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INTRODUCTION

WE SOMETIMES RECEIVE STRANGE OMENS OF WHAT LIES AHEAD.

One gray dawn, almost forty years ago now, a dead dog was found hung from a lamppost in downtown Lima. No one seemed to know just who would have done such a thing, or why. Clearly, however, those responsible wanted to send a message to the new Chinese prime minister, Deng Xiaoping. They had picked a lamppost not far from the Chinese embassy and left a crude sign around the dog's neck. "Deng," it read, "you son of a bitch." The police cut down the unfortunate animal, a few newspapers ran stories, and Peru's sprawling, grimy capital went about its business.

The macabre canine mystery foretold a long and bloody war. It was 1980, and the American hostages were still captive in Iran, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan were rising to power, and John Lennon was soon to be murdered outside his Manhattan apartment building. The dog had been strung up by militants of a then largely obscure Maoist faction called Sendero Luminoso, or Shining Path (and it was later learned they had left others with similar placards elsewhere around the country).¹ These hard-line revolutionaries detested

Publisher's note: The original Spanish-language edition of this book included an introduction by the Chilean anthropologist Yerko Castro Neira. (See note 21 below for more on his role in bringing *When Rains Became Floods* to publication.) A translation of Castro Neira's introduction, provided by the Universidad Iberoamericana, is available on the Duke University Press website at www.dukeupress.edu/When-Rains-Became-Floods/.

Deng for steering China away from command socialism and toward the market economy. The dead dogs were an early propaganda salvo in their fight to establish a Peruvian People's Republic modeled on Mao's Cultural Revolution and its missionary Marxist zealotry. Shining Path militants believed that the Soviet Union and Cuba had also strayed too far from the true socialist pathway. They wanted to take charge themselves of raising the revolutionary torch toward the new century.²

Leading Shining Path was Abimael Guzmán, a former philosophy professor at Huamanga University in the Andean city of Ayacucho. He founded the Peruvian Communist Party, as the rebels called themselves, in the late 1960s, and in 1980 ordered their first armed attacks.³ A cult of personality arose around Guzmán, Chairman Gonzalo to his followers, and party propaganda anointed him as “the Fourth Sword of Marxism” in a royal Communist Party lineage from Marx to Lenin to Mao. What the revolutionaries termed “Marxism-Leninism-Maoism, Gonzalo Thought” became their guiding ideology. They planned first to seize power in Peru and then bring down capitalism worldwide. Victory, Guzmán promised, was certain. “We will demolish imperialist domination and the reactionaries” he declared, “and we will wipe them off the face of the earth.”⁴

It was madness, of course: the pseudoscientific Marxist jargon, the bogus Dear Leader cult, the absurd expectations. What chance had a few backwater rebels of taking over the planet? Only a few thousand Peruvians ever did join Shining Path. But the group's fervor made it what the influential Peruvian intellectual Carlos Iván Degregori termed a “dwarf star,” namely a burning force out of proportion to its modest size.⁵ Shining Path gained control over parts of Peru's impoverished southern highlands in the early 1980s, and the country's president sent in the military. Their brutal battle, with local villagers massacred by both sides, plunged the region into *chaqwa*, the Quechua word for suffering and chaos. The guerrillas also expanded their Lima operations. There they killed policemen and politicians and, as a scare tactic, blew up electrical towers to pitch the capital into darkness (even though, as I recall from living in Lima then, thousands of gas-powered generators would soon afterward roar to life across the pragmatic city). Abimael Guzmán, the small-town philosophy professor, became his country's most wanted man, the Osama Bin Laden of that time.

Everything came crashing down in the end. As the war dragged across the decade, many villagers grew disenchanted with Shining Path; they began forming *rondas*, or local militias, to drive the guerrillas from their former Andean strongholds.⁶ And then in 1992 a police SWAT team captured Guzmán in his apartment hideout upstairs from a ballet studio in a wealthy Lima district.⁷ So certain was the Shining Path helmsman about his own invincibility that he had not bothered to encode the party membership rosters discovered there. The information helped the police to round up almost the entire Shining Path leadership. They displayed Guzmán to the press corps in a *Silence of the Lamb*-style cage and then locked him away in a navy island prison off Lima's coast. Only a few guerrilla remnants remained at large, far out toward the jungle, the war effectively over.

