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Grey Man Behind White Chair

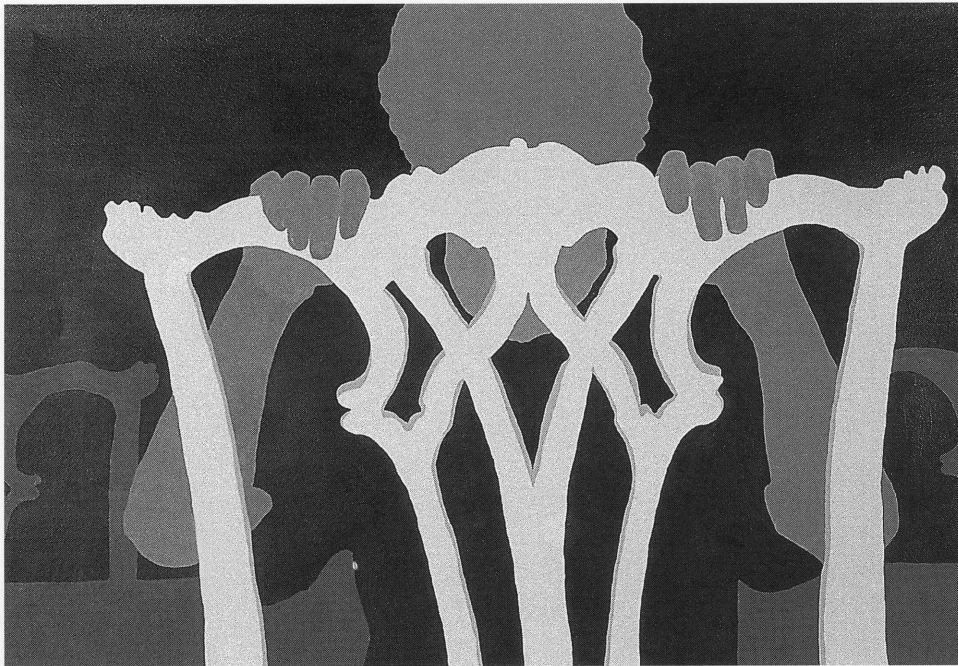
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2] perón was a dictator who ruled argentina from 1945 until 1955, when he was overthrown by the armed forces in a bloody coup. i will not elaborate on life in a dictatorship. i will say, however, that freedom of expression is one of the first things to disappear, and my parents constantly reminded us to use caution in our behavior. they were born in argentina, but their families had come from ireland, and we spoke english. this made us suspicious, as there was, in some sectors of the population, a strong and sickish nationalistic feeling. my mother's brothers worked for the argentine railroads, property of the british who had built them. in 1948 perón expropriated them as part of his national program.

during perón's dictatorship, my godfather, one of my mother's brothers, was imprisoned and held incommunicado for two weeks; his crime was never clearly stated. when we were authorized, we visited him. the jail house was in the oldest part of town. a gloomy gray stone building, it stood on one corner detached from its neighbors; a large crowd moved around it. and so there we stood, aliens in such a crowd. at the appointed time, the door opened, and we walked into dark hallways that oozed of smothered air and gray walls that collapsed into a world of silence and despair. and then we came to my godfather, wearing a coarse gray uniform, a black number stuck on his back. to this day i have a haunting memory of that visit.

at the time, we lived in the township of rodriguez, two hours away from the city of buenos aires where we commuted by train daily to our work places. we lived in rodriguez one year so that the transition period, from country life to life in the big city, would not be too drastic on my father, who had lived all his life on a farm. we then moved to the city of buenos aires, where most of my parents' family lived.

now, let me tell you what happened to me during this prohibition time. a national election was due at the time of our move. my mother and i had not made our address change on time, so we both had to travel to rodriguez on election day to fulfill this obligation that is law in argentina. elections are held on a sunday. all stores are closed, and entertainment is banned for the day. the voting procedure is also different from that observed in the united states. in argentina, at age 18, a citizen is issued a document similar to a small passport with pre-printed pages. on election day, the clerk in charge identifies the voter with a listing, then stamps and signs the document. this is an official document, not to be tampered with, and its presentation is required when renewing passports and other official transactions. it was to be the first time i'd vote, and i felt so important with my recently acquired adulthood that i showed my document to a group of friends.