuing with the classes.
Surely this would discredit me as an interviewer. What’s more, although it seems strange to say it, my interviews weren’t really about specific questions I wanted answered as much as they were a way of being in the company of someone I would otherwise have no way of being with, and of sharing something with them through the act of a purposeful conversation. There wasn’t anything in particular I wanted to know, just things I wanted to feel through the exchange of language. Consequently, the best interviews I had done were with people who wanted to be interviewed. He didn’t seem like one of those.

We chatted lightly for a couple of sentences about whether he lived close by and how he had fared at a doctor’s appointment that he had mentioned when I saw him last. I said I was sorry I hadn’t been to the class in a while and that I had been busy. He shrugged and said, Of course you have been busy, in such a way that I couldn’t tell if he was making fun of me or if he knew more about what I was doing than I did. It’s up to you, he added, then said he had to go to the bank. I thought briefly about standing by the glass door while he went inside to the bank machine, guarding the entrance for him in a way that seemed appropriate for the general fear of robbery that pervaded the city, then decided that he knew infinitely more than I did about how to live here. I said goodbye, my shame still clinging to me like the smell of bad meat.

Mariana Docampo

If you watch television, said Mariana, If you watch TN and you watch Canal 7, for example, which are the two poles, it’s very clear that Argentine reality is a construction. A family that watches TN will have one reality and a family that watches Canal 7 will have another. Without a doubt neither one of them is the reality.

But the theme, she continued, is that the one who is raised in either one, when he or she soon sees something else, everything collapses. The point is not to go to the other side as if it
were the true reality. That’s why I always try so that everything that’s constructed, deconstructs itself as a mode of advancing. Distrust everything. Don’t keep yourself in fixed blocks. Instead maintain permanent movement in order not to fall in the trap of lies. It’s a little of that.

I had started to relax and could hear the metaphors in Mariana’s speech. They lit up in the air, floating.

…ideas are architecture…

…convention is a square…

She shrugged. It interests me to work precisely with that when I write. To deceive the reader with a reality that could be otherwise. That the reader comes in to the writing and after, show them that all this could become something else.

And it seems to me that you are working that by way of the voice, the narrative voice, I said, thinking of the ephemeral, ambient quality of Mariana’s prose. More than the plot or the events, it’s the narrator. Their attitude, their personality.

Clearly, she said. In this book I do that more specifically. The narration was one of the things I was interested in working with. For example in La Raíz [The Root], one doesn’t understand much about who is narrating. I wanted it to be a voice that one distrusts at some moment. What interests me is precisely to assemble that tension, to enter the fiction but at the same time to have something that moves you away from it in order to be able to reflect on it.

…fiction is a space…

…reality is tension…

…knowing is a push and a pull…

It seems to me that’s what happens in general with life, she said. I enter it from one side and suddenly I encounter something that changes it.
That moment interests me, I said. When you look around and realize that life has changed.

Yes, said Mariana, that everything could be otherwise. A little like science fiction. You are bred into a discourse where all things have their place. What happens if all that does a turn, and it’s something else? All that you were acquiring, the language, the forms in order to understand things, what happens if all that does a turn? In my personal experience, there was a moment when everything turned and for me this transition is devastating. Because it’s like returning to be born again.

…discourse is a kennel…

…knowledge is a form…

…reality is a veering path…

To think that all that’s constructed can deconstruct itself and be something else… That’s where I reflect on the possibility of constructing and reconstructing with language, she said.

Creativity is communication

The streets were empty because of a football match. No cars passed. Grey light fell over the sidewalk through clouds that didn’t move. It was like the city was holding its breath and sleeping at the same time, and urban apnea. I had walked and walked and only after a long time understood that I was hungry, but many places were closed with metal walls pulled down over the front while others had metal bars and padlocks. I found a bakery where the door was still open and a television high up on the wall was showing the game. A portly man who looked like the owner because of the way he stood and because of the dirty white towel he had tucked into his belt was watching it with one hand resting on the back of a chair. I stood by the counter and asked him for two empanadas and a beer. He repeated my order in a curious way, as though he
had left out all the consonants. His face was kind. It looked like his eyebrows were pinned high up on his forehead even when he looked down. It made his expression look frozen in a permanent state of surprise. I sat under the television so I could watch the match while I ate. It seemed like a way of belonging since the teams were obviously important.

_Cerveza, buena_, said the owner from across the bakery. He tipped his thumb up in the air to drink from it.

I lifted the can a little off the table and put it back down, nodding, then I looked back at the television. His voice was odd.

¿_Sos de River_? He pointed at the TV.

I shrugged.

_No es mi equipo_, I said. It’s not my team.

_NO es_, he grimaced. _A mi tampoco_. Nor mine. He wagged his finger in the air as he spoke.

¿_Cual es_? He asked. What is your team?

_No tengo_.

¿_No tenés_? he said, visibly astonished. You don’t have one?

I shrugged again. I knew what was about to happen.

¿_De dónde sos_?

_Canadá_, I said.

_Ah, Canadá_. The owner was visible thrilled. _Claudia_! He shouted into the kitchen.

¡_Canadiense_!
Claudia came rushing out, wiping her hands on her apron, looking left and right but mostly upwards as though I might be somewhere in the ceiling. She had thick glasses. I saw that her hands were contorted and her eyes never settled, but kept rolling back and forth.

The owner’s name was Carlos. He introduced his wife Claudia and said that she was mute. He put his hand over his mouth when he said it, then spread his hands out in the air to show me that something had stopped. I realized then why his voice sounded odd: he was mute, too, but not as mute as Claudia. The fact that they had found each other struck me as beautiful.

Carlos wanted to know if there were empanadas in Canada and how much did they cost. When I told him yes but they were expensive he repeated the question and my answer to Claudia, who nodded vigorously. I made sure to talk to both of them evenly. Claudia looked at me without blinking. Carlos repeated everything I had said with the same words and big gestures while Claudia rattled her approval with constant nods.

Carlos told me that he and Claudia had met when they were eight years old. His mother drove a school bus and she would drive them both to school. He showed me how she did it by walking around the bakery picking up invisible children and putting them in an invisible basket in his lap, as though each child were the size of a loaf of bread. Un pibe acá, he demonstrated, One kid here, otro pibe acá. Another kid here. Otro, otro, until he wiped his hands together in the air and said he had asked Claudia to marry him. He said he was very lucky that she agreed. At that time they were both twenty-six. Now he was sixty-five. I nodded, seeing that they understood each other in a way that any couple would envy. They had two daughters, he said, and with a pride that melted my heart, his hands on his hips and his chin tilted up, his eyes widening even more than I thought possible, announced that neither one of them was mute. Oído perfecto, he said, kissing his fingertips and opening his hand in the air to let the kiss free. Perfect
hearing. Then he quickly turned to Claudia and repeated everything he had told me, to which
Claudia nodded, thrilled.

By the time I left the bakery that afternoon Carlos had shown me the scar behind his ear
where some sort of hearing device had been surgically installed. He’d had it removed because it
made him too sensitive to the tiniest sound. No tengo que oir todo, no, he said. I don’t have to
hear everything. Solo lo importante. Just what’s important. He had unbuttoned his shirt, too, and
shown me the scar where he had had open-heart surgery after a heart attack nine years ago. He
said he was retired now, but if he didn’t do anything he would just sit at home sleeping and
watching TV. With the bakery at least, there was always something to do.

I thanked him for the empanadas and because I felt sleepy I walked to Lezama Park
where I lay on the grass. A man asked me for money. I sat up and told him I didn’t have any,
which is the way I’d heard other people say it, no tengo, and disculpa, forgive me, accompanied
by a small shrug and a squint to apologize. I remembered one woman who I had seen many times
camped on Avenida Callao across from the Plaza Rodriguez Pena, wrapped in blankets, and to
each person who said disculpa, forgive me, to her outstretched hand she said, disculpado,
forgiven. I had never heard that particular reply before but in my mind she had elevated the
moment by what she said, giving it dignity. Knowing the words was easy but knowing when to
say them took listening. The man shuffled away and left me alone on the grass. I read a book for
an interview I hoped to conduct but only a few of the sentences sunk in, only a few of them
really meant anything to me. The rest were just noise. I watched a dog chase pigeons around the
park until it caught one and its owner jogged after it, shouting half-heartedly, but the dog had
already devoured the bird and bloody feathers hung from its mouth.
Creativity is a challenge

Gabriela invited me to a barbecue where I met a painter. We were standing on a rooftop drinking wine from plastic cups keeping warm beside the carbon, turning our heads at times when the wind blew smoke in our eyes. I showed him pictures on my phone of portraits I had done in Canada and talked about the drawing classes as though I was still going to them once a week. I want to learn how to draw, I told him, hoping to cultivate the eagerness and naiveté that made room for people to teach me things. Parece que ya sabes dibujar, he said, unmoved. It seems like you already know how to draw. Lo que te queda es hacer algo con eso. What’s left is to do something with that.

Mariana Docampo

You are a writer but you also dance tango, I said. Tell me about creativity in tango.

I do Queer Tango, Mariana explained. I’m clarifying it for you because traditional tango has other manners of creativity. There are very defined roles in tango, the person who leads and the person who is lead. In traditional tango it’s the man who leads and the woman who is lead. In Queer Tango they are not fixed roles. That is to say, either identity can occupy them. The role of guiding, traditionally the role of the man, is the one who has the possibility of creating figures. In tango you are all the time improvising. That is to say, you don’t have a structure that you have to repeat… pardon me, yes there are structures, but there is no choreography. It’s a dance of improvisation. There are certain movements that are of the tango. You have to do certain basic steps. And above this formula you are able to create. Meanwhile, the woman, or the role of the guided, inside the possibilities that are given by the one who guides, can make what are called ‘adornments’. Which is to move the feet in a way, make a flourish, etcetera. When you do Queer
Tango both people have to be very prepared for guiding or being guided. It seems to me that the creativity is given in the improvisation.

…creativity is a response…

…creativity is readiness…

In exchange, Mariana continued, in traditional tango, creativity has to do with the space that the man gives to the woman and in that space the woman can be creative. What you have in Queer Tango is the possibility that in any moment it can become something else.

…creativity is a space…

It’s not total abandonment, she said. You have a structure and once you learn it, you articulate it and go along creating.

…creativity is elaboration within a zone…

So for you, can you use tango to understand what passes in writing? I asked. To have this tradition or this system that already exists and later put something creative?

I’ll give you an example, I just thought of it now, said Mariana. I think there is a difference. That formula, that scheme that there is in the tango, is a site. In writing, no. No, it’s more vast what happens in writing. I look for a site when I write. I try to work with things, with the Internet… I look for a scheme and I work on that. I like to always have something in order to not lose myself completely. In writing, one assembles as one goes. In tango you already have it. It’s a convention. And that makes it also a site. It’s not so vast.

…writing is a place…

…the site is a guide…
Creativity is a turn

I met Abigail twice but only the last time matters to me. She was the friend of a friend, in Buenos Aires for a short course in Argentine literature from Yale. Abigail was from Zimbabwe but more recently had been living in Peru. The first time, we met by the obelisk and wandered around the Museo Latinoamericano de Bellas Artes in Recoleta, moving separately through the small rooms where carved wooden trunks and hammered plates of silver slumped in the shadows of glass cases. It was a Thursday, and by chance the museum tickets were free that day which made it seem that we had won a prize, that we were on the inside of the city, but at the same time I felt greedy about our luck and couldn’t decide if it was because of her or because of me that it had happened this way. There was something competitive about our first meeting, both of us insisting on speaking in Spanish, comparing what we had learned of the city, probing what the other had found that could be shared, and I was relieved, then disappointed, when I realized that my intonation was more fluent than hers — relieved because it meant that I could position myself closer to the source of the language and disappointed because I felt it was my job to carry the conversation. Luckily there was still time to have a bigger heart. She was younger than me and fanatical about Peru. According to her it had the most delicious food and the most interesting history and the best people. It might have been because I had lived in Chile that I felt defensive. There was one moment, though, after we had left the museum and walked in the cold grey streets for an hour under a bitter wind, one moment that was a glimpse of what would happen the second and only other time I would see Abigail: we stepped into a warm café and sipped coffee and ate croissants with a tiny table between us and talked about J. M. Coetzee. She had read one of his books a long time ago and had been meaning to read his others. I could feel myself light
up when we talked like that and I wanted to give to her, caring, excited for what Abigail would find in the books that had meant so much to me.

A month went by. Abigail and I arranged to meet three days before her flight left for the USA; from there she would fly home to Zimbabwe until university began again in September.

We met at the same place as before, under the obelisk, and tucked ourselves into a table by the window in a café on Avenida de Mayo where Julio Cortázar had written his first novel. I was touched that we still spoke Spanish, now that the pride of new language had settled and we had both spent enough time here to find a more secure version of ourselves — we had less to prove, so meeting in our acquired language felt like an act of habit and respect for where we were, like taking off one’s hat while indoors.

For the first couple of hours I still felt the distance of our talk. We traded observations about the city, what we had found, where we had been, how our projects were going — her classes, my interviews. Then something changed. Maybe it was because we had been sitting there so long or because it had started raining outside or because I knew that she was leaving and I would be leaving, too, knowing that we were in this together although in different times for different reasons and living in different bodies with different plans for each of us. I felt myself open up like I was no longer relating facts of my history or repeating lines I had heard myself say before but was sharing in a present moment, in the questions that we were living right then, which is the only way I have ever felt that I’m truly meeting someone.

At one point we had been talking about Paris in the 1920’s and how foreigners could live there in relative luxury as long as their money was coming from elsewhere and one could write in cafes and meet with other writers in a city that was falling apart and being rewritten at the same time and maybe, just maybe, one might have felt the way we felt to be where we were right
now, when Abigail asked me, ¿podrías volver a vivir en Buenos Aires? Could you come back to live in Buenos Aires? and something about the way she said it, or the way she squinted at me as she waited to hear what I would say, made me feel like there was no better time to tell her the things I didn’t know.

We talked about the difference between dreaming of this place and the reality of actually finding an apartment, paying bills, trying to make community; belonging, belonging in Buenos Aires as an outsider, in Montreal, where I had lived, or in New Haven, where she was going back to, belonging anywhere. She said she didn’t feel like she had roots in any city but it bothers her less now than it did before. I said that when I realized I didn’t have roots I learned to build a home with leaves. She smiled and said that’s it, that’s a good metaphor and I felt fond of her as I realized how gentle we both were. Just as we were getting up to go she asked me, Adrian, what’s the secret to partnership, do you find someone who lives where you have found yourself or do you go there with someone, and I told her I don’t know, I think more of places, of places I want to go, and I go there.

We hugged tightly to say goodbye like we understood each other because of the things that neither of us knew. I walked alone to San Telmo for a tango class and I thought about the difference between meeting Abigail as an event and meeting her as part of myself; where in the first one, when meeting was just an event, we were acquaintances whose lives bumped against one another but still remained separate. There were a lot of events in my Buenos Aires. The second time I met Abigail might have started as an event but it became the other kind of meeting, the kind that was an honest encounter, which was much rarer, because it was a way of being myself at that same time that it was a way of becoming myself. As I hurried away, late for class, the thought of Abigail occurred to me as bright and new. I felt an urge to call her and see her
again before she left on Saturday, to go quietly crazy with her for three days until the city used up all our secrets. But we never met again.

*Mariana Docampo*

In both cases, in literature and in dance, you talk about the feeling of connection, I said. Is that connection something that you use in order to understand what is creativity?

Yes, because if not, it’s impossible. If you are not connected to what you are making, it can’t be. In tango there’s something physical, you connect or you repel. You are [present] or you are not [present]. You have to find yourself, to be in you, to relate yourself to the other. With writing it’s more complicated because there is no physical distance between you and the work. You are with the computer, you are with your head. It’s a little crazy what passes. The physical instance of writing is like a non-body.

…to be is to be present…

...writing is a non-body…

If feeling yourself connected is the part of writing that enchants you, what is it that disconnects you from writing? I asked. Is there something that doesn’t please you, that frustrates you?

The difficult part is the quantity of hours in a crazy state, she said. At times I pass all of a day writing and you disconnect yourself also from yourself.

She said she tried not writing, thinking that should could just dedicate herself to tango and that would be enough. But it caused her anguish. She said she missed talking about profound themes.

Maybe in the future, she said, I could just do tango and be more human. Connect myself more with my house, with my plants. I don’t have that. That complicates me. I would like to be
in connection with what surrounds me and not so much in my head. That’s what complicates me the most.

…writing is depth…

…writing is disconnecting…

Creativity is loneliness

I had an interview at six o’clock in Palermo so I walked to Plazoleta Cortázar and sat with my back against the low stone wall in the round-about at the end of the street, reading a collection of short stories by Juan Diego Incardona, while a group of teenagers set up drums and played flutes and shakers in a way that reminded me of Bolivia. The sun went down with the late yellow light falling into my lap, then moved across the low wall of the park until only the musicians were lit directly and the street was cast in one broad shadow from the buildings. Other people came to sit on the half-wall, often dangling one leg over the side with the other leg crossed in front of them on the cement while they looked into their phone, then writing something, resting their phone in their hand on their thigh and looking up at the teenagers playing music, then, after a pause, looking down at their phone again in a pattern they repeated until someone arrived and their faces lit up, they kissed on the cheek, and walked away together. Later a woman sat on the ground with her back against the wall not far from where I was reading, one leg crossed over the other out in front of her, and read a book whose title I could not make out. I thought about her without doing anything, making a deal with myself that if she was still there when I got up I would talk to her, but the more I thought about it the more empty I felt so that there was nothing in the world I could offer her except silence and space, which I grew certain was all she wanted. I imagined her stopping at a bar to meet friends on her way home. I imagined their familiarity and how the time passed. I stopped pretending to read and folded my
book over my knee, looking up at the teenagers and their music, seeing that the boys were ragged like they had been travelling and the girls were, too, although I couldn’t tell if they had known each other for years or for the length of a song. They didn’t pass around any kind of hat or cup after they finished, only letting the music collapse into a tinkle of laughter when the sun left the plaza, the light slipping up the tree trunk into the branches and letting go into the pale blue sky that now seemed bitten or stung by street lights. After they had packed up their drums they sat on a bench and drank from a clear, label-less plastic bottle while a girl with tattoos on her arms came and went, talking to someone she knew across the plaza and then returning to the bench for another drink. They put their drums on their backs and walked away when the bottle was empty. The girl who had been reading beside me was gone, too. I zipped up my jacket and looked into the grey dusk. I was alone in a city that knew nothing about me, as though cast out into a void, with only the scant outline of plans to keep me from blowing away entirely.