But the damage had been done. The war had cost an already poor, divided country more than \$1 billion in damages and had left more than a half million refugees and at least sixty-nine thousand people dead.⁸ The memories of those who vanished in the violent storm still hang over the highlands now decades later. "Where could she be?" asks a ballad by the master Ayacuchan songwriter Ranulfo Fuentes; "Perhaps under the stony ground/becoming earth/or among the thorns/budding like wildflowers."⁹

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IT WAS IN THE HEADY EARLY DAYS that Lurgio Gavilán joined Shining Path. He was just twelve years old and the third of five children from a poor peasant family in the Ayacuchan countryside.¹⁰ These windy highlands were a region of almost Fourth World poverty, with no running water, electricity, or other basic services. Villagers made their homes in straw and mud farmhouses scattered amid the gigantic green Andean peaks. Gavilán spent his first years in the hamlet of Auquiraccay. Many families there also had land in the jungles that lay a day or two's walk down the steep foggy footpaths to the east. Gavilán's parents eventually settled by the Apurímac River's tropical banks. They could only afford to send Gavilán to school for a few years, and he did not learn to read or write. The boy spoke only the local indigenous Quechua tongue.

Shining Path was rising in the region. Their Maoist blueprint dictated first controlling the countryside so as then, as Guzmán put it with his accustomed vehemence, to “strangle” the cities. The promise of a new, just order found traction among a peasantry who had suffered discrimination, hunger, and marginalization for so long. Gavilán’s older brother had joined a roving guerrilla column; Gavilán followed out of family loyalty and idealism and with few other possibilities for a poor Andean boy. The party expected its militants to give the so-called quota, namely, to die and to kill for the greater revolutionary good. Those who tried to desert were stoned, hung, or shot in front of the others. Gavilán’s little band lived a frozen, half-starved life on the run, hunted by green army helicopters and village militiamen, as often as not tortured to death when captured. Gavilán fought with Shining Path for a little over two years. Finally, still only fifteen, he was taken prisoner by an army patrol that had starved his column out of rocky Razuhuillca Mountain.

This extraordinary memoir, so beautifully translated by Margaret Randall, describes Gavilán’s guerrilla years. As our only insider account about life in Shining Path, *When Rains Became Floods* is a first. It also happens to be a magical, devastating, powerful piece of writing (and no less a literary star than the Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa admiringly hailed its original Spanish publication).¹¹ Like every really good book, this one takes unexpected turns, sharp here. Gavilán, his life spared, became a soldier himself, fighting now against his former guerrilla comrades, and then later a Franciscan priest. Each of the three clannish organizations to which he belonged—Shining Path, the army, and the church—proved to be a strange and sometimes terrifying enchanted island in its own way. *When Rains Became Floods* is a latter-day Andean *Odyssey*, with Gavilán, like his ancient Ithacan prototype, also somehow managing to survive the hardships, temptations, and perils of a long journey in search of his own place in the world.

It is with Shining Path that Gavilán begins his story. We already have many other Latin American guerrilla war memoirs. One thinks, for example, of Ernesto “Che” Guevara’s *Diary*, about the iconic Argentine rebel’s failed fight to overthrow Bolivia’s then military dictatorship.¹² Gavilán also recounts almost unimaginable sacrifice, suffering, and

struggle powered by dreams for a more just society. Yet *When Rains Became Floods* is no paean to the revolutionary road. To the contrary, Gavilán describes the deadly contradictions at Shining Path's crimson heart. The guerrillas promised democracy and equality in the new revolutionary order. Their own internal organization, however, mirrored the oppressive Peruvian hierarchy of color and class dating back to the Spanish conquest five centuries before. Here Guzmán and his mostly white, city-dwelling inner circle commanded a young, poor, brown-skinned army from village stock. Shining Path, good Maoists, claimed the peasantry would be the revolution's backbone, and yet they slaughtered villagers by the thousands for siding with the army or just seeking to remain neutral. I recall the weeklong journey I made on foot through the Ayacuchan highlands toward the war's end. As much as I had heard about atrocities, it was shocking to walk through one brutalized hamlet after another and to listen to the survivors' tales about Shining Path torching houses, kidnapping children to become fighters, and hacking villagers to death in predawn attacks. Guzmán's troops bore responsibility for some two-thirds of the war dead.¹³

