

slid over braided hair, a smooth brow, eyes with closed lids soft as poppies, and went on exploring. I felt two breasts that were full and firm, broad, rounded buttocks, legs that locked around me, and I sank my fingers into pubic hair like mountain moss. Not a word came from that anonymous mouth.

How difficult it is to make love, without making noise, in a mountain of straw burrowed by the bodies of seven or eight other men, sleeping men who must not be awakened for anything in the world. And yet we can do anything, though it may require infinite care. A little while later, the stranger suddenly fell asleep next to me, and worked into a fever by the situation, I started to get panicky. It would soon be daybreak, I thought, and the first workers would discover the naked woman stretched out beside me on the threshing floor. But I also fell asleep. When I woke up, I put out a startled hand and found only a warm hollow, a warm absence. Soon a bird began to sing and then the whole forest filled with warbling. There was a long blast from a motor horn, and men and women began moving about and turning to their chores. A new day of threshing was getting underway.

At midday all of us had lunch together around a makeshift table of long planks. I looked out of the corners of my eyes as I ate, trying to find which of the women could have been my night visitor. But some were too old, others too skinny, and many were merely young girls as thin as sardines. And I was looking for a well-built woman with full breasts and long, braided hair. Suddenly a woman came in with a piece of roast for her husband, one of the Hernández men. This certainly could be the one. As I watched her from the other end of the table, I was sure I caught this attractive woman in long braids throwing me a quick glance and the slightest of smiles. And I felt as if the smile was growing broader and deeper, opening up inside my whole being.

## 2



## Lost in the City

### ROOMING HOUSES

**A**FTER many years of school, and the struggle through the math exam each December, I was outwardly prepared to face the university in Santiago. I say outwardly because my head was filled with books, dreams, and poems buzzing around like bees.

Carrying a metal trunk, wearing the requisite black suit of the poet, all skin and bones, thin-featured as a knife, I boarded the third-class section of a night train that took an interminable day and night to reach Santiago.

This long train crossed different zones and climates; I took it so many times and it still holds a strange fascination for me. Peasants with wet ponchos and baskets filled with chickens, uncommunicative Indians—an entire life unfolded in the third-class coach. Quite a number of people traveled without paying, under the seats. Whenever the ticket collector came around, a metamorphosis took place. Many disappeared, and others might hide under a poncho on which two passengers immediately pretended to play a game of cards, to keep the conductor from noticing the improvised table.

Meanwhile, the train passed from the countryside covered with oaks and araucaria trees and frame houses with sodden walls to the poplars and the dusty adobe buildings of central Chile. I made the round trip between the capital and the provinces many times, but I always felt myself stifling as soon as I left the great forests,

the timberland that drew me back like a mother. To me, the adobe houses, the cities with a past, seemed to be filled with cobwebs and silence. Even now I am still a poet of the great outdoors, of the cold forest that was lost to me after that.

I brought my references to a rooming house at 513 Maruri Street. Nothing can make me forget this number. I forget all kinds of dates, even years, but the number 513 is still in my mind, where I engraved it so many years ago, fearing I would never find that rooming house and would lose my way in the strange, awe-inspiring city. On the street just mentioned I used to sit out on the balcony and watch the dying afternoon, the sky with its green and crimson banners, the desolation of the rooftops on the edge of town threatened by the burning sky.

At that time, living in a rooming house for students meant starvation. I wrote a lot more than I had up until then, but I ate a lot less. Some of the poets I knew in those days broke down under the strict diet of poverty. Among them, I remember Romeo Murga, a poet my own age but much taller and gawkier than I, whose subtle lyric poetry was filled with emanations that lingered wherever it was heard.

Romeo Murga and I went to read our poetry together in the city of San Bernardo, near the capital. Before we took the stage, everyone had been in a festive mood, watching the queen of the Floral Games—fair and blond—with her court, and enjoying the speeches of the town dignitaries, and the so-called local bands; but when I went on and began reciting my poems in the most wretched voice in the world, everything changed. The audience coughed, joked about me, and had a good time laughing at my melancholy poems. Seeing this reaction from the barbarians, I rushed through my reading and left the stage to my companion, Romeo Murga. It was something to remember. When this Quixote, over six feet tall, with dark, frayed clothes, came on and began reading in a voice that was even more wretched than mine, no one in the audience could hold back his indignation and they all began to shout: You starving poets! Get out! Don't spoil the celebration.