After the interview I zigzagged back and forth through Palermo in the early night between Calle Thames and Scalabrini Ortíz, not wanting things to end and wishing even more than before that there was someone I could call. I sat on the half-wall in the plaza again and checked my phone like a friend would be there any minute, even looking up and scanning the clumps of people that moved by in the yellow tinted shadows across the street with what I thought was an expectant, hopeful look on my face. The cement was cold. I thought of the girl who had been reading in the late afternoon and of the many good conversations she was having. When I couldn’t pretend any longer, I pushed off from the wall like it was an island and I was going out to sea. Walking made sense to me, more sense than sitting still, as though walking were a place all to itself. Walking, reading, and writing — all of them were places. I reached the subway station at Santa Fe and checked the map, realizing that I could walk back to Constitución
instead, stopping at bookstores along the way. I had so much time and it would only take a couple of hours.

**Creativity is a fragment**

All at once Isabel and I are running for a train to take us back from Tigre in the north of Buenos Aires. It is dusk.

**Mariana Docampo**

Talking about your process of writing, does it cost you? I asked. Or does it come to you with fluidity? I could hear Spanish metaphors speaking through me.

…Difficulty is an expense…

…Ease is a fluid…

The problem is between terminating one thing and grabbing another, she said. When I’m writing it flows more. I start with twenty distinct things and if I don’t go to any of them, I anguish myself. When I am already in something, it’s more facile. Writing is a network that I go along assembling with words. Once I have that, I find what I wrote and even if I’m not connected with the story, I go along correcting words, repetitions. Then, in a moment I hook myself and go writing. It’s beautiful because also it’s a work in which I don’t have to be thinking what happens next. As if it were a frame that already exists and you go along correcting it. I go out, I read, I play with the Internet, with books. It seems to me that it’s like the construction of a site from which I can go out, and to which I can return.

As Mariana talked I thought of the twenty distinct things like a row of little stones on a table. I thought of looking at them and none of them moved.

…writing is a network of objects in relation…

…the network is a frame…
…inspiration is a hook…

And this network isn’t only in the leaf that you are writing, I said, thrilled each time that the word for page was the same as the word for the things that grew on trees. For me they always traded places, so that I could see letters written on plants and pages fluttering in the branches. But also in the act of writing itself?

Mariana nodded gravely. It’s as if it were a loom to which I go and give a little stitch. She plucked an invisible thread in the air. The site is also rooted in the materiality of the words. It’s something that the material already has, when it’s open. Writing is a network, but it’s also a state. The problem is when it’s not open.

I could feel my mind trembling and alive like it had just come out of a river into the sun. The joy of our talk was coming plainly through my eyes.

…creativity is a cloth…

…the word is the material…

…the material is a container…

…language is a way of being…

What is it that makes this network open or closed? I asked hopefully.

Magic! she laughed. I don’t know how it is achieved.

My heart sank, knowing that I would never know either. What do you do when you feel that something has closed? I asked.

I wait, she said. I occupy myself with moving my other books, I dance tango, I try to get money for my books, I read or prepare workshops. I occupy the time with other things. It’s difficult because you don’t know when it’s really open. At times you open various things and none of them are conducive. Or they are preparatory for something else.
...a word is a stitch...

...writing is the work of the loom...

But each little while, she added, I come back to see if it functions or not.

Creativity is a show

I took the subway to Humberto Primo and walked as if with confidence along a dark street where no doors opened except one. The black trees were like holes in the wall, wide cracks through which I would not have been surprised to see stars. A thin corridor of red light widened from the doorway across the sidewalk and faded at the edge of the street. Two men were standing beside the entrance smoking and talking; one of them inhaled and let the cigarette hang by his body as he breathed out, his chin tilted up, and I felt them look at me when I passed. I tried to glance through the doorway into the light and take in as much as I could without stopping. A bulletin board was pinned with a thousand pamphlets across from two women who sold tickets from a high narrow window. The entrance sloped up into a widening space that was either a room or a patio. In the dim glow far away I could see a man and a woman crouched on a mat and hear the metal ping of an aluminum drum played by fingers. Then the doorway drifted behind me and I was alone in the cold street again. I kept going like I was trying to find something else. After half a block I checked my phone as an excuse to pivot and walked back towards the doorway, wanting to pass cleanly beyond it again and walk all the way home but knowing this was somehow good for me.

The room smelled of candle wax and stone. The man and woman in the centre were collapsed on one another, back to back, with the woman draped over him while he slowly lifted her, his head down. Sitting cross-legged at the edge of the mat was a man playing an upturned metal bowl in his lap, letting it sing high when he tapped it now and then with a ring he wore on
his finger but otherwise thrumming rhythms like a low animal running. Other young people were sitting all around on pillows that had been scattered on the cement floor, in pairs or in groups of three, wearing scarves that looked like they were made of flickering shadows because of the candles that melted over bottles around them. I leaned against the wall beside a heavy dark curtain where I hoped I would not block anyone, where I hoped, in fact, I could be invisible, and watched the dancers with my hands in my pockets, feeling suddenly grateful that this sort of thing could happen, that I could find myself here and have a place among strangers.

Then, looking around, a sadness struck me as I envied all of their friendships, seeing that even the ones who were alone still had each other, that they were alone together, they moved differently, with a closeness I couldn’t dare to match, among strangers who were not strangers for them. Standing by the wall no longer seemed polite, it was cowardly, but the alternative, sitting down next to the nearest couple, a man and a woman who seemed totally complete in their beauty together, the flickering light transforming them into a warm, amber fluid — the alternative was too disruptive, even cruel, as if something in myself, not just the room, would have to shatter for me to join them.

I channeled all of my courage into the effort to look into the eyes of the next person who passed the curtain where I was standing. No one noticed.

On the way out I asked at the window if Isabel had arrived yet. She was the friend of a friend; she had written to say I could find her here. It was strange to look for someone I’d never seen before. It usually works because the force of two people searching brings them together. She’s coming later, said one of the women from the window. So everyone here knows her, I thought. Just for a second my shadow filled the long rectangle of light over the sidewalk, then I walked home.
Creativity is memory

There are many points from which to write about an experience and each of them is true, but the truth of the experience should not be sought in its writing. For whether I write about an experience in the very moment that I have it, looking quickly down to jot a note, or years later in another country, I am relying on my memory to get me there. In Buenos Aires, for example, I saw the shadow of a leafless tree cast upon a grey brick wall and for an instant, the thought crossed my mind that the shadow was a crack in the stone, a thick break that started at the sidewalk and splintered as it reached the sky. On a notebook that I always keep in my back left pocket, I wrote down: shadow = crack in wall. I put the notebook away and walked on.

Memory has already been exercised twice in that account. The first time was nearly simultaneous with the experience — I saw the shadow of the tree, perceived something of language that I could use to tag the experience, and wrote it down. In this case the muscle of memory performed more of a spasm than a flex; I wrote quickly and kept moving. Now I’m sitting at a table in Vancouver. A year has passed since I saw the shadow of the tree against the wall. Memory has performed in a longer way — longer because I spent more time here writing it down than I did on the day I saw it — and longer in the sense that I have stretched it back twelve months to reach the point when the experience was first drawn. Neither one of these accounts is more or less true than the other, but they are certainly different, a difference that is felt as much by the tone of their telling as by the quantity of their content. Reading one or the other gives a different texture to an experience that is somehow beyond the reach of either of them. The writing becomes a thing of its own, tethered to an invisible past.
Creativity is common ground

I met Isabel at a café near her office. She looked at me without blinking, her elbows leaning on the table, while I told her what I was doing in Buenos Aires. She didn’t move when I had finished my best impression of being excited, just looked at me like she was still waiting for something, telling me, so what? with the way she lit a cigarette. I could feel myself shrinking. I decided in that moment that I had no stable centre and that my eagerness to please her meant that we would never be friends.

We got up to leave and I was surprised when she said there was a park a few blocks from here, El Centenario, that she would show me. It looked like it was raining in another part of the city not far away. She had grown up around here, living with her grandmother, and when she had been a little girl there had been no metal bars on the parks and no high fences and they didn’t lock them at night. People used to sit on the grass by the pond under the stars playing music and talking and drinking, she said, but the city is robbing us of everything. As we walked I noticed that Isabel never stayed on the paths — instead, she chose her own line, going over whatever cement or grass or stones or dirt was on the way, and she touched every tree that she passed.

Isabel’s voice was tidy and neat in a way I never heard before or since, even though she had lived all her life in Buenos Aires. For one thing she pronounced all of her ‘s’s. At first I wondered if it was just for me, that she thought she had to speak extra clearly for my benefit, when all I really wanted was to be treated like anyone else, but I heard her with this same crisp intonation when she talked to her friends, too. It was like the porteño accent had been rubbed away with a coarse grit that left the sharp, hard sculpture of her voice underneath. Her intonation lifted at times I hadn’t heard before, as though everything she said, even a line as simple as what
time she finished work or what she would have for dinner, sounded like a description.

Everything seemed to carry with it the ghost of the same message, one that said, this is how things are, like her words were a hand making a long, slow sweep across time, palm up.

When it started to rain she hooked her arm in mine and we walked beside bloated thick-trunked trees called *palos borrachos*, drunken poles.

You see? she told me, pointing at the thickest tree, this one has had a lot to drink.

What I had thought at first was indifference now felt like peacefulness. Isabel was calm and distant in a way that made me feel like I was not alone, or that we were both alone together.

Too bad you didn’t come in summer, she said.

Honestly, I said, this climate suits me perfectly right now. I’m more wintery than summery. The summer makes me feel like I’m never doing enough. In the winter I feel like all of me is in one place.

These days, me too, she said.

When we got back to her office Isabel talked on her phone under an awning with her other finger in her ear as cars passed. I hitched myself up on a stone windowsill at the bottom of a massive mural and dangled my feet in the damp air. For a minute I belonged.

*Mariana Docampo*

Do you believe one can learn to be creative? I asked.

I don’t know if learned, but exercised, yes, said Mariana. To learn implies something that one doesn’t have, that is exterior. I don’t believe there’s anybody that doesn’t have creativity. Perhaps not incentivized or exercised, but it’s there.

She gave me an example.
Let’s say you are Adrián now, but you could continue to be the Adrián of 2010. It seems to me that one changes naturally, but there are people that don’t change, and it seems to me that to change is also an exercise. Like writing. If I don’t make a physical movement towards my computer and sit down to write, I don’t write. If you don’t exercise creativity, you watch television and it kills you. The opposing energy is very strong.

…to learn is to age with time…

I believe there are quite a lot of possibilities for creativity in Argentina, she said. I was in Europe giving tango classes and I realized that the artistic question is more complicated there. Those who already have their place are able to make art, but in general it costs a lot more to be creative. Here we talk, then we say, what are we going to do now? Are we going to take another coffee somewhere else? It seems to me that it doesn’t happen in other places so naturally. Here one thing brings to another and you connect yourself with each other. This seems like a creative life to me also.

…creativity is a sequence of connected moments…

…creativity is an invitation to continue…

I don’t know how it would be in Canada, she said. But I remember in Switzerland you have to do things with three weeks of anticipation and in three weeks I was leaving so nobody was prepared to take a coffee. A lot of solitude. And what can that produce? The majority of people are bitter, sad, alone, but when there’s more movement it seems to me that there is more place to exercise creativity. She paused. I’m a chatterbox, no?

I beamed, cheering for her with my eyes. How often had I been frustrated and alone because everything seemed to be organized weeks in advance in Vancouver. I longed for the
kinds of possibilities she described. Maybe that was why I felt so open to Buenos Aires, because Buenos Aires seemed so open to me.

**Creativity is a party**

I walked along Avenida Córdoba with two bottles of wine in a plastic bag and knocked at the address I’d been given. *Feliz cumple*, I told Isabel in the doorway, the familiar version of saying happy birthday. Isabel was still cleaning up. She told me later that she preferred to keep busy when people are over — it gave her distance and allowed her to be there without feeling lost. I told her that I knew what she meant.

Like a good Canadian I was the first to arrive. I leaned against the wall, smiling, as her other friends came over. We drank wine and I helped a woman pick seeds out of a plate of marijuana, happy to have something to do, while she talked to a friend of hers who had fourteen cats. I interrupted only once to ask how she names them. She said that one of them was called Gollum because she found him in a construction site where he had fallen down a hole full of iron shavings. He looked grey and black until she brought him home and washed him, when she realized he was white. He still moves in a strange way, she told me. She said nothing about the other thirteen.

At two or three o’clock in the morning we ran out of wine and fernet so I offered to go with Isabel to buy more. She hooked her arm in mine as we walked, a habit that made me smile from the inside. There was a line at the corner store and we waited together without talking, side by side, while a boy behind the counter shouted and passed plastic bags to a man whose car was idling with one door open beside the curb.

We brought the fernet back to the house and I installed myself by the wall again, feeling a fragile, reckless joy spread up inside me. I was here, in this new friend’s house with her friends
and their real lives. Sometimes I danced but mostly I beamed quietly from the edge of the room, feeling that there was something terrific in being no more than a happy person in a room full of strangers. Isabel came to check on me now and then, not saying anything, just walking over, to which I nodded so deeply it could have been a bow, tilting my grin into my cup, and telling her that this was my favorite way to be. A distinction that was possible in Spanish opened up to me then because of its two verbs for being, so that the language itself seemed to be saying it: I told her that it was always my wish to ser parte, to be part of the whole in a permanent way that was integral to who I was, at the same time that I was most comfortable when I could estar afuera, when I could be outside as a changeable state. I could be part and be apart. I’m like that, too, she said.

Suddenly the woman with the fourteen cats was collecting dishes from around the room and stacking them next to the sink, where another woman began washing them. A man with a thin beard gathered empty wine bottles with his fingers in the necks and the music had ended, opening the dark air to the clink of glass and cutlery. Someone swept. The light from the fridge widened and narrowed. The sky through Isabel’s patio door was now a soft aching blue with a line of orange along the lip of the roof. Isabel was asleep in her room. Someone had pulled a blanket over her and put a glass of water beside the bed. What good friends! She would wake to a clean home. I touched her arm as I said goodnight. The man who had brought the music saw us to the door and locked it behind us. As I drove away in a taxi at six o’clock in the morning with three other people who all got out along the way, returning me to Constitución just as the sun was coming up, I reminded myself that life is an opportunity to let go of everything, smiling, an open hand in the wind.
Mariana Docampo

People are using fewer and fewer words, said Mariana. But what happens if language keeps shrinking? The experiences that one has of the world can also shrink.

I always think that I am accumulating words, collecting them, I said. I meant it especially in Spanish, where my living archive of words grew daily. But to have the contrary would be… I began.

It’s sad, said Mariana, and at times I think it’s something even harmful. It gives me the sensation that language tends to unify. That people tend to reduce variety. Certain words are used in the media, on both sides, in which the word starts to vacillate in significance. For example, those of Canal 7 are talking about the monopolies of media. They themselves are talking about the media as if they weren’t media. So the word itself is filled with other concepts, or it empties of concepts.

…words are funnels…

…meaning is an equilibrium…

…concepts are substances…

Maybe this epoch requires a distinct language, she said. Language expresses a world to you and this world is changing very fast. You look at the heavens and in place of stars you see satellites.

…language is a pace…

…history is a pace…

That makes me think of names, I said. In the year 2000 the name Adrián meant one thing, who I was in the year 2000, but now it has another sentiment. It contains another. But that word, Adrián, follows me for all my life, even though it goes changing.
One must flee from the word! Mariana erupted. From the name! Yes, that’s terrible. We are prisoners in words.

If we could only elect a different name each morning, I mused.

Is that why we’re raised with the concept of ‘one’? Mariana asked. If you are a multiple being and you are distinct each time, how is it that you have one unique word that names you? It’s not only that it names you but it conditions you. For example, if I become Adrián, how am I going to do this? Adrián would do something else. That name quits you of your liberty to act. The word can come to limit you.

…a name is a condition…

…un-naming is freedom…

[Translation of a conversation recorded in Café Adaggio, Saavedra Park, Buenos Aires, July 12, 2012.]

**Creativity is a confession**

It was dusk. Isabel and I sat at a dock in Tigre, north of Buenos Aires, drinking mate and munching alfajores, hunched over our crossed legs and losing the yerba when Isabel spooned it out in the breeze. We looked in the direction where the sun had set through the big wheel of an amusement park, keeping time with the kids who screamed at the high part of the rollercoaster, which for them was new with every pass but for us made a rhythm that punctuated our conversation and broke up our silences, too. I told her about the day when I thought I would visit her and then, after walking for an hour towards her house I had realized that I was sad and tired. I had thought at first that visiting her might pick me up or that I could simply say to her, I’m sad and tired, but as I walked I had felt increasingly that it was not the kind of feeling I wanted to
burden her with and that, instead, it had been the kind of late afternoon when I just needed to let
the feeling pass through me. I had walked home instead. It took another hour and a half or so,
from Palermo to Corrientes which I liked so much, especially the part where the bookstores
began and I could see the first trees, and then down Callao and finally Entre Rios. I told her how
I knew all the stores after the intersection with Belgrano, all the breaks in the sidewalk stones, at
least I thought I did, or I recognized them when I saw them, and I had smiled weakly at the man
who worked at the butcher shop before turning the corner onto Solis. The house had been empty,
which had relieved me.

What a strange idea of friendship you have if you think that would be a burden, she said.

