

**Extract from *Los pasajes comunes* [Public Ways] by Gonzalo Baz,
translated by James Bennett**

During my entire childhood and adolescence I lived in a complex of large apartment blocks to which I never returned, but which appears to me in different ways. Sometimes I think about that estate, our parents' estate, loans from the mortgage bank, choosing what school we'd go to, the large assemblies to decide our common future. A form now inaccessible to me. I can also make out the way, evoked or invented, that Sami, Lucas and I walked in those distant years, the years of my mother's suicidal crises, of dangerous games and reading things for the first time. I have plenty to say about that era, but I prefer to write about those memories that come back violently at every moment, bursting in when I'm not looking for them, sounding like a faraway explosion that paralyzes me as its shockwave gets closer and, from one moment to the next, leaves me stunned by a heap of images I can never put in order: burning police posts, frozen grass on the football pitch, the sound of an elevator going frantically up and down in the morning. Sometimes I dream I'm flying over the night, between steel and silver buildings, and I see us in our jackets with our fingers stiff from the cold, trying to strum a guitar. The estate in its ghostly form watching us from the windows of the top-floor flats, when we think everyone's asleep. That useless remainder, full of badness.

There are memories that live in me, and even today make me search my pockets for things to throw on the street when I see a police car approaching. It's been years since I've had anything on me. Just sweets, useless receipts, my wallet and my phone. A quick archaeology of my pockets reveals fossilized memories: bits of tobacco, fragments of a time when we bought two loose cigarettes for a peso. Unknown brands, moisture stains in the paper and heavily marked filters. Every day we crossed the estate to go buy them at the kiosk. We went back to the Infinito and smoked them while the dogs played on the pitch. I can't remember what we talked about. I'd pay good money to hear our voices from that time. We spent all day outside, as if being in our houses was like letting time get away from us. We avoided our own parents and everyone else's, and sometimes we avoided ourselves on long strolls around the neighbourhood's various passageways; lost in apocalyptic ideas, in blurry omens.

Our estate is divided into three large areas out of which rise up ten-floor apartment blocks, with four apartments on each floor, and three on the ground floor. Forty-three families in each building. The towers are very close, almost stuck together, leaving small, strange spaces between them, often taken up by a tree or a square of grass mined with dog shit. The only things I actually need to write about happen in these interstices. The areas of the estate are living organisms which on occasion devour each other. They have tumours that grow and expand, fungi, mist. There are also passages between the towers, staircases linking islands, hundreds of dark, invisible nooks, used for fortuitous activities. From the tiny bathroom windows you can see all sorts of things. The plastic smell of cocaine paste floating up, a man shitting, a couple sleeping in each other's arms on a piece of cardboard on the grass.

Most of us had always lived there. Our parents had acquired those well-lit boxes of cement where we watched our adolescence go by. Opaque eyes, impenetrable, watching everything happen from that zenithal perspective, the perspective of the towers.

There were plenty who were the same age as us, but our group was always the same: Sami, Lucas and me. Sometimes Martín. At first we didn't trust him sticking his nose in our business, which he usually found funny. Then we came to accept him and even picked up his way of laughing at things which seemed serious to us, as if he knew none of it would mean

anything in a couple of years. Sami and Martín lived in the tower opposite mine and Lucas’.

Tower H3 was where we grew up and the place from which we watched everything sinking. In our neighbourhood there were no airs and graces, we were what we were, part of the hinge. Every day up in H3 I watched my mother grab *The Communist Manifesto*, in which she hid her money, and count the notes over and over again, obsessively. Afterwards, she wrote the numbers down in her little notebook with a red pen. My mother wrote with a red pen in her notebooks. When she was depressed she wrote, it calmed her. Whenever I think about her illness, I always see the red letters written in her notebooks. A locked calligraphy more like a pulse than writing. I lost those notebooks when I left the country.

