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Through a tropics of light: An introduction to and translation of Eduardo García Aguilar's
"Bulevar de los Héroes"

Miskowiec, Jay Anthony, Ph.D.

City University of New York, 1991

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A

Through a Tropics of Light:
an introduction to and translation of Eduardo García Aguilar's
Bulevar de los Héroes
by
JAY ANTHONY MISKOWIEC

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in
Comparative Literature in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

1991

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This manuscript has been read and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in Comparative Literature in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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I. Eduardo García Aguilar and *Boulevard of Heroes*

Eduardo García Aguilar was born in the Andean city of Manizales, Colombia in 1953. For most of the '70s he lived in France, studying philosophy and political economy at the Université de Paris, Vincennes. Since 1980 he has resided in Mexico City, pursuing a career both as a novelist and a journalist. (There is a twenty-two page entry for him in the *Diccionario de escritores mexicanos*, Instituto de Investigaciones Filológicas, Mexico City.) He was Central American correspondent for *El Periódico de México* and has written for *Excelsior*, *Unomasuno*, and *Sábado*. At present he is associate director of Agence France Press in Mexico City. For two years he worked in the institute Filmoteca at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México; his investigations there resulted in the book *García Márquez: la tentación cinematográfica*. (He has struggled with the anxiety of influence of this father figure, "de esta imagen paterna": while Baudrillard was thinking how to *Oublier Foucault*, García Aguilar was considering the metaphysical murder of his compatriot, writing "¿Cómo matar a García Márquez?") *Bulevar de los Héroes* is his second novel and was a finalist in the 1987 Premio Internacional de Novela Plaza y Janes. He has also published *Tierra de leones* (1986), three collections of short stories and a volume of poetry; his third novel, *El Viaje Triunfal*, and a collection of short stories, *Urbes Imaginarias*, are currently going to press.

The post-boom generation of Latin American writers have begun to question dominant and accepted political positions. The work of García Aguilar illustrates "the

lucidity of utopian failure" (Ochoa Sandy III, 23). [1] Capitalism and Marxism, Catholicism and Islam have promised paradises to their followers. While the streets of the Western free-market democracies are filled with drug dealers and legions of the homeless, soldiers of the Red armies drive their tanks over protesters and the guardians of religious fundamentalism send children into combat. *Boulevard of Heroes* questions heroic idealism and the failure and false promise of ideologies. The defeated revolutionary Petronio Rincon wanders through an exile of disillusionment, the lucidity of his madness the realization that one can't convert the nonbelievers. This fin de siècle, end of millenium attitude sees vanity in the sacrifice and suffering necessary to systems of conquest and conversion. *Boulevard of Heroes* is marked, says its author, "by the desire to explore why throughout all of history humanity has dreamt of the possibility of creating a happy world on earth, when never more than now, at the end of the twentieth century, have we been absolutely sure of its impossibility." (Ochoa Sandy II, 23). [2]

Three distinct chains of narration run throughout the first part of the novel, operating in a fixed order and with a symmetry of action. Each of these originates in a particular geographical location: 1) Paris, Petronio's place of exile; 2) the jungles and plains of South America, where he pursues his dream of revolution; 3) La Enea, the Great City of the Andes, where he grows up witnessing the injustice and absurdity of the social order. Each of these places is a kind of wilderness possessing particular sites and monuments of ritualistic importance.

In the final part of the novel, Petronio enters the "zone of forgetfulness," another world where all the places and periods he has lived through are conflated, imposed or superimposed upon each other. It resembles at first a medieval battlefield, where ramparts are defended in hand-to-hand combat and the victors enjoy the luscious spoils of war in abandoned fortresses. But as he journeys deeper into its interior, the zone becomes a post-apocalyptic world where ashes fall continuously from a sky that never darkens and fundamentalist preachers perform miracles in the gutter, ravens perch in

trees and silent black-clad figures wander the parks. Finally he will rediscover the jungle and ancient pyramids, ranges of smoking volcanoes and empty inns.

Multiple worlds on earth is a recurring motif in the literature of the Americas. "The World" and "the island of the Earth" once described two regions of Western cosmography. The former implies not only a physical location, but a moral or spiritual order not always coextensive with the latter, parts of which were "uninhabitable in an absolute sense, because of cosmic conditions that man could neither alter nor remedy" (O'Gorman 62). Petronio discovers revolution works not at the level of actual social change, but only in the realm of mythic action.

García Aguilar remarks, "I deeply admire the hero, especially the Latin American hero, the gods of our times." (Ochoa Sandy II, 23) [3] The introduction which follows has two basic questions: Who is speaking? And from what site? Before discussing *Boulevard of Heroes*, I wish to describe "magic realism," the genre in which this novel may be placed. A political and religious preoccupation will be traced to the very discovery or invention of the New World.

“Discourse may in fact be the place for a phantasmatic representation, an element of symbolization, a form of the forbidden, an instrument of derived satisfaction (this possibility of being in relation with desire is not simply the fact of the poetic, fictional, or imaginary practice of discourse: the discourses on wealth, on language (‘langage’), on nature, on madness, on life and death, and many others, perhaps, that are much more abstract, may occupy very specific positions in relation to desire.)”

Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*

"Each history is thus accompanied by an indeterminate number of anti-histories, each complimentary to the others...the progress of knowledge and the creation of new sciences takes place through the generation of anti-histories...The savage mind deepens its knowledge with the help of *imagines mundi*. It builds mental structures which facilitate an understanding of the world in as much as they resemble it."

Claude Levi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*

“America is neither dream nor reality. It is hyperreality. It is hyperreality because it is a utopia which has behaved from the very beginning as though it were already achieved. Everything here is real and pragmatic, and yet it is all the stuff of dreams too. It may be that the truth of America can only be seen by a European, since he alone will discover here the perfect simulacrum -- that of the immanence and material transcription of all values.”

Jean Baudrillard, *America*

“There is no need for unhappiness in America. America does not need to conquer anything. It is too vast. America is its own frontier. America is its own utopia. And America is a name...A name discovered. A name invented. A name desired.”

Carlos Fuentes, “Gabriel García Márquez and the Invention of America”

II. Magic Realism and the Description of the New World

A. The Moment of Magic Realism

As the first of the Buendías explores the terrain around the new settlement of Macondo, he and his followers awaken in the midst of the jungle to encounter an old Spanish galleon, beautiful orchids and ragged sails hanging from its rigging and masts; during another excursion they find a rusted suit of armor holding a skeleton, around its neck a clasp containing a lock of a woman's hair. The guerrilla leader Crazy Rincón leads a few of his soldiers on night patrol, and deep within a cave they find the mummies of an extinct tribe sitting in a circle, the colors of their tattered clothing gleaming in the torchlight. These dead ancestors have been waiting, he explains, to teach them a lesson about their struggle.

Magic realism is a tone, style, discourse describing material objects and actual events which are enveloped in an atmosphere that itself appears to possess a kind of metaphysical life; it objectively presents an improbable aspect, a hidden immediacy within reality, the conjunction or juxtaposition of the rational and the irrational. Magic realism surfaces at specific junctures and spaces within a basically verisimilar narrative. I am concerned with mapping out historical and cultural foundations for these moments, attempting to find the point where politics and religion meet reality and magic.

Enrique Anderson Imbert perceives that instead of seeing magic as if it were real, we encounter “reality as if it were magic...the dissolution of reality (magic) and the copy of reality (realism)...the spectacle of a new creation” (Márquez Rodríguez 39). [4] The fantastic side of this phenomenon takes inexplicable events -- a girl floating up to the sky, dragons setting fire to fields to defeat a column of tanks -- but presents them with absolute naturalness. The marvelous and the fantastic are different sides of verisimilitude: the first portrays the real as unreal, the second the unreal as real. They are both ways of ordering experience.

Magic realism has been described as “una terminología de transculturación” (Suárez-Murias 97). The idea of the Americas as the New World begins to take shape in the decades following the voyages of Columbus. One geographer writes, “New islands, new lands, new seas, new peoples; and what is more a new sky and new stars” (Elliott 39-40). This marvelous, tangible reality is part of the earthly patrimony of America, and “that’s why, because of the virginity of the landscape, the formation, the ontology, the Faustian presence of the Indian and the Negro, because of the revelation that constituted its recent discovery and the fecund mixtures that presented favorable conditions, America is far from having exhausted its wealth of mythologies” (*Tientos* 99). [5]

Alejo Carpentier places “lo real maravilloso” within the nature and history of the New World, existing from its very conception. Ethnic reality (indigenous or Afro-Caribbean) resists a dominating European Christianity, and from this meeting of conflicting faiths the marvelously real, perceived in virtue of an “exalted spirit,” surges from “an unexpected alteration of reality (the miracle) from a privileged revelation of reality, from an unusual or singularly favorable illumination of the inadvertent riches of reality, from an amplification of the scales and categories of reality” (*Tientos* 96). [6] Unlike the oniric, arbitrary, interior, and individual worlds of surrealism, the marvelous or magical is based upon established faiths or beliefs. A certain religiosity is implied, for those who

“ don't believe in saints can't be cured by the miracles of saints, nor can those who aren't Quixotes put themselves body, wealth and soul in the world of Amadis of Gaul ” (96). [7]

Carlos Fuentes notes the “policultura indoafroiberoamericana” of Spanish America that exists along side of or within a Western tradition. It is the heir to a number of conflicting and complementary histories, from the mythologies of prehispanic cultures to the Greco-Latin world the Spanish brought with them, “the apogee of written law and stoic philosophy; immersion in the dogmas, hierarchies and promises of Christian philosophy. Renaissance and Counter-Reformation, conquest and counter-conquest, Jewish survival, African appartment; a new mixed, Creole, indigenous and black civilization” (*Literatura Contemporánea* 26). [8]

The Americas bear a legacy of the confrontation between a Western, Christian (rational, messianic) tradition carried by the Spanish and those peoples whose beliefs, histories and physical environments do not correspond to this traditional conception of reality. The impulse behind the economic, political, and religious expansionism of the late fifteenth century may be linked to the rationalism that begins to develop during the Renaissance. Truth must be seen, actualized, carried out in praxis. Hegel says in concise summary, "reason is purposive activity" (83). The New World offers a unique opportunity for the Catholic Church and various states to act upon their convictions while expanding their empires. Europe appropriates the goods and souls -- the wealth -- of the Americas; the development of knowledge consists of the individual "acquiring what lies at hand ready for him, in making its inorganic nature organic to himself, and taking possession of it for himself" (90). There is an implicit morality in this logic: the nature of truth, of the Absolute, is "to force its way to recognition when the time comes...[it] never appears too soon, and never finds a public that is not ripe to receive it" (129).

In his study of the Mexican poet and mystic Sor Juana, Octavio Paz describes the relation between the indigenous and colonial cultures that is still relevant to the politics of Latin America and the aesthetic of magic realism: “...each of these societies is

separated from the other by negation. The Indian world was negated by New Spain: New Spain, nonetheless, cannot be understood without the Indian world, both as an antecedent and as a secret presence that pervades practices, customs, family and political structures, economic systems, crafts, legends, myths and beliefs...Each negation contains within itself the negated society -- usually as a masked, a veiled presence” (*Sor Juana* 13). In *Boulevard of Heroes*, we will see this presence surface in skeletons of indigenous tribes and structures such as pyramids that symbolize an ancient heritage Petronio draws upon. In *Christopher Unborn*, Carlos Fuentes describes thus the disjuncture between the different cultures: “...the mystery, the ambiguity of this land inside Mexico, the seed of Mexico, but so totally alien to the white Mexico with blue eyes, ...and the imminent celebration of the Quincentennial of the Discovery of America...an undiscovered population unaware that it had ever been discovered, a date, an enigma imposed on it by others” (209).

Physical manifestations of these cultural palimpsests reside in American architecture. The temple site of the Aztec mother-goddess Tonantzin is today occupied by the Basílica of Tepeyac, dedicated to Mexico’s matron saint, the Virgin of Guadalupe; the emperor Motecuhoma’s former palace is covered by the Palacio Nacional and the Templo Mayor by the Catedral de México. Such physical structures provide a thread of continuity between the indigenous and colonizing cultures. As Paz notes, “When Cortes decided that the capital of the new kingdom would be built on the ruins of México-Tenochtitlán, he became heir and successor of the Aztecs” (*Other Mexico* 298).

The rewriting, restructuring of history had occurred as well in the prehispanic world. The Aztecs were themselves invaders and colonizers of the Toltecs, who first resided in the Valley of Mexico. The “Codice Matritense” relates how one king and his advisor decide to give their people a new version of the past, in order to prove they are the legitimate descendants of the previous great civilization:

'They preserved an account of their history
 but later it was burned,
 during the reign of Itzcoatl.
 The lords of Mexico decreed it,
 the lords of Mexico declared:
 'It is not fitting that our people
 should know these pictures.
 Our people, our subjects, will be lost
 and our land destroyed,
 for these pictures are full of lies
 (*Broken Spears* xx).

Todorov quotes Fray Lorenzo de Bienvenida, who indicates how religious conquest resides partly "in removing from a holy place certain images and establishing others there instead, preserving -- and this is essential -- the cult sites..." It is only just that what has served the worship of the demons should be transformed into a temple for the service of God" (60). Perhaps the most fundamental aspect of the Spanish conquest is not the extermination of the indigenous civilization but rather "the multiplicity of procedures utilized in its conversion to the Spanish civilization: conversion, urbanization, 'functional' architecture...the communal land system, the linguistic and didactic program in general of the Franciscans and Dominicans" (Earle 58-59). Architectonic structures will be a recurring motif in my discussion, especially those which invoke a religious presence. Indigenous texts and voices were essentially silenced by the early colonial church, but much of their resonance remains, literally and figuratively, just below the surface of modern Latin America.

The works of fiction I will discuss in relation to *Boulevard of Heroes* -- e.g., *The Kingdom of this World*, by Carpentier; *Christopher Unborn* and *Terra Nostra*, by Fuentes; *The Dogs of Paradise*, by Abel Posse -- all concern the discovery and creation of new worlds, colonization and imperialism, revolution and exile. The act of naming is the principal gesture of the real and fictitious protagonists here, one of the threads I hope to weave between the different texts. It is a gesture of both perception and creation,

discovery and invention: “The discoverer...not only wishes to discover reality; he as well wishes to name it, desire it, speak it and remember it. At times all these converge into another proposition: to imagine it” (*Literatura Contemporánea* 29). [9] Let us take a brief overview of some historical foundations to the modern Latin American novel.

B. Through a tropics of light

Magic realism as the discursive formation of the New World is set in motion by the voyages of Columbus: the movement towards an unknown place along an unknown route, a land and people whose identity is immediately misconstrued and subsequently reconstructed. The “discovery” of the Americas has been a redefining process for the West. A half century after the voyages of Columbus, the historian Gomara writes, “The greatest event since the creation of the world (excluding the incarnation and death of Him who created it) is the discovery of the Indies” (Elliott 10). The unexpected existence of these lands questioned assumptions and traditions about nature, history, religion, the very definition of humanity. The Old World had to internalize the new lands and peoples into its own horizon, to overcome “obstacles of time and space, of inheritance, environment and language” (18). What was essential to the Catholicization of the Americas was “not that a hidden part of the earth became known, but that some lands appeared inhabited by men who had not yet received the light of the gospel” (O’Gorman 20). For a church desiring to expand its empire, this new world provides a unique opportunity.

In the prologue to his diaries, Columbus frames the political and religious intentions of his proposed journey to the Indies: to see their lands and peoples and “the manner in which they may be converted to our holy faith” (Colón 16). [10] The search for an adequate language to describe a newly encountered world is a constant in these early texts. Columbus tells his men that in order to write the king and queen a just account of what they were seeing, “a thousand tongues would not suffice to express it,

nor his hand to write it, for it appeared that it was enchanted” (Todorov 24).

Colonization and conversion begin with naming, a political and linguistic act that appropriates the object as it is spoken. Columbus first encounters “an islet of the Lucayas which was called Guanahani in the language of the Indians,” but then soon passes “this island of San Salvador” and “the island which I gave the name Santa Maria de la Concepción” (Columbus 77,79). With nothing more than a phrase an empire is expanded. The assigning of names is part of the process of assimilation and accommodation, “mediating between our apprehension of those aspects of experience still ‘strange’ to us and those aspects of it which we ‘understand’ because we have found an order of words adequate to its domestication” (White 21). At times naming has the power of changing the very essence and existence of things.

The Spanish will react in amazement to the world they encounter. As they enter Tenochtitlan, at that time probably the largest city in the world (as Mexico City, which now occupies the same location, is today), they come across canals, palaces, markets full of silver and gold, plumages and precious stones like jade and turquoise, puma and leopard skins, tropical fruits and cocoa and tobacco, exotic animals and birds and snakes. In the melancholic tone of a pilgrim who encounters “the vision of paradise and subsequently must destroy that which he loves” (*Literatura Contemporánea* 29), [11] Bernal Díaz remarks, “It looked like those enchanted things of which they speak in the book of Amadis; because of its great towers, and pyramids and buildings in the water, all of masonry, some of our soldiers said that surely what they saw was a dream” (Séjourné 5). Cortés is without words adequate to relate his vision. Speaking about one of the city’s great temples, he can only say, “No human tongue can describe its size and characteristics,” and gazing upon some palaces he remarks, “it would seem to me wellnigh impossible to tell of their excellence and grandeur...and so I shall say nothing about them, only that in Spain there is not their like” (5,6).

C. Views of the Vanquished

A perception of the magic of reality is made evident in some of the earliest indigenous texts. Miguel León-Portilla finds that “the first fundamental trait of the Conquest is what could be described as the magic frame in which [the conquest] will have to unfold” (*Reverso* 19). [12] Describing the arrival of and conquest by the Spaniards, the Aztec threnodies -- the “songs of sorrow” written by the descendents of priests and warriors -- set down the tragic and mythic events of history. (And what better example of the library of Borges: using the phonetic notation of the Latin alphabet, Aztec princes attending colonial Catholic schools transcribe into Náhuatl ideographic manuscripts from the indigenous royal libraries and the remembered fragments of epic songs and religious poems, which are subsequently translated into Latin or Spanish.) Their destiny, the downfall and destruction of their civilization at the hands of strangers, is foreshadowed in the images and visions they see, in “the metamorphosis of concrete objects into religious mysteries” (Earle 54).

The emperor Motecuhzoma’s reign, during which the conquistador Hernán Cortés and his men arrive, was marked by innumerable signs predicting the return of the deity Quetzalcóatl, the god-man who created humanity out of his own blood and human wisdom out of his own thoughts, who “taught man science, showing him the way to measure time and study the revolution of the stars [and] showed him the calendar and invented ceremonies and fixed the days for prayers and sacrifice” (Séjourné 26). A number of omens join images of nature or physical objects to descriptions of strange creatures and marvelous events. Everyday elements -- fire, water, wind, temples, food, voices -- surge from their usual places, but are totalized and codified into the Aztec mythological system. These images are not allowed to remain alien; they are seen as part of a certain order of sacred events in the universe.

Reports of strange happenings, the appearance of “towers or small mountains

floating on the waves of the sea” (*Broken Spears* 13), arrive from the eastern coast. The destructive force of galloping horses is described with wonder: “They make a loud noise when they run; they make a great din, as if stones were raining on the earth. Then the ground is pitted and scarred where they set down their hooves. It opens wherever their hooves touch it” (ix). The dress and demeanor of the Spanish and the beasts they bring with them are extraordinary and terrifying: “They made a loud clamor as they marched, for their coats of mail and their weapons clashed and rattled. Some of them were dressed in glistening iron from head to foot; they terrified everyone who saw them”; “The strangers brought arms which could shoot fire, and wild animals on leashes...lions and ounces so ferocious that they ate people” (41, 46).

Fray Toribio de Benavente relates the indigenous reaction to the arrival of the Spanish. This event first causes the Aztecs "great terror and amazement. They saw a strange people arrive from the sea -- a feat they had never before witnessed nor had known was possible -- all dressed in strange garments and so bold and warlike that, although few in number, they could invade all the provinces of this land imperiously, as if the natives were their vassals" (154). They first call the Spaniards “teteuh,” or “gods.” As the invaders' greed and fury manifests itself, the Aztecs change their perception of and thus their designation for the Spaniards, who become “popolocas,” the word for peoples considered barbarians. The name given indicates itself a way of seeing.

To the Aztecs, war was a political and religious institution that held great significance, an event which made possible “the mystical transformation of the human being into a divine agent” (Earle 53). Its major purpose was to capture sacrificial victims for the sun, the giver of all life who would perish if not fed with human blood. From a pragmatic point of view, this practice proved an effective way to intimidate their enemies, what Laurette Séjourné calls “ritual slaughter as a political necessity” (35). A neighboring city-state was held in an almost perpetual state of war just to provide a ready source of prisoners. Not surprisingly, they become willing allies of the Spanish. If we group the different tribes collectively, we see that the indigenous peoples helped bring about their

own fall.

It seems one of the cardinal rules of war is that the victors get to write the history. But there is always the other side, the voice of defeat. Conversion and conquest will be remembered by the indigenous peoples as a form of destruction:

Y todo esto pasó con nosotros. Nosotros lo vimos, nosotros lo admiramos: con esta lamentosa y triste suerte nos vimos angustiados.
 En las caminos yacen dardos rotos;
 los cabellos están esparcidos.
 Destechadas están las casas,
 enrojecidos tienen sus muros.
 Gusanos pululan por calles y plazas,
 y están las paredes manchadas de sesos.
 Rojas están las aguas, cual si las hubieran teñido,
 y si las bebíamos, eran agua de salitre.
 Golpeábamos los muros de adobe en nuestra ansiedad
 y nos quedaba por herencia una red de agujeros.
 En los escudos estuvo nuestro resguardo,
 pero los escudos no detienen la desolación.
 Hemos comido panes de colorín,
 hemos masticado grama salitrosa
 pedazos de adobe, lagartijas, ratones,
 y tierra hecha polvo y aun los gusanos... (*Reverso 53*).

[And all these misfortunes befell us. We saw them and wondered at them; we suffered this unhappy fate.
 Broken spears lie in the roads;
 we have torn our hair in our grief.
 The houses are roofless now, and their walls
 are red with blood.
 Worms are swarming in the streets and plazas,
 and the walls are splattered with gore.
 The water has turned red, as if it were dyed,
 and when we drink it,
 it has the taste of brine.
 We have pounded our hands in despair
 against the adobe walls,
 for our inheritance, our city, is lost and dead.
 The shields of our warriors were its defense,
 but they could not save it.
 We have chewed dry twigs and salt grasses;
 we have filled our mouths with dust and bits of adobe;
 we have eaten lizards, rats and worms...] (*Broken Spears 137-38*).

This passage illustrates the physical, literal nature of magic realism. The images chosen come from the real, material world, out of real, lived experiences. The immediate here and now is extraordinary, marvelous, fantastic, even if horrifying.

D. The Discursive Formation of the New World

Magic realism not only forms part of a fictional narrative depicting fantastic or inexplicable events, but is a transformational concept between the épistemè -- a society's or culture's structures of knowledge and the conditions under which they arise -- of the Old and New Worlds. It appears not only in certain novels (obviously not every modern Latin American work of fiction may be included in magic realism, nor even every work of authors like García Márquez: there is a world of difference, for example, between *Cien Años de Soledad* and *En Mala Hora*, the latter much closer to a kind of social realism), but as well in documents such as letters, diaries, encyclopedias, religious, philosophical and economic treatises. The Latin American novel, says Fuentes, will better know itself "when it recognizes itself in its founding texts: the *Chronicles of the Indies*" (*Literatura Contemporánea* 28). [13] Encyclopedic works such as Oveido's *History of the Indies* and Acosta's *Natural and Moral History of the Indies* attempt to encompass a totality of knowledge about the New World. Out of necessity they draw on the indigenous languages for their catalogues, taxonomies, and general descriptions. A certain aesthetic already begins to be established in the earliest American texts, for the "indiscriminate compilation of facts lumped them together into an undifferentiated category of the marvelous or exotic" (Elliott 32).

Fuentes cautions against privileging certain texts over others: "We cannot feel satisfied with the official, documented history of the times: that history is also all the things that men and women have dreamed, imagined, desired, and named" (*Gabriel García Márquez and Invention* 193). Literary texts may illuminate the traces and archeological fragments of the "syncretic world," "the very surrounding reality" of the

ethnic, religious, cultural and psychological mixture Carpentier locates in the Americas. Grouping these various texts under the category of “magic realism” does not ignore their different natures, but recomposes them on a similar plane with regard to language, thought and society. It analyzes them within a “science of the concrete,” such as Lévi-Strauss utilizes to describe the origin of myths and rites: a type of discovery which “nature authorised from the starting point of a speculative organization and exploitation of the sensible world in sensible terms” (*Savage Mind* 16).

Foucault describes the network of relations between statements of a particular field in terms of the “discursive formation,” whose four constituent elements are: a continuous, geographically well-defined field of objects; a definitive, normative type of statement; a well-defined alphabet of notions or concepts; and the permanence of a thematic (37). Let us consider in *Boulevard of Heroes* and the other works I will discuss: the New World, both the literal geography of the Americas and the figurative space of a newly encountered region of the cosmos; the granting of names at the enunciative level and the diary and encyclopedic descriptions at the normative level; concepts such as revolution, religion, nature, wealth; the exile, the colonizer, the proselytizer in search of new lands and new peoples, and the suppression and hidden presence of indigenous or non-Western cultures.

Hayden White discusses the “tropical element” in discourse as the process by which objects supposedly described realistically or analyzed objectively are in fact constituted in ways that violate a canon of logical consistency. For the rhetorician or grammarian, tropes are “deviations from literal, conventional, or ‘proper’ language use, swerves in locution sanctioned neither by custom nor logic...not only a deviation from one possible, proper meaning, but also a deviation towards another meaning, conception, or ideal of what is right and proper and true ‘in reality’” (2). Thus emerges a new kind of experience, a new combination of description and argument, a resituating of the environment. This tropics of discourse takes into account the “alternative figurations

of reality in images held in memory and fashioned, perhaps out of response to contradictory desires or emotional investments, into complex structures, vague apprehensions of the forms that reality should take even if it fails to assume those forms. (especially if it fails to assume those forms) in existentially vital situations" (20).

Magic realism seems to parallel this tropics of discourse White develops: it is a way of understanding -- of rendering the unfamiliar familiar, "of removing it from the domain of things felt to be 'exotic' and unclassified" (5) -- the Americas, an apprehension by the West of a strange, rich, but often threatening world. Comprehension requires "the ability to come to terms with the unexpected and the unfamiliar, to see them as phenomena existing in their own right...to shift the accepted boundaries of thought in order to include them" (Elliott 18).

"First question: who is speaking? Who, among the totality of speaking individuals, is accorded the right to use this sort of language ('langage')? Who is qualified to do so? Who derives from it his own special quality, his prestige, and from whom, in return, does he receive, if not the assurance, at least the presumption that what he says is true? What is the status of the individuals who-alone-have the right, sanctioned by law or tradition, juridically defined or spontaneously accepted, to proffer such a discourse?"

Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*

"Lo real maravillosa se encuentra a cada paso en las vidas de hombres que inscribieron fechas en la historia del continente y dejaron apellidos aun llevados: desde los buscadores de la fuente de la eterna juventud, de la áurea ciudad de Manoa, hasta ciertos rebeldes de la primera hora o ciertos héroes modernos de nuestras guerras de independencia."

Alejo Carpentier, *De Lo Real Maravilloso Americano*

III. El Escritor Latinoamericano y la Revolución Posible

How does one distinguish between temporal and spiritual power? In his essay "Du politique comme violence," Roger Dadoun describes the "natural body" and the "mystical body" necessary to a certain discourse: "the Political is characterised by a primordial duality, opposing or juxtaposing or superimposing a *natural Body* (which would answer to 'nature,' to the earthly regime, to daily historicity, to an empirical positivity, etc.) and a *mystical Body* (which would answer to a transcendence, a beyond, a Mystery, etc.)" (59). [14] Power is often exercised through speech; the Prince has the ability to give substance to his words: "he is the one who speaks reality, and he speaks it in such a way that, literally, edifies it, brings it about, creates it: the speech of the prince is fundamentally *edifying*. In pronouncing the real, he extracts it from nothingness, he erects it" (62). [15] Macandal, who exerts such infatuation and influence over the other slaves in *The Kingdom of this World*, does so with the strength of his voice and the memories of the old world he relates with it. When he finally flees, his physical absence represents as well "the disappearance of all that world evoked by his tales" (18).

One of the central subjects of *Boulevard of Heroes* is power: political and religious roles that strive toward an implied relationship with the absolute. This novel is a reflexion upon, says García Aguilar, "the delirium of heroes, who are capable of dymg

for an impossible cause” (Patañ, *Entrevista* 74). [16] Petronio Rincón is based upon an exiled Colombian revolutionary, Tulio Bayer, that García Aguilar met while a student, “a hero in his last, sad years in Paris, when he had discovered the ridiculousness of his fiery and juvenile guerrilla adventure” (74). [17] García Aguilar was struck by how the human body, the corporal signifier had decayed, and along with it any exalted spirit: “Nothing remained of that mad look toward the future seen in the photos of his youth...one found him already in physical decay, scorned by his leftist *compañeros* who, like everyone, are fascinated by the people who triumph, who keep hold of power, but turn their back on the failed, the defeated” (Ochoa Sandy I, 23). [18] A doctor and one of Colombia’s first Marxist guerillas is now an obese middle-aged man living in two squalid rooms five thousand miles from his home: the broken hero, the fallen existentialist.

What is the legitimacy of power based upon? As Machiavelli says in *The Prince*, no people has ever had a giver of laws who did not take recourse in the name of God, since otherwise the laws would fail to be accepted. The legislator or politician appeals to divine authority and a wisdom superior to that of ordinary men. The history and the stories of the Americas are replete with individuals empowered by their very names or the titles they have been granted; accordingly, I wish to sketch the link between real lived experience and the discourse of magic realism. Let me here establish historical and literary antecedents for the figure of Petronio Rincón and the events of *Boulevard of Heroes*.

A. Thieves in the Temple

In a letter to Pope Alexander VI before his first voyage across the Atlantic, Columbus writes, “I hope in Our Lord to be able to propogate His holy name and His Gospel throughout the universe” (Todorov 10). Bartolomé de las Casas, who rewrites Columbus’s diaries into the form by which they are known, describes the etymology of this

evangelizer and colonizer's name, a perfect signifier for the signified. Cristóbal, or in its Latin form Christum Ferens,

"means the bearer of Christ, and it was thus that he often signed his name; for in truth he was the first to open the gates of the Ocean sea, in order to bear our Savior Jesus Christ over the waves to those remote lands and those realms hitherto unknown...His surname was Colón, which means "repopulator," a name befitting the man whose enterprise brought about the discovery of these people, these infinite number of souls who, thanks to the preaching of the Gospel...have proceeded and will everyday proceed to repopulate the glorious City of Heaven. It also befits this man, in that he was the first to bring the people of Spain (albeit not as they should have been) to found "colonies," or new populations which being established amid the original inhabitants...should constitute a new...Christian Church and happy republic' (Todorov 26).

Columbus is charged with a divine mission and endowed with political authority. He lives in a period when "evangelistic religion and expansionist, imperial politics still complimented each other" (Earle 60). His status is unique: Admiral of the Royal Navy and delegate of the Church. As the former he speaks of peoples to be conquered and wealth (specifically land and gold) to be accumulated; as the latter he finds souls to be converted. He pursues an empirical knowledge that can be accurately measured and quantified; he accepts a knowledge based on faith, not altered by events.

The primitive people are rescued from nothingness. In his diary Columbus notes, "'It has seemed to me that they belonged to no religion'" (Todorov 35). Octavio Paz writes in *The Labyrinth of Solitude* that the native Americans are a people betrayed by their gods. Todorov describes their demise as a kind of misapprehension or misreading of sacred voices. The fall of the indigenous empires occurred because "the Mayas and the Aztecs lost control of communication. The language of the gods had become unintelligible, or else the gods fell silent...the gods no longer speak to them" (61).

The morality, necessity, and desire for change on the part of the natives is always assumed by the conquerors. In a kind of Hegelian logic, Columbus writes to the king of their willing conversion: "they are certainly ready for conversion to our holy Christian faith, and will understand it without great difficulty" (*Select Letters* 10). [19] The spiritual

expansion he brings is intricately linked to political conquest and material wealth. Cortés advises the king and queen of Castile to eliminate certain religious practices among the Aztecs: “Your majesties may therefore perceive whether it is not their duty to prevent such loss and evil, and certainly it will be pleasing to God if by means of and under your protection these people are introduced into and instructed into the Holy Catholic Faith” (*Five Letters* 24). A certain equilibrium is established, where the Spanish will exchange their religion for the indigenous peoples’ commodities: the soul is delivered and the body taken.

Cortés is believed to be the god Quetzalcóatl; he and his men enter the capital not as strangers or guests, but also as gods returning home to resume power. The emperor Motecuhzoma awaits him with anguish and fear: “This is what he felt in his heart: ‘He has appeared! He has come back! He will come here, to the place of his throne and canopy, for that is what he promised when he departed’” (*Broken Spears* 23). When they meet, the Aztec leader realizes the figure he encounters bridges two worlds: god and man, dream and reality. Motecuhzoma addresses Cortés with wonder, trying to convince himself that what he sees is not a vision or dream: “No, it is not a dream...I have seen you at last! I have met you face to face...And now you have come out of the clouds and mists to sit on your throne again” (*Broken Spears* 64). The strength of the Spanish lies not only in their physical presence (in fact, they number some 600 compared to the hundreds of thousands of indigenous people they encounter), but in the mystical nature of their being and origin as perceived by the Aztecs.

In *Terra Nostra*, a youth tells the decrepit king of Spain about a realm on the other side of the seas. (Any further reference in this introduction to “the youth” refers to this same character.) His voyage begins when he finds an old man building a boat on the beach. They work for several weeks in silence until they are ready to sail. As they finally begin their journey to parts unknown, the old man says his man is Pedro: the rock, the foundation of the church. The boy is still unbaptized: “I entreated him to give me a name,

adding that, with neither mockery nor mistrust, I must assure him I didn't know my name" (351). He has no roots, no family, no property, only the dimmest of memories. First calling the youth Sir Thief or Genteel Pirate, the old man finally finds the most fitting epitaph: Pilgrim.

The youth describes to the king how the natives choose him as the next stand-in for the god Smoking Mirror, who each year is sacrificed in the person of a prisoner, but is immediately reborn in the body of another elected youth. Like the omens announcing the coming of Quetzalcóatl/Cortés, "the words of the sorcerers had the ring of portent; they marveled at what had happened; my arrival, the testimony of my footprint in the ground meal they had sprinkled there the night before, were proof that I was the one they had waited for" (425). The hieroglyph for this deity, a clouded mirror surface, symbolizes "the world of forms which, according to Nahuatl mysticism, is but a reflection of hidden reality" (Séjourné 172). Tezcatlipoca, the Smoking Mirror, is characterized by contrasting dualisms: the god of divine providence, but also of failure and ruin; the god of purity and order who foments quarrels and protects sin; the friend of the rich who regards slaves as his sons (168). The youth recalls the horror of sacrifices in his honor and the celebration of them in distant places: "Here my name meant shadow and crime, and in the jungle, light and peace" (*Terra Nostra* 433).

The premise of *Christopher Unborn* is that the male child born on the five hundredth anniversary of Columbus's arrival to the New World and whose family name "most resembles that of the Illustrious Navigator, shall be proclaimed PRODIGAL SON OF THE NATION...prelude to his assuming the position, at age twenty-one, of REGENT OF THE NATION, with practically unlimited powers of election, succession, and selection" (6). In the midst of a national crisis, the government searches for a symbol that will legitimize their power. One bureaucrat finds the solution in a new matriarchal figure, Mamadoc, who encompasses the entire history of Mexico, including "Our Lady Coatlicue, she of the serpent skirt...Our Lady la Malinche, the traitorous lover of the con-

quistador Cortés, the motherfucker who created the first fucked mother who created the first Mexican...Our Lady of Guadalupe, redeemer of the humble Indian...Our Lady la Adelita, the darling Clementine, the fairy godmother of the revolution...and supersecret Mothers all the gringas of our masturbatory dreams..." (32-34).

The black leader who assumes power after the slave revolt in *The Kingdom of this World* is certain to attribute his success to both secular and divine ordination. He is backed by "the Grace of God and the Constitutional Law of the State," and in addition to being simply king, he is the "Destroyer of Tyranny, Regenerator and Benefactor of the Haitian Nation, Creator of its Moral, Political, and Military Institutions, First Crowned Monarch of the New World, Defender of the Faith, Founder of the Royal and Military Order of Saint Henry" (116). The role he acquires is both religious and political.

Spiritual power lends strength to the political. In *The Dogs of Paradise*, an account of the voyages of Columbus and their historical aftermath, a priest places in the hands of the colonial administrator "all the instruments of inquisitorial procedures. Ever since, in America, repression would have the profound flavor of redemptive pastoral, exercising torture" (296-97).

Besides the church and state-sanctioned exercise of absolute power in the form of torture and execution, the common trait of all terrorism (that is, of unsanctioned, anarchic power), whether religious or political, of the left or of the right, is "to find resource in and anchor itself to a 'mystical body,' and to do everything to dissolve into the 'natural body' of man (individual or society), while exploiting, paradoxically, the original violence of this division" (Dadoun 67). [20] Petronio's lover Adela is part of a Parisian underground terrorist cell that sees one of its leaders anonymously assassinated. As their ideas and dreams crumble, "they were left no alternative but desperate acts hatched in the isolation of terrorism, condemning them to clandestinity and grim tragedy" (67).

B. Bolívar y los heroes

Bolívar's shadow surfaces throughout *Boulevard of Heroes*. He is the paradigm of the Latin American revolutionary, his great dream to create one independent and unified country from Mexico to Cape Horn. This is a mythic, monumental endeavor, for it will be (in the words of García Márquez) "according to his own words...the most immense, or most extraordinary, or most invincible league of nations the world had ever seen" (*General* 74). This dream will turn to disillusion as the avarice of greed and power sets in among the new leaders of the different American republics.

Petronio's first experience in organizing the masses is with the beggars and whores from a poor barrio in the city of his birth, la Enea. Words alone apparently not enough, he offers them succulent meals and drinks until they allow him to form them into a union. Their gestures to overthrow the government of the wicked Doña Berta Arnulfina Ochoa (this last name being the same as one of the Colombian drug cartel's most important families) consist of innocuous acts like writing pornographic graffiti on walls and pissing in churches. But Petronio's arrest provokes true anarchy: "The beggars, the filthy plebians, the malodorous took possession of chapels, churches, schools, bakeries, restaurants, jewelry stores and...by evening had devoted themselves to breaking street lights and entangling the electricity and telephone wires, creating an unspeakable confusion while lice-ridden, mangy types from lower-class neighborhoods spit on high dignitaries in front of the statue of Bolívar, whose twisted face expressed the emotion and perplexity that had provoked the historic riot" (105-106).

The last event Petronio attends before he enters the Hopital Saint-Louis is a protest against an African dictator and the atrocities he has committed. But politics being as much public relations as anything else, substance equal to the image portrayed or the label given (the War in the Gulf has its own theme song and logo, like a mini-series brought to us by CNN and Leader of the Free World Productions), Nambuctu declares himself "Great Revolutionary" and pledges to help "the struggle of Third World peoples

for the conquest of peace, democracy, the international proletariat, for which he offered the blood of his subjects” (177).

At the height of Petronio’s desperation, anger and cynicism, after he has defecated in the offices of the Party of Obligatory Happiness, he is forcibly interred in a hospital. There his mind wanders to his Andean youth, his revolutionary adventures, the martyrdom of his failed loves. Walking the hallways at night, he comes across beautiful verdant palms and banana trees and hears in the distance the croak of frogs and the screeching of monkeys. From a grove of trees standing in the silent corridor, he sees gesturing to him a tall, strong man. It is Simón Bolívar, “messiah of the Latin American epic.” He offers Petronio a sign of hope, placing his hand on his shoulder and insisting, “Don’t abandon us, continue firm in the struggle, for in the end paradise awaits you!” (182).

But in the zone of forgetfulness, after he has fallen into the “delirium noctu,” Petronio is taken to a cabaret where “the brotherhood of discouraged heroes” meets. There he sees again the man who had called to him. But the hero of revolutions is now a decrepit figure wracked by tuberculosis, not the noble warrior astride his mount, an invalid who “coughed ceaselessly and walked weakly, expressing in his pallid face the effects of a devastating illness” (235). (This image is much closer to the one García Márquez will draw several years later in *The General in his Labyrinth*.) Petronio tries to pass by unnoticed, but Bolívar’s gaze searches him out. This recognition is another rite, a kind of benediction, for “that one instant of communion with the greatest hero justified his long existence, his childish dreams, his adolescent struggles, the deliria of his first youth, the absurd adventures and the painful exile to which they had led him” (236).

In the very first scene of *Boulevard of Heroes*, when Petronio is led to the plane that takes him away from the New World and into exile, “he felt the heated calling of glory and thought he saw a sword in the sky” (57). At the end of his tragic, epic journey, after he has wandered through the zone of forgetfulness, participated in a victorious

revolutionary government that soon begins to show signs of tyranny, found love but never happiness (or learned, as his lover tells him, that happiness is silence), he can no longer stand the weight of his existence. Standing on a rock floating in magma and seeing in the sky the Southern Cross, he disappears in a storm that spirals through the volcanic abyss. Like the tribe whose mummies he finds in the cave while on patrol, he prefers “suicide to surrender.” Later his son, while playing in the attic, finds a jeweled sword which seems to emit a mysterious energy. It is the sword of Bolívar, stolen a century before from its resting place, never to be seen again. The decorative weapon becomes the icon upon whose possession various revolutionary groups base their legitimacy. In the final act of the novel, Petronio’s heir will efface permanently this mark of inevitable and unending suffering and struggle. He throws the sword into the same pit of bubbling lava that had swallowed his father, where, in the last phrase of the novel, it “floated a moment and then sank in search of its owner” (252).

C. Revolutionary priests

Boulevard of Heroes has a strong religious undercurrent. Petronio’s idealism is a mixture of messianic Christianity and populism, liturgy and propaganda. His desire becomes a political and evangelical madness, “the obsession with an idea, the obligation to complete an undertaking, the eagerness to achieve a dream, utopia...revolution seen as a mythic action, occurring in legendary spaces” (*Del mito* 10). [21] The novel echoes with the history of the civil wars and “la violencia” that has reigned in Colombia throughout this century, the same subject matter in much of García Márquez’s work (e.g. *La Hojarasca*, *En Mala Hora*, *El Coronel No Tiene Quien Le Escribe*). Petronio is a political martyr, an heir to the struggle, his father having fallen victim to the government of the violent times.

Religious power, “at its core radically mystical, does not cease to invade and occupy the scene of the ‘natural’ ” (Dadoun 67). [22] The distinctive feature of clerical

radicalism in Colombia has been described as “the office of the priest, including its symbolism and charisma, [being] injected into civic life as a type of political authority...an implicit refusal to acknowledge that civil and ecclesiastical spheres should be differentiated” (Vallier 17). This mixing of discourses has also been the basis for the Catholic church’s alliance with conservative forces throughout Latin American history, the religious and political hierarchies joined to maintain the status quo. The radical priest, on the other hand, works to reshape “the symbols that relate ordinary men to their uncertain and brutal worlds” (Vallier 23).

A cardinal event happens in Petronio’s youth when he hears speak the dissident priest Antón Botero, who is both “son of the Virgin Mary” and defender of the oppressed. The man is enthusiastically followed by the masses, because not only was he “a priest he was also a revolutionary and it seemed to them easier to follow the former than the latter, for in this way they were covered by the grace of God” (125). This figure becomes becomes a role model for Petronio.

Resonating in the character Father Botero is the Colombian revolutionary priest, Camilo Torres. Having been dismissed from his university post for challenging the Church’s traditional values, he eventually left the order to fight with the guerillas and was killed in battle soon afterward. Once, responding to a question comparing the priest and witch doctor, Torres outlined the boundaries of their domains, both of which I believe Petronio sees as his own: “Religion deals with fundamental problems of man -- his origin, destiny, conduct, and ultimate goals -- while magic is concerned with the details of daily life. Religion proposes long-range solutions, whereas magic offers only short-range solutions. Religion relies primarily on a supreme being, a higher power, whereas the efficiency of magic depends primarily on a human act” (98).

Torres emphasizes the necessity of the church to adapt itself to the reality of contemporary life, to use vernacular language and ordinary dress. When Father Botero comes to La Enea to tell the people about repression in their country, he is forbidden by

the archbishop to celebrate mass in the cathedral. Instead, he descends the narrow, dirty streets to a labor hall and there tells the gathered masses that holding mass before the workers, in their own house, is something much more valuable and touching.

Later the priest is taken away by the forces of order. Petronio raises his voice in insult against them and is arrested. This episode is part of an initiation, a test of his will. After he is interrogated, fingerprinted, and photographed, he is locked in a cell. It is a “glorious night. Petronio felt himself a hero for the first time and in the guard’s negligence sent via a whore friend a message to those outside, as if there were really ardent masses of admirers awaiting him” (127). Weeks later, after reading in the newspaper of Father Botero’s death and seeing the disinterest of his compatriots toward the event, undoubtedly an assassination committed by the government, Petronio “secretly swore in the name of General Bolívar to take up arms and liberate his fatherland from disgrace...before the monument of the patriarchs he swore again in his name to create the Grand Republic of the Andes, the first paradise of America” (128).

D. Elegidos para mirar la catástrofe

A certain resignation seems inevitable in any discussion of political change. *In The Kingdom of this World*, the slave owners are replaced by a black tyrant who is then deposed by a group of seemingly progressive mulattoes. But for the masses of impoverished people nothing changes, and they begin “to lose heart at this endless return of chains, this rebirth of shackles, this proliferation of suffering, which the more resigned began to accept as proof of the uselessness of all revolt” (148).

García Aguilar considers the “boom” in modern Latin American literature “the apotheosis of the political writer” (Ochoa Sandy III, 25). [23] His own generation of writers, the heirs to this legacy, have discovered “the mournful trap of ideologies and we know that the world has no order, that it’s not worth the trouble causing a blood bath trying to bring about unrealizable ideas” (Agudelo Tenorio 9). [24] As Petronio

journeys through the zone of forgetfulness, he participates in another revolution which brings to power a regime as corrupt and intolerant as the system it replaces. He looks at the venerable leader he follows and shares the guilt “for the butchery provoked by the useless search for paradises of air, idyllic worlds of impossible equality” (195). The old man implores the people he has just liberated to break the statues and idols, beginning with his own, and not let this revolution be converted into a religion, another kind of mystification. The old man's greatest anguish at the end of his life is that “he could tell no one of his deception and scepticism in the face of men nor the clearer certainty that the world, be it this one over here or that one over there, held no order, for it was born of nothing and to nothing would it return” (208).

García Aguilar's critique of political systems is that ideology always becomes the dictatorship of absolute truth. Compared to those modern Latin American writers who have written about fascist, military dictators and regimes, García Aguilar seems to question the left in particular, perhaps because of its promise of happy worlds on earth, its face of utopian idealism. He is more than sceptical of figures like Fidel Castro, who rules he believes with ‘un catecismo de marxismo absurdo, ridículo.’ He asks how it is possible that “in Latin America there are still people who forget that Castro, Pinochet, and Stroessner are three dictators who have dominated their countries for years? How is it possible for a human being to pretend to hold the absolute truth over thirty years?” (Ochoa Sandy II, 23). [25] Recent decades have been a period of disenchantment for Latin American intellectuals, who have suffered through three great failures: “the first, of Christianity; the second, of hippidom; the third, of Marxism” (Vallejo 21). [26] While he makes explicit the horror and brutality of the Nazi Werner Gerhard's premeditated and sophisticated violence, García Aguilar still disdains naive or false morality.

As Orwell illustrates in *1984*, totalitarianism has an obsession with language, with explaining and limiting the exactitude of words; it is concerned with “making absolute political roles, of having recourse to every possible and imaginable form of ritual

(Surnaming, Symbolization, Spectable, Costumes, Mythical Figures, Auras and Divine Gifts)” (Dadoun 65). [27] Utopian ideology is concerned with perfect spaces: “Communism and fascism are closely linked in the totalitarian idea of a perfect world, without bad odors or evil thoughts. Without dissidence” (Ochoa Sandy II, 23). [28] As two of Petronio’s friends search for him in the house of the assassinated anarchist leader and former Nazi, Werner Gerhard, they look through this terrorist’s books. Zouzi asks, “*Mein Kampf* and *Capital*, *L’espoir* and *Le feu follet*. What do Hitler and Marx, Malraux and Drieu la Rochelle have in common?” (147). More than we would imagine, García Aguilar would have us consider. The idea of perfectly ordered societies, utopias or dystopias, always returns to a dictatorship of perception, forcing the other to see the world in a certain way; or not to see the world, to blind him to reality.

“We must also describe the institutional sites...from which this discourse derives its legitimate source and point of application (its specific objects and instruments of verification)...The positions of the subject are also defined by the situation that it is possible for him to occupy in relation to the various domains or groups of objects...”

