

## Carmen Rodriguez / HANDS

*Translation: Heidi Neufeld-Raine with the author*

I've come to the end of the path. While you're playing at home, daughter of mine, I'm here at the end of the path. The local radios have already gone off the air. Marches have replaced the last-minute warnings and the military commands are polluting our ears, our minds and our hands with their sinister vomit. And while you play at home, daughter mine, I'm here at the end of the path. We're all here; friends and "compañeros" have all come to the university this spring day. We've all come and we're waiting. From eight to ten I have to give the translation class; I've got it prepared — we'll do some children's stories like "Peter Rabbit." Only today, I'm not waiting for my students.

When I was little, they never let us play with weapons. My brothers played ball; I played with dolls. Sure, sometimes we played with water pistols. We ran down the street in Cerro Bellavista after the boys, shooting our water pistols at them; afterwards, we hid on the hill. When we came home all soaked, my mother sent us to bed.

Roberto came, he says we have to wait, that they'll be here soon.

When we went to the fair — remember when we took you to Bustamante Park in Santiago — I could never hit the ducks with that rifle. I shot at everything except the duck. We had more fun on the Ferris wheel and on the merry-go-round. This time when we took you to the fair, you wanted to try the rifle but I wouldn't let you; I said it wasn't necessary; rather not.

Five people have gone to watch the bridge, to wait there until they give us the warning call.

We've lined up and we're jogging. It's been so long since I've jogged; I think the last time was in high school; in Physical Education. It's amazing how one lets oneself go; I can't run half a block; I get too tired.

You're playing at home, daughter mine. They say they're Soviet, that they'll be here soon. The button-downs have Gloria

brand and I think they bring them in from Argentina.

After the '60s earthquake, they gave my father two big pistols so he'd guard the school. He locked them up and never let us hold them. One night, Mama heard a noise and went out on the patio alone with one of the pistols. The blasts woke us up. My mother had killed a cat, thinking it was thieves. What a woman.

Roberto is explaining how to hold them. He says it's easy, you just have to grasp the trigger, that they're light and firm. Now we have to practice throwing ourselves onto the ground. What will it be like holding one in my hands? I only know how to hold children and books. I have small, soft hands. You like it when I scratch your head with these hands, or tickle your nose or hold you and cuddle you up when you're sleepy. We're all face down in the grass, pretending we have one in our hands. On the other side of the river, there are strange noises. Your bald doll, the one that was mine and is yours now, must already be dressed: maybe you're changing her clothes, or are you singing to her?

The ones who were on the bridge come running; they say they're coming already, that they're crossing. It's hard to hear, the noise is terrible, the earth shakes. We have to be ready. We get into lines to receive them. The helicopters seem like dragonflies with huge eyes that watch. The city groans on the other side of the river. Our island anxiously awaits the start, the finish. We can already see them in the street with all the poplars. They've come to the end of the road. The American tanks have come to the end of the road. American trucks have blocked access. Green insects drag along the asphalt. We have to run to the river. With empty hands we have to run to the river, maybe we'll manage to take the boats, maybe they won't shoot, maybe they'll concede us the right to life. With empty hands I run downhill, with empty hands, I think of you, daughter mine, about your future and my future, with empty hands I reach the bank and throw myself at the boat already moving away while I think about the years to come and about you, daughter mine, about the promises I made you, and the better life we wanted to make for you and I make you one final promise, the last promise of all, tomorrow, tomorrow, daughter mine, when we're ready again to retrieve life and the future, tomorrow, daughter mine, you and I won't have empty hands.