It was tempting, back then, to regard Shining Path as an anomaly. Like Cambodia's Khmer Rouge, their fight seemed a case of Marxism devolving into mass murder. The reality, as we look back now across the decades, is that extreme brutality in the revolutionary Communist cause was not uncommon: Lenin's pogroms, Stalin's gulags, Mao's purges. (And, it should be underscored, what we have learned about supposedly liberty-loving America's own secret assassinations, torture manuals, and backing for bloody dictatorships is hardly cause for pride either.) It was Marxism's magnetic promise to do away with capitalism's savage inequalities to build an egalitarian earthly paradise. So noble was the goal that even the bloodiest means could seem justified in achieving it. "You have to break eggs," as Stalin supposedly put it, "to make an omelet." Gavilán grew disgusted with Shining Path's especially unapologetic, almost ecstatic intention to "crush," "annihilate," and "pulverize" those in its way. This book, then, stands less in the tradition of Che than of a Václav Havel or Andrei Sakharov. It bears witness to how far Marxism could go wrong and, in Peru and too many other places, lead to so much blood, death, and sacrifice for nothing.

That Gavilán was so young gives his account a particular poignancy. We know from books, films, and sometimes their own memoirs about African children dragged into wars like those in the Congo, Sudan, and Sierra Leone. In the longer view, of course, there have always been child soldiers—the boy David slaying Goliath; Napoleon’s drummer boys; Warsaw ghetto resistance fighters; and, for that matter, American teen gang members in drug battle zones. In Peru, too, anthropologist Jessaca Leinaweaver notes the phenomenon of “child circulation,” namely how poor Andean children may be sent to live and sometimes work with relatives in other places.¹⁴ These flexible kin relations have served, among other things, as a strategy for navigating precarious economic circumstances that make the stable nuclear family a luxury many Peruvians cannot afford. At twelve, Gavilán had already left his parent’s jungle homestead, and in fact he was in the highlands planting potatoes with relatives when he followed his brother into Shining Path. He found many other kids his age among the guerrillas, an army of lost boys and girls.

Yet Shining Path was another world. Some children, like Gavilán, joined more or less on their own; others were taken away at gunpoint from mountain homesteads to be made into fighters. For young recruits, the column became family, a ragtag little band with no way back home. One teenage fighter was strangled to death, Lord of the Flies style, for stealing some crackers and tuna, a warning against disobedience of any kind. “Forgiveness,” Gavilán explains, “did not exist in the party.” If Gavilán and many others lost faith in the fight eventually, the ties between them remained strong through it all. Gavilán describes his special bond with Rosaura, a high-spirited Andean beauty of nineteen who became his surrogate big sister. (And Shining Path, much more than most other Latin American guerrilla movements, recruited many women into its ranks.)¹⁵ Gavilán and Rosaura would join the others to sing revolutionary anthems at their nighttime camps (“Down with imperialism! Down! Long live our freedom!”). “The songs,” Gavilán recalls, “made us feel as if we were made of steel, but we were human, children, peasants shouting among the lifeless rocks with no one listening.” Gavilán was fleeing an army ambush with Rosaura when a bullet shattered her arm, and then another left her bleeding to death on the mountain.

Gavilán would be captured the next day. He was grateful to the lieutenant who spared his life, and, as a homeless fifteen-year-old, he decided that staying in the army was his best and perhaps only option. Such side-switching was quite common by that time. The guerrillas had promised a better world. A decade later, their war had only brought misery and suffering, and villagers could see that Chairman Gonzalo would not, as Gavilán had once believed, “appear at any moment in a helicopter and do away with the soldiers.” Sympathy for Shining Path never ran very deep. The Peruvian military, too, scaled back its more indiscriminate brutality for a more savvy mix of threats, handouts, and promises to win over the peasantry. Some villages turned against the guerrillas almost overnight, much as Gavilán did. *Rondas*, the local anti-Shining Path militias, gained rapid strength across the Andes, bolstering the counterinsurgency. If the Andes had witnessed powerful rebellions going back to the eighteenth-century neo-Incan Túpac Amaru and before, this latest one, paradoxically enough, was partly brought down by the very peasant masses Shining Path’s Maoist blueprint had predicted would be the most diehard revolutionaries.¹⁶ Guzmán’s capture, the corrupt Lima establishment rushing to crow over his downfall, only hastened the end of a war already being lost in the mountains.