I told her about walking home from my tango lesson one night, too, which made Isabel
laugh because I was another tourist learning tango. I had looked up at the lights on Avenida 9 de
Julio, thinking, this city isn’t finished with me yet and I’m not finished with this city. Even
though part of me was not defeated but was tired and frankly wanted to rest, wanted to go home,
another part of me was squaring with all the things that this city could be. I could hear it singing
something that was so rhythmic it was more like a chant, not a challenge but a ceremony. I knew,
I told her, gesturing across the water back the way we came, that the taxi drivers and the book
sellers and the café waiters had no idea what it meant to me to be here and to want to come back.
I needed to come back, or at least to say that I would in order to console myself in that moment
of nostalgia, loneliness, and wanting to belong.

Then, because of the way Isabel looked at me I told her about a time years before when I
had lost hold of everything and seemed to be falling apart from the inside, like my organs were
chunks of ice that broke off and crashed into a black sea beyond the bottom of who I was. I had
done things then that I still couldn’t explain to myself, didn’t know how to explain, which is
when I had discovered dancing, that thing beyond language and reason and how, in a way, it had saved me. And how is it now? she asked. We had packed up the *mate* and the bag of *alfajore* crumbs and were walking back towards the train. Like another person, I said, like it happened to someone else who has taken the time to teach me what he learned. But in Canada I still think about dying, I told her, very often in fact, like it’s in the colours of the walls or the noise that a fly makes, and I assume it’s just around the corner for me whether by illness or by accident. I can hear a voice that must be my voice although it’s longer, not higher or lower, just longer, like it’s stretching from one side of death to the other and passing through this bright light in the middle that is the shock of my life. It’s the voice that comes out of me when I imagine meeting death, and the voice pleads, there is still so much I wanted to do! The words were coming easily and Isabel was looking at me like all of this made sense. The train back to Buenos Aires arrived and emptied and a sea of people crushed towards the open doors, running. I told her that when I travel it’s different. When I travel I’m so immersed in being alive that I can feel things more fully. I can even feel the possibility of dying in a way that is vibrant and vivacious like a crazy adventure that makes everything sacred. But in stillness, at home, dying comes to me as anxiety. She reached back and took my hand as we ran across the platform, breathing when the train doors closed. The station pulled away and blurred into blocks of graffiti at the back of grey cement houses.

At midnight we sat on wooden stools in her living room. I described a short story I had read by Robert Walser about a man who got throat cancer. One day it was difficult to swallow, then more and more difficult as each day went by until he was eating through a straw and his face was gaunt. His kids watched him get skinny. His wife was by his side. All of them must have known where this was headed. He died two months after finding out and I had thought,
that’s me. That’s what’s going to happen to me. If it’s not my throat then it will be something else. No matter when it comes it will be too soon. I’ll have to find a way to let go of all this. I’ll have to look inside myself for peace because I won’t be able to find it in the pain I see around me as people say goodbye. So I’ll leave them. I’ll leave them before I’m dead. I’ll seek comfort inside myself, shutting people out although they’ll never know it. I’ll keep up appearances but every last meeting will just make it harder. Then I thought, any minute now it’s going to hurt to swallow. I haven’t got much time. I haven’t done anything yet. I haven’t done what I set out to do. I haven’t put my voice out into the world. I have to hurry before it’s too late. But the next day after reading the story all I had done was go for a walk and read a book, a different book, in a sunny café window stopping sometimes to look a bird that pecked at seeds on the sidewalk.

Isabel and I ordered empanadas. They were delivered to the door half an hour later. We opened a second bottle of wine and put the empty one under the sink. After the food was finished we took turns smoking. Then, her face calm, stopping sometimes to brush an ant off the table, Isabel told me more than I had told her. I put my hand on her hand and kept it there until it got sweaty. I knew that if one of us was going to cry it would be me. Other times we laughed like something was breaking. We said goodnight when the sun came up. She pulled out the cot in her storage room and gave me some blankets. I lay still in the early morning, not feeling breathless but feeling my heart beating.

**Creativity is a conduit**

I was holding a door open with my mind. Language, not just words, but language in its wild full entirety passed through the space that I held. I didn’t know where my thoughts were coming from, maybe from history and from all the ways anyone had ever spoken, the history of language tumbling out through a door in my mind and into my mouth. The movement of
language had the force of air. I could feel it coming out of me from a place beyond who I was but because they came through me it was like they were mine. They picked up traces of me on their way through, like flocks of tiny birds leaving a cave with darkness on their wings. Shapes came streaming. My lips and my tongue were not making the words, they were moving around them. The sounds had their own momentum. My work was to hold the space open so the history of language could pass through me, to concentrate just enough so that words could fly out on their own. If I thought of the words themselves, if I thought of the words directly they stopped moving, the flow faltered, my mouth and my tongue, expecting momentum, closed and tripped at the wrong times — a dark bird slammed against the wall of the cave. But if I stayed open and loose, giving in to a lucidity that was also a madness, then language remade the world through me, through a hole in my head, my little body transformed into a passage for possibilities so gorgeous I swooned, holding the space for the flight of a sentence.

Creativity is a combination of moments

I wrote no notes about this and it’s not in my journal but I told her what it meant to me: Isabel and I were sitting at the table of our first meeting between the end of our coffees and the start of her cigarette and she was telling me about her trip to Berlin. It’s one place I could imagine living, she said, the only place other than here. Do you take pictures when you travel? I asked. She shook her head. Neither do I. But sometimes I record sounds. Me, too, she said, showing me how she did it. “Subte en Berlín, dos de noviembre”. Subway in Berlin, second of November. She said it into an invisible microphone in her hand and then raised it up into the air. At the same time she tilted her head to the side to pull her ear away from the mic, as if the invisible recorder was as hot and as bright as a torch. The truth of what she had done expanded over me in a smile so big I had to look down into my empty coffee cup. I knew that gesture. It
was exactly how one holds a mic to record the ambient sounds of a place. The honesty of the way she had done it satisfied me like good food.

I saw two times collapse into her one gesture: the time when she had done the recording rushed into now, where she sat without a microphone but with all the knowledge of how the microphone made her behave. Her movement without it was made real by the memory of her movements with it. I could see in the way she tilted her head that she knew what she was doing, that the microphone had weight and purpose and meaning, and because it seemed so familiar it was as though she knew what I was doing, too. When I recorded sounds, I tilted my head in exactly the same way, but I hadn’t known that I did until I saw her do it. She was showing me a way of seeing myself. She had done what art does.

**Creativity is a rhizome**

I took the subway to the interview, lowering down one of the stems to where the roots of the system were all connected under the city. The maps of the system were distorted into straight lines so that a subway line that swept east in a wide curve was shown as a vertical blue bar spotted with white dots whose names floated unattached in the space beside them. I could only get glimpses of the order because I didn’t want to stop walking. The plan seemed always to be moving.

**Creativity is a conversation with Juan Diego Incardona**

Juan Diego Incardona spent thirteen years as a street vendor, walking around Buenos Aires at night selling earrings and bracelets. It was easy to imagine him meeting people and at the same time bearing witness to the wild and sometimes frightening range of humanity that comes out when it gets late. He had a calming presence, like he was always waking up from a nap, and he seemed at home wherever he sat down. During those years as a street vendor,
because he worked at night, he wrote in the afternoons while listening to music. Now his schedule has changed but the music is still there. Music is the mother, he said. All the other arts are the sons and daughters of music. It’s first and most in something like creativity. Because I believe that in the moment of writing one is creating a rhythm. A rhythm of sound but also of feeling.

Then he said something that felt like a riddle: writing is like a semantic rhythm of thrown relations.

Over the course of four books Juan Diego Incardona has constructed the world of Villa Celina, a suburban neighbourhood on the sprawling outskirts of Buenos Aires. He grew up there himself. His work as a writer has been to build that life into fiction, often fantastical, by ‘literaturizing’ experiences, anecdotes, characters, and feelings. The scale of the neighbourhood fascinates him, he said, because you are telling part of the history of a country. What pleases me is to tell the grand political themes, national ones, in the history of the small village. He added the words of Leo Tolstoy: Paint your village and you paint the world.

Juan Diego Incardona’s speech brimmed with metaphor. He turned to it easily and developed each image or comparison with comfort and familiarity, as though it were obvious that literary style could be sampled for red blood cells and that creativity required a collector’s eye for rare figurines. After our conversation he invited me to drop by his writing workshop a few days later, where we watched a film by Kurosawa, talked about its themes, and ate pizza while he restrung a guitar.

When I first met him at the Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos where he worked, I started by asking him about the role of memory, since it seemed to me that it was important to the world of Villa Celina that he had created.
How good, he said with earnest enthusiasm. Yes, evidently creativity is like the reunion of various vital forces. And one of the prevailing ones in my case is experience. I didn’t always write like this. At one time I injected myself with the serum of the library, and I tried to imitate the literature of those that I admired. For example, as a boy I read a lot of Borges and inevitably I copied Borges.

I smiled at the image of a library in a needle.

He explained how he turned to his own life, his own anecdotes and his own experience, to write the stories of Villa Celina.

As I advanced, he said, I contaminated my memories with imagination. I even exacerbated them, bound them up in the fantastic.

Contaminate in what sense? I asked.

Contaminate not pejoratively, but like a figuration in the sense that they are not facts, that it’s literature.

What I was doing didn’t have many antecedents in Argentinean literature, he explained. There isn’t much written about the suburbs of Buenos Aires. In the last few years there have appeared a few writers who are working on it, but not many. The proper name, Villa Celina, plays a very strong role in my work. It’s a place that exists. The names of the streets appear, names of people that exist. The operation was to literaturize a segmented zone of reality that has a cartography that exceeds the geographic and includes a culture, that is, the popular culture.

…creativity is a new cartography…

Creativity is flight

I put my book down and imagined the city stretching out in all directions around me. I could travel up the sidewalk of Entre Rios and the alternating patches of light and shadow,
yellow from the street lamps and a deep purple bruise from the shadows of trees, while cars and sometimes colectivos drifted past in the street. There was a parilla I had never tried but it was always full, with people spilling out onto the sidewalk most nights until one o’clock in the morning. In the window of my mind the restaurant was so smoky that the room with all its families and couples was washed with a pale blue cloud. From there I leapt to Boedo and walked north in my memory, which was now as much a fantasy as it was any part of the past, floating up Castro Barros until it became Avenida Medrano to linger in patches of thought that lit the place as much as the lights did.

I saw the other people from my writing workshop arrive to a meeting as though all at once along Medrano even though I knew at the same time that they came one by one. I had never seen them arrive with my eyes but I could see them instead with my mind as Flora, then Ivan, then Paula, passed under the yellow light from the street, the glare catching on a red sash that Flora used to tie back her hair and glinting, in a different time that was somehow the same time, on the rim of Ivan’s glasses. I could see the brighter light of Avenida Rivadavia shining on the skin on the top of Pablo’s head as he walked up the stairs from Castro Barros subway station.

What were they doing now? I had memories of us in the same room but none of us when we were apart. I scattered their homes all over the city. In my mind their apartments hardly varied: they all lived alone in second floor cement places with tiles on the floor, scant furniture that made it possible to trace the line where the floor met the wall almost all the way around the room, except where it was interrupted by a single couch and the four legs of a writing table, and from each of their homes a yellow rectangle of light shone out above the street, the kind of light that I would see from down below as I walked and wondered, looking up, if it was theirs.
I thought that if I got dressed and braved the dark pass under the bridge that divided Constitución from San Cristóbal along Calle Solís, turning on San Juan then heading north up Entre Ríos, I could find myself in the light of memory, which for me was the same as the light of nostalgia, and that, curiously, had something to do with hope. I wished that I could find the people from my writing workshop and drink a bottle of wine with them. I could see myself smiling in the corner of their lives. But I didn’t know where to find them — not only where in the city but where in their hearts. To me they were complete without me, they had everything they needed, friends and family, routines and fears, plans and a hope of their own. Even their surprises seemed regulated by a different system. Spanish and a shared taste for books was only part of a language. Everything I considered doing to intervene in their lives seemed to go against the natural rhythm of the city, as though I were constantly striving to silence my part in it at the same time that I wanted so much to belong.

*Juan Diego Incardona*

It’s important to me that the work brings something new, said Juan Diego. That literature isn’t simply a copy of other anterior literature. Because it’s one thing to inscribe yourself in a tradition, in literary systems of interpretation, for example the literature of the periphery, or of Peronism, or literature that works with rock music, politics, or love. But an author must put forward with the language, with the themes, with the treatment of those themes, something that is his or her own. That is where there is different value from the rest. If not, we would simply be copying one another and accumulating common places in literature, because the common places are comfortable. What’s good is to assume the risk of bringing raw material. Material that has little literature.

…creativity is an outlier…
…commonality is a comfortable place…

He gave me an example.

It’s like the little figurines. I don’t know if in Canada you collect figurines when you’re kids. Kids here have little figures of the players from soccer teams. Boca Juniors for example. River, Boca, those are the most well-known teams in Argentina. The #10 of Boca or the #10 of River are in many collections because they’re famous. But the difficult figurines are the #4 of Temperley, the #4 of Bánfield, the little clubs. It’s the unique place where the little players are worth more than those that in reality are worth millions. And the other figurine is a guy who maybe makes just enough to live, but that one is worth more. You find very few of those. In literature it’s the same. I’m not going to look for the #10 of Boca, I’m going to look for the #4 of Bánfield or the #4 of Sacachispas, which is a really small club in the neighbourhood. That is to say, I’m going to find the diamond in the carbon.

I was surprised by how easily Juan Diego used metaphor to describe his ideas. In my introduction to the project, when we first sat down for the conversation, I told him that I was interested in narrative accounts of his creative process. I didn’t mention anything about metaphor, not wanting to lead the conversation towards it too explicitly. But it was like he already knew what I was looking for and offered it to me constantly. It was like he thought in metaphor.

The search is permanent, he added. It never ends.

…creativity is finding rarity…

…creativity is an endless quest…
The less literature there is behind what you are doing, the more potent the creativity will be, he continued. Because if there are already heavy books from grand authors, the chances for creativity is crushed. Those grand voices asphyxiate you.

...creativity is loneliness...

...history is a line...

...the voice of another is a force that smothers...

...one’s own voice is a force that liberates...

Now, he said. When someone puts themselves in a terrain that is a desert terrain, where one is walking for the first time, it’s not that Borges, Cortázar, Bioy Cesares, Kafka, Beckett were walking around there, no… it’s a place where I construct the road and where creativity has the possibility of good results.

...creativity is a road in the desert...

Creativity is a sanctuary

I needed to be moving. As if from far away, I watched my foot go into my shoe and my arms disappear into my jacket. I heard my soles scuff down the cement steps and my hand pat my pockets for keys, phone, and some money. I lifted the bolt on the door to hear it clang behind me. Up ahead I saw the family that lived in the darkness under the bridge. Two men stood talking by the cement wall, one with his arms crossed and the other with his leg hitched up on a cinder block, his pants too short, his shoe without a sock. Three people slept on the mattress against the wall, their backs to the street. I could see that two of them were very small, their bodies curved like half-moons wrapped in blankets, and a woman sat up between them with more blankets over her lap, looking up sometimes to speak in a low voice to the men that stood beside her. I held my breath and did not know how to pass them, then decided that I should pass
them breathing. My body tensed as I got closer and I felt that I was walking into fear — not afraid, but moving towards a moment where possibilities shattered outward, even terrible ones that I could imagine but not accept. The sound of that fear was sharp and shrill as I walked, then, when I drifted by without incident it faded and got lower and lower behind me like the siren of a passing ambulance. The narrow point that my mind had become opened up and it occurred to me that the man with his foot hitched up on the cinder block was a friend of theirs who had just stopped by for a chat, passing time on a Thursday night. I saw that the family might one day remember this corner the same way I remember the home I grew up in, as a place with its cycles of weather, accidents, and feelings of community and that there were good things about it and not so good things about it, but that they could look back on it from a day that didn’t exist yet as one of the many places they had lived, or even as one of the few places they had lived, and they could remember it in a way that no one else could. They were the custodians of memories I would never have. Their faces in the blast of headlights from the occasional car that passed under the bridge and their hands in the shadows of the blankets seemed suddenly important, even necessary, as though without them the bridge would collapse. I thought of a story by Borges (1962), “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, in which memory is all that keeps a place alive so that a few birds are all that protect a certain amphitheatre from vanishing. Then I wanted to tell them I was sorry: sorry for being afraid of them, sorry for comparing their hard life to a story that I found beautiful, as though beauty were enough to live on, even if it was, for me, enough to live for.

Entre Ríos was empty. A fog had settled along Belgrano. The door to the parilla I had thought of was closed and all the tables inside were full, as though it had brought in what it wanted of the night and left the rest on the street to get cold. Strange mannequins stared wide-
eyed and stiff from dark dress shops. I looked down and hurried across the shadowy expanse between the plaza and the National Congress.

Avenida Corrientes was an oasis of light. I stood on the corner of Callao against the metal door that had been pulled down over one of the bookstores and watched clumps of people parade by, envying and celebrating their friendship at the same time. It was dazzling to be alone among so many people. I walked in the direction of the obelisk as colossal theatres spilled lives onto the sidewalk between blankets laid out on the cement where other lives sold rolled up scarves, plug adaptors, umbrellas, and batteries. At the obelisk I turned and walked back on the other side of Corrientes, feeling that I was safe as long as I stayed in the light of this busy street, knowing that the rest of the city was darkening all around. At the back of a bookstore near Callao a man was reciting poems while a woman played guitar between his verses. She had a strong angular face; his was round and always upturned, like he was pleading for something in the way that he spoke. Then, when he finished each poem, he came back down from his residency in the ceiling as though his own smile had broken him, looking bewildered to find that a room full of people had been listening. After the zenith of one of his poems he raised up his arms from his sides and finished, saying, *la vida es* ..., then hesitated with his arms still in the air. I was sure he was going to say some sort of metaphor and I was even prepared to wince — life is a flower, life is a doorway, life is an egg — but then the pattern of language transformed and he said instead, finishing the phrase in a way that made me feel refreshed and humble, *...lo mejor que yo conozco*. The best that I know.