Michel Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*

“Je suis l’Empire à la fin de la décadence.”

Paul Verlaine, “Languor”

IV. New Frontiers

A. The *via rupta*

The jungle is a heterotopia of the ritualistic and the untamed, a place of ongoing formation that precisely resists institutions and ideologies. On the second voyage of Columbus, several sailors get lost while exploring an island for gold and natives. Re-finding the coast is like resurfacing from the subterrain, “the trees so thick they couldn't see the sky” (*Letters of Columbus* 32). [29] In the beginning of *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, the obliterating force of the new land is described, a melancholy entropy that impedes conquest, that seems to force a regressive path: “Then, for more than ten days, they did not see the sun again. The ground became soft and damp, like volcanic ash, and the vegetation was thicker and thicker... and the world became eternally sad. The men of the expedition felt overwhelmed by their most ancient memories in that paradise of dampness and silence, going back to before original sin” (20).

The youth in *Terra Nostra* watches the old man who has delivered him to the New World: “Like God the Father, this old man covered with hair as white as a fleecy cloud was presiding over the first day of Creation” (373). He claims for himself the land he finds, but a group of natives surges from the trees and tears down everything he has built. They all let fly at once with their spears toward his heart, stopping for a moment the

invasion.

Yet the wilderness is full of fixed sites and recognizable signs. One of the earliest historians of the Americas, Bartolomé de las Casas, appears in *The Dogs of Paradise*, seeking (and already expecting to find) in the land of the New World an essential divine presence: “He found the marble gates and other irrefutable traces of the One God. Item: a waterfall crashing on rocks below, producing a deafening roar and generating a mist with the seven primordial colors of creation. Item: a beetle with golden dots on its back. Item: a serpent with a clearly drawn Christian cross just below its head. Item: no fewer than a dozen gigantic butterflies dusted with the Vatican colors, a delicate yellow and white like powdered sugar” (291). The mark not only of God, but of Christianity itself, is everywhere to be seen. There is already a place for this land in the Catholic order of things.

The place of man in nature is more uncertain. The first night out on their revolutionary adventure, Petronio and his rebel followers settle along a river bank. As the youths fall into slumber, Petronio stands guard. From the trees comes a panting, and suddenly a puma pounces upon one of the sleeping boys. Petronio hears “a dry scream of horror resound along the river bank and jumped up ready to fire. But it was too late, for the ferocious being lept away with surprising agility hauling its prey, clamping the boy’s neck forcefully in its mouth as it disappeared into the darkness” (64-65). This proximity to the brute force of nature is a moment of transformation for the boy soldiers. As a murmur sweeps through camp, “the coldness of death shuddered through the men’s bodies” (65). The witnessing of death is a rite of passage, and, as their leader tells them, a preordained warning always to be on guard against the world around them.

The Kingdom of this World is set in Haiti during the French Revolution, that event which so successfully blended *liberté, égalité, fraternité* with the guillotine. The slave-owners feel a vast percussion resounding out of the jungle that seems a thunder storm advancing upon them. They wonder if poison lurks in their food and drink, on their

nightstands and tables. What they fear most is the unknown, like the sounds they can't understand. In this magically real world "a drum might be more than just a goatskin stretched across a hollow log. The slaves evidently had a secret religion that upheld and united them in their revolts" (58). Physical mutilation becomes the permanent mark of political exploitation. The arm of Macandal, the slave who exerts influence over the others through the memory he retains of old world (African) kingdoms, is crushed by a cane mill. The slave owner, not comprehending his piercing and prolonged animal howl, sees the mangled limb and calmly calls "for the whetstone to sharpen the machete to be used in the amputation" (13).

After rumors of upheaval arrive to Haiti, one rainy night blacks from plantations throughout the island gather in the forest to hear a messianic leader. He tells the slaves their gods demand vengeance and will guide their arms in battle. They have a strength the whites lack, for "victory went to those who had warrior gods to invoke" (*Kingdom* 79). After the whites are overthrown, black priests begin to appear. Mixing the languages of voodoo and Catholicism, they celebrate the rites in Latin, but with African intonations and accents. Henri Christophe, the first black emperor of the New World, hears a drumming from the hills that mixes with the throbbing in his veins and the prayers in the castle: "The rhythm coming from the distant heights mingled strangely with the Ave Maria the women were saying in the Throne Room, arousing unacknowledged resonances in more than one breast" (110).

As they first set out through the jungle, the youths who follow Petronio feel a religious calling in their undertaking, revolution being "something beautiful, an adventure that led to the knowledge of human weaknesses, a type of purification rite through which one encountered a unique salvation" (64). The country they are struggling for, he tells them, will be without classes or masters and slaves, truly a heaven on earth: "a fatherland at peace where all are united and love each other like gods, a fatherland of glory, of honey, of happiness, of harmony, where our children can grow healthy, far from

harm. For this we offer our lives, not for a country of men but of angels” (66-67).

Leading his guerrilla troops through the jungle Petronio discovers, or rather invents Eden, the originary location of humanity. They find a stifling, dusty little town, forgotten by the government and only stumbled upon by those who are lost. The inhabitants greet them with astonishment, not knowing whether they are part of “the regular army or subversives or a troop of actors portraying soldiers in a variety show” (119-120). The villagers soon propose Crazy Rincón as their king. He humbly declines, but accepts to be “supreme chief” of the “Independent Republic of Eden,” declaring the marvelous village the “ideal, miraculous site in which to initiate the battle for man’s happiness.” Its citizens will be remembered in history as “the first to believe in the utopia of human justice, in the possibility of changing the world and in the reality of dreams” (120).

But the village remains haunted by its history, the creation of paradise on earth requiring more than the designation of a new name. Despite Petronio’s attempt at “exorcizing the terrible past, the dogs continued to bark and appear on certain moonlit nights and on the walls of the town hall they had continuously to erase the inscription ‘Long live Death’ that in cursive black letters appeared like fruit emanating from beyond the grave, capable of challenging the unbearable heat and Luciferian dust of Eden” (124). Werner Gerhard, the fugitive Nazi who for years tortured, raped and murdered the natives of the region, vanishes before the forces of justice. Even in his absence, he makes his presence felt.

Gerhard is remembered with horror by the inhabitants of Eden. After fleeing from German defeat to South America, he is protected by conservative governments who appreciate his experience in torture and oppression. He increases his fortune through huge plantations, where he is the sole arbitrator of justice, inventing “horrendous punishments for rebellious workers, many of whom he ordered fingers or whole hands cut off or in the worst cases eyes gouged out” (123). When Petronio finally comes

to settle accounts with him, now a decrepit old man confined to a wheelchair, he will seek an eye for an eye, using a sword “like a guillotine” to sever the old Nazi’s hands.

While the density and lushness of the wilderness are a physical threat, they also offer a kind of seduction. The youth in *Terra Nostra* recalls how after the grayness of the ocean and the stark black and white beach, the jungle interior overwhelms his senses, the smells of its decaying foliage blending into a sensual aroma. A torrential rain turns the earth into a quagmire, rotting the fruits of the jungle and hatching thick clouds of mosquitoes. The youth is led through “a corrupt jungle, Sire, humid and dark, where the tree trunks had never seen or never will see the light of sun: so tall and thick are the leaves, so deep the roots, so heavily intertwined the ivies, so intoxicating the perfumes of the flowers -- so melded into mud the scattered corpses of men and serpents” (386).

Pursued by their enemy through the jungle and plains, Petronio and his troops encounter in the landscape and terrain a musky smell of sex. He asks the men if they can’t see the dragons in the landscape and smell “the opium of their unmistakable odor.” These creatures provide the rebels with power and inspiration, emitting “an aroma mingling with the tropical waters, creating a new celestial perfume that later left them bewildered for hours and days, but with an irrepressible force, the force the conquistadors undoubtedly felt when, clouded by the tropics of light and knowing themselves to be in worlds until then nonexistent, they confronted the sea of the green land, as if it were the steps to life and death” (89). Under the influence of this natural narcotic and the words of Petronio, they reach an ecstasy that readies them for combat.

The dragons begin, after they bathe and make love, “to throw their immense tongues over a vast shaking crystal that reflected the zinc sheet of the sky and then the fire spread through the underbrush” (89). These magical beings lead them to victory over the tanks and troops of their enemy. But this has really occurred by a much simpler act. Nostalgic for his days in the field, Petronio will reconstruct “in a dream the famous battle

he fought against General Tovar, when he stopped a column of tanks by ordering burned miles and miles of cane fields” (61). Revolutionary success requires making dreams into reality. There is a rational side to the fantastic, and a magical side to the real.

A monument of both religious inspiration and social order, García Aguilar recalls the cathedral constructed from black volcanic rock he saw “throughout my entire childhood and adolescence like a kind of petrified and castrating dinosaur” (*Cádamer* 4). [30] The “horrendous, hypocritical, Catholic” city of Petronio’s youth “was ominous and gloomy like the immense cathedral of poured concrete the founders, attacked by the cancer of dementia, constructed in the glorious epochs of economic expansion” (91). As a child, he discerns the strange and powerful presence of beasts in the city skyline and the landscape of the neighboring valleys and villages. The night his father is assassinated, Petronio sees out his window a prehistoric animal, the black spires of the hulking cathedral casting shadows over the courtyard. Within the house he finds another dark presence that marks him: his father’s black casket surrounded by candles and a circle of women praying in the undulating light. This image will surface again in the jungle, when he encounters another ritualistic circle of death.

B. Palaces and pyramids

One night on patrol Petronio and his men discover a cave, where deep inside, “like immutable witnesses resting against the wall, lay disfigured mummies and skeletons covered by the dusty film of time” (77). Petronio tells his men there is a lesson about dignity to be learned from their distant ancestors who chose suicide over surrender and “in silence, with infinite patience, awaited a death that was preferable to defeat” (78). Like the meeting he will have with Bolívar in the zone of forgetfulness, this encounter with “the prophetic signs of the singular inferno of his childhood dreams, justified for him all past and future sacrifices” (78).

Petronio’s empathy with the ancient indigenous tribes begins as a child when “he

would look through blurred photographs of prehistoric temples. He copied Mayan engravings, drew feathered Aztec serpents, faces of prehispanic figures bearing angry teeth, intricate Incan labyrinths and he wrote poems of adoration to those ruins which so intrigued him...He imaged Lake Titicaca, the long esplanade of Teotihuacan, the majesty of the Oaxacan hill where crazed priests in the fog of some strange knowledge constructed Monte Albán and he read of the wars between other savage tribes that regretfully left neither stone nor monumental trace, but still bequeathed beautiful legends” (78). This litany of prehispanic monuments attests to the heritage of the vanquished Petronio carries with him. These images he sees in books will be the same as the monuments and ritualistic spaces he seeks refuge in while wandering in new worlds.

In his essay, “The Critique of the Pyramid,” Octavio Paz describes the eternal religiosity of this architectural structure, an “edifice made of time: what was, what shall be, what is. As space, the platform-sanctuary is the place where the gods appear and the place of the sacrificial altar: the point of convergence of the human world and the divine. As time it is the center of motion, the end and beginning of the eras: the everlasting present of the gods” (*Other Mexico* 294). The pyramids of the Americas seem born from the earth itself; the landscape is, as Paz notes, something historical, linking nature, divinity, and humanity.

Fuentes sees his own country, Mexico, symbolized in the form of “a pyramid within a pyramid, until the entire land was a temple dedicated to the fragile maintenance of life nourished by the arts of death” (*Terra Nostra* 430). The youth is led to a pyramid buried in the dark humid forest, now a kind of a charnal house where vultures gorge on mounds of corpses. Within one of its niches sits an ancient man immersed in pearls, who tells the youth he has been waiting for him. In this “elaborately embellished cave” they exchange gifts and places: “life for death and death for life” (396).

The masses of supposedly emancipated blacks in *The Kingdom of this World* are

forced into virtual slave labor, as a palace for their new leader is built. But they are promised it will be the very symbol of their freedom and the new social and cosmic order: “The Citadel La Ferriere would be the country...Because down below, the sufferings involved in its building forgotten, the Negroes of the Plaine would raise their eyes to the fortress...thinking that there, higher than the birds, there, where life below was the remote sound of bells and the crowing of roosters, a king of their own race was waiting, close to heaven” (98). Here is the materialized promise of heaven on earth. Their labor is their reward.

As Petronio, Adela, and their guide from Comayaguela flee that inferno, they follow an abandoned road through dense jungle until they come across an elaborate stone pyramid. Columns of anthropomorphic figures hold up the temple’s roof. Other palaces and carvings indicate “the city had been an extraordinary center of contact with ancient gods” (242). From this site Petronio sees again the gleam of a sword in the sky. A harpsichord melody draws him down a cold staircase to a sarcophagus deep inside the pyramid. There he meets a composite figure of all the libertines and tyrants he has ever encountered in his life. He tells Petronio he is “the god of revolutions” who has “always been at your side, dear friend...to make sure you would arrive to the final signpost” (244).

C. Paris, *lá-bàs*

The site of Petronio’s exile is Paris, not the city of lights but of darkness, of poor immigrants and circus performers, fugitive terrorists and decadent bourgeois. It seems the home of no one; even his lover, Adela Dampierre de Nerval, whose name rings with a kind of self-conscious and tragic aristocracy, is displaced from the posh sixteenth arrondissement to the working-class nineteenth. Yet this city is an appropriate site for the fallen hero to examine his failure in, the domain of both reason and surrealism. Fuentes’s own examination of the need to search for new worlds begins in “Paris, the fountain of all knowledge and the source of Divine Scripture” (*Terra Nostra* 13-14).

Petronio seeks a world of instinct, he desires having to struggle to survive so he may more feel the life within himself. After he is exiled, Petronio vows to continue his rebellion and promises “to live in Paris as if it were the jungle and he a solitary hunter” (37). In the park Buttes Chaumont, where fake ancient Greek temples mix with a sculptured wilderness, Petronio begins talking to himself and recalls in his delirium the romantic days of revolution and their imagined grandeur. Wandering the paths in the moonlight and remembering his past, he hears the wild sounds and smells the aroma of trees, regretting “they weren’t of the tropics, inhabited by tucans, guacamayos, wild parrots, doormice and monkeys...after that first lapse of time in Paris, he again felt like he was in the countryside, lost among the trees of the forest, planning strategy for his battalion, his troops who admired him with a political adolescence” (61).

Constellations of the tropical heavens appear in the Old World sky. The hallucinated image of the South American stars effaces the present environment. Petronio feels his own despair in the heaviness of the winter sky but then sees “in his first desired delirium the Southern Cross, the most beautiful guide of the plains, the cross emerging from the very bottom of the planet, the unfolding, unending guide of his desires” (6). This constellation, a cross, is the sword he first sees in the sky: weapon and crucifix, the combined emblem of politics and religion.

At night he haunts the parks and forests near Paris, hunting swans on the lakes and cats in the cemeteries. Late one evening he runs through tilled fields out onto a passing highway, “alone, lost, completely submerged in the secret of his solitude, in the contemporary jungle”(95). Far from his home in the tropics, Petronio carries with him the martyrdom of nostalgia. He has lost control of his fate, and now “thanks to witchcraft, he appeared on the other side of the world, facing strange, luminous warnings” (95).

Petronio becomes a night watchman taking care of an old circus elephant, Catalina, who stirs in him a longing to return to his native soil and sky. She is kept in a warehouse that once held a variety theatre. Petronio wanders through the attics and

locked rooms, finding wigs, costumes, masks, maps of cities of the New World, pornographic posters, notes from lovers and the letter written by a condemned man to his only daughter. He tries to hear the actors' voices and see them on the stage; in his solitude he "had found no better place to feed his illusions and fantasies" (74).

This is not his only archeological find. In the forest of Vincennes, near the university, Petronio literally stumbles upon an old crate buried in the dirt. Inside of it he uncovers Nazi medals, pieces of uniforms, documents from those horrendous times like lists of names and descriptions of war matériel, even human teeth and bones. There in the fields of his exile he "found an inexhaustible quarry of memory...the violet zone of hell, where all limits have been surpassed" (112).

He makes several epiphanic voyages outside of Paris, discovering a distant European past that is part of his heroic legacy. He senses the figure of Napoleon wandering the steps and halls of castles he visits throughout France. In Barcelona, he wanders past the dream-like, surreal houses constructed by the "magician Gaudi," whose student was the architect that rebuilt the Great City of the Andes. In the harbor he stops before a statue of Christopher Columbus looking out over the waters and recalls again "the tropics of light" through which he has travelled.

García Aguilar cites Huysman and the fin de siècle decadents as important influences. These writers took great interest in the biographies and legends of tyrants and kings and their craving for the impossible. (Indeed, the protagonist's namesake, Petronius, was a satirist in Nero's court. After having been accused in a plot against the emperor, he committed suicide.) The blending of the fantastic and unexpected with the ordered and logical, what Huysman describes as "spiritual Naturalism, a fusion of Realism and Mysticism" (Green 288), resembles magic realism, perhaps reflecting similarities in the periods in which they developed: "Every end of the century invites great cultural equilibriums to be made and culturally the great and solid structures previously constructed crumble" (Patán, *Entrevista* 74). [31] The scepticism and irony of *Boulevard*

of Heroes attempt to penetrate the facade presented by Latin American utopias and instead present a rather tragic, turbulent world view.

Petronio goes into both a forced and chosen exile. His spiritual itinerary resembles that of the typical romantic and decadent protagonists, who “both quickly weary of everything and everyone around them and finally escape into solitude, idleness and reverie. Both go first to a Parisian suburb. Both are momentarily tempted by the monastic life, both reject it. Their hypersensitive and demanding natures make them prey to ennui and the death-wish” (Bishop 142-43). The decadent hero, nostalgic and melancholic, is perhaps one of the few people in his generation who sees the unavoidable entropy of culture and civilization.

Near the end of *Boulevard of Heroes*, Petronio and Adela, along with their guide Luperon, walk through the alleys and outskirts of Comayagua. They enter a cabaret, the gathering ground of exiles like Bolivar, and see a bizarre performance take place. Two terrified white horses are dragged on stage to a guillotine, where the first is beheaded. Petronio cannot tell whether he witnesses “a performance or bare reality.” As the next one is brought to the apparatus, he rushes forward “to prevent the new execution, with such bad luck that the blade fell on his left hand, which rolled on the ground to the screams of Adela and the expectation of the brethren” (237).

D. Elegies on the Fall of the City

The final location of *Boulevard of Heroes*, “the zone of forgetfulness,” is a historical and geographical palimpsest of all the places and events of Petronio’s revolutionary adventure. This leg of his voyage originates in a vacant plaza where a statue of Michaelangelo’s David stands. (This setting resembles the plaza Rio de Janeiro in Mexico City, on which García Aguilar lived for several years while working on this novel, in the “witches’ house,” “la casa de las brujas,” whose exterior seems a model for Werner Gerhard’s house.) The worlds García Aguilar develops surge from having witnessed

such disparity and poverty in the horrendous slums of the Americas, in cities like Bogotá and Mexico City. On sacred sites exist monstrous scenes: “Next to the most beautiful baroque temple are deformed and starving beggars...These experiences, so typically Latin American, have invited me to explore the true face of the deformity and hunger of the immense majority of our Latin American brethren” (*Cadáver* 6). [32]

The very writing of this section, where Petronio and Adela enter the apocalyptic city of Comayagua, is marked by the force of a natural event that struck the world’s largest metropolis. Just as García Aguilar began working on it, he was awakened one morning by one of the worst earthquakes in recent Mexican history. The last chapters are informed by “the catastrophe, the misery, the crisis that struck Mexico” (Ochoa Sandy I, 23). [33] Fuentes, writing two years later when most of the damage from the quake had yet to be addressed, describes the descent of Tenochtitlan as “the least intelligent, least provident city, the most masochistic, and most suicidal, most stupidly stupid city in the history of the world” (*Christopher Unborn* 109).

A perpetual colonialism is represented in *Christopher Unborn* by the physical mutilation of Mexico’s land. The Yucatan is ceded to Club Med free from any government interference, in order to pay the interest on the eternal external debt. Three other Mexican states are ceded to a U.S. oil consortium until the interest on the debt is paid, which of course will be never. A hundred kilometers either side of the old border lies the anarchic territory of Mexamerica, independent of both the Distrito Federal and Washington, D.C., a place of smugglers, contraband dealers and political refugees. Only a fragment remains of The Invisible Sweet Fatherland, destroyed and effaced as the text is written: “impeccable and adamantine: the forest of silkcotton trees, the silvered velocity of waters, the crocodile and the ocelot, the monkeys and the toucans under the vegetable vault. And a column of smoke that rose from the heart of the jungle: the forests cut down, the new highways, the drilling of the Five Sisters, the changed course of the river, the traces of the past wiped away forever by mud slides and oil spills” (21).

(Perhaps I have privileged the influence of Mexico on García Aguilar throughout my discussion, from Aztec mythology to the work of Carlos Fuentes. But he has spent most of his writing career there, and this country provides an appropriate backdrop to reading about failed revolutions and stifling ideologies. In the last eighty years it has gone through two revolutions carried out in the name of a renewed sense of national identity: the defeat of Porfirio Díaz's dictatorship and the nationalization of the oil industry by Lázaro Cárdenas, the latter perhaps more historically significant than the former. That the ruling party for almost the entire century has been one of "institutional revolution" reveals a lot about the nature of political change.)

The entire zone of forgetfulness allows Petronio a chance to see "el reverso de la conquista," the other side of conquest, the reality of war. Though the venerable one's troops are victorious, they leave behind a horrifying spectacle: "thousands of corpses lay muddied in the ashy land, while a cold rain wet their remains...and the curious outlines of ancient volcanic surfaces became confused with twisted cadavers that one upon the other, as if in a rotting and brittle magma, began to be devoured by insects and immense buzzards from hell" (164).

Disease has been a great tool of conquest, especially disfiguring ones like the measles or pox. The Mayan book of the Chilam Bilam recalls a kind of purity in the prehispanic world, when there was still no sickness: "they had no aching bones; they had then no high fever; they had then no smallpox; they had then no burning chest; they had then no abdominal pain; they had then no consumption; they had then no headache. At that time the course of humanity was orderly. The foreigners made it otherwise when they arrived here" (Crosby 36). One of the oral accounts gathered by the historian Bernardino de Sahagún describes the leveling impact of an epidemic: "There was great havoc. Very many died of it. They could not move...And if they stirred, much did they cry out. Great was [its] destruction" (56).

Comayaguela is a place where “horror reaches its limits.” But it is more reality than dream or nightmare: “masks have disappeared leaving to the elements the true face of existence, the theatre without make-up” (228). As Petronio and Adela approach the city, an acrid dust rises and penetrates all the pores of their bodies. They walk through the fetid odor of garbage past the silent hovels of the leprous, cancerous world, “the terrain of nameless torture.” Creatures less than human come at them: “like worms, larvae, sticky parasites appear beggars, thousands of ragged and skeletal beggars...the hungry of history, the sweaty slaves...the humiliated millions...the victims of a forgotten exodus not mentioned in history books” (222-23). Witnessing this hell is part of the sentence imposed upon those who wander the zone of forgetfulness. In this dystopia that holds only the mutilated, the wounded, the diseased, those who are always left behind any kind of political or ideological change, Petronio realizes the futility of his idealism: “If we ever believe to possess the truth, the vademecum, the secret formula, only here, before this horror we barely perceive can we understand the impossible undertaking of all utopias” (2235).

The old man who sails with the youth in *Terra Nostra* toward the unknown believes there must be a different world where they can start over, “another, better land, a free and happy land made in God’s true image, for the one we have left behind is but an abominable reflection” (355). An ancient Aztec recounts how their temples were destroyed, setting in motion a cycle where “evils succeeded evils, men tried to flee, but where could they flee that was not the earth, always the earth?” (394).

“The truth of Marxist theories of class struggle and the necessity of revolution lay in the experience of the individual, conscious of existing as exploited or exploiter and freely choosing to invest his life with the meaning of struggle for or against a society of universal recognition between consciousnesses. Now all this had the air of a myth...”

Vincent Descombes, *The Critique of History*

V. Conclusion

As the youth in *Terra Nostra* gazes at the indigenous peoples emerging from the jungle, he realizes how savageness, strangeness, difference are a matter of perception: “They looked at us. We looked at them. And from that first exchange was born a fleeting, silent question: ‘Have they discovered us...or did we discover them?’” (377).

The (ongoing) conquest of the Americas has had religious and political motivations from its very beginning. Petronio Rincón is a logical heir to Columbus, Moteuczoma, Bolívar, Torres. The colonizer, the king, the revolutionary, the priest strive to define and name experience, to draw the contours of old and new worlds. In the diary of his first voyage to the Indies, Columbus sets forth his purposes; besides writing down all of his experiences, he intends to sketch “a new sailing chart” in which he “will locate all of the sea and the lands of the Ocean Sea in their proper places under their compass bearings and, moreover, compose a book and similarly record all of the same in a drawing...and above all it is very important that I forget sleep...” (19-20). This last phrase, “q’olvide el sueño,” could also mean “that I should forget dreams”: this will not be a surreal voyage, but a journey through a physical, material, sensual world where everyday reality -- flora, fauna, people -- stir the senses, revealing a fantastic side. At the heart of *Boulevard of Heroes*’ narrative is a reportorial voice, the obvious result of García Aguilar’s formation as a journalist. The fictional settings his characters inhabit are also locations he has lived in, like his homeland, Colombia, that “country decayed by blood

and the daily, professional violation of man's most precious rights" (170).

I have attempted in this introduction to explore the discursive formation of magic realism as it is set forth in *Boulevard of Heroes*. My fundamental structural concern has been the reference point: the status of the speaker; the site of enunciation. The New World episteme (those conditions and structures under which a society or culture gains knowledge of itself) is well enunciated by the patriarch and revolutionary, who, throughout the history of Latin American literature, have often spoken from a simultaneous religious and political, messianic and ideological perspective.

The Americas have long held a mythology of the revolutionary. Mario Benedetti, in his essay *El Escritor Latinoamericano y la Revolución Posible* (1973), writes that the possibility of revolution only acquires its true dimension through "the assault on the impossible" (87). [34] Fidel has apparently achieved utopia in Cuba: "what's certain is that...revolution has ceased to be an abstract possibility, a remote aspiration, to be converted into a verisimilar transformation, a believable image (90). [35] But the choice of "verosímil" instead of "verdadera" seems revealing to me. This is *like* reality, not true reality; it has yet to undergo the conversion from image to material. Ultimately, belief is more important than achievement: "a possible revolution...is not yet a reality; it is simply a perspective" (104-5) [36].

The philosopher of history Toynbee says that civilizations reach a certain perfection when, having gazed upon themselves, they recognize their own dissolution. There is undoubtedly a certain pragmatic, demythologizing resignation in *Boulevard of Heroes*. Idealism promises us we can change reality by giving it a new name, by baptizing it into our system of beliefs: a thing is that which I call it, that which I can say about it. Petronio discovers revolution exists only as a simulacrum; he will never achieve more than the facade of utopia. Confronting "the god of revolutions," Petronio confesses he has completely lost faith in his plans, he can no longer tolerate the indifference of others or the stupidity of those who blindly follow utopian doctrines and heroes enamored with

power. His struggle has been an illusion: "Revolutionaries, leaders, we are the greatest and neediest imposters on earth" (234). The disillusioned cry of the Aztec priests resisting assimilation by the Franciscan monks ring in Petronio's words:

'Then let us die already,
let us perish,
for our gods have already died!' (Reverso 21). [37]

Yet García Aguilar leaves us with the existential essence of freedom: the power to say no, to nihilate in a way. This is the only way one can be liberated from the gods and their idols. The lucidity of great failure "doesn't lead us to self-destructive desperation, but to the apotheosis of knowing ourselves chosen to look upon catastrophe" (Ochoa Sandy I, 23). [38] On the edge of the apocalypse, we have perhaps one more chance to create ourselves.

VI. A Note on (the) Translation

In a letter to the Catholic kings of Europe, the Admiral Cristóbal Colón fixes the newly discovered region of the cosmos: “Here is Earthly Paradise, to where no one may arrive, save by divine will” (Posse 8) [39]. The act of naming more than indicates the object; it is a form of life-giving. The particular nominative “indicates that it is not a being or essence in general that is put forward, but something reflected into self, a subject” (Hegel 84). As the translator of such neologists as Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar says, “Sometimes a name is what gives an object existence” (Rabassa 4). Naming has been one of the principal gestures I have explored in my discussion of *Boulevard of Heroes*, the choosing of that literal, metaphorical, material, ephemeral mark. In the last analysis, the thing always exceeds that which we call it.

My process of translation has proceeded through three basic steps: 1) a direct, literal draft; 2) the verification of syntax, grammar and the multiplicity of meaning in certain words and phrases, done at times in concert with a native speaker (in fact, Mr. García Aguilar and I read together sentence by sentence the original Spanish text and the English translation over a period of several weeks); 3) the crafting, the aesthetization, so to speak, of the text, where one stops translating an old work and begins to write a new one. The ultimate goal here is to sound as close as possible to an English (or more

accurately a [standard] American English) text; that is, to sound as little as possible as the copy of another work. Translation is at its best, I believe, when it is most self-effacing.

The first two steps were done in longhand; I can't imagine doing them on a computer or word processor. One needs to see simultaneously the various possibilities; it is often those terms and phrases "sous rature," in the Heideggerian/Derridean sense, that emerge with the closest meaning to the original. Translation as a kind of close reading of the original text also involves noticing the erasures and palimpsests in the text the translator is creating.

I would like to describe briefly several particular translations. At times it is necessary to provide two translations for one word or phrase, two signifieds for one signifier. I first literally misread "santo y seña," which means "password." But its literal translation, "saint and sign," also seems fitting in at least one particular passage: the elephant that Petronio takes care of is the "password," the key, the clue for understanding a voracious colonialism. She is indeed this sign, but she is as well a kind of saint, a martyr, a mystical being that Petronio can communicate with. Within the context of a partly religious thematic, I ultimately decided to keep both the metaphoric and literal meanings. William Weaver says explicitly, "translation is not exegesis" (119). True, one should not try to iron out meaning when it remains deliberately ambiguous, or for example edit obtuse sentence structure (though I can't help but cut prepositions and commas in the Romance language texts I've worked with.) But word of choice is often an interpretation or explanation.

For example, I translated the phrase, "un paraíso secreto vedado hasta ahora para ellos, pero que guardaba maravillosas sorpresas," as "a secret paradise until now forbidden to them, but which guarded marvelous surprises." It was then suggested that "kept" would be a more accurate, less literal translation for the last verb. I made the change in the draft, but later reconsidered the translation as I was coming to an overall

understanding of the novel. In the context of ongoing battles and threatening locations, my original choice of “guard” better conveys the idea of prohibition. As well, the phrase, “perdido en las añoranzas de los tiempos clausurados,” was suggested to be “lost in the nostalgia for those bygone times.” Again, I returned to my first literal translation of “cloistered times,” because after having read and understood the mission of Petronio, I felt this was almost a monastic period for him. In this sense, translation, especially with regard to verbs and prepositions, is a kind of visualization: one must see what is happening in the text.

I was not always consistent in the translation of the same words and phrases. The first time the street name “la calle de Los Solitarios” appears, I returned it to the French “rue des Solitaires,” because in English we most often refer to a street in a foreign country by its original name. In the fourth chapter, I translated it as “Street of the Solitary,” because there it forms part of the ambience and description of the characters. As Steiner says in “Understanding as Translation,” “Even substantive remains such as buildings and historical sites must be ‘read’, i.e. located in a context of verbal recognition and placement” (29).

Translation is a kind of contextualization; grammatical structures, semantic connotations, and tone, all have to be balanced between the text being read and the text being written. One treads here on continually shifting sands; indeed, the etymological link between “translate” and “betray” is often felt as the translator, in attempting to create a work that stands on its own, must engage in a sort of infidelity to the original.

Appendix: List of Original Quotations

1. “la lucidez del fracaso de los utopias.”
2. ““por el deseo de explorar por qué a través de toda la historia el ser humano sueña con la posibilidad de crear un mundo feliz en la tierra, cuando nunca como ahora, a finales del siglo XX, estamos absolutamente seguros de que es imposible.””
3. ““Yo admiro profundamente al héroe, y sobre todo al héroe Latinoamericano, los dioses de nuestra época.””
4. ““la realidad como se fuera magica... Entre la disolución de la realidad (magia) y la copia de la realidad (realismo)...[el] espectáculo de una nueva Creación.””
5. “es que, por la virginidad del paisaje, por la formación, por la ontología, por la presencia faústica del indio y del negro, por la revelación que constituyó su reciente descubrimiento, por los fecundos mestizajes que propició, América está lejos de haber agotado su caudal de mitologías.”
6. “una inesperada alteración de la realidad (el milagro), de una revelación privilegiada de la realidad, de una iluminación inhabitual o singularmente favorecedora de las inadvertidas riquezas de la realidad, de una ampliación de las escalas y categorías de la realidad.”
7. “no creen en santos no pueden curarse con milagros de santos, ni los que nos son Quijotes no pueden meterse, en cuerpo, alma y bienes, en el mundo de Amadis de Gaula.”
8. “el apego al derecho escrito y la filosofía estoica; inmersión en la filosofía cristiana, sus dogmas, jerarquías y promesas. Renacimiento y Contrarreforma, conquista y contraconquista, supervivencia judía, aporte Africano; nueva civilización mestiza, criolla, indígena y negra.”

9. “El descubridor...no solo quiere descubrir la realidad; también quiere nombrarla, desealarla, decirla y recordarla. A veces, todo ellos se resume en otro propósito: imaginarla.”
10. “la manera que se pudiera para la conversión de ellos a nuestra santa fe.”
11. “la visión del paraíso y en seguida debe destruir lo que ama.”
12. “el primer rasgo fundamental de la vision azteca de la Conquista es lo que podría describirse como el cuadro mágico en el que esta habrá de desarrollarse.”
13. “cuando se reconoce en sus textos de fundación: *las Crónicas de Indias*.”
14. “le Politique se caractérise par une dualité primordiale, opposant ou juxtaposant ou superposant un *Corps naturel* (qui relèverait de la ‘nature,’ du régime terrestre, de l’historicité quotidienne, d’une positivité empirique, etc.) et un *Corps mystique* (qui relèverait d’une transcendance, d’un au-delà, d’un Mystere, etc.)”
15. “il est celui qui dit la réalité, et la dit d’une manière qui, littéralement parlant, l’edifie, la fait advenir, la crée: la parole du Prince est fondamentalement une parole *édifiante*. En prononcant le réel, il l’extrait du néant, il l’érige.”
16. ““el delirio de los héroes, que son capaces de morir por una causa imposible.””
17. ““un héroe en sus últimos y tristes años en Paris, cuando había descubierto lo ridiculo de su fogosa y juvenil aventura guerrillera.””
18. ““No quedaba nada de aquella mirada hacia el futuro de las fotos de su juventud...se encontraba ya en la decadencia física, despreciado por sus compañeros de izquierda que, como todo el mundo, está fascinada con la gente que triunfa, que detenta el poder, pero da la espalda al fracasado, al derrotado.””
19. “ad sanctam Christi fidem conversionem, cui quidem, quantum intelligeri potui, facillimi sunt et proni.”
20. “de se ressourcer, d’s’ancrer dans un ‘corps mystique’ et de tout faire pour le fondre dans le ‘corps naturel’ de l’homme (individu et société), en exploitant pour cela, paradoxalement, la violence originaire de cette division.”

21. “la obsesión con una idea, el empeño de cumplir una empresa, el afán de alcanzar un sueño, la utopía...la revolución vista como una acción mítica, ocurrido en espacios de leyenda.”
22. “à fondement radicalement mystique, n’a de cesse d’envahir et d’occuper la scène du ‘naturel.’”
23. “la apoteosis del escritor político.”
24. “la trampa funesta de las ideologías y sabemos que el mundo no tiene arreglo, que no vale la pena crear un baño de sangre buscando realizar ideas irrealizables.”
25. “en América Latina todavía hay gente que olvide que Castro, Pinochet, y Stroessner son tres dictadores que han dominado a sus países durante años? Cómo es posible que un ser humano pretenda tener la verdad absoluta durante 30 años?”
26. “la primera, del cristianismo, la segunda del hippismo, y la tercera del marxismo.”
27. “absolutiser les rôles politiques, en recourant à toutes les formes possibles et imaginables de rituel (Surnomination, Symbolisation, Spectacle, Costumes, Figures mythiques, Auras et Charismes).”
28. “El comunismo y el fascismo están muy ligados en la idea de un mundo perfecto, sin malos olores y sin malos pensamientos. Sin disidencias.”
29. “la espesura de los árboles tanta que el cielo no podían ver.”
30. “durante toda mi infancia y adolescencia como una especie de dinosaurio petrificado y castrador.”
31. “Todo fin de siglo invita a hacer grandes balances culturales y culturalmente se derrumban los grandes y sólidos edificios construidos con anterioridad.”
32. “Junto a un templo barroco hermosísimo hay mendigos deformes y hambrientos...Estas experiencias tan latinoamericanas me invitan a explorar al verdadero rostro de la deformidad y el hambre de la inmensa mayoría de nuestros congéneres latinoamericanos.”

33. “la catástrofe, por la miseria, por la crisis que golpea a México.”
34. “el asalto a lo imposible.”
35. “lo cierto es que...la revolución dejó de ser una posibilidad abstracta, una remota aspiración, para convertirse en una transformación verosímil, en una imagen creíble.”
36. “Una revolución posible...no es una realidad; es simplemente una perspectiva.”
37. “” Déjenos pues ya morir,
déjenos ya perecer,
puesto que ya nuestros dioses han muerto!”
38. “no nos lleva a la desesperación autodestructiva, sino a la apoteosis de sabernos elegidos para mirar la catástrofe.”
39. “Aquí es el Paraíso Terrenal, adonde no puede llegar nadie, salvo por voluntad divina.”

Boulevard of Heroes
by
Eduardo García Aguilar

Crazy Rincón yearned to establish a happy world on earth and to accomplish this he renounced everything, except hope. At the end of his first adventure, when the soldiers of Ciudad Bolívar led him to the military plane, he felt the heated calling of glory and thought he saw a sword in the sky. The sun fell in flames over the plains and fragrant winds carrying verdant aromas crossed the Orinoco valley, where so many of his dreams resided. A cloud of dust obscured the horizon and the pilot yelled from the cockpit to scare off two cows obstructing the runway. Petronio leaned back against a crate of mangoes and lit a cigaret. He sweated profusely and his black eyes shone as he took leave, as he said a farewell to arms. Exile awaited him. The plane landed in Caracas. The Andean hero passed through corridors and took escalators and signed some papers before they pushed him onto a jet. They left him there and in the blink of an eye the plane was flying, and from the window he observed amid the tropical gleams and the wakes of ships little white rays of foam and the sinuous line of islands dotted by palm trees. He slept comfortably, trying to forget his defeat. He arrived in Paris and was received by two pallid functionaries and a squalid woman who spoke Spanish very well. Petronio was gruff and detested the journalists gargling at him with their microphones, asking him about some exotic country whose name they didn't even know. He told the immigration authorities he refused to beg for subsidies, stipends, transportation discounts, social security or meal tickets and added that Paris would be for him the continuation of his rebellion. Later, through the windows of a black car he saw the avenues and narrow streets, the tall

buildings along the periferique, the church of the Sacre Coeur surrounded by old houses from whose cubist chimneys emerged oriental figures and modernist faces. When he arrived at his destination they assigned him a clean room with a cot, a nightstand, a sink and towels, leaving him among black Africans and Arabs who wandered the halls or prayed or knelt on prayer rugs in anguished genuflections. Chinese, Vietnamese, Cambodians, Russians, Jews, natives of Greenland and Tahiti seemed like ants in the Tower of Babel, making greetings to the left and to the right, trying to find the interlocutor who would alleviate their solitude. Dinner was later served and Petronio stood in line with Arabs dressed in exotic flowing tunics and twisted turbans, amid the sound of a boisterous polyglot and the tinkle of tea pots, plates and dirty silverware thrown at this mortal reservoir. His stomach churned as he saw on the menu spinach soup, veal steak, cheese, plum marmalade and a bottle of cheap wine. Holding his tray aloft, he headed to a table with some empty places and settled in among fellows from the Ivory Coast, Zimbabwe, Senegal, and Tunisia. A red vandal from this last country who said he was called Zouzi started up a conversation with Petronio and for an hour they told each other secrets about their distant worlds. The one recalled nights of waning moons, sand storms, the delirium of caravans, wars between the Bedouins and the other told stories of lost swamps where crocodiles and bug-eyed lizards crept, of hallucinogenic mushrooms and murderous lichens that appeared on the humid walls during the night. When they finished eating they said goodbye to the three blacks speaking a strange dialect and headed to the cafeteria, continuing their conversation about the force of winds, the different phases of the moon on clear nights, rivers, palm trees, swamps. Petronio had spent the best days of his life in the jungle and knew like the back of his hand certain torrential dark-watered rivers where trunks voyage, the vestiges of capsized canoes or the bodies of tortured rebels. He learned to live in the jungle, to look at the stars and distinguish the passing of a comet through the sky filled with premonitory stars or the fall of illusory meteorites. Zouzi, raised in the desert by dark-skinned women, had

known shifting sands and infernal heat, arousing smoke provoking wisdom, the sand storm's lanterns of lulling sleep and to remember his past he was reborn. He began to play the flute, its tone enrapturing the moribund customers of the cafe. Thus the evening passed, each one savoring their encounter. Finally they shook hands and sincerely embraced each other in friendship.

A few days after his arrival, Petronio rented a small studio. The frame of its only window, eaten away by termites, let in terrible cold drafts. To reach the building one crossed an interior courtyard filled with trash cans and scattered bags of nauseating garbage. Following Zouzi's advice, he went through the streets and found enough things to furnish his room: on the rue Botzaris he discovered a leather reclining chair, on the rue des Solitaires an orange-colored German refrigerator, and on the rue Crimmée the large and fluffy mattress he had longed for. On other streets of the area he found after the trash was thrown out mirrors, crates, rugs, old stools, an Italian coffee maker, and a round mirror. In just a few days he cleaned the walls, the kitchen, the floor, the ceiling and devoted himself to painting his nest with a novice's emotion. Little by little the pigsty was transformed into a pleasant and friendly space, admired by his new friends. Winter came and the streets filled with ice and snow, restaurants left their doors closed and the darkness of the streets turned the city into an enormous house full of surprising hallways. Men with purple noses and burned-out eyes, hunchbacked, long-jawed old women, and hairy grimacing youths ran through the neighborhood, covered from head to foot in thick wool vestments and the delicious air, ice cold, caressed the ruddy faces and furrowed joints of the immigrant laborers. Petronio devoted himself to learning the streets of his new surroundings and to browsing through the bakeries, supermarkets, Arab stores, wax museums, rare book stores, belle époque restaurants and streets ridden by the current vice and narcotics.

After a few months his savings ran out and he spent his last francs on a bountiful meal at a restaurant in Montmartre. He realized he had begun going into debt and

needed to use his ingenuity not to starve to death. His first idea was to trap tender pigeons with a net installed in the garret window. He put some bread in a basket and attached a string that dropped the top over it when the pigeon pecked at the crumbs. In this way he gained enough weight to withstand the cold. For a while he was accustomed to roasting them in the chimney and inviting occasional guests to dine with him on these delicacies. Tired of eating pigeon, he decided to change his diet. He considered the subtlety of swans, but twisting their necks pained him. He thought he might hunt them in parks, at night, hidden from the guards.

One night he went out, covered by his black coat and woolen scarf. The wind crept through the buildings, whistling like an ogre. The last few bars were closing. A desolate wind blew the autumn leaves. Next to the doors of the houses trash bins full of junk, bric-a-brac and table scraps waited to be plundered by nocturnal predators. Passing by a sewer grating, he heard the distant sound of an opened drain. Petronio felt like having a calvados before he went hunting his swans. He made a toast with a tall woman, skinny and pallid, the wild flower of a long aristocratic saga. Her fingernails were painted with dark polish and her lips were the withered color of burned meat. They made another friendly toast and yet another when they said goodbye, and she disappeared through the door completely drunk.

“That’s the beautiful Adela Dampierre de Nerval,” said the owner. “She’s a millionaire but rather excentric. And a night owl. Around this hour she starts wandering the streets and parks like a lunatic.”

After he finished his calvados he followed her down the rue de Plateau to the rue Botzaris, bordering the park. The abysses and idyllic hills seemed out of an opium dream or like an image of the age before the flood. Walking slowly with his hands in his pockets, he lost her in the darkness a few blocks farther on.

In the park were two caves descending to the lake, little paths lost between thickets, and artificial woods crowned by small pavilions. Petronio jumped over one of the spike-

topped fences. Excited, he smelled again the aroma of trees and regretted they weren't of the tropics, inhabited by tucans, guacamayos, wild parrots, doormice and monkeys. Memories rekindled. They weren't the same wild, nocturnal noises, but after that first lapse of time in Paris, he again felt like he was in the countryside, lost among the trees of the forest, planning strategy for his battalions, his platoons who admired and respected him with the innocence of a political adolescence. He began to go crazy and talk to himself, lost in the nostalgia for those bygone times. He spoke with all his lieutenants from the Orinoco campaigns, ordering them into position among the trees to hold off the ambush of the regular army. He reconstructed in a dream the famous battle he fought against General Tovar, when he stopped a column of tanks by ordering miles and miles of cane fields to be burned. He heard the sound of the missiles, the murmuring conversations of campaigns in the field, the secret talks, the contented moments studying by candlelight the theses of an oriental dictator. He saw the winter sky and forgot the cold: after seeing the gray sky hover daily over the city, black and crushing at night, he seemed to see in his first desired delirium the Southern Cross, the most beautiful guide of the plains, the cross emerging from the very bottom of the planet, the unfolding, unending guide of his desire and not really finding it, except in his imagination, he let fall a few tears of rage.

Later he walked along the gravel path. The park Butte Chaumont seemed the cove on a lost planet. In the lake near the park offices was a gaggle of swans. Up above was the replica of a faded Greek temple, whose cupola offered a vista of the dry ochre and red leaves that covered the entire area. The leafless branches of the trees resembled the veins of a withered, once fleshy being. In the spring the park would be filled with flowers of every color and shape and the beautiful merry-go-round of playing children. He saw from the temple's cupola the entire vicinity and other distant and dark neighborhoods, peopled by storybook houses. Next to the temple was a cave leading to the little lake of the swans. At that moment he heard strange movements, interrupted breaths, presences

arising from his past, from a twilight zone. He smelled the piss and shit of drunks. The moon cast his shadow and he saw himself in the lake, where suddenly a swan stirred on the waters and passed over the liquid surface with an ecstatic majesty, leaving behind itself a silver wake. He waited a few moments before heading to the reservoir. He aimed his rifle and began shooting blanks at the swan. On the other side of the lake he saw the lost light of a nineteenth-century building, and a piano melody began to resonate in the middle of the night. Its sad notes became lost in the air and betrayed by the wind, until they reached the cavern where they reverberated into Petronio's hearing. It began to disappear in the middle of the beautiful melody, and it was strange to realize that the swan wasn't the victim of his playful shots; serene in the pride of its beauty, he saw it then pass, turning in circles, sketching on the ductile waters spreading, fleeing concentric circles, parabolas, ellipses, gentle motions, as if it were the very swan of the lake and the animal knew it performed for the solitary man, a sad scrap of the war, burdened by a withered glory that now began to cast itself over the water, like an illusory ballet...

During the first few weeks they travelled along an unknown tributary of the Orinoco. They came following bad directions, fighting the mosquitoes and just ahead of the wild beasts. The first day after they had lost contact with the world, Crazy Rincón told them that it was necessary to test themselves in the fight against nature. That they shouldn't be afraid. That a good revolutionary must know the pain of hardship, the madness of abandonment. And above all that they be brave when confronting the worst enemy: despair. And so one afternoon, atop an immense rock they arrived at by circling an impenetrable forest, he saw an even more turbulent river coming from the north, thundering with the unspeakable torment of a thousand bolts of lightning. It was a marvelous sight. Trunks of uprooted trees flowed swiftly by, the roots still intact and covered with soil. The crags impeded the water's flow and formed intense whirlpools and from the distance the sound reanimated Petronio's feelings. He discerned an islet in the middle of the immense torrent and said to his followers, OK boys, we're going to reach that islet now! One of the youths refused and he threatened him with his revolver. Faggot! You're going to be the first one there, here we're going to learn how to battle infinity! They slowly descended the rocks. Petronio led the way, dressed in a khaki jacket and baseball cap and with a machete on his belt. Behind him came a group of five, and behind them, much farther behind them, taking turns with some heavy knapsacks, were another ten. A few were city boys who felt like they'd been tricked into some stupid adventure, like they'd been sucked into a whirlpool of madness; others, native guides, felt

heartened behind their “little doctor” and thought they were on their way toward glory, a secret paradise until then prohibited to them, but which guarded marvelous surprises. It took them over two hours to climb down, owing to the uneven ground and ravines separating them from the river bank. It was getting dark. The mosquitoes began circling more fiercely in the luminous rays of the full moon that appeared when the sun was a simple orange gleam spreading over the horizon, covered by wafts of purple clouds. We’re going to camp here for now, he told them. Tomorrow we’ll see about crossing the river. The fifteen boys and two or three older youths who arrived much later didn’t give much credit to their fiery leader’s plans, but they accepted the challenge. If we conquer the current and reach the island we’ll prove we can do the impossible!

