NATHAN BAJAR *Untitled*, 2015

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Disappearing

JACKIE GENDEL The Old Look of New Austerity, 2011. Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in

BUENOS AIRES, 1992: IT'S A SULTRY FEBRU- ARY HERE BELOW THE EQUATOR, WHERE NAZIS ARE HARBORED, WHERE MACHISMO REIGNS.

Where Argentina's middleweight boxing champion, Carlos Monzón, flung his wife out the window to her death. "My dinner was late for the *second* night in a row," Monzón explained.

Me? I'm sharpening my housewifery skills.

Beneath our window is passing the primordial recycler: an old man and an old horse dragging an ancient wooden cart. They beg discards from any household that will oblige. Cardboard, newspapers, string. Trodding the cracked streets of Argentine mornings, theirs is the doleful cry of a dying animal. "*Trapero, botellero*," they wail. Rag-gatherer, bottle-gatherer. Along with the tango's sad strains, their dirge defines this melancholy land.

Nothing much happens in Temperley, the lethargic hamlet where my husband, Horacio, was born. One of the rough stones ringing the tarnished sapphire of Buenos Aires, Temperley's only shops, besides markets, are video and liquor stores.

Horacio and I are quartered on the second floor of his family home on a cul-de-sac with the lovely name *Calle Cervantes*. The house is ruled by Blanca, the only one of her eleven siblings to have left (reluctantly) her family's remote ranch in rugged Roque Pérez for an urban life. The formidable Blanca is my mother-in-law. *La piedra*, we call her, "the stone."

Her all five senses keen, you can sneak nothing past her. Last week, on an insomniac pre-dawn ramble, I opened a living-room armoire and drank the few remaining sips of apricot liqueur from one of its phalanx of bottles, hoping that the sticky-sweet liquid would lull me back to sleep. My wee indulgence drained its container, which I put in the trash. At lunch the next day, Blanca ("Buba" to her grandchildren) announced to the assembled,

"A bottle's missing."

My blood rushed hot. *She must take daily inventory!* Then I remembered my husband's tale of childhood terror: like a condemned man forced to dig his own grave,

"I had to fetch my father's leather belt so my mother could give me daily beatings," he'd told me, "just for being a curious little boy." No, there'd be no escaping this one. I fessed up.

During the viscous silence that followed my apology, I grasped the extent of my transgression. *That nearly empty bottle had surely been in its spot—between equally empty bottles of anisette and amaretto—for decades.* When I bought Buba a new liqueur, I knew it could never restore the ancient equilibrium of her treasured array.

How could my hot-blooded husband have come from this ice woman? Nowhere in the Spartan first floor of her house is there a blush of color. Though her son is a prolific, illustrious painter, the only one of his images on her walls is a murky, eviscerated figure he painted as a teenager.

"I don't need anything new," Buba states flatly. And she doesn't. The sole household item that ever changes is the annual calendar from Enrique's gas station. The cutlery, which dates from her 1932 wedding, includes a curious table knife that had been employed thrice daily by her late husband, Juan Fidel.

"My father almost suffocated from a chunk of chicken stuck

in his throat," Horacio explains, "so he used this knife to chop his food into minuscule morsels." He must have sharpened it often, since its blade has become a mere sliver. But it remains in the flatware drawer, and if it's next to your plate, you use it.

"My family is Italian, German, and Scottish," Blanca informs me. She's particularly pleased with her Scottish blood (diluted though it is), of her German maiden name, *Badde*, and of the British spelling of her middle name, Esther.

Most Argentines go by nicknames that—no matter how unsavory—are terms of endearment: *gordo* (fatty), *flaco* (skinny), and *foro* (condom). It's routine and affectionate to call one's mother and father *vieja* and *viejo* (old one). Horacio is *bala* (bullet) because of his speed at football. And any Argentine man, woman, or child may be referred to as "*che*," an epithet that means just "Hey, you!" The world knows Ernesto Guevara as "Che" simply because he's Argentine. Since my mother-in-law struggles with my difficult first name, she often summons me with "Che!"

My husband and his first wife married when they were teenagers. In seven years together they had four girls and a boy, who are now my stepchildren. We're currently awaiting the results of seventeen-year-old Nuria's pregnancy test. She has three boyfriends is the problem.

