

National Commission on Disappeared People

Nunca Más

Extracts from the testimonies of victims of Argentina's years of terror, when close on 9,000 people are known to have 'disappeared'

chose silence, why there was no outcry, why there were so few brave voices. Had it not been for circumstances — the intervention of fate, the frustration of the military, first in the economic field, then in its military adventures (which at one time included the invasion of Chile), there would have been no end to 'The Process'.

There would have been no final accounting because the brave voices, many of whom became members of the National Commission on Disappeared People, would have been drowned out by the triumphal tunes of the military.

But fate did intervene, and Raúl Alfonsín, the least likely of the leaders of the Radical Party to become the party's candidate, was chosen and elected President of Argentina. Dr Alfonsín was one of a handful of people — and one of only two political leaders among them — who founded the Permanent Assembly of Human Rights. One of the first acts of his government was to set up a national commission to investigate the fate of the approximately 11,000 people who disappeared. The chairman of the commission, the distinguished novelist Ernesto Sabato, told me, when the commission's work was finished, that it would lead to the arrest of thousands of people.

That has not happened. It has proved impossible for the government to bring all of those responsible for Argentina's time of terror to justice. *Nunca Más*, the commission's report, however, did serve as the basis for a four-and-a-half months long trial of the nine commanders who formed the first three military juntas, at which over 1,000 witnesses gave evidence. In the event, only five of the accused were found guilty, and none of them received the maximum penalty demanded by the public prosecutor. Can justice be said to have been served if only five men are punished for turning Argentina into the hell that *Nunca Más* documents? Perhaps there is some solace in the thought that more even than justice, Argentina needs self-knowledge. The evidence gathered by the National Commission on Disappeared People fills a void in Argentine history. While this was all happening, the Argentine people pretended to themselves that nothing was happening. The None-So-Blind allowed thousands of people to become NN's — the initials stand for No Names, meaning the unidentified bodies that the military put in mass graves in after-hours burials in cemeteries. Of course, many more people have simply disappeared, their bodies disposed of like garbage, drugged and thrown from the air into the sea, dumped into rivers and lakes, or burned.

Never again? It may be possible now that the None-So-Blind have been forced to see. ■

In December 1983, Raúl Alfonsín was elected president of Argentina, thus putting an end to seven years of rule by the armed forces. One of the new civilian government's first acts was to set up a commission to investigate the fate of the thousands of Argentines who had 'disappeared' during the years of military government. The National Commission on Disappeared People (CONADEP) gathered over 50,000 pages of testimonies from relatives of the disappeared, from people who had been abducted but had survived, and even from some of the people who had been involved in the repression. The commission visited the sites of secret detention centres, and tried to identify remains found in many mass graves. The evidence collected suggests that at least 8,960 people disappeared following their illegal capture by members of the state security forces in operations which followed a similar pattern throughout the country. First the victim was seized by anonymous armed men. If this happened at the person's home, the intruders would often abduct the other people present as well, and ransack the property. Then he or she (30% of the victims were women) would be taken hooded to one of the 340 illegal detention centres (police stations or armed forces' properties specially adapted for this purpose). Then followed interrogation and torture. Torture was used routinely, not merely to obtain information, but also as a way of spreading terror.

The victims totally disappeared from the view of the outside world. No-one admitted to holding them, their relatives could get no information as to their whereabouts, and only a very small proportion of them were ever charged with 'subversion'. The vast majority were simply killed after they had told all they knew. Their bodies 'were not returned', as a military contact informed the father of one of the disappeared. They were disposed of in mass graves, in mortuaries, or thrown into lakes, rivers, or the estuary of the Rio de la Plata.

*The Commission on Disappeared People's report, *Nunca Más* ('Never Again'), was presented to President Alfonsín at the end of 1984. It demonstrated amply that the sequence — abduction, torture, murder, and concealment of the bodies — was not haphazard, that these thousands of people did not die as a result of regrettable but accidental*

*'excesses' committed by members of the armed forces in their 'dirty war' against subversion. Instead, it showed that the military authorities, at the highest level, had chosen the murder of all known, suspected, or imagined opponents as the most effective way of imposing rule without dissent. It found that the armed forces had made a concerted attempt not merely to make these people disappear, but to destroy all evidence of them ever having been held by any part of the state apparatus. *Nunca Más* was used as the basis for the trial of the nine military leaders of the three juntas which ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1982. In the event, only five of the nine were found guilty on charges of human rights violations, and only two were given life sentences — a verdict which caused indignation among human rights workers in Argentina.*

