



Detention photograph from ESMA

The Undershirt (1979)

Marcelo Brodsky

The photograph has no end. The image that it had succeeded in reconstructing, the portrait of my brother from the shoulders up during his detention at the ESMA, turned out to be incomplete. During my visit with Víctor Bastera to the Superior Court No. 12, where the ESMA case is being handled, Víctor claimed his right to go through the file to see the evidence that he himself had provided. The first file that we saw contained only photocopies. We requested the originals. They appeared.

And the photograph was there, but complete. From the shoulders, it continued down, toward the waist. The undershirt was visible—a worn, basic, irregular item. A minimal, wrinkled undershirt clothing an adolescent body after a session of torture.

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The shoulders look young, crisscrossed by the straps of the shirt. (The different times in the photograph overlap, continue). The defenselessness and beauty of youth appear, at the same time, through the bits of cloth following the beating. The face is a slightly dislocated, but still complete. The photograph expands on and adds information. It contains small details that are as irrelevant as they are real. It allows you to glimpse the dark passageways that lead to the wall against which it was taken, the sounds of chains being dragged as you walk, the shackles... (another photograph shows the marks left on a young woman's wrists, someone else's sister, by the ropes with which she was bound).

The slight comfort provided by the undershirt dresses the body in its pain, marking it. It is not a naked body. It recalls the loincloth of another who was tortured, on the cross. And the scarves—pieces of white cloth; scraps, worn on different parts of the body.

They tell me that he worked out in his cell, in a space similar in size to a pen for raising pigs—as Víctor Bastera and I both described it—with walls barely a meter high. A rectangular place, small, about the size of a compact mattress, with barely any headroom. They did everything possible to talk there. A foam mattress and some blankets, with no cover or sheets. The bare minimum, what you provide a slave, the very basics to survive and not freeze to death, because the sessions must continue.

I always liked undershirts. I sleep in one, which is more of a t-shirt. This one is different, it is the classic style: the kind you would see in the neighborhood, worn by the butcher drinking *mate*. The upper half—one assumes—is quite dirty, with a clinging odor, and its folds, its shadows and highlights in the photograph, clinging to the body of my brother, still alive.

And the nine prisoners told Bastera one thing the day they were able to meet with him, thanks to the complicity of a “good” guard, sticking their heads out of the openings of their hovels.

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They asked him: “What will happen to us?” Silence. Víctor did not know and could not imagine what it might be. He had managed to change his rank: he was a photographer now. They needed him for something other than just to torture him. “Just don’t let them get away with it, Víctor.” That’s what the nine prisoners told him, in the dark. Don’t let them get away with it.

Translated by David William Foster and Marcial Godoy-Anatívia

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