I moved out of the Maruri Street rooming house like a mollusk leaving its shell. I said goodbye to that shell and went out to

explore the sea—that is, the world. The unknown sea was the streets of Santiago, which I had seen almost nothing of, as I walked back and forth between the university and the room I was now leaving for good.

I knew that during this adventure there would be more of the old hunger to face. At least my former landladies, remotely linked to my part of the country, mercifully doled out a potato or an onion from time to time. But I could not help it: life, love, glory, freedom called to me. Or so it seemed.

I rented the first room where I was completely on my own, over on Argüelles Street, near the Teachers Institute. A sign peered through a window on that gray street: "Rooms for rent." The landlord lived in the front rooms. He was a man with graying hair, a noble bearing, and eyes that seemed odd to me. He was talkative and quite eloquent, and he earned a living as a ladies' hairdresser, an occupation he shrugged off. He explained that he was more interested in the invisible world, the world of the beyond.

I unpacked my books and the few clothes I possessed, from the trunk that had traveled with me from Temuco, and I stretched out in bed to read and sleep, filled with pride at my independence and my idleness.

The house had no patio, only a gallery lined with innumerable closed rooms. The next morning, as I explored the nooks and crannies of the lonely mansion, I noticed that all the walls, including the toilet's, displayed signs saying more or less the same thing: "Resign yourself. You cannot get in touch with us. You are dead." Alarming notices that cropped up in every room, in the dining room, in the corridors, in the tiny parlors.

It was during one of Santiago's harsh winters. From colonial Spain my country had inherited a vulnerability to the rigors of nature as well as a disregard for them. (Fifty years after the events I am recounting now, Ilya Ehrenburg, who had just come from the snowy streets of Moscow, told me he had never felt so cold as he had in Chile.) Winter had turned the glass windows blue. The trees on my street shivered with cold. The horses pulling the old carriages blew clouds of steam through their nostrils. It was the worst possible time to be in that house, among sinister intimations of the beyond.

*Coiffeur pour dames* and occultist, the landlord stared straight through me with the eyes of a madman, and calmly explained: "My wife Charito died four months ago. This is a trying moment for the dead. They go on visiting the old places where they lived. We can't see them, but they don't know that we can't see them. We have to let them know this so they won't suffer, thinking we're indifferent. That's why I've put up those signs for Charito, they will make it easier for her to understand that she is dead now."

But the gray-headed man must have thought that I was much too clever. He started to watch my comings and goings, to make rules about female visitors, to pry into my books and my letters. I would enter my room without warning, to find the occultist going over my scanty furniture, investigating my poor belongings.

I had to look for new lodgings to shelter my threatened independence, so I made the rounds of the unfriendly streets in the dead of winter. I found a place a short distance away, in a laundry. It was obvious to me that here the landlady had nothing to do with the world beyond. Run-down gardens straggled through chilly patios with fountains whose stagnant water the algae covered with solid green rugs. There was a back room with a very high ceiling, and transoms over tall doors; in my eyes, this increased the distance between the floor and the ceiling. I stayed in that house, in that room.

We student poets led a wild life. I kept up my country ways, working in my room, writing several poems every day, and forever drinking cups of tea I prepared for myself. But, away from my room and my street, the turbulent life of writers in those days had its special fascination. They didn't go to the cafés but to the beer taverns and the regular bars. Conversations and poems were passed around till daybreak. My studies were suffering from all this.

The railroad company supplied my father with a cape of thick gray felt for his outdoor work, but he never wore it. I made it a feature of the poet. Three or four other poets also started wearing similar capes, and these constantly changed hands. This garment used to stir up the fury of good people and of others who were not so good. It was the heyday of the tango, which came to Chile

not only with its heavy beat and its thrumming "tijera," its accords and its rhythm, but also with its entourage of toughs who invaded our night life and the out-of-the-way places where we got together. These underworld characters—dancers and trouble-makers—sniggered at our capes and our way of life. We poets fought back hard.