Could I have shared this with anyone? Would I have known how? I walked back out into the night where it seemed that something had ended. Corrientes would always keep going without me. I left the lights behind and walked into the darkness. The streetlights grew further
apart, smaller and in places crowded by the leaves of trees. I moved briskly over the wide space where the night sky sagged low in front of the Congress building. Now the parilla was closed and the chairs were upside down on the tables in the dark. The fog that had begun at Belgrano made the street feel uncertain, vague at the same time that it was abrupt, with the shape of a young man, then two, appearing suddenly beneath the awning of a gas station, crossing into the soft yellow air to fade as the headlights of a car drifted over their wake, then the car vanished, too. I saw myself as if from across the street, a hunched little man powering through the night on skinny legs, his neck down like something would drop on him any minute from one of the balconies. Stand up! I urged him, and felt the weight of my arms relax into my jacket. I lifted my head and took the time to walk properly — with care and purpose, but not abandon, not teetering on the brink of a sprint. I was safe for this moment. I had feared what was not happening. I breathed out into the fog, passing the shoe store and the butcher shop. A tiny bar on the corner of Entre Ríos and San Juan was still open; the owner and his son were watching football on a TV that had been stacked on top of the fridge. I asked for a beer and sat at a small wooden table by the door, writing a list of all the things I would miss about this place. It took over an hour. The list became a letter that I would read out loud at the writing workshop to tell them what it meant for me to be here. When I passed under the bridge I held my breath, then remembered to breathe. The family was nowhere in sight.

Juan Diego Incardona

We talked about other authors who had created their own literary universe and set their stories within it — William Faulkner’s Yoknapatawpha Country, Gabriel García Márquez’s Macondo, Juan Rulfo’s haunted plains of northern Mexico.
Is Villa Celina a world that you have already fixed, I asked, or does it go along changing by way of the writing?

Yes, by way of the writing it transforms but I’m conscious when I work, said Juan Diego. It’s not instinctive. What’s instinctive is perhaps the imagination, but there’s a program. There is a plan in all this work, this universe, where I dialogue with the tradition of Argentinean literature. In my books for example the characters of Leopoldo Marechal, Roberto Arlt, Borges, and Héctor Oesterheld appear. It pleases me to inscribe myself in a tradition. It’s good from the perspective of the ludic, too, that creativity plays with tradition and inscribes a belonging.

…history is a conversation…

…creativity is play…

Because to write is also to belong, he added. To belong to something. To a social community, a literary community, a camaraderie.

…writing is an act of membership…

Creativity is a fractal

Something happened. I’ll call it an experience of life. I’d like to leave out what it was for now. As soon as I say what it was it will start to become something else, because of the words. In Buenos Aires I always kept a notebook in my back pocket. One day I wrote this down: man = charcoal. That’s not enough to sum up what happened or evoke what I felt but it’s where the story starts, because before that there was only an experience of life, true to itself and inexplicable. Man = charcoal. For me it was a tag, a way of marking the moment so that I could find it easily again later. The experience of life passed on into other experiences. Apparently what happened before and what happened after was less interesting to me, or didn’t convert so
easily into language. Some moments just declare themselves. When I got home that day I flipped through my notebook and from that note I wrote the following in my journal:

“I walk along Rivadavia with my stories. Stop to eat two empanadas leaning against a building. A man like a smudge of charcoal and carrying a tremendous garbage bag over his shoulder mumbles at me, asking why I won’t give him something to eat. I give him the other half of my empanada.”

Now the process has begun, the one where an experience of life folds into words, which then in turn fold into more words, expanding outward beyond their start, growing, and with each incarnation they change. Like this, which I have written months later:

My stomach was heaving with hunger. I get dizzy when I don’t eat. It was dusk and I was late for the writing workshop, walking as fast as I could along Rivadavia and looking up ahead at each corner for a bakery without too many people where I could dash in and eat something without slowing down. I passed a few but couldn’t imagine myself inside. It was like I had been erased from each one and someone else was standing in the place I had tried to put myself. I often add myself to a room with my mind before my body gets there, just to try it out. But the momentum of being late didn’t give me much time. I could imagine quickly but I was still slow to decide. I was riding on my legs like they were a steady animal, the rest of me slumped over on top of my hips. Then a bakery opened up with a wide space where I could fit. Two empanadas, I said, and the words were also a thought as I considered how much I could eat, how the food would fit into me like my body was a room. I searched the archive of my memory for a time when I had seen someone walking on a busy street eating empanadas in this city and didn’t find enough to prove that it was something people did, walk and eat at the same time. Here and there someone concluded a final bite before dashing from, say, a café to a colectivo, but otherwise the
only examples of eating in the street were performed by people standing still. Even children waiting outside their school or playing in a park stopped to eat. In compliance with the silent laws of the city, even though I was late, I leaned against the wall outside in the entrance to an alley beside the bakery and ate as smoothly as I could, not wanting to draw attention to myself, wanting, at my best, to be invisible. I saw a man shuffle along the sidewalk carrying a tall bulging garbage bag over his shoulder, his clothes like burnt wood. He was looking down along the side of the street at the places where nobody else looked. I knew that he could see things that nobody else could see; I knew he would see me. I finished the first empanada and briefly considered the wholeness of the second. It was still complete, still true to itself, an uninterrupted shape in the universe. A bite would claim it. There was still time to give it away. Maybe he would pass me. I chewed so hard my temples hurt. Why won’t you give me something to eat? The man said without blinking, suddenly standing right in front of me. My throat went dry and my eyes watered. Swallowing was a lot of work. He didn’t move. He stood on the street with his garbage bag bulging out into the sidewalk behind him so that people had to go around. They didn’t look at him or at me; we were both invisible. I thought about my hunger and how I had planned it. I should have gotten three. I didn’t have time to get another one. My body started aching with shame. Then my thoughts tunneled back to a time years ago in Chile and the same thing had happened: a man with clothes as worn out as an old fire asked my friend for some food and without hesitating he broke what he was eating in half and shared it. The gesture was so confident, so basic, that it was like a long clear note from an instrument I had never heard but instantly understood. It was a fundamental act; there was nothing beyond it. I couldn’t tell if I had that thought or if that thought had me. It seemed to have arrived into me from somewhere else, somewhere far away. I wondered if this was the same man, as if all the charcoal men of the
world would appear to me in rhythms, just as I would appear again and again as a stranger with food in the street, and this encounter would play itself out across time until I learned what to do with it. The thought of my friend gave me courage, like a breeze of relief. He was showing me a way out of where I was stuck. The man hadn’t moved. Why won’t you give me something to eat? I passed him what was left.

Another image of that first written moment folds out. From two words and a sign, two words that are also signs, as Derrida would say, a wider glimpse opens up. Then that glimpse is widened again to another image. Neither one is truer than the others — they are each incarnations of a lived moment that will never be repeated, never really be conveyed, only altered by the tools of language. I could say even that language deforms the experience; maybe all I can say is that something happened. Then these words take up that experience and make it something else. Does the second account, the one I wrote that night after I got home, does it deform the first one? The openness of “man = charcoal” (a metaphor) offers a liberating airy quality to the thought about what the experience might have been. There are few parameters, only a few limits are provided and they are soft and nebulous. Metaphor opens. The second account offers a slightly more concrete scene — narrative starts to appear like a shape in the distance — but still it floats. A lot is unclear. The next incarnation of the lived moment is longer, there are more details, and among the details there are feelings and thoughts. Couldn’t each of these feelings and thoughts be expanded further? Not just expanded but altered to become something else? There are more rooms that I could imagine myself into, just as there are spaces between all the words.

Each of these accounts, whether they are three words or three thousand, has an invisible partner in the past — the lived moment that will never be seen again except by the language I
attach to it. These two separate entities, experience and language, are tethered together in the act of metaphor-making: experience is the topic and language is the vehicle. Metaphor is that generative gap between the world as it is and the world as it could be.

*Juan Diego Incardona*

Like a carpenter with wood the author thinks that there are things that serve him more than others, said Juan Diego. He discards some wood and takes others because they are good for the universe. Not everything enters the universe, or there are some things that prosper more than others.

…stories are buildings…
…the writer is a carpenter…
…a universe is made of wood…

I asked him how he knew what wood to keep and what wood to throw away. Was that an instinct? He gave me another metaphor instead.

Creativity is like a stream of water. The writer’s technique — how they produce characters, the scenes, how they produce verisimilitude, with what tone they work the realism or the lack of realism, the atmosphere, the climate, the suspense — all that is what shapes the stream of water. How to make the pipe smaller, for example, so that it comes out with more pressure and doesn’t become a lagoon. It’s like a sentimental disorder, he said. But one can direct it a little, no?

…good work is focused water…
…the opposite of creativity is a puddle…

Soon enough there are water leaks, he added. The pipe bursts… and that’s what’s beautiful about literature, that it’s an experience.
Creativity is a rumour

The spectre of crime haunted Buenos Aires. Two weeks after I arrived, a man was parking his car in his garage and two thieves dashed under the gate before it closed; he shot and killed one of them; the other one shot and killed him. Journalists speculated that he had been trying to protect his family, who at that time were sleeping inside and were awoken by the sound of their father coming home for the last time. A teenager in San Martin was attacked after school by a group of boys who pushed him until he fell and then kicked him until he died. The thieves, who had become killers, escaped with his iPhone. The event had been recorded by a security camera outside an electronics store; the footage showed grainy stills of black and white ghosts lurching towards one fixed point and then vanishing. It was discussed again and again by evening TV hosts who looked relieved to have this break from chronicling the country’s latest slide into economic crisis. But the one that bewildered me most was a sign that was taped to the wall of the Castro Barros subway station that said: On March 2nd, 2012, at 1500h Alejandro Ferrer, aged 23, was stabbed and killed here, if you saw anything please contact this number, he could have been your brother or your son or your friend so don’t be passive, and there was a photograph of a young man with brawny arms and a thin beard, smiling on a sunny day.

I thought about that twenty three year old and about how it had happened — on this very platform? In the middle of the afternoon? — as though his death were somehow impossible. I checked the time, absurdly relieved to discover that it was five o’clock and not three. A woman told me to always be careful on the streets and in theatres but especially in the subway, to carry as little money as possible and always in your front pocket, to look down, don’t talk to anyone, just get where you are going because there are thieves, thieves everywhere, and especially if they
know you are foreign. Another woman remembered wistfully that it wasn’t always like this: when she was young she would walk home in a mini-skirt at any time of the night, but that was before the drugs came and ruined everything. Now taxis were dangerous, too. They could take you anywhere.

A blanket of anxiety was stretched over the city, a feeling that crime not just could but would happen at any moment. People were braced for it, so that the stories that played over and over on the news seemed only to strengthen the sense of suspicion, anticipation, and fear. It was as though stories of crime offered a place to unload the uncertainty of not knowing where or when it would happen next.

I had heard in guidebooks and in other accounts that Constitución, the neighbourhood where I was staying, was rough. The train station four blocks away was infamous for stabbings, theft, and drugs, and I took a secret pride in telling people where I was staying as though it gave me a license to know something that was true and real about the city, so that by the end I had grown fond of it, grateful that I hadn’t found myself by chance staying in Recoleta, Belgrano or Palermo. I had learned from times in other countries that it didn’t hurt to ask if an area was safe, but not everyone thought this way. The first time I asked Victor if I should be concerned when coming home at night he looked at me like I had been wasting his time for an hour with that one question. Exasperated, he flicked his hands in the air, insisting immediately, It’s safe! It’s safe, okay?

A few weeks later I was considering a trip to visit an artist in San Martín, a trip that others were cautious to endorse without the usual advice — carry nothing more than what you need; come back before dark; know exactly where you’re going and you’ll be fine — and I asked him again, having forgotten his first reaction. This time Victor stamped his foot and made a noise
like he was spitting on the floor. It’s safe, okay?! Nothing will happen! Then he stormed into the other room to gurgle a mate and read on the computer. It occurred to me later that Victor had lived through two dictatorships; he had fled to Brazil with his family; he had come back and lived under a pseudonym; he was the director of a national Marxist newspaper that chronicled the unjust treatment of the poor. He had seen enough to know what real violence was.

Gabriela and I agreed that there was something sensational about Buenos Aires’ fascination with crime. Where was it? we wondered, having seen so little evidence of it ourselves. Surely this was no more or less than what could happen in a city of ten million people. I stood in Buenos Aires like standing on an edge — my feet on the ground, hearing stories falling all around me.

*Juan Diego Incardona*

Do you believe you have achieved your style? I asked. Do you already know what it is?

No, Juan Diego paused. I have a universe. Style is something that is in permanent transformation. Because it goes along varying. The grammar is getting richer, it’s incorporating other things. It’s subtle at times but what’s mine is the universe. An author’s style is in permanent growth. If you don’t achieve this transformation you repeat yourself. It’s like one becomes redundant, monotonous. It’s difficult for authors who find a recipe, a formula, and they stay there, trapped. They don’t try to put in new things.

…grammar is wealth…

…a recipe is a trap…

I thought of something Guillermo Martínez had said: in learning to write one book you learn to write many others like it. Each book must set off alone.
You know those authors whose names convert into adjectives? said Juan Diego. Borges, borgesian. Kafka, kafkesque. It’s because they have achieved something that is of them. It’s like if you took a blood sample from them, let’s say, from a ten-page short story you take a sample from page two. It’s going to have the same quantity of red blood cells, of vitamins, that speaks of the whole body. The same if you had taken it from page four or five. It doesn’t matter what moment of the story it’s from. There’s something of the style of the author that is their own and that has the quantity of red blood cells, white blood cells.

…style is blood…

…creativity is a life force…

I went along aspiring to find mine, Juan Diego explained, my own mode of expressing myself, which is difficult because one has to break with all the idioms that are not one’s own. And this original idiom, it’s not totally new. Instead it’s a new combination of all the others. It’s how much you put of this idiom, how much of this one, how much of that one. What reading each person had, the writer and the reader. What things one elects from life. How does he or she observe the world. It depends.

…expression is a mode…

…idioms are ties…

…creativity is a combination of idioms…

Creativity is theft

I walked towards the subway station, still giddy after my conversation with Mariana Docampo. I carried my folder under my arm, holding tight to the recorder that now contained the trace of her words.
Beside me, a group of four kids walked quickly away from a store. A space at the side of my eyes seemed to break and the back of my neck tingled. Dámelo, dámelo, said a woman who followed them out, her voice lifting at first like a question, then, when she said it twice again, falling hard into each word like she was hitting them with the sound. The kids walked with an unnatural speed and one of them, a girl who was wearing a red sweatshirt and couldn’t have been more than twelve years old, turned to look back over her shoulder just as the woman broke into a run. For a second it looked like the girl was laughing. She dropped a handful of scarves on the sidewalk and the four kids spread out into the busy intersection, one crossing the avenue and another crossing the street ahead, with the girl in the red sweatshirt and a taller boy wearing black turning sharply down the road to the side while the woman scooped up the scarves behind them. She came sprinting back to the entrance of the shop and threw the scarves into the doorway, shouting that they had to call the police, and kept running past the door as if to catch the kids on the other side of the block. The owner of the store next door nodded blankly under her awning but didn’t move. A space widened around the shop where the woman had thrown the scarves; otherwise people kept walking past. When I got to the corner I looked down the street and saw at the very end the girl in the red sweatshirt, paused like she was waiting for me to give her a signal that would send her racing off in a particular direction, and I thought I could make out through the distance that her face was still lit with a thrilled grin, before she dashed around the corner and was gone.

By now the momentum of the sidewalk had carried me along and the shop was somewhere in the long space behind me. I held my folder tighter and gripped the recorder like I was holding on to all the things that Mariana had said, like I had a bag of words in my pocket. The threat of being robbed meant more to me after the interview than it had before; now I was
carrying something irreplaceable, a string of language hung across the time of our meeting. The words were hard bits of air that were now suspended like a song that no one else had heard yet.

At the same time that I was cautious I felt a breezy excitement, too, as though the girl in the red sweatshirt was me and we both had escaped with something that we wanted, something that meant as much to me for the way I had gotten it as it did for what it was. I was relieved that I was finally witnessing a microcosm of the larger fear. It was a safe way to watch the anxieties of property play themselves out.

If there was another fear, though, it was for the world that would be created by children who stole for fun. Children who laughed when they sprinted away from damage. Children who, in a few years, could kick a boy to death for his phone. Surely the city was failing. But the way I heard it described it seemed like Buenos Aires was always failing. The best of it was in a past that animated the present with melancholy and a vain hope for a wayward return to a home that no longer existed. The city staggered through time like Walter Benjamin’s angel of history with its back to the future, except that the angel of Buenos Aires was singing with one hand clutching its chest. Against all odds, new things still happened in a hundred years of nostalgia. In a place that talked so much about its broken rules, it was surprisingly plain to see that crime could be this simple. I could understand that it was popular, as in, of-the-people, that these were children, even children playing, a fact that disturbed me only when I considered all children doing it at once. Instead, for this one moment of one day, it seemed weirdly logical. I knew I would feel different if it happened to me, but everything I had ever seen felt different when it finally happened to me.
Creativity is fear

It might have been midnight. I faced Avenida 9 de Julio with its fourteen lanes of traffic where they crossed Independencia. Waves of white lights streaked down from the obelisk in pairs; on the other side of the avenue waves of red lights drifted up towards it. The signal changed to walk.

The feeling of the city opened as I crossed the broad shadowy expanse, looking up at a rare moment when I could see the night sky with the billboards and the buildings and even the obelisk itself like marginal, insignificant chatter at the sides of a deep silence. The signal was already blinking when I looked down and saw that I had only made it half way across the avenue. Up ahead were the shadows of three boys stepping onto the cement island between the two directions of traffic, wiping their squeegees in a bucket of dark water. I stepped onto the cement with them as the pairs of lights on either side rushed at us, sealing us on the island together. I waited with my eyes fixed on the far shore. The tallest of the boys lumbered at me with his squeegee up like I was a drug that he needed and I wondered if this was a moment when everything would change. His body was full of shadows, except for his eyes, which had the streaks of white lights passing furiously across them. My stomach was a knot and I didn’t know what to do with my hands. Give me some money, he said, his voice sagging and melting under his heavy face. Give me some money, he said again. When he blinked the whole city blinked with him, folding into darkness and lifting. I imagined taking out my wallet and opening it to give him some money, knowing that would be the end. I cursed myself for not putting some extra bills in my front pocket, anyplace where I could have given him something in one clean
stroke without rummaging around in my jacket. I remembered what someone had told me when I was in Sierra Leone: things go wrong when you stop paying attention.