Fearless, foul-mouthed, and charismatic, fifteen-year-old Sabrina is the leader of the pack. When she cut out the knees of her jeans to wear the bottom third of them around her ankles, she set a town fashion trend. We're eager for her romance with the son of a questionable Peronista TV star to end, but we know she can take care of herself.

"He's just my style," Sabrina lets loose about her ten-years-older boyfriend, "and I don't give a fuck what you think!"

Sabrina's extensive vocabulary of vulgarities surprises even her verbally gifted father, and her defiant spirit inoc-

ulates her against the attitude of resignation rampant in this downbeat land. She'd be a standout anywhere. But in Argentina—like the Buenos Aires billboard that shrieks *Shoppylandia* in bulbous red and yellow letters—Sabrina is fluorescent.

We share a water tank with Horacio's sister, Edith (pronounced sans "h"), twelve years his senior, who lives in the house next door. Edith works in a bank and is still afraid of her mother. Distinguished by her precisely enunciated British speech and short blond coif, she possesses the beleaguered body of a matron who's reared four children, including a wheelchair-bound daughter. Two years before I arrived, Edith's late husband called her into their bedroom to witness him pull the trigger of a gun pointed at his heart. He left her little but his proper English surname, which she carries proudly.

Until as recently as 1983, Argentina was ruled by a military junta. The army conducted a seven-year war, *la Guerra Sucia,* against leftists who had allegedly tried to organize a coup. That Dirty War is credited with creating, at minimum, thirty thousand *desaparecidos* (disappeared).

Disappearing is worse than dying. First you're interrogated and tortured. After you're killed, the junta's next step is to destroy all records of your existence and to raise your children as their own. Many of *los desaparecidos* were placed in airplanes, drugged, and tossed alive into the Río de la Plata. The military knows that without a bone or document to prove your existence, you can't really be declared dead.

My husband was very nearly disappeared when, while walking near his home, several soldiers ordered him onto a truck. Perhaps it was his gravitas that made them suspicious, or maybe it was his beard. In any case, they demanded his identity card, which showed him clean-shaven. That discrepancy would have sealed his fate were it not for a colleague who chanced by. From the truck's

JACKIE GENDEL *Tops Off*, 2011. Oil on linen, 20 x 16 in

flatbed, Horacio, surrounded by dozens of the now disappeared, called out to his friend,

"Roberto, quick! Run to my house and ask my mother for my journalist ID. The one with a beard." (Later, in New York, when Horacio and I left our apartment, he often asked me, "Do you have your documents?")

In 1983, when democracy returned to Argentina, there occurred a nod toward punishing the murderers: A handful of the generals responsible for the Dirty War were arrested. In a deal with Argentina's moderate president, Alfonsín, these military men were shepherded to a minimum-security prison, where they're coddled in comfort. We occasionally see in the papers photos of these blackguards out on weekend leave, strolling arm-in-arm with their girlfriends.

When Alfonsín was replaced by the ambitious Carlos Menem, son of Syrians who emigrated to Argentina, the military leaned on the new president: "We got you elected. Now you must pardon our men."

But the Argentine people—long cowed by the terrible triad of military, church, and police—planned a gigantic demonstration demanding that Menem deny amnesty. To publicize the event, the organizers chose one of Horacio's illustrations: the bust of a military man, his puffed-up chest smirking with dozens of medals, each one dangling a skull.

My oldest stepdaughter, who was especially distraught at the prospect of the last jailed generals going free, was crying.

"Don't worry," I told her. "Menem wouldn't dare pardon those killers. And if he does, people all over the world will rise up against him."

Three days later, he did. And we didn't.

Argentines dare not speak of the Dirty War. Their sole remnant of that horror is the weekly ritual enacted by *Las Madres de la Plaza de Mayo*. They gather every Thursday, these mothers of the disappeared, in front of La Casa Rosada, the president's pink-walled residence. For two hours they walk silently around the government

square, so that we do not forget, white bandanas tied under their chins.

As I watch them walk, I'm grateful that Blanca isn't among them, that Horacio isn't among the vanished. Yet the sons and daughters of these mothers were swallowed by the same sad, southern land that lured and then engulfed me. Now, while I wrench myself from this place, my mother-in-law moves to straighten herself. As she stands at the door to watch me walk out onto Calle Cervantes, I feel the tug of her last goodbye.