Around that time I unexpectedly struck up a friendship with a widow who is stamped forever on my mind. She had big blue eyes that became misty with tenderness whenever she remembered her late beloved husband. He had been a young novelist, noted for his handsome physique. Together they had made a striking couple, she with her wheat-colored hair, her irreproachable figure, and her deep-blue eyes, and he very tall and athletic. The novelist had been destroyed by what used to be called galloping consumption. Later I've felt sure that his blond consort also contributed her share as galloping Venus, and that together the pre-penicillin age and the spirited widow carried off the monumental husband in a couple of months.

The lovely widow had not yet peeled off her dark clothing for me, the black and purple silks that made her look like a snow-white fruit covered with a rind of mourning. That skin slipped off one afternoon in my room, at the rear of the laundry, and I was able to fondle and explore all that fruit of fiery snow. The natural rapture was about to be consummated, when I noticed her eyes closing below mine, as she cried out, sighing and sobbing, "Oh, Roberto, Roberto!" (It seemed to be a ritual performance. The vestal virgin calling on the vanished god before surrendering to a new rite.)

However, in spite of my youth and need, this widow seemed too much for me. Her invocations became more and more urgent and her spirited heart was slowly leading me to a premature destruction. Love, in such doses, is not good for malnutrition. And my malnutrition was becoming more dramatic every day.

## SHYNESS

I really lived many of the first years of my life, and perhaps many of the next ones and the ones after that, as a kind of deaf-mute.

Dressed in ritual black since I had been a young boy, like the

true poets of the last century, I had the vague impression that I didn't look bad at all. But, instead of going after girls, since I knew I would stutter or turn red in front of them, I preferred to pass them up and go on my way, showing a total lack of interest I was very far from feeling. They were all a deep mystery to me. I would have liked to burn at the stake in that secret fire, to drown in the inscrutable depth of that well, but I lacked the courage to throw myself into the fire or the water. And since I could find no one to give me a push, I walked along the fascinating edge, without even a side glance, much less a smile.

The same thing happened to me in front of grownups, insignificant persons, railroad or post-office employees with their "señoras esposas," their lady wives, so referred to because the petite bourgeoisie is shocked, intimidated, by the word "mujer," woman or wife. I listened to the conversations at my father's table. But the next day, if I ran into those who had dined at my home the evening before, I didn't dare greet them, I even crossed over to the other side of the street to avoid embarrassment.

Shyness is a kink in the soul, a special category, a dimension that opens out into solitude. Moreover, it is an inherent suffering, as if we had two epidermises and the one underneath rebelled and shrank back from life. Of the things that make up a man, this quality, this damaging thing, is a part of the alloy that lays the foundation, in the long run, for the perpetuity of the self.

My rain-haunted backwardness, my long-drawn-out retreat into myself, lasted longer than it should have. When I came to the capital, I slowly acquired new friends of both sexes. The less attention people paid to me, the easier it was for me to make friends. I was not particularly curious about mankind then. I can't get to know all the people in this world, I said to myself. Still and all, a faint curiosity was stirred up in certain circles by this new poet, just over sixteen, a reticent boy, a loner, whom they saw come and go without so much as a good morning or goobye. Aside from the fact that I'd be wearing a long Spanish cape that made me look like a scarecrow. No one suspected that my striking attire was made-to-order for my poverty.

Among the people who sought my company were two big snobs of the day: Pilo Yáñez and his wife, Mina. They were the perfect embodiment of the beautiful idle life I would have loved

to live, more remote than a dream. It was my first time in a house with heat, soft lighting, pleasant furniture, walls covered with books whose multicolored spines were like a springtime that was inaccessible to me. Kindly and discreet, overlooking my various layers of silence and withdrawal, the Yáñezes often invited me to their home. I used to leave their house in a happy mood, and they noticed and invited me again.