The river flowed furiously. A spectral silence was composed, taking in the din of the waters, itself a kind of silence, an unknown side of desolation. They settled among the trees. A few men threw themselves down on the riverbank and to relax laughed about each other and told jokes about the past they’d left in civilization. They were happy despite the risk of their endeavor. Petronio was right: revolution was something beautiful, an adventure that led to the knowledge of human weakness, a type of purification rite through which one encountered a unique salvation. Night fell. The moon reigned alone in the sky and they saw planets passing and wandering meteorites fall. A few of them watched Petronio speaking with the three eldest by a palm tree, and they became proud of their leader. Chalo, a twenty-year-old boy, headed toward his companions and told them Petronio was a genius. Hours passed and they all wished to sleep so morning might arrive more quickly. They gathered together in groups to rest. Some stayed in the center of camp, others at a distance. A few hours later Petronio, who was on watch, heard a panting near another palm tree and in the blink of an eye saw a huge puma leap onto one of the boys sleeping next to a backpack. He heard a dry scream of horror resound along the river bank and jumped up ready to fire. But it was too late, for the ferocious being lept away with surprising agility hauling its prey, clamping the

boy's neck forcefully in its mouth as it disappeared into the darkness. A murmur swept through camp and the coldness of death shuddered through the men's bodies. Petronio, his rifle still in hand, returned from the spot where a trickle of blood testified to the misfortune; he looked at no one but crossed to the bank of the river and shot at the moon, then turned toward them raising his hands. Boys! I understand your silence, I understand your terror, but this was preordained, I want to tell you he's not the first, nor the last, I don't know how many of us will make it, we must enter the war zone and confront General Tovar, we have to cross the river and we can't fly over it. Let's be prepared for the worst, let's be on guard so neither this beast nor any other will catch us unprepared. We'll post guard. And remember: we have given our lives to a cause. We're not afraid of death!

Morning dawned. In the early hours they made some rafts, cutting the wood themselves and fastening it together with reeds. Petronio took command of the first group to set off, leaving instructions for the others to do the same when he reached the islet. The river flowed gently. They heard the sporadic shrieks of wild animals. The raft followed the river's course. Petronio raised his right hand and with a grave gesture bid farewell. On the bank Epaminondas Cardona, the second in command, gave orders for the second contingent of five to prepare to cast off later. Petronio's raft began turning, held steady for a few moments, and then started to tilt indiscriminately from side to side while the men kept balance by moving the knapsacks accordingly. Petronio fixed his gaze on the distant islet and let the fresh morning wind chafe his face. He brushed aside the hair fallen over his forehead. A few birds crossed the sky. On the other side of the river lay the dense forest. It made Petronio's eyes shine. For a few moments he was disconnected from reality and began to feel the happy childhood he had spent in the Andes, near the coffee plantations and the vast mango groves covered with coffee dust. And in a flash he had the illusion of one day arriving at the presidential palace mounted on a burro, amid the uproar of the crazed masses and the metallic and glorious report

of the trumpets. But here were the river currents and the reeling raft, the watchful face of his subordinates, the islet just a few feet away. They landed easily, climbed the promontory and flew their flag. Epaminondas ordered the other contingent to cross the river after the boys gave their jubilant signals. The raft floated and quickly followed the current. It soon reached its destination and Epaminondas set off with the last group. On the islet Petronio called them together and said: We must achieve power, our only desire is to create a great, happy, radiant country. And to achieve this we have to use violence. May the sheriffs of the Andean Republic and their corrupted titulars tremble on their infamous daises! May the ill-fated matriarchs and the allegorical Attilas bite their nails in fright in the face of our daring venture!

Epaminondas sat on a warmed rock, slowly chewing on a blade of grass, and looked at him with penetrating, skeptical eyes. The other boys listened to him enthusiastically, ready to applaud. The dream had just begun and they had not yet entered the obscure fissures of dissidence and the secret tunnels of envy and greed. From the outset Epaminondas felt an antipathy for the improvised leader who had just arrived from a city in the highlands. Petronio had a peculiar physiognomy that made him seem old and young, crazy and sane, friendly and hateful at the same time. He raised his hands asking for silence, then took a breath and said, I want to found a great fatherland, a great nation! Let us go forward! He always spoke with such assurity that no one could imagine just a few months earlier he had yet to experience the battles of a true armed revolutionary. His emphatic speeches made an observer think he was before someone who had lost his youth in clandestine fighting. But the truth was he only played at being a guerilla like he had once played with tin soldiers. He was the typical product of those difficult times, when in the heat of revolution little Robespierres were improvised or a few books became infallible bibles. The great fatherland boys, said the improvised champion of the people, is a country without rich or poor, without executioners or slaves, a fatherland of glory, of honey, of happiness, of harmony, where our children can grow healthy, without

fear. For this we offer our lives, not for a country of men but of angels! The men gathered closely around crazy Rincon, who raised his hands and with burning eyes looked toward the other side of the river, through a cloud of mosquitoes.

In La Enea, the city of his torments, grew cypresses and not the leafy trees of the jungle. The gentle Andean mist wafted through the azalias in the morning. Down below men in double-breasted suits and wide-brimmed hats, accompanied by women with beehive hairdoes and see-through wraps and high heels, strolled along the sidewalks of the train station. Dressed like a little sailor, he arrived with his mother. They stopped to get flowers, delaying their descent on the modernist steps of Los Fundadores Park. The smell of coal and oil permeated the large halls of the beautiful building constructed by the Catalan architect. It was monumental, immense, between gray and green, with French cupolas and windows framed by baroque ornaments. In the distance other trains were delayed and a locomotive suddenly passed like a shot. Far away could be seen the precipice that led to the rugged terrain of the Olivares, continued north, and lost itself amid the green landscapes and the cold, high places.

He played among the legs of people waiting for a train to take them somewhere else. Old men in ponchos, old women in shawls, old men with canes, ladies with black handbags, thick stockings and feathered hats. The green interior walls held nothing but enormous blackboards on which were written mysterious time schedules. The deafening noise of the ticket buyers made each voice imperceptible. The sweat of bodies near windows took on the acrid smell of a crowd.

The ghostly sound announcing the passing of the coal-powered trains rumbled through the gulleys and ravines, and the people hastened to take up their suitcases, coats

and bundles. The smiling mother took him by the hand and pushed him through the door as the train arrived at the station. It looked like a dragon to the child. A magical caterpillar charged with fire, shrieking and giving off smoke. A metal dream with strange limbs dressed in a religious mantle joined to iron wheels, vomiting a bluish vapor. Petronio looked from behind his mother's skirts at the travelers who began to lower their belongings from the cars and shout greetings from the windows. The mother waited and waited but no one arrived. She cried in silence while the child played. Then they returned to the steps, climbing them between the azalias and cypresses. Above them the city hung on the ridge of the mountain range. The black cathedral, two hundred meters high, constructed of solid concrete, seemed from there a fantasm, a long-legged animal with aggressive eyes. Old Chryslers with oval hoods and inflated, rounded forms passed through the streets.

The train began moving off to other distant ranges and the child returned with his mother crying over the blue cloth of his sailor suit and his little polished patent-leather shoes. His mother walks with him near the Catedral Primada. An idyl sun stands over the square, near the statue of Simon Bolívar. The old Chryslers drive down the avenue like mysterious, unknown birds. The boot blacks work beneath the cypresses. In the foreground the city hall, constructed by the Catalan architect who built the train station, appears like a fantastic cardboard palace and from it leave men dressed in double-breasted suits and wide-brimmed hats. They climb the stairs to the top floor of an old mansion and from there look onto the street. The midday siren sounds. The mother, her lips painted red and her hair recently permed, her face still young and her eyes an intense and peculiar black, watches from the balcony with her other friends, dressed in dark dresses and high heels, with beautiful gold and emerald broaches pinned to the lapels of their finely tailored coats, and they begin to applaud the procession coming from the regions of the abyss. Thousands and thousands of people applaud and pack the sidewalks, spilling over the police barricades. Many long Chevrolets and Fords arrive,

along with flower-covered jeeps, groups of guitar players performing traditional music and flocks of trios playing boleros, and a carriage adorned with wreaths pulled by a roan horse. Inside it a woman waves her hand high and the crowd shouts, "Luz Marina! Long live Luz Marina!" showering her with confetti and streamers, red and yellow roses, agapontos, primroses, novios, marigolds, magnolias. The queen has just passed and given the city of the Andes the greatest triumph in its history. Later the telephone rang and the mother went to answer it. She immediately burst into tears and fainted. Her friends carried her into the bedroom and took the boy, dressed like a little sailor, to a patio to play with other children. The afternoon quickly passed. Petronio is tired now and sleeps on a sofa after his mother's friends have given him a bottle. Night falls. Around midnight, half asleep, he felt a movement in the house. The murmur of people arriving and leaving and knocking on the door could be heard. They didn't let him leave the back room and a silent woman, covered by a black shawl and holding a rosary in her hand, watched over him until he fell back asleep. The boy awoke after a strange, ethereal, otherworldly hour. No one was in the room. Outside he heard crickets and cicadas. He looked out the window at the full moon and all its formations and then opened the door a crack onto the hallway. Murmurs could still be heard. The clock of the cathedral drily struck four. Petronio saw the hulking mass from which the four bells came and felt terror. It was the first time he was ever afraid. The black spires of the haunting church, threatening and much bigger, an entire block and a half long and two hundred meters high, cast shadows over the patio. It was built in the boom times with the effort of the entire city of the Andes, stone by stone, beam by beam, rose window after rose window, stained glass over stained glass, until it appeared a prehistoric animal capable of dominating with its presence not only the city, but as well the villages scattered over the slopes of the coffee plantations of the mountain range and the neighboring valleys of the fiery land. The boy ran looking for his mother and saw between the slits of the door a titillating light of terror. He pushed it open and saw the black casket

surrounded by candles in the middle of the room. Around the catafalque, on chairs arranged in order against the walls, sat women consoling his mother. They prayed. The candle light created in the space of the room a surface of undulating shadows and projected in turn against the white adobe wall the rectangle of the casket, which seemed to tremble and float in the air, as if possessed by a horde of succubi.

The next morning a band arrived in front of the house and began to play solemn funeral marches while the crowd squeezed through the door. The procession left the house and headed toward the Catedral Primada, entering it by the stairs in front of the city hall. The mysterious mouth of the church swallowed up the people and inside, beneath the immense dark naves smelling of incense and burning holy candles, a solemn funeral mass began. Among the inspired organists was the marvelous Cuervinio Timegestro, a graduate of the Trieste conservatory. The archbishop officiated the ceremony at his golden altar. The echo of the requiem resounded off the walls, the confessionals, the icons of the Virgin of Sorrows, the Sacred Heart of Jesus, the Nazarene, Saint Martín de Porres, Saint Vincent de Paul, Saint Cayetano, Saint Peter Claver, Saint Ignacio de Loyola, the Miraculous Virgin, and others, small ones, hidden in bat niches full of pigeon droppings.

When it was all over, the procession headed down the main street. A long black vehicle led, its windows covered by black curtains; behind it came a number of cars and buses full of people. When they arrived at the entrance to the cemetery the curious crowd impeded for a few moments the pallbearers from lifting the casket. After they managed to force their way through, they descended the sloping road near the illustrious pantheon designed by the architect Farreni i Pociello for the Ruiz personages, and finally arrived at their destination. The gravedigger, aided by some boys, fastened slipknots around the coffin and slowly lowered it into the hole. The admirers of Petronio's father, a direct descendent of Nepomuceno, tossed red roses. Then the gravediggers went to work. They shoveled in dirt and afterward laid a concrete slab over it, finally sticking on

the marble gravestone with the name Nasciencemo Rincón Ochoa. The fitting drizzle of the afternoon, the unending rain of the Andes, dispersed the crowd and in the church of Christ the King sounded bells and more bells.

Zouzi found crazy Rincón an easy job to survive on in Paris: taking care of an elephant. The work consisted of watching all night long an elephant named Catalina, making sure she ate at the right time and didn't do anything wild. She belonged to a well-known circus and for long periods of time in the winter was confined to a cold warehouse on the rue Richard Lenoir. Foreign watchmen followed one upon the other, driven away by the penetrating cold that dampened the walls and tiles of the place. The elephant remained nostalgic, for though captured in Africa and brought there almost ten years ago, she still hadn't adapted herself to the hectic city life. At times she bellowed, creating echoes in the enclosed space, invoking her ancestors and the green landscape of the African jungle where she had happily grown up. When this happened, Petronio caressed her ears and back and gave her sugarwater and gingersnaps she contentedly devoured until she fell asleep. Her eyes half-open, she would slowly chew her food or watch the gentle movements of the old curtains. Petronio played his tape deck, listening to the melodies of Morocco, Egypt and Algeria; voices shaped by a lament of the sands, lent to him by Zouzi and a few other friends from the Street of the Solitary. The music drifted through the attics and hollow rooms where were still found old powdered wigs, strange levers once used to simulate waves on the sea, fabrics, threadbare costumes, terrifying and smiling masks, reflectors for projecting candlelight and special brooms to put out the resulting incendiary effects. It all seemed to emerge from the remote past like proof that amusement and theatre have constituted the monstrous mirror of an ephemeral

existence. Many decades, perhaps centuries earlier, works of theatre and pantomime spoofing the ruling and poorer commercial classes were undoubtedly performed there. So it wasn't strange that in a later time the decrepit place was used to shelter the elephant Catalina. Petronio found in other attics many more things, rose-colored parasols with markings from Normandy; fine cardboard with drawings of the seven wonders of the world; translucent colored papers sketched with minotaur heads; Japanese screens with drawings of naked geishas and lithographs with maps of the cities of the new world. He found everywhere surprises in the termite-eaten trunks, like an unbound edition of a book of poems by André Chénier or the letter from a condemned man to his only daughter. On the walls could still be seen notes written by lovers or the records of receipts, as well as the traces of faded murals or pornographic posters. Thus the warehouse became a kind of box of inexhaustible surprises. Accompanied by an elephant uprooted from her jungle, the password of a voracious colonialism, Petronio lived amid the ruins of an ancient variety theatre and tried to hear in the dust the voices of the worm-eaten actors, as if he were attempting something easy and tangible. He didn't need to read or engage in dialogue to feel read or engaged in dialogue by the stars of pantomime, the wizards of stiltwalking or ventriloquism; and he didn't need to pray for there to appear on the stage blurry figures of beings painted with artificial smiles or greasy peals of laughter. He had found no better place to feed his illusions and fantasies. His friends considered him fortunate, for other people from the Third World had to devote themselves to such ignoble tasks as cleaning the toilets of the new philosophers and writers dedicated to anthropology or sweeping and vacuuming the apartments of people who left notes like: "Enlevez le caca de Zizi."

By this time, Petronio knew well the weave of the city and was acquainted with the bars of Saint Germain, where Latin American and foreign drunks flocked. He spent a few hours each day walking through the streets filled with Japanese tourists. He slept with an occasional girlfriend or in small garrets when there was a party. Wednesdays and

Saturdays he took a break from the elephant Catalina and devoted himself to solitary revelry. He would go to Chez Georges on the rue des Canettes and there meet with the nocturnal vagrants. It was a tiny place, the walls battered and covered with posters depicting images of legendary artists like Gerard Philippe and Antonin Artaud. The massive wooden tables held marks left by decades of fingernails and pencils. The oldest drunks stopped at the bar and looked at girls in the mirror who gaily gestured through the smoke of their Gitanes. The liquor bottles gleamed on the shelves while the waiter hastened to serve drinks. Compared with the huge cafes of the Andes, frequented by the adult inhabitants of the cities who devoted themselves to discussing politics or business while tangoes played in the background, here the theme of politics only arose from time to time, perhaps initiated by a recent arrival who had yet to rid himself of false illusions in obligatory paradises. He spent happy hours of solitude and madness in this atmosphere, next to the windows covered by the fog of a thousand breaths that looked onto the street. At times he read a small book or looked at his hands, their tissue slowly renewing itself. It was no longer the same smooth adolescent skin, but deeply marked by thick callouses. Traces, weaves, roads, streets, twisted paths travelled and still to travel. The minutes would pass and he would look at the faces of the other solitary people, sad-featured, blank, opaque faces like those of dead fish and he would have another drink and another until some guy or woman approached him, a different one everyday, and started up a conversation. The crepe vendor from the corner near the church Saint Germain, the fallen existentialist, the affectatious Lolita overtaken by the years, the Antioqueno mountain man who didn't speak a word of French and stuck to you like a leech in the bar, or the old Spanish exile with an angular face and modest polyester suit, the Arab woman, the bearded grouch, the Russian woman in a coat, or the superliberated native from Cali who greeted him every day by grabbing him in the ass. How had he arrived there and under what circumstances? This was one of those public questions made ostentatiously within the hearing of some girl attentive to his tragedies. He

travelled in a ghostly train that offered him surprises at every turn. The girl whose turn it happened to be would listen to him without being able to uncover his complexities, or would laugh when he told her he took care of an elephant or would try to find in the lines of his hand the mark, the password of his destiny where it was written some guy from the Andes would one day take care of a nostalgic elephant or drink wine in a bar he'd had no inclination of the day he left for France. He would end up later on a corner with the sad-eyed, angular-faced Spaniard, listening to a story even sadder than his own, an orphan's story of long trains filled with children abandoned by the war and stations in lost cities where ladies dressed in white uniforms received them, taking them to cold orphanages ruled over by fat and angry women. The conversation would wander to another table where an Arab girl with lovesick eyes would look at him or to another table where a dark-skinned man called l'Azteque tossed a coin in the air and laughed each time he saw the side on which it landed on the floor. Thus the hours would pass, the images blurring one into the other, enchaining themselves, becoming confused into a sole braid of colors and movements, coiling like a snake on the brilliant floor of cigaret butts and scuffed, sweaty shoes, expanding like a smoke ring until it crashed into the misty windows and escaped through an aperture into the black night of the wet street.

Having already penetrated to the depths of the jungle, crazy Rincón climbed a mountain ridge and saw the mouth of a cave. It was midnight and he was accompanied by four faithful boys, unable to sleep while the night delivered to them the jungle secret. The echo of the sounds of calling birds repeated itself endlessly until it reached the depth of the cave and then it returned, entangled and absorbed in self-memory. They entered, walking over the humid gray floor. Their steps were lost in the hollowness and their shadows multiplied on the walls covered by moss and dead leaves dragged there by tenacious winds. They stealthily passed through several chambers until they came upon one, where, like immutable witnesses resting against the wall, lay disfigured mummies and skeletons covered by the dusty film of time.

In his youth, Petronio read that the savage tribes preferred suicide to surrender. Many of them committed mass suicide, awaiting death resting against the walls of a cave. He also read that Humboldt, during his trip on the Orinoco, visited a lair of the remote past, contravening the customs of those descendants reluctant to violate the gentle, polished material of forgetfulness. And now Petronio found himself by chance in one of those visions arrested in the solitude of delicious anonymity by the centuries. He imagined them fleeing their enemies on sleepless and agitated nights, fleeing with eyes reddened and sore like firebrands of fear's ember, fleeing by rivers and through dense jungles, dragged along by the hatred of abandoning the peace of their lands, until,

exhausted, they made their way to this cave and in silence, with infinite patience, waited for a death that was preferable to defeat. The old wise men with furrowed brows undoubtedly looked upon their followers, men, youths, warriors, children, half-naked women with flaccid gray breasts and long black hair, looking down at the ground covered by moss and dried leaves. The skeletons lay covered by clothing frayed by the centuries, the blue and red still perceptible beneath the dust and they seemed apparitions, sudden holographs animated by the irregular light of the smoking torch. Petronio had dreamt of this moment since his childhood and for a few minutes forgot he had taken up arms, forgot that some time ago he had abandoned the city, had changed neckties and double-breasted suits for khaki pants and military boots, undertaking an adventure his friends knew beforehand would be a disaster. But the sudden encounter with his distant ancestors in a ritualistic and peaceful position, namelessly covered by the years, their arms crossed meditatively, appearing to him prophetic signs from the singular inferno of his childhood dreams, justified for him all past and future sacrifices. As a child, he would look for hours through blurred photographs of prehistoric temples. He copied Mayan engravings, drew feathered Aztec serpents, faces of prehispanic figures bearing angry teeth, intricate Incan labyrinths and he wrote poems of adoration to those ruins which so intrigued him. Not until much later did the tin soldiers begin to mingle with his initial passion. He imagined Lake Titicaca, the long esplanade of Teotihuacan, the majesty of the Oaxacan hill where crazed priests in the fog of some strange knowledge constructed Monte Albán and he read of the war between other savage tribes that regretfully left neither stone nor monumental trace, but still bequeathed beautiful legends that flowed now like the waters of an enchanted fountain. Boys, he told them, I love the great civilizations, but the life of these tribes fascinates me much more--they were alone, waiting, with no great fortress to protect them from defeat. He crouched next to the torch, facing the skeletons and making his own rest there awhile listening to him. The Pijaos, he told them, preferred committing mass suicide over surrendering to

the Spanish, and this may befall us if we are forced to give in to our enemy's force. Fatherland or death, boys! These old great-great-grandfathers appear here today to teach us of dignity. The four young lieutenants had never seen a man of arms speak so emphatically. Petronio spoke to them of an unknown honor, of an unknown world still to be. None of them would ever forget this magic moment. A few bats emerged from the depths of the cave, flew nervously about and left through the mouth of the cave leaving behind a wake of wind and then more and more followed while the men huddled next to the torch. When something similar happened to Humboldt, said Petronio, he didn't follow his guides' fearful advice, but wished to observe carefully the marvel chance had offered him. Humboldt, boys, companeros, was a great man, a wise old man who never stopped searching or wished to limit his discoveries. After seeing fall the famous meteorites that filled with sparks a night of the Grand Colombia, almost two centuries ago, he took refuge in this jungle, he went fearlessly to its very depths, and he knew well the meaning of discovery, just as I understand it now. Petronio grabbed the torch and told his people it was time to go. The flames of the torch distantly caressed the twisted bones, heaped up there like emanations of stone, forms produced by the earth's incessant flow. They descended gropingly, dazed, by the same path they'd broken hours earlier, each one thinking of his solitude. Down below the river surged and shone with the intensity and strong luminosity of the full moon. The distant hills and valleys seemed part of an unreal landscape. It was all too beautiful to be true. In a flash, while cutting a branch with his machete, it occurred to Petronio that everything was unreal, even himself.

When crazy Rincón turned fifteen he returned to the train station, but it had already been eaten away by time and the decadence of the city. He remembered then the wound time had left forever in his heart: the useless wait for the father already assassinated when he and his mother waited with knowing smile and filial love for him to walk through the door. This time he was going to meet another boy who wanted to invite him to participate in a revolutionary movement. He was also a youngster, but with a mission, in the name of other hidden leaders, to initiate Petronio into the mystery of happiness. They met in the train yards, in an old moss-covered locomotive. The two adolescents sat face to face, promising they would never let their arms be twisted, and began to play at revolution.

The railroad was built during the commercial boom and dismantled with the advent of the difficult years. During the first period they built three beautiful, French-style buildings, from plans of Antoni Farreni i Pociello, the same man who constructed the Teatro Olympia and several mansions in the heart of the city. For many years the site was the transportation center of the Andean summit, but time and poor administration had undermined it. Traffic diminished from the high costs of operation and the difficulties in scaling the slopes of the mountain range, which became increasingly more eroded and dangerous. Coming from the nearest city meant climbing torturous precipices and curves 1500 meters above sea level, leaping through mists and over streams, traversing eroded and tormented terrain, and evading electrical storms whose lightning bolts set fire

to the trains. During the last years everything remained in the most absolute desolation. Only merchants and traders used it to pick up shipments of products from the sea or valley or to deliver coffee to the capitals.

The buildings were watched over by guards charged with protecting one of the most vain and gloomy examples of haughtiness built by local leaders who had dreamt of converting the city into a cultural center. Postcards depicted the buildings in the style of Gaudi, their chocolate roofs like houses out of Hansel and Gretel. Grand arcades and pilasters, enormous portals of fine wood helped evoke filmy late afternoons, afternoon fogs, dispossessed castles.

Few cities as beautiful and prosperous had been built on the crest of the Andes. Only Manaos in a different era held such pretensions. Petronio's city was the commercial and industrial center of the range, thanks to the coffee produced on the humid slopes. At the turn of the century it was leveled by a devastating fire that left not a stone standing. The glorious times were still far away and as nothing was impossible for those men, they constructed over the ruins once again the city of their dreams. They had to haul by mule the cement needed to raise the new buildings, such as the Cathedral built over the ruins of the first one. In a few years the prosperous village became a modern city, full of force. Destiny had wished to assassinate it and what resulted was a rebirth. Invincible men turned it into a reality and on the day a new era was inaugurated the priests and bishops of the cordillera were there endlessly sprinkling holy water and after the political speeches three days of religious ceremonies began. Organists took turns thundering on the cathedral's organ and in the afternoons the orchestra and symphony played hymns while the residents waved green flags with a volcano in the center. The prayers defied the volcano of the high mountains that had erupted in the distant past, leaving an eternal trace of lava. Later came terrible governments and la violencia that lasted for decades. Petronio Rincon's father was one of the last victims of the governments of those difficult times. Two years before his death, Petronio's uncle Epifanio was killed with no chance to defend himself, a victim of the terrible bands of the government.

Everyone in the wrinkled relief of the range held a grudge. Those who came from the most

distant villages and who had experienced the killing more directly were left with an opaque gaze and extinguished voice, like the living dead. When they reached the city, they frequented cantinas of silence and darkness that created a gloomy atmosphere of coffee and brandy drinkers. The first few times crazy Rincon went to one of these bars, talked into it by friends his age who had been regulars since they were kids, he felt the same horror as when he opened the living room door and saw in the shadows the catafalque of his father and the allegorical circle of praying women. In the bars he compared the tango to a moribund prayer, a funeral oration, and the whores seemed like mourners at a burial of the living and for this he never returned to those places. He was sure he would try in bed to convince the whore into joining the ranks of the revolution. He always went against the current and preferred reading history books until dawn in a sickly disorder, where he imagined the tin soldiers in combat. He walked alone through the streets and locked himself in the Municipal Library to read books about battles and voyages and decrepit encyclopedias about the world wars. For this he continued to be known as "Crazy Rincón," a dreamer in lands where he was exiled, a dreamer, a utopian in lands dominated by the cathedral and the traumatic memory of the fire and the violent times, a visionary in an epoch of mourners and fleeing soldiers.

Crazy Rincon carried with him in Paris the martyrdom of nostalgia. Certain moments strengthened him, like that afternoon in the Place des Voges feeding the pigeons, or looking through old books on the dusty shelves of some antique store, or facing the modernist windows that reflected his defeated visage. He spent a morning on a cold bench with a bottle of wine and the jabber of children getting out of school, dressed in their little blue jackets and skirts and their small black shoes. A dialogue of silences, of solitudes, of necessities inflamed by the cold or the gray clouds that hung over the city each day. The fragrant wind smelling of little cookies or the dirtiness gathered in basements and cellars. The aroma of coffee, of tea, of liquor. The plaza, the subway station, a hotel like one seen a hundred years before by delinquent tenants, lovers of caskets, vagabonds. The cool breeze of the other night, the filth of the Metro's stairs, the bustle of people getting on and off the cars with lost, moss-covered gazes. The trials of those in love and those alone. The groups of people gathered around the Bolivian musicians, the magician from Bucharest, the black percussionists, the dancers from the Antilles. Assembled and obsessive images. He went through his elephant's warehouse, discovering old objects that testified to the presence of other, already deceased beings. He went up to the attic and pried into crates covered by dust, finding love letters, post cards sent by an American uncle to a beloved niece, prescriptions for expired medications, photo albums. Paris offered him the possibility of losing himself among ancestors

and living and dead people who remained in garrets, sitting comfortably in their moldy cries. The certainty of open veins beating, the live flesh of wars and absences or plans and defeats. Fabrics, cameos, cosmetic cases, old abandoned armchairs, satchels; all of it dispersed among the refuse of the attics. Seated at a table, he stared at the pictures tacked to the wall next to the chimney pipe. There were photos of his father sitting next to a fountain; a silver-tone photograph of Greta Garbo; one of Bolívar's villa, with purple flowers and leafy trees surrounding a courtyard in whose center was erected a mansion with Spanish tiles and adobe walls. A spider crossed the wall, stopped a few moments and then continued on its way. Petronio picked up the photograph of the jungle and ran his fingers over it. He recalled again that recent time in his life when he wandered hidden among the cane fields listening to the incessant buzzing of the flies. The spider disappeared into the shadow of a rafter, and later two others emerged from behind the image of the jungle and slowly headed toward the ceiling. During this period only the friendliness of Zouzi Chebbi cheered him up; his unparalleled cous-cous, embellished with natural ingredients, the smell of spices cooking in the little studio, an exotic song of Samir playing on the record player. They went out together, browsing through Persian markets or looking through the products sold on the sidewalks or listening to the incomprehensible language that carried Petronio new messages. On the boulevard Belleville Paris seemed far away, almost on the other side of the sea. There was no comparison between the streets of the Arab quarter, on Sundays like the side streets of some North African capital, and those in the center of Paris, where eccentrically dressed women wandered about, fire eaters did pirouettes and mimes danced and walked. To enter Belleville was to lose oneself on the other side of the sea. But it was farther away than ever, even much farther than his cold and green world of the Andes, with its exaggerated and exuberent vegetation that crept between the precipices and ravines like a feverish stain, a rare testimony of life, or the torrid sign of the dampened time. There, next to the Arab, crazy Rincon discovered new forbidden zones.

On the avenue Belleville walked women covered by dark chadoras and men in turbans. The Tunisian attempted to develop theories about nation, homeland and power, stirring in his interlocutor the emotion that political discussions had raised in him when he was a student in the lost city of the Andes. A group of Arabs in the meanwhile crossed the sidewalk. A woman sold herbs on a carpet. A cinema displayed Arabic lettering between photos of Bruce Lee and men with swords and turbans. From some chimney arose the hazy figure of Lawrence of Arabia. Zouzi insisted on discussing politics and telling him of strange international plots hatched by Machiavellian agencies against a few opposition leaders of his country. He told him of innumerable secret agents who would have to stalk restaurants and bars while spying, on the trail of drug traffickers and terrorists, pimps and other agents who thrived among the exiles. Thus the two passed pleasant moments until they ended up drunk, staring at the screen where dancers writhed like Salome next to a snake.

One day the Tunisian offered him some Lebanese hashish. They sat on cushions around a wooden table in his studio on the rue des Pyrenees. It was like an antique store, with carpets on the walls and enormous Indian fabrics on the ceiling that concealed the direct light of the bulbs. In the corners were more tables crowded with amulets and herbs and flowers and piles of journals and magazines in the nooks. The room's sleeping area was dressed like him in bright colors. He wore rings on every finger and had a pipe that seemed like a game of tubes and glasses connected with spirals, the huge spaces filled with cognac and other liquors, so that the smoke became purified by the flavor of its elixirs. Petronio sucked on the stem several times until he felt the marvelous halo, a heat that carried him away and brought him closer to things, breaking the laws of time. Zouzi smiled and began to read like a litany an Arabic text, his eyes concentrated on the book while crazy Rincon tried to silently apprehend each of the trinkets that flooded the room, enveloped in the red diffused by the dark lamps behind the silk fabrics and folding screens. He could no longer lie as before, when they asked him if he smoked hashish and he had answered yes. The feeling of flight, of being out of time, fascinated him; the

excitation of feelings turned to his most cherished fantasies, such as power and glory; the whirl of certain rose-colored desert landscapes covering the walls, leading him to cities where he imagined himself the sultan of some bloody army with a harem of silent beauties. He was completely absorbed and travelled rapidly from one world to another, from the past to the present, and he was flung toward the window to regard the square that could be seen from there, a kind of interior courtyard with two or three battered and solitary trees, the survivors of decades, perhaps centuries, of incessant and foolish modernizations. There lovers held each other's hands as the certainty of late afternoon approached. The yellow light of the street lamps rose and the bakeries and butcher shops and markets became full of people who later flowed over the sidewalks among the murmur of students getting out of the lycee. Like a succession of scenes from a movie carefully directed by some insane photographer, the semi-darkness of the interior rooms became an energy capable of moving the inhabitants of the city, changed into the extras of a perfect film. Petronio's reddened eyes passed over the square and became lost in the stone steps that bordered the street up to Pere Lachaise, a cemetery where he went to hunt lost birds; later they flew over the city to Sacre Coeur and discovered the mystery of Paris, city that sucks, traps, drugs those who shed over her their solitude. Sometimes, he thought, neither the jungle nor the cane fields held the enchantment that seemed to cover the roofs and chimneys of the marvelous city. He entered again the room filled with antiques and consumed a little more of what the pipe held, provoking the bubbling liquor and drawing into his mouth the pure, spicy smoke that seemed to enter his mouth like an obsolete torrent of pleasure. Zouzi continued his litany while Egyptian music played, a voice of lament emerging from the speakers like the plea of a woman abandoned in the desert. Petronio felt intensely the effects of the drug and tried to find the roots of that weeping in his own land, thinking the world was one great city divided into a thousand neighborhoods, where crowds of the same color or race gathered together to protect each other from the unknown; a thousand neighborhoods that were in turn the fleeting ports of vagabonds.

After the discovery of the mummies, they encountered General Tovar for the first time and won. Crazy Rincón owed his success to the confluence of two circumstances: the illumination of the wild ancestors and the forced collaboration of the dragons he dreamt of each time he slept. They were huge, he said, like dinosaurs, but so beautiful that the first night, when he and the boys saw them rising from the other side of the river, they remained speechless, hypnotized for a long while, looking at the arabesque of the colorful details, the amusing gesture of their smoking nostrils, the softness of their extremities, the movements of their hands and feet that possessed a feminine grace, especially when they used them to eat branches or rest upon a millennial tree trunk. Epaminondas was the only one who denied seeing them, concluding with his closest friends that Petronio was definitely crazy, and they began to hatch a plot to eliminate him.

Petronio believed the dragons had come through the air, over the Pacific, struggling against distant storms and aggressive winds until they reached the coasts of the Americas and they travelled by rivers and through jungles until they joined them in the late afternoon of the plains. With their immense flames they torched the mosquitoes that began spying on them early in the evening; they devoured dangerous snakes, wild animals, they tamed the overflowing waters of the rivers and moved mountains like in olden days, leveling the ground of their struggles. They were of every color, the skin of some robed in a pink and phosphorescent tone, translucent like the shadow of angels.

The females were smaller and covered by a soft yellow and green and their faces expressed the most tender and happy endearments that they lavished on the males. They were coquettes, and they saw them rising in the late afternoon, expressing their love. Later in the night they heard their moans, like the weeping of ships in a slip or faraway, on the high seas, when the thick trill of their fiery bellies dispersed itself over the calm waves of the ocean. They never forgot their faithful presence as they advanced upon the enemy. Petronio dreamt that on the day they finally achieved power they would accompany them and would be seated in the cupolas of the cathedrals and over the capitol, in the plaza de Bolívar, emitting roars and canticles. Petronio spoke of rivers that seemed possessed by a musky smell of sex that disturbed them all on certain afternoons on the plains. It was them, the dragons, those who made love in the torrential water of the current, expelling a perspiration, a carnal perfume that disturbed the waters. He and his followers smelled the opium of that unmistakable odor and achieved an ecstasy that made them more ready for combat, as if the smell turned their muscles to steel and their blood to gunpowder.

Epaminondas didn't smell any smell or see any dragons. He said for a materialist dreams were only a slogan and the triumph of the revolution was one of reality over dreams. With the face of an onanistic Jesuit exhausted from masturbating to a picture of a Greek ephebe, with gold teeth and his face contorted as if he was taking it up the ass, Epaminondas decided to fix things before it was too late, assured that most of them were on his side, and allowed Petronio and his five lieutenants the tranquility of believing they were followed by the others in their innocent fantasy of providential dragons coming from the Orient. During siestas, when Petronio was absent, Epaminondas instructed the others to set the ambush. Before the month was over Petronio was to be relieved of his command and sent on his way to the other side of the border. They were fed up with his moralizing speeches, his strange customs and gestures, and his obsession with the power of dreams.

But Petronio continued to see the dragons. He saw them making love near the waterfalls, sighing with pleasure, the female dragon reclined against a rock so the male could better penetrate her. At the same time they heard the music of yet known arpeggios, the hot liquid of their orgasm and then they smelled an aroma mingling with the tropical waters, creating a new celestial perfume that later left them bewildered for hours and days, but with an irrepressible force, the force the conquistadors undoubtedly felt when, clouded by the tropics of light and knowing themselves to be in worlds until then inexistent, they confronted the sea of the green land, as if it were the steps to life and death. Thanks to Petronio's dragons, they clobbered General Tovar's army as it advanced with tanks and jeeps decorated by shrapnel towards the liberated zone situated between burning cane fields. No one believed it but they all saw fire coming out of their beautiful snouts. The females organized everything and were the most enthusiastic. The sky burned in the distance. There was little wind.

Suddenly a soft breeze coming out of the south moved the canefields and corn rows of the large estate. The gophers looked for refuge in the unbearable heat and in the distance a reconnaissance plane shone. There was nothing else to do but set the mountain on fire and the dragons began, after bathing and making love, to throw their immense tongues over a vast shaking crystal that reflected the zinc sheet of the sky and then the fire spread through the underbrush, leaving a white wake of smoke over General Tovar's troops, causing him to retreat immediately, while Epaminondas and his people laughed with the hardness of those who don't see dreams, he and his didn't see the dreams, said Petronio, don't see and won't see the marvelous, they won't know what it's like to toast an accomplished dream because they already carry within themselves the bitterness that will consign into into exile all color, the kalaidoscope of good tidings, the obsolete tunnel of surprises, the aura of jokes, the humor of critics and everything will be a block of ice there where should have been a dance, ardent heat and smiles. They will turn with their face of fetid basilisk gray the red, pallid the healthy, deathly the vital,

congealed the fiery, gloomy the cheerful, and they will enchain the dragons in special dungeons where they will die of boredom and cold longing for the liberty which Petronio would have given them.

His city was ominous and gloomy like the immense cathedral of reinforced cement the founders, attacked by the cancer of dementia, constructed in the glorious epochs of economic expansion. The women, dressed in black, guarded an eternal grief for their dead husbands and disappeared uncles, and made their pilgrimages like crows of an evil death through the streets that rose toward the different churches of the city. The women dazedly passed through the wide wooden corridors of their vast houses filled with flower pots of primaveras and geraniums, guarding a sadness that undermined their nerves, they prayed, in dreams they saw the Pope, they gave alms to the priests and they grew old in face of the volcanoes that came to rain in the mountain range.

He grew up among women. The movement of women in the kitchen, in the corridors watering flowers, in the salons drinking hot chocolate. Diffuse memories of gigantic Christs above dense, green hills, gold crucifixes above the headboards of the beds of widows and old maids. A city floating in the mist saw him grow up and play in the cobblestone streets, cut esparto and chase balloons in the distant sleeves of the sierra. Voices, processions, a million candles in the front gardens and in the walls of the ranch houses, candles on the steps of cathedrals, candles, candlesticks next to the sacred heart of Jesus, candles giving off the smell of wax and a delicate luminosity that cast shadows over the adobe walls of the old colonial houses.

Azelias, primaveras, daisies, calendulas, lulos, dalias, chrysanthemums, disseminating a florid odor through the hallways. A tormenting solitude accompanied his dreamful readings on endless afternoons. That was his wild spring, the memorable juice of his infancy, the empty

cobwebs of his myths, the dusty metallic reign that now stirred in his defeated imagination.

Crazy Rincón is now seen in old woolen pants and a wide-collared shirt. His wheat-colored hair, parted on the left, has been washed with soap. He walks, as he does every day, down the main street. Boys lean against the walls and silently smoke cigarets. When afternoon falls the streetlights go up and the bars and cantinas swarm, expelling the putrid aroma of the music of the slums. He motionlessly greets the faces he has always seen and they fill him with a desire to flee, never to return to this city. He looks at the bluish green sky and sees the cathedral's towers, defiant like the horns of a prehistoric creature. Then come hellos, greetings, waving hands, canine smiles, the expanse of a disaster delayed, petrified, drawn in the faces of his compatriots. He prefers to continue straight down the main street, towards the place where there is no one else and the avenue leads to an overlook of the valleys. He nears the abyss and sees, miles away, the titalating lights of the little villages and to see the distant clouds of smoke rising he thinks he must travel, lose himself in distant cities or literary jungles, that his infamous and gloomy world, covered by malediction, could not be the only terrain for his talents. His fellow city dwellers had become drowsy with the plague of pride, stigma marked them and was like a veil over their eyes that prevented them from seeing beyond the horizon. They believed La Enea was the center of the world and they were sinking in its florid shit, their brains enchained by cretinism. He felt like vomiting into the abyss of the valleys, he wanted to spit on the hot earth forbidden in the city, but he couldn't, better he rest on the grass and try to feel peace or hope a magic chrysalis would spring forth from his insides and lift him flying over the cities and valleys of his imaginary world.

Almost always after his walk to the overlook he would again walk along the main street and meet the same specters leaning against the walls, their faces reflecting indolence. In the cafes and cantinas, the same female drinkers with fat legs and cheek bones abused by make-up continued waiting for the eternal big-bellied drunks who spit

on the tiles and then laughed uncontrollably. Such spectacles horrified him and he would go to his aunt's house where he lived alone, pampered like an only son or nephew, enjoying the privileges of being the man of the house. In that house he saw as a child his father's catafalque and the procession of the beauty queen of the world. Within the adobe walls of his room he listened to modern music on a dismantled record player and devoured books, having decided to discover certain secrets forbidden to his companions and he awoke studying heroes or reading boastful biographies. Dawn came and surprised him in some Russian city, there, a hero just threw a bomb at the czar's carriage; on the steppes, the solitary mujic was just shot; on the Chinese plains, thousands of yellow men acclaimed their liberator; suddenly, when the birds began singing on the patio he discovered the incertitude of a condemned man in a Paris prison, the mutilated leg of a terrorist in Belfast, the beating heart of a soldier in the battle of Charleroi, the prayer of someone shipwrecked off Point-a-Pitre or Cartagena, the moan of blacks in a Spanish ship just set sail from Sanlúcar de Barrameda, a medieval knight marvelously faithful to a damsel in a green gown, the irrepressible wrath of a Kaybl, the dramatic rape of Lawrence of Arabia by eighteen Muslims, the escape of Eulalio Guíérrezy Vasconcelos to the north of Mexico, the quartering of José Antonio Galán or Tupac Amaru, the rebellion of a million blacks, Mohandas Gandhi's hunger strike or the harikari of a Japanese writer. The servants awoke at six and began to bustle about the kitchen, from where came the smell of breakfast. On the radio popular songs played and the announcers read catastrophic news. The buses and cars of early risers passed sporadically in front of the mansion. And then he wrapped his bedclothes around himself and through the window observed the blue that began to dominate and this blue changed in tone and the roofs of the houses and the trees slowly awoke, covered by the killer liquid of a possessed painter who wanted at that hour to return everything to that color. The time had arrived when mysterious figures were drawn in the mountains and the towers of the cathedral appeared like the menacing spires of hell.

Just as he had promised upon his arrival, he was going to live in Paris as if it were the jungle and he a solitary hunter. He placed pigeon traps on the roof and in the distant parks and forests strange and ordinary birds became his victims. Large supermarkets, clothing and liquor stores seemed to him gardens of a novel world where he could, thanks to his dexterity and surety, extract the most exquisite flowers. Alien to this world, to useless conversations, he thus constructed the closed world necessary to live without the moon, amid neon lights whose whiteness sometimes seemed the emanation of the snowy Andes that had filled his idyllic infancy, those majestic Andes that revealed through the mist silhouettes of volcanoes, inaccessible and steep mountains obstructed by wavy foliage and below, far below, in the valleys the steaming ribbons of the hot land's rivers, their serpentine sparkle crossed by small, low clouds of cotton candy.

During this period he would walk alone for miles through the nearby forests of Meaux, shooting rifles at a few sleeping birds, such as ducks, and in his globetrotter's boots he would tramp through the meadow covered by the frost of the clear winter night. Nobody noticed when he rested next to a pool beside a large house where a family ate to the sound of strange music. Thus he passed many hours, extracting from the hunt the secret world of fortunate families foreign to the tropics, gathered around a fireplace whose light could be seen on the walls or through the window curtains. Other times he would run through tilled fields and come out onto a highway flooded by bright lights and walk seeing and hearing the passing cars and trucks, lost in his neon jungle, without

inopportune voices or people ready to give him advice; alone, lost, completely submerged in the secret of his solitude, in the contemporary jungle, he observed his long shadow over the highway and the rectangles of metallic light on the bridges, the intense blue light covering his distorted face while he aimed his rifle at the flying images of owls and crows. He waited in the wind tunnel the highway formed with the light and couldn't believe what he saw: time had transported him through imagined fissures and made him wander through a crevice, up a slope, an incline of antipodic stalactites. He was raised in the Andean cold and later ventured in the desperate heat of the the Eastern plains; he came from the tropical cold, near the frozen snows, but also from the valleys, from the expansive plains where the sun bronzes and now, thanks to witchcraft, he appeared on the other side of the world, facing strange, luminous warnings that proclaimed unknown objects, passing over lands that in their centuries were inhabited by frost and vagabonds, by plague and hunger, by the gallows and by the dagger. A black bird appeared, illuminated by the neon light, hovering a fraction of a second above an electric cable. A shrieking, subtle gleam split the blackness of the sky and a scorching smell rapidly crossed a bend in the highway. The bird's remains fell to the asphalt and were dispersed by the speeding vehicles. Petronio walked a few more feet and climbed steps leading to a hotel built over a bridge. That image remained etched in his mind. He waited there until after one and then returned to the city. Now he heard Catalina's movements and saw her in the shadows moving her long snout. He climbed onto the animal's back and began speaking to the walls, gesturing with his baseball cap from time to time to make a point, sitting or standing according to the impulse of his discourse. Later Petronio lay down on the old cot next to the kitchen and slept like a rock. He woke suddenly, startled by a dry and thundering blow that came over the cement floor of the warehouse. He jumped from his bed in fright rubbing his eyes, picked up a flashlight and asked who was there. Nobody answered. It was about five in the morning. The kitchen door was closed. He waited a moment before stealthily opening it. He found the switch with his hand and

turned on the light in the enclosure. He looked at Catalina, sprawled kneeling on the floor, her trunk twisted and eyes open. He approached, touched her skin, put his ear next to her body and understood she was dead. She remained in an impressive position, like a Muslim praying to the gods of the half moon. Petronio, who saw in everything strange knots, secret weaves, began ruminating on the event's significance. He didn't call anyone else, but preferred to stay there until dawn accompanying his friend, his companion that had emotionlessly listened to him during so many nights, with whom he had established a cathartic knot that freed him from daily tensions and especially from the frustration of living an absurd life to which he didn't adapt himself. He left her thus in the shadows, cold, stiff, petrified. He brought along a white sheet and covered her head. A little thread of very dark blood came from her trunk, forming a cursive A as it passed over the cement. Then he went to make coffee, covered himself with his coat, and sat next to her, at the little wooden table where he used to write letters.

He was accustomed to death, although each unexpected passing of a public figure or distant friend raised him to a state of strange lucidity. Death seemed to him an electric discharge liberated by destiny, a necessary eclosion of energy, the antechamber of a new experience not far from the image he kept of his ancestors. Friends died, but they also remained present, indelible to him; he would die and would remain in those whom he adored and detested and in this way he would live on. He was not afraid of death because he knew it was around the corner, waiting, crouched on the hunt. How many times had he been near it? He didn't know, but was sure he had brushed against it many times and remained ignorant of that proximity. When it came, it operated between the coincidence of that hunt and the straight, capricious line that writes the destined epitaph. And now he had had the luck of witnessing an ostentatious death. He turned on the light, lit a candle and then another three stolen from Notre Dame Lorette, arranging a subtle edge of light and he walked around the body of the ecstatic herbivore, tuskless, old perhaps, eight feet high, with rough skin and prensile trunk; turns and turns to drive away the evil

spirits, thinking of his grandmother's death, of a childhood friend's, unforgotten loved ones who beat incessantly, as now would beat through the years the kind and gentle female animal. He knelt and sobbed awhile until a breeze propelled by the light of day crossed the wide room.

Afterward everything was movement. During the morning a few saddened jugglers showed up, seeing something written in this prophetic sign. A beautiful woman with curly hair sobbed a long spell, while her companion the trapeze artist caressed her bent head. The tightrope walkers arrived later and greeted Petronio before bowing to their workmate. The clowns made more of an uproar than the dwarfs, who retreated to watch from a distance, numbed like sheep who felt a presentiment of the next end. The owner offered them a pastis which they greedily drunk. Petronio hadn't slept and after learning the time and place of the elephant's cremation, he said farewell and went and had an unimportant dream inhabited by dragons.