I understood why I had seen the stretch of another man’s stride on a different night as he crossed this same avenue, his long legs and the bend in his elbow, dashing all fourteen lanes at once. Getting trapped in the middle was not wise.

I could not run now — traffic ravaged both sides of the cement island at a hundred kilometres an hour. I imagined this man striking me down as though we were on a stage that a thousand cars would see, each one passing their headlights over the scene of a stranger crushing another stranger, none of them getting more than a glimpse before the avenue swept them along. Maybe one of them would call the police. But by then the damage would be done. What would they find? Surely not my memory, my sense of hope, my love.

I couldn’t tell if I was being robbed or asked. There was something blurred about his intentions. My entire city of experience had converged on this spot, so that none of the things I had done that day or that year, none of the feelings I’d shared or words people had told me, would have any bearing on what happened next. If he wanted to hurt me there would be no assessment of my merit. He would not check to see how much my parents loved me. I was a moment without a name between the pause of windshields in traffic.

_Disculpa_, I said gently. Forgive me.

I tried to find some truth of what was happening in his eyes, looking into him without blinking, and at the same time trying to convey a wide sense of peace, of openness, not defying him but lifting myself up in self-assurance and goodwill. He looked tired, even disappointed. I wanted to help him even though he could crush me. Did he not know that all he had to do was
grab me by my jacket with his fist scrunched under my chin, lift me up and bring his face a tiny bit closer, and he would have it all?

In that narrow second when neither of us was really thinking, just reacting, we were bound up in one another. He was the only one who could save me. I needed him in order for this to turn out okay. He mumbled something I couldn’t understand and stepped closer. Still looking into him I said *disculpa* softly again. I was mystified that language had kept me safe for this long, that words were protecting my body. A single pain bent across his eyes although the rest of his expression didn’t change. I thought of a cold metal pipe falling through the night air, never landing. The pain turned to anger; his eyes hardened. *Disculpa*, he sneered at me with teeth.

Then quietly, like a whisper, the traffic light changed from green to red. His friends ran up the lines of cars waving their squeegees. He blinked, the city folded, and he lumbered after them between the shadows.

*Juan Diego Incardona*

Do you believe that creativity can be learned? I asked.

It can be stimulated, said Juan Diego. I believe there are things that are innate, that have to do with some people’s capacity for observation. Others have much imagination. Others have a good sense of rhythm. But it can be stimulated. Practice or a good workshop can stimulate it. Maybe the simplest things to learn in a workshop are techniques, because it’s something more tangible, more concrete. I can explain what a determined narrative process signifies so that you practice it, but I’m not able to teach that person a mode of imagination. To me it seems that it has a lot to do with how one was molded in their infancy, the imagination of infancy. Because to write literature is to be a little bit a child, to play with things.

…techniques are objects…
…infancy is a form…
…to write is to play…

I asked what he does in the moments when he doesn’t know how to continue what he’s writing. He told me about learning to play the guitar.

The first time you touch the guitar you are doing scales the whole time, he said. Do, re, mi, fa, sol. You bore yourself doing scales. Until a moment when the hand flies on the fingerboard and you are no longer looking at your fingers so that they press well. You forget about the left hand and you lend your attention to the right hand, which is the hand of interpretation. The left now goes on its own. It has the technique. And here you interpret the song, with the right. But first you have to do a lot of practice.

…writing is music…
…music is contact…
…technique is a sound…

Our conversation closed with a humility that seemed older than Juan Diego’s forty years.

It’s a vocation, he said. It tranquilizes me to have written this about my neighbourhood where I lived for thirty years, which has to do with my family, my friends, my culture. If I’m going to die today, among all the messes that I sent myself, if there’s something I did clean it was to write these books. I’m tranquil for having done something in which I put everything: love, values… I feel that vocationally I achieved a result that satisfies me. And many times that doesn’t happen. Many times I studied things that I abandoned. But here I constructed a universe and it’s the fruit of much work. Many hours of solitude. You have to be there at home, writing, when everyone else is having a party. But it gave value to the shame because today people read
these things. A kid reads them. Or you come from another country and you read them. It’s magical.

…creativity is validation…

…creativity is making a home…

[Translation of a conversation recorded at a table in the garden, Espacio Cultural Nuestros Hijos, Buenos Aires, July 17, 2012]

Creativity is translation

Are you reading Bolaño’s work in Spanish? a friend asked me months later.

Yes, I said. Some of it.

Is it different?

I don’t know, I said. I’m different in Spanish.

Creativity is a change of scene

I had breakfast at Lidia’s house in San Telmo with the sunlight coming blunt and wide through her fourth floor windows, surrounded by paintings she had done and musical instruments she had collected.

I had been up late the night before and waves of exhaustion came over me when I finished eating, pulling air out of my body as if through a hole in the backs of my knees so that I deflated, a limp bag of air emptied at the table, and my mind emptied, too, holding to the only idea I could think of: stay upright. My eyes were tight little balls knotted with cramps; my stomach felt fluttery and open like it had been lifted to a space in my chest. The pride I’d felt in getting home at four o’clock in the morning had turned to numbness, too tired even to judge the person I’d been when I’d made the decision to stop at Bar de Roberto to hear a man wrench out
his whiskey-soaked heart in the form of a tango under a single light bulb. Now, at breakfast in
the daylight it was like that city had vanished.

Lidia put her napkin on the table and said, there, now read me your story. I moved into
the voice of the language like I lived there, taking up the sounds with a confidence that seemed
to come from the words themselves; and not just from the words, which on their own were, in a
way, meaningless, but the intonation that held them together. Reading Spanish had more to do
with singing than with saying. It was the sounds between the words, or the way that one word
moved into the next — how one treated the space between them — that brought the confidence
into me. I felt like I was channeling all the times I had heard men read out loud in this city,
filtering those moments for the ones that could be both humble and dignified at the same time,
and clear as though I were always looking up to see over a mountaintop that one day I hoped to
climb. In order to read I had to suspend the part of my mind that understood meaning and give
in, as though blindly, but seeing in a way that was blind, to a constant relay from the words to the
sounds that kept me hovering over the page like I was flying, kicking my legs in the air to brush
the ink with my toes. I saw and spoke at the same time. My eyes were four words ahead of what
my mouth made from seeing. I felt like I was racing. I looked down at my speed and faltered. I
looked back up at the mountaintop and kept kicking. I could not pronounce a few of my own
words. I ran over them again and again until Lidia gave them to me herself. I repeated them
badly, crestfallen that the language I had made had somehow betrayed me, resenting them; then,
shaking my hair and lifting my chin to forge on, breathe out, and let go or else I would get stuck
forever. When I finished I felt triumphant, wanting more, like I could still hear trumpets ringing
my ears.
Very good, Lidia said like a teacher. The beginning especially has something. The ending I don’t like so much but that’s me.

She found an anthology on the shelf and showed me her name beneath one of the poems, standing up to read it with her chair tucked in beside the table. I was relieved that one image stood out and I could cling to it until the poem was finished so I could repeat it back to her. Otherwise the work was lost on me. I had never known what a poem was, partly because I couldn’t tell what a poem wasn’t. Later I decided that it was a poem if it ached with what was not there, but in this case I couldn’t understand enough of what was there to know what was missing and consequently nothing ached. The sounds, however, ached just a little on their own.

To the park, then? said Lidia, putting on her scarf. The sunlight at Puerto Madero was cool and dry, already laying itself out flat next to the long low shadows of trees. After we had walked for an hour, so slowly that sometimes it seemed like we had to wander in little circles to keep from falling over, Lidia stopped and lifted her face to the sun. She closed her eyes and stayed that way with her chin up. I stood beside her with my hands in my pockets, then, when I realized that she showed no signs of moving, I copied her. With my eyes closed I could see the two of us as if from the perspective of people walking past, people whose lives I knew about only from the sound of their footsteps and the things they said as they walked, and the things I understood about them were calibrated by the patter of a dog’s paws on the paving stones and the sound of their voice before they were gone, so that I could invent an entire attitude just from the way they said, che ¿entendés?, an attitude that was more like a feeling or an orientation, a position, that dissolved into the air when the sound of another life clopped past. What was Lidia thinking? I saw myself as though I were about to vanish at any moment and had to keep my thoughts focused on who I was to others in order to exist, as if that was the only thing holding
me in the world, holding me down like a net. I noticed that I was facing the sun with my eyes closed. I could feel my chin raised up and the space it opened on my neck. The light soaked red and black into my eyelids. Across my cheeks spread not heat but a glow that started at my skin and went into my muscles. Something in my face went slack, like a hand that finally lets go of a heavy bag that until then has been cutting into the fingers and still burns, but burns because it is coming back to life. When I opened my eyes Lidia had wandered back the way we came, her steps still scribbling lazy falling loops on the white stones. I’m going home now, she said, my ankle is bothering me. But you should stay. I can see that you need this.

I walked along the boardwalk for two more hours with the Rio Plata stretching brown and far to the east — an hour away until my feet hurt and I realized I was so tired I was stubbing my toe on more and more paving stones and an hour home, which, because of my fatigue and because the sun had gone down between the buildings, left the same trace on me as a dream.

**Creativity is recognition**

As I prepared for another interview I saw Claudia from the bakery again in front of a printing shop. The image of her face with her upturned eyes as they were magnified through her glasses wobbled through a crowd of strangers. Like anytime I meet someone I know on the street, the feeling of knowing her arrived sooner than her name or where we had met or even who she was. The street seemed to redefine its terms in that moment, so that I couldn’t say what I had felt before or if I had felt anything at all. I might not even have been there and the street might not have even existed — not that she was so important to me, but that she gave my memory of that street an occasion to begin. Even though I could slow down the feeling of when she appeared to try to make some sense of it, examining the way it happened, I still couldn’t seem to find the details of what it was really like before she showed up. Out of the dull black
shadows of the shoulders of men’s coats the feeling of knowing her face just lit up. Something leaned forward — not her, because at that point I still didn’t know where the feeling was coming from, just a bending force of certainty that wowed out from the crowd, like a voice saying, *Here,* in the way that *here* can mean an offering and a place at the same time. The feeling presented itself as a narrowing entrance, like a funnel, and for a second I couldn’t say whether it pulled me in towards her face or whether something about her face was pouring forward into me. There was an exchange that was even a contest, those two directions pulling and pushing, so that her face was exerting itself over me at the same time that I could feel myself converging on it, in my mind, and suddenly I knew who it was, it was Claudia. The afternoon at the bakery lit up in the space between us. The funnel was gone and we were two people who knew each other on the street.

The chance encounter seemed to mean more to me than it did to Claudia. If I hadn’t stopped her she was ready to walk right past me, her eyes wandering unblinking along the branches of the trees overhead.

*Claudia,* I said. *¿Qué tal?* What’s going on?

Her eyes came down but still didn’t blink.

It’s me, I said, the Canadian. We met two weeks ago, I talked with you and Carlos. It was a Sunday.

Her head tilted back and throttled down in a giant nod like she was breaking a piece of wood with her chin. She was in a hurry. Although she put her hand on my shoulder she was already pulling away to open the door to the shop where I was going in to print. We went in together. She pressed her face against the computer screen as she clicked the mouse in fast patterns that sounded like a Geiger counter, like she was getting closer to something. I printing
the questions for an interview I would do the following day, pretending that I didn’t mind being
the only one to celebrate that I had just run into someone I knew in a city of ten million people, a
phenomenon that would always impress me no matter how many times it happened. I paid at the
desk. Across the room, Claudia shouted and moaned at the computer. The owner of the printing
shop shook his head and muttered under his breath. Claudia repeated what she said and the
owner shrugged.

*Quieres abrir una página,* I said. She wants to open a page.

For some reason I understood her easily, maybe more easily than other people. It was like
I could hear the words beyond the sounds she made.

I helped Claudia find what she was looking for but she still seemed distressed.

*La conozco,* I explained to the man at the desk, who was watching us from across the
room. I know her.

*No la entiendo para nada,* he shrugged again. I don’t understand her at all.

I touched Claudia’s arm as I left. *Chau,* I told her, but she was too absorbed, too
frustrated with the computer, to notice.

**Creativity is a conversation with Vanesa Guerra**

By now I was more comfortable introducing my project. I could use fewer words that
mattered more, and my sentences seemed to have more obvious endings. I could feel part of me
light up as soon as the interview began, as soon as I assumed the role of interviewer, and I took
on qualities I’d until then only imagined that I had.

Vanesa Guerra is a psychoanalyst and an author. I was touched to see that she brought a
notebook and a pen to the café where we met, as though she hoped to collect new ideas, too.
I started by asking her about a line that had stood out for me in her book, *La sombra del animal* [The shadow of the animal] (2008).

In the short story called “Las Alas” [The Wings], I said, You wrote:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><em>Nuestra poca fuerza reside en eso, en un falso no saber, en un falso no querer saber.</em> En la práctica de un olvido inmediato. (p. 47)</th>
<th>Our little force resides in that, in a false not-knowing, in a false not-wanting-to-know. In the practice of an immediate forgetting.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

It made me wonder if at times this is also the process of writing. That writing demands a certain forgetting in order to be able to continue writing. Without that forgetting, self-consciousness impedes us.

Enchanting, said Vanessa. It had never occurred to me to plant it that way. Your reading pleases me.

She reread her own phrases out loud.

It’s true, she smiled.

From there our talk seemed to travel in many directions all at once, and only after a while did I realize that there was a central force that held those directions in place. Understanding her words was like the difference between looking at the fragmented light that casts off from each of the faces of a prism, and looking at the prism itself. Our conversation spun the prism so that at first all I could see was frantic blasts of dazzling light; but when I calmed I could see the steady shape at its centre.
Creativity is an image

The next day I went to the massive park near Plaza Italia in Palermo and walked a long, lazy circle around the lake while radiantly beautiful people clattered past on rollerblades, skateboards, and bicycles. It was Sunday and families were spread out on the grass. I sat under a tree and tried to read but nothing came — the world of the writing was not enough to keep me, and instead I looked emptily out at the world going by around me, without me, feeling distant from both of them. Surely there was someone I could call. I thought of Florencia from the writing workshop and how she had secretly sent me one of her stories. It was the account of a nun who starts noticing one of the boys who lights the candles in the church and she doesn’t know what to do with her feelings. I was grateful and wished that we could already know each other in a way that was honest. Then, when I saw her again at the workshop, she refused to look at me. It occurred to me that knowing her would require more strength than I had. I imagined her standing over me, tearing my stories into strips that fell through the cold sunlight as she smiled.

In the middle of the park was a gallery showing the drawings of the Hungarian artist Lajos Szalay. The building was a round white house nestled between the trees; now that I consider it, his drawings climb grotesquely from the shadows where the roof meets the trees, a giant white foot looming over the park while shattered lines erupt through one of the windows. I walked through pale rooms punctuated by blasts of wild ink and drawings that were fragile and audacious at the same time, feeling thrilled to have found an oasis of art. I wanted to hold on to his drawings so that I could take them with me, not as much for how they looked as how it felt to see them. The more drawings I looked at the more I wanted to hurry home and draw. I suddenly believed that I could do it, that I had something to say with art, which is the best feeling there is.
I understood that the purpose of drawing wasn’t to supplant the things I had seen. The drawings would exist on their own terms — part of the world; apart from the world.

When the sun went down I didn’t want to go home. I felt like the park was closing as an idea, not just as a place, and I was forced to make my way back to the city. I walked up Calle Jorge Luis Borges to Plaza Cortázar and wandered around Palermo Viejo in the dusk. Everyone had someone to see and be with. I leaned against the window of a store that sold expensive handbags and watched people go by on the sidewalk, then I looked at the street and for a long time I didn’t really see anything. In my mind I was making ink drawings but none of them came out right. Without notice or reason, I pushed off and walked back to the subway station.

Vanesa Guerra

It is as if writing were a mode of untangling something that is in a very intuitive order, said Vanesa, that exists as if it were a dream. You see that one dreams and when one tells that dream, you have already done a torsion. You put it into words.

…writing is translating non-language into language…

You add things, she said. It is as if by writing it you are changing the material.

…non-language is a material…

…the material changes with words…

To me it seems that the creative act is how we translate ourselves, she continued. It takes us from one place and puts us in another, where one doesn’t stay the same. At least it happens to me that I don’t stay the same, in myself. It produces a species of exile.

…creativity is translation of one’s self…

…translation is exile…
Not by way of stories, she added. To me the stories don’t matter. In truth they’re not important to me. I’m not a grand recounter of stories. I prefer that they’re told to me by others. What I do is different. I believe that writing is like returning to a zone where we’re not inhabited by language.