I saw cubist paintings for the first time in that house, a Juan Gris among them. They told me that Juan Gris had been a friend of the family in Paris. But what intrigued me most was my friend's pajamas. Whenever I could, I examined them out of the corner of my eye with intense admiration. It was winter, and the pajamas were made of a heavy material, like the baize on billiard tables, but a deep-sea blue. In those days I couldn't imagine any kind of pajamas except striped ones, like prison uniforms. Pilo Yáñez's were like nothing I had ever seen. Their heavy fabric, their resplendent blue, aroused the envy of the poor poet who lived in the Santiago suburbs. And in fifty years I have not come across any pajamas quite like those.

I lost sight of the Yáñezes for many years. She gave up her husband, and she also gave up the soft lighting and excellent arm-chairs, for an acrobat in a Russian circus that passed through Santiago. Later on, she sold tickets, all the way from Australia to the British Isles, to help out the acrobat who had swept her off her feet. She ended up as a Rosicrucian or something like that, with a group of mystics in the South of France.

As for Pilo Yáñez, the husband, he changed his name to Juan Emar and in time became a powerful, though still undiscovered writer. We were lifelong friends. Silent and kindly but poor, that's how he died. His many books have yet to be published, but they are sure to take root and blossom someday.

I'll leave Pilo Yáñez, or Juan Emar, and take up my shyness again, recalling that during my student days my friend Pilo was set on introducing me to his father. "I'm sure he'll get you a trip to Europe," he told me. At that moment, all Latin American poets and painters had their eyes riveted on Paris. Pilo's father was a very important man, a senator. He lived in one of those enormous ugly houses on a street near the Plaza de Armas and the presidential palace—where no doubt he would have preferred to live.

My friends stayed in the anteroom, after stripping off my cape to make me look more normal. They opened the door to the senator's study for me and shut it behind me. It was an immense room, and may have been a great reception hall at one time, but it was just about empty now, except deep inside, at the far end, where I could make out an armchair, with the senator in it under a floor lamp. The pages of the newspaper he was reading hid him completely, like a screen.

Taking my first step on the murderously waxed and buffed parquet, I slid like a skier. I picked up speed dizzily. I tried to brake myself, only to lose my footing and fall several times. My last spill was right at the feet of the senator, who was observing me now with cold eyes, without letting go of his paper.

I managed to sit down in a small chair next to him. The great man inspected me with the eye of a bored entomologist to whom someone brings a specimen that he already knows inside out, a harmless spider. He questioned me vaguely about my projects. After my spill, I was even more timid and less eloquent than ever.

I don't know what I told him. At the end of twenty minutes he put out a tiny hand toward me, as a sign of dismissal. I thought I heard him promise in a very soft voice that I would hear from him. Then he picked up his newspaper again and I started back across the dangerous parquet, taking all the precautions I should have taken when first stepping onto it. Of course the senator, my friend's father, never let me hear from him. On the other hand, sometime later a military revolt, which was actually stupid and reactionary, got him to jump out of his chair with his everlasting paper. I confess that this made me happy.

#### THE STUDENT FEDERATION

In Temuco I had been a correspondent for the review *Claridad*, the Student Federation's organ, and I used to sell twenty or thirty copies to my schoolmates. One piece of news that reached Temuco in 1920 left bloody scars on my generation. The "golden youth," offspring of the oligarchy, had attacked and destroyed the Student Federation's headquarters. The authorities, who from colonial times to the present have been at the service of the rich,

did not jail the assaulters but the assaulted. Domingo Gómez Rojas, the young hope of Chilean poetry, was tortured, and went mad and died in a dungeon. Within the national context of a small country, the repercussions of this crime were as profound and far-reaching as those of Federico García Lorca's assassination in Granada later.

When I arrived in Santiago, in March 1921, to enter the university, the capital of Chile had only five hundred thousand inhabitants. It smelled of gas fumes and coffee. Thousands of buildings housed strangers and bedbugs. Public transportation was handled by small rickety streetcars that struggled along with a loud clanking of iron and bells. The ride from Independencia Avenue to the other end of town, near the Central Station, where my college was located, took forever.