*More than a thousand other cases are still being heard against other members of the state security forces. Whatever the outcome of these trials, the CONADEP report *Nunca Más*, which has sold almost 200,000 copies in Argentina alone (more than any other book in the last decade), stands as a courageous example of one country's efforts to confront a period of moral depravity in its own recent history, and to insist that individual human life has an absolute value beyond political expediency.*

*The English edition of *Nunca Más* is to be published on 31 March by Faber (London) in association with Index on Censorship. The following extracts give a sample of the detailed testimonies which comprise half the 450-page report and which describe each stage of 'disappearance'; they are followed by the conclusions of the Commission on the Disappeared People.*

**Nunca Más* will be published in the USA by Farrar Straus & Giroux; a Portuguese edition has appeared, and Italian and German editions are in preparation.*

Abduction

As I was inserting the key in the lock I realised what was happening, because the door was pulled inwards violently and I stumbled forward.

I jumped back, trying to escape. Two shots (one in each leg) stopped me. However, I still put up a struggle, and for several minutes resisted being handcuffed

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and hooded as best I could. At the same time, I was shouting at the top of my lungs that I was being kidnapped, begging my neighbours to tell my family, and to try to stop them taking me away.

Finally, exhausted and blindfolded, I was told by the person who apparently was in command that my wife and two daughters had already been captured and 'disappeared'.

They had to drag me out, since I couldn't walk because of the wounds in my legs. As we were leaving the building, I saw a car with a flashing red light in the street. By the sound of the voices and commands, and the slamming of car doors, interspersed with shouts from my neighbours, I presumed that this was a police car.

After several minutes of heated argument, the police car left. The others then took me out of the building and threw me on to the floor of a car, possibly a Ford Falcon, and set off.

They hauled me out of the car in the same way, carrying me between four of them. We crossed four or five metres of what by the sound of it was a gravelled yard, then they threw me on to a table. They tied me by my hands and feet to its four corners.

The first voice I heard after being tied up was of someone who said he was a doctor. He told me the wounds on my legs were bleeding badly, so I should not try to resist in any way...

(Testimony of Dr Norberto Liwsky)

Torture

The interrogation sessions later became shorter, but the electric prod was more intense, savagely seeking out the sphincters. The worst was having electrodes on the teeth — it felt as if a thunderbolt was blowing your head to pieces — and a narrow string of beads, which they put in my mouth and which were very difficult to swallow because they induced retching and vomiting, thus intensifying the ordeal, until finally they forced one to swallow them. Each bead was an electrode and when they worked it seemed like a thousand crystals were shattering, splintering inside one and moving through the body, cutting everywhere. They were so excruciating that one couldn't even scream or groan or move. They produced convulsions which, if one hadn't been tied down, would have forced one into a foetal position. This left one shaking for several hours with all one's insides one huge wound and an unbearable thirst, but the fear of more convulsions was stronger, so for several days one didn't eat or drink, in spite of their trying to force one to do so.

Every day they invented new things as collective punishment. Once it was really

horrific. A person calling himself 'Lieutenant' came and said that he was giving us military training, which wasn't true — we were tightly blindfolded and couldn't talk. There were nearly always guards there and they were always coming and going, bringing people in and taking them away.

They took us to what I imagine was a large room; they surrounded us and began to hit us all over, but especially on the elbows and knees; we would crash into each other, blows were coming at us from all sides, we would trip and fall. Then, when we were completely prostrate on the floor, they started throwing ice-cold water over us and with electric prods they would force us to our feet and take us back to the place we had come from. They left us all together, shaking, wet, shivering, huddling together for warmth.

We could hear them playing cards, their voices raised to drown out the constant screams of somebody being tortured. When they finished the game they would amuse themselves by ill-treating us.

