

Name: TT1.2 Forgiven Journey. Available in: Ocampo, S. (2015) Thus Were Their Faces. Translated by D. Balderston. New York: NYRB, pp. 3-5

¶1: SHE WAS trying to remember the day she was born. She furrowed her brows so much that the adults interrupted her telling her repeatedly to unwrinkle her forehead. That was why she couldn't reach the memory of her birth.

¶2: Before they were born, children were held at a large department store in Paris; their mothers ordered them, and sometimes went in person to pick them up. She would have liked to watch the package being unwrapped, the box in which the babies were shipped, but she never reached the houses of newborns quickly enough. They arrived quite hot from the trip because they couldn't breathe very well inside the box, and that was why they were so red and cried incessantly, their toes curled up.

¶3: But she had been born one morning in Palermo Park making nests for birds. She couldn't remember having gone out of her house that day; she had the feeling that she had made the trip without a car or a carriage, a trip full of mysterious shadows, and that she had woken up on a road lined with trees that smelled like Australian pines where she had suddenly found herself making nests for birds. The eyes of Micaela, her nursemaid, followed her like two guards. The making of the birds' nests wasn't easy; they had several rooms each: they even needed a bedroom and a kitchen.

¶4: The next day, when she returned to Palermo, she looked for the nests along the road lined with Australian pines. There weren't any left. She was about to cry when her nursemaid said, "The little birds have taken the nests up into the trees, which is why they are so happy this morning." But her cruel sister, who was three years older than she was, laughed, pointing with her linen glove at the Palermo gardener, a one-eyed man who was sweeping with a broom made of gray branches. In addition to the dead leaves he was sweeping up the last nest. At that moment, she felt like throwing up, as if she had heard the sound of hammocks in the backyard of her house.

¶5: Then time had passed, making the date of her birth seem desperately far away. Each memory was of a different baby girl, but all of them had her face. Each year she grew older the group of girls that surrounded her expanded.

¶6: Until one day, when she was playing in the study room, the daughter of the French chauffeur said, with atrocious bloodthirsty words, "Babies don't come from Paris," slowly adding, while looking around to see if the doors were listening, with unsuspected strength, "Babies come from the tummies of their mothers, and when they are born they come out through the belly button." Who knows what other words dark as sin emerged from Germaine's mouth, though she didn't even pale upon saying them.

¶7: That was when babies started to appear all over the place. Never before had so many children been born in her family. The women wore huge balloons on their stomachs; each time an adult spoke about a newborn an intense fire burned across her face and she bent

down to the ground looking for a ring or a handkerchief that hadn't fallen. All eyes turned toward her like beacons lighting up her shame.

¶18: One morning, just out of her bath, watching the water swirling into the drain while her nursemaid wrapped her in a towel to dry her, she laughed and confided her horrible secret to Micaela. The nursemaid got very angry and assured her once again that babies came from Paris. She felt slightly relieved. But when night returned, anguish mixed with the sounds of the street took hold of her whole body. She couldn't sleep even though her mother kissed her over and over before going to the theater. The kisses had lost their power. And it was only after many days and many long dark nights—the enormous clock in the kitchen, the empty hallways of the house, the many grown-ups hiding behind doors—that she was lifted onto her mother's lap in the dressing room and her mother said that babies didn't come from Paris. Her mother spoke about flowers and birds, and everything mixed up with Germaine's horrible secrets. Still, she desperately believed that babies came from Paris.

¶19: A moment later, her mother said she was going to open the window, and after opening it, immediately her mother's face completely transformed: she was a lady in a feather-covered hat who just happened to be visiting the house. The window was almost shut, and when her mother told her that the sun was glorious, she saw the dark sky of night where no bird sang.

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