Petronio demanded to be present during Catalina's cremation. Men dressed in blue overalls sprinkled gasoline over the immense body that lay sprawled in a warehouse in Kremlin Bicetre and then went to have a drink in the establishment's canteen. Crazy Rincón, seated on a block of cement, witnessed the mass slowly consume itself bit by bit. The men returned a half hour later and threw the ashes into a tipcart. When it was all over, Petronio went out onto the street and took a bus headed toward Porte d'Orleans. He slept during the trip and awoke only when the bustle of the boulevard Jourdan indicated he had arrived at his destination. Every Friday afternoon at this hour the residents of the capital left for the country or other cities. Young couples with knapsacks cuddled on the sidewalk, waiting for an aventon [59]. The streetlights lit up and luminous advertisements shone along the length of the avenues. In the bistros the movement of drinkers was seen. Ambulances and patrol cars suddenly passed, emitting sad, undulating shrieks and snaked rapidly through the streets while the cold brushed against the walls. Petronio walked the length of the avenue General Leclerc, looking in the store

windows, crossing paths with pallid, lost-eyed walkers. He lit a Gitane, tossed back his woolen scarf, and then exhaled a puff of smoke. German rock music poured out of the penny arcade and mixed with the compulsive sound of pinball machines, amid the gleaming jackets of young homosexuals hanging out in front of "le drugstore." A certain violet spilled out onto the wet street and was cut by yellow, green, and blue flames, cintillating like the colors of a fanatical painter enraptured by staining in his own way the black asphalt canvas. A dog pissed against a tree. A bum spit on the sidewalk. An obese woman with vericose veins smoked a black cigaret next to a lamp post. Three thick-lipped blacks with bloodshot eyes laughed. A blonde whore in cheap stockings made obscene gestures at a young bearded Jew in glasses, hat and long gray coat. And thus began the interminable night, it flowed untiring like so many other nights of remote epochs related in their time by neurotics. Petronio entered a bar and ordered a diablo menthe. At the bar forty-year-old drunks with red veiny noses and swollen eyes staggered into each other, talking politics while the owner repeated the dose of monotonous liquors. From a little jukebox where a pair of young punks were kissing came a metallic, shrieking music, strangled in the orange cushions before it collided into the altar of liquor bottles emitting interior reflections, gleams that in their turn collided against the windows on the boulevard Raspail. Gusts of wind suddenly removed the darkness, and with it arose dirty scraps of paper and used metro tickets. The night seemed to concentrate itself there, over the city of memories a thousand times narrated by voices of frenetic demonstrations, voices of ninety-year-old fishwives, moaning from leprosy or syphilis from other convulsive centuries, the hoarse voices of a million convicts from Cayenne, buried, still lacerated by chains and shackles, the vile voice of a decrepit marquis frightened at seeing the guillotine, voices, rumors, breaths, smacking lips, drooling mouths, fluted whistles, residues of a claustered and

hermetic world that only went out at night, flying over the intact city where the future elderly stained the hours of sorrow between the sound of leaden music and the sparkle of certain coats of lustrous black leather.

Later he ordered a beer and drank a couple more before he left on a new course in Saint-Germain des Pres.

General Tovar cursed for three days, swearing he would capture Crazy Rincón and his followers. But they were already far away. They came to a little nameless village of huts and stayed there a week. Petronio slept in a hammock in a hut near a cane field, and the women lovingly took care of him because he saved the life of a child dying from the bite of a rare insect. One day Petronio awoke to see the girl who had just brought him hot coffee. She was eighteen, her skin bronzed cinnamon, black hair to her waist, full breasts and firm thighs. She seemed like a little gazelle fled from the forest. Stirred by the crazy man, the little gazelle kept looking at him. The man felt ashamed because he had promised himself he would sacrifice flesh for the altars of revolution, but a powerful animal desire overpowered him. When the girl opened the curtain of the hut, a curtain of cheap and yellowed cloth, he smelled her odor like the vapor of a demonic inspiration. He would have liked to take her there on the dirt floor, to bite her neck, grab her ass, deeply kiss her sex, but he didn't know how. Each time the nymph silently approached to remove the plates or serve him steaming coffee, he felt reborn the desire to make her his own. It had been a long time since he felt so impassioned. In his city he had had sporadic relations that were ruined when he tried to convince the woman he was with of revolutionary goodness. For this, when he discovered the adolescent before him, he felt nostalgic for a lost youth that had already begun to wither. Lucia still left him blinded as he always was before women. Her thin and delicate face stirred him, the strong exact lines and discrete smile with which she greeted him; her firm flesh stirred him, her spirited

muscles, the bare feet, the hair, her mermaid hips, in sum the freshness of a youth he had never known. And if he had secretly begun to love her it was because for the first time he had discovered time. During those days of relaxation, while General Tovar prepared a new offensive, Petronio forgot his dragons and began to adore Lucia. He tried to avoid meeting her, but one day while laying beside the brook he saw her come to wash clothes in a long white gown, a ribbon tied around her pony tail. He looked at her, moved, he looked at her while she worked. She smiled when she saw him laying there and he too returned the smile. He was terrified. He got up and leaned against a tree, thinking about what he should do. Later she approached him, leaving the basket of clothes next to the rocks. They talked about the village and the heat. The little girl perspired profusely and on her upper lip appeared little beads of sweat. She ingratiated herself with a tender inexperience, but he had never before dared, possessed by the thousand law tablets of Andean timidity and the possessed and nationalists' ten thousand laws of closed-legged messianism. Petronio took her in his arms as if she were an ill-gotten prize, feeling her mouth and her tongue luxuriously wander with his own, he surrendered himself, he groped the firm waist, the round, hard breasts and her hips he had so longed for over the past few days. First they embraced and kissed against the tree. Then he touched her damp sex beneath the little cotton panties and he felt like fainting. They fell to the grass, entwined in an unending kiss. The little gazelle's legs opened to the pressure of the crazy man who slowly penetrated her, feeling the beating rim of her flesh and the foreign arms caressing his neck and he entered the hot depths where a soft liquid and odor bid farewell, making him lose knowledge in a limitless ecstasy. He heard the little gazelle moan softly as she spread her exhausted hands, like those of a fabulous doll, over the earth. Petronio saw the sun set over the plains, burning between the leaves of a tree, and he felt his body floating as if it had been dispossessed of all materiality. The little girl was there, her eyes closed. She breathed rhythmically and at times her little body seemed to shiver. He admired her face, her strong and dark calves, her feet covered by beautiful

sandals. In the distance the basket of clothes steamed alone while the crushed crystal flowed in an eternal present.

They made love a hundred times and everywhere, on the river bank, next to the reservoir, in the red mud of an artificial lake, near the barbed wire, in huts, in the dry grass and when they weren't together they smelled each other out in order to recognize the trace of love in the other's body. Petronio began to gather flowers--roses, marigolds, agapantos--making bouquets he secretly offered to the little gazelle, hiding her from the gaze of his companions, especially Epaminondas and his followers, behind the huts, next to nameless thickets inhabited by refugee ants, near the animal stables and corrals, always hidden as if he were committing an unforgivable sin, dirty in the eyes of others, although in the depths of his heart he knew it was marvelous, like the paradise he had searched for since his adolescence, and then a kind of illumination made him see things even more clearly than when, blinded by passion, he encountered swamps and torrential rivers and caves filled with mummies and the fleeting bullets of a soulless enemy. Over the vast expanse of the plains, in the lost village placed on the map by a magician, by a juggler, by an escape artist, he wanted to stop time while the others pressed to leave there for dangerous places and he found reasons that each day became less believable, while in the house they had given him his afternoons were more afternoons under the hanging planters and among vines whose violet and red flowers budded with an unhinged violence, and he was ready to invent new strategic pretexts in order to lengthen a love that had escaped him from his first dreams, dragging him towards others that were like mirages projected on the mirrors of volcanic rock. He waited for her on the porch, he waited for her at midnight while all the soldiers slept or the sentries smoked cigarets and played cards while awaiting orders to leave for new adventures. He waited for her near the ravine or in the distant landscape, behind a hill of red earth where only orange flowers grew, regarding in ecstacy the other little sepia lake that towards late afternoon ceased reflecting the morning star of dawn or the light of some distance blaze, beyond the

possible limits of the astonishing plains. He waited for her with a thousand subterfuges in order to look at the Southern Cross, laying on the grass at the end of the world, on clear nights seeing pass the little lights of satellites, moving among a million stars with a milky firmament, and she began to touch with her little gazelle hands his flacid arms and to taste with her little Bambi tongue the beating chest of Petronio, the crazy one, the lunatic who until recently had believed in something else and now was the militant of a new party--love, flesh, the sin they had forbidden him. He waited for her faraway in a lost inn where they sold sodas that softened the dog days' edge and later they returned walking through the fields of esparato grass, without seeing the boundary of the green sea of silences, and he thought he was flying, flying, above the earth, flying above the obscure memories of the Andean night that stuck in his dry throat like a damned bitterness.

When he turned twenty, crazy Rincón was a tall, thin boy who avoided everyone but the beggars and whores from the barrio Arenales, who he tried on several occasions to organize into a union. For these deeds his companions in the Law School of the Universidad Andina considered him a helpless lunatic, above all when they saw him together with Leonardo Quijano, Mario the Evil, Nazario and Agaucate, a few of the many pleasant beggars who crossed the city from bridge to bridge with sacks and satchels on their backs. Petronio was convinced organizing them would succeed in overthrowing the government of dona Berta Arnulfina Ochoa, the wicked woman who acted as the immovable tyrant of the Andes. After several meetings where he offered them succulent meals and good drinks the “clochards” of the summit of the Andes, as they were sneeringly called by a poet of the city, agreed to organize a union and began taking actions that disquieted the legitimately constituted authorities. As nobody would have believed these crazy people were guilty of this folly, the usual ones were punished. Nazario had in his command the beggars and homeless of Hoyofrio, whose fierceness was without comparison. They met on the hillsides overlooking the hamlet of Maria and from there they planned their joint acts. Those on the Olivares side were directed by Leonardo Quijano, who in other times was a well-known and respected person. They met on the bridge of Olivares, where they were allied with the Fundidistas, a group of young rockers ready to rupture the sacrosanct routine of the city. Their most well-known acts were

putting up posters and smearing the walls across from the municipal maternity clinic with pornographic inscriptions. For his part, Aguacate led the tramps of la Enea and its outskirts, who characteristically pissed in front of churches and public buildings and smoked marihuana by the exits of the rich girls' schools, and finally Mario the Evil, slightly apart from the Fundidistas, was the terror of downtown Chipre, a city where his army of wicked youths disturbed the normal life of their neighbors. Dressed in dirty black clothes, red clown ties and old patent-leather half-boots, stylishly set off in leather jackets and hopeless vests and military boots, sometimes naked, sweaty, insupportable, grimy, desolate, the masses of the four sectors kept in check the well-functioning order of the city during desperate and feverish months. The nuns from the Drop of Milk complained, as well as the members of the Guillermo Valencia Literary Salon, the directors of the Symphony and the Palace of Fine Arts, the editor of the newspaper La Ñapa, the governor and his secretaries, the parish priests and members of the military, who accused Crazy Rincón of being the instigator of the acts and held him for five days in jail on only bread and water.

Reaction wasn't long in coming and on the fourth day of his imprisonment his followers took over the city. Foul odors spread everywhere and the offices of the highest dignitaries were sunk into the most disastrous state, provoked by the urine and excrement with which they tried to avenge themselves after so many years of ignomy. The beggars, the filthy plebians, the malodorous took possession of chapels, churches, schools, bakeries, restaurants, jewelry stores and for several hours sacked the places with the goal of profit, then threw the objects away in the street and garbage cans in a watercolor of which they all retained memory. Inside, incarcerated in a jail cell two meters square, crazy Rincón died laughing when they told him about the folly of the maddened crowd, who by evening had devoted themselves to breaking street lights and entangling the electricity and telephone wires, creating an unspeakable confusion while lice-ridden mangy types from lower-class neighborhoods spit on high dignitaries in front

of the statue of Bolivar, whose twisted face expressed the emotion and perplexity that had provoked the historic riot. From north to south, east to west, top to bottom, diagonal to diagonal unnumerable misdeeds were committed, until Berta Arnulfina herself went to the prison where the Crazy One was held, offering him freedom in exchange for his demands, which consisted of declaring the park of the Founders a recreation and amusement site for the beggars, the construction of large, wide tubes where they would be able to take shelter during the strong, continuous rains that lashed the beautiful city of the Andes, and furthermore to declare a special budget to provide lunch and dinner in the most lovely house facing the park, demands that were accepted when the enraged mob was at the point of starting orchestrated vexations against the nuns of the Drop of Milk and the poets of the Guillermo Valencia Literary Salon, composed of the wicked Berta Arnulfina Ochoa's most desperate and unconditional bootlickers. Petronio was carried out on the shoulders of the cheering crowd and taken to the Plaza de Bolívar, where he made a speech known by heart today by everyone, because in it he devoted himself to ridiculing point by point the past and present statesmen of the horrid city of the Andes. Afterward the beggars and homeless paid him homage in the city's most distinguished club, previously taken over by Mario the Evil and his horde. They partied for three unforgettable days, during which they consumed all the liquor and food that had been ordered the Previous day for the fiftieth anniversary of the Ochoa family's government involvement. It took the firemen and sanitation workers another three days to clean up the city and put everything back as it was before, they applied themselves night and day to erasing the pornographic writing and posters put up with the strongest glue on the walls of the most elegant houses and most sacrosanct buildings. It had been nothing but a riot. The promises were never fulfilled, but the act was worthy of remembrance. And after that Petronio enjoyed the greatest credibility among his classmates, but especially among the whores of Arenales, who adopted him like a son, ready to follow his orders when he so commanded.

At twenty-three Petronio, who was just finishing his studies, began to plot a second revolution in the darkened bars and bordellos, where he shared with his whore friends nights of a febril innocence. Graciela, the strongest of them all, rapidly organized an army and that very night they went on strike, despite the protests of the bar owners and pimps, who were intimidated by Mario the Evil's army dressed in black leather jackets adorned with skulls. That afternoon women of all ages left the center of the city, their lips heavy with lipstick and cheek bones covered with exaggerated make-up, in micromini-skirts revealing voluminous legs covered by black-seamed stockings of every weave and texture and blouses that challenged the good taste of civilization. To the cry of we're all whores, even dona Berta and the housewives, they didn't miss visiting any street or plaza, nor shocking any senora, and finally they took over the city hall and spent the night receiving the poorest clients for free in the name of the supposed "Proletarian Sexual Service," installed under the inspiration of Crazy Rincón, who from then on became more suspect and scorned. In his impeccable cloth jacket and vest, the image of an anachronistic and ridiculous youth, he passed into Andean history, his two riots having contributed to the rapid fall of dona Berta Arnulfina and her accomplices. Afterward came a period of drowsiness and Rincón himself was its victim. Bored, no longer having power, he left and became a typical little lawyer of the cold earth, mediocre and without will, devoured by the codes and obscure work of the sad provinces. It couldn't continue this way and ten years after his last exploit, he decided to throw everything overboard.

Like all the other solitary people of the Third World, Petronio never found a place more receptive than the intergalactic cafeteria of the spirit, situated at the University of Vincennes on the outskirts of Paris, which sheltered during the day the most diverse fauna of the world, crazy men, sages, lovers, the possessed. From Latin America came Argentine communists, Chilean Trotskyites, Brazilian samba players, Colombian cocaine dealers, semioticians from Barranquilla, ecologists from Caracas, Bolivian flutists and zampona players, Argentine photographers, exiled Cuban homosexuals, Peruvian writers, Paraguayan storytellers, professors of Náhuatl, bearded men from Managua and San Salvador, Panamanian rumba players, Uruguayan sociologists, Ecuadorian lawyers, and defeated leaders from every capitol in disgrace. From Africa the endless fauna included drummers from Senegal, North African terrorists from Morocco and Tunis, Algerian doctors, Third World theoreticians from the Congo and the Sudan, snipers from Ethiopia, spoiled children from the Ivory Coast, beautiful dark women from Zaire, gigantic muscular men from Angola, accountants from El Cabo, Amadou, Moamars, Alis who wandered through the corridors without understanding much, dazed, removed from their world and placed among tall Polish and delicious French women, eccentric leftists from Frankfurt or Berlin, and swarthy women of the Americas, dancers of the cumbia, jubilant Salomes lost amid vendors of trinkets and abstract books, like the gray sky of those afternoons that Petronio Rincón began between the intergalactic gallery and the classrooms.

His new spot was situated in the middle of a forest of the same name as the university, surrounded by trees, lakes, and abandoned military barracks. The metro went as far as the station Chateau de Vincennes and from there a bus went to the campus. In the summer, the esplanade with its leafy trees took on a certain tropical air. Before entering one of the paths bordered by pine trees, the bus arrived to the parking lot, congested with decrepit autos painted bizarre colors. The students got off the bus, dressed like clowns in absurd hats and clothes from the flea market. An Arab bizarre that sold pipes for Lebanese hash, blouses of Indian silk, pastries made by a nostalgic man from Kabylia, trinkets and junk like sepia cameos, out-of-tune trumpets, bear-skin coats, and English snuff lay spread throughout the dirty and foul-smelling corridors of the university. The detritus and vestiges of urine and dried defecation blew over the opaque tiles and through the entrance and remained in the stinking corners. After passing through the gate, one encountered the intergalactic gallery, as Petronio began to call it. By its placement, isolated and almost clandestine, this enclosure united the world's strangest beings, like the last hippies, wrinkled, dirty, forsaken, whose whitened skin contrasted with the macabre hollows of their sunken eyes; dirty, shitty, pissy old women exposing their genitals, who hauled bags of garbage, empty jelly jars and soda cans; a monstuary of abominable beings, beings half-illuminated by a halo of unspeakable marginality and dulled by a strange force, they were lost in the weave of cement reeds Petronio dazedly saw in the grbage-filled pool that on the day of its inauguration held beautiful girls and blue water. In the Vincennes afternoon, Petronio saw the gray fog reflected in the humid glass windows, he went through the corridors of Vincennes, the classrooms of Vincennes, the toilets of Vincennes, the restaurant, the stairways, the rickety pines and green lawn. It didn't take Petronio long to find a lot of friends who told him of their unreal projects. After a long and ostentatious solitude he found accomplices who tried to convince him of his own lost importance and offered extraordinary possibilities for a vile foreigner like himself. Petronio was an awakened dreamer of castles of

chocolate and ice and dust, but his exaggerated madness didn't equal the most innocuous hatched delirium in the corridors of Vincennes. There, next to the department of Political Economy, a large group of Third Worldists listened ecstatically to an Egyptian economist, then ran behind a German wiseman and tomorrow behind a minister of law with a South American passport. A Senegalese with a big nose, suit and tie, carrying a briefcase, rebuked him next to the stairway and hectored him with a long speech in guttural, tic-laden French. His name was Amadou and he treated Petronio with a displeasure unknown to him. Later a group of his young compatriots invited him for coffee so he might tell them about his adventures of insurrection. Those who had never heard of him imagined they had. In small rooms littered with cigaret butts and dirty papers, anonymous men embraced him and he wasn't without a withered woman to lovingly look upon him with moribund eyes. The weeks went by and nothing new under the sun occurred. Only the afternoon fog, the foul-smelling atmosphere of cigarets, the humour of thirty-thousand marginalized bodies, the jokes of a disturbed crazy man, the din of plates and bowls and the uncertain aroma of the food in the central restaurant, gave a consistency to the university's tedium. One time, amid the crowd, possessed by drowsiness, he recognized the face of the woman he had made a toast with in Buttes Chaumont, but in the blink of an eye he lost her.

To the east, beyond the military barracks, extended the fields where new recruits took target practice. The terrain was crossed by pedestrian paths isolated by barbed wire. Hills, dunes, cliffs covered with underbrush constituted the propitious field of amateur athletes and motocross fanatics. During the day, Petronio began to explore the terrain and pass alone through the wild and barren zone that seemed evil to him. On the far side, bordering an avenue of the forest of Vincennes, were the wide hangars where eccentric rockers rehearsed heavy metal songs expressing the loneliness of the suburbs and the senselessness of life. In a distant, unseen studio, workers rhythmically struck the molten metals or let escape the mournful shriek of wood cut by saws. With a beer

can and a book in hand, the South American waited for nightfall before he left the place with the strange taste of guarding a secret corner of his memory. Several times the secretary of the department of foreign languages, a Tunisian named Dag, lent him his mo-ped and with it he speedily played, following the tracks left by the motocross aces he sped, flew, fell on the barren terrain, he skidded and slid on the clay declines, making himself more and more the owner of the secret zone. On one of those afternoons, crashing into a few pieces of junk, he discovered a green box top, inside of which was a Nazi eagle; after digging awhile he found a few other boxes containing medals with Hitler's face and red and black swastikas. It was a burial that had survived many decades before being uncovered. He lifted out one of the boxes; the next day he returned to dig more and found new ones, vestiges of military boots, shreds of fascist uniforms, faded military caps, leather portfolios replete with bills and lists. Later he came upon a bunker, long ago abandoned, that no doubt served the heralds of the Occupation and he smoked a Gitane, imagining the horrifying quarry over which he was seated. With his fingernails he scraped here and there to clear away the weeds and light layers of dirt, he found new boxes replete with reproductions of swastikas and decorations and yellowed, oxydized papers, lists of German and French names and descriptions of war materiel, such as tanks, rifles, machine guns and evil military trucks loaded with anonymous cadavers. He couldn't resist the temptation of moving through the nave of his memory towards those ill-fated times and he saw on the site an SS contingent marching in ranks near the cement bunker and a captain with a Thanatotic kepi, calfskin boots and breeches, his jacket covered with decorations, gave marching orders to the left and right to soldiers who goosestepped and turned like evil marionettes, with a stoney gaze and lips closed in a rictus of death. Then a firing squad came forward and he directed them toward a large wall where a few partisans dressed in baggy white shirts, cloth jackets and pants wide over their boots shouted long live the Liberation and death to the enemy forces. The soldiers stopped in front of the insurgents and fired on order. The bodies fell without a cry or

scream or moan or supplication and later a dry, absurd silence floated in the smelly, dusty air. Petronio continued digging in other distant places and found new traces of horror. From under a rock he extracted a femur, then he found a worm-eaten tibia among the twisted underbrush of scrap iron and in the base of the bunker a set of dentures with a gold tooth. There in the horizontal and cold expanse he found an inexhaustible quarry of memory, he removed an epoch's souvenirs, he removed death, the mire, the sour reality of madness. With his fingernails, with the point of his shoe he uncovered the cemetery of evidence, situated a few blocks from the University of Vincennes, the other, opposite side, the reign of liberty and dysymmetry.

Petronio continued his vespertine excursions. He lingeringly observed objects, trying to perceive the essence, the demonic brilliance the evidence exuded and for a few moments he communicated with the violent zone of hell, where all limits have been surpassed by the compressive roulette of intolerance and dreams. Nobody knew about his secret adventure. His friends thought him oppressed by a strange depression, a "cafard" as Zouzi said, and for this they preferred not to accompany him to the eastern forest of Vincennes. They left him alone to ponder this supreme anxiety. When the motocross aces were there as well, who without authorization had taken ownership of the esplanade, devouring the earth, he climbed onto the bunker and watched them swarm, converted into bullets. The angels of death overran the quarry of memory and silenced it with their powerful machines, removing the residue of history. There were about ten of them and they appeared in the distance on the stone path rising from the outskirts, their black helmets and leather jackets adorned with skulls and later they rumbled from one corner to the other, shouting when they managed to throw themselves ten or fifteen meters through the air before landing on the ground and speeding toward suicide. An hour later they turned and withdrew, turning into black birds with elongated beaks and disappeared on the bordering highway, heading towards the zones of implacable cement.

One afternoon, after the Attilas the Hun took off, Petronio was returning on the path, carrying in his hand the top of a Nazi crate, when he saw the woman from Walter's bistro in Buttes Chaumont walking alone smoking, a few books in her arms. She was dressed in jeans, high heels, white stockings and an oversized purple sweater. Her hair hung loose and she wore a blue silk scarf. They looked steadily at each other as they devoured the separating space, recognizing each other with the vagueness of a fortuitous encounter. Adela also dwelled in that zone, but at different hours. The freshness of the overturned earth delighted her, as it flowed together with the aroma of the woods and the delicate sound of the streams. It was like a marvelous island that let her distance herself from the uproar of the classrooms and cafeterias where the century's verbosity was regurgitated. They began conversing and smoked a lump of hash that made them jump at shadows in a macabre intimacy. They recounted their lives in two hours and fixed the world in fifteen minutes, until she put her hand on his muscles and prompted him to give her a kiss, reclined upon the bunker of the bloody years. They made love without taking off their clothes, in the cold, listening to the pounding of anvils and the shots of army cadets at their daily exercises.

Adela began to desire Petronio more strongly the day the students of Vincennes beat up the rector. That day they saw together an operata. The functionary, a thin man with short hair as spiky as the bristles of a porcupine, was chased through the corridors and fled shoeless from the insults hurled at him by the blacks and Latinos who accused him of opening the doors of the house to the forces of order. The man didn't respond and made his way through the furious mob that became more heated with each passing second. As he headed towards the central esplanade an Arab struck him, giving him a bloody nose and shattering his tortoise-shell glasses. The two of them laughed so much at the scene they ended up embracing against a tottering post. She listened with an almost canine attention to everything he told her about the world and her skin burned with the desire to protect, to calm the sorrows, to heal the past wounds of a broken man.

They would have stayed forever in the cafeteria talking of those things if it hadn't been for the guards' implacable announcements inviting them to leave. Later they drank a glass of wine at Chez Georges and then spent the night in the nightwalker's apartment drinking Cointreau. She was the first woman who truly managed to erode his feeling of messianic responsibility and it enchanted him that she would have liked to participate in a guerrilla adventure in the tropical jungle. Adela, who was a specialist in South American leftists, found in him the tenderness and naivete that had always lacked in the other savage revolutionaries she had slept with. Her apartment on the rue de Crimée consisted of two rooms, a salon with posters of Che Guevera and revolutionary singers, as well as photos of Peruvian and Oaxacan Indians and Ethiopian warriors. The kitchen was full of small jars of spices and fine cooking utensils. They listened to Bolivian music the entire night, the angular tones of the zampona resounding in the room with the nostalgia of a lost world. In this atmosphere they entwined themselves in a much more passionate embrace, possessed until dawn by a sleep of stone. Another day they went to Versailles. They journeyed by train, observing the little houses from a sepia postcard and the green forests from an art deco dream that enchanted Petronio, because they seemed the settings from a book of timid adventures. After visting the vast rooms of the Sun King, after seeing the immense painting of Napoleon's coronation, after visiting the petit trianon and playhouses of Marie Antoinette, they arrived at the grotto where it was asserted she hid from the menacing mob. A crystalline brook flowed within. They heard the murmuring waters in the darkness and perceived the exterior light coming through a tiny aperature. Adela recounted to him the queen's changes of fortune and taking water from the river bed wet his open hands. They made love there on the ground, hidden from the world, while tourists speaking in loud voices passed above, ever afraid to enter the grotto. Petronio embraced his lover and let the aroma of her body envelop him in a soft dream of ancient imaginations. There was a moment when he mistook the century, wasn't a simple foreigner in France, but a true courtesan of the castle in the

epoch of the Sun King. He imagined a dusty wig on his head and he felt on his body the exotic clothing of other centuries and heard the conciertos of ghosts, theatrical rehearsals and the moans and jokes of whiny buffoons. Versailles revived in him the maddest fantasies, carrying him back to the grandiose dreams of his infancy.

In the beginning the lovers met often, but later the meetings became more infrequent. They walked in Saint-Germain, they made a few sporadic visits to certain friends of Adela, listening to music and reading aloud the diary of Che Guevara, savoring a delicious Armagnac. But due to what seemed a wavering of passion, Petronio observed that Adela guarded a bitter secret her beauty couldn't hide. Such mysteries and apparent indifferences provoked in him uncertainty. But the truth was that the woman, besides having a heart that loved everyone, held secret dangerous ties that rendered hermetic certain aspects of her life. Anguished days thus passed for both of them.

Yet Petronio subtly changed. His contact with love caused him to be more concerned about his dress and personal appearance, it opened to him the until then repressed world of music and art, and it made him more romantic, so that in afternoons of solitude he saw with other colors the world that surrounded him. On a trip to Bordeaux, Berlin, and Barcelona he suffered more transformations, although he never forgot the desire to change the world by any means possible. He sent Adela impassioned letters from Barcelona, postcards from Berlin, he bought her wine in Burdeos and the short lapse of time he passed in those cities seemed like an eternity. In the train taking him to Spain he read *The Song of Songs*, translated by Fray Luis de Leon, and he felt ecstatic remembering the body of the woman who offered herself to him drop by drop, like a terrible apparition. In Barcelona he visited the Parque Guell and the dream houses built by the magician Gaudi and attended an exhibition of Goya's paintings. It all seemed an epiphany: his walks on the flowery, crowded Ramblas; the little wood-paneled bars where he drank vermouth and ate eels and had hors d'oeuvres with beer, amid the uproar

of dinner companions; the majesty of the Gothic quarter with its nitrous smell of other centuries; the variety of products in the markets; the street lamps; the tropics of light pointed to by Christopher Columbus, across Father Ocean. He marveled at this pleasure in living, this new happiness that blossomed as he savored a soda while looking at a replica of a caravelle in the port. He bought books, posters, records of pop singers and an embroidered blouse. He breathed the air like a cherubic blessing while he showed off his new clothes--an English cut sweater, chic pants, a flannel checked shirt and an Indian silk scarf. He grew his hair long and a discrete beard covered his face.

When he returned to Paris, they saw each other over the next two weeks, and one night they went hunting. Adela greatly enjoyed Petronio's stories about his first hunts of swans, herons, doves and cats and how a French journalist had once tasted his cat in pineapple sauce as if it were an exquisite "canard aux ananas." And they toasted that first meeting in Walter's bistro, when he had gone hunting and she to her apartment on the rue de Crimée. While he smoked a bowl of hash, Petronio spoke for the first time about chance and magic. They danced to Brazilian music and afterward went to a party at the Salon Wagram that ended at dawn. Adela's body drove him crazy. Slender, fine, her face softly made up and clothing that always expelled a peculiar aroma, everything together contributed to his agitation. The amorous experience seemed to him a prize for his past austerity.

He travelled to Berlin invited by a friend. They were two impassioned weeks. He chose a postcard with illustrations from the end of the last century, in which two lovers -- a man with slicked back hair and a flower in his lapel, and a woman in a long, silky dress -- declared each other their love next to a Nordic pier. There he visited the Kunfursterdam and drank capuccino and beer while watching the people pass, but what impressed him most was the wall zone and its barbed wire and buildings imprisoned in the tragic time. He had a photo taken in front of the mournful barbed wire. One day he went with a friend to visit East Berlin. The abandoned subway tunnels seemed horrible to him,

where police dressed in gray watched over the past like estuary evidence, and the obligatory division appeared absurd. Finally, after returning to West Berlin, he was invited to a party in Tegel, the beautiful divided city.

In Paris new weeks of joy passed. They enjoyed hunting in parks as if they were in the jungle and they planned to go to South America to enlist in the revolutionary movement. Petronio had new ideas about how the revolution should work which coincided with Adela's. On certain evenings, listening to Bolivian music, they imagined themselves in the jungle thicket, dressed in military green, firing rifles at enemy soldiers. Petronio promised her he would prepare everything, establish new contacts and speak with international charitable organizations who would finance their purposes. Dreams burned: to return and feel the heat, to return and see the mythic palm trees already forgotten in the cold of the north, to smell the aroma of exotic fruits that were only seen in luxury stores or a few supermarkets, but in skimpy sizes with imaginary flavors, to feel again on the skin the rays of an implacable sun, or from the balconies of baharague houses, covered with flowers and vines, to look at the volcanos and vallies out of prints.

Plans, plans, they made many plans, but Adela's secrets increased, nervousness made her irascible and hard. Since the assassination of a legendary leader named Boris Silverman, the woman had been out of her mind, like the companions of her generation who saw in that death a dream aggressed, an illusion that had already begun to wither away. They were youths who at a certain moment believed they had touched heaven with their hands, but were found themselves in a mournful mist that covered it with posterity at the climax of its undertaking. With the first gray hairs and wrinkles, with the presence of the ineluctable illnesses or hypochondrias, youths like Adela became immersed in reality: they would become old. Their great castles of ideas crumbled and with them the spirit and freshness of youth. And then they were left no alternative but desperate acts hatched in the isolation of terrorism, condemning them to the clandestinity and grim tragedy of those who march against the current. Boris Silverman,

whose actions didn't fit with the official groups of the left and much less with those of the right, fell riddled without anybody knowing for sure where the bullets came from. As Adela had ties to him and because the strange leader of the crazy actions had long been pursued, she began fearing for her life and that of Petronio. One day she disappeared forever, leaving the South American in a state of frustration that nothing, neither liquor nor hashish, managed to calm.

After the difficult separation from Lucia, Petronio pursued other places of adventure with his own men. They took canoes down the Ciriguayas River singing revolutionary songs and fording whirlpools until they arrived at a dusty town where everyone was sleeping. White houses raised on stilts where inside hammocks swayed extended the length of a dusty street and skinny, dirty dogs greeted them in the afternoon tedium. There was no mayor, for the last one had become bored and fled towards the plains with muleteers, and since then nobody had taken more notice of the job. Nor was there a priest, for the last one couldn't stand the heat, or the hunger, or the mosquitoes, and left on the dilapidated old bus that passed there every six months. The inhabitants of Eden remained there from inertia, keeping a memory of their dead parents in the mountains or fluvial whirlpools. There was no other acceptable reason for living in the 110 degree heat, in a village that figured on no map nor in the government budget, nor was contemplated in the limited routes of the plains, and anyone arriving there by some dismal chance could only leave on foot, confronting the cobblestones of the dried-out byways or the mud of the rainy season. After the already distant encounter with General Tovar, the authorities lost the contingent's trail and thanked God for the disappearance of the revolutionaries. Toward nightfall, when the breeze came, sleepy fat women and men with eyes reddened from drink came out of a few houses. They greeted them with astonishment, for never was anyone seen to come to or leave Eden. They didn't even know if they were from the regular army or subversives or a troop of actors portraying

soldiers in a variety show. That night a few women laid out for them cots full of thumbtacks in the abandoned houses and offered them refreshments, leaving them for the night with green coconuts and cool drinks of a pearly and hope-giving liquid. Epaminondas was upset because once again they were going to stop and vegetate in a phantom village. Days passed and lethargy began to conquer them. The boys enjoyed themselves by helping cattle cross the river or gathering gigantic bananas or wild guanabanas. Petronio, for his part, played at times the healer and assisted child births, winning with his joviality the friendship of the villagers.

One night he seriously contemplated founding the country of Eden, the first paradisiac territory of America, spurred on by his village friends, who one festive night proposed him as their king. At first the crazy man responded that such a proposition bothered him, but afterward, with the support of four of his most beloved soldiers, he thought seriously about the matter, under the condition they not call him king but supreme chief of the Independent Republic of Eden. This act was too much for Epaminondas, who in a cafe on the main square told his friends they had to finish off Petronio Rincón. But so great was the enthusiasm of the villagers that two days later all the streets and corners were adorned by flowers, streamers, and fantastic arrangements and the women offered drinks of honey and rum to the emotional men that ran through the streets shouting long live the new leader. At six in the evening, beneath the fireworks and to the music of the municipal orchestra who brought out their instruments from cupboards where they had been buried for more than twenty years, Petronio accepted to be supreme chief, declaring that this marvelous village situated near the border with Venezuela was the ideal, miraculous site in which to initiate the battle for man's happiness. Dressed in pants and a white shirt, sandals and red neckerchief, Crazy Rincon was acclaimed when he said the neighbors of Eden would be remembered in the country's history for being the first to believe in the utopia of human justice, in the possibility of changing the world and in the reality of dreams. He promised not to relent

in his military efforts to extend happiness to other regions, to lash from Eden the evil heralds of human injustice and the savages and reptiles who had taken possession of the country over so many years and who deserved an unforgettable lesson.

A pack of dogs barked on the river bank. They walked along the village outskirts and came up the main street barking at the people who began to disperse towards a small house where there were a fiesta and drinks for everyone until dawn and they settled on the podium, barking like crazy at the round and impotent old moon that lit the plains. There were dogs of every color and size: dirty, sticky runts covered with fleas, squalid and mangy hounds from decadent and spurious races, wolves and coyotes whose teeth gleamed while they scratched and turned in circles over the cool floor. Petronio had already gone far, mounted on a mule, a rifle on his shoulder, behind him the band playing Mexican revolutionary marches and European war hymns, and suddenly they sang I'm a pirate sailing on the seas and everyone sang the chorus as they approached the little house where the women were serving cigarets, boiled meat, sweets, veal a la llanera and Germania, the only drink that arrived there from a distant capitol via the river Ciriguayas. The party began and the couples started dancing on the floor. Painted women made up to the last pore danced with sweaty, drunk men amid the noisy crowd, while from time to time they shouted political slogans and long lives and cheers and once again the crowd returned to the band playing cumbia, merecumbe, currulao, salsa. The same band now playing navy hymns and marches undertook with percussion a secret dance of lost islands in the Indian Ocean and everything was happiness and good luck and a drunken insomnia trotted over the seminude bodies of big breasts and thighs and asses that excited the native guides in straw hats. Petronio danced with the prettiest one there, a twenty-year-old girl with swarthy skin and the generous oriental eyes of Madagascar and afterward he danced with a horrifying old woman with large breasts and a grotesque smile who was drunk and said obscene words to the smiles of her old clients, she, the last, the only, the true whore of Eden.

The cabinet was readied toward dawn and in it figured the young lieutenants and village friends who had incited him to enthrone himself as supreme chief of the new Independent Republic. The town hall was installed in an old mansion that over many years served as the refuge for a Nazi fleeing from world persecution. Constructed of wood, in the style of the big southern houses in Mississippi where Clark Gable acted, it stood empty for a long time due to the superstitions of the villagers, some of whom were sure it was inhabited by ghosts and that at night, beneath the full moon, could be heard the barking of spectral dogs that in the month of September appeared and walked through the streets with reddened and phosphorescent eyes. Petronio assured them these superstitions were foolish and that a materialist like himself couldn't believe in impalpable things. Everything can be rationally and scientifically explained, he told them, seated at the mahogany table where, surrounded by dignitaries, he signed the government decrees. Nationalizings, expropriations, free and obligatory education, food and shelter for everyone, were some of the initial measures strenuously applauded.

The days and weeks peacefully transpired. The house was painted white, the doors repaired and the rusty hinges changed so they would no longer squeak. The zinc sheets that had cracked or been ripped off by hurricanes were quickly replaced and the floors waxed by the women of Eden took on again the splendor of past times. The Nazi was remembered with horror. Shortly after arriving to Eden and installing himself comfortably to enjoy the fruits of the enormous fortune secret organizations of his party were able to rescue from defeat by the Allies, he sowed terror in the region, making the campesinos work like dogs on his enormous tobacco plantations. He payed miserable wages and under the protection of conservative governments increased his limitless fortune, managing to influence gubernatorial elections and even financing the activities of don Lauculo Gómez's conservatives, directed by the bloody Urdaneta. His racism could enjoy itself on several planes. He tortured dark-skinned plainmen and assassinated blacks and mulattos under the most absurd pretexts, like them raping the campesi-

nas who belonged to him. The German barbarian instituted the right of corporal punishment and the law of the claw, he created horrendous punishments for rebellious workers, many of whom he ordered fingers or whole hands cut off or in the worst cases eyes gouged out. From his southern mansion, where there were pianos and fine furniture he had brought by the Ciriguayas River, in that luxurious house where his friends drank cognac, champagne and exquisite wines, he passed his days planning new horrors or secretly receiving the “birds,” the assassins, who he financed with ingots of gold held in huge safes and buried in secret places. During his years of residency in Eden he used the name Nacho Palomino. He spoke Spanish very well, even using slang and regional expressions. He dressed like a native and knew so well the torturous paths of politics that he was consulted by the leaders of the Blue Party, who were ready to make the journey to the airport in dilapidated and unsafe little planes. Next to the house could be seen the traces of the landing strip. Petronio found beneath the weeds metal placks adorned with symbols of the Third Reich, belts from Nazi uniforms and pieces of boots. Petronio covered the walls with lime, trying to hide the inscriptions and drawings that resisted disappearing and that supposedly were painted by the old fascist tall in stature, with blue eyes, white skin and graying hair.

The old people didn't cease recounting to him that terrible time. And they assured him that in other inexpugnable sites lived and were still living fugitive Nazis secretly allied to and helping each other. His reign was absolute while the Blue party governed, but when the subsequent governments of these bloody thugs came to an end and new democratic breezes stirred, scandal became a possibility. An anonymous letter was sent to a newspaper in the capitol and the press began to speak about Werner Gerhardt, evil chief of an SS division, the frightening torturer of Jews and gypsies, the inspector of crematoriums, personal friend of Hitler, a trafficker in works of art and objects made of human skin, a dealer in white slavery, the owner of whorehouses in Berlin and Frankfurt, a spiritualist, an illusionist, an escape artist, and a marvelous

chameleon able to transform himself into various dissimilar characters. The press caused the great Nazi hunter to come to the country asking for his extradition, but before a commission could make its way to the plains, the guy disappeared with his ingots of gold and his jewels without leaving a trace, as if there weren't innumerable bastard children with blue eyes he had given to unnumerable women in the region and that today live isolated, outcasts, vile small peasant farmers, hidden in huts with dirt floors, dressed in rags with plenty of blue-eyed children. At the moment Petronio was installed in that house the children of that time were men, tall and straight, but mute: nobody had ever heard them say a word. And worst of all was that despite the Rinconian intention of exorcizing the terrible past, the dogs continued barking and appearing on certain moonlit nights and on the walls of the town hall had to be continuously erased the inscription "Long live Death," that in cursive black letters appeared like a fruit emanating from beyond the grave, capable of challenging the unbearable heat and Luciferian dust of Eden.

Prayers, weeping, nocturnal processions, balloons wandering over the Andean city. Millions of candles lit on the sidewalks and in the corridors of the mansions and ranches of the mountain range. Illuminated churches and Easter saints covered by purple veils and the smell of incense. Streets filled with rifles, women in wraps and men in wide-brimmed hats. Old green Chryslers advancing down the central avenue and among them a convertible with the figure of Father Antón Botero, the new national hero persecuted by the government fearful of his charisma and the overflowing masses which welcomed him in all the cities of the Andean heights, of the vallies, of the plateaus and coasts. The vehicle went all the way down the main avenue until it came to the Plaza de Bolívar, where, making his way through teary mothers and the hysterically pious, he managed to climb the raised platform, dressed in a black suit and black shirt buttoned up to the neck, without a tie.

Petronio is in the crowd and listens to the new Jesus Christ with blue eyes and white face, thick lips and aquiline nose. The man puts his hand to his heart and offers hope while more and more women with children continue to arrive, along with old shoemakers, barbers and tailors hoisting the red banners of renovation. They all enthusiastically followed him, for besides being a priest he was also a revolutionary and it seemed to them easier to follow the former than the latter, because in this way they were covered by the grace of God. Before them, in the City Hall, doña Berta Arnulfina Ochoa had

ordered shut all the doors and windows facing the plaza and had withdrawn to a backroom with her advisors to discuss the needed measures in light of the priest's success. Everyone shouted, electrified, enlivened and with their arms raised high they menaced and insulted the wicked government of the difficult times. This was incredible, for so many years of obligatory peace, lethargy, and foolishness seemed at last condemned to end before the subversive current that managed to communicate this delegate of God, this son of the Virgin Mary turned revolutionary. Petronio listened to him that afternoon expounding to the people, and afterward when he ended amid hoorays and couldn't gather up the carnations and roses and kisses and words of affection with which his admirers regaled him, he was led by his lieutenants to the same old automobile. Petronio followed him on foot. The vehicle advanced with great difficulty through the crowd, while it descended the lofty streets of the city toward an enormous union hall where he would speak about his life and his plans to change the country. Up near the telephone exchange the car could no longer continue, for the street was impassable from construction. Then a man appeared with a beautiful donkey and said to him, father, take this, God bless you and illuminate you, God guide you and feed you with glory, and father Botero, tears in his eyes, answered him with a kiss, mounting the beast to the smiles and applause of the people. A woman appeared by another street with an olive branch and handed it to the priest, who raised it to shouts and hoorays and he continued walking on the street of the old maids. From flowery balconies they threw at him confetti and streamers, flowers of every color and holy water. Petronio followed there at his side, walking slowly and looking into the eyes of the enlightened one as if trying to find in them an inexplicable revelation. The high-road 19 was one of the oldest of the most glorious city of the Andes and some of its houses had been standing since its foundation in 1848. In one of those enormous houses of baharaque and wood awaited him the labor leaders who knelt before him and kissed his hand, to the resistance of the enlightened one. He entered through the vestibule and went to the large hall adorned

with wreaths. Father Botero prayed at the altar of the Virgin of Sorrows and said he truly regretted the fact the archbishop had prohibited him from celebrating mass at the Catedral Primada, but to hold it before the workers, in their house, was something beautiful and touching. The applause wasn't long in coming. Petronio made his way through the crowd and stopped next to the priest who officiated the mass, gave kisses and hugs, stretched out his hands, he blessed, made crosses in the air and left again on the donkey to travel new descending streets that led to barrios of misery. He was horrified by the village's subhuman living conditions, its little bamboo houses hanging from cliffs endlessly washed over by the damned rains and he visited groups of families decimated by landslides. Enormous chunks of eroded mountain would suddenly fall upon entire neighborhoods, leaving buried beneath the rubble dozens of the humble inhabitants. The father listened attentively to the stories, he blessed the dangerous grounds at the same time a fitting rain began to fall over the little bamboo houses. In the distance, at the bottom of the abyss, the Olivares ravine was seen, that also in rainy epochs descended laden from the heights, razing everything in its path. Afterward the father mounted the same donkey and slowly headed to the Plaza de los Fundadores, where squads of menacing police forced the crowd to disperse. The priest remained alone with a group reduced to the fanatics, among them Petronio, the twenty-three-year-old boy who looked upon him with more and more emotion. From the forces of order appeared the archbishop and army commander and they gave him the peremptory order to leave the city immediately and in a small truck he was taken to the airport where an army plane awaited him. Petronio raised his voice and insulted the prelate and the commander and was arrested and taken to jail. They interrogated him and took his fingerprints, they made him sign documents, they photographed him and then left him confined in a cell. That was a glorious night. Petronio felt himself a hero for the first time and in the guard's negligence sent via a whore friend a message to those outside, as if there were really ardent masses of admirers awaiting him. In the darkness and cold of captivity he tasted

the delicious elixir of martyrdom, as he said afterward when he strutted through the streets dressed in a suit and the indispensable tie, in a country where neckware played as important a role as the family crest. From the street corners, the human wall supports looked at him more suspiciously than when he directed the needy and the women of happiness and after that his isolation grew unavoidably. He understood this when he encountered eyes that would not look him in the face, but evasive gestures, mocking smiles in the cafeterias and cold handshakes. Two weeks after his solitary confinement he converted to messianism. He opened the newspaper and on the first page appeared the disfigured face of Father Anton Botero, assassinated in the mountains a few days after he had joined the ranks of the guerilla movement. In the middle of the page was another photo of the entire body, where the father revealed his riddled chest and his military uniform stained with blood. The press celebrated the event with delight and dona Berta Arnulfina Ochoa ordered Veuve Cliquot champagne brought to toast with her secretaries the end of a short nightmare for the rich. In the cafes everything went on as usual. The people read the news, laughed, and later looked at the sports page to find the results of the soccer championship. In public libraries boys came to consult books and illustrated encyclopedias without noticing the event and in the cantinas drunks puked their guts out before confronting the tenacious Andean fog. Petronio felt his heart turn cold and he wanted to scream again into the abyss of Chipre, observing the little villages of the Valley and the powerful rains moving from one quadrangle of the relief to the other. In the afternoon, the orange light of dusk reflected off the snow-covered mountain range. Standing, looking at the country, he secretly swore in the name of General Bolívar to take up arms and liberate his fatherland from disgrace. Later he walked to the plaza of the Founders. Before the monument of the patriarchs he swore again in his name to create the Grand Republic of the Andes, the first paradise of America.