Creativity is transformation

Months later, when all that remained of Buenos Aires were feelings and even those had softened to the point where I had to turn them into words in order to preserve some semblance of what they had been, I made drawings of Victor from the photos I had taken while he and I had dinner. I wish I could say that there was a reason why I didn’t use ink, a principled, aesthetic reason, and if I tried to invent one now I would say it was because ink seemed to show itself in terms that were too certain, too clear, and what I felt required a kind of mental massaging in order to understand it. At the time ink simply didn’t occur to me. By then I had forgotten about the drawings I’d seen of Lajos Szalay. The charcoal work of Ricardo Ajler that I’d seen in La Boca with Lidia, however, stayed with me and maybe that’s why I used charcoal. In the end I think the reason was simpler than that: I already knew what to do with it. I understood something of how charcoal behaved, and so I could use it right away, without hesitation. Plus, I could literally get my hands dirty and massage the drawing in the same way I hoped to figuratively do with my memories. The drawings helped me understand what I’d been searching for all along in language. By drawing Victor, I was carrying the image of his face from something literal, from the photograph, to something intuitive, something less concrete, in the drawing. The drawings didn’t look exactly like him, not as accurately as the photographs did — that wasn’t the point. I was using the image of him for ideas about how light falls across a face and the kinds of shadows it makes. They weren’t supposed to be exact copies of what he looked like — I had the
photographs for that. Instead, I wanted to give in to the way he could be interpreted by the medium. The charcoal exerted its own force over the outcome. If I’d used ink it would have gone in a different direction, because ink has its own authority, too. Each drawing made something new of the photograph. I was carrying the photograph beyond itself into an image that was connected to its literal appearance by certain traits while taking on new ones because of the medium, because of decisions I made, because of hopes and inadequacies and intuitions I had. To put it in terms of language, the photograph was the topic and the drawing was the vehicle of the visual utterance. They were bound by similarities of meaning — maybe the drawn eyes had something in common with the photographed eyes — and held apart by differences in what they were — no two drawings I made of Victor looked like they were of the same person, as though each interpretation became something else. With metaphor it was the same: I coupled the word ‘creativity’ with different experiences to see what new understandings the metaphor could create. Creativity was the literal object, the topic in the phrase, the equivalent of the photograph; violence, searching, contact, chance, confession were the recast object, the vehicle, the drawing. No drawing was ever the last drawing, just as no metaphor was the last metaphor — there could always be others, and each one would make something else of the photograph as long as no two drawings were identical. Luckily there were many factors that prevented any two drawings from ever being the same: the medium, the timing, the focus, the hope, my own inconsistency and more; the possibility of talent, the journey of the artist, the incubation of the idea, the epiphany of the image, the strategy of the layering, the possession of the mind, the madness of the line, the vulnerability of the intention, the mortality I wished to eschew, the tension and attunement that kept me trying. In short, expanding the metaphorical range, just like making drawings from photographs, was a creative act.
But that process didn’t start with the photograph. In its own way the photograph was already a transposition of the original. The photograph, after all, was taken from life. Victor and I ate dinner together in a world that really happened and from it, I took a picture. That picture isolated some aspects of Victor’s lived person and let go of others. The picture, for example, shows nothing of the way he swung his head when he looked up at the television from peeling an orange; there is no trace of the smell of cigarettes or how he waved the knife he used to chop cabbage while acting out the Spanish accent of the losing fútbol team; the noise he made — Hup! — when he was startled in the kitchen is silenced; even time is discarded in favor of this impossible stillness. The photograph of Victor is not Victor. It connects to him by the similarities between the physical aspect of his lived appearance and his photographed one. There is an experience and an image, connected by the mind that brings one to the other, a mind that makes metaphor by carrying the unsaid experience beyond itself into language.

How can I know the experience when it is so complex with sounds and smells and time? Something is always left out of the record. Luckily, looking back through the pinhole of retrospect, the photograph allows me to consider Victor in a new way. Drawing him was a way to look closely, to consider him again. Each of the stages of transformation — from life to photograph to drawing to other drawings, to other languages — offers an opportunity for the wisdom of metaphor, using something that is not the thing to consider the thing, using B to consider the possibilities of A. The process of making metaphors shows what B and A are capable of together. Maybe it’s no coincidence that those are the initials of the city where I chose to ask what creativity could mean to me.

A final thought about the drawings, and I’ll let metaphor do the talking here: one thing I learned along the way, one thing that blew my mind and completely changed the way I worked
with charcoal, showing me how highlights could be bright where I wanted them and how contrast drew the eye through the image; the thing that changed my practice, lending me control and the confidence to abandon what I had thought were rules, was a rubbery little nugget that I could mould into any shape I needed, wiping away what hadn’t worked and making a neat line out of a smudge. Just as any story is made by leaving things out, so is every charcoal drawing lit with absence. I recommend for any aspiring artist, an eraser.

_Vanesa Guerra_

To me it seems that we have all had experiences of a non-tongue, a non-language, Vanesa explained. And to me it seems that this non-language is paradoxically the perfect language. It includes the possibility of being multiple at the same time, equivocal, ambiguous. Such an experience stays with you at the limits of language, in permanent orbit. And sometimes through a crack it enters, arrives, connects.

As Vanesa spoke I imagined a stone skipping across the surface of an endless lake at night. The stone was a word. The other side of the lake was impossible to describe.

…language is a territory that passes through the stars…

The original idiom, I said.

Clearly, said Vanesa. The original idiom. It enters as if it were a memory of a language belonging to someone else. When it enters, it enters like an impulse-from-the-heart, an intuition. It arrives like lightning. It seems to me that the creative act has to do with this encounter. The encounter with what goes orbiting around the tongue, around language, because really I believe that it wasn’t lost.

Hearing Vanesa speak was like walking into echoes. I could feel the original sound beyond them even though I hadn’t heard it yet.
…creativity is the encounter with non-language…

When it comes close to us, she said, one possibility is to take it and to make it into a translation. I believe this is what art does in all of its manifestations. Another possibility is to not do anything, no? Have a son, plant a tree… I don’t know.

How do you know when that moment has arrived? I asked. How do you know if you are encountering non-language?

I believe that this happens to everyone, said Vanesa, from what I hear from my patients. There are moments in which something that isn’t from this world touches them or touches us. It can be testified after in some way. Now if someone is thinking of art, if they are a musician, a writer, a poet, a painter, a sculptor… that is how to sustain the lightning.

…non-language is a touch…

In this way inspiration is posterior, she said. It is what makes you sustain the material. After inspiration is work, but I don’t know if it interests everyone. To inspire yourself or to keep inspired, which is more voluntary… it seems to me that it implies work with the soul, with the spirit.

I never planted it like this before, Vanesa added. I’m planting it for the first time now that I’m telling you.

…ideas are seeds…

I thought of Walter Benjamin’s lightning bolt again, which was the moment of encountering non-language. Inspiration came after it like thunder, sustaining the memory of electric contact. Language was the long labour of naming lightning.
Creativity is a song

Another night. The grey city swept by with pools of yellow light between the trees, the kind of light that made me want to lean my head against the taxi window and look up, tired but alive, like I’d seen someone do in a movie while the reflections of buildings and the pale blue glow of dawn glided in liquid bubbles across the glass. We were passing through Boedo; it might have been three or four in the morning. Here, said the driver, wrenching on the brake, Bar de Roberto. Almost asleep we stood on the sidewalk while the taxi floated away into another dimension, drifting down the street and turning left at the end of the block, its dim yellow side in the street light before passing away. Part of me was still curled up in the back seat as it left, the part of me that was homeward, so that when the taxi was really gone I was left with what remained: the part of me that had no home and wasn’t going anywhere, the part of me that never slept even though it was exhausted, because it had no place to sleep, moving with its eyes closed, feeling with the hands of a soul that had no body. The city spread out from that one place on the concrete where I stood.

From a black rectangular hole in the wall shadows spilled onto the street. Wanting to keep moving, wanting to have a reason to move, I turned to the two other people I’d come with, the ones I’d had dinner with and stayed up late talking and drinking wine with, thinking to ask them, todo bien? and nod in solidarity, but I couldn’t see them. I looked around. A tree loomed at the corner of the sidewalk; yellow light fell through the branches to break in patterns on the ground. The red dot of a cigarette lit up against the trunk and for a second the little light breathed in on a face, then was gone. Had they left in the taxi? Had they left without me? My head spinning I went through the gestures and sounds we had made while getting out: the rustle for
money in the dim taxi light, my foot on the pavement to stand at the curb. Three doors slammed; I was sure they were here. I walked towards the shadowy hole of the entrance to the bar, wearing a sense of purpose like it was a jacket that had belonged to an older brother who had seen terrible things and still loved me. Someone lifted their arm with the cigarette hanging above my head so I could pass underneath.

It was so dark inside the bar I could hardly see. I didn’t want to stand still to look around; it would make it obvious that I didn’t know where I was going, and if I didn’t know that then maybe I didn’t belong. I could feel my shoes touching the floor and the balance in my body, the balls of my feet and the pads of my toes, the shifting weight in my bones. There were narrow spaces around me made by the absence of chairs and tables, chunks of openness that I drifted into like a current of air in a still room, hovering, waiting, but waiting with intention, then when I could feel another opening ahead I moved into it and found myself on the other side of the room. But what room? Another door even blacker than the first went off from there into nothing. I could hear small rough voices echoing off the walls like they were reflections of candlelight on the cement, all texture, no source. Finally looking into the space I had crossed, back the way I’d come, I saw the shadow of a man tending a long bar with bottles stacked up high behind him, so high he could never have reached the upper ones. Then I saw why it was so dark: there was one single light bulb high up above at the top of the room. The light that it cast was thin and tired by the time it reached the ground. The tabletops barely caught it. It seemed only strong enough to make a little grey line across the tops of hunched blobs of darkness below. And then a man started singing.

He didn’t so much sing as tear his soul open. Inside him there was a grotesque animal made of ink and pain. But inside that, because it seemed like he was shedding layer after layer so
that every time he made a sound another animal roared and whimpered beyond that one — inside all of those, at the very centre, was the man again, so infinite that he stood alone with rules broken all around him like they were the egg shells from which he’d been born. He was wearing a suit. His white shirt was disheveled, stained with night, and his jacket was unkempt like ripped wings after a century of forgetting how to fly. His face, a sagging puddle of grey, looked up like the rest of him wanted to see out from under his eyelids, eyelids that refused to open all the way because his body had fallen asleep a long time ago and his voice, this voice that was climbing out of him through a hole in his heart, wanted up towards the light. He stood on a chair and wobbled, swooning, holding a glass cup to his chest. He stuck out his chin and gestured with his cup at all the pain in the room. It was then that I noticed a man playing guitar beside his table. I hadn’t heard him before, only felt that he was there, that something else was in the room with the voice. I saw too that I was sitting at a table by the wall. Another young man I’d never seen before with a forest of black curly hair tilted a wine bottle at me, raising his eyebrows. Beside the bottle there was a glass that looked like it had been traced into the room with white pencil. He poured me a cup of the wine and nodded, lifting his own glass, not to me but to the man who was singing, and we both drank while the song ripped another hole in the night. The singer’s eyes were completely closed now. He clawed at his shirt. Stars of spit fell in the air. He looked down, his mind gone and his body left over to die. Then he rose and stamped his foot on the table. His head threw open to drink like he would swallow the whole glass, hurling it into the fire of his mouth to smash at the back of his throat where the flames were. The song was an ending, even from the very first word. When it was over he fell asleep with his head against the guitar player’s chest.
My feeble project returned to me: to call what he had done ‘creative’ was insulting. His life had burned up in a song.

I left, expelled into the night. The sidewalk felt even more empty than before. I didn’t know what would happen next. The thought of home occurred to me as a far away sound or a candle on a hill. I moved towards it. The street ahead of me yawned, a black and infinite maw. I turned around and went back to stand by the doorway of the bar, leaning against the wall, watching nothing, waiting for nothing. The city around me vanished and there was only this one corner in the night. Voices tinkled from the darkness beside me. I thought of the other door at the back of the room, the one I hadn’t entered. In the taxi I leaned my head against the window, looking up at the dawn.

A few days later, in the afternoon, I went back to Bar de Roberto. The ceiling was a regular height and the winter sun streamed through the windows. A couple of tourists clapped for a dapper man playing tangos on the guitar.

Vanesa Guerra

When we name a word, said Vanesa, when we name anything, we put it in a category. Before the word, even before the conformation of “I”, time and space are not established. Time and space construct themselves to the extent that they gain terrain for an anterior experience.

…a name is a category…

…time and space are limits…

The way that babies connect to one another is evidence of this non-language, she said. We could think that there is a language there, without a doubt, but it doesn’t have the density of the word. Even if the word is a subtle material, in relation to this non-language it’s very dense.
So I believe that inspiration, the work of inspiration, is to try to quit as much as possible the density of the word.

…non-language is a language…

…inspiration is the lightening of words…

How can this be done? I asked.

One way is to use words wrongly, she said. To break with certain codes of narrative structures, to shatter certain systems of identity in order to liberate. It seems to me that in those games there is a meaningful effect. That permits you to be a bridge to… I don’t know if it’s very confusing what I’m saying…?

Creativity is dance

My tango lessons were in the basement of a café on Avenida San Juan. The café was open each evening when I arrived but closed when I left, so that when the lessons were over I would climb out into the street through a smaller door beside the main entrance that the owner had already locked. I usually arrived before Estela, the teacher, who was a friend of my tango teacher in Vancouver, so I would wait with the quiet relief of someone who has a reason to be there even though it made me look no different from the ones who had no reason at all. Estela’s smile looked like it was pushing through a tired face that had been draped over hers like a curtain. I could feel that she wanted to smile, that her smile even had a life of its own, but that it took effort to let it through. Then at other times the curtain blew away as if a great wind was passing by her face and there it was, just her smile, her true face before the curtains fell back. I learned to look for her smile in her eyes where it was steady and bright, easier to find as we became better friends. She had a big backpack slung over her shoulder that made her lean to one side when she walked. She greeted the owner, a thick bald man with a striped apron who
reminded me of a baker, and nodded at me. ¿Bajamos? she said when it was time to go down the stairs.

Show me what you know, she said. She had taken off her scarf and her jacket and set up little speakers from her computer.

I held my hand behind her back, hovering at her spine, and tried not to press when we turned. She told me to stay light, don’t lead me with your hand, lead me with your torso. I tried to find the place in my body that would turn us from the centre. It felt like I was rummaging around in the dark of my own body or digging with the hands of my mind until I believed that I had found it and we turned, which was the proof that I had found the right place. If I hadn’t found it, then I would have turned alone. I tried to focus on simple things, on the weight of my body as we danced around the broken tiles of the basement.

Tango is no more than two people walking, said Estela, lifting her hand from my hand and her other hand from where it was resting behind my neck so I was holding her but she was no longer holding me. She turned her head to the side as if to look at the way we were still moving together. You see? Just walking.

It was true. We walked together. Then the weight of my body suddenly became the most complex thing I had ever experienced, that lumbering pendulum that swung from side to side with each step. I searched for the centre of my body somewhere in my waist, between my hips, and let it become heavy so that the hip without the weight of my step could fall, even slip out behind me like my body was advancing without it and when I stepped again I could feel that leg pull in behind me. The sound of my shoe slid to catch up along the tiles, barely touching my other shoe as it brushed next to it, then advancing into the weighted air of the place where Estela’s body had been.
Knees, was all she said.

The next step I kept my weight slung in my hips and glided the other leg forward but this time made sure that my knees nearly brushed when they passed.

Very good, she said. Now, with your hand behind your back.

She let go from her right hand, my left, and I folded my arm away. We continued. I put my mind into the muscles of my centre and tried to think from there.

_Deja de pensar,_ she said, _deja de pensar,_ which would mean stop thinking except that it was the verb for leaving, leave thinking, leave thinking, as if thought were a place I could abandon to spend time elsewhere, as if thinking were not the only home I knew, a home I was frightened to leave and had so little practice leaving that when I did, like in the moments of dancing when the air seemed to break apart and I was stepping through a smile in my mind to an infinite space, the space of always wrapped up in an instant, I felt something break in my heart, too, and I wanted to cry at the same time that I wanted to laugh. The more I thought about thinking and tried to leave it the more anxious I became so that hearing the words, Leave thinking, brought me closer to the edge of what I needed in order to dance but it couldn’t push me over. I didn’t know how to let go of wanting to let go.

One time I drank wine before the class, sure to chew bright sparkly gum after so that Estela wouldn’t smell it on my breath, hoping that it would help me find the abandon that I knew was possible from other times dancing, in other cities in other ways. Maybe a drink would make it easier to leave thinking, to at least soften the edge so that I could tumble, finally, into the ephemeral, infinite fluidity that I wanted. Instead it made it more difficult to find my body. Where is your weight? Estela said. It shifted to different places in my body, at times in my knees and then, just when I thought I had found it, teetered high up across my shoulders so that I could
feel it but couldn’t settle it anywhere, much less in the centre of my body or, where it belonged, in the music. The pendulum swung wider.

After the class we climbed through the tiny little door that the owner of the café had left open for us and walked slowly along the sidewalk to Calle Peru, stopping at a barred window where Estela bought cigarettes and lit one as we continued walking. I can tell right away what kind of person someone is by how they dance, she said. My heart sank. I confessed that I felt like a sensitive person trapped among thousands of rules that I had made for myself. She nodded and said, yes, you dance stiff. Your shoulders are tight. But here’s what I see. She gave me her bag to hold in the street. This is how you danced when you first came to me. She lurched a few steps with locked knees and her arms up like a robot stopping traffic. This is how you dance now. Her body softened and walked forward, just walking, with her arms embracing a ghost. You see? she said, squinting into her cigarette and taking back her bag. I see a person with a lot of tenderness. It’s good that you have it for tango, because that part cannot be taught.

Creativity is an exercise

At my lesson the following week I told Estela that I needed to work on my embrace.

So embrace me, she shrugged.

I held her.

That’s all it is, she said.

As soon as I call it a dance it becomes something else, I said.

It’s just an embrace. Two people walking together, embracing.

She cleared her bag off the chair and moved her computer to the floor. Hold this chair over your head, like this.

Like this? I asked.
With your hands here.
Okay.
And walk. Just walk.
Like this.
Head up. Like that. Shoulders, shoulders. Relax. When you embrace me you look like this.
That bad?
I walked around the basement holding the chair above my head by its legs, my shoulders down and my head up, feeling the weight in my back. When it was over I could feel myself leaning back because I was finally standing up straight.
Better, better, she said.

_Vanesa Guerra_

So far we have been talking about the word as something unique, I said. What about writing, which is the union of many words. Do we arrive to something more subtle when we see it in total?

I hope so… I hope so, said Vanesa. For example, it seems to me such an arrival happened in me as a reader of Clarice Lispector (2012c), in _The passion according to G. H_. In that reading, I had an experience of another zone outside of language. It seems to me that the grand works that are involved with that search, they achieve it. But I don’t know if all us writers have that capacity to achieve it. Clarice achieves it like nobody else.
So one returns to the origin and brings an impression of that origin back with them, in the form of words, I said. Is that the journey?

Yes, clearly, said Vanesa. One returns, but one cannot stay there. One must leave because there is no possibility of regressing. The only possibility is to have another experience of the lightning, and therein produce the passage again. You are shot out from non-language, without belonging. One can never belong because it orbits. Because it’s in permanent flight. Like the moon that permanently falls. You cannot catch it.