The Student Federation's headquarters was frequented by the most famous figures of the student rebellion, ideologically linked to the powerful anarchist movement of the day. Alfredo Demaría, Daniel Schweitzer, Santiago Labarca, Juan Gandulfo were the best-known leaders. The most formidable was undoubtedly Juan Gandulfo, who was feared for his bold political thinking and his unflagging courage. He treated me as if I was just a boy, which, of course, I was. On one occasion, when I arrived at his office late for a medical appointment, he frowned at me and said, "Why didn't you get here on time? There are other patients waiting." "I didn't know what time it was," I replied. "Take this, so you'll know next time," he said, pulling his watch from his vest pocket and giving it to me.

Juan Gandulfo was short, moonfaced, and prematurely bald, yet he always made his presence felt. Once a troublemaking army man, who was well known as a bully and a good swordsman, challenged him to a duel. Gandulfo took him up on it, learned fencing in two weeks, and left his rival battered and scared witless. Around that same time, he engraved in wood the cover and all the illustrations for my first book, *Crepusculario*—impressive woodcuts done by a man no one ever associated with art.

The most important figure in the revolutionist literary world was Roberto Meza Fuentes, editor of the magazine *Juventud*, owned also by the Student Federation, but with more contributors, and more carefully prepared than *Claridad*. Outstanding in it

was the work of González Vera and Manuel Rojas, who were, for me, from a much older generation. Manuel Rojas had recently come back from Argentina after many years there, and he astonished us with his impressive size and his words, dropped with a kind of condescension, pride, or dignity. He was a limotypist. I had known González Vera in Temuco, where he had fled after the police assault on the Student Federation. He came to see me straight from the railroad station, which was a short distance from my house. His sudden appearance had to impress a sixteen-year-old poet. I had never seen such a pale man. His fleshless face seemed to be carved in bone or ivory. He wore black, a black frayed at the extremities of trouser legs and sleeves, which, however, did not make him look less elegant. His words sounded ironical and sharp from the very first. On the rainy night that brought him to my house—I had not even known that he existed—I was moved by his presence, just as Sacha Yegulev is moved by the revolutionary nihilist's coming to his home; Andreyev's fictional character, Yegulev, was looked on by young Latin American rebels as their model.

#### ALBERTO ROJAS GIMÉNEZ

The review *Claridad*, which I joined as a political and literary militant, was run almost singlehandedly by Alberto Rojas Giménez, who was to become one of the closest friends I would have among my own generation. He wore a cordovan hat and the long muttonchop whiskers of a grandee. Well groomed and elegant despite his poverty, in the midst of which he seemed to preen like a golden bird, he embodied all the qualities of the new dandy, an attitude of contempt, a quick grasp of our numerous conflicts, as well as a cheerful sophistication and an appetite for everything in life. He knew all about everything—books and girls, bottles and ships, itineraries and archipelagos—and he flaunted this knowledge even in his slightest gestures. He moved about in the literary world with the condescending air of a perpetual idler, someone in the habit of wasting all his talent and charm. His neckties were always magnificent displays of prosperity in the midst of general poverty. He was constantly moving into a new home or to a new city, and thus for a few weeks his natural good humor, his persis-

tent and spontaneous Bohemian ways, delighted incredulous people in Rancagua, Curicó, Valdivia, Concepción, Valparaíso. He always went away as he had come, leaving poems, drawings, neckties, loves, and friendships wherever he had been. Since he was as unpredictable as a storybook prince and unbelievably generous, he gave away everything—his hat, his shirt, his jacket, and even his shoes. When he had no material belongings left, he would jot down a phrase on a scrap of paper, a line from a poem or something amusing that came into his head, and he would offer it to you as he went, with a magnanimous look on his face, as if he were putting a priceless jewel in your hand.

His poems were written in the latest fashion, according to the doctrines of Apollinaire and Spain's ultraist group. He had founded a new school of poetry and called it "Agu," which, he said, was man's first cry, the newborn infant's first poem.