Ten days later, in eight column inches, the daily *Minute* published news about the assassination of Adela Dampierre de Nerval, the “strange and decadent Parisian aristocrat, known for her relations with blacks and South American revolutionaries, especially terrorists and guerillas, with whom she had been associated for some time.” Petronio began to inquire desperately about the woman’s life, her revolutionary contacts, customs, and vices, and he couldn’t imagine or believe she was as dissolute as everything seemed to indicate. His sadness became more acute and he thought destiny unjust to snatch from him the only escape from his unhappiness, the only flame that had brought him closer to the heaven of good fortune. He soon heard other stories. They said she was unable to sustain relations with Europeans, to whom she had a special aversion. Others said it was the typical case of a woman enthralled by Latin American and African folklore, addicted to Third Worldists who in turn mixed her up in their political affairs. Adela began to frequent every kind of event in solidarity with the Third World that famous leftist writers and intellectuals attended, as well as the innumerable young students and exiles who constituted the erotic material necessary to calm the desires of the attractive stellar-faced French. She had learned to play the guitar and sing the song “blue eyes, don’t cry or fall in love,” taught to her by a young Bolivian Indian playing the *zampoña* whom she sometimes accompanied from a distance in the passage ways of the metro Chatelet, and she spent many afternoons at the University of Vincen-

nes, in the forest of the same name, hypnotized by the blacks and Arabs who improvised music with percussion instruments while they smoked hashish in large cone-like cigars rolled with loose Gitane tobacco. Her friends from the sixteenth arrondissement began looking at her suspiciously and her parents, aristocrats turned car dealers, had to accept grudgingly that their daughter should live with foreigners, blacks, South Americans, Spaniards, Arab rats and others, and even that once she posed in a horrendous Italian porno magazine, where she had been led by the degenerate Colombian who initiated her into the scuffle of Parisian marginality. Since her most tender adolescence she had been a problem child, and she lost her virginity to a young bank robber who later served a long prison sentence. Under such conditions her parents decided to accept her as she was, letting her have her own apartment next to the city hall in the twentieth arrondissement, where she lived the last year of her life holding sybaritic parties that mixed politics with the bedroom, the thesis of Chairman Mao with Colombian marijuana, terrorist acts and robbery with revolutionary poetry. She lived her life without her family being aware of anything that had happened since she moved into her apartment, so that on the day of her death the parents were far removed from a scandal scattering over them like gunpowder and of which they only learned after returning from a vacation in the mountains of Haute Savoie. The day of the crime, the press said, she had spent sleeping after a long "partouze" ending at dawn. That night the owner of a cafe was sure he had seen her with a muscular negro, although an old woman in a Russian hat walking her chihuahua declared she had seen her with a swarthy type, "South American, Arab, absolutely no doubt a foreigner." What is certain is that the night of the assassination she was dressed in brown slacks and a Shetland wool sweater, a white bearskin coat down to her calves and a burgundy silk scarf. The photos published by a weekly tabloid showed her beautiful face adorned by round glasses, her hair lank and blond, her pug nose, the half-nude body in a t-shirt with a drawing of Che on it, through which were suggested her rounded breasts and legs like those in a fifteenth-century Persian miniature. Death

surprised her in the blossom of her twenty-seventh year. The dailies linked the murder to a drug deal. They speculated she had been taken in by some colored drug dealer, one of those that swarmed around Vincennes, who had robbed her of the money she had tried to buy a fix with and that meeting resistance, had shot the defenceless woman like an animal. But in a few of her circles it was rumored that perhaps she was assassinated for knowing the secrets of an implacable revolutionary movement that doubted her loyalty or by some paranoid terrorist who believed her a vile Mata-Hari using her sexual skills. The police arrested several suspects they let go for lack of proof and they remained silent before the rapid disbanding of her ex-lovers, who fled as if from a mousetrap before the possibility of being investigated. Several black Nigerians were arrested in the Persian market at the university's entrance, investigated and later deported as illegal aliens, but without proof being found of their participation in the crime. Finally the tabloids published the pornographic photos from the Italian magazine, where she appeared making love in every possible position with wicked Greek and Italian gigolos, and with those photos more than seven years old they tried to confirm the assassin had no other motive but passion, implying he acted from the jealousy of a primate. And so it began to disappear from the pages of the newspapers, owing to the pressure of her relatives, upset because the names Dampierre de Nerval were mixed up in such a bothersome affair.

The Good Petronio was convinced that among the paraphernalia of Vincennes he would find tracks clarifying the crime of the French woman, who was, according to *Paris Match*, the most excelled alumna of the sexology course given by Gilles Eleusis. A few people recounted that during the classes of this guru, where naked students tried to break the tensions of the body, smelling and touching each other without regard to sex, race, or beauty, Adela had begun relations with a Latin American who disappeared forever before the crime, without leaving any trace. Others said the night before the event, after a class on Malcolm Lowry's *Under the Volcano*, Adela made love with a black

Senegalese in the bathroom of the data processing center, then a crazy voyeur from Cameroon declared in the cafeteria to have seen the act from one of the urinals while he masturbated hearing the young woman's cries of pleasure and the moans of the Senegalese to whom a few people attributed the crime. Around the university, where so many disappeared or went insane, the case seemed nothing out of the ordinary. But in one of his philosophical trances, Eriik asserted that the assassinated woman wasn't a devourer of Third Worldists, nor much less an adorer of exotic phalluses, but on the contrary, had wished to bring about revolution. In his search for the absolute, in his mystic ideal, in his despair, Petronio tried all avenues, mixing with all sorts of groups, some of which began to suspect him. The death of Silverman and the assassination of Adela exhibited the traces of a plot against leftists, hatched who knows where. I'm not going to say anything about this to them, but I think, said the philosopher to his audience, the same companions or high levels of her secret society sacrificed her like a butterfly for her contacts and friendships. His eyes bulging, Eriik added that many of today's revolutionary groups were only fronts for sinister organizations, for wicked brotherhoods ready to annihilate the heirs of rebellion. Later, after concluding, he told Petronio he was ready to die if necessary in order to discover those truly guilty of the horrendous crime.

A few days later Petronio confirmed a date with the possessed Eriik, who later convinced him he would reveal secrets to him and open the floodgates and lift the veils that prevented him from identifying the assassins. The day of the meeting he arrived punctually to the Zimmer and later let himself be taken to the north of Paris. On the way he learned Adela had been militating with The Leader, a mysterious character who would not let anyone see him in Asnieres. Eriik parked the car next to a market and he followed him through little streets and allies to a block with old houses out of a turn-of-the-century postcard. The Leader's house was situated in the middle of the block. In front of it was a high, rusted trellis, covered with wild climbing plants and dried branches.

The grass had grown long in the front yard. There was dust, humidity, a broken down car, trees, creaking doors, and a spiral staircase that led to the red brick mansion bearing two towers with merlons, parapets, turrets and watch towers, a kind of castle that finally ended in a conic roof, like in a fairy tale. The rest of the house held more turrets, parapets, watch towers, modillions, but everything was covered by a gloomy air of abandonment, so that it seemed firm, unbeatable, and serene like a fortress in the middle of a plebian neighborhood. The door was opened by Mr. Hervada, the Basque guard, tall and corpulent, half-bald, almost albino, with strong jaws and muscles like Sampson, wearing on his arm two thick silver bracelets. The mysterious man was dressed in jeans and a checkered shirt that could be seen under the military pull-over he still had from his mercenary days in the Southeast Asian wars. He invited them to sit in the salon on some large black leather sofas. The Basque looked at Petronio with cold and penetrating eyes when he learned, from Eriik's lips, that he was an exiled ex-guerilla, and he crossed his arms without pronouncing judgment or showing curiosity or emotion. Hervada listened to Petronio without looking at him. He headed to the kitchen and asked them if they wanted a drink. Eriik asked for a rum and coke and Petronio a vodka and orange juice. The coarse giant slowly served the drinks, clinking the ice in the bottom of the glasses. A woman opened the door leading to the other room and crossed the room to the kitchen, making only a slight greeting. The house smelled old and dust covered the furniture. The crocheted table cloths and curtains seemed not to have been washed in many years. The woman passed again with a platter, opened the door and called senior Hervada, who rubbed his hand over his bald spot and followed her to the chambers of The Leader. Eriik and Petronio continued talking. Eriik remarked that The Leader was a sick old man with intelligent eyes and an astonishing lucidity. He had lived there for many years. In his youth he was mixed up in all kinds of plots and trafficking. Prior to the '40s he had participated in various political movements. First he was a fascist and then a communist and now he professed a strange anarchism that was a mixture of bitterness and despera-

tion. He had abandoned his children and in his prosperous old age squandered money sustaining a small group composed of radicalized youths who immediately converted him into a kind of God and listened to him as if he were the very oracle of a religion of millenary islands. Little young men and women fell into his clutches, creating among themselves a bond that saved them from an urban solitude. At first there were three leaders and one militant. The militant was a squalid boy who died by mistake placing a grenade next to a nuclear reactor. But afterward the movement grew, due especially to the beautiful female militants that attracted to the group other youths who fell in love with them, and that attracted defenceless workers from the periphery and margins of society, thanks to the "Proletarian Sexual Service," in virtue of which the women completed sexual acts with blacks and Arabs. After knowing that every Friday night he had the right to sleep with a beautiful revolutionary, an immigrant worker would throw everything overboard and sell his soul to the devil. "He's something fascinating," said Eriik. With the cavernous and hurried voice in which he dictated his lectures to an astonished public, he expressed his wonder for experimentation. "The only form in which an ideology enters is through the sexual organ, either because of its use or its atrophy." The idea to create something new that would submerge institutions and overflow sanity had already appeared to him long ago, in his adolescence. He had dreamed, like Petronio, of great movements and from contact with books and heroic biographies of becoming a great soldier. Petronio had also wished to be a man of action capable of transforming by tricks ideas into facts. Both admired Napoleon Bonaparte and as youths felt themselves attracted to the uniforms of the Hussars, they poked into history books to find the roots of his irresistible ascent and glory, the terrible, wicked dark space of the guillotine, the luck of all those who entered into a cause and were devoured by it. "We are dreamers," Petronio said to Eriik while the beautiful girl with syringes passed before them, poured into her delicious faded jeans, "but one must dream and dream beyond the dream; success isn't as important as ambition, realization as

intent. I had a collection of soldiers in my adolescence. One of my neighbors had a lot more and in the patio of the house, one of those houses with Spanish roofs and wide patios, we built impregnable and beautiful perfect clay castles and lined up our armies to fight. They were better than me, Pelusa and Leon Duque. My passion for tin soldiers, the toys of heroes, comes from then," he added. They finished their drinks and Hervada remained secluded with The Leader. It was getting dark. The walls of the mansion were covered with saltpeter and peelings of rotten paint were falling onto the skirting board. A cold wind passed through the house as Erik led Petronio to see other rooms. They went up the spiral staircase to the second floor where they saw rooms replete with books. Dusty rooms filled with volumes, books on the floor, thrown about like garbage, books on unfastened shelves, books stacked up to the ceiling and dirty dust balls blowing through the hallways. Later they went to the third floor and saw a room, also abandoned, on whose walls were seen sepia photographs of a woman and objects from the conjugal bedroom surviving decadence, as if someone had ordered that nothing be removed throughout the years. The Basque called to them from below and they answered his call. He looked at them scornfully and then served himself a whiskey. "I have to tell you this is no game. The Leader has charged me with telling you that if you're thinking of collaborating in the movement you mustn't treat it like a sport. We've already had problems and the police are watching us. Up until now it hasn't occurred to anyone to think The Leader directs our movement, but we know they already have leads. Our objective is to overflow the normal banks of the workers' movement, of society in general. Not to lose any propitious opportunity to make all peaceful manifestations degenerate into a confrontation with the forces of order. And regarding your doubts about Adela's case, better you stop questioning: it's a proletarian secret."

Petronio forbid mention of the name Werner Gerhardt the day all his belongings were burned in the stadium. Clothing, books, postcards, notes, plaques with Nazi insignias, boots, drawings, accounting ledgers and photos of women were consumed over an hour beneath the implacable sun of Eden. In a long speech the Supreme Chief explained Nazi madness and asked destiny to find the war criminal in the not too distant future. When the act was finished, war-wounded from that epoch passed before him. Youths with darting eyes, boys with the initials WG branded on their backs, men with stumps instead of hands and crutches instead of feet, old men with their tongues cut out and women infamously tattooed over their entire bodies with fascist symbols. It was incredible, but certain, that this demon reproduced in the plains of the Andean republic the horror of his youth and specialized in making it yet more infernal. How had it been possible, he said, that men from this country had helped this foreign jackal? During the periods the Blues were in power, leaders of this conservative party brought their enemies to Eden so that Werner Gerhardt could find the best method of torture, the torment most in accord with the crimes imputed to the victim. More than ten years of horror and darkness reigned in those peaceful plains, almost fifteen years of hate covered the long meadows, the murmur of the Ciriguauas River, the blue horizon, the lunatic night of silence. Before him passed invalids with cancerous hands held out begging for alms, on the sand of the soccer field the creatures huddled to drink sodas and eat bread with the spectral smile of punishment. There were so many the Supreme Chief bitterly cried, for

during his stay he hadn't sensed the horror in the houses on the royal street, beneath the ceilings of overheated zinc, in the lazy tranquility of the tropics and he cursed that they had hidden it from him. The nasty dog Gerhard had fled with the complicity of the Blue dignitaries to a neighboring country protecting him, or perhaps he lived in Europe doing new unpunished misdeeds. The repugnant German reptile was no doubt alive, while the people looking at Petronio beneath the sun of the plains smiled with the humility of those who understand nothing. Since they had been children, they had been the jackal's victims and now they passed peacefully, silently next to the trees and thickets on the river bank and they waited for death without anybody worrying about them. The Supreme Chief ordered them to clean and fix up a mansion on the outskirts, as big as the town hall, so they could lay out there the victims of the Blue epoch and before it he ordered a plaza constructed to the martyrs of the Blue enemy.

An agricultural and husbandry school opened where two boys from the contingent began to direct their neighbors in the cultivation of sugar cane, bananas and cotton and even in raising wild animals. Soon there was great abundance in Eden and it seemed happiness had finally come to that lost spot.

Petronio began to forge new plans. He said they couldn't just live happily while the rest of the country was dying of hunger. In a dramatic act he declared he would continue his path all the way to the National Palace, riding a burro to liberate the entire country and make Eden the first bud of a great adventure. There was great opposition to the plans. The guerillas had grown accustomed to peace and didn't want to continue adventuring. Epaminondas saw then the opportunity to annihilate the hated Petronio and he convinced the others to follow him. To the sadness of the inhabitants, they left one afternoon, entering the plains in a feverous march and thus the days passed until General Tovar caught his breath and readied his army. They attacked villages and sacked banks, they invaded haciendas and killed the foremen; one day they came across a German and shot him against a giant tree. Under Petronio's harsh discipline they

neared the Orinoco, when already nearly all the boys were convinced by Epaminondas that Petronio was a dreamer, a crazy adventurer, especially after the day he was accompanied by furious geese that jealously watched over him while he slept. Fatigue had come to his army, tired of hearing the Supreme Chief's speeches, his florid and absurd litanies, his universal dreams and ingenious messianic morality. The former students from the National University and other middle-class boys deserted first and later the strongest and most valient wanted to take for their own possession and profit what they'd confiscated under the command of Epaminondas, tempted more and more to be a bandit.

The moment of truth came three months later. At sack time, everyone was ready and toward dawn they bound Petronio in his hammock and cut the necks of the geese who didn't have time to cackle their last warning. Petronio desperately struggled, but his feet, hands, and neck were all bound and he had no alternative but to swear and swear while his troops withdrew hastily under the command of Epaminondas and his smiling gold teeth. He was like this almost half a day before he began untying the ropes, first one foot and then the other, hours later a hand, later the other and finally, weak, rope-burned, he managed to jump to the ground, overcome by the impotency, the lie and mockery of having trusted. He walked for hours in the mountainous zone until he came upon a directionless path whose course changed with the miles, thanks to the tracks from vehicles that had passed there. The road was sometimes muddy, other times dry, becoming confused with the immense plain. Gray and ardent clouds passed over the prairies and the darkness was split by rays of light. The peaceful silence was lulled by insects and distant thunder. Petronio ate fruit and stopped to rest near ravines and rivers covered by the huge leaves of wild plants. By four in the afternoon he hadn't come across any sign of life. When night fell he made a fire beneath a tree and rested there pensive, defeated, impotent before the treason of his men. That day all his illusions were dashed to the ground, months after embarking with a group of men on his insolent adventure.

He wolfed down guanabanas and madrones, he devoured gigantic bananas, he drank the water from crystaline rivers and he satiated the deepest thirst with coconut milk. At night he looked at the stars and remembered his childhood, the flowers in the spring patio, the magnolia tree, the yellow and red dalias, the lulos and medlars. Thus he passed the days until he neared the border. He embarked upstream on a river scow and helped unload freight. He enjoyed the long voyage over the currents and whirlpools, under a cloud of mosquitoes, conversing with the hardened travelers and recent newlyweds who went to Ciudad Bolívar looking for their fortune. The rust of the scow penetrated everything and clothes got dirty. At the stops they got off to eat crabs and salmon and drink German beer, an icy and delicious contraband. In a few cantinas he danced to hot music with longhaired mulatto girls, and later they copulated on humid farms where one heard the combo of dawn, the echo, the lost sound of the cumbiamberos of the Atlantic coast.

Petronio returned from Los Fundadores Park, where he had spent part of the night, and sat down on a wicker chair for a drink of aguardiente. It seemed as if some fitting phantasmal hand had become hardened covering that salon of aunts with a varnish of failure or as if a curse had chosen the house as its lodging and taken possession of its objects. Dust covered the tables and settled under the dressers and beds. The wallpaper was becoming unglued. The window shutters were dirty. Rincon took his cup and headed to the study whose books, enclosed in antique bookcases, belonged to his father. Time had stopped there in the vast rooms and salons of the solitary house tired of lodging a family that lived by failure. Outside the afternoon rain increased, beating against the Spanish-tiled roofs. The wind was raising the water and mud. Thunder and lightning shook the Rincón house that seemed the diminutive replica of the entire city. Who were the founders of this madness? The Great City of the Andes was the fruit of the last economic expansion. One of Petronio's ancestors, his great-grandfather Nepomuceno, tired of mine failures in the northern mountains, passed over the Olivares ravine until he came to a barren arm of the western range. He dreamt of creating an empire where coffee, a product newly fashionable in France, would healthily invade, making everyone rich. Nepomuceno was a tireless drinker of the dark liquid, whose origin was supposedly in Arab countries, that excited the senses, provoking illusions and deliria. He was a corpulent man with clear blue eyes, a twisted moustache and mane of

hair, who on the muleback descended the narrow canyon in the company of Elpidio Echeverry and Romualdo Palacios. It wasn't the first time he had visited those jungle-covered paths. First, searching in the cold regions for hidden treasures full of vessels of golden jewelry, he discovered immense herds of wild cattle and afterward, accompanied by the engineer Wilhelm Deghenard, he achieved a calvaristic knowledge of the region, whose borders were still in litigation and whose phantasmagoric owners disappeared or were incapable of farming or bringing progress. Deghenard was an intelligent man who had become rich in the northern mines, but when they began to be exhausted he tried to discover other ones south of the western range. On one of these expeditions he was guided by Nepomuceno.

They descended the ravine of Olivares, they climbed to las Minitas, later to the heights of El Perro and later to La Enea, where Nepomuceno had his first idea to construct a village that would give economic force to the region, cultivated with hypothetical coffee bushes. Everything there was then a silent wilderness and the old German didn't want to tell the other about it, for his metallic greed prevented him from dreaming of foundations. The year 1843 flew by. September 7th, while crossing the knoll that would later bear the name San Cancio, where there is now an insane asylum, Petronio's great-grandfather came upon the worm-eaten vestiges of ancient huts and the skeletons of two adults sprawled on the grassland. Those were Fermin Lopez and Jose Hurtado, two old miners who had become lost in the western lands without leaving a trace. Their terrible end, perhaps killed by robbers or savages, didn't frighten the discoverer but more strongly induced him to colonize the zone, whose white bones were already fertilizing the glorious future.

Deghenard and Nepomuceno spent several days on the summit of the range, they explored some of the high mountains' thermal springs and they skirted the edge of the perpetual snows, using strange instruments of calculation and secret books to dig in the dried-out lands of the paramo. As they descended, they observed wandering on the

green plains herds of wild cattle with bluish hides and haughty bearing; thousands of surviving beasts, evidence of disappeared populations. Many centuries before that the land was peopled by the Akuarimanes, a savage tribe characterized by marvelous silver work coveted by the Spanish, who decimated them in two centuries. Of the eighty-thousand encountered, only two hundred remained, scattered in caves and along the banks of hidden rivers.

They returned afterward to San Cancio, again to the edge of Alto de Perro, and then to Alto al Cielo, the highest proturbance in the zone and from where could be seen the valley. Nepomuceno couldn't explain to himself how after so many centuries the zone had remained forgotten. He couldn't understand how such a splendid viewpoint hadn't provoked the greed of some visionary Spaniard, and even less how the immense riches of the zone hadn't been exploited. But those reflexions only anticipated an approaching fever he would carry to motivate himself into staying there with Deghenard, trying to hear the echo of the voices of millenial chiefs and see the ghostly clouds of smoke, the inhabitants buried in the wilderness.

Later they returned to their places of origin. The German, old and disillusioned, returned to the capital of the northern mountains and later travelled to Frankfurt, from where he had come, sent by a mining company, and in coming obliged to abandon his love Ruth Ochs. He never loved again. Nepomuceno, on the contrary, tried to convince several of his friends to invade those lands and create a new country, encountering a certain fear in those who hadn't forgotten the strange decease of Fermin Lopez and Jose Hurtado.

It didn't take long for a few new dwellers to settle in the zone. They cleared the forests and began farming, despite several lawyers in the north who accused them of infringing on the land of others. But it was already impossible to stop them. Quijano, Elpidio Echeverry and Romualdo Palacios, arriving upon the beautiful fluvial beach where there were two olive trees, decided to baptize the ravine with the name Olivares.

The name rumbled amid the wilderness and the voice of Nepomuceno Rincón --robust and mysterious -- could be heard for more than another hundred years on the steep cliffs of Olivares, where Petronio, the distant ancestor and heir of messianic madness, was accustomed to passing entire afternoons of tedium.

Several years later, when the first parish house was built, Nepomuceno and the new inhabitants discussed the name the new obligatory stop in Andean commerce ought to carry. Nepomuceno imposed his own idealist: La Enea. There were applause and fanfare. Women danced in the little central plaza. The priest waved incense, causing big clouds of smoke whose harsh color travelled through the air and lay against the baharaque walls. La Enea was already an unstoppable fact, a magic word that would move mountains. None of the founders ever imagined that more than a hundred years later, all the eyes of the country would turn in amazement at the Great City of the Andes, the lighthouse of the Republic.

Petronio took another drink of aguardiente, closed the beautifully bound book he was reading and felt the shudder of those who are called to greatness. He felt as if his body -- or the shadow of his body -- was elevated above the city and travelling through the years, decades, centuries. For the first time in his life he understood with lucidity, with absolute clarity, that his body was part of the interminable flux of the years and that the old age and forgetfulness of the centuries would make of his voice the lost echo of his ancestor, the condemned, useless, anonymous echo of a bitter extinction.

Petronio slept little, spoke in monosyllables, and lost hour by hour the happiness he had acquired during his romance with Adela. His friends preferred not to talk about her to him, so that he wouldn't become lost in thought and drink until all hours of the night. He rejected offers of work that week and dedicated himself to hunting more zealously and living off the expropriations he made in supermarkets. He had no doubt the crime against his beloved was forged by Hervada and The Leader to erase the tracks of a compromising act. He knew there were a few thugs who took advantage of the good faith of youths, in order to mix them up in the obscure interests of the cavern. One day he completely disappeared. Zouzi and Eriik looked for him in the studio on the rue du Plateau and not finding him after several days of waiting, they decided to open the door with a master key. They found the same posters of pop singers. The pink, spherical lamp slowly swung back and forth. The old wooden window with beautiful iron fittings was covered by a layer of vapor that impeded the light from entering. They turned on the bulb and the room became lit by a violet light. The round table in the center of the room held a vase with withered red roses. A few cups lay in disorder on the table in the room, but the little kitchen was clean and orderly. The carpet was impeccable, as if it had until recently been packed away. They stood there bewildered and were ready to leave, when Zouzi found an envelope on the pillow which containing a handwritten page which said:

Men of the world. Sons of the earth. I always believed in the possibility of finally constructing a happy world. I've guarded that hope since childhood. I was always rebellious and never accepted anyone's orders. My dream was liberty, the book of free will, the end of hierarchies. I dropped everything suddenly to go into the mountains, taking up arms to end the oligarchy of my country. But people didn't believe in me and I was betrayed. I know one must dream to make solitude more bearable. We are born alone and we die alone. The hugs, the caresses, the handshakes, the parties, the walks, the encounters and the adventures are fictions that cloak solitude. Now I know we will always be alone. All my life I wanted to put an end to that solitude and for this I approached the dispossessed, wishing to be the best brother of men. If it were possible to fuse myself with the world, I'd be happy today and not writing these words. Politicians and creators of grand ideals desire the same thing: to forge the many into one, into a solid block. Today I'm convinced this is impossible and for this I want to revindicate absolute solitude, individuality, the self-saver who can. Now that I no longer have hopes or dreams, I don't know how to stand existence. Thirsty for the absolute, a man like myself can't stand the inevitable limits of friendship and love for a cause. Perhaps there is a parallel, hidden universe, where I can touch the illusions, the chimeras and the horrors I dream of at night.

Buttes Chaumont, the ice age.

Where is Petronio? they asked each other. The next day they agreed to meet and go to The Leader's house in Asnieres, to inquire about him. The Leader's house was silent and gloomy. It seemed like a dinosaur's carved tooth, the tip of a baroque totem that had survived the centuries. In those northern neighborhoods lived in olden times wealthy sectors of whose glories only the testimony of decadence remained. It seemed the abandoned, secret house of a witch, the castle of a mysterious Nosferatu, the nasty den of dusty cadavers. Eriik, who had the tendency to let his imagination twist reality,

saw bats coming out of holes in the walls and green smoke figure of the witch in Hansel and Gretel leaving the chimney. He closed his eyes as he had done other times upon seeing inconvenient things and when he opened them again the house seemed like the face of a withered, wrinkled toothless old man, the open mouth peopled with labyrinths, but he preferred not to say anything and took another drag on his smoking Gitane.

They rang the doorbell, but no one gave any sign of coming to open the door, so they passed through the iron gate and crossed the yard full of weeds and rusty objects from other decades. The wind beat against the shutters. Leaves fell from the trees in the icy afternoon air. Eriik climbed the staircase and pushed on the half-opened door. Zouzi followed him, entering the vast enclosure. A sepulchral smell hovered in the dusty room. Eriik stopped and placed his arms on his hips, hooking his thumbs in his belt. He advanced a little more, closely observing the site until he recognized the shoes of a man sticking out from behind the leather couch. It was the Basque giant Hervada, who lay dead, much bigger now than alive. A few maggots crawled over his face covered with coagulated blood.

“Tiens,” said Eriik, “il est plus grand mort que vivant.”

“We have to get out of here,” stammered Zouzi, his legs trembling.

“No, wait,” responded the professor, indicating to his friend the other door.

Zouzi pushed it open with his foot and entered with the absurd hope of finding Petronio. Before him on the wall had been drawn a strange swastika whose top and bottom arms represented respectively a hammer and sickle.

“Il est fou ce mec,” cried Eriik.

There was also a table covered in a disorder of books and papers and a filthiness of dust and cigaret ashes everywhere. In the back leading to another space was a wide arch, hanging from it a dirty, bloodied curtain.

“This old man was capable of anything. How could they believe him, Eriik?” asked the red Vandal from Tunis.

“Our generation was educated to believe,” responded Eriik.

“Look, this old man has here *Mein Kampf* and *Das Kapital*, *L'espoir* and *Le feu follet*. What do Hitler and Marx, Malraux and Drieu la Rochelle have in common?” asked Zouzi.

“Much more than you imagine, friend.”

Eriik pulled open the curtain and saw within the old man lying there dead in his wheel chair, his hands mutilated and his open blue eyes looking toward the infinite. He was sitting in shit and the fetidness he expelled made them both hold their noses. On the back wall was written in Gothic letters “Long live death!”

In back was an unmade bed and books and more books thrown onto the floor, and a nauseating smell of urine that mixed with that of the cadavers.

Zouzi and Eriik remained petrified before the horrendous spectacle, but then left without leaving a trace. They understand nothing of what had happened and knew they must guard the secret as if it were forever sealed in the eternal crypts of their deaths.

One night before arriving at Ciudad Bolívar, Petronio was conversing next to a truck when he saw the sky ignite in fire. A meteorite shower was falling, marking long flaming trails that sketched lines across the Southern Cross. Everyone was stunned. Instead of lessening up, the shower grew and grew and it was the most beautiful spectacle ever seen. Petronio agreed with Baron von Humboldt. At the beginning of his voyage in South America, on the Atlantic coast, he had seen a similar shower with Bompland. Like fireworks, the lines of the lights made ellipses and parabolas across the sky and later dissolved as they neared the plains. Moonlight lit the expanse of the plains and the rumor of the river seemed to travel over the surface of a magic mirror. From the riverside the travellers could afford the luxury of the spectacle reflected in the night water. After another sudden increase in meteorites, the astonishing stellar theater ceased and once again the night returned to the tranquility of centuries. Everyone applauded and cheered, raising their liquor bottles, coming out of the amazement prompted by the natural phenomenon. Something new was going to happen in his life, thought the Andean, who was already drunk. In the sky were reflected the lines of his hand and like a palmreading of the surface of destiny, the ethereal hand of the future. The appearance of passing comets, luminous haloes and multicolored dawns had always brought news of the future. He had been convinced of that ever since his grandmother read the dawns and twilights of the Andean mountain range, foretelling the new events in the bloody

times. That night he sweated more than usual, thirst took possession of him, while the men controlled the sailing and looked at the water's surface with the help of reflectors to prevent the trunks and whirlpools from making the current unconquerable. Sprawled against the wooden hatch he smoked his last remaining Pielrojo cigarets and drank his last swig of aguardiente. The refreshing night climate made him regain his spirits and from then on he thought only of returning in search of the traitors, searching to renew his forces and teach Epaminondas a lesson. He didn't sleep thinking about his return. New plans surged in the night, with the help of celestial signs that according to him indicated he mustn't renounce his dreams in that moment of deception. When the meteorites appeared to Humboldt and Bompland in an unforgettable shower, they hadn't thought their journey would take them through so many countries,. After that event they fearlessly entered the most dangerous zones populated by poisonous bugs and carnivorous wild beasts, like the puma. They crossed the jungle without fearing mortal illnesses and malignant fevers, they travelled on the Casiquiare and afterward to Nueva Granada and down to Ecuador guided by the scientific spirit. Petronio thought his guide would be the revolution and that Epaminondas must have begun to tremble, because the next time would be the definitive one. He would return to Eden, he would arm its citizens, he would hunt down the subversives, he would gather them in the central plaza and burn their corpses like the papers of the bastard Werner Gerhardt. Afterward he would begin to expand the liberated zones and step by step, patiently, thanks to his power of seduction and the justice and validity of his principles, he would arrive at the capital, mounted on the burro of his dreams, holding an olive branch to create the great, perfect fatherland, the world of happiness and work, the continent of equality and love, the terrain, the country, the republic of the superman. The intelligence would spread to every wild place of the Andes, and he would have to be the force behind developing production and technology. Eden wouldn't seem obliged to depend on foreign powers, but to emulate and surpass them. And then on the continent where the Southern Cross

was seen would be the new empire of knowledge and progress, the kingdom of human justice. On the triumphant day the fireworks of Calarca would magically imitate the rain of stars he had just seen and on the Plaza de Bolívar he would announce a Botanical Expedition to take the census of the riches of the republic's lands. He inhaled the Pielroja and looked at the firmament full of stars: Cassiopeia, Orion, the Seven Goats, Aldebaran, Ursa Major, constellations, diffuse nebulous clouds of interstellar space and he digressed through the planets in the blind obscurity of the infinite, pointing out with his fingers the signs of the zodiac.

Toward dawn the boat's owner announced they were two hours from Ciudad Bolívar. The party began all over again. Petronio got more aguardiente and drank in peacefully the stupor of the new day. He fastened his sandals and looked at the landscape with emotion, happy to know it would not be long before he went back, this time in an airplane to Puerto Carreño and from there to the jungle again, regrouping his soldiers, making speeches in villages, convincing the incredulous, making see the blind, revealing wisdom to the illiterate. Through trees on the riverbanks monkeys swung, undoubtedly those seen by Aguirre, he of the wrath of God. The shrieks of animals were close to the passing boat, whose travelers made a tremendous uproar. The cigaret tasted much better than before and the aguardiente transported him to a delicious, incredible state, thanks to which the future was seen as simple and soft and beautiful as the plains of America. Already more ranches were seen on the river bank. Soiled little men in canoes offering regional products came nearer to talk over the ochre, vital waters. Standing, facing the wind, more erect and firm than ever, Petronio smoked more and more while he spoke to his travelling companions. People gathered up their belongings. Guys with skin burned forever cinnamon and robust chestnut eyes surrounded by wrinkles, men with strong calves trained by walking on trails, machos with thick hands knotted from cutting and gathering so much firewood; these were the kind of people necessary to realize his plans, people who had nothing to lose and everything to gain.

Injustice was at the point of returning to Eden. He raised his fist and screamed at the waters and the people thought he was crazy for coming to stay in the city of the liberator.

As Ciudad Bolivar was the new spearhead in the development of the neighboring country, most of the voyagers came carrying the same illusions as Petronio. They came in search of new opportunities for work and dreamt of thousands of bolivars, a car, a house, education for their children, good food and civilization. They were men varnished by the heat and hard work; hopeless beings with dark circles under their eyes and rotten teeth. They came through a mirage that would end by leaving them in the whirlpool of progress.

In the distance they caught sight of the city's first houses. The boat neared the dock. The Iron City, the most spectacular amusement park in the region, slept in its morning dream. The Ferris wheel, with its colored seats and slightly rusted and chipped interplanetary ships, was situated in the corner like a gigantic metal flower. The shooting booths and the head of the fantasy train came within sight amid the fog of the hot land. The boat moored and the travelers began forming a line to disembark. For some there remained beyond the plains a terrible nightmare. For Petronio, on the contrary, it was his new goal, his insatiable mirage.

In a few years La Enea was converted into a commercial empire whose capital

nourished the economic development of the Great Country of the Andes. Even after the terrible fire that devastated the city, the sons of the founders began again the task of rebuilding it, but this time using the most durable materials. The 1930s passed and the capitalists of the cities brought European architects, engineers, sculptors and musicians to reconstruct pompously the most illustrious city of the Andes. From other regions, on the backs of burros, muleteers brought loads of cement and ornaments of forged steel and avant-garde architectonic structures from Turin and Leipzig. During the following years the tasks took on the feverish tone of madness, due to coffee and not the rubber of the tropics, by which Manaus, the measureless city of the Amazon, was only the presage of this new splendor.

From every corner of the city, amazed citizens saw workers and jugglers of space attach new beams to erect gigantic towers of poured cement that little by little grew above the enormous cypresses brought to adorn the lateral parks and how, in the middle of the city, the immense mass of the Catedral Primada took on the form of an interplanetary animal capable of straightening out the most obstinate pederasts and ladies' men of the Andean summit. On the hill of Chipre, the neighbors saw the Palace of Fine Arts raised, an enormous brick construction that looked like a castle, with spiral staircases and turrets and merlons, where shortly after being finished were presented the works of orchestra directors, teachers of the lute, piano, flute, cello, violin and clarinet, as well as

crazy actors, haughty ballet dancers, unruly mimes, unhinged painters and sculptors with portentous hands. On the other side of town, engineers gave the finishing touches to the aqueduct, which had many reservoirs and modern methods for processing the water that came from the mountain range. The merchants and industrialists dedicated themselves to renovating their houses or building new edifices that provoked envy in other capitals for the measureless luxury of their salons and facades, for the exquisiteness of their gardens, bathrooms, studios, terraces and porches. Due to the high international price of coffee, the local bourgeoisie could afford the luxury of buying the best clothing and jewels with which to adorn their horrendous spouses, who like Berta Arnulfina Ochoa, couldn't lessen with make-up the internal horror that degraded their moribund faces. La Enea became the glorious city of the Andes, the magic refuge of the exquisite, the delicious sybaritic brothel of the valley and snowy land. In secret houses unknown to the police and archbishop, interminable orgies took place where foreign artists and local poets devoted themselves to seducing boys and misguided nymphs, happy widows and brick masons contracted to work on the constructions. On luxurious chairs and Persian rugs, cocaine was given out that they inhaled with the help of little gold spoons and later they dedicated themselves to laughing and conversing, possessed by a narcotic lucidity. The writer Arnaldo Fariá Utrillo chronicled those interminable ritualistic ordeals of satyrs and crazy women. In texts marvelous for their tone, in contrast to the *costumbrista* regionalism in vogue in the fatherland at that time, the postmodern writer described Chinese kimonos, Mongolian slippers, necklaces made of snails and exotic pearls, bottles of wine and cognac recently brought from France, and he went round and round describing the nude bodies of the daughters of the political bosses, the exciting contortions of the young boys he loved and the desperate and red face, the bluish lips and withered eyes reflected in the carved mirrors, when toward dawn, after every imaginable excess, the inhabitants slumped on the staircases and rugs or entered rooms with beds covered by sepia comforters, and awaited an unsatiable, unsundering fornication

until the vicious dawn of the Andes. The musicians slept exhausted over their trumpets and harps, pianos and harpsichords, guitars and tambourines and peace returned with the light of the mountain range, brought on by the gleam of the snow and the gentle heat coming from the depths of the valleys, observable from the twisted terraces.

Farías Utrillo, an open and recognized homosexual, was at that time La Fúnea's most important writer. He had travelled through India and Southeast Asia as a reporter for a Madrid magazine and was chosen to write extraordinary accounts of the epic of Lawrence of Arabia, and on his way back he stopped in Damascus for three febrile months of writing. He lived in Paris and New York, Buenos Aires and Bahía before required to return to the city by the lawyers and executors of the fortune willed by his parents. Once in possession of the money he dedicated himself to squandering it in the immense mansion of his orgies. He was a good-looking man, tall, firm although thin, with perfect

white teeth and the disheveled mane of a poet. He had an uncontrollable attraction over women and knew very well how to win himself love with advances and indifferences, with caresses and doses of humiliation. Petronio remembered him well, because his mother, who was still very young after her husband's death, fell into his claws and suffered unboundingly the most unbridled love of her carnal and gallant existence.

Once, piqued by a curiosity the man's frequent visits to the mansion near the Catedral Primada provoked in him and by the rumors his classmates spread, he followed them to the Utrillo palace, and hid in the garden until dark and guests began to arrive. There were men and women that decades before took pleasure in the luxuries of the bonanza and who now, in decline, returned again to bacanalía in order to bid happily farewell to a terrible and betraying life. Through a window, atop a canvas awning, Petronio watched in astonishment. He was barely twelve and had yet begun to hang out with leftists. His mother was kissing the old fox Utrillo on one of the sofas while others drank and danced. Petronio felt happy, for his mother, because of her youth, lived

submerged in the sadness provoked by her husband's premature death. Now through the window, he could see her happy when with the hand of the poet Utrillo she turned in crazy circles to the sound of the tango through the hall of gleaming tiles and Persian rugs, and let her long black hair puff up like a feline's, later resting her hand on the gallant bohemian, who today took pleasure in a woman and tomorrow abandoned himself to the taste of the young boys who abounded in the most cultured and glorious city of the Andes.

A few years later, that last epiphany of pleasure would vanish. The glories of the city, like the great monuments, the exotic cathedral, the Palace of Fine Arts, the vice and secret sins disappeared so that the ideology of the saviors might reign. Like the bubonic plague, hate began to reign over the beautiful urb, and the rust of absolute truth covered the hinges of the doors and gates through which the commanders of pleasure and beauty crossed.

While his friends missed and looked for him in his absence, Petronio dedicated himself to visiting great historical monuments, like the cathedral at Chartres, the Chateau Gaillard in Normandy, the romanic churches in Poitiers and a few castles that held memory of the great Corsican Napoleon. He also visited Provins, a marvelous little village whose houses of visible beams and medieval towers transported him to a glorious past; he visited Moret-sur-Loing to see the organ of an ancient church and the Merovingian tombstones; he visited Montereaux to see a sword that hung like a threat from the central nave; and one by one he made a pilgrimage to the Castles of the Loire: Chambord, Chenonceaux, Chaumont, Azay-el-Rideau, Blois. He saw from the train on which he traveled beautiful little girls running through the flowery prairies and in his mind he kissed them, possessing them later in his dreams. And thus, resting from tension and anguish, Petronio tasted the ability of transporting himself through the centuries. Meeting the greatness of the past, he recognized his misery. The present had dissipated. The past had suddenly appeared like a revelation or punishment. Thus as the great city of the Andes had created its millenary glory, impossible and absurd, Petronio made of his failures grandiose and enduring temples. And the entire myth toppled over him one afternoon in Fontainebleau, where he had gone hunting in order to dissipate the confusion he had been submerged in since the death of Adela and the discovery of The Leader's sect, who were possibly guilty of her disappearance. He stopped before the Patio of Goodbyes and gazed at the undulating steps which Napoleon had perhaps

descended after signing his abdication. He realized that compared to this man he was just a poor asshole. The figure of the hero was the same as the classic pose in which paintings of the epoch had enframed him. He felt the horror of the power that like an invisible cancer cracks the walls of the body. The Corsican had abdicated and now it was his turn to do so in the same place his master had. But with one difference: Petronio abdicated disillusion. He descended the steps and entered the building, wandering about, observing the sacred chambers, the private rooms held in caricature in the foul-smelling reality of the museum. From the red-carpeted studio that belonged to a queen or princess, he saw the pools where old voracious carp devoured the bread tourists tossed to them in the dark waters. Later he went and observed the horrendous, oily, fat fish, skillful beasts possessed by the hunger and gluttony of uselessness. A Nordic woman looked fixedly into his eyes while he tossed pieces of bread. He felt something strange in his body. An ill feeling, a heavy agony ate at his guts. He hid behind a shrub trying to breathe, for something contracted and imprisoned his lungs, twisting them in pain. Then he threw himself on the lawn and crawled along, spitting from his mouth a kind of drivel more viscous than common saliva. With his hands he seized hold of the ground, of the recently cut lawn and slithered a few meters. The mass pressed more and more within him and the drivel became heavier. The world spun round and round him like a carousel, a merry-go-round of stories. He began to feel nauseous and weakly tried to throw up, until finally a viscous and thrashing body opened a passage in his mouth and lept toward the pool of gray metallic water, piqued by a strange fury. It was a carp with one of those rings they say was put on them many years or centuries ago. The bluish skin of the animal remained impregnated in his mouth while he continued feeling the horrible convulsions and the lack of breath. Weak, he remained face down on the ground, his hands and arms spread out.

When he stood up, he completely knew his truth, which was a lie, an immense cathedral of accommodating illusions. He was nobody, he was just the laughing stock of

the capable or a role model for the stupid. A lunatic like himself wasn't called to lead states, nor represent nations, nor be a prophet. Epaminondas was right, he was disquieting to those who live in reality, a dreamer, a clown, a medicine man of airy illusions. The thoughts came in torrents and left him drenched in sweat. His life, he thought, was like the caricature of a hero, the vile stench of failure. He had gone to Paris to escape tedium and defeat like thousands of other natives from the southern continent and the only remedy left to him was to live in Paris as he did in the jungle.

That night he slept in a North American tourist hotel and he smoked a hundred Gitanes, burdened with the desolation of his discovery. He went back to Paris the next day, feeling the pleasure of returning to the refuge of Buttes Chaumont, where he could shut himself off to think without anybody bothering him. In the mailbox he found a rose-colored letter that had been sent from a village in Yugoslavia and had taken a long time to arrive. By its unmistakable handwriting and the perfume that still emanated from its delicate interior, it was from Adela Dampierre de Nerval. Before opening the letter, stirred by secret emotions, he smelled it, lying on his bed, listening to songs of a pop singer. They were epiphanous moments. But the letter did not carry good news.

Petronio cheri,

Don't forget I truly love you. You were the gentlest and least macho South American I have known. I love you and wish to see you again. I've been outside France, for my life is in danger and I don't want to die like Boris, at the hands of Werner Gerhardt's band. I never told you, but I participated in his leftist group for a long time, confiding in his intentions. One day Boris Silverman, who was very close to Gerhardt, got out and recommended I do the same. He'd already suspected The Leader was an old Nazi who tried to satiate his totalitarian impulses through communism. He doesn't forgive and for that he killed Boris. Now he's looking for me. He says every traitor to his movement must die. Everything for him, nothing against him. Everything within the revolution and

nothing outside of it, he says. I'm thinking of secretly returning to get a few things from the apartment on the rue de Crimee. Wait for me. I'll pass by and see you.

Love,

Adela Dampierre

Werner Gerhardt! groaned Petronio with his hands clenched over his face. Werner Gerhardt! he said again with the letter in his hand. And he sat a moment on the brown leather recliner. Two tears fell from his eyes, while songs of Veronique Samson and Julien Clerq still played on the radio. In silence he made a cup of coffee and opened the other letters that had arrived, a few from the Great Republic of the Andes, others from Barcelona, others from Berlin. He put back in place the objects moved by the wind and brushed off the table where he wrote letters. There he composed his message to the world. Later he changed clothes, took his revolver and went out into the cold streets. He passed by the Arab restaurant and ate a delicious cous-cous with a bottle of Sid Brahim and left a generous tip for the Arab waiters. He walked down the Street of The Solitary to the metro Jourdan and descended the deep escalators. At four in the afternoon he stood before the house of The Leader, Werner Gerhardt, with his hand in the pockets of his trenchcoat and a Gitane cigaret in his mouth, his glassy gaze lost in an oceanic past. He waited there several minutes. The wind ruffled his hair and coat. It was very cold and the neighbors rapidly passed by like shadows with baguettes under their arms. Petronio at last moved his arm and held his cigaret after taking one last puff. He threw it to the ground and stubbed it out with his wet boots. He crossed through the rusty iron fence and climbed the steps. He knocked on the door. A Spanish girl opened it and refused to let him enter, but he pushed her aside and went into the salon. At that moment Hervado appeared and began to insult him, telling him he had to announce his arrival and must forget the South American vice of being able to enter wherever and whenever he felt like it. The giant rushed upon Petronio and was going to strike him, when the

latter, in a rapid movement, fired a shot point-blank through his jacket. The Basque monster looked at him in the surprise of death and fell stumbling behind the sofa. He began to vomit blood through his mouth while his eyes glazed over. The Spanish servant screamed and fainted in the door of the kitchen. He calmly and imperviously gave himself time to take another cigaret out of the blue packet. He lit it, deliberately observing the walls and the faded granite-colored curtains. There were reproductions of framed paintings, posters from old films, among them an impressive one that pertained to "The Hands of Orlac." Petronio opened the door that led to the old man's studio.

"Gerhardt," he shouted, "the time has come to settle accounts."

A voice was heard behind the curtains that led to the room in back. The old man spoke perfect Castillian, with an accent of the Great Republic of the Andes.

"I've been waiting for you thirty years."

"I'm not leaving here until you pay for the crimes you've committed in your shitty life," answered Petronio in a vigorous voice.

"It's already too late, already too late, young man, for me to pay up."

The old man parted the curtain and advanced a little in his wheelchair. His hair was completely white, he was very thin, and in dark sockets were sunken blue eyes, so clear they made one afraid to hold his gaze. Rincón looked him in the eyes without expressing surprise. The old man smiled and then began to cough. "Look here, I want to tell you something," he added, "I'm the living portrait of what you should have been. You can do whatever you'd like, but when you leave here you'll be the reincarnation of old Gerhardt."

And he let out a loud peal of laughter that turned into a dramatic and persistent cough, after which he spit phlegm into a brass chamber pot.

"Talk, you old rat, and don't ask for forgiveness," said Petronio.

"Forgiveness? Me? How wrong you are, Señor Rincón. Death doesn't worry me.

You're going to free me from a terrible nightmare. At last! At last! You know well what the ambition of power is."

The stooped old man started coughing again and bared his teeth in a sarcastic smile, his hands trembling. He breathed in a horrendous manner, like an old dog, and from his lungs came an interminable whistle. He was dressed in blue-striped pajamas and a cream-colored bathrobe. His slippers were white.

"I can't complain," he continued, "I did in my life what I desired. The pleasure I've felt in dominating has been so great that I don't think anyone has enjoyed themselves as much as I have. And now you'll continue under my domination. Act. Finish me off, asshole! Always remember my face and my trembling hands. I am goodness! You see that which can be goodness. The day you all achieve power in the name of the good, you will know that in reaching it you have to kill many to hold onto it."

Petronio took a sharpened sword that adorned the left wall of the room, approached the old man and picked him in the right hand. A stream of blood immediately gushed forth. The aged man lowered his head without blinking and began to breathe more difficultly. Rincon raised the sword and brought it down like a guillotine against the left wrist and the blow was so well aimed that he severed the arm of the wheelchair. Then the old man moaned and managed to raise his face to look a last time at his executioner.

"Nothing is worth anything if the rest is worth less," he mumbled. But Petronio had already shot him several times. He seemed immortal. With his stumps he managed to move the wheel chair and disappeared behind the curtain.

Petronio got off the launch and rented a room in the hotel Colón, situated near the wharf and dike where drunks and hippies gathered to smoke marihuana. It was an old dump several floors high, with wide rooms and vast salons whose walls held reproductions of paintings by Millet and European landscapes. Petronio had a change of clothes and a few pesos he earned giving apocryphal recipes to old people making their way to the Atlantic. He had travelled with a false passport, passing himself off as a neighbor of Merida, in the Venezuelan Andes. Things were going well, but Petronio wanted to plunge into an ardent bar where beautiful whores with enormous tits and thighs danced to the melodies of Los Corraleros de Majagual. At eight the fiesta began. Petronio settled in at the bar and ordered a double aguardiente with lemon. The music played at full volume, but there was nobody at the tables. The whores sat next to the wall near one of the fans and laughed, making obscene jokes about the men who looked at them with an adolescent's timid eyes and scared face.