...a word is a journey to a non-word and back again…
…non-language is a falling moon…

Creativity is trust

The explanations did no good. I understood the idea of the dance but I needed to know it with my body. My body needed to know it in the way that the body knows, that is, in a language without words and with an original, inexplicable grammar. When Estela described something for a long time I grew impatient. I could see the words floating by, meaningless, wasted, irrelevant. The only measure of my learning would be in what I could find with my body; the only explanation for dancing was dancing. I knew I would have to practice each movement a thousand times until it was coming from the memory in my muscles and not from my thoughts directing them. I imagined my arms, legs, and back as though all of me was newborn, acquiring patterns and habits, and overcoming the old ones. I tried to walk as though I had never walked before, believing that if I could wipe the slate clean then I could write a more honest phrase overtop of it. I thought of one muscle at a time, putting my mind inside each part of my body as I walked, so that I experienced everything from my knees or from my hips or from my back, my own weight
above me, the flex and pull and stride. *Deja de pensar,* Estela smiled. And another thing, she said. Breathe.

You are still too stiff, she told me one day. Here and here. She touched her back and her shoulders. Try this. She tied her scarf around my head, covering my eyes. Okay? she asked.

Okay, I said.

The soft pressure on my head was comforting. It was good to have this excuse to close my eyes. The blindness, though, was harder to accept. Estela put one hand on each of my shoulders. Now walk, she said.

I stepped into the darkness. I could feel the weight of her hands against me, enough to know she was there but not enough to stop me. I pushed into the space ahead of me; there was resistance; then the space opened again. Keep walking, she said. Her voice came from far away. I held a map of the room in my mind and had placed myself beside the wall that faced the stairs. When I reached what I thought was the corner I hesitated.

I won’t let you bump into anything, she said.

Estela turned me by angling her body a little to the side and I followed her, striding into nothingness. I moved my mind to the balls of my feet and the bend in my toes when I pushed forward. The pendulum swing of my body was subtler now but because I was paying it so much attention I could feel my weight shifting widely back and forth with each step. I found my knees and thought from there. It steadied me. I invented an invisible groove in the air and moved through it, using the sides of a space that only existed in my mind for balance. For one step I was perfectly aligned — I moved evenly, with strength and lightness at the same time, and I could feel that all of me was connected to itself and from it, I could feel Estela’s hands not against my shoulders but somehow a part of them. I must have smiled from under the blindfold.
You can feel that, no? she said.

The glimpse of success scattered me again. My ankles wobbled, sending tremors up my legs through my knees until I was not dancing but standing in a body. She put her hands on my shoulders. I breathed. We walked.

Fine, said Estela. Now this.

She put one hand on the centre of my chest. Again, walk, but walk through me. Her weight was stronger against me this time, and because there was only one place where we touched I had to lead with the direction of my torso. My shoulders felt broad like wings I wanted to use but couldn’t. They turned when I walked, one shoulder back as the other leg moved forward, swinging on the pivot at the centre of my body where the palm of Estela’s hand was hard against me. Blind and without music, I walked around the room like I was striding into the future. I could hear both of us breathing and the sound of our shoes scuffing on the tiles. I had the feeling of falling. I wondered if she would kiss me, then realized that I was hoping she would.

Vanesa Guerra

So language is not a point, but a passage, I said.

A passage, a translation, an exile, said Vanesa. Because I also believe that an intense experience of creativity can exile us from ourselves. An internal exile. It’s like your own voice has run away. Because the anterior voice has to arrive. One receives one’s experience of who they could have been without knowing it, and here I return to what you signaled at the beginning, that it’s an un-knowing related to the un-knowing of forgetting. Because in reality we forget how those primary experiences were.

…creativity is internal exile…
…a voice is an animal living in time…

Because maybe you have the luck to remember something that you lived when you had three years age, she continued, but in the moment that you tell it, you change the reality.

…age is a possession…

…a story is memory transformed…

From that memory you are going to translate yourself, she said, and with that you are going to betray yourself. Because the categories with which you remember, are categories, posterior.

…translation is betrayal…

…categories are limits…

**Creativity is a tradition**

A few nights later Estela invited me to a milonga in La Boca. I knocked on her door at eleven o’clock as she had told me to do. In front of her house was a car that had been emptied and burnt so that only the blackened frame was left. She waved from the top floor, from the roof, in fact, so that I could see the night sky above her. She gestured with a cigarette in her hand and said, *ya termino esto*. I’ll just finish this. I stood on the street beside the burnt car and leaned against the wall, then sat on the step of the door next to Estela’s feeling comforted by the balance of light and shadow, which seemed like just the right amount. It made me feel like I was safe. There was a policeman in a yellow vest standing on the corner two blocks away who looked like he had learned how to sleep standing up, with his hands in his pockets and his head bowed. When Estela came down and we walked past him together, she greeted him, *buenas noches*, and he grunted *buenas noches* back.
I was glued to the window of the taxi as we drove through La Boca to the milonga. Night had folded over the city. We were nowhere near the part that had been painted up with bright primary colours, where there were dozens of policemen around to see that the tourists had a good time. Each street that branched off to the side was empty, looking like it was waiting for the theatre of life to begin. Big chunks of cement were lit with a dull yellow light and a few puddles sprawled between the pavement and the sidewalk like bodies. Naively, then feeling sorry for having thoughts like this, it occurred to me that the streets looked like stages where a door would open at any moment and someone would start singing, looking up at the stars that were really the lights of the theatre — sorry because I knew nothing of what it was really like to live here. We stopped at a gate where a little light shone through the white bars of a fence. For a second as I stood beside the taxi I felt like I was between two worlds, both of which were safe and therefore familiar, the taxi on one side which could drive away from all of this and the milonga inside, brightly lit and full of people, while down the road in either direction the night extended towards an unknown truth that I would never discover because if I did, I assumed, it would be among the last things I learned. I imagined walking that way, in the direction that the taxi went, fading into the dark between the low, blunt cement houses, walking as though I was naked in the world, having given up everything I could imagine holding on to so that I could fade into a city that would swallow me up. I wished for a spiritual submission that didn’t require violence. I wanted to give up, to open, without being hurt.

The milonga had been happening in the same hall on the same night of the week for eighty years. Eighty was also the average age of most people there. Estela, at fifty-two, was like a daughter to a lot of them. She greeted them happily, kissing them on the cheek like someone coming home from the city to a place in the mountains where everyone was family. I felt like a
child, a lucky child, at the same time that I was proud to be a smiling young man beside her. We found a table and ate empanadas and shared a bottle of wine with ice cubes in our glasses so it lasted longer. Her friend Adolfo ate and drank with us. He worked as a light technician on movie sets and had the big hands of a plumber. When he sat at the table he massaged his palms like there was an ache deep in his bones that he was trying to work out through his fingertips; when he danced with Estela his bones still carried that heaviness but he had found a way to transform it into strength. I could see that they knew each other well. Although Estela had invited me there to watch, to see what a real milonga was like, she danced with me once. It didn’t seem like the kind of place where I would ask anyone else: they had all arrived in couples, looking like they had been married for fifty years, and it didn’t feel like a place for beginners. I kept my movements simple and re-enacted the most basic values of what I had learned, knowing that it was better to be reliably modest than a spectacular disaster. My hands were sweaty and I couldn’t find my knees. In spite of the massive hall there was always someone in my way. I could feel the eyes of people sitting at the tables around the room watching me. Estela whispered in my ear, Forget everything and just enjoy the music.

When we had circled the floor and were once more in front of our own table, Adolfo winked and gave me the thumbs up.

Otherwise I watched the elderly. I watched how they danced, first their feet and then, when I understood where the dance was really happening, their torsos, trying to find the moment when they turned; but mostly I watched how the dance seemed to keep them together, as though I could see that they had lasted fifty years together because they held each other at least once a week and walked around a room full of their friends together. Nobody talked as long as they were dancing. Nobody even looked up. The men had learned to gaze into the infinite sadness of
the floor beside them, finding there a weary attention that allowed them to turn inward to their bodies; the women’s eyes looked glazed and far away, as if they longed for a time and a body that they could feel but couldn’t see; at other times the women’s eyes were downcast, even closed, like she had found a way to join her partner by following his dreams.

Could that expression be learned? Or was it the composition of a face I would never have? I remembered Lidia telling me, We don’t have your face here, meaning that the ancestors of my face had not settled in Buenos Aires. My head was too round, lacking angles; my face was soft. But later, when a few weeks had passed, she told me, You don’t look like you’re from here, but you move like you’re from here, concluding, Maybe you lived here in a past life.

Estela danced with Adolfo and later with others while I watched and grew sleepy. At three o’clock in the morning we left with another couple who offered to give us a ride. Through the window of the car the streets of La Boca seemed even more mysterious than before, the curtain left open on a stage where all the actors dozed in the wings. We turned west towards Constitución. The backs of two men walking in the middle of the road lit up in the headlights. Where were they going at this time of night? Where were we going? Neither one of them turned. They folded to the side, parting, one on the right and one on the left and we slipped between them. I thought of their homes, that this was their street, their night. Then I wondered if they were scared, too. Estela complained that the cortinas between the tandas of tango were too long and they were bringing down the milonga. The DJ was no good and everything was getting worse. The car became a little bubble of laughter floating through the dark streets of the night as though knowing each other had transformed us for a second into little shimmering globes of metallic light, like mercury.
Creativity is vulnerability

The next lesson did not go well. None of my limbs fit together, and the ones that did felt like they were tied with bits of old twine, so that my legs flapped below the knees and hyperextended and my arms had no strength in them no matter how much I pulled at them. I wanted to push forcefully against the difficulties I was having with the dance as if I could hurl them into a fire, which only made me tense. I berated myself with sharp sighs and a few annoyed grunts that had a grammar of their own, as if they would explain that I too was disappointed in my performance so Estela wouldn’t have to say it herself. I felt far away from my own body. I was shouting at it from my brain — turn left! Strong back! Lead with your torso! — but it was like all my words were drowned out by a tight grinding sound that came from my teeth. We finished early and Estela told me that everyone has days when they can’t dance. The problem is when you let it get you down. She said there could be days when the opposite happened, too: when life was terrible and the dance could lift you like there was nothing else in the world but tango. I wanted her to know that I could dance so I told her about living in Montreal, where I had danced nearly three times a week. I could feel her listening. I wished I could feel like myself in the dance. I wanted to feel free. As I was talking I realized that there was another reason I was so upset and the more I thought about it the more certain I became that she could see tears in my eyes. Something inside me was breaking and although I wanted it to break another part of me was holding it back. I wished she would ask me what was wrong, ask me, I begged, but only with my eyes, knowing that I would never tell her because it didn’t make sense to me until I was walking home and it hit me fully, landing into words that contorted and pulled away from the feeling like they didn’t quite fit together either, like there was more to say or maybe less. I felt better but I still wanted to cry. It occurred to me that crying and feeling better were related and
that I needed the dance even though it was hard for me. The saddest thing I ever learned from tango was that I wasn’t used to having another body close to mine.

Melancholy struck me then. It could have been because I was leaving soon. The city seemed to be turning its back on me. I didn’t have a home here and maybe I never would. My feet hurt from wandering outside. I told Estela that I felt isolated. I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it because I knew that it was not a grave affliction, that it would pass, and that feeling lonely was at times an integral part of the landscape of Buenos Aires. Maybe everyone had to pass through this stage of existential solitude in order to belong here; maybe belonging here meant feeling waves of loneliness undulating between the waves of nostalgia, lust, and dreams. Around that time I took the train to Tigre with a friend and when we got back to Boedo we talked all night.

I told Estela that nine out ten days I’m happy with myself, I’m content — *contento*, a word I loved because it was imbued with happiness, too, and not just contentment — but then that one day hits me and it’s like I forget about all the other nine. That one day takes over and I think, I have nothing. It’s worse than not knowing why I’m here. It’s as though I can’t remember even *if* I’m here. All the reasons I had leading up to it are gone. There’s a wide, empty void underneath me. I can hardly tell if I’m walking or standing still. It makes no difference. I try to figure out what brings it on, if there’s something that happened to make me feel this way, but that’s the problem. Nothing happened. I just woke up and there was the void. I could say it’s because I don’t want to leave or because I’m lonely but it’s not even that. It’s inexplicable. And yet, the only thing that makes it pass is saying it.

Estela’s mouth was half-open in a way that, if photographed, would have looked like she was smiling. I noticed then that her gums were black and her teeth were stained from smoking.
Her eyes were bloodshot or maybe just tired. The curtain of her face seemed to have blown aside and I could feel rough and honest care coming through her in the way she was listening.

She seemed to know what I was saying before I had finished saying it.

*Chico,* I’m like that, too, she said. And next time, don’t be lonely. Just call me and we’ll eat something. It’s that simple.

**Vanesa Guerra**

Each word is a unique category, I echoed. Does the experience keep living, or is it changed by naming it?

Ah, how terrible! said Vanesa. Yes! At times we kill things, you see… ?! There are things that one doesn’t write in order not to kill them. It’s preferable that they continue to orbit around us.

…writing is murder…

…creativity is a galaxy…

She told me about how she had heard some writers say, ‘My best book has not been written” and how at first she hadn’t known what they meant. Then one day she understood: what they should have added, she told me, is that their best book had not been written, “…and nor would they ever write it.”

Because there’s an existence there, she explained, and a happiness for something that, if it isn’t lowered to words, lives. And if it is lowered to words, it might not be found, or it destroys that life.

…words ruin experience…

It makes me think of the sadness that we mentioned before, I said. Each time we write, we are killing an experience that is more pure than the words that we are using to call it. And
from there comes the sadness of consciousness. You used the word, ‘to lower’ into language. As if the experience were up high, and words were down below it…

It’s more dense, the word, said Vanesa. It has a density.

…language is weight…

**Creativity is an exhale**

The last time I saw Estela the city seemed to be breaking through her. I had all but given up on becoming the dancer I had hoped. I was too stiff. There was too much to think about. I would never know the sublime pleasure of walking with dignity and hunger, well-dressed, across the floor of a *milonga* to lift a woman into my embrace and glide across our regulated lust together. I would go back to flailing alone at folk festivals.

The lesson ended and we changed our shoes. She said she would come to Canada one day; she had heard there was good tango in Montreal. Maybe she could teach there. If not, then France — she had some French students that wanted her to start a tango school with them. She said it without any twinkle of hope in her eye, barely a breath of excitement in her voice. We walked up the stairs into the empty café, said goodnight to the owner, and stepped through the tiny door into the street. When we reached the corner Estela put down her bag and lit a cigarette and said, Wait for me.

She didn’t say anything, just inhaled and looked up at the tops of the buildings where they met the black shadow of the city sky. The silence was so comfortable I was surprised when my own voice was the one to break it.

What will I find if I come back here in six months? I said.

*Una mierda,* whispered Estela after a pause. *Una mierda,* she said again, louder, *Este país es una mierda.* This country is shit.
That’s when the city seemed to break into her or out of her, somehow it was both, as though she and the city had had enough and were coming out through the other.

She swore and laughed and apologised for swearing and when I made noises that said, It’s fine, say whatever you need to say, she kept swearing and didn’t laugh until she had finished. This country is falling apart again, she said, and I want to leave. I’m fifty-two years old and I have been working since I was fifteen. Why can’t I save some money and have a good life?

She tilted her foot and looked at the bottom of her shoe. I don’t know how I had missed it but I saw then that she wore thin green eyeliner that was the same colour of green that Pablo Neruda had used to write all of his poems.

In six months? she continued. We will still be here. It will have deteriorated but it won’t have collapsed by then, not yet. One thing we have as Argentine people is that we are very elastic. You have to be.

She crushed her cigarette and her face lit up with the expression that I recognized as hers but couldn’t name until then: it was the look of endurance. She hugged me and kissed me on the cheek. Sos un buen chico, she laughed. You’re a good kid. Me avísás cuando vuelvas, let me know when you come back, and was gone.

I walked slowly back to Constitución, stopping at a bakery to buy empanadas that I ate standing up by a brick wall next to a motorcycle. I felt sad and cracked. Maybe it was better to be an outsider. But what would happen to all these people?

Vanesa Guerra

Do you use the word ‘creative’ or ‘creativity’? I asked. How do you feel with that word?

If I think of the act of creativity, the result is difficult for me to apply. To create is like… I don’t know. Like a lot. The word is used, but I realize that I don’t use it.
She said she uses the word ‘recreate’ more. It’s like a cousin of creativity, she said. It isn’t an act of once-and-for-all, but it’s an act that relaunches all the time.

**Creativity is protest**

A helicopter circled over the eastern part of the city above the Casa Rosada. Avenida de Mayo was littered with thousands of paper fliers and the street was still closed off to traffic, although every once in a while a van with the logo of a TV station zoomed past, lifting a swirl of paper behind it. There was more garbage in the plaza in front of the Casa Rosada and a man was packing up his camera and folding a tripod before walking across the grass to where his van was parked. Two other men were drinking from a clear plastic water bottle under a tree. Otherwise the plaza was empty.

Earlier that day Avenida Callao north of Rivadavia had been blocked off by labour groups beating drums and carrying green banners. They had come from different parts of the country, some of them travelling for hours and even days, and they moved in loud clumps through the centre of the city to converge in front of the government buildings. The tall stone offices that flanked Callao amplified the sound of the drums and stirred all the noises together like churning suds into a froth, except for the firecrackers that people set on the pavement, which pierced the air with a dry bright snap and left a second of stillness in their wake. A member of the president’s party had threatened a national transport strike in opposition to the president’s decision not to raise truck driver’s wages. He, not the president, had been a truck driver himself at one time. The day’s manifestation was to show what it would be like to have no trucks, no shipments of goods coming in or out of the city, no transport. Many streets were empty and few cars passed. It was hard to find fuel.
Other waves of protest passed by the windows of cafes where I read or benches where I rested during long walks. For a few minutes drums and banners were everywhere, fluttering against the glass of the café like butterflies, and I could see the strained necks of men and women chanting about the kind of world they wanted to live in, which was not this world but was just within reach. It wasn’t long ago that the same thing could have gotten them killed or disappeared. What made some crimes right and some crimes wrong? Again and again these voices emerged in similar formations across the span of time, different people with the same courage making noise against the silence. How would I join them? How would I participate in the history of the world that I wanted? I was too frightened of loud sounds to shout, too gentle to throw a firecracker. I needed a quieter way.