The flat two floors above us, on the eighth floor, was where Lucas lived, my brother throughout my teenage years. His parents were known in the flats as “the debtors” because they stopped paying the mortgage after running their hardware store into the ground. How do you bankrupt a hardware store? You have to be a real prick, one of the neighbours used to say to Jorge, a thin man with a brown beard which turned yellow depending on how much he was smoking. As well as not paying their service charges, they also stopped paying the cable bill, the service fees and the electricity. You could feel the tension between them as you went up the stairs, either from the screams or the silence that came out through the door and flooded the landing of floor 8. Running away was Lucas’ fantasy, his only plan was emigration. A recurring idea in times of crisis. Emigrate to bars on the Mediterranean.

There's something that won't reveal itself. It just signals. A problem that keeps changing shape. Over the years I developed a certain capacity to identify these signs, without always being able to read them. There are things that appear, that link up, evidence of an underground syntax. Sometimes I can grasp the thread of things that happen in my life. I can suddenly wake up in my childhood room and see dozens of green bottle flies on the white walls, and discover, out of nowhere, my dead hamster underneath the wardrobe, whose disappearance had until then been a mystery.

Remembering Vasco in the middle of a fight with Cynthia was further proof of the mind's capacity to pick up distant signals. If I try to follow the connection, I get lost in a desert: Atacama, to use the name of a desert I know. An arid saltpetre landscape whatever way you look. And there, far away, the outline of Vasco appears to me.

Vasco in the middle of the street screaming at every car that goes by as they swerve to avoid him. Some beep their horns, others accelerate to get past him. Or in an elevator, holding a piece of glass in a handkerchief and threatening anyone who tries to get in that he'll cut their throat there and then. He always appears in the middle of an explosion, with his threatening eyes and red face. However, if I try to list them, I can count on one hand the amount of times we saw him in that state. Whereas when he was a relaxed guy who barely spoke, like he was during most of the time we spent with him, sitting on the wall or in the Infinito, in those states I find it hard to remember him, as if there were something disposable about that everydayness. What did we talk about on those never-ending nights? There are three or four images to go back to, the rest is a full-up car park, a geography. There's no timbre to our voices, our clothes are discoloured, our throats just let out Paraguayan cigarette smoke that gets lost between the buildings. Not even the features of a face. Just its expression, fearful, violent, amazed. Then it emerges, like a Japanese monster, the piece of glass in Vasco's hand, plunging on a loop into the abdomen of the guy from 702, and the little drops of blood falling down the elevator shaft through the crack, splashing several floors below.

That crack, through which a trickle of dripping blood appears to me, reminds me of my father arguing with my uncle about who'd pay the bill on one of those Sundays when we all still ate together, when my father was still around. He held out the hundred peso note saying go on take it, don't be stupid. And my uncle, waiting for the lift saying no, fuck off Charly, I'm not taking it. My cousins and I watching my father hilariously trying to put the money in my uncle's shirt pocket and my uncle, whose hands were full, twisting so as not to let him, and in the back and forth the lift arrived and in my father's final attempt he dropped

the note and it went through the crack. And we ran down the stairs, jumping seven or eight steps at a time, to see if it would appear on one of the lower floors.

The image of Vasco came to me, years later, in the middle of that fight with Cynthia in which both of us, in different parts of the world, were screaming down our phones, overloading the mics. She told me in her mixed up Spanish that I needed to go to therapy, lose weight and give up alcohol, write more articles, leave self-referential writing behind, stop always writing the same thing, not go back to Montevideo. I looked, from the balcony of our apartment in São Paulo, at how the tree had grown: it would be so sad to leave now, just as its branches were giving some shade to our balcony. I wouldn't be able to sit there drinking beer at night watching the lights go by. Then I lay down on the tiled floor from where I could follow the paths of the small planes and helicopters which flew every day over that gigantic city in which I had lived for ten years; some men in blue t-shirts putting a Direct TV antenna on the opposite rooftop, an old woman shaking out a carpet. I think I fell asleep for a few minutes, and in that pre-dream trance an image of Vasco appeared, crossing the commercial part of the estate with a stolen supermarket trolley full of paper. I was unsettled by how involuntary the memory felt, I thought of someone putting a photograph in front of me. A photograph I didn't want to see.