The Munich salon was an immense zinc-roofed stall held up by tall wooden posts. It was adorned with snakes and oil paper, like strips of a brilliant phosphorescent material. In various corners or next to the posts were potted ornamental plants. The dance floor was a cement square. Cool air penetrated through the cracks in the wooden walls. A sad jukebox of subtle circus colors, blue, orange, yellow, red, and silver, was placed under a painting of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that shone, lit by a yellow candle.

A gang entered the hall and began to order an astonishing amount of drinks and they guzzled from a bottle, singing songs of the plains. A harpist with a straw hat and a suit of cheap white cloth began to sing and make verses, challenging the new drunks. They organized a verse competition and sang for more than an hour about the amorous misfortunes and mischief of the eternal plains. Petronio, deep in thought as always, watched from the bar and applauded from time to time, admiring the troubadors' ability and talent. Afterward the harpist quit playing his instrument and began drinking with the guys. He was very drunk and shouted something at Petronio, who paid no attention and went over to the rows of liquor. He ordered another drink. The guy continued bothering him. Petronio wasn't in the mood for conversing with drunks and so payed for his drink and got ready to leave through the large door. The man stopped him and pushed him against the wall, to which Rincón responded with all his might and readied himself for a fight where shining knives glittered. The harpist continued after the Andean, trying to wound him, complaining about the lack of attention paid to his words. Rincon protected himself behind the ornamental plants with the aid of a chair, to the screaming of the drunks and whores. The musicians raised the fury of the harpist, inciting him to teach the outlander a lesson. He was just at the point of accomplishing this when the police appeared, knocking over the half-filled bottles of beer and rum and with their guns drawn they hauled them to the police station. When they discovered Rincón was carrying a false passport they jailed him in a cell of two-square meters and gave him bread and water over the next seventy-two hours. The government of the Illustrious and Gregarious Republic of the Andes requested the bandit's extradition and began a national polemic over this. He was held in custody while they awaited a solution. He was left no other choice but to request asylum from the government of the country where he had been captured, but he received a negative response. On the front pages of newspapers in both countries he appeared as a dangerous terrorist, a subversive instigator ready to violate constitutional rights and laws, a public danger to democracy and

from the Andes was solicited the most prompt extradition in order to bring him immediately to justice. The dignitaries of the Republic of Titulars were thirsty to teach the youths a lesson and didn't want to let crazy Rincón slip out of their grasp. In front of television cameras he insulted his government, denouncing one by one the aberrations of the legally disguised odious regime; he recounted the crimes and horrors committed throughout the centuries by the corrupted, racist aristocracy; the humiliations the people had had to accept in silence, and above all the successive betrayals when through either naivete or foolishness they had decided to avail themselves of the amnesties offered by the little old men from the blue or red party and their cold accomplices. Vociferating, he challenged the vile rulers of his country to deny the accusations and he incited the public to take up arms against the odious dictatorship of the constitutional democracy, whose laws only served to exercise harsh domination over the blacks, mulattos and mestizos of the people. He had long hair, like a hippie from San Francisco, and his long beard gave him the air of a prophet. His tattered clothes and skinniness made him look like a fakir from India. In the Andean capital several demonstrations took place that were repressed by the army with a great deal of blood. The dreadful Berta Arnulfina Ochoa, the immortal captain of the blue army, gave speeches against the neighboring government for dilatating over the extradition of the criminal, provoking serious diplomatic frictions between the two countries. In the midst of all this, near Eden the army of Epaminondas had dedicated itself to pillage and blind violence. In their path remained burned-out houses and huts, old men and mayors decapitated or with slit throats, dead dogs, gutted parrots, cattle devoured by the voracious gluttony of the bandits and all those misdeeds were attributed to Petronio, so that it was he, they said, who had incited the innocent and peaceful citizens to turn themselves into hyenas from night until morning. In front of the embassy of the country where crazy Rincón was detained, hordes of Andeans from the blue party threw stones and Molotov cocktails, breaking windows and starting fires that were quickly put out by the efficient fire

department. A group of devoted old women founded a terrorist organization dedicated to riddling the shaggy communists with machine guns they carried hidden in their sewing bags. At that point the French Embassy proposed itself as intermediary and granted him political asylum. Petronio was furious, for he wished to return to the jungle, where he had never been happier. But owing to the protests, officials from the ministry of the Interior, accompanied by the first secretary of the French delegation, presented themselves at the police station to lead him into exile.

The death of Fariá Utrillo was lamented by the nostalgic ones of the centenary and the founding priests. Berta Arnulfina and her blue ladies thanked God for the death of the Sybarite and publicly attacked the drug-addicted satyr, the seducer, the libertine who reigned for decades in the Andean heights with his exquisite works. Priest of the cult of words and beauty, renovator of rhyme, inverter of alexandrines and heptosyllables, purist of metaphor and the risk of dreams, Fariá Utrillo was read by the senores and senoras of that epoch of withered glory and in modern times was still recited in distant brothels by old enamored prostitutes or dipsomaniac bartenders. In that epoch power was grammatical and not political, or at least the State was stronger if under its direction the hinges were greased with metaphors or synalephas, in which the great bard of the Andes was as skillful as a matador. With his death departed the last Greco-Latin and the glory of La Enea began to sink with him, spiraling into the abyss of desperation.

His burial held no importance. The inhabitants of the city were busy with demonstrations that were the outcome of the death of the red Father Antón Botero. Tubercular, skinny as a little street dog, devastated by arteriosclerosis, bald and with cataracts, Fariá Utrillo was the shadow of a shadow that wandered in the old and decrepit mansion of his glories. The big modern buildings and apartment complexes built in the environs turned his house into a decayed tooth in the weave of the central neighborhood. A niece was charged with taking care of him during his long and painful agony. Thanks to the rent from a coffee plantation in the nearby municipality of Calarca, the woman

could count on enough money to pay the doctors and nurses and settle the taxes and bills the mailman brought daily. Although eaten away by the Parca, Fariá took pains to demand they bathe him every day, powder and make him up, and dress him afterward in his striped suit of English wool, his jackets and colorful Italian ties. Sitting on his leather sofa next to the antique lamps and vases, he dictated to his niece poems, works of theatre, articles for the daily *La Patria*, musical scores, and the day of his death he managed to dictate an article about Heinrich von Ofterdingen, the work of Novalis he most enjoyed. With trembling hands and quivering lips, pained eyes and drool falling slowly over his bib, Faria raved remembering his glorious youth, the parties in Paris with Gómez Carrillo and Mata-Hari, his trips to Buenos Aires with Vargas Vila, revealing secrets he later included in *Odisea Romantica*, his friends from the high spheres that admired him for the perfect French of his loves and the subjugating humor of his dialogue, and he resisted dying, he refused to leave the world, attempting through writing to kill the Parca that already lurked mysteriously in the room, dressed in black with a sinister chegnon adorned by a purple brooch. He ordered the windows shut and the double curtains drawn, he ordered the patio and front doors facing the avenue barred, he had the chimney stopped and authorized his niece to open the door only when one of the epebes he hired appeared in the patio dressed in white and playing a flute to chase away the Parca of his fear. The woman then opened a little the back door and let him enter to take his place near the piano, ready to reveal himself nude for hours, observing the poetic blue tear drops of the Andean-watered, aquamarine, Montmartrean, Verlainian, idolatric bard. He asked them to disrobe slowly, indicating to them movements and artistic contortions he learned in Berlin brothels in 1918, where he went with family members of Marisela Deghenard, who was then a beautiful maiden surpassing Colette in the magic art of Dionysian ballets. The epebes obeyed and satisfied him, knowing they would be generously paid. On other occasions he hired two boys who had to pass the afternoon posing on old cushions and Persian rugs, guided by the pederast

art the poet had dominated since his turbulent adolescence. When they left, several weeks of total confinement passed. He feared the Parca to the point where he illuminated himself with artificial light and refused to answer the telephone, because it was black and he believed that with its voice that witch could call him definitively towards nothingness. Nevertheless he listened to music on a hi-fi. Old operas, songs of Italian soloists such as Caruso and tunes of Frelé and Damia, songs of bohemian Paris sung by drunken cabaret singers made him happy and forget for a few moments the ineluctable presence of death. One day, precisely his last, he listened to classical music all day long. A young servant was charged with bringing the records, placing them on the stereo and changing them when the side had finished. Toward late afternoon he listened to all sorts of piano melodies written by classical composers. He then asked to hear Chopin, while he drank a tea of yerbabuena and smiled, resting his head against the back of the sofa. Arthur Rubenstein was at the piano and drove him mad with that divine art coming from his hands. On the first side played the Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor, Opus 35. First the Grave: Doppio movement, then the Scherzo and later, before the Presto, the Funeral March subtly began: Lento, which he had forbidden himself from listening to for more than thirty years, for each time he listened to it in his youth sinister events occurred that left him taken aback. But now, in old age, through a servant's mistake, this side played while he was half-asleep caressing his old angora cat. He woke when the sinister notes began and he tried to get up and stop the player, but was unsuccessful, for he fell to the carpet, lost his breath and lucidly, possessed, indefensible he saw himself die, his chest shaking with horrendous convulsions that he tried to stop by opening his mouth and sucking in the treasonous air of life escaping from him. When the niece and servant came down he was passing away, and he looked at them with his glassy, cataract-covered eyes, tearfully bidding farewell. When the march had finished he had already gone on to a better life and the cold began penetrating his weak bones. The women wept. They opened the double curtains that used to stay permanently closed, they opened one by

one the doors, they unstopped the chimneys and fresh air passed through the mansion carrying the aroma of flowers, the transparent air of the Andes smelling of coffee plants and banana trees, the lost wind of the humid heights and abysses crossed by rivulets of crystalline waters coming from the perpetual snows. Petronio had just turned twenty and was pursuing his studies. Despite his militancy in leftist groups, he lamented the death of he who was friend and lover to his widowed mother, now in her fifties, the victim of a premature, inevitable decrepitude. She didn't want to go to his burial and asked her son to take her place. Later she began to play the piano, her eyes lost in the immensity of defeat. She sang the songs he had composed for her, with sad verses guarding the secret of time. She was dressed in her best dark dress and had a fresh magnolia pinned to her lapel. She put on a lipstick the color only she possessed, she made up her eyes and covered her wrinkled face with crimson. Her husband, a cultured man who had fallen in political contests by a curse of his time, abandoned poetry for the art of commanding and prospering in infamous anterooms. He had died young with his career before him, leaving unsatisfied illusions and frustrations in those who surrounded him. Then she had to stand the infamies of that horrendous, hypocritical, Catholic city that seemed populated by hydra heads. They were always murmuring about her friendships, they invented lovers for her, they said she was a lesbian, they tormented her with gossip, they turned their back on her, they nicknamed her the happy widow, for the sole fact she hadn't secluded herself, like others, in a mortal and interminable mourning or in a sinful penance filled with guilt, fear, and hair-shirts. They couldn't accept she had tried to make her home an a pleasant place where she could receive the latest heralds of progress and the arts, such as poetesses, among them the author of *Azul Definitivo*, or masters from the conservatory like Roman Cardona and the professor Mascafrenos, or sculptors accused of pornography like Tiburcio Botero Jaramillo and Anatolio Menzur, in the end, those few in this sad world of materialists and scientists who still had the strength to drink cognac at night in the heat of a few symbolist candles, while the widow played

a scene from Colette she had learned to perform in her youth, directed by a teacher from Nancy who had ended her days in La Enea. Nobody could understand that she had forced herself to embrace a little air with the terse hands of exile, that in the asphyxiation of a country decayed by blood and the daily, professional violation of man's most precious rights, that in this black world of cassocks and long dresses and shawls, escapularies, rosaries, and penance she dared to challenge them with a happiness that was twisted into sadness, but as if all passing good luck was the flood of failure. Her sisters didn't understand her either and censured her attitude, relegating her to a secondary role in the raising of her son. She didn't want to make a fuss and learned to live with them, making her life to one side, against the current, but with a well-achieved restraint.

Petronio was thus her representative at the poet's burial. At his home only a few old friends showed up, many of them trembling, and a group of youths who admired and read him. They were the boys from the club Los Languidos Camellos, who got together in a school similar to a witch's castle, with attics and cellars, located on the avenue Santander. The precocious heirs of the centennial's Greco-Latins, boys who had yet to turn twenty, dedicated their free days and a few of those nights to discussing weekly readings. Solemn, twisted, elegant, they appeared the caricatures of a past and irrecoverable world, the fossilized gleam of a glory that no longer belonged to them. Assiduous visitors to the Municipal Park Library, whose last book was donated at the end of the '40s precisely by Fariá Utrillo, the youths read the classics with an astonishing voracity and they stirred among the shelves searching for such exotic works for youth as those of Choderlos Laclos or Madame de Sevigne, Cagliostro or Novalis. For that reason the members of the club were persecuted as much as the leftists of the fundidismo or the rockers of the fat Ossa and Wadys Echeverry. The Languids, as they were sneeringly called, conversed in a circle in the patio more than an hour before they entered the vast room where a vigil was being held for the Fariá Utrillo's remains. They approached the coffin and looked grievingly and admiringly at the hero of their restlessness and

martyrdom. He gave them books, he directed their readings and he recounted to them on interminable evenings his adventures throughout the world. There they learned of his voyage to Lawrence's Arabia and the interview he gave at a camp looking over archeological discoveries, they learned as well of the torturous relationship between the Guatemalan Gómez Carrillo, a man as brilliant as Fariá, and the most famous woman of the epoch, Mata Hari, with such intimate details they felt like the chosen. He taught them as well that literature was a religion to which only a few had access and that the secret of writing took root in the liberty and desire of self-illumination or in discovering secrets, in revelations that made one more perfect, even when the writer was smeared with the most ominous mud of history and the heart. There they learned that they were destined to be great, though they were to die in anonymity and scorned by their contemporaries, that they were already seen as birds of an evil omen, and for that reason they walked self-satisfied down the central avenue, dressed in antiquated cloth suits left them by their fathers, in white shirts with starched collars and gloomy ties with gold and emerald tie-clips and rounded Quevedian eyeglasses Fariá gave to his ephebes when he perceived in them the light of a sad literary career. The Languids lifted the coffin onto their shoulders and brought it out onto the street; there were no more than fifteen people in all: the servant, the niece, The Languids, Cuervinio Timegestro, Petronio and other old unknown people that coughed and limped as they boarded the bus hired for the occasion. There were no flowers or wreaths or sympathy cards, much less votes for solemn masses or official messages, which indicated the hate held by the government for poets, theatre actors, novelists and musicians, painters and sculptors that rendered homage to the heroes of the foundation and the centennial. The cortege crossed avenue Santander at a great speed to avoid the stones thrown by citizens to damage the vehicles or wound the mourners. The riled people, who worshipped the sinister Berta Arnulfina Ochoa, who elected her by an overwhelming majority, vented thus their hate for the poets and artists, crying queers! queers! señoritas! señoritas! get out faggots!,

endlessly humiliating the sacrosanct magi of color and word. An incomprehensible caliban-esque hate made them recall the epochs of the centennial, when they occupied all the important posts and when the syndicalists and cheap politicians were stopped by the moral renovation of the humanists, ready to cut payoffs and economic privileges and banish political bosses and ignorant demagogues. Petronio saw among the agitators many of his Maoist and Trotskyite friends. In school, although he didn't make friends with any of them, he held the Los Languidos Camellos in good opinion and forgave them for living in the ivory tower of poetry. His political companions were barbaric and obtuse beings, boys who had channeled hate into revolution or goodness into combat. They scorned all books that weren't scientific and all dream or illusion was broken apart like a predictable equation. They destroyed paintings of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and The Last Supper and put in their place photos of Karl Marx, Lenin or Che Guevera, which they kneeled before like the faithful of an intolerable liturgy. Yet those who by sensibility, family education or passion, tended to admire the arts were colonized by a nauseating catalogue of words and their pleasure reprimanded, difficulties of the country cited, to which all flowery phrases, illumination, or poetic uplifting remained of secondary importance. On the bus, the members of the club didn't turn around to look at the street where people were insulting them. Silently, with the dignity of their anachronistic faces, the youths opened a book of Fariá Utrillo and read during the passage. The surviving old men ducked their white-haired heads and leaned on their canes thinking of the irrecoverable past and that unequalled youth. The niece, rigorously dressed in mourning grievously cried while the servant tried to console her. The hearse of La Equitativa Funeral Home, driven by Polo the mortician, swiftly went first, opening a passage through the rich kids' cars. The color of an intense sun diluted the buildings and enlarged the expansive sleeves of dreams. The snowfalls of the mountain range were clearly seen. The old structures still remaining from before the 1925 fire were unusual, the national flag unfurled in the opened windows. A few old

women of an immeasurable age, reciters and declarers of alexandrines, looked out at the procession and said farewell to him with uplifted hands. The beautiful gray building of the orphanage, which up until the last month received money from Faria Utrillo, put into formation the little abandoned boys and girls, and one heard the aching intonation of I am a pirate sailing on the seas with no more laws...The procession arrived at Christ the King and remained there waiting for the brilliant Carlos Aguilar, a very distinguished member of Los Languidos Camellos despite being a lad of sixteen, to speak with the priest. Petronio knew that at the last moment the priest had refused to hold mass over the present body, pressured by orders from the archbishop, to which Aguilar responded by spitting in the atrium and turning around. Farther below was the cemetery, a beautiful construction built at the time of the centennial by the famous Catalan architect and considered one of the most beautiful cemeteries in the Americas. The mausoleum almost at the center of the pantheon had been built by Fari Utrillo, after the model of Raymond Roussel, a friend from his time in Paris. It was enormous and contained many niches that would remain empty. The capital invested there would have been enough to remodel completely the buildings of the Train Station or construct the Cathedral Primada's missing tower. It appeared a modernist building with expressionist pretenses, modeled along the lines of Fritz Lang's film "Metropolis." He began constructing it during the centennial, bringing marble from Europe and ironwork from Turin, and using the admirable talent of the Catalan architect, a disciple of Gaudi, whose traces could be found in many corners of La Enea. His friends were to be reposed in the niches. And so it was, for in it rested more than twenty illuminaries. Before dying, Faria made a list of his favorite epebes and added the members of the Club and three or four old people who were still alive, including Petronio's mother. Forty in all, which meant that sixty of the one hundred niches were to remain forever empty. The gravediggers arrived and began working in the central crypt. The grave remained open, ready for the great Faria Utrillo to be deposited. Then Carlos Aguilar, with that face of an Andean Rubempre

or Rastignac, swimming in an abominable plaid suit, his hair greased back and dark, rectangular glasses that made him look forty when he was only sixteen, climbed onto a low platform and recounted with a solemn face in a few words some of the hero's adventures, as well as ideas on art he bequeathed to his disciples. After a sad applause, the sun hid itself and a black cloud covered the snowy whiteness. Petronio embraced the niece of the deceased in his mother's name and shook Carlos Aguilar's hand. The gravediggers slowly lowered the coffin and a sea of red roses and magnolias were tossed by Los Languidos, resonating there below on the aromatic wood of the poet's last refuge. Carlos Aguilar began to cry and his tears seemed to restore him the youth that at such an early age had been confiscated by art.

Two days later, Petronio read in the newspaper about the appearance of the mysterious mutilated cadaver of the ex-Nazi Werner Gerhardt, son of the legendary Berlin actress Marisela Deghenard, a belle-epoque vampire . According to the information, The Leader managed to fool the French police by passing himself off as a retired and decrepit noble who complimented his earnings with low-income rents. Except for declarations by the most famous Nazi hunter in the world and a few Israeli associations, the topic didn't show signs of turning into a national scandal. They accused the Basque mercenary of the crime, who during the skirmish, according to France-Soir, managed to be finished off by the victim. Moreover, assured the news, the maid was the assassin's accomplice. The article finished by saying that "Gerhardt, after having been a confirmed Nazi, had turned to Marxism-Leninism."

Petronio drank his espresso in one gulp and got up from the circular table. He paid and went out into the street. He was dressed as always in a trenchcoat and between his lips smoked the infallible Gitane. He bought another daily in search of information and withdrew to the humid streets of Le Marais, crossing the Place des Vosges, and headed towards the Bastille by the rue Pas de la Mule. Walking toward the rue de la Roquette he came across a large demonstration gathered at the monument of the Bastille. It was composed of students from every university, members of the most radical groups, shaggy-haired forty-year-olds dressed in jeans and leather jackets ready to confront the forces of order. Nambuctu, the dictator of the Southern lands, had decided

to execute five rebels, torturing them with the terrible method of flaying. There was still no news, but the people had responded to the call of the great old philosopher Candide Pequinois, who on the radio proposed a demonstration with the intention of preventing the wicked black dictator from killing the subversives. Around the monument thousands of people, brandishing banners and effigies, ceaselessly shouted and raised their hands to the gray sky. An immense photograph of Boris Silverman, a hero to the youths, waved among the crowd. A gleam of a new revitalizing light lit the illusory wick of Petronio and he right away joined the march heading toward Saint-Germain. Among the demonstrators he met Eriik who, surprised, embraced him for a long and happy moment. Eriik thought something had happened to him, but he preferred not going to the police to avoid complications; he gave him the news of The Leader's assassination at the hands of Hervada; Petronio responded he had just learned of it in the press. Then joining hands with beautiful girls, they continued behind the red procession, shouting insults at the black Nambuctu, evil troglodyte, assassin of innocents.

The barbarian Nambuctu had come to power thanks to a progressive coup d'état and for the last three years had decimated the population of his republic. With every captured opponent he prepared succulent meals to which he invited ambassadors and dignitaries of civilized countries. Monsieur Richard Pomponnard, deputy of southern problems, had had the misfortune of dining on the rump of a black subversive one festive night at Nambuctu's government palace and for that reason, upon returning to France, decided to move lever necessary to overthrow the wicked man. But government interests made direct and official action impossible. Now that the enraged masses were going through the streets of Paris, things took another course and Pomponnard, in his deputy sash, went out to accompany the leaders of the left and the scruffy university students, to the surprise of other party members. The taste of the revolutionary's rump still gave him heartburn and provoked terrible cramps that prevented him from sleeping peacefully. At this same time, the resplendent president of color continued inflexible in

his irrevocable determination. At his palace, together with ministers and a few mercenaries hired to advise the government in matters of foreign relations and the economy, the dictator, drinking a bottle of the best cognac, decided at the last minute to grant mercy to his enemies and left the palace for his ranch on the Bubure River, where he passed his weekends accompanied by one of the most beautiful women of the international pleasure market. The black man enjoyed himself on the wide patios and especially in the spacious, luxurious chambers where he endlessly copulated until Monday brought him back to the palace to continue his governmental tasks. News of the amnesty arrived late to Paris, so that it was impossible to prevent the demonstration from continuing in all its fervor, and in the art deco metro exits foreigners milled around giving inflamed speeches against dictatorship and little women in long blond hair or brunette curls shouted the hardest insults against the black brute. The next day they learned about the amnesty and felt bad: there had been no martyrs. Monday things were worse yet: the black Nambuctu declared himself Great Revolutionary, he aligned himself with the Empire beyond the Urals and gave aid to the struggle of Third World peoples for the conquest of peace, democracy and the international proletariat, for which he offered the blood of his subjects.

Amid such confusion, Petronio felt even more disoriented. Tuesday morning he planted himself before the building of the Party of Obligatory Paradise, saw its shepherds come and go, and after meditating well, he entered and on one of the carpets in the reception area dropped his pants, showed the secretary his hairy white legs and defecated in silence, his face circumspect before the general amazement. After being thrown out by the forces of order, which first threw him against the walls, Petronio went to heal his wounds in the Hopital Saint-Louis. The nurses in a ward near dermatology, and thus learned in curing foreigners like blacks, Arabs, Cambodians, Vietnamese and South Americans with mange or venereal disease, attended him quite well, suturing the wounds he got in the eyebrow and his fat lip. They offered to keep him for a few days, for he

seemed to them quite disturbed. A half-hour later they dressed him in white pajamas, gave him a faded blue bathrobe and laid him down in a very clean bed. Next to him was a syphilitic Yugoslavian, a psoriasitic pied-noir, and a Cambodian afflicted by a psychosomatic dermatosis. Although he feared the reason for his internment was due to an interest in converting him into a little guinea pig, the South American let the nurses do whatever they wanted, happy to be separated from mundane noise and stupid friends. A guy with a hawk-like face arrived accompanied by an old doctor. He ordered him to take off his pajamas and, putting on a white glove, placed his finger for two eternal minutes in his anus, taking a few specimens that he put in a special receptacle. At six in the afternoon they appeared with a dinner tray composed of a chicken thigh, a few vegetables, a pastry, yogurt and a small cup of coffee. At eight they turned off the light, forcing him to sleep when he was at the height of sleeplessness. He tossed in bed awhile, thinking of the recent events in his life and he felt at peace for the first time since he'd arrived to Paris. In silence, seeing the shadows projected by the tenuous light of a few dark neon bulbs, hearing only the smacking lips of the fat Cambodian in the other corner, Petronio began to laugh at all his adventures, like his revolutionary dreams of Eden, the anti-exile rebellion that brought him to hunt swans and steal jars of caviar and lobsters in supermarkets, the love of Adela, the faith in heroes of exile and martyrdom, the illusory belief in Third World industrialists or empresarios of hunger. Thus, between dream and reflexion, he fell into a catatonic lethargy he didn't wake from until a beautiful young nurse with Moroccan features, chewing gum, gave him a few slaps on the butt announcing breakfast was already being served. That early hour was delicious. The cold light of the exterior morning entered through the wide windows and the orderlies and nurses began to pass through the corridors, tasked with noting data on the patients, like their temperature or the quality of their urine. Before eating -- the first time in Paris he had ever been served breakfast in bed -- he saw the obese Cambodian lift his mattress, from under which he extracted a rectangular carpet he placed before his bed and later

kneeled on, moaning incomprehensible prayers and making religious genuflexions. Later came the medical team directed by a pork-faced doctor. They inspected the eczematic bandages of the Cambodian, a poor man that lost wife, children, uncles, parents-in-law, parents, cousins, friends and lover during the brutal Biblical exodus provoked by the progressive, popular, revolutionary government of Cambodia, led by Pol Pot. He had come to Paris in search of traces of a distant cousin but hadn't found anyone. Since then, submerged in a wicked depression, he had begun suffering a terrible illness. Afterward, they began analyzing the case of the pied-noir, who suffered from psoriasis, due to his daughter having married a Moroccan without his permission. The old man broke out in insults against his son-in-law while the orderly injected him with sedatives. They passed to the next bed, where a young good-looking Yugoslav suffered unspeakable pain provoked by a strange venereal disease that swelled his testicles. When they got to Petronio's bed the doctor ordered one of his assistants to re-examine his anus, to which the young man urgently responded, introducing this time three fingers for more than ten minutes, finally returning to repeat the procedure of the previous day. The doctor left and the morning passed slowly and diaphanously in the ward. How had Petronio come to such a point that a bed in a French hospital was paradise? The Cambodian again placed his Persian carpet before his bed and began his supplications, bowing to Allah. In the afternoon a Mormon priest appeared and for more than two hours tried to convert him to his doctrine. He said his God was ready to take him out of the depths of misery he found himself in, without knowing that Petronio considered himself neither a pariah nor a Third World slave reclused in a French hospital ward, but an idealist ready to experience every exotic sensation in the most unreal locations, a curiosity of life that had passed through jungles of vegetation and concrete, lived with whores in the tolerant neighborhoods of Andean cities, convinced citizens of the plains, beat up drunks in Ciudad Bolívar, hunted and eaten swans and doves, stolen from supermarkets, made love with sylvan nymphs and cosmopolitan revolutionaries and best

of all, defecated in one of the office buildings of Obligatory Paradise. The Mormon finally said goodbye, leaving him a bag of coins that seemed to Petronio Judas Iscariot's pieces of silver. The next morning before breakfast, the same beautiful nurse gave him a washcloth for bathing. In a line, that morning's chosen crossed the hospital's beautiful park, constructed in the epoch of the Three Musketeers, covered in their blue terry cloth bathrobes, and before the cold could crack their ears and noses they entered a strange obscure enclosure with dim, orange-tinted lights. Petronio handed his ticket to a woman with the abominable face of an hysterical concierge and entered a cubicle to take off his robe and pajamas. Then he opened a curtain and saw the vast ward where the splashing of the other sick patients was heard. Rusty green latex walls appeared and disappeared in the nauseating vapor. He was seventh in line to bathe. He headed to the back and there saw a door, also in a rusty green latex, with the number reversed. An antediluvian tub with feet of a Napoleonic lion was full of a purple liquid and from its horrendous transparency emanated the smell of permanganic potassium and other repugnant antiseptics. He then understood that each of the tubs of the dismal enclosure was full of dissimilar, viscous, phosphorescent liquids whose orange, yellow, green, purple, blue and red tones covered the putrid skins of the patients. Since his arrival he had seen with surprise bizarre colors in many faces. He was having such reflexions when the concierge pinched him and said okay, let's go, the water is getting cold and there are others waiting, foreigner! to which the South American first put in one foot and then the other. The old woman closed the door and he was alone, enclosed, immersed in the viscous solution that boiled with bubbles from the laboratory of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. With a scouring pad he scrubbed his body. The vapor, as it increased, passed through all the cubicles and penetrated through the interstices of the doors, it caressed the other sick patients and angelically rose among the abominable tubes, mixing itself at each step, acquiring a new color every minute and finally creating a mysterious cloud that stuck to the ceiling, above which new wards of horror endlessly and unrestrainedly split off. At the exit, after having

dried themselves with towels bearing hospital markings, the patients left with red, green, orange, metalline blue and purple faces and crossed again the patio of waiting patients, who at that hour, after breakfast, were left to walk in the gardens or pray in the precious old Gothic church where a nefarious organ played each time a guest died with unspeakable pain and cramps. Petronio let them do everything. That of the anus was already an admitted custom. Other times they sent him towards where they checked his teeth, eyes, ears, took blood, urine and stool tests, listened to his chest with a stethoscope and took x-rays. During the expeditions to other departments in the hospital, he explored the faces of other sick people and familiarized himself with the corridors and red-brick buildings that seemed to emerge from remote centuries. Century after century the French adapted the rooms to new discoveries, but the beauty of the vintage structures remained intact, such that the fantasies of millions of patients, guests who had spent the course of centuries in those enclosures, seemed to keep watch from every crevice over the daily movement of the life-givers in that unequalled shell of a monument.

Petronio had a slight eruption of urticaria. Since they prohibited him from scratching, he rubbed himself with his blankets. The doctors prescribed sedatives and asked him for calm, something difficult for a being so nervous, who due to being distanced from the bustle and frustrations of the city couldn't avoid thoughts that transported him to his Andean past, to his guerilla adventure or the martyrdom of his failed loves. The eighth night he began to suffer insomnia and nightmares. Getting up to urinate he noticed the corridor was bordered by beautiful palms and banana trees of a prodigious verdure. Returning to bed he heard the distant croak of frogs and the screeching of monkeys. He tried to gain control of himself, but it was impossible. On the tenth day he had his first vision. He was returning from the bathroom after emptying his bladder when he saw a movement among the thickets. He stopped in the silent corridor and made out behind a grove of bananas a tall and sturdy man in military dress, sporting a beret and smoking a cigar. It was Simón Bolívar himself, messiah of the Latin American

epic, who called him with a Benedictine smile to penetrate the thicket situated near the nursing station. Petronio rubbed his eyes, slapped himself in the face three times and seeing the man still called him, lifted one of the enameled leaves of the banana tree and interred himself in a jungle clearing. Simón Bolívar put his hand on his shoulder and said to him: Don't abandon us, continue firm in the struggle, for in the end paradise awaits you! Petronio was going to respond when he melted into the jungle, leaving him alone again in the ward where forty sick people snored in their misfortune. He went into his room and waited uselessly for sleep until dawn and fatigue submerged him into a pleasant lethargy. A little later, the beautiful nurse woke him for breakfast and like a sleepwalker he devoured the croissant dunked in his café au lait and the red strawberry jello, so he could afterward settle beneath the covers and submerge himself in another dream that was interrupted when the young aide woke him to take some more anal exams. That night, despite having gone to urinate several times, he didn't have the vision of the jungle, much less see the prodigious apparition of Simón Bolívar. He wanted to speak more with him, he wanted to know why he visited him and demanded he continue the struggle for the people's liberation. Was he perhaps going to be the New Chosen One, the New Messiah of Latin American revolution? Would the Hero have come to propose him as the new Great Bearded One of the socialist paradise? In those things he passed the night and the following two days until he thought everything had been a stupid illusion and he was really going crazy, and he decided to live in peace, enjoying the security of the hospital. The doctors were pleased with him, for he was a pleasant patient who let them do all the tests they prescribed, and who lived smiling, for which the nurses, especially the beautiful Moroccan one, treated him like their badly wounded lover. The caresses of the beautiful nurse uplifted him. In the morning, at breakfast time, she woke him with neck massages and light touches on the throat that excited the South American and made him dream of taking her in one of the corridors of the building where the ward was situated. Her name was Sylvia Krouma and she had thick lips and a madonna's

fleshiness, lemony skin marked by the traces the sun left in her Bedouin ancestors, long hair, round well-proportioned breasts and hips and legs that managed to seem desirable beneath the white hospital uniform. Long, tedious hours passed with no surprise. The doctors jealously guarded the results of his analyses and what was the fruit of chance had been turned into an important medical case. A number of conclusions and a slight nervous urticaria took on secret dimensions, and the nurses who knew this began to bring him popular magazines and political news, novels and memoirs, newspapers, magazines with crossword puzzles and riddles, romances and detective stories. They conversed pleasantly and were ready to satisfy his every whim. The thirteenth day of his seclusion he began to feel alarmed, but the head doctor told him it was very important for science and for himself to remain secluded longer, explaining that the tests were late in being analyzed by the team of medical experts. They continued his fetid baths in the antiseptic wards, already converted into sites of daily pilgrimage, to such a point the apathetic concierge treated him like a lost son and kept apart for him the biggest and most perfect tub, offering him as well the least soiled and torn towel and finally saying goodbye to him with a smile and astonishing friendliness for a person as stuck up as she. In the parks he greeted the veteran patients that had already completed several months or years of seclusion, like ancient cripples or old consumptives who filled him in on the domestic news. There was so much free time that the vast salons and passageways, the innumerable buildings and corridors of ancient arcades became known thanks to his rigorous curiosity. What could have once been the elegant chambers of a baron or marquis, or the dungeon of a Jacobean, the corridor that in other times led to the leprosarium or the enormous halls where soldiers screamed in pain after a bloody war, were passed through by Petronio during free hours, when after his exams the nurses let him wander like a ghost. Thus he came across a door they told him was the "entrance to mystery." Descending the staircase leading to the basement of the Gothic church, where an organ melody was always heard, was an immense door whose wood, eaten away by parasites,

showed signs of having passed through the centuries with stuck hinges, held up in the ancient stone wall. A rusty chain wound through the openings of the wall and door, and Petronio unwound it without much difficulty. After an enormous effort he managed to push the door open, while the dust of centuries came loose, making him cough. He at once shut it again and entered the stairwells. He waited more than a half-hour in the darkness, guiding himself by the feel of the stony surrounding wall, until he came to a landing where moans were heard. In the distance, through a corridor covered with moss and lichens, where he had to walk with the utmost care, was heard the crossroads of a tremendous current whose waves could be perceived thanks to a weak light coming from a diminutive rectangle situated a few meters above the dike. The nauseating smell of the drains where the city had dropped its detrius was truly unbearable. Petronio covered his nose with his blue bathrobe and walked to the bridge that crossed the frightening current of the sewer. It was an old bridge built centuries ago, by its style and the date inscribed on a monolith: 1774. The light from the rectangle, emitted by a wax candle, came closer and closer, and the licking flame was reflected over the walls of the gigantic nave, the cupola perhaps one or two hundred meters high. Every step, every brush of his clothing was amplified in the concavity and the mysterious effort was lost, erased in the infinite immensity. Humidity spread everywhere, the dripping of viscous liquids sounded against the cement plank at the same time the gleam, as the drop broke, exploded in a fantastic luminosity. The moss was several centimeters thick and reptile-like creatures without eyes or veins crossed beneath the boots of Petronio that had always accompanied him, or fled crawling between the curly greenness of the vegetal mesh. Petronio stopped a moment on the bridge's highest point. Below, in a canal thirty or forty meters wide, the putrid waters desperately fought to follow the path toward the distance and splattered in the din. The cold became increasingly terrifying. The current came with a colossal pressure, carrying everything: trunks of rotted trees, huge, rounded tropical leaves, dead animals such as dogs, tigers, giraffes, buffaloes, antediluvian birds with

enormous wings and beaks that broke against the bridge when a mass was pushed up or thrown by the pressure of other waters flowing beneath the inflamed river. Petronio saw everything in the obscurity blended by a black light coming from the imperceptible horizon. Blind birds split the icy air of the eternal night. Their flying created waves of wind that crashed against the wall or the face of Petronio, who descended slowly towards a landing with a metal door through which were heard the moans of an enclosed world. He knocked several times without answer. He waited a half-hour before he knocked again and only after several hours did he hear steps. Someone lifted the crossbar and removed the chains, someone coughed near the door while putting a key into the rusted lock, someone breathed, someone spit phlegm and then cleared his throat while irons sounded. Petronio stood before the door. Behind him the current continued its interminable path and the landscape, the blind and humid plains, extended toward the infinity of the nightmare. The door half opened and dragged in pain over the cement.

“Who is it?” said a repugnant greenish old man, whose nauseating smell almost made him vomit.

“A visitor,” answered Petronio.

“Do you come from the Hôpital Saint-Louis?” asked the old man.

“Yes.”

“Enter, make yourself at home.” And he pointed to a corridor.

The old man disappeared through a door and left him there, not without first closing the door with a jailer’s attentiveness.

Every ten meters along the length of the corridor was a smoking torch that brightened the path. From the floors seemed to come a bloody liquid that men with portentious muscles, stripped bear and dressed in loin cloths, washed with mops that expelled the soft aroma of cemetery flowers. Petronio asked both of them which path to follow and they answered with signs that they couldn’t speak, then opened their mouths and revealed their amputated tongues in a terrifying smile, as if they lent no

importance to their tragedy. They guided him to a threshold and showed him, written in the marble frieze:

DELIRIUM NOCTU

Petronio touched the walls, the torches, the muscles of the tongueless giants in order to understand they were real, he crossed the threshold and came to a plaza of great dead buildings and houses that looked like chocolate castles. In its center was a fountain and from the water gushing toward the sky emerged Michaelangelo's statue of David. In the penumbra grew trees whose leaves shook in the wind coming from caverns. He walked along the sandy paths until he came across a metal chair where he rested his weariness and astonishment, when he felt the rush of cavalry approaching, leveling the darkness of occult skies. Only one of the horses bore a rider. He was a warrior attired in the habits of a Roman centurion. The sorrels stopped to drink from the fountain while the man distrustfully interrogated the new inhabitant of the shadows. After speaking with him several minutes, he offered him one of the white horses and invited him to follow the road through the forgotten expanse of the plains. Petronio mounted the beast, dressed in the blue robe, white pajamas and slippers of the Hôpital Saint-Louis. The warrior gave a shout and they began to ride at great speed, leaving behind the plaza of David and the fountain of crystalline waters. There was no time to speak or gambol, for the devastating wind impeded it. After five hours of riding, they made out the light of a distant bonfire. They arrived there a few minutes later and dismounted from their horses. Three old men huddled around the fire, cooking strange fish with neither eyes nor mouth. They were dressed in long white tunics and sandals and spoke a language Petronio didn't understand. One of them, the most smiling, invited them to sit down and

offered them a clay plate with fish on it. They voraciously ate and passed the dinner with a liquor having the dull flavor of lichens another of the men dispensed from a leather bottle. The warrior, speaking in dialect, explained to Petronio the old men were fleeing from the war and heading into the desert after having lost their most precious possessions. "In the zone of forgetfulness bloody battles are still being fought and never has there been peace throughout the centuries," he said, looking into his eyes. He explained his mission consisted of taking horses to the border with Noega, where revolutionaries from that country would buy them at a good price and afterward he would return to the lands where he had lived alone for many years. Petronio asked for information about the inhabitants of Noega and inquired about the possibility of crossing the border in order to remain there. The warrior responded he could recommend him on the condition he enlist in the ranks of the red army. The old men were in a hurry and kissed the guests farewell on both cheeks, and Petronio, the warrior and the horses continued on the road toward their destiny, with no other light than the gleam of memory. The ride lasted three days and three nights over level terrain, until they came to a more hospitable mountain. "This is the Western range," the warrior told him. The soft blue sun that always crossed in a straight line the sky of Noega was seen in the distance before it hid behind the mountain chain. The temperature rose and on the banks of a stream they rested and drank fresh water that gave them strength to continue on the road. The man told him how he had arrived to the world of forgetfulness by chance and that never in his terrestrial life did he imagine he would be condemned to live without the hope of dying, imprisoned in the chains of eternal youth. He was working as a Roman soldier when they charged him and his squadron with exploring the environs of Lutèce, in search of ferocious criminals who decimated the population and invaded markets, kidnapping maidens and stealing barter. They had managed to capture the criminals, who they immediately brought to justice, when a storm let loose that showed no signs of letting up. They then took refuge in a cave, and out of curiosity he went another hundred meters farther in,

illuminating his way with a torch, drawn by the landscape of stalactites and the game of echoes his tenor voice produced. He wandered amazed in contemplation when the wind blew out his torch, forcing him to wander without a compass through the chambers of the terrible labyrinth. Thus several days passed until fatigue submerged him in a febril delirium and, crawling, he arrived to an abyss where he saw the tenuous blue light of the planet of Noega. He decided then to take courage and descend the dangerous abyss to the distant vallies, feeding himself with the moss and figs he found behind certain hidden stones. Thus he became forever lost, obliged to wander through the hidden zones. "He who arrives here can never leave and is condemned to live as if in a tenuous dream," said the man in ending and he put down a few pieces of leather to sleep on. Petronio remained impressed by the story. The simple curiosity of knowing a mysterious basement led him, like the warrior, to that world he didn't know whether was nightmare or reality. But he, who always searched for adventure, felt the delicious chill of the uprooted and peacefully lay down on the grass. The next day they again took to the road, through the mountain range populated by beautiful birds and colorful reptiles. At the end of two days they made out the border, two leagues distant. As they neared the customs post, Petronio observed that the men wore the same tunics as the old men, and he saw they were very happy when they came out to receive the warrior, who they called Antenor.

Later they led them to an encampment where an old man with a white beard embraced Antenor and invited him for a drink. The old revolutionary leader of Noega explained to him in detail the situation at the front, the permanent agressions of the other Empire of shadow and how they were readying an army to attack the cavalries that at night sewed desolation in the fields of his fatherland. Antenor, as always, was excused from not enlisting in the ranks. He explained to him, nevertheless, that with him had come a friend ready to fight for the cause of peace and he pointed to Petronio. He nodded his head in greeting the venerable man and approached the table where they were talking about him. The old man shook his hand, looking him in the eyes, and

requested he be served a drink. Petronio told him how he had tried to make a revolution in his own country, situated in the high mountain ranges and plateaus of the Andean world, in the terrible zone, to which the old man replied saying that in Noega things were similar and that he fought for the sake of fighting, knowing harmony between men was impossible. He asked him about his qualities on the battle field, he inquired about his political ideas and smiled when Petronio passionately expounded them. The latter remained bound to enlist in one of the centurions' contingents and received the embrace of the Leader of Noega. The sky was blue and the sun of those regions passed at the level of the horizon, over distant mountain ranges, without ever setting or rising, provoking a soft aquamarine penumbra. Beneath that harsh light, the white clothing was transformed into phosphorescent surfaces and the shadows dragged along the violet magma of another world. Petronio saw Antenor saddle his beast and bid his friends farewell. They gave him water he voraciously drank and then he embraced his traveling companion, giving him instructions how he might serve with glory Noega's army. Then he went off again through the prairies of forgetfulness and was lost in the moribund obscurity of the horizon. The encampment of the Noegan warriors was full of people. Many years earlier the capitol was conquered by the shadowy enemies, and this was one of many attempted incursions for its reconquest. The ancient leader was afflicted by a terrible illness that had devastated him for several months and the doctors had abandoned all hope. For this he was feverishly organizing his armies for the last campaign, for he had decided to arrive at the lost capital before dying. The other soldiers happily received Petronio and joked with him while they prepared to leave for the front. In turn, the South American shone with enthusiasm and mystique, a strange thing for the men of Noega, who were moderate in tearful effusions and sentiments. Petronio went from one end to the other, helping saddle the sorrels, he adjusted loosened horseshoes, he jumped to carry water from the river or was ready to lower from the immense wagons the rifles and munitions that came from the different points of the compass. He spoke here and there,

getting used to the Latin dialect from which his language came. The old man took notice of the stranger's merits and immediately felt sympathy for him. In his youth he had also lived in Paris and like him fell into the Other World from the Hôpital Saint-Louis, where he was interred after fighting in one of the many political revolts of 1789. From a Jacobean vocation, attenuated by centuries of impossible struggles, the old leader sympathized with the disciple who two centuries later continued fighting with the faith he and his companions had during his epoch and whose objective was less important than the useless tenacity applied in obtaining it. At the beginning of the last campaign of his life, knowing death surrounded his camp, the ancient hero wished to find the last perfect verse with which to conclude the poem of his glory. The world of Noega was composed of subjects loyal to its chiefs, beings incapable of thinking for themselves and eager to meet the messiah who would guide them down imprecise roads. During one period they helped overthrow a chief they had loved, for another one had won them over with the inexpressible charisma of his gestures, but later, when the new tyrant abused them and surrounded himself with a retinue of vampires that subdued his former companions in the struggle, they turned their gaze again to the old opposer and were ready to bring him to the throne of power. The old man had passed one hundred years in clandestinity, surrounded by a number of militants who died riddled by the armies of tyranny and now saw how from every part, from desert and mountain, tropical and cold places came waves of men ready to give their lives for a cause. When he went out to review the troops, the deafening cry provoked by the hurrahs stunned the camp and many of them knelt, imploring him for caresses and blessings. All his life he had fought against gods and in favor of reason, but destiny had converted him into a deity of Noega; he was inflexible throughout his long life against power and idolatries, teaching not to obey, not to follow doctrines or spurious ideals, and today, old and moribund, he realized it had all been useless. Then, with the beatific smile of a sage, he accepted being the high priest of a new religion, the messiah, the Pantokrator of another empire, and so not to defraud his

followers he was ready to give the final send off. With malice on his lips he spoke with the fanatics, he touched their hands and embraced their bodies in the encampment, feeling at times the secret desire to cry. He had let his beard, his fingernails, his hair grow longer in order to convert himself into the Patriarch. He kissed the hands of the nymphs who went out onto the roads to meet him, offering him aromatic flowers and delicious refreshments, he conversed with the beautiful women they brought to him at night, ready to offer him every possible pleasure, he became the godfather of children and the confessor of old women who wished to wash themselves of the sin of having been the wives or lovers of members of the enemy army. For this he felt from the first moment sympathy and sorrow for the South American idealist who worked like a crazy man organizing contingents of ignorant and rudimentary men he rapidly seduced, converting himself into an army centurion. Seeing him, he remembered scenes from a golden youth lost on battlefields, when imbued by the cult of reason he was one of the cruelest and most incorruptible officials of the time. He ordered Petronio called and named him his personal secretary, trusting him as a filter in his relations with the local leaders who arrived to surrender and who he mistrusted. During the first weeks a secret friendship was woven between them, not of words or effusiveness, but of complicit looks and gestures. They passed entire hours in silence revising messages and in a few words the old man would indicate to him he didn't wish to receive those asking for an audience. The old man never consented to or proposed an intimate dialogue, for he wished to guard the secret of his past. He preferred to offer a filial affection, the same kind that surges between grandfathers and grandsons at twilight, and so the relationship elapsed in a harmony that gave him peace and confidence. The seventh of September they left for the first great battle. They crossed another mountain range and an immense river and then followed a southern angel toward a steep plateau covered by volcanic residue. Petronio communicated the old Pantokrator's orders to the various captains of the contingents and to one of these they readied themselves for battle. The first cannon shots

weren't long in coming. In the violet penumbra the fire took on the lethal color of death and in falling scattered stones that wounded the soldiers. At the signal of their leader, who appeared shouting in the tent, the men of Noega began firing their arms, managing to open a gap through which they tried to enter. Hours later, when half their companeros had been killed, the terrible mortar of peace drily exploded, its thunderous sound deafening the width of the volcanic valley and opening a gap in the ramparts the rest of the army entered through, confronting hand to hand the soldiers of the night. The encounter lasted fifteen fateful hours, at the end of which the last enemy garrison raised a white flag and were taken prisoner. But there still remained other ramparts to cross, protected by terrible armies. The spectacle was horrifying. For more than three kilometers thousands of corpses lay muddied in the ashy land, while a cold rain wet their remains. The black uniforms of the enemy and white ones of the venerable old man's subjects revealed blood that beneath the light of Noega's sun turned purple, and the curious outlines of ancient volcanic surfaces became confused with twisted cadavers that one upon the other, as if in a rotting and brittle magma, began to be devoured by insects and immense buzzards from hell. The conquering army continued onward, leaving them to the mercy of those varmints of the Killing Fields. The road was arduous. They had to pass over a black terrain that seemed the immense current of a nauseating river. A thousand years ago the volcano Ixt-Atl had erupted in this place, sewing eternal devastation upon those lands. The dreadful explosion lasted many weeks and through the mortifying mouth of the volcano came enormous rocks that fell down on the slopes and vallies, plugged rivers, covered small villages, leveled forests and flooded idyllic Edens. An ash was also emitted that covered the sky and the world was thus completely dark for several years. The survivors got used to the obscurity and only the light of the eruptions or the slight gleam of the ignacious red lava flowing like a river allowed one to recognize the face of the dead. Afterward the magma became petrified and the current on which the victorious army marched was the remote proof of that catastrophe.