(Testimony of Antonio Miño Retamozo)

Life in the detention camps

In Campo de Mayo, where I was taken on 28 April 1977, the treatment consisted of keeping the prisoner hooded throughout his stay, sitting, without talking or moving, in large blocks which had previously been used as stables. Perhaps this phrase does not express clearly enough what that actually meant, because you might think that when I say, 'sitting, hooded, all the time', it is just a figure of speech. But that is not the case: we prisoners were made to sit on the floor with nothing to lean against from the moment we got up at six in the morning until eight in the evening when we went to bed. We spent fourteen hours a day in that position. And when I say 'without talking or moving', I mean exactly that. We couldn't utter a word, or even turn our heads. On one occasion, a companion ceased to be included on the interrogators' list and was forgotten. Six months went by, and they only realised what had happened because one of the guards thought it strange that the prisoner was never wanted for anything and was always in the same condition, without being 'transferred'. He told the interrogators, who decided to 'transfer' him that week, as he was no longer of any interest to them. This man had been sitting there, hooded, without speaking or moving, for six months, awaiting death. We would sit like this, padlocked to a chain which could be either individual or collective. The individual type was a kind of shackle put on the feet; the collective type consisted of one chain about 30 metres long, long enough to be attached at either end to opposite walls in the block.

Prisoners were chained to it every metre and a half, as circumstances required, so that they were all linked together. This system was permanent.

(CONADEP file No 2819)

Death

This is how the first operation was carried out. We left Headquarters with three cars. Father Christian Von Wernich was waiting for us at the Detective Squad at La Plata. He had spoken to and blessed the ex-subversives and had organised a farewell for them at the same unit. The family (who were to await them in Brazil) had sent them flowers. The three ex-subversives — two women and a man — were allowed to go free, without handcuffs, and as far as they were concerned we were simply guards who were to take them to the airport and put them on the plane. We had been given express instructions not to carry arms but as we feared that a shoot-out might be simulated in which we could be killed, we decided to take both our issue weapons and a personal one. Father Christian Von Wernich was in the same car — number 3 — as me.

'X' was a young man of approximately twenty-two years, fair-skinned, with chestnut hair, who had lived near La Plata on the General Belgrano road.

The signal to start was a message we would receive on the radio asking our position. When we received the signal in car number 3, I had to give the blow that would knock 'X' out. I hit him near the jaw but it did not knock him out. Giménez took out his issue gun. When 'X' saw it he flung himself on it and a fight started. This forced me to grab him by the neck and I hit him several times on the head with the butt of my gun. This produced several wounds and he bled profusely; both the priest, the driver and the two of us who were beside him were bloodstained... The three cars went off along a side street towards a wooded place where Dr Bergé, the official doctor was waiting.

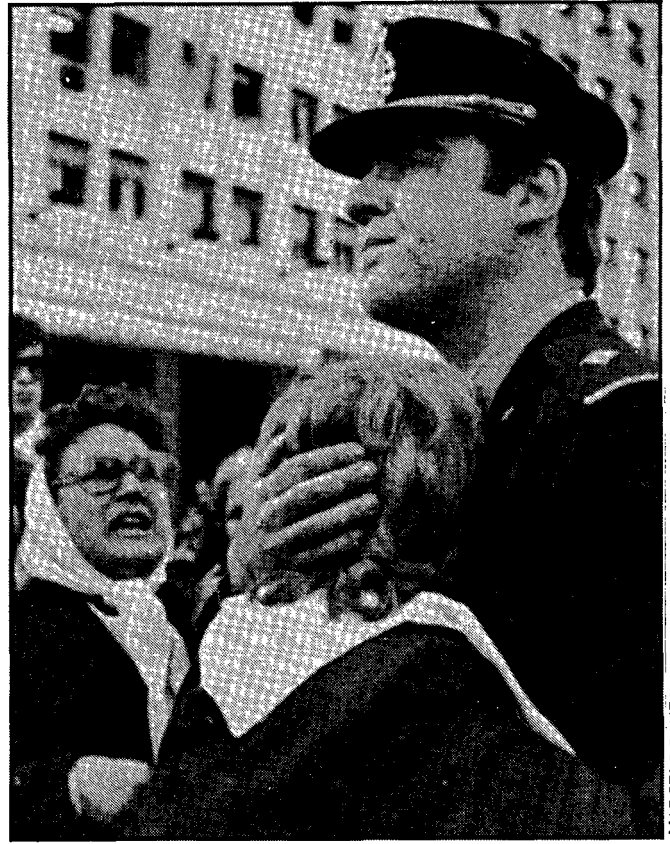
The three ex-subversives who were still alive were taken out. They were thrown on the grass, the doctor gave them two injections each, directly in the heart, with a reddish poisonous liquid. Two died but the physician left all three for dead. They were loaded on to a van belonging to the unit and were taken to Avellaneda. We went to wash and change our clothes because we were bloodstained. Father Von Wernich left in another car. We immediately went to the Police Headquarters where Chief Inspector Etchjcolatz, Father Von Wernich and all the members of the group involved in the operation were waiting for us.