Gavilán remained in the army for seven years. He began, still too young to enlist formally, as an errand boy; then he was a lowly private, finally rising to sergeant. By contrast to the archetypal right-wing Latin American militaries of, say, Chile and Argentina, the Peruvian army had a populist tradition; its so-called military socialist junta of the late 1960s carried out a major land reform intended to benefit the rural poor. The army was also among the few avenues of social mobility for penniless, brown-skinned young men in a Peru whose hierarchy of color and class led some to compare it to South Africa under apartheid. Yet barracks life was hard. There were nighttime patrols in the icy mountains and capricious commanders with pseudonyms like Centurion, Lieutenant Shogun, and the Big Banana, not to mention the danger still of Shining Path attacks. Here, too, Gavilán witnessed firsthand the military’s brutality, including secretly executing captured guerrillas. Gavilán and the other troops, while marching in town, would sing: “Terrorist/if I find you/I will eat your head” (and

only later, as the military tried to win people over, changed to “Good day, the soldiers of Peru salute you”).

A chance encounter led to yet another abrupt life change. Nuns from the Congregación Jesús Verbo y Víctima (Jesus Verb and Victim Congregation) now and then traveled with Gavilán’s unit for protection. One, as she got to know the young sergeant, suggested that he consider the priesthood. The Catholic Church in Peru was, as elsewhere in Latin America, deeply divided. Advocates for what the pioneering Peruvian Dominican Gustavo Gutiérrez famously termed “liberation theology” believed the Church should prioritize the fight for social justice and the poor. They clashed with conservatives like the Lima archbishop Juan Luis Cipriani, an outspoken opponent of homosexuality, human rights activists, and other “unholy” forces. By then Gavilán was no longer the illiterate little Indian boy who had joined Shining Path, and yet he knew and cared little about larger debates within the Church. He became a priest in order to leave war behind, serve the needy, and atone for what he felt to be his own wartime sins. As a wandering Franciscan, he became “homeless once again . . . like the lilies and the birds in the countryside,” except now under Christ’s white flag and not the red hammer and sickle.

It is an amazing story, and yet what makes *When Rains Became Floods* so special is Gavilán’s telling of it. The book resembles a long Andean Zen prose poem in its spare yet haunting way. Gavilán wastes no words, and in this sense he writes in the tradition of the sad *huayno* ballads still so popular across the Andes. These compact songs frequently draw imagery from the natural world—the yellow flower in the rocks, the little bird’s delicate song—to evoke the pain of lost love, homesickness, and poverty. For his part, Gavilán pauses at various moments to recall an evening’s thin pink light, a mountain morning’s stillness, or talking to an eagle who perched near the military base. These little parentheses do not always serve any larger allegorical purpose. Gavilán wants to account for the rocks, the trees, the animals, and the rain because they also belong to this world of ours where life itself can sometimes take flight as fast as a mountain lark winging into the grey-blue sky.

It might be possible to see some primordial indigenous worldview at work. But this would, I think, be a disservice to Gavilán. His view

of the interconnectedness of humans, animals, and the land is indeed rooted in an Andean way of understanding quite different from a more conventional Western outlook. But the Andes have never been the pristine Shangri-La of the tourist postcards and travel brochures, despite the region's outsized, almost mythical history and geography. Villagers nowadays migrate between the countryside, Lima, and sometimes Europe and the United States; join evangelical churches; check in with relatives on their cell phones; and otherwise belong fully to our shrinking modern world. Gavilán's own journey exposed him to varied influences that left their mark. He recalls for us, music threaded into his tale, the lyrics to Maoist anthems, barracks chants, and Franciscan vespers. *When Rains Became Floods* bears traces, among other things, of Gavilán's religious training and the archetypal biblical themes of sin, suffering, and rebirth, if never exactly redemption. He lists Franz Kafka and José Saramago among his literary inspirations.¹⁷ This, then, is a son of the Andes, and yet no "typical" anything. *When Rains Became Floods* is all Gavilán's own, and a sometimes brilliant literary creation at once all too real, dream-like, and different from any other book I know.