The contingents later arrived at a flat terrain and there established their new encampments, where they prepared to attack the second ramparts seen in the distance like the gray teeth of a gigantic prehistoric animal. Petronio followed around on foot the old man, who each day showed signs of becoming weaker. His blue-green eyes were clouding over and the movement of his eyelids became increasingly slower. The smile, on the contrary, seemed renewed, although the trembling steps showed unavoidable old age. He ordered Petronio to cut back his audiences and his mandates were almost laconically metaphoric. For the first time he used a cane, which submerged him into a profound sadness: "I always collected canes as works of art and now it falls to me to use one," he said to Petronio that night, drinking a cup of tea, in one of the few bursts of intimacy with his faithful secretary.

The next day they stood before the ramparts. They let the enemy army fire for a long while and launched surprise cannon shots that prompted the prepared deflagration. Great hunks of wall flew through the violet air. Lookout towers crumbled where enemy guards watched the expanse that bubbled at their feet. Then the soldiers of blackness came out of the openings to fight hand-to-hand combat, using lances and deadly bayonets, swords and filed knives that split heads in two or three pieces. Thanks to the oval-eyed tribes who fought guided by the suicidal spirit faith in the venerable man aroused, the hand-to-hand combat ended with favorable results for the army of peace. But the Killing Fields filled with more corpses. Throughout the entire century, the result of battles celebrated there, the Fields served as the depot of putrifying bodies. It wasn't strange, even in times of relative peace, to see how, in funereal pushcarts, numerous cadavers arrived that were deposited there for buzzards and rabid dogs to leisurely feed on. Along the length of the river of black lava were decapitated skeletons, moss-covered skulls, femurs and tibias set apart that became confused with the volcanic rock covered by spiderwebs. Military buckles, campaign boots rotted by the rain, the material of black cloaks, helmets, gloves, belts, pieces of armaments, dogs dead from indigestion filled the

cavity or served as fertilizer for the few wild plants that molted in the shadows. There were so many dead from the second battle they managed to cover the volcanic rock with the ochre color of combat. From that point, looking down, could be seen the bodies of more combatants and the incessant turbulence of the birds of prey. The nauseating odor of dead bodies penetrated the air, forcing the survivors to cover their mouths and noses, and others, filled with horror at seeing their friends devoured by odious dogs, fell into a faint and tried to flee, running over inert bodies, but finally, exhausted, died of fright seeing there was no limit to the horror, nor surface free of death's bittersweet aroma. The venerable old man rested in a rocking chair and asked Petronio to accompany him a moment through the encampment installed on one of promontories of the ruined ramparts. The old man didn't speak. He preferred to stand looking into the profundity of the abyss. After a moment tears welled in his neutered eyes and he covered his face with his wrinkled hands. He brought forth valor from where there was none, wiped his face with a silk handkerchief and recovered his beatific smile. Petronio understood the man had suffered much for his people and perhaps felt guilty for the brutality provoked by the useless search for paradises of air and idyllic worlds of impossible equality. Half the army lay upon the Killing Fields. The few soldiers who survived ate in fright, with bulging eyes and beard grown of guard duty. The nefarious enemies had made incursions into nearby populations, killing everyone. In other zones of the Fields appeared funereal pushcarts carrying pregnant women, old men and old women, children and men of peace dedicated to farming. On the highways of the hot earth, situated beyond the mountain range near the capital of Noega, brutal guards of order berated the travelers on any pretext or made them pull harnesses in mines staked by secret agents of the venerable one. The terror was beyond limits. During the first years of dictatorship, when all the people feared the tyrant, revolutionary activities were reduced to a minimum and a frightened peace reigned over Noega. The oligarchs and overseers acted freely and enriched themselves without encountering opposition. Rebel skirmishes didn't occur

and the venerable's men, young artists, philosophers or writers, were stigmatized, possessed by and condemned to hate and death. The present chief was then still a young man, able to disguise himself in a thousand ways in order to go out into the villages of the hot earth, where he recruited the first militants among young, ardent students. They were so few that the dictator didn't realize they met to hatch the movement's plots in cafes or bars in the center of the capital or at the fiestas of border towns, or in the burning land of the tropics. They lived happily, surrendered to a catacombic mysticism, writing glorious communiques where they spoke of a future happiness, of a world of equality and peace and the star that announced its advent. They went over the dikes, the central avenues, the ancient allies, reflecting on the definitive and unstainable era when the beings of these lands would live happily ever after, without poverty or humiliation and they believed that truth was possible. But everything was missing. A fire had to be lit under the workers of Noega, teaching them to reclaim their rights from the nepotism of the tyrant who arose in the people's name, and as well to reclaim the happy world of the future. The years passed and their task was bearing fruit. Their followers increased and the first skirmishes took place. The engine of reply grew irreversible on the blood of its martyrs. Later, beyond the frontier of the violet world, where there is always darkness and cold, was created the first independent government. The dictator was convinced they would succumb there and so constructed ramparts on the mountain range, isolating the pleasant regions from the subversive enterprise. He annihilated the internal sympathizers and suspects fled before it was too late. Thus the rebel army grew little by little in the shade of the obscure zone until everything was ripe. The first long marches were disastrous, but this one, the definitive one, seemed headed toward success. They only had to penetrate the hot land, arrive at the ramparts, destroy them, fight hand to hand against their defenders, and then advance to the bunker of the oppressor regime, situated in the capital's center where the dictator, surrounded by his family and trembling potentates, awaited defeat. The venerable one looked again out onto the final

night and contemplated the thousands and thousands of corpses scattered on the Killing Fields. Later he retired to the back of the encampment, where chiefs from various contingents awaited him to define future strategy. For his part, Petronio went out to look at the stars of the violet world, whose sun continued its agonizing path even with the horizon. The white horse approached and began drinking crystalline water coming from the fountain. The South American, without stopping to look at the sky, asked his sorrel whether or not he was delirious, although he thought he was in his right mind. The animal, vain and beautiful in its viril presence, neighed into the chilling darkness of the abyss. Behind its silhouette appeared, clearly, the Southern Cross he longed for. Petronio pointed to it with his anxious fingers.

The new dawn was distinct. The sun rose as it did in tropical lands, and a strange luminosity flooded the park. The previous night they had abandoned the promontory and walked down the mountain range until they crossed the bridge over the river Lepta. Later they entered the hot plains that were now seen illuminated by the radiant sun. The villages welcomed them in triumph, tossing confetti and streamers. They hung garlands around the venerable one and offered him the cool juices of tropical fruits. The buildings were festively decorated with the flag of Noega, hung from the windows and roofs. The tyrant's armies had fled toward the capital, but among the troops many soldiers deserted and put themselves at the orders of the Venerable leader in the small plazas of villages, covered with flowers of orange blossoms, dailias, and yellow roses. Groups of folk musicians animated the fiesta and dedicated themselves to inventing couplets and allusive ballads about the exploits of the heroes and the tragedy of the martyrs. In several plazas were shot the tyrant's most faithful and sanguine centurions, thanks to whose secret and treasonous labor the servants of order captured and martyred with unspeakable tortures the urban militants of the hot land. The rest of the prisoners were sentenced, by means of summary trials, to various terms in prison and others were set free after verifying they had acted under the duress of blackmail. After passing through fiestas in liberated provinces and feeling face-on the people's enthusiasm, the warriors devoted themselves to resting in a luxurious, enormous hotel near a banana plantation. After the partisan triumph, guns shot off by drunks were heard in the distance, as well

as the players running through the street until late into the night, celebrating the triumph of the venerable liberator, who at that time was preparing the strategy to follow during the next few days. In the hotel, while many rested, the old man, Petronio and the captains and comandantes of his High Command were discussing plans feverishly. Petronio exercised the function of moderator, without acknowledging that in this zone of forgetfulness where he now lived he was finishing the dreams of his forefathers. Distracted at times by the beating of his heart, he thought of triumph and the frantic scenes of success. He had wanted to see old Faria Utrillo in that meeting, dedicated to creating the passwords of dream and delirium and preparing fiestas for the Founding of the new paradise. The high commanders decided to leave there around dawn. After the soldiers left, Petronio remained with the venerable and well-loved chief. The latter dictated a testament to him in a trembling voice. In it he recounted his long revolutionary trajectory, from the first uprisings, through all the struggles against the tyrants of the nineteenth century and the governments of secret brotherhoods, his adventures in the more distant world, passing through exotic places where men with citrine or yellow skin, oval or round eyes, tall or short in stature, with quiet or resonating voices, passed through the dirty streets bearing the humiliation or abandonment in which the empires submerged them. He dictated annals from the turn of the century when they named him ambassador to volcanic lands under the dictatorship of an illustrious tyrant, and afterward the battles in mortifying wars, until the day he fell into the world of forgetfulness through an abyss of penetrating insecurities and doubts. He said he wasn't sure if the years of untiring struggle produced dignified fruits, but that didn't matter, for the important thing was to struggle unendingly, fleeing from the greed of triumph. He dictated that revolution was a state of spirit inherent to people in epochs that fear the passing of premonitory comets. Finally, he pronounced with difficulty a few phrases where he invited the people not to let the revolution be converted into a new liturgy dedicated to exploiting the same things as ever, and he stirred them to destroy statues

and idols, beginning with his own, for he didn't deserve to be awarded by the army for a pleasure he had carried to the steppes of longevity. Petronio copied the dictated text and reread it several times after the venerable one went off to his quarters. Later Petronio went down to the lounge of the tropical bar and ordered a drink he drank alone among the ornamental plants and fountains, when he saw a woman, dressed in blue overalls and a military cap, making a phone call from the reception desk. The woman was beautiful, her body insinuating itself beneath the sullen fabric, and her feet, enwrapped in leather sandals, were as smooth as could be. Petronio stood up holding his drink, recognizing Adela, and ran to embrace her. He recognized the amber aroma of her body, the sexual bronze of her skin expelled by a demonic halo, the perfect and soft lines that once drove him crazy and he pressed his lips to hers, making disappear the world that delightfully churned around them. After being assassinated by Hervada, Adela recounted to him, she descended into the other world of forgetfulness, and after becoming lost in the violet zone she managed to reach the hot land and realize her life's dream in the tropical and startling latitudes of revolution. She told him of her happiness working for a cause. They went into the salon holding hands, where they observed the pool and waving banana groves, the humid lawn and the gleam of the fireflies that came and went through the palapas of the night. A group of doctors approached, vaccinated them against tetanus, and later a trio of musicians began singing them the song, "blue eyes, don't cry or fall in love," accompanied by guitars, flutes, zamponas and a violin a curly-haired youth magically played. Later Adela recounted in detail to him all her adventures, she told him the news that appeared in the press was pure lies hatched by The Leader to discredit her before the world and prevent her from being converted into a martyr. She explained to him her subtle flight was due to her supposing, after the assassination of the katangués Boris Silverman, she would be the next victim of the sinister shadowy character. For several years she had collaborated in the same terrorist cell as Silverman and contributed, thanks to her relations with the haut monde of Paris, to hatching armed robberies,

kidnappings, crimes in shining gold palaces, heisting jewels hidden in the strong boxes of her millionaire cousins and uncles; with Boris the Red she seduced key men for the organization and she slept with two imperial spies in order to bring them to the rat trap of their death. When Silverman acquired more ascendancy among the young and beautiful militants, The Leader, who was a voyeur, and Hervada, a Marsyasian satyr, became infuriated and decreed death to the brilliant new heir of autonomy and revolution. Oh! his death filled me with terror and I fled not knowing Hervada was a hound and could make out my scent from many leagues away. When I returned to see you, they gave me no time and I was assassinated without compassion by that monster you were well able to kill.

From the loudspeakers came slogans and the festive air extended to every corner. Men in bullet-proof jackets walked through the hotel's vestibule, smoking and drinking, while the former administrators, a fat man named Zuazo and his aide, characterized as informers, were led outside the building. The waiters took off their gala dress and smiled at the customers, dancing around the tables and calling everyone "compañero." In the reception hall, where private business conventioners met so many times, were gathered arms, tents, and horses. Youths recently recruited by the forces of peace stood guard. The warehouses full of luxury goods were left to the mercy of the rabble, and little girls, besmeared in cosmetics and perfumes, were seen carrying away dresses of the latest fashion and pearl necklaces. Dark-skinned boys walked barefoot carrying in their hands porcelain china, vases of Murano crystal, satchels and suitcases, bottles of cognac, exquisite boxes from Holland, sherry, whiskey, gin, bags of sweets and tins of caviar and crabs from Singapore, and they sang while fleeing with stereos and little tape recorders from which came metallic and moving music. In a blink of an eye the warehouses and boutiques were left empty and within them were gathered new rifles and bazookas, boxes of munitions and tents. The soldiers of good and officials of the venerable one went out onto the esplanade to refill their battle trucks and tune up their jeeps. In a flash a terrible

explosion was heard, accompanied by the noise of broken windows. It was a surprise bombing that didn't give many people time to escape. Adela and Petronio managed to get out and helped evacuate the wounded, under the orders of the venerable one. They saw from there how the building fell among the flames, launching a long tongue of black smoke into the sky of the violet night. There was total darkness. Without considering the loss of arms and men, the army continued its immediate course, and in a few hours recovered its spirit. At dawn they gathered together next to the doors of the great rampart and blew up the dynamite set there by the saboteurs of good. A hole opened and there they shot the enemy soldiers. In the distance, several of the tyrant's planes were shot down from the sky by a special command. Upon leaving completely the Sun, the rattling of machine guns was unceasing and the dead were counted in the thousands, found on the side of the road and in the suburbs of the capital. The fetid odor of corpses quickly returned to reign again, penetrating, insolent, nauseating. The bodies exploded like puffed up toads and their faces became more and more swollen, making impossible any recognition. Big black flies buzzed in the skies, at times dimming the thunder of the mortars and the passing planes of the imperial forces. Thus they continued on the path toward their goal. The government soldiers knelt before the cortege and polished the boots of the soldiers of good. On either side of the avenue, the residents of the capital, dressed in cotton according to the usage of those tropical regions, raised their arms showing flags and photographs of the venerable one and tossed colored firecrackers and confetti and streamers that carpeted the wide central avenue. They played tambourines and clarinets and twirled noisemakers and children sang the anthem of Noega. It was known that at the airport the forces of evil had yet to surrender and that in official planes ministers and their families journeyed to the exterior, along with potentates, the tyrant and his nepotic cohort. In the vehicle of the venerable and new Supreme Leader went his most faithful collaborators, among them Petronio holding the hand of Adela, who had put a red ribbon in her hair and dressed in a "huipil," according to the native custom

of the zone. Many comandantes envied Petronio, for they believed he would be promoted and they began a plot to prevent it. The diverse factions of the new revolution tried to make alliances among themselves in order to take power and obtain stronger positions. They were all from different towns, but of the same nation, people who had fallen into the zone of forgetfulness from the watchtowers of their illusions and they weren't ready to throw away the first opportunity presented to them to achieve power. The old man knew it, for during his long passage through the tunnel of time, ill-destined to make a pilgrimage of revolutions and uprisings, he learned to recognize the greed of men and the negative pressures it exerted over them. The delicious brotherhood began to crumble, for no one trusted his neighbor, nor those with whom he had shared hunger, cold, or laughter in the darkness of the violet zone, and on the contrary they acquired little by little the rictus of greed. The venerable one looked at them with distant eyes, deciphering with his knowledge the secret design of his subordinates. He raised his hand to salute the village and smiled at the señoras who tossed him carnations and roses from their balconies to the sound of the old national anthem. When he arrived at the plaza of the Founders, a profound silence fell over the uncontainable mass of people who, waving their flags, listened to the new chief's speech with a devotion never before seen in Noega. The old man said he had completed his life's dream of expelling the invaders and that it was no longer up to him but his disciples to conserve and solidify the paradise and happiness of lands formerly dominated by death and hate. In the distance smoked the rubble of bombed and dynamited buildings. Immense twisted furls of smoke rose into the sky. From time to time, in a way that sped the speech along, explosions and gunshots were heard whose effects couldn't diminish the tinkling of the religious bells. On the streets bordering the plaza of the Founders or on the outskirts, special groups of soldiers dedicated themselves to removing the smoking cadavers that appeared on the sidewalks with open eyes and mouths disfigured by battle. The dead were piled up on corners and sprinkled with gasoline before being set on fire. The mutilated received the

attention of the Red Crescent doctors and their cries of pain and frustration were heard in the streets and shook the walls of the clinics. Mangy dogs ate human fingers, hands, eyes, ears. The buzzards fluttered about, for having devoured the incalculable mass of dead bodies on the Killing Fields, they came to finish their macabre dinner. A peasant in a sombrero with a bird's feather and plated teeth was saying in a plaza the only ones well-nourished in Noega were the buzzards, the rich and the comandantes, but he was immediately arrested by the police of the good. Old women begged for alms on the sidewalks and prayed supplications on the steps of the temples and the altars of churches. Pastors of strange religions, dressed in short-sleeved shirts and brown dacron pants, recited verses from a sacred book and tried to capture more adepts for their stern colonial ends. But the venerable one's voice was heard everywhere, through the loudspeakers installed in the plazas, in schools, in churches, or on the ten-thousand recently liberated corners of the city. He finished his speech earlier than expected and parted through the red curtains, then descended the steps of the podium, helped by two aides who led him to a horse-drawn wagon where Petronio, Adela, and other comandantes awaited him to take the road to City Hall.

That's astonishing, said the old man, when the hot sun set and he made out the tyrant's impressive castle situated on the hill of Rebuixar. I can't believe it! he added as he passed through the massive gold arch leading to the Elysean fields, still intact after the battle, with their swans, herons, cranes, fawns and thousands of birds such as parrots, macaws, pericos, tucans, mockingbirds, canaries, robin redbreasts, hummingbirds, peacocks, birds of paradise, figpeckers, Capuchean doves, messenger pigeons, finches, wild pigeons and many others that revealed long legs and dreamy feathers, like the Houdan rooster that pecked at a ceiba tree, or the fisher martin that, silently, slept on a magnolia branch, or the disturbed pheasant that fled over the grass chased by a hundred scared flamingos. The vehicle crossed the avenue of white pearly sand that shone like a rivel of brilliant gems. First they passed through a village where two zebras

were napping and they went into a small grove. A wild boar crossed the walk, then an anteater, then further on three macaques made obscene gestures and a hundred monkeys swung from tree to tree, making graceful pirhouettes that for a moment made the venerable one forget the great hours they were living. The wagon rapidly continued down through the flowery thicket and turned left, fording a lake constructed in an image similar to the garden made by Louis XIV in Versailles and they saw the gondolas and empty little boats wave alone on the water. It's fantastic! exclaimed the comandante Abderramán, making out the beauty of the lawns, the spectral beauty of the marble statues brought from Mediterranean ruins and staircases identical to those at Fontainebleau, which they slowly climbed. They had never felt so alone. The five of them entered the first hall of mirrors, of illustrious and aromatic floors recently varnished and over whose halls enormous elaborate mirrors reproduced infinitely their squalid figures. They were all dressed in white tunics, as when they resided in the violet zone, and the mirrors reflected a thousand images of their bodies, diverse fantastic forms, flat-faced, elongated, rectangular, oval and circular, and the echo of the spoken word was lost within the mirrors and came back to leave by other mirrors to resound throughout the interminable corridors of the palace. Many people had spoken to them of the Rebuixar's castle, but the passionate descriptions of those who observed it from afar, despite their fantastic and mythomaniac nature, didn't even manage to touch the luxury, the marvel, the excess of its reality. For many years the tyrant dedicated a great part of the public treasury to constructing a temple of unequaled power, so beautiful and demented that no one could ever forget it. The tyrant was a cultivated and intelligent man and held power in high esteem, which he converted into his religion. He considered those who struggled to obtain power as beings chosen by the great deity and he who obtained it as the chosen one to whom all excess was pardoned. For this he devoted himself in large part to constructing the enduring temple where the triumphant could be sheltered, irregardless of their ideologies and tendencies. The venerable one knew it when he

found above the red cushion that lay at the foot of the throne, in the hall of mirrors, a note on extremely fine paper saying:

To my beloved and admired successor:

I know about all your sufferings during the decades of struggle for this throne. In the middle of war I loved and admired you, for you were of my same race: that of the chosen. You won this war and deserve it. Enjoy then the terrible solitude of governing. I will remember you from exile and will accompany you as well in your deceptions. Our only objective is power. It is an end in itself, blind and chilling. You free me from a terrible burden: pride.

Attentively,

your brother from
before and after,

Rebuixar

the fifth day of the month of the sun, in the beautiful capital of Noega.

The venerable one kept the letter and climbed onto the throne, his head bent. From mirrors that suddenly opened like doors came watchmen with long trumpets who began to play a hymn so moving and glorious that the venerable one and the comandantes were on the point of bursting into tears; later the elegant watchmen left by their staircase without saying goodbye and went off through the park, adorned in glittering uniforms and patent-leather slippers, disappearing amid the chattering birds. After-

ward, through one of the mirrors, came a jester accompanied by four dwarves and two harlequins that began to pirouette and dance over the brilliant floor, cracking jokes about the disgraces of those who had come to this place. The jester, kneeling before the venerable one, said to him, I'm at your service, new tyrant of Noega! and did three somersaults before falling seated to his companions' peals of laughter, next to the entrance door.

The government was immediately installed. Comandante Abderraman was charged with foreign relations and Petronio was named personal secretary by the venerable one, who converted him into a kind of all-powerful superminister. On the steps of the palace a photo was taken in which the new directors appeared dressed in white tunics and that same day they moved into the different lodgings of that unending castle or into the little *petits trianons* scattered the length and width of its anachronistic style. While this was taking place, in the dusty and suffocating streets the people of Noega were swarming full of happiness, obeying the orders the police of the good indicated to them, like throwing out their old clothes and changing into white or colored tunics of woven cotton. All the signs of the ancient regime were blotted out of the streets in a febril and rapid labor. On every corner could be seen men taking down enormous placards or women blotting out with red or white paint the slogans and phrases of propaganda attributed to Rebuixar. In other places, workers took away the rubble of ruined buildings, the remains of churches or old mansions, they blocked up the holes left by bombs and finished leveling the scorched parks where dogs, horses and cats, men, rats and squirrels lay charred.

In the second month of governing, after happiness was decreed and the modalities of paradise were legislated, the venerable one began to worsen. Doctors from every region arrived at the palace, offering their magic recipes, and one after the other they passed before the bed of the Supreme Leader, who became increasingly weaker, more pallid, and had less appetite. A medicine man from the tropics brought elaborate salves

of crocodile slime and anaconda skin. They applied them over the entire nude body of the venerable one, who felt surprisingly better. He got up and walked through all the rooms and vast halls of Rebuixar's castle, its walls covered with erotic frescos copied from those of Pompey, where beautiful cortesans made love with young gallants on silk cushions. He visited the enormous kitchen replete with copper utensils arranged in geometric order of size on the white walls, and he saw the cooks busily preparing the government's meal. Watchtowers from where one could see flowing blue rivers, marble towers for the faithful government writers, pools covered by mosses and purple flowers, expanses and expanses of an unending nightmare left him disgusted. Then, in silence, guarding the secret day by day, he decided to coldly analyze the possibilities of naming a successor who would be enthroned with great pomp. Walking through the forest of exotic birds he studied his comandantes and friends, trying to find the indicated one. But his greatest anguish was that he could tell no one of his deception and scepticism in the face of men nor the clearer certainty that the world, be it this one over here or that one over there, held no order, for it was born of nothing and to nothing would it return, he said aloud looking at the ibis and pheasants scratching in the earth. So handsome in his unblemished tunic and his long white beard, he lay down on a rock and meditated for many hours, in full contact with that pure and idyllic nature where he was hostage to the services of order. They had prohibited him like a child from going into the streets, so as to avoid daily contact with crazy people who could harm him, they prohibited him from losing himself in the streets where the crazy and possessed waited for the opportunity to make themselves famous with a magnicide or where the fury of the hungry, the mutilated or the orphans could erupt against your venerable and sacrosanct person. For such a stupid and useless life, he said to a crane drinking from the fountain, better to disappear forever. Nothing is worth anything if the rest is worth less, he added, before returning on the path towards his enormous lodgings of solitude.

When order was completely restored, the hinges of city life continued in their ineluctable tedious direction. The very labor organizations and various entities took charge of channeling rebellion and incubating discontent towards healthy activities of national reconstruction, for which Petronio and other functionaries had nothing to do but figure in public acts or give declarations over loudspeakers. Adela, who was in charge of press affairs and government diffusion, kept herself busier than the high dignitaries and lived happily and radiantly running from one hall to another, from petit trianon to hut, using the beautiful wagons and coaches pulled by Antenor's white sorrels, raised in the violet zone. In this way, the only happy person in the Castle of Rebuixar was Adela and her beauty was greater now than ever, to the point where every important man desired to sleep with her. The very same venerable one adored her like an inspiring muse and didn't spare eulogies to her beauty and work, to her overflowing and incomprehensible happiness that made the austere vastness of power vibrate with color. At the dinner hour the old man would call Petronio and Adela and they devoted themselves to playing cards or dominoes or playing like children in a room of beautiful velvety cushions. Afterward he went off to another adjacent room and from there looked at the frolicking lovers with the languid gaze of old age. Adela and her lover kissed and touched each other for long hours on the cushions and later rolled smiling on the floor. Petronio panted like a beast to see , the long hair, the thighs covered by the soft fabric of the tunic

and afterward they copulated throughout the night, reflected through the mirrors, behind which they were attentively observed.

Adela recounted to Petronio how she had come to the zone of forgetfulness. After fleeing terrorized from the threats of Werner Gerhardt, he hid in a country house situated near Moret-sur-Loing. She stayed there awhile before journeying to the exterior on blue trains. Upon returning to Paris, she let herself be seen near Vincennes and in her apartment, and thus was located by the assassins who took up the job and finished her off that fateful night. It was the last thing she remembered, because after that she appeared thrown into the middle of the dark desert of the violet zone, where a group of journalists interested in covering the war helped and adopted her without objections. She wanted to communicate with the other world, but it was impossible, so that she was getting used to living apart from her real world.

“And this which we’re living, is it real or fictitious?” Petronio asked her.

“It’s neither one nor the other, it’s something worse,” she responded while she walked in the darkness accompanied by the South American.

They both touched each other in order to have unmistakable proof they truly existed, they spoke to hear their voices, they looked at each other, they ran along the paths measuring the strange destiny they were living.

“The zone of forgetfulness,” Adela added, “is the prize of those who dream of an impossible world and fall into the traps of utopia.”

Petronio looked at the Southern Cross from one of the highest rocks of Rebuixar’s hill, located in the rear part of the castle, and later plucked the notched leaf of a plant that seemed the electric hand of an inexorable being and made a pipe with the stalk of a volcanic plant. They smoked the herb in a few puffs, inhaling as deeply as they could. They experienced the effect in their bodies and felt they were wandering over the vast prairies where lost villages flickered.

“We’ve never been as far away from the people as we are now,” said Petronio

after inhaling another aromatic puff.

“The triumph of those for whose redemption we struggle is directly proportional to our distance from them. The farther we are from them the closer we will be to triumph. A tyrant is he who loses contact definitively with the world and thus can aspire to be the representative, the absolute concrete form of the masses,” replied the woman.

“Look at the Southern Cross. You never saw it. I lost it the day I saw myself forced to abandon my land.”

Adela stretched out on the rock and opened her legs, raising her hand to point out the Southern Cross. Petronio touched his lover's waist with his hands and threw himself on her. He lifted her tunic and entered her, feeling the humid rim of her sex inhale the palpitating member that stirred toward the final ecstatic moan. Later they rested awhile in the night breeze. After waking from a short dream, Adela looked into the eyes of her man and said to him:

“Let's go...”

They went down the hill towards the stalls of Rebuixar's castle, they entered and took two white sorrels secretly out onto the sand paths beneath the aromatic plants. In the rear part of the castle they approached a gateway and bribed a young soldier at that moment drinking alone at the guard post, trying to hide his act. They mounted and fled at a rapid gallop from the capital of Noega. They rode without stopping until dawn. Then they crossed the southern border and came to the muddy regions, where they were met by campesinos living in grass houses that smelled of the wood smoke with which they prepared their rations of iguana and lizard fish. If in the zones of the hot land there was a stinging, dry heat, in those of mud and mire the heat mixed with the tremendous, sticky humidity. Most of the people were of the black race and their life peacefully passed amid the millenary poverty to which they were as accustomed as to a natural resource. Nobody complained about the distant system of government, nor showed signs of wanting to change the situation. The children played hide-and-go-seek naked behind the brush,

where fierce serpents and ferocious beasts lay in wait every day. Habituated to danger, they were seen playing with poisonous spiders, pulling out their hairy legs. The elders dedicated themselves to hunting and gathering and the women to making primitive meals composed of boiled tubers, plantains and rice that sometimes, on lucky days, were accompanied by meat. Those exotic inhabitants were great fishermen and out on the coast or on the turbulent rivers passing near there they displayed the art of nets and fishing poles, prompting the admiration of those scarce visitors, like Petronio and Adela, who decided to remain and live there. The oldest member of the community, a grey-haired black who spent most of the day playing the dulcimer seated in the prow of an abandoned dugout, lent them one of his huts and spent the following days showing them the region. "What you see there is the mountain range separating us from Noega. They say it's paradise, but we prefer to be here. It's better not to get mixed up with those blacks. Paradises always end up being a bunch of foolishness," he said while chewing some tobacco. "They say you've come here to convince us, but nobody has made a big deal over you. You haven't come to brainwash us, have you?"

Petronio smiled at the man's phrases and Adela took him by the arm and said:

"Don't worry, don Protarsio, we come fleeing from paradise."

The old man made friends with both of them and took them in his charge as if they were adoptive children. He led them to a white sand beach where an Antillian combo played moving music in a tin shack full of sea food and beer. That was a festive night. The boys in the band tirelessly played one after the other happy and sad songs and improvised verses about the easy life of the tropics, or the quarrels and pain of love. It was an unknown music, a mixture of black combos and the rhythms of the Isle of Guadeloupe, which according to the old man, was in the sea, and the danceable music of the Jamaican colonies situated in the same green sea of dreams.

"Here the only thing they know how to do is dance," said the old man. "They seem to be ghosts. These musicians have been here since we arrived and they haven't stopped

playing since the first time I saw them. They say the air here relieves them of hunger and fatigue. It's the oily vapor of the blue whales that arrive here lost and die of the heat. That's what makes them like this." The old black man went to dance with one of the cooks and intoned with his raucous voice an incomprehensible litany and afterward, laughing loudly, he returned again to his friends. They got beers and drank limitlessly until they were drunk. Toward nightfall began to arrive men dressed in guayaberas, women in cotton gowns, mustached youths, and a group of boys who recited poems, drank brandy, and immediately started to dance. An hour later more musicians arrived and the combo seriously got going, for at least fifty couples were dancing on the beach and in the middle were Petronio and Adela, who had to loosen up their bones stiffened by tragedy and seriousness, their muscles atrophied by tension and their faces pallid from the autumn cold of Paris and the lack of light in the zone of forgetfulness, covered by the violet color of death. The bottles of red and black beer, the glasses of aguardiente, the joints passed from hand to hand while the dancers continued moving their hips and embracing and pressing against each other in a vapor of salty, sexual sweat. Petronio hadn't danced like this for a long time and the dance was like a postponed conquest in the absurd reality of the blind world. Adela, on the contrary, had been quite addicted to dancing since she came into contact with Third Worldists, from whom she always demanded a dancing session before she started copulating. In fiestas with blacks from Benin, Senegal, Mali or Angola or mixed-bloods from San Salvador, Cali, or Lima, the woman danced every number and shook every which way and was convinced that after a series of cumbia or salsa, reggae or creole music, the flesh was more ardent for sex, which was the most important and decisive practice of her life.

At three in the morning, when the fiesta was at its apogee, the siren of an enormous oceanliner was heard. The gigantic ship grew as it approached the wharf, its chilling lights projected over the darkness of the night. The vast projectors of intense blue light pierced the darkness in every direction. The beautiful ship stopped a few

hundred meters from the beach and several people were seen being lowered into life boats and rowing towards the fiesta. Upon arriving, a man elegantly dressed in turn-of-the-century fashion said:

“We are the dead of the Vulkanik. May we join the party?”

One of the orchestra leaders agreed and to an announcement from the smiling man, his hair slicked back and parted on the left, hundreds of passengers descended from the ship down a ladder to the wharf. There were women in mink coats and silk dresses, hats with veils and trailing feathers, high-heeled shoes and nylon stockings; men in double-breasted suits and suspenders, wide-brimmed hats, cigars in their mouths and patent leather shoes with spats. The rumba players applauded their arrival and everyone began to dance in unison, while the sailors brought out crates of cognac, armagnac, champagne, calvados, whisky, green Portuguese wine and absinthe. Ariel Castillo and his group of vallenatos livened up the fiesta for the next hour. Between the black party-goers and the vagabonds from the zone of forgetfulness that had come all the way here was fixed an extraordinary friendship and the haughty old women and the anachronistic dandies took off their crowns and lifted their robes, adducing that for more than four decades they were lost on the ocean, wandering alone in the mortal forgetfulness of night, enduring the routine of the narrow cabins, visiting to change from the engine room or the bridge, playing dominoes in the officers' staterooms or ruminating on disgust in the pool or covered decks. There were senators from many parts of the world, oil and tin magnates, mimes and famous actors from the era of silent movies, baseball players, praiseworthy boxers and soccer players, as well as dramaturges and novelists and ministers of state who, excited by the liquor, tried to seduce the young mullatas and mestizas whose breasts were almost budding on par with their enticing bodies of stylish vampires. Alfonso Molano, a rumba player also lost in the zone of forgetfulness, had to calm many of the elegant wives already furious over the sensuality and flirtatiousness of the swarthy women, and Miguel de Francisco dedicated himself to controlling the

absinthe drinkers who became more annoying as the fiesta went on. Later sailors lowered from the oceanliner cases full of exquisite canned foods and a variety of pates and delicious pastries that the drunks didn't wait to devour, later attacking the snowy powder an Italian trafficker from Sicily offered by the pound to whomever wanted some. The next group was a Jamaican reggae band, led by a dark man with long braids and faded blue jeans, who brought to the fiesta an atmosphere of peace and ecstasy, who livened up the seated and turned on the coldest and then a thousand couples were seen on the sand, devoting themselves to incessant fornication, until the silk gowns and mink coats, the felt hats and fedoras, the linen jackets and shirts, the high-heeled shoes and Italian loafers were dragged away by the boiling sea of the hot zone and the sand served as the canvas for the ardent drawing the bodies made in the febril shaking of hips, atrophied in the routine of a damned voyage. This is what they were doing when a skinny man with a cynical face, splendidly dressed with fingers covered by jewels, said to be a famous writer, a grouchy millionaire, dedicated to scandalizing priests and the pious, slipped away from the fiesta in company of Protarsio, who he had persuaded of his plans, and after walking along the wharf, they boarded the oceanliner. With the help of his rounded eyeglasses, adjusting the carnation in his lapel, the strange character smilingly observed as never before in his celibate life the spectacle of infernal copulation. He heard the moans of unsatiated women, the canine screams of foul-mouthed men, the orgasmic conspiracies of love, the lascivious licks that sounded over the lemony, hard skin of the mullatas and he saw the white mass of travelers like the bodies of agitated molusks who mixed with the blackness of good luck. With eyes irritated from seeing so much, ears tired from hearing so much and nose anesthetized by the humours expelled by the bodies during fornication, the big-chinned, pallid, wan, sly character waited until the bacchanalia became languid between the sighs and the secret inaudible little words, and when everyone began to fall into a lethargic sleep, he gave the order to Protarsio and the two of them quickly descended the steps and ran down the wharf to the beach, while

the golden oceanliner began sending off enormous blazes that neared the skies and cremated them with an inaudible fury. First went the masts and then the helm, the luxury cabins and the officers' staterooms and later the deck, minutes later everything was a fiery torch on the nocturnal sea and a desperate heat smelling of plastic and metal began to invade the sweet beach and gild the entranced and naked bodies that began to rise and scream and run terror-stricken towards the bushes, where joined like a herd of cattle they observed the destruction of their fortunes and the only home they possessed in their journey across the ocean in an exile of forgetfulness. Monseigneur Daniel-U de la Sainté Trinité, one of the most conspicuous travelers on the oceanliner, covered his nudity with his cassock and exhorted the elegant damned to have patience in face of disgrace. The new situation, said the prelate, constituted a danger, but also an opportunity to remake their lives, occupied until then by the laziness and tedium of inactivity to which they'd been condemned since the shipwreck. According to his theory, the zone of forgetfulness was the secret world where the passionate of the earth endlessly suffered attached to the obsessions of their time. The frivolous had to withstand eternal frivolity and the serious an endless sadness. The women who covered themselves with felt hats and the men who hid their organs with fedoras to the laughing gaze of the mullatos and blacks, of the cumbia and rumba players of the hot earth, attentively listened to the sermon of the one sent to earth by God and in their faces was reflected an interest in finding a cause to erase their years and decades of idleness. Only the diminutive writer in a necktie and starched shirt with a stiff collar observed the scene, covered by his suit of black English cloth without feeling hot or suffocating. The wind dragged the luxurious clothing toward the waves and linen shirts, silk skirts, embroidered briefs and boxer shorts, bow ties and neckties were lost in the waves. The monseigneur said they must organize a fatherland faithful to the principles of democracy and it wasn't long before senators and ministers appeared, offering to organize a new country, which they called Libertilandia. The natives remained astonished. In the morning different candidates for the presidency of

the Republic gave speeches near the huts, on the wharf, beneath the banana trees, mounted kneeling or standing on the torsos of untamed men. Each one repeated the same story with different adjectives and proposed happiness for everyone, attacking at the same time the ignorant plebes who rejected civilization and culture and opposed the free circulation of ideas. Among them all appeared one who seemed the most brilliant and virtual winner. His name was Apolinar Frias and thanks to being able to keep on the double-breasted suit, the shirt, tie and patent-leather shoes, he befogged everyone with his deportment and diction. His long Ciceronian speeches captivated the old and new inhabitants. Petronio recognized him as one of his country's most important politicians from the beginning of the century, thanks to whose legislation the great republic of the Andes had been converted into the republic of titulars against which he had so struggled in his revolutionary life. The man, who had a round and agreeable face, with thick eyebrows and pearly teeth, proposed to create free enterprises ready to bring progress to every corner of the zone of forgetfulness, especially to the land of Noega dominated by the totalitarianism of the venerable one. Against uniformity and blind ideologies, in favor of free market industry and equality of opportunities, for the rights of man, was written on a poster members of his party put up between two African palm trees. Petronio, Adela, and Protarsio and the polemical, incendiary writer, the provocateur of the new path of events, dedicated themselves to observing the elections, drinking beer at the concession stand at the beach. The old man with rounded eyeglasses devoted himself to being ironic about the ladies of the oceanliner, who now dressed in flowery robes, according to the style of the ports of the zone, and about the men who, with the exception of himself and Apolinar Frias, sported guayaberas and woven sandals, and he asked them to guard the secret of his crime. In the afternoon the inhabitants went to vote in the only three urns placed along the beach. The members of the musical groups abstained, along with Petronio, Adela, and the grouchy writer. Protarsio voted for his wife and the Monseigneur for the Virgin Mary. In the end Apolinar Frias won 256 votes

to 128 for Admiral Olivier, who represented order and tradition, in contrast to the positivist and modern libertinism.

Thus was created the grand Republic of Libertilandia, with its ministers and ambassadors, its directors of institutes, unions, guilds, church and army. With the goal of achieving national unity, Apolinar Frias named as supreme minister Admiral Olivier, with responsibilities of vice president. Ricky Contreras was named minister of Finance and Public Credit, and he ordered him to create a dynamic industry. All the high dignitaries were people from the oceanliner, including a few women, like the minister of Communications and Education. To the protests of the natives, due to their relegation from the government, he responded with evasive and friendly handshakes. In two weeks the dark-skinned men from the beach were building government buildings and public halls in a tiring labor that lasted for weeks. With machetes they chopped down palm trees and fruit plants, banana groves and bushes and thickets in order to trace the streets of a new city, which they gave the name New Pennsylvania. Working day and night, the frivolous voyagers constructed their businesses in different branches and prepared to extend their actions from the Boulevard of Heroes all the way to the end of the hot zone. One afternoon there were strange movements near the concession stand of beer and delicious seafood: two sturdy giants who were busy guarding the ruins of the oceanliner, still emerging from the waters, carried a lifeless body. The people milled around looking at it. It was the poor fiery writer who for several weeks had lived distraught playing in the waves, revealing his long-legged body, his weak and fleshless shoulders. After his secret act, life had changed him and he devoted himself to enjoying the sun and sea water. In animated discussions with Petronio and Adela, he recounted to them one night how the fire of the Vulkanik was for him a kind of orgasm, the first of his life, and since then he had lamented a sterile age dedicated to literature. Nobody will know, he said in a cunning turn, that the grand Republic was the fruit of orgasm. Sadness spread among everyone, for his was the first death of the fatherland. By presidential order, a burial was

prepared with all the dutiful honors. The wives of the ministers made beautiful wreaths and floral arrangements, the carpenters constructed an elaborate coffin with indigenous drawings alluding to fire, and the hearse was readied to be pulled by the white horses of Petronio and Adela. During the moving burial of the man of letters, Crazy Rincon thought of Faria Utrillo and believed perhaps this little man was the reincarnation in the zone of forgetfulness of the illustrious writer he admired in his youth. In a short time he had won the friendship of the natives, with whom he played and made jokes, and above all of the exiles of Noega, with whom he shared a distrust of politics, to which they had dedicated so many fiery years. A band played funeral marches and along the length of the chrysaline sand beach everyone followed the procession, heads bowed, until they came to the grave, opened on a site from where could be seen the nascent city and sea. After a speech by the president and a prayer for the dead by Monseigneur Daniel-U, the mourners dispersed. Later it started to shower, and then came an electrical storm and the inhabitants took shelter in grass huts with zinc roofs. There was no doubt the republic would prosper. The women of the oceanliner forgot their past luxuries and devoted themselves to working alongside their husbands for the greatness of their new fatherland, eager to accumulate much property and money. The men became more nationalistic than the very natives. They invented a national anthem and every morning they sang it before the flag. The rumba and cumba players of the beaches and swamps were indifferent and continued their tranquil life of fiestas and idleness, far away from the economic utilitarianism of the new Republic of Libertilandia.