**Vanesa Guerra**

This is almost the last question, I said. What is it that limits you most in writing?

There are many limits, she said. And if I respond to it easily, and in one mode not very truthfully, or with a minor truth, it would be a lack of time. But more than that, when I am working on writing I am a little crazy. I’m not centred. Not at all. I start to live in two times, and those two times are very strong.

…creativity is madness…

…creativity is living in two times…

…being is a spinning top…

**Creativity is a rhythm**

Maybe learning Spanish as I had done without studying it in a classroom, without verb tables or grammar lessons, just learning it from the sounds as I heard them used — maybe that was a way of being creative, too, with an art that had been made a billion times in the minds of...
others already but that was, for me, a new act, an absolute birth, a beginning as though there had never been this exact beginning before. All the words existed, even all the shapes I wanted to learn were there for me to absorb from others. To the world I was inventing nothing — my best work was to sound like anyone else — but to me invention was pouring out every time I spoke. I was waking up in language; I was coming alive. All the newness was mine. Maybe creativity cycled privately through lives again and again in the same way across time; maybe creativity was a rhythm. I remembered another writer I had met years before in Cuba who had told me, A lot of people have eaten an apple. But nobody knows what an apple tastes like to you.

I tried to find the apples of my life.

Then another writer had asked me, Where is your book? and I had to tell him I had none.

_Vanesa Guerra_

This is the last question, I said. How do you react in front of a work that doesn’t please you?

I suffer when it pleases me, when it pleases me and I know that none of the editors of this country are going to like it. In the face of that circumstance, I continue ahead because I can’t avoid it. I will edit it myself, that possibility always exists… a rubber stamp editorial lifeboat among friends! When something I’m writing doesn’t please me, I give it some time. And if in that time it doesn’t go, it’s because it doesn’t go.

…good work moves…

And how do you know? I asked.

Because it’s like love. If nothing happens to you, it doesn’t go. Literature in me is absolutely passionate and loving, further than what I can tell you.

…To write is to love…
Creativity is gratitude

After the interview I thanked Vanesa with all of my face and heart and walked her home from the cafe. She said she would invite me up for coffee, just as Mariana had said happens in a place where creativity is not just something you make but a way of sharing life with people, but she saw patients from ten o’clock until midnight and had to prepare. When I told her about my project she nodded, saying, Estamos totalmente construidos por metáforas. We are totally constructed by metaphors. I walked away into a night that was bursting with hope. Words went out on their eternal departure, flinging towards the unnamable possibilities that orbited around the cluster of my being — not even around my self, for that was too singular, too discrete — and as they got closer to the place that I had strained to throw them, the words dissolved into liquid particles that broke apart like sunlight through falling water. Word after word flew beyond what language could do into a bright crack in the universe where all I heard was the sound that lips make when they smile. Then everything went quiet except for the hum of being alive.

Creativity is a departure

I visited the National Library and climbed to the top floor, thinking, I could come back here. I rested in a big chair with a view over other buildings before descending through the stairwell, having no patience for the elevator with its slow doors, but there was something hollow about the stairs, abandoned and lonely, like I was already far away.

That afternoon I walked to San Telmo and waited on a bench in Parque Lezama until the time I had been told, then knocked on the door of my final interview. We talked for almost two
hours. When it was finished, the woman I had been interviewing told me she had forgotten that she had been talking to someone who wasn’t speaking his first language. It seems that you are at home, she said.

Something larger than our conversation closed around me. The process of interviewing now seemed familiar — I knew how to rely on my equipment and I knew the feeling of taking my place, of starting the conversation, attending. Not that I had mastered my role, but I knew my movements within the context of the interview by now. The patterns of my experience were familiar.

My time here was ending.

As I walked down the steps of her apartment and waved from the sidewalk, she told me that next time, when I come back, we’ll drink wine with some of her friends.

Creativity is letting go

The last few days condensed and blurred. The buildings, the cars, the people and the streets seemed vague and uncertain, like they could vanish at any moment. I noticed more backs than faces and a feeling of haste had settled over the city. Sounds blended together so that I couldn’t tell the difference between a voice and the clop of shoes going by. The colours, too, had softened, like a thin grey silty powder had been rubbed over all my memories.

Buenos Aires no longer seemed intended for me. Until then I’d thought that we were both leaning in to one another, but in the end I was leaning alone. I would leave and pine for my memories of this place, for my hopes of what it could have been, while the city would go on indifferent to whether I was there or not. It had given me ideas and offered me feelings, it brought me to a way of being with myself that I wanted more of, it showed me what art could be,
it sent me a chance at friendship and built me a home. And when I left it would do the same for someone else.

Maybe it was because I knew that I was leaving that my body made a natural arc out of the time it thought it had. Whatever it was, when it was time to go it was time to go.

The sky was cool and grey on my last full day in the city. I went for a walk with Gabriela, who helped me choose a pair of shoes from the market in El Once because mine were worn out. On the way home we stopped at Café de los Angelitos on Rivadavia where the ceilings were so high there really was room for angels. We talked about the things we hoped to write and about the house she planned to build with her boyfriend in Nicaragua. I told her that I felt outside of love, that I was apart from it, not part of it. My eyes clouded over and I had to blink many times. She told me to leave a little door open in my heart, leave a little door open in your heart for love, Adrian. We asked for the bill. Outside it was finally raining.

Gabriela had work to do so I went for another long walk, this time to Avenida Santa Fe, looking for a book that I hoped to give to Camila when I saw her for dinner that night. The streets were wet and black and I walked without an umbrella. Everything seemed to be dissolving. I couldn’t find the book I wanted but I found a different one instead.

I felt crushed, even annoyed, three hours later when Camila wrote to say she wouldn’t be joining us. I reminded myself that I was already sad for reasons I couldn’t totally understand and striking out at her for not keeping our plans was only a way of feeding the sadness. I imagined the city as though it were made of cardboard, slumping in the rain, with books and buildings turned to pulp like oatmeal. She said she had time tomorrow morning before I went to the airport.
I met Gabriela again at midnight for dinner. The entrance to the parilla is still clear when I think of it, its brick step at the corner of the street and the white iron bars on the door. Gabriela asked if they were open and a man with an apron said yes. We agreed on a table by the window where the curtains were drawn. I remember the paper placemats and the yellow label on the bottle of wine and how both of us were tired. I felt like I was fading from the room at the same time that I knew I would always be there. We talked about the most difficult times in our lives, the times that we now drew strength from because they showed us that we could get through them. I was grateful that we had known each other for so many years and had found ourselves at this table in this city. Then all too soon it was over and I was gone.
Chapter 5: Reflections

Creativity is a metaphor

I hope it is clear by now that the metaphors for creativity are inexhaustible. Each metaphor and narrative pairing opens up new possibilities for understanding what creativity means and what it means to be creative. In other words, metaphorical thinking can multiply ways of knowing. As Amundson (2010) writes of his own work assembling and examining the “metaphor spectrum” for how people understand career, “some metaphors are more useful than others. By using a variety of metaphors there is a possibility of attaining greater understanding” (p. 10).

The purpose of collecting and narrating metaphors of creativity here is two-fold: first, to show how any idea can be developed, nuanced, and brought to life by exploring the lived experience of the metaphors around it, and second, to emphasize the necessary incompleteness of greater understanding. The list, after all, is never finished. I cut at least a dozen scenes from this final version, scenes that offered possibilities for creativity as compensation, homecoming, luck, impermanence, echo, instrument, ritual, defense, failure, frame and question, but the list could continue beyond all of those, too. It is up to the imaginative engagement of the researcher and the reader to find the likenesses between two separate entities and create something new by carrying one meaning across to the other. Making metaphor, then, may be the most fundamental creative act there is. It is also the most accessible. It can be as common as a thought.

Over the course of the Good Winds Chronicle, the emphasis of the fragments shifts from the research project to the research experience. At first the interviews are given greater weight than the personal narratives around them — the excerpts are longer and more numerous. As the story progresses, however, that balance is tilted in the opposite direction, with the interview
excerpts shortening, becoming fewer, and the narrative vignettes expanding to take the space. This reflects an experience that I believe is common to much research: a question brings the researcher to explore an idea that at first seems theoretical but in the end is revealed to be deeply personal. I went to Buenos Aires to interview writers; along the way the experience of being immersed in the milieu developed and even took over, until I realized that I was growing, changing, and learning beyond the question that had initially brought me to do the research. I suspect that a similar personal transformation is at the heart of all research that matters, research that transforms the researcher and offers something unexpected. By acknowledging the way that research is embedded in experience, knowledge becomes situated, contextual, personal, and visceral.

Translation plays a key role in this project, which is why working in Spanish was so important. If I had translated the text of the interviews more formally, making our speech smoother, transforming the way we spoke in Spanish into the way we would have spoken in English, much of the poetry of those conversations would be lost. I wanted to “use words wrongly”, as Vanesa Guerra said (p. 201, this text). It was a way of breaking language to see what else it might have inside, beyond, or through it. More importantly, though, I wanted to show that the conversations were uniquely Spanish, and so any translation into another language had to acknowledge that it was not there to supplant the original but as a variation on it. Even the original Spanish transcript was a variation on the event that happened in time and space between two living people. And, if Vanesa Guerra’s comments are taken to heart, then even that conversation was only a variation on a non-language experience of existence that we both brought into words for the convenience of exchange and contact. Somewhere that wasn’t a place, sometime that wasn’t before or after, there was an immutable source that eschewed language;
everything else was another possibility. This is what I mean when I write that metaphorical thinking is the search for common ground between the two separate identities of language and [experience]. Each metaphor for creativity is paired with a moment of lived experience in the past, expressed here by the narrative account of doing fieldwork in Buenos Aires. More broadly, then, translation serves as a metaphor for what happens between the two identities in the phenomenon of metaphor-making itself, where one language becomes another and transforms it into something new. As Bateson (1994) writes,

> When we try to translate from one language to another and from one system of categories to another we discover that categories slip and slide, never matching perfectly. We make the same discovery in the encounter with children and lovers, with the living landscape and even with the layered self. (p. 58)

The title of the Chronicle — Good Winds — is a nod to the transformation that happens when significance is conveyed from one language to another, taking its name from a deliberately crude translation of the city ‘Buenos Aires’. Bringing that name into English invites new consideration of its meaning and its potential as a metaphor.

Another kind of translation occurs in the act of remembering, which carries experience from past to present and transforms it along the way. Memory offers infinite opportunities for creative, generative, metaphorical thinking. Remembrance, as Benjamin (2007b) writes, is “the capacity for endless interpolations into what has been” (p. 16). Fortunately, the number of possibilities offered by memory are not limited by the length of time of the remembered event as each moment can be revisited, reconsidered, and examined through multiple visions so that it becomes a reflection of one’s relation to time as much as a record of events (see Benjamin, 2007b; Woolf, 1985).
Just as memory offers infinite possibilities for reflection, so do the stories of those memories make room for new understandings of one’s self and one’s experience. This openness to interpretation is made possible by the very ambiguity that so much non-narrative writing tries to avoid. By recognizing metaphor and narrative in creative ways, the uncertainty of daily life is offered up for examination. In Bateson’s (1994) words,

> Ambiguity is the warp of life, not something to be eliminated. Learning to savor the vertigo of doing without answers or making shift and making do with fragmentary ones opens up the pleasures of recognizing and playing with pattern, finding coherence within complexity, sharing within multiplicity. (Bateson, 1994, p. 9)

The narratives of this dissertation convey ‘the warp of life’ in their incompleteness, acknowledging that sometimes the most meaningful learning happens at the margins, on the way to the interviews, and even between the scenes themselves, in the spaces among the fragments. The episodic structure allows the reader to make connections of her or his own, exploring patterns and the subtle meanings that are possible through open texts like these. A network emerges: the metaphors of creativity are contextualized by the narratives that accompany them, and those narratives, in turn, are contextualized by the fragments and interview excerpts that surround them. The significance of each reflection is carried across to others to form an inadequate whole, fragmented and trembling, held together around the silence of things unsaid, unmade, not yet created.

Being with the incompleteness of knowing is integral to learning more. As Bateson (1994) writes,

> The solution [to the ambiguity of metaphors] is not to purge metaphors from speech and try to ignore them; the solution is to take responsibility for the choice of
metaphors, to savor them and ponder their suggestions, above all to live with many
and take no one metaphor as absolute. (Bateson, 1994, p. 141)

These metaphors of creativity are offered and then fall away to make room for others.

The same process that I demonstrate in this dissertation about creativity can be taken up in
efforts to understand the meaningfulness of other concepts like love, death, god, and community:
the researcher begins with a survey of different views on his or her subject of interest, typically
called a literature review, and pays close attention the metaphors that are implicit in each
perspective. Then, the researcher consults with living practitioners of their subject, people who
have engaged earnestly with the phenomenon that the researcher wants to understand, again with
an eye to the metaphors that pop up along the way. Finally, the researcher composes the account
of these lived encounters in the form of narratives, or chronicles, which situate his or her
research in personal experience, illustrating how knowledge arises from examining context. The
result will inevitably vary — indeed must vary — depending on the particular experience of the
researcher, but the method can be engaged with many different topics and in many different
places, each time revealing new insight into the meaningfulness of the research subject and the
researcher’s relation to it. With practice, metaphors become more apparent. Noticing a good
metaphor can be profoundly satisfying, since “all human speech and thought [is] full of
metaphors, often unconscious and unexamined” (Bateson, 1994, p. 141; see also Lakoff &
Johnson, 1980). By making connections between my own experiences and the metaphors that
arose through them, I came to feel proud of what I had been a part of in Buenos Aires in a deeply
personal way. Writing was for me “a homecoming”, “a glorious game”, and “a profound
validation” (Bateson, 1994, p. 205). The process of learning about my own experience through
the practice of writing turned something foreign into something familiar, and finally turned that
foreignness “into a habitation of mind and heart” (Bateson, 1994, p. 213). In Peripheral Visions (1994) Bateson writes,

> The world we live in is the one we are able to perceive; it becomes gradually more intelligible and more accessible with the building up of coherent mental models.

> Learning to know a community or a landscape is a homecoming. Creating a vision of that community or landscape is homemaking. (Bateson, 1994, p. 213)

In my case, learning to know a community and creating a vision of that community — the ‘homecoming’ and the ‘homemaking’ — were bound together in the act of writing. I learned new possibilities for understanding my experience through exploring the narratives of metaphor and creativity that were generated through the daily life of doing research. If noticing a creative metaphor feels satisfying, making one for one’s self feels celebratory.

Literary idols accompanied me during the days when I wrote this chronicle, and even though their names might not appear directly in these pages their stylistic influence cannot be dismissed. The works of certain writers are like close friends — with or without meaning to be, I am affected by their mannerisms, their timing, and their vision. As a rest and as inspiration while I wrote, I read Jorge Luis Borges (how could I write about Buenos Aires without reading Borges?) and some of his stylistic structures haunt these pages. For example, the opening line of ‘Creativity is mentorship’ (p. 78, this text), which begins, “I owe my discovery of the word pordiosero to a charcoal drawing by Ricardo Ajler” is an echo of the first sentence in one of my favorite Borges stories, “Tlön, Uqbar, Orbis Tertius”, which begins, “I owe the discovery of Uqbar to the conjunction of a mirror and an encyclopedia” (1962, p. 17)⁷.

⁷ Borges was fond of this stylistic move and repeated it more than once, as with the more comic and touching opening line of his essay, “When fiction lives in fiction” (Borges, 2010). He
Other influences are less direct but more profound: the inward gaze of the Brazilian Clarice Lispector’s writing (see Lispector 2012a; 2012b; 2012c; 2011; 1989) inspired me especially as I wrote about my experience of language (e.g. ‘Creativity is a conduit’, p. 156, this text), as did the cadence of the Chilean-Mexican Roberto Bolaño (see 2011; 2010; 2009a; 2009b; 2008; 2006a; 2006b) as I wrote about my movement through the city. I suspect that the impact of Walter Benjamin’s prose, especially his memory work in “Berlin Chronicle” (2007b) and the fragmented structure of the vignettes in “One-way Street” (2009), is already clear. It is important to recognize these influences because in many ways my voice comes to me through them, that is, these writers give me a language I want to use. I hope to tell my own stories, but if those stories are inspired by the names I have mentioned then they are also influenced by them. What’s more important is to consider that these stories would likely come out different if I were reading other works or if I were inspired by other voices. Just as these stories transformed each time they were incarnated through writing, first in the scraps of notes seconds after the event, then in the journal hours later, then in this dissertation when a year had passed, so would the next version be altered by the whimsy of memory, experience, inspiration, hope, and circumstance. This flux reminds me that writing exists in community and in time. In Bateson’s (1994) words, “personal writing affirms relationship, for it includes these implied warnings: this is what I think at this moment, this is what I remember now, continuing to grow and change” (p. 76). These stories will changes as I change.

This project re-envisions education as the dynamic and ongoing search for further understandings. Instead of viewing curriculum as a predetermined set of learning outcomes, I begins, “I owe my first inkling of the problem of infinity to a large biscuit tin that was a source of vertiginous mystery during my childhood” (p. 155).
evoke it here as a creative and even infinite examination of experience and language. As with Sameshima’s (2006) distinction between curriculum (in many ways, a fixed object) and *currere* (a verb from the Latin, literally ‘to run’), I am less interested in metaphor’s properties as a noun than I am in its potential as a verb, through practices of thinking metaphorically as they are demonstrated here.
References


Retrieved on September 19th, 2011 from http://www.springerlink.com/content/978-1-4020-9876-5/#section=45909&page=1&locus=0


Florida, R. (2009). *Who’s your city?: How the creative economy is making where to live the most important decision of your life.* Toronto, ON: Vintage.


Cine.