Father Von Wernich saw that what had happened had shocked me, and spoke to me

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JORGE SANCHEZ



MARCELO RANEA

Two moments in a demonstration during the time of the Junta

telling me that what we had done was necessary; it was a patriotic act and God knew it was for the good of the country. Those were his very words...

(*Testimony of Julio Alberto Emmed, file No 683*)

I noticed that we began to receive corpses which sometimes came with a 'name of sender', but usually without anything. This was in 1976. The corpses were usually brought in by the police and sometimes by the *Gendarmería*, the Army or joint groups of Security Forces. The officials who handed them over were lieutenants or sub-lieutenants whose names I don't remember. Sometimes they came with groups of ten or twelve soldiers, but I didn't pay much attention. These corpses had the following characteristics; they had bullet wounds, some with a lot of perforations, sometimes so many as eighty, sometimes seventeen, for example. They all had painted fingers and bore clear marks of torture. They had marks on their hands as if they had been tied with cords. From time to time one would appear completely torn to pieces, split open.

After the first batches came more of five, eight, seven. I must explain that the autopsies were carried out on bodies sent by

the ordinary or federal judicial authorities, but that the subversives were not given autopsies, and came with just an order from the military judge and the death certificate already provided by the 3rd Corps or the police doctor.

An order was given for the bodies to be cleared from the hospital, which we did, as we have described in our petition to the then President of the Republic, General Videla, on 30 June 1980. We did it in two lorryloads, two journeys in the same lorry with thirty bodies at a time which were put into a ditch in the San Vicente cemetery. The pit was a new one, we inaugurated it. It measured roughly 36 or 40 metres long, 8 wide, and 6 or 7 deep. The municipality had dug the grave, and the machine was still there when we arrived. I've never seen such a big grave in my life.

After the Córdoba hospital we returned to the morgue of the San Roque hospital in December 1976, and around March 1977 we went back to the big pit — I can't remember how many we took. I went two or three days beforehand and saw that the pit was nearly full. It seemed to me that they had put in more bodies. I can't remember the exact number we took there. But I do remember clearly that the ditch was full to 1.5 metres from the top.

(*Testimony of Francisco Bossio, mortuary employee*)

Aftermath

On 25 March 1976 at 9.45 a.m. uniformed personnel of the security forces raided the premises of the Mestrina shipyard located at the intersection of Calles Chubut and Río Luján in Tigre, Buenos Aires province, where my son worked, and arrested him in front of all his workmates. As soon as he was arrested we began formalities to determine his whereabouts, and shortly afterwards we managed to locate him in Police Station No 1 in Tigre. I got some clothes and food to him and received a few messages in his handwriting; I still have them. Then he was transferred and we lost trace of him. To date we still don't know where he is. I would like to point out that the Ministry of the Interior informed us that 'Carlos Ignacio Boncio was arrested and his release at the disposition of the National Executive was ordered by Decree No 1615/76 of 5/8/76.' His supposed 'release' never took place since, as I said before, we never heard of him again. This was despite the information requested by the judge presiding in the case. The *habeas corpus* presented to Dr Guillermo F. Rivarola at Federal Court No 3 (No 39.930) was eventually rejected and the order given to send photocopies to the Army High Command so that they could investigate my son's supposed illegal deprivation of liberty.

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[On 5 April 1977 Boncio's mother wrote the following letter to the court dealing with the writ of habeas corpus:]

Judge Rivarola, I am an Argentine citizen. My name is Ana Inés Mancebo de Boncio. I wish to inform you that my son Carlos Ignacio Boncio, L.E. 8.242.272, has not been released. Despite the response to my writ of *habeas corpus*, I know for a fact from people released from Campo de Mayo that my son is still there. I beseech you, therefore, to use your good offices to determine why he has not been set free given that his release has been authorised. Thanking you in advance for your assistance, I am, yours sincerely, Ana I.M. de Boncio.