Petronio and Adela abandoned Libertilandia early one Monday and took the northern road toward Comayagua. They bid farewell to Protarsio and then visited the tomb of the grouchy writer, leaving there a branch of red roses. Over the plantations they crossed hung the cool vapor of the tropics that stirred in them the endless circumnavigation of voyagers, and the exiled shade changed into a green luminosity, into the clear material of dreams. The white horses, of the race of those of Antenor, trotted over the rough gravel road and their insomniac riders, the ghosts of memory, characters from utopia, conversed about the picturesque abandoned world. The country of eternal elections had surprised them in the middle of the journey, but there was nothing to do there between the speeches of Apolinar Frías and the exhortations of Mousseigneur Daniel-U, so they decided to continue their journey, the inevitable sentence the zone of forgetfulness gave to the captives. Hills, vallies, a bridge over a gorge, certain chain-link and barbed wire fences, white crosses, clouds, inhaled silences, ruminating beasts, mysterious sounds of a horn through the trees, images, colors, requisites and a thousand other motives and elements they came across on the insomniac edge of their exile. Their destiny was written in space, with the form of a trace that went burning and erasing its proof. Fallen like rebel angels into the unfortunate shadows of forgetfulness, the heroes found no calm or port of call in which to rest the anxiety of their failure. Oh, God, Petronio said to himself while he drank the water with coarse sugar and vinegar the wife

of Protarsio had prepared him, until when, until what limit will we live under the penalty of time, and he remembered Atenor, the voyager of the obscure zones, with a vigorous face and skin conserved over the handsome features, he clearly saw him arrive at the mysterious plaza of David, rescuing him from the worst forgetfulness of his time and he listened to that cavernous voice and the resigned desperation of someone who can no longer do anything but withstand destiny without a compass beat in him. Happiness is a nightmare, he said to his Adela, happiness is a torment when it becomes a sentence, a dungeon, an implacable guillotine, justice, an inexhaustible bond, routine, a known terrain, a blemished continent stoned to death, like an envelope of kings burdened by auguries of assassination, happiness, he repeated, is the certainty that nothing is worth anything if the rest is worth less, that the path and the word are useless. They came across crystalline lakes and bends in the road out of an impressionist painting, the dry highway sheltered during the trajectory of an unbearable sun and in the distance they saw the arid and useless fields and the flimsy hovels of feelingless people who grazed a horse or whipped a mule so it would break a furrow in the rock. The musicians sang that music of guitars and tibles and their hands cried over the strings the passing of time, and later they mixed in the sound of some bandola, with the limited dry memory of the harp and later they played the sad canticle of swans. Terrain of sadness, mortal zone where nothing happens, field without time, without destiny, not written about in the absurd books of rituals, terrain prohibited from activity, Comayaguela surpassed nightmare. The entrance to the city ran between mud hovels and the fetid odor of garbage came out to meet the pilgrims on the dusty afternoon of an ochre nostalgia. Damaged quarries opened the abyss to people oppressed by the useless obligation of work. Little houses, hovels, murderous spaces that hung on an edge projected a shadow of silence. Later the dust covered the horizon like a curse and made impossible any view, it was a parched dust, like dried wood shavings that entered through the nostrils and made every voice, every attempt at speaking hoarse, a fine, disgusting dust that stuck to the lips and

penetrated the palate prompting nausea, a dust that made you cry and covered the moist surface of the eyes. Adela: look at the horrendous whirlwind coming from that city of lepers; look there's no air, there's no atmosphere, you don't see the contours, the faces, the landscapes, the bahareque huts, the distant mountains; we have to resist, not a single second of rest, not a breath at this time is allowed in this zone; we have to cross, to conquer the curtain of dust, open with our fingernails the shades of the coprological dust, we're not allowed to wait one moment, nor to lie down or hide behind rocks, no, on the contrary, we must slice open the whirlwind and thus in the teary darkness of failure we will arrive there, there is the city of leprosy, the city of cancer, the zone worse than the violet zone, the terrain of nameless torture. The curtain dissipated and then like worms, larvae, sticky parasites appear beggars, thousands of ragged and skeletal beggars holding out their hands like daggers and they open their mouths with dreadful breath and they seem to pronounce words that nobody hears and that signify nothing and they run behind you, sweaty, with cancerous skin, they show you their greenish wounds, their shreds of leprosy, the damp and bloody scabs that become infected and they show their necks swollen from goiters, skirvy, beri beri, malaria, hepatitis, jaundice, decayed teeth, oh God, it's not possible, the asshole of this world, the concentration of infamy, caricature of miseries; here, Adela, is the kingdom of the dispossessed, the bewilderment of those who have nothing, here, in this country, you can see the misery of the centuries, the millenia, the suit of the pustulent drivel, the millions of wounded, mutilated, one-eyed, one-armed, one-legged, prosthetics, kings of the impossible illness, here are seen those who've never eaten a piece of bread nor tried a mouthful of earth, look at the hungry of history, the sweaty slaves who carried stones to build Egyptian pyramids, Babylonian mounds, Mayan tombs, here they are behind that bridge, the humiliated millions whose mortal grimace paralyzes the spectators, look at them, the tibiae and fibulae in living flesh, dripping something that isn't blood, nor serum, hemoglobin, pus, the honey of other worlds, look at the nauseating holes there where once were eyes, these

are the fifteen-thousand blind of Bulgaria, those who died in Siberia; the victims of a forgotten exodus not mentioned in history books; the scorched, those who die in pots of boiling water to pay a penalty; those who scream over burning coals; the warriors who bring the catapults, those who cultivate the earth to the lash of the owner, the Indians, the beggars, those who instead of the teat sucked the cancerous mucous of an Afghani skeleton; they are the ones who truly didn't see the light, nor who will ever see it, the fruits of ignomy of this race of hyenas that is man; the victims of a pirate one day buried in the sand of the beach and devoured by nameless reptiles. It takes strength to see this hell. This is the sentence, said Adela. If some time we dream of its surrender, if we ever believe to possess the truth, the vademecum, the secret formula, only here, before this horror we barely perceive can we understand the impossible undertaking of all utopias. Still in this pathetic shit, in this rotten part, these beings find encouragement to create hierarchies. There the potentates who traffic in the miraculous shit of those who don't eat but still crap, farther on the gatherers of scabs and sores, to the left those who buy and sell hepatic urine, those who buy at low prices bad eyes and fingers, those who buy nails and hair and pile their stands with false teeth and decayed molars, there is someone who gathers peeling skin or traffics in trembling fears or in the bacteria and viruses of death. Next to the river, amid the discouraging swamp, emerge the vendors' booths. There are hundreds of them and they are attended by beings of an exaggerated fatness, agonizing in grease. In the heat of this hell, amid the muddy magma, are booths of vessels in various shapes and sizes, shops with woven bags, granaries, stalls of vegetables saved from the night of memory, products of a drunken nostalgia. In the lanes run people emitting the shriek, the sigh of hunger and they have the breath to laugh at the mathematical screech of the killer Parca, the Morta, that chooses there the day's victims. The witch Parca, skeletal, dressed in black, hoding the scythe high, passes through the lanes and devours a fat person exuding a viscous gray liquid and showing the pussy pimples of a nameless, undiagnosed illness. By the light of one candle, in the eternal late afternoon, the Parca

huddles and shrieks like a whore aiming a blow at the merchant of mirrors, she who sells the face of her own aching and tries to cure it with the gaze of her own miseries. Saving the rubbish from the river, fishing out the detritus coming from other worlds, gathering with fingernails the fossilized coins of an extinguished empire, selling their very children or auctioning off blood to the vampires who arrive every Thursday, the inhabitants of the banks of the Comayagua gather the money necessary to buy a mirror and later place it in their hut, their cave, outside, in order to look at themselves all day long, or at particular times, like idiots, for in this way they are sure of being alive. The Parca witch goes through the labyrinth and comes to the stall of venomous serpents. The owner here is a man with a snake face, acquired through permanent contact with his ill-fated merchandise, he has yellowish eyes with a red weave of microscopic veins. He sits on an enormous chair of boa constrictor skin and around him creep a thousand clammy snakes that flick their forked tongues and lick his pussy calves, his hands covered by nervous ringworm, his lips swollen by leprosy. The Parca dog arrives here and aims her blow at him and then the reptiles flee through the entire market. Nobody shows emotion, on the contrary, it's as if they were of the same race, for they become entangled in the feet of the beggars who make purchases in the market with their disgusting alms, they take refuge beneath the booths of stinking meats, or creep among the grains or climb coiling around the pilasters that hold up the market or they go into the purses or bags of women shopping or pass through the muddy street and flee towards the waters of the Comayagua river and there head toward the Sargasso Sea. Further on is the seller of sea shells. They buy them in order to dream the impossible, in order to hear the distant the fluttering wings of sea gulls and the salty punctuality of the foamy and vital waves. She is a fat woman who is always smiling due to an accident. She waits on people standing up and the showcase is filled with beautiful sharp, blunt, oval, spiral, romboïd, conical, cylindrical, triangular specimens. Each one of the shells carries a premonitory drawing, maps that mark out the destiny of the world and dates of catastrophes. Her booth is very

successful among the residents and she is the happiest one. Next to the candle and icon business, the candles of royal wax and the sacred texts, that of the shells is the most requested. The woman gives a shell to Petronio and he listens to the murmur of the waves, the channeled whistle of oceanliners, the chirp of certain sea birds, then Adela does the same with a spiral shell and the woman reads her destiny: you will not leave here, Comayagueta is your kingdom, you will inaugurate a saga, you will sell certain medicinal herbs, take it, this amulet of good auguries, it will protect you against boredom. God, says Petronio, oh God and looks toward the hill on whose summit there is a cross lit by tiny candles and later they go off into the night embracing, protecting each other, closer than ever and they see twelve- and thirteen-year-old whores, white, black, mestizas, copulating for a coin against pillars with beggars. Here, with striped panties and feeble little breasts they kiss and there is a line for blocks, there are ten, twenty, thirty, a hundred and they lay on the sidewalks or heaps and open their little legs so men can put their hard and throbbing members in them and ejaculate, quickly, without stopping and later fall sprawled out and get up and go elsewhere and the little whore sells kisses, the other one lets a finger, a candle, a shell be inserted in her and she parts her damp sex so an old man can suckle like a young bull and suck trembling while he ejaculates in the mire, amid the night vapor that rises like the profound smoke of the volcanic earth. They are beautiful whores with oval, Oriental eyes and southeast Asian skin, distant relatives of the West, the discarded shadows of exodus. Whores with curly and withered or spongy and brittle hair that falls over the sad, adolescent, infantile men. Their still firm and beautiful bodies are offered on a street corner and they laugh at Petronio as he passes and looks at them, Lila, Umbra, Esther, Aloisa, Hebelina, Aumera, Ura, Ictimona, Ofrana, Eva, Labia, Melpomene, whores from the nocturnal zone lit by the lights of merry-go-rounds, the lights of fireworks, little women of the shadows who give laughter and orgasms to the miserable. Seeing one of them, striking, a biblical diva, an infernal beauty, Petronio feels his member grow and stretch against his clothes and feels a moist liquid at the tip of his

gland. Then he approaches her, she is Aumera and he kisses her nipples and she touches his hair and nears his sweating body, Petronio licks her salty skin and sucks on her sex which she moves in contortions and she imitates an impossible moan, later with her little hands she touches his testicles and his member that has grown more and throbs and then she sucks it with her soft, oriental lips. She spreads her legs and Petronio puts his phallus deep inside her. She desperately moves her hips and like the wind she inhales his member and sucks it into her guts and she kisses his chest with her lips and with her hand she softly touches his torso, then Petronio comes and ejaculates like a beast with his eyes closed, experiencing an unknown pleasure that smells of the sweat of the earth, the muddy, unhealthy, germ-filled air and he feels the liquid pass through his urethra and hotly leave to be deposited in the little hole of the narrow, rattling vagina from where the semen will come out and be spread afterward on the thighs, lubricating the crack another will come pierce or suck, according to his pleasure. Petronio will remain sprawled out on the sidewalk in a somnolent state, his muscles possessed by an anesthetic stupor. Adela will give him a liquid they have offered her that they extract from a carnivorous, giant plant growing in the jungle and later process until it's converted into a liquor. Everyone drinks it in smoking calabashes and remains drunk on the river bank, on the sidewalks, conquered by *delirium tremens*, by the imagination of those who create their world in another zone. Petronio wakes up and drinks more, he rises and hallucinates from the potion. The music of another planet is heard, a nostalgic tune with voices from another world, singing of exile, the impossibility of finding those friends time has helped scatter in other inaccessible zones and that nothing nor no one will recuperate, it is a music that speaks without speaking and that stirs the skin with passion. The music of the exiled, those who upon leaving can no longer return to the place of departure, those who are ghosts to their families or shadows, spectors, a vague brightness, mirages to their past lovers. The song of the 'saudade,' the musical rite rendering homage to bodies that touch each other and vibrate next to each other, that excrete liquids and words in a coupling

time and usury are burdened with wearing away. Lodging! Lodging! Here, lodging! a deformed, half-dwarf man with knock-knees and tiny arms deformed like the tentacles of a crab, orientates them through a vestibule, deep in a neighborhood where a room illuminated by a lamp of tenuous light awaits them. The little man, who they trust, lays them down on a mat. Afterward a projector sends little colored figures, kaleidoscopic drawings against the wall and he recites them poetry in an unknown language; I'm one of you, he tells them, trust me, I'm your brother, the guide, the friend, the human heat in this hell you are beginning to live. Later, he arranges for them on a stereo delicious music of Indian strings, of the lute and sitar and he lights incense and slowly smokes a joint while he watches them sleep, weakened by the fatigue of such a long voyage and the emotions of an unaccustomed recognition full of surprises. Three hours will pass and they will re-awake. The room is warm and an agreeable aroma adheres to the carpets woven in oriental colors and figures that separate the walls from the uproar and trappings of Comayagua. They will look at the little man who smiles at them with an immense tenderness reflecting friendship and surrender. Good day, he says to them, my name is Luperón and I have lived all the stages of this initiation. This is the last place, the end of the world, of every world, the conclusion of the other and of this one. We are the chosen. I've been here ten years and I know it like the back of my hand. They respect me, they do me no harm, I'm like a wise man, a prophet, friends, count on Luperón, your friend, your brother, your comrade. He placed on the stereo some delicious music and told them it was the latest thing blacks in New York were listening to and afterward served them a kind of hot chocolate with little green breads and nestled on the carpet, inviting them to make themselves comfortable on the cushions. This is a fascinating world, he told them, here you will find people of every kind, who like us have arrived at the last state on this Boulevard of Heroes. There is no world more complex and multiple than this one. Here wisdom is found, the true illumination proposed by the sacred texts. He who hasn't lived here will disappear ignorant of truth, he will vanish deprived of

revelation, he will be extinguished incomplete. Luperón is their first friend. As they begin to enter its secrets, their love for Comayaguela will grow and they won't be able to separate themselves from it. Cities are made of friends. A city without friends doesn't exist. A city without memories, either bitter or happy, is a dead zone. Like love, they require a fabric of passions and secrets to make them one's own. After Comayaguela, friends, there are no more surprises. Horror reaches its limits here; masks have disappeared leaving to the elements the true face of existence, the theatre without make-up of our genus, the crude representation of human life. Later the little man offered them marihuana, which they immediately smoked, listening to sitar music. The room was filled with knick-knacks. Trunks, little tables, lamps, incense burners, posters on the walls, sepia photographs, manuscripts, ancient and modern maps, drawings of boats and space ships, cigaret packs from all over this world and others, ships in bottles, paintings, curtains, handwritten papers and dusty incunabula in every language, with worn leather bindings and old covers. The chamber had an open skylight and through it stars were seen. Luperón brought out a telescope and looked at the interstellar space. He was dressed in a flowery shirt, dark brown pants and moccasins, everything well-taken care of but with the inevitable mark of the years, like those clothes of an owner determined to keep them throughout his entire life. In an armoire he had an infinity of papers on which were written the story of his life in the last city, its transformations, the tenor of the times, strange and routine facts, deaths, births, assassinations, predictions completed and to be completed, the dates of plagues and contagious illnesses, the number of residents, the vapors of the river, objects that came from the river bed, floods, torrential rains, the mysterious tone of the waters, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, falling meteorites and lightening, senseless hurricanes and memorable dates of quarrels provoked by misery or the cruel invasions of unstoppable hungry neighbors and killers. Upon looking at the sky he brandished his horse lip and smiled with the tenderness he learned in the time of his wandering. He chose his friends with his gaze and knew only himself how to touch the

halo they expelled, the waves of complicity or the seals of strangeness. A bastard son in a distant country of enormous ferns, he was raised in an infamous orphanage by old one-eyed spinsters who humiliated him limitlessly and gave him the job of bootblack. Still his companions, as miserable and unfortunate as he, didn't pass up the opportunity of making jests at his expense, joking about his deformities, his horse lip and his shortness. In his cabin, beneath the darkness of endless nights, Luperón meditated and promised to forgive those who attacked him during the day. When they called him to eat, he silently stood in line, knowing he couldn't share even one word with the soulless companions of misfortune, and then, with the spoon tied to the table, he extracted from the bowl the putrid soup they gave them and that was recollected among the leftovers of vomit. He withstood unjust punishments, whippings, long periods in dark and dank rooms, the rain of spit. One day when he was fifteen, he decided to escape and did so by opening a hole in the canvas wall separating him from freedom and that night he escaped while everyone slept. He journeyed begging alms, selling soft drinks at intersections or at stations with foreign buses, he exercised the office of illegal bootblack, garbage collector, he cleaned toilets and sewers, and thus, having saved up a few coins, he journeyed to the north of his land and saw republics and kingdoms, deserted and dangerous zones, he trafficked in miserable coins at the border and he edited gossip columns and bulletins of imaginary confederations, and finally, he arrived to Comayagua to live among those who knew no other reality but misfortune. He was then adopted by those monstrous, big-bellied malodorous women and those nauseating beings who had no face but the worm bed of their decrepitude. Since his adolescence he had been the son in whom everyone placed hope and they didn't refrain from giving him the best, even at the cost of their own privilege. For this he had a better room, a more acceptable bed and even a stereo they bought from a moribund gringo on the river bank. Half prophet and maestro, an acceptable monster and authority, Luperón was the untouchable being who had the task of guiding the outlanders who arrived attracted by chance and the wheel of

fortune. He saw Petronio and Adela arrive and made out in their vigorous and terse faces the patina of foreign well-being and in their astonished gaze the innocence of those who haven't seen sorrow but yet intuit it. He took on the role of companion and listened attentively to their words. They asked him for explanations, news, exact details about the nature of this country exiled from maps and about which no one spoke in the violet zone of forgetfulness. Luperon answered them that here no one knew anything about the exterior and were only familiar with their own way of living and didn't long for other worlds because they didn't know they existed. Kingdom of ignorance, the cove of unreason, the sacred terrain of decay, it served as a mirror for the outlanders and the natives of darkness. Only I can look at the stars, he told them, Aldebarán, Cassiopeia, Alfa Centauro, Ursa Major, Seven Goats, Saturn, all the stars are my friends. I am an expert on zodiacs, the only one who knows of eclipses, the chosen of time. Here no one knows of hours, or years, or centuries: they live in an eternal present, that of life. They wake up and run through the streets in search of a crust of bread, they satiate themselves and then go back to sleep, they only talk about this, about eating, and they know of nothing besides shitting, pissing, belching and farting. This is the paradise you've dreamed of: they have no fear, nor do they suffer, they're satisfied and happiness would be a true misfortune.

The next day, after sleeping with difficulty, Petronio and Adela were wakened by the prayers of the entire city, at that moment initiating its hour of supplications. They began in an unknown language, in a low voice, and as the minutes passed the volume of the voices rose. Adela opened her eyes first. Luperón was no longer there. The light of dawn had just begun creeping in through the skylight. The murmur of a hundred thousand voices increased and seemed the rumbling of an earthquake, the hollow voice of volcanic magma. Petronio also opened his eyes and listened to the thunder. They remained there like defenseless creatures, expectantly, trying to decipher the scriptures of a religion unknown to them. After awhile the canticle began to lower in volume and then started to increase again, finally extinguished in a shattering scream of women lasting twenty minutes. There followed silence, nothingness, the cold of inexistence, as if the inhabitants were able to fade out with the energy of their muteness. Adela and Petronio went out into the neighborhood and crossed the patio where women with hidden faces continued their inaudible oration. They wore black clothes and held a rosary in their hands that they moved with thin agile fingers. Another woman, kneeling with her hands held open, directed her gaze to the heavens from the roof of a building decayed by termites and mold. She dangerously neared the edge, asking, demanding her God that he draw her to earth. And, in fact, she slipped from the top, remained hanging

a few moments from the gutter and fell to the ground, exploding in a bloody haze that splattered against the walls, the faces and the feet of the mourners. Adela leaned against the wall feeling nauseous. The woman's head was split open and from the cavity oozed whitened flesh. The women stood up and began to applaud and pray, God Comayague, saint of saints, illuminate her, oh Toad God, receive her, shine on her, bless her oh God, and they started again to applaud. Then they departed and left the inert body there on the ground.

In the streets of Comayaguela life seemed to follow a daily routine. People in rags wandered on the destroyed sidewalks, greeting each other and smiling with vile decayed teeth. Pallid, yellowish faces passed like specters, living corpses. From the flat roofs women tossed garbage, spit, urine and shit and the people stepped aside to avoid the shower. They sold herbs, sprouts, flowers, moss, and lichens whose meritorious properties were proclaimed by the foreigners. Serpents from the previous day slept in every corner. The penumbra grew. Luperón had recounted to them the previous night that the volcano, which was eternally active, emitted enormous puffs of smoke that covered the skies and seemed to become more active with the setting sun. For that reason there wasn't what was called in other worlds day, but a cloud of ashes that changed tone according to the fury of its activity. From the sky fell a persistent dry ash that congested noses and made eyes water, it fell in the street, on the sidewalks, on the roofs and esplanades. People were used to the punctuality of the soot and so wore black clothes that covered their sleeves, they were turned into magpies, mysterious birds that arrived in the afternoons and took possession of the main square. Adela and Petronio arrived at the plaza and leaned against a tree. The shriek, the chatter of the magpies was unbearable; on every branch, hidden in their blackness, the black-feathered birds with metallic semblances seized the park; there were hundreds of thousands of them, like crows. The magpies, or quiscales, as Luperon called them, were part of the landscape and considered brothers by the inhabitants of Comayaguela. A few old street lamps,

installed in the modernist period, illuminated with their roundness certain coves. Next to them were preachers, pastors, priests, the enlightened. There on the corner of the Street of Torments a robust nine-year-old boy, with cropped hair preached with great surety to a group of dazed listeners; the child moved his hands, opened his mouth, rolled his eyes and turned round and round without neglecting any of his faithful, pointing at them with his index finger and asking them questions; suddenly, crawling on the muddy ground, a man who had for hands and feet four stumps covered by dirty blue cloth and for a face a snubnosed, deformed, leprous surface, came into the center of the circle and begged the child for a miracle. The innocent theatrically knelt with open hands and closed eyes and began to ask, God, why do you not come help your creature? and begged for another miracle, miracle! prompting expectations among the crowd. Then the infant headed to the monster and kissed him on the cheek and asked everyone to shout God! God! God! and they moaned and cried; then everyone saw how hands and feet blossomed from the invalid's stumps and grew as the shouting rose and the child shrieked miracle! miracle! miracle! miracle! and the others continued the chorus and from every corner of the park came more of the curious and the magpies made a deafening uproar. The man rose amazed, without believing it and his face altered between smiles and tears. His new long white legs seemed those of an angel and his smooth muscular hands those of a giant. The people touched him and knelt before him praying. The child, in a trance, lay face down on the ground while a woman sprinkled him with holy water. On other corners other miracles were performed, and in front of the Cathedral a man with a white beard proclaimed he had cured a blind man and the blessed one ran showing the sore that formed on his knees from crawling on the pavement. Outlanders looking like imperial soldiers on leave, in white short-sleeved shirts, brown pants and cropped hair, proclaimed another revelation and further on the leaders of another sect offered their miracles: a woman cured of goiter, a man saved from cerebral thrombosis, an idiot enlightened in the blink of an eye, a cripple that walked. A thousand

sects split the booty of the crowd on the plaza of Comayaguela; pastors of different brotherhoods negotiated the conversion of the inhabitants and in their hidden offices in baharaque mansions or in tents situated next to the river they made the calculations, statistics, the accounting of the number of adepts. Amidst everything the quiscuales shrieked their lamentations and evil auguries. They found Luperón amid the throng. With his malicious little eyes and horse-lipped smile, he discretely observed and greeted the many he knew wandering about there. He opened his arms to embrace Petronio and Adela and invited them to follow him. They felt assured to be with him, for he was the prodigal brother who from the beginning stirred in them a mix of love and dependence. They followed streets leading to the north end of the plaza. The neighborhood was in a better state than the south and seemed to be where the oldest people lived. He recounted to them that the old city observed certain customs different than the other zones and if there was luxury, paved streets, light and less depressed merchants, it was due to them being vestiges of the bygone world of lost times. He explained no one held rancor or envy and upon dying they received offerings from the fetid beings of the south. Luperón guided them down a lane of old mansions, and in an obscure vestibule introduced them to the owner of Casa George, a secret bar of penumbrous lights, where the Sybarites of that world met to converse and take pleasure in the contorsions of naked nymphs. They sat down in a corner around a table covered by a white and red checkered tablecloth. A crippled waiter immediately arrived and showed them the list of liquors, conserved for two hundred years in the warehouse of la Casa and which constituted the bounty of pirates that in those times intercepted various French ships carrying wine, cognac, champagne, armagnac, calvados, apertifs, digestifs, cider and spirits; thousands and thousands of bottles that hadn't been finished due to negligible consumption. Casa George remained in the center of the neighborhood of colonial vestibules and romantic balconies. The neighboring houses were covered with red clay roofs and their lime walls were painted white, while the wooden door frames and thresholds were blue. Inside

were paintings of nobles and infants, pastoral country scenes and figures of beautiful naked and clothed women. There were also tubs of butter, pork shoulders, heads of bulls sacrificed by the legendary masters of bullfighting, complete collections of cigaret packs from all over the world, beautiful tickets to strange bars, violet curtains, plaster hands in distinct positions, handbills from spectacles dated in Hamburg or Upsala, in Madrid or Marrakesh. The wood bordering the door and windows and that of the bar possessed the color of vintage mahogany from those marvelous bistros and the floor shone with the wax sad servants put on it in the mornings with the zeal and attentiveness of artisans. The round, detailed tables, with drawings of furious animals or princesses, were marked by a century of the gossip and tatoos of distant lovers. They made a toast with their first drink while three nymphs undressed on a diminutive stage covered by a black curtain, after a clownish orchestra intoned German songs from musical comedies and low-class operettas to the applause of a dissimilar audience. At nightfall the place became more crowded when the portentous Madame Lola arrived, with her fantastic sequined eyeglasses and her retinue of hangers-on. Luperón explained that in Casa George the brotherhood of discouraged heroes met, created to lessen the bitterness of those scarce beings that traveled through the journey of hope and arrived at Comayaguela attracted by an unstoppable force. But outside the organized activities of the brotherhood, the heroes had to return to the eternal martyrdom of horror. A man arrived at that moment and headed to the bar. Short of stature, with swarthy skin, very fine features, and sad eyes, the guy was dressed in a nineteenth-century military uniform with epaulets and sported a rusty marble-gripped saber. The man coughed ceaselessly and walked weakly, expressing in his pallid face the effects of a devastating illness. He came to a table and the waiters helped him sit down. Later some other officials of an independista army approached his table and greeted him with a salute. Petronio recognized in him the hero who had called to him in the Hôpital Saint-Louis, the hero of the revolution of the Americas, the great Simón Bolívar, and he preferred to conceal himself from his gaze.

But the penetrating eyes of the man still captured his, and nodding his head, he saluted him. It was a marvelous moment for Crazy Rincón. That one instant of communion with the greatest hero justified his long existence, his childish dreams, his adolescent struggles, the deliria of his first youth, the absurd adventures and the painful exile to which they had led him. All the guests knew who he was, but respected his privacy. Each member of the brotherhood, by the sole fact of belonging to it, had to consider himself above the naive adorations and salutes that contributed to reinforcing hierarchies. Having known past defeat, the hero who had savored triumph and fled from it or was forced out of power knew how to contain his emotions. With the elegant indifference of the great, they carried on the life of Comayaguela in sad dwellings and even in the hot open air of the river banks. Nothing could excite them but signs of illumination or powerful announcements of an indomitable nature. Their kingdom was catastrophe, their arms the solitary cry of individual confession. The party became more and more animated. The cohabitants spoke in different groups or played dominoes, chess, or whist and cigaret smoke was seen rising, forming faces, figures, gray landscapes. Later the volume of the voices suddenly rose and a peal of laughter of a Spanish or French hero was heard. The innocuous theme of daily life didn't find much of a reception at the tables and more often it happened anecdotes about the dead time were recounted, when everyone gave themselves over with zeal to causes that were betrayed. Brethren, said Luperon, we were lucky, but the evil heroes, the traitors, war criminals, those thirsty for power come to Comayaguela converted into magpies and are condemned to devour carrion. The lights went out at Casa George and a projector cast a blue light over the stage. An actor dressed like Napoleon ceaselessly walked from one side to the other, his left arm bent at an angle over his shoulder and his right hand placed inside his jacket. The cohabitants stopped their conversations and attentively watched the spectacle. They raised the curtain more and an enormous stage was revealed, a fantastic decor of rugged mountains. Later two of Antenor's white horses appeared floating in space, led by two black grooms in loin

cloths and yellow feathers. The silken wings of Pegasus made possible the soft flight. From one side sweaty, naked men dragged an enormous guillotine they placed in the center of the stage. The light of the projector turned white and intense. There followed the music of trumpets and the horses were forced to descend to the floor and dragged to the guillotine, despite the neighing and the look of terror they brandished when their mouths opened showing their white teeth. The two blacks brought them closer to the force, up to the fateful semicircle, and they thrust in the first one so the blade could fall onto its neck, prompting a spray of blood that fell near the cohabitants. Petronio rose astonished, not knowing whether he were attending a performance or bare reality. The blacks pushed forward the other sorrel and were placing it beneath the sharp-edged blade when Petronio, having left the seats without heeding the calls of Luperon and Adela, hurled himself upon the apparatus of Mr. Guillotin in order to prevent the new execution, with such bad luck that the blade fell on his left hand, which rolled on the ground to the screams of Adela and the anxious desire of the brethren.

That night Casa George closed earlier than usual and the heroes left quickly, scattering through the streets of the old quarter of Comayaguela where they had their lodgings. Returning to Luperon's room, the victim was led by his friends in a silence that contrasted with the decreasing uproar of the magpies. They crossed the central park where the miracles had taken place and followed the obscure small streets going south, they passed parks with rounded street lamps where slovenly youths smoked cigarets and kissed on benches. They went down streets and through mire they almost slipped in, they held their noses so not to smell the corpses the river brought from distant places and they came out near the market; just a few women sold broths and magpie claws in spicy salsa; they walked among twelve-year-old whores dedicated as always to the compulsive satisfaction of old decrepit men and desperate and hungry men dressed in rags and they arrived at the threshold of the neighborhood where enormous candles still held vigil over the body of the woman who had died that morning. A medicine woman put compresses

of spider webs on Petronio's stump and calmed him with a drink of valerian and arsenic.

Days and weeks passed and Crazy Rincón was cured of the wound, but with the ineluctable loss. As Adela began to suffer from a cough, Luperon found for her warm blankets that held off the effects of the cold on the beautiful woman's weak bronchia. She was already used to the daily life of Comayaguela and dressed like the other women in the area, who she accompanied in the morning prayers. They taught her how to prepare meals with the precarious produce of vegetables she was able to get out of the bald land, she learned to recognize the property of herbs and mollusks and insects and she could hunt in the tedious afternoons. As for Petronio, the loss brought him to a boundless sadness and Adela feared for his sanity, but more than his hand, he lamented the loss of one of his horses, which he considered amulets of luck. He never returned to Casa George, although they invited him and a few of the more animated conversors of obscurity came for him. He patiently accepted the destiny of luck and he understood that the scenes in the Hopital Saint-Louis were premonitions of future experiences. He didn't long for Paris or the Andes, but like all true exiles, while he was the farthest and most lost from his place of origen the greater was the excitation of his spirit. In his misfortune he controlled ideas and began to write the memoirs of his life and the memories of his past. He wrote in little yellow notebooks of maize paper the recurrent recollections of his infancy and in other blue ones the impressions of his voyage in the violet zone of forgetfulness. In a large notebook with graph paper he edited the external events and states of animation provoked by Comayaguela. It seemed to him the most fascinating world on earth because in it reigned the horror of nightmares. He almost never went to the market or river bank and he devoured with pleasure the books of his smiling horse-lipped friend in which were written all the keys of the secret zone. One day, covered with soot, the members of a travelling theatre company arrived to the muddy quarter. In the street of serpents, five men mounted on ten-foot tall stilts, dressed in the exotic clothing of clowns and harlequins, started an uproar with the help of cowbells and

tin bells, toy trumpets and accordions. It had been many years since such an insolite thing had occured and the neighbors first thought it was executioners who had come ready to carry off a few inhabitants. But that wasn't it: they came only to communicate a smile to the last hollow in the world, to the saddest and most desperate zone on earth. As there was no government in the country, for illusions and projects had long lost credibility with the inhabitants, members of the company had no obstacles to entering and many less to wandering in the streets. The dirty swollen-bellied children knew for the first time smiles and laughter. They started a fiesta and formed a circle trying to climb the stilts up to the bodies of the buffoons. Women devoted to supplications went out onto the street and laughed, forgetting for a moment the misery and catastrophe of soot. The men, many of whom were invalids or moribund, applauded the jokes and ordered their wives to prepare tea made from the leaves of happiness. Adela recounted this to Petronio and he finally went out into the streets, concealing his stump. They lit candles, brought out seats, they arranged hearths of firewood and tables where they set out nauseating meats and everyone began to gape at the spectacle, responding to the questions and applauding when the biggest one began to kiss a girl who also arrived on stilts, a lovely girl with straight black hair and Ethiopian beauty traits. When the clowns left, the people seemed calmer and ready for change. They next morning they dedicated themselves to killing the snakes that slept on sidewalks and under beds and made bathe many of the deformed beggars that showed their fetid-smelling scabs in the light of the volcano's phosphorescent ash. In the mornings, after the religious lamentations, the women and children washed away the ash the volcano had left in the streets of Comayaguela during the night and there were some who sewed beautiful colorful clothing like that of the group of actors and they offered it to their children. The idea spread quickly to other neighborhoods, such that in a few weeks the children were dressed in extravagant styles and with the teachings of the mime Juancarlos they learned to make stilts with the intention of going above the clouds of dust and ash covering the city. One of the children managed

one day to touch the other side of the sky and stood on his tiptoes seeing the luminosity of the tropics. The boy was converted into a God by the inhabitants who recounted the beauty of his vision. He said that to the north, on the sides of the volcanoes he saw something like an immense temple, but at that moment one of his stilts gave way and he had to get down. For those who thought the world was reduced to the streets of Comayaguela, the stories of Daimon were the fruit of fantasy and they didn't believe the angelic smile he daily brandished observing the eternal cloud, behind which was the luminous zone of a thousand flashes. Petronio studied in Luperón's books the possibility of that zone's existence, but the horse-lipped man threatened him to desist in the affair, adducing that nothing is worth anything if the rest is worth less. Weeks later, in the rainy season, when the streets were submerged with a black mud and the houses were flooded to such a point that it wasn't difficult to find sword fish or little fresh-water sharks in the living room or kitchen, Adela revealed to Petronio she was three months pregnant and embraced him for several long emotional minutes. The Crazy One lifted his spirits and no longer cried about his lack. Luperon brought out from among his books one whose verses spoke of maternal cities and another in which there was a list of names of men and women and proposed that if it were a male it would be Cyrano and if a female Ligeia. Petronio started hunting again in the wild zones of the river bank and brought a few parts of beautiful birds to celebrate the event. But a new and powerful illusion was ignited in his heart: to flee from Comayaguela, to escape from the trap, to spare the child from entering the horrors of a world enclosed in desperation, enchained in disillusion. On his hunts he calculated in detail the direction of the horse trails and with an old compass he orientated himself and one day returned convinced of having found the way to the luminous zone Daimon had spoken of. At first the deformed Luperón resisted, but finally he agreed to leave with them on the search for new horizons. The afternoon of a hurricane-like day he gave all his books to the children dressed like harlequins, imitating the histrionics of the travelling theatre company, he traded his personal effects

to his neighbors and to Casa George he gave his stereo and records so they might remember him. The night before the departure they packed the only horse to survive the fateful performance and they loaded several bags with objects and indispensable products for a long crossing. At dawn, shortly before the women began their prayers and crying, the three left in silence. Petronio with his lack, Luperón with his horse-lipped smile and Adela, sitting on the back of the only sorrel, with a growing belly of fertility.

They had no difficulty crossing the dense jungle where the fires roared through the solitude, nor did they encounter dead, enormous trunks that would have impeded the passage. Only near the border with the primitive hills did they discover a moldy rigid trunk that turned out to be an anaconda sleeping an interminable siesta. When night fell they settled under a tree and lit a fire to scare off predators. The maternal heat of the pregnant woman removed any lurking danger and turned aside the path of assassin cyclones. The extraordinary green of the jungle fascinated them. Petronio was already familiar with it, but Adela and Luperón only had vague references obtained in the illustrated encyclopedias of dreams. They marvelled at seeing stalks of plants grow with a surprising rapidity or observing the eclosion of carnivorous flowers. There was a moment when the three slept listening to the hum of singing insects, ensconced in the prodigious anonymity of the jungle. One day, around eleven, they were advancing down an old abandoned road when they ran across a beautiful stone pyramid. It measured more than seventy meters high and leading to the altar at the summit was a staircase bordered by stone engravings of a great clarity, whose colors could still be perceived from far away. On high four anthropomorphic statues of contorted men and women raising plumes and bracelets held up the temple roof. Farther on other stone palaces indicated the city had been an extraordinary center of contact with ancient gods. Most of it wasn't covered by underbrush, nor showed signs of pillage or destruction. The three ap-

proached and, squatting down on the green plaza, contemplated the marvel of a miraculous time. There was no one in the vast sacristy, but no doubt someone must have been charged with cleaning the funeral markers, the pedestals, the crests and the wooden doors that still allowed a glimpse of the enmeshed geometric weave of a wise and profound art. It wasn't possible the undertaking of centuries had spared the constructions of men or lesser gods, whose inevitable destiny is destruction and daily usury. Luperón told them how he read once, in one of the books belonging to a wide-ranging writer from Comayagua, that an extraordinary city was hidden on the road leading to the eternal snows. The author of the text recounted how a profoundly devoted civilization flourished there, that for more than a millennium it refused to practice war or make sacrifices and for that reason was annihilated by a warlike race. Years later the plague decimated the aggressors and the survivors took it upon themselves to keep vigil over the eternal beauty of the temples, teaching their children the duty of trimming the weeds and shining the marble and colored stucco where the glory of a peaceful era was recounted. Petronio headed towards the steps, Adela leaned back to contemplate her shifting belly, and Luperón stayed to care for the future mother. The Crazy One climbed the stairs and from the top contemplated the beauty of the valley. He touched with his hands the enormous and perfect figures, he felt the vertigo of the heights and the effects of the pure air and turned to see in the sky the gleam of a sword. He penetrated to the altar and knelt before the stucco murals, dominated by the figure of a large-nosed patriarch surrounded by slaves and subjects. From some orifices situated in the floor of the summit he heard the melody of a harpsichord and he saw coming out the slight puffs of an aromatic smoke, the essence of the flower of desire and sandalwood. The smell possessed an overflowing sensuality, an aroma that caressed the sense of smell and rose all the way to secret zones of the brain, that under its novel effect took on a crushed sensibility. Petronio moved the flagstone and saw some steps leading to the depths of the pyramid and the earth. He was afraid, but he armed himself with valor and began to

descend, supported in the darkness by the damp, cold walls. He came first to a landing, turned at an angle and followed some other steps leading to a place illuminated by a phosphorescent light of violet tones. The sound of the harpsichord became clearer and more penetrating. At the bottom of a sarcophagus, its elaborate walls and rafters drawn with figures of birds of paradise, their tails aflame, an old man who resembled Werner Gerhardt, with the eyes of the venerable one and the nose of Fariá Utrillo, spoke in the voice of the neurotic writer of Libertilandia and stopped for a moment his interpretation of an exquisite aria.

“Petronio” he said, walking over a flagstone illuminated from beneath and at whose center was drawn a corn plant. “I’ve waited for you a long time. Nobody who arrives at Comayagua has the strength to attempt another adventure and escape.”

“Who are you?” asked Crazy Rincon, flourishing his stump with fury and expectation.

“I’m the god of revolutions. This is my temple, this my city, those my fertile valleys. The God of revolutions lives in peace. I’ve always been at your side, dear friend. I have taken the form of a hero, of a friend, of an animal to make sure you would arrive at the final signpost. You are the one charged with making the revolution other heroes of the Andes couldn’t achieve.”

The man returned to the harpsichord, blew on the incense burner, and another puff of aromatic smoke floated into the atmosphere.

“But I’ve already lost faith, venerable one. My world is condemned to perpetual injustice,” replied Petronio, looking into the depths of the sarcophagus.

“It’s not you who decides. Although the loss of faith can be a variant of the same thing. It’s easy to make a religion out of incredulity.”

Playing the keyboard, dressed in a tunic, his thick hair falling over his forehead, the strange character hummed a song, indifferent to the protests of the South American.

“Nobody believed in me. The people betrayed me,” remarked Petronio. “I can’t

oblige those who like being subjugated and render tribute to their tormenters. The Grand Republic of the Andes is a Fatherland of Fools, excellency. I'd be disgusted to return there. Dynasties continue to reign and nobody says a word. Dreamers are crushed by the pile drivers of indifference. I believed in my project of entering by the Orinoco, crossing the jungle and beginning the march on the Palace of Government, where I thought to arrive on an elegant burro, holding an olive branch. But everything collapsed like a house of cards. I no longer want to do the ridiculous. Revolutionaries, leaders, we are the greatest and neediest imposters on earth."

"Shut up, you speak heresies. Don't believe I worked in vain with you. I disguised myself completely to test you. Until you assassinated me. You cut off my hands in Asnieres. What I haven't done to satisfy your illusions and rages!"

The old man raised the lid of the harpsichord and took from it a sword. He came toward Petronio and handed it to him over the grates separating them.

"Venerable one..." said Petronio.

"Go forth, see, and save your land. You have no other destiny. And forget me."

The old man became lost in the depths of the sarcophagus, ringing some little bells he took out of his tunic. Smelling the pleasant incense, Crazy Rincón climbed the steps and come out again into the light. He looked down below and saw Adela sitting in the same place he had left her. The landscape was moving, beautiful, of an Apollonian pulcritude. He went down the esplanade and didn't wish to tell Adela about his encounter. He told her he found the sword. They waited a while for Luperón to return, but he never arrived. They looked for him everywhere, in the nooks of the Palaces, again in the sarcophagus, through the trees, on the altars, on the ball court, they shouted with both voices, they waited there five days and never was the smiling, horse-lipped friend of Comayaguela heard of again.

Later came the mountain range, the enormous and wrinkled green-lined surface, partly covered by snow. Tatters of vaporous clouds occulted and then revealed the spine

of the terraqueous animal, behind which appeared an orange sun. Concavities, bends, dense zones of entangled vegetation, precipices, bottomless abysses fixed one atop the other, long sloping rivers whose deafening waters descended in leaps, snorting, afixiated in their crystal indifference, sleeves of light green, rectangular spots, pointless circles, pastoral skies, the madness of shocks, fractures, twistings, a cave of earthquakes, a vital and active zone, beating and dangerous. Above, touching the sky with the curls of trees, the final limit of the mountain changed as the distance lessened. Petronio looked at his compass and broke a path towards the most obscure line, covered by thick, black clouds. The temperature slowly got colder. A few solitary cebu bulls grazed next to the icy ponds and tumbleweeds and dwarfish plants, crushed by the atmosphere, set the tone for the kingdom of the high plains. From a leather bag hanging from the horse's saddle bag, Petronio took out a blanket and covered his wife, the mysterious fairy of obscure streets, illuminated now by the exotic adventure of the tropics. Adela sewed in her free time clothes for the future bud. Having resisted for so many years work she considered denigrating to the feminine sex, she discovered with the old women of Comayaguela the secret pleasures of colors, the infinite delirium of needlepoint and learned to create beautiful articles of clothing. Her change was sudden, and so she avoided immersing herself in useless discussions that stirred hate, trying to beat the interlocutor with points of reason and not of land. Far removed from her world, lost forever in unknown zones, with no nostalgia for the bustle and meanness of the city, Adela discovered the other occult feelings of her sex and dedicated herself to looking for premonitory signs in the songs of birds, in the veins of shriveled leaves, in four-leafed clovers or in the passing of blue guacamayos.

"Petronio," said Adela, "I'm happy; I truly feel like I'm in paradise."

Petronio looked at her with tired eyes, hid his stump and asked her, "What is happiness, Adela?"

"Silence," responded his wife, lifting her hands to her belly.

The next day they arrived to the sterile zones. The lunar landscape, scattered with enormous rocks, extended in every direction, revealing fractures and veins of amber metals. The cold and wind made advancing difficult and at times the gale tried to lift them into the air. Adela shivered with cold and Petronio hugged her and covered her with the blanket. At six in the evening the horizon cleared and the perpetual snows surged forth, unembarkable mountains covered with vigilant snow, hollows of absolute whiteness, surfaces that reflected the rays of the sun and blinded the old shepherds. From where they were it was frightening. A small road zig-zagged and rose high above the sand and ascended to the refuge where one could see the Great Republic of the Andes in its total expanse. There lived a midwife charged with attending to the wives of shepherds of flocks and bulls. She affectionately welcomed them and offered them a delicious soup, sugarwater with brandy and a piece of meat. The refugee house was built by a Swiss man, a kind of chalet, intended to receive tourists and famous personalities invited to the grand capital for the centenary celebration. The building was constructed with aromatic wood and tiles of colored clay and inside were installed all the advances and luxuries of those years. For many decades it had been converted into an exotic site, preferred by the solitary and neurotic poets that lodged there to see the tropical snowfalls, the fantasian auroras of the night, the cry of the brown bears and the nocturnal shine of the surfaces from the heat of the moon. Beautyqueens, theatre artists, actresses from award-winning films, patriarchs, bureaucrats, famous writers, European alpinists and Peruvian mountaineers left their traces in the tables and notebooks where they registered the passage of their pilgrimages. But for a long while nobody had come, alarmed by news of people disappearing, falling into surprising crevices or being dragged away by assassin avalanches and especially by rumors that the volcano was again active. That first night Petronio and Adela took a room on the second floor, where they could appreciate the smoke from the volcano and the tongues of sulphury fire rising into the blackness of the night. The old lion crater seemed like the mouth of a wounded dragon and Petronio was

sure it was the father of the dragons of the plains, his allies and soulmates. While Adela suffered her first labor pains, he dreamed of speaking with and inviting the crater which would help him complete the charge of the god of revolutions. The spectacle was astonishing and the beauty of the contrast between the snowy expanse, the blackness of the sky, the clearness of the plains and the smoking volcanic fissures, was only fitting for one of Fariá Utrillo's poems. At three in the morning, Adela entered the final stages of childbirth and the midwife, a thin and pallid woman, covered from head to foot in clothing of virgin wool, asked Petronio to leave the room and stayed to help the beautiful French woman. The man was below in the reception room, listening to broadcasts interfered with by the electrical activity of the Andean heights. One could hear musicals and songs and prayer hours, voices, poems and news of the other world. The only tenant of the refuge, a corpulent man with a round face and eternal smile, was seated next to the chimney drinking from a bottle of cognac. He called to Petronio and invited him to sit down. He told him that two years ago, deceived by women and men, he had decided to live off his revenues in the refuge, far away from the world, and he was happy. I anxiously await the day of eruption, I want to be the first one buried by lava, said the guy named Gerardo Baldión. Petronio told him about his life and accepted a few drinks. The man took a little bag from his wallet and opened a slip of paper in which there was a white, pure powder. It's dried snow, his new friend said to him; try it, you won't be sorry. He put some on a mirror, cut it into four lines and gave Petronio a silver tube with which to inhale the most delicious fruit of the summits. It's something marvelous, said Baldion, he who tries dried snow for the first time becomes addicted forever; the snows of Ruiz are the most astonishing narcotic in the land. Petronio felt the heat of the powder in his nostrils and an ochre flavor filled his mouth with the vice's delicious anesthetic; minutes later an uncontrollable force possessed him and made him leave the refuge to challenge the low temperatures and the meteorite showers that rained for miles over the snowy surface; he walked through the sand against the unexpected gale and climbed the lion's

crater to listen to the crackling fire, the bubbling sulphur, the undulating volcanic lava that struggled to leave the circular inundation of infernal and phosphorescent coloring; he descended the precipice to the edge of the crater without listening to Baldion's cries, and leaned against a rock possessed by the warm environment, watching pass the fiery iguanas, the igneous spiders and the silver chameleons uprooting the carnivorous plants that opened their throats and strangely bellowed at the absurd visitor. Petronio took out of his little bag another slip of paper with the dried snow of Ruiz and inhaled another dose of the precious narcotic, he went up to a rock floating on the ardent liquid, he hopped to another, without fear, without hesitation, and from the bottom of the depths he saw in the sky the Southern Cross rising in the stellar map, alone, unique, grandiose, the possessor of secret and nocturnal auguries. Petronio continued floating in the stony nave, on the lava sea, but a gale spread over the summit. The friend took hold of himself and continued calling to Crazy Rincón, but he paid no attention. The spiraling gale moved the sand and stones, the plants and animals of the fire, it thundered and turned into a magma maelstrom. The wind whistled more than a half hour and leaving the hollow headed south, carrying sand and tumbleweeds. Calm followed the disorder. Baldión, completely covered with sand, got up and cleaned his face and eyes of dust. He climbed the summit again and from there saw that nothing had remained in its place. The gale mixed stones and sand, made vanish the vegetation and fauna of the fire, and in its place left a round, perfect lake whose ardent lava calmly vibrated to the call of time. He understood then Petronio had disappeared forever in the volcanic abyss and took the matter calmly, he descended to the refuge and listened to the crying of children in the solitude of the summits. He entered and the midwife told him it was a little pair of precious twins. Baldión saw them there and didn't have the courage to tell Adela what had happened. They were named Cyrano and Ligeia, the beautiful girl told him.

Adela cried for more than a week, but time healed the wound. As she had nowhere to go, she remained there with the children, Gerardo, and the midwife. She

occupied the room from where could be seen the nocturnal smoke signals and the Southern Cross, which was for her the incarnation of her hero. The children made pirouettes until the third month and cheered up the room that was gloomy and solitary beforehand. When she no longer had milk to give them, she descended the road, accompanied by Maria, the midwife, and bought milk at a stable situated at the sandstone border. Later they climbed back up, conversing among the cliffs and resting on ephemeral dunes.

Life at the refuge calmy continued. The only client lived wrapped up in himself, reading geology books and trying to predict the day of the volcanic eruption. Due to his limitless fortune, the man lived happily far removed from the world and the women that had disgusted him until they turned him chaste. He had gone ten times around the world and after having taken pleasure in bodies from Java, Madagascar, Singapore, Sweden, Quebec, and Peru, he returned to the Andean land to begin a life away from the vain pleasures that madden men. His only activity was poetry and painting and his work was hidden in the drawers and attics of the refuge. He helped Maria with domestic chores like shoveling the snow from the entrance, cleaning out the chimney or bringing firewood to heat the icy nights and for entire months he disappeared into the mountains, where he went to ski and mountain climb.

One day the inevitable occurred. Adela recovered the svelteness that had driven crazy a hundred Third World revolutionaries in Paris and the violet zone and was wearing clothes a tourist from British Columbia had abandoned there. The vaporous flannels she wore in the house hinted at her firm breasts that trembled like gelatine when she painted doors, swept floors, or took care of the children. The excentric man discovered in the cinched pants of faded fabric the perfection of her muscles and hips. One day they encountered each other in the attic, when Gerardo was repairing the hinges of the skylight, and a humid desire suddenly possessed him. Their bodies brushed and they remained looking at each other face to face, then a force attracted their lips and

they entwined in a kiss and embrace that integrated their flesh in a sole mass of happiness and passion. On a bundle of straw they stirred all afternoon, covered by a wool blanket next to the chimney. From then on there were no limits to their intrigue, spurred on by abstinence and the reception of so many months. Maria was an accomplice to this encounter and was happy to see born in her reign the love of two beautiful examples of the human race. It could be said that love covered them with a fabulous halo and salvation came to them when they had least hope.

The children played in every corner, penetrated all the attics and unpacked all the suitcases and packages, closets, and cupboards. On one of those days Cyrano devoted himself to taking out every box, bag, bundle, suitcase and satchel abandoned in the attic and in one of those he found the packet from which he drew out Petronio's sword. The child played with it for several hours before going down to the salon of the refuge and surprising his stepfather and mother with his prodigious find. The piece glowed and a certain mysterious energy seemed to emanate from it. Gerardo took it in his hands, looked it over point by point, and finally said it was a jewel of incalculable value.

"It's nothing more nor less than the sword of Bolívar," he exclaimed with certainty.

Bolívar's sword had disappeared from the niche where it was displayed more than a century before and nobody knew anything more about it. The secret police of the Great Republic of the Andes pursued militants of subversive groups, poets, novelists, housewives and heads of family trying to find it, but ceased after a decade of investigations. Various revolutionary groups based their legitimacy in the fact of possessing the jewel, but none gave certain proof. The country entered a violent stage that prompted many murders and there were several insurrections that passed in good time after being annihilated by the secret services. Nothing, not even the force of nature, seemed to have the impetus to overthrow the dictatorship of the titulars. One by one, the heroes were forgotten by the people and in their place reigned the sons, grandsons, great-grandsons

and great-great-grandsons of remote presidents and dictators. After intimate deliberations, Gerardo and Adela decided not to make public their find and proposed to return the jewel to its legitimate owner. They immediately dressed the children and climbed to the mouth of the crater, fighting against the wind. Cyrano wore a harlequin's outfit with patches of white and red and Ligeia the clothes of an infant. The wind blew black rain clouds and from the summit was seen Petronio's city with the enormous cathedral of poured concrete, the ruined Palace of Fine Arts and the flowery parks. The sun illuminated the lunar zones of fallen snow and it was hot where cold had always reigned. Adela handed the sword to Cyrano and ordered him to throw it forcefully into the pit of bubbling lava. The boy happily readied himself, gave three turns for momentum and hit the mark. The sword floated a moment and then sunk in search of its owner.

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