If a single theme runs through the tale, it is the almost magical capacity of certain institutions and ideologies to shape lives. Gavilán marched under three banners—the Communist hammer-and-sickle, the Christian white, and, as a soldier, the Peruvian national flag. All three had a vertical command structure that demanded absolute obedience from their followers. Each proffered its own sacred articles of faith, whether Chairman Gonzalo's teachings, the glories of Peruvian patriotism, or the Word of God. A horrifying hypermachismo pervaded military culture. Soldiers in Gavilán's barracks brutalized prostitutes and raped captured prisoners. By contrast, the Franciscans demanded chastity, and Shining Path discouraged and sometimes punished love in war. Gavilán, while clear about these and other differences, shows how dangerous it can be to subsume one's own will to any greater crusade. Yet this book is not some simple morality play about the hazards of groupthink. Gavilán also conveys the attractions and sometimes joys of comradeship, purpose, and belonging for a meaning-seeking and social species like ours, no matter what that larger cause may be. He manages throughout his tale to combine

strong, sometimes heart-wrenching feeling with a seer's meditative distance from petty worldly judgment.

As he turns in his Franciscan habit to pursue a university degree, Gavilán is left with his memories. The war's end led to various attempts to reckon with its human costs, among them street art, a memory museum, and a Truth and Reconciliation Commission appointed by the national government.¹⁸ In reality, of course, we can never make the past right, or even agree on what lessons should be learned from it. The war divided many Andean hamlets, turning neighbors into what anthropologist Kimberly Theidon has termed "intimate enemies."¹⁹ Some villagers, uninterested in opening old wounds, refused to speak to Truth and Reconciliation Commission investigators, or wanted money to do so.²⁰

The commission itself, once more mirroring archetypal Peruvian hierarchies, was mostly made up of white Lima-based intellectuals and activists, with not a single Quechua speaker among them. Top military officials wanted to shut down any investigation of their war crimes. Shining Path leaders, also anything but repentant, still issued occasional pronouncements about world revolution's inevitability from their jail cells. Many Peruvians have little interest in recalling a war that ended before the younger generation was even born. Their everyday concerns, like so many of us nowadays, revolve more around making a living, the latest on Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, friends, family, and dreams for the future.

Gavilán gives us this book in the hope, however tenuous, that greater understanding may help ensure that nothing like the war "will ever happen in Peru again."²¹ As much as anything, *When Rains Became Floods* nonetheless reads as a personal reckoning, as the account of a man, in his words, "standing before life's mirror." Gavilán wants to make some sense of his past, and as he puts it, "memories are like a journey through endless time." But he has no truck with platitudes about trauma, healing, or any point of final resolution. "I felt," he writes at one point, "as if memory was feeding in my blood, like fleas or white lice did when I lived clandestinely and walked with my rifle in my hand, reading the bible of Mao Tse-tung." Remembering brings Gavilán both pain and pleasure; much about the past remains a mystery to him, as it must be to us all.

As much as he has seen, Gavilán is still quite young, barely forty at this writing. The little boy from Auquiraccay has already lived three very different lives, and now, as an anthropologist, has embarked on a fourth. It was reading the influential mid-twentieth-century Peruvian writer and anthropologist José María Arguedas that first drew Gavilán to the field, and he counts now Frantz Fanon, Michel Foucault, and Edward Said among his other influences. Anthropology, he explains, has furnished him a way to better understand the costs of war and suffering, and the changing realities in his native Ayacucho.²² This new career and his two young children have once again given Gavilán what he describes as “reasons to go on living.”

We are very fortunate to have his extraordinary book.



La Mar province, Ayacucho, where we fought in 1983 and 1984.
Photograph by author, 2002.