[In answer to a request for information submitted by this Commission to the Ministry of the Interior, on 21 March 1984, we received the following statement:]

This Department is unable to give concrete information on the police station, and even less on the officer who effected the release of Carlos Ignacio Boncio ordered by Decree No 1615/76 since no records exist for the reasons previously given. It is assumed, however, that he was released by the Army

since records do have him registered as being located in 2nd Corps Headquarters MM. These are the only records in existence since Decree No 27226/83 ordered the destruction of all evidence relating to the detention of persons held at the disposition of the National Executive.

[The deposition relating these facts was presented to Federal Court No 2, Buenos Aires city, on 24 August 1984.]

Conclusions

Up to the time of the presentation of this report, CONADEP estimates that 8,960 people are still missing. It bases this estimate on the information it received and comparisons made with figures given by national and international human rights groups.

This is not a final figure, since CONADEP realises that many cases of kidnapping have not been reported. The figure may also include people who did not communicate their release in time.

- Abduction was also used as a method of repression prior to the military coup of 24 March 1976. It was, however, from the date on which the forces usurping power took absolute control of the resources of the state,

that the method became widespread.

The kidnappings were carried out by members of the Security Forces who concealed their identity. The victim was then taken to one of the approximately 340 secret detention centres then in existence. In the course of its investigations, CONADEP inspected a large number of these establishments used by the *de facto* government. They were under the command of high-ranking officers in the military and security services. The prisoners were kept in inhuman conditions and subjected to all kinds of torture and humiliation. Our investigations to date show that a provisional figure of 1,300 persons were seen in these centres prior to their disappearance.

- Seeing proof of the extent of the use of torture in these centres, and the sadism with which it was carried out, is horrendous. Some of the methods used have no precedent elsewhere in the world. Some depositions referred to the torture of children and old people in front of their families to get information.

- CONADEP has shown that as a result of these methods, prisoners were murdered, their identities concealed and in many cases their bodies destroyed to prevent subsequent identification. We also established that people alleged by the forces of repression to have been killed in combat were in fact taken alive from some secret detention centre and killed in simulated military confrontations or in fake attempts to escape.

- Among the victims still missing and those who were subsequently released from secret detention centres are people from all walks of life:

	%
Blue-collar workers	30.2
Students	21.0
White-collar workers	17.9
Professionals	10.7
Teachers	5.7
Self-employed and others	5.0
Housewives	3.8
Military conscripts and members of the security services	2.5
Journalists	1.8
Actors, performers, etc.	1.3
Nuns, priests, etc	0.3
	<hr/> 100.0

- We can state categorically — contrary to what the executors of this sinister plan maintain — that they did not pursue only the members of political organisations which carried out acts of terrorism. Among the victims are thousands who never had any links with such activity but were nevertheless subjected to horrific torture because they opposed the military dictatorship, took part in union or student activities, were well-known intellectuals who ques-

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'What did you do?' the girl asked, putting down the blazer she was about to put on.

'I broke away from her and ran out into the middle of the road shouting how was I supposed to feel, and why didn't those bastards hiding behind the curtains come out into the open; I was ranting and raving like a maniac, while she stood there going red as if I'd slapped her in the face.'

Dolores sat watching her cigarette go out in the ashtray.

'I created a real scandal. And do you think anyone came out to see what was going on, do you think anyone looked out of the window? Not a soul.'

'I'm sorry,' Elena said. 'I'm really sorry.'

But I wasn't sorry; what I was feeling was completely different, horribly different. I told Elena I was going back to the square. She glanced at me briefly without a word, then turned on her heels and went back home, presumably. The square was still empty, or almost empty, I don't remember exactly. I sat down on a bench, muttering 'How am I supposed to feel, for Christ's sake, how am I supposed to feel?' over and over again, till I'd said it so many times it started to lose its force. I was distracted by the sight of an old man doing his utmost to get a little boy he was holding by the hand to touch

a pigeon. I looked around me and realised why I'd returned to the square, I'd returned to watch the rats slinking back once they'd sensed that danger was over. Now the whole square was full of rats loitering or scurrying around. More and more rats kept pouring in and out of the side-streets. I looked over at the Cathedral and saw the steps lined with rats. But were they really rats? Disgusting, stinking, cowardly rats? Ought they to be exterminated like vermin? I looked at the little boy chasing the pigeons. I looked at the Casa Rosada, two grenadier guards were on sentry duty. At that point I leant my head against the back of the iron bench and began to weep, silently, so no one would notice.

The girl put her blazer on and went to look out of the window.

'It's got dark,' she said. 'The last thing I wanted was to go home in the dark.'

But something else was obviously on her mind. As they turned to face each other at the front door, she clutched her by the arm.

'I don't know how one's supposed to feel about it either. All I know is that you have to find some kind of breathing space. Because if you don't have room to breathe, you'll be dead as well. And the worst of it isn't that you'll be dead but that you'll have added another corpse to their collection.'

Translated by Jo Labanyi

tioned state terrorism, or simply because they were relatives, friends, or names included in the address book of someone considered subversive.

- This Commission maintains that it was not just a question of some 'excesses', if that means aberrant acts, being committed. These atrocities were common practice; the normal methods used daily during the repression.

- Despite their claim in the 'Final Document of the Military Junta on the War Against Subversion and Terrorism' that the forces of subversion had 25,000 recruits of which 15,000 were 'technically able and ideologically trained to kill', the War Councils set up to judge these crimes sentenced only approximately 356 individuals. This demonstrates clearly that other measures were used to annihilate thousands of people who opposed them, terrorists or not.

- Hence the claim that subversion and terrorism were in effect defeated is invalid: certain terrorist organisations were wiped out but in their stead a system of institutionalised terror was implemented which undermined the most basic human, ethical and moral principles and was backed by a doctrine which was also foreign to our national identity.

- CONADEP prepared 7,380 files, comprising depositions from relatives of the disappeared, testimonies of people released from secret detention centres and statements by members of the security forces who had taken part in the acts of repression described above. It carried out various investigations in different parts of the country and collected information from the Armed Forces, the Security Forces and other private and public organisations.

- As a result of its investigations, CONADEP was able to present evidence before the courts, comprising 1,086 dossiers proving the existence of the main secret detention centres, giving a partial list of the disappeared seen alive in these centres, and a list of members of the Armed Forces and Security Forces mentioned by victims as responsible for the serious crimes they denounced.

- The destruction or removal of documentation providing details of the fate of the disappeared before government was handed over to the constitutional authorities hindered the investigation with which this Commission was entrusted by decree.

Nevertheless, there is evidence which allows us to confirm that people who are still missing passed through the secret detention centres and that the truth as to their subsequent whereabouts will come out as progress is made in determining which individuals are responsible for the acts of repression committed. ■

Zinovy Zinik

The Maiden and the Beast

Short story by a Russian writer now living in London



MARGARITA GLUZBERG

Zinovy Zinik was born in Moscow in 1945, and worked there as a theatre critic and teacher. He began writing prose in the mid-sixties, and was strongly influenced in his early writing by the circle of non-conformist writers around Aleksandr Asarkyan and Pavel Ulitin. He never attempted to publish his work in the Soviet Union, knowing in advance that it would be unublishable there. In 1975 he emigrated to Israel, smuggling out a suitcase full of manuscripts.

Unwilling to become part of the system, afflicted by a sense of claustrophobia and insularity, he decided that it was preferable to be an 'external' rather than an 'internal' émigré. Emigration liberated his writing and, as he says, gave a plot to his alienation.

In 1977 Zinovy Zinik came to London, after spending two years as director of the Russian theatre studio at Jerusalem University. He now works as a freelance critic and writer, and his work has been widely published in émigré journals such as Vremya i my and Sintaksis. Two of his novels (A Displaced Person and Russian Service) have been published in French translation by Albin Michel, and received wide critical acclaim; a third (A Niche in the Pantheon) is due to be published by Albin Michel in the spring. Russian Service

has been serialised in English by the BBC, and a story by Zinovy Zinik will appear in London shortly in a collection published by Quartet. The story which follows was broadcast by the BBC on 30 January 1986.

To Robin Phillimore

Once upon a time there lived a monster, a real Beast and no two ways about it. At regular intervals God sent it down to the capital of the world to punish the inhabitants for their licentious ways.

Every one hundred years the Beast would appear in the city and devour the fairest maid of them all. The maid who was chosen by the elders to be the sacrifice for our time was known as the Maiden, since she was the only virgin in the population of consenting adults that consisted entirely of fornicators. It was an unwritten law that the Beast devoured the maid on the seventh day after making its appearance — not a day earlier, not a day later. The Maiden, naturally, wept bitterly and cursed the day she was born, the local population and the elders. The eldest of the elders tried to console the Maiden and direct her thoughts towards the ways of truth. 'Just think', he said. 'According to the law the Beast may not touch you for a whole seven days. In seven days you can accomplish much. God finished the