Rojas Giménez set off new fads in the way we dressed, in the way we smoked, in our handwriting. Mimicking me, in gentle fun, he helped me get rid of my melancholy tone. Neither his skeptical attitude nor his wild drinking spree ever infected me, but I am still deeply moved when I remember his face that made everything light up, that made beauty fly out from every corner, as if he had set a hidden butterfly in motion.

From Don Miguel de Unamuno he had learned how to make little paper birds. He would make one with a long neck and outspread wings, which he would then blow out into the air. He called that giving them their "vital push." He discovered French poets, dark bottles buried away in wine cellars, and wrote love letters to Francis Jammes heroines.

His lovely poems went around all wrinkled in his pockets, without ever, to this day, getting published.

Being generous to a fault, he attracted so much attention that one day, in a café, a stranger came up to him and said, "Sir, I have been listening to you talk and I have taken a great liking to you. May I ask you for something?" "What is it?" Rojas Giménez asked, looking put out. "Let me leap over you," the stranger said. "What?" the poet asked. "Are you so powerful that you can leap over me here, sitting at this table?" "No, sir," the stranger said meekly. "I want to leap over you later, when you are resting in your coffin. It's my way of paying tribute to the interesting

people I've met in my life: leaping over them, if they let me, after they're dead. I'm a lonely man and this is my only hobby." And taking out his notebook, he said, "Here's the list of people I've leaped over." Wild with joy, Rojas Giménez accepted the strange proposition. Several years later, during the rainiest winter anyone in Chile can remember, Rojas Giménez died. As usual, he had left his jacket in some bar in downtown Santiago. In the middle of the Antarctic winter, he had walked across the city, in his shirt-sleeves, to his sister Rosita's house over in the Quinta Normal neighborhood. Two days later, bronchial pneumonia carried off from this world one of the most fascinating human beings I have ever known. The poet flew away with his little paper birds into the sky, in the rain.

But friends present at his wake that night had an unusual visitor. A torrential rain was falling on the rooftops, with lightning and the wind together illuminating and shaking the huge plantain trees on Quinta Normal, when the door opened and a man all in black, drenched by the rain, walked in. No one knew who he was. Before the curious eyes of the friends keeping vigil, the stranger braced himself and leaped over the coffin. And he left immediately, as suddenly as he had arrived, without uttering a word, vanishing into the night and the rain. And so Alberto Rojas Giménez's amazing life was sealed with a mysterious rite nobody has yet been able to puzzle out.

I had just arrived in Spain when I received the news of his death. Seldom have I felt such intense grief. This was in Barcelona. I immediately began writing my elegy "Alberto Rojas Giménez viene volando" ("Alberto Rojas Giménez Comes Flying"), which *Revista de Occidente* later published.

But I also had to say farewell to him with some kind of ceremony. He had died so far away, in Chile, when days of heavy rain were flooding the cemetery. I could not be near his mortal remains, or be with him on his final voyage, so I had an idea for a ceremony. I went to my friend Isaías Cabezón, the painter, and together we headed for the marvelous basilica of Santa María del Mar. We bought two huge candles, each almost as tall as a man, and with them we entered the shadows of that strange temple. Santa María del Mar was the cathedral of seafarers. Fishermen and sailors built it stone by stone many centuries ago. Then it was

embellished with thousands of votive offerings: miniature boats of all sizes and shapes, sailing through eternity, formed a tapestry over the walls and ceilings of the beautiful basilica. It occurred to me that this was the perfect setting for the late poet, this would have been his favorite spot if he had come to know it. My friend the painter and I lit the huge candles in the center of the basilica, near the clouds of the coffered ceiling, and sat in the empty church, each of us with a bottle of white wine, feeling that, despite our agnosticism, the silent ceremony brought us closer to our dead friend in some mysterious way. Burning in the highest part of the empty basilica, the candles were alive and radiant and might have been the two eyes of the mad poet, whose heart had been extinguished forever, looking at us from the shadows, among the votive offerings.

## MADMAN IN WINTER

Apropos of Rojas Giménez, I'll say that madness, a certain kind of madness, often goes hand in hand with poetry. It would be very difficult for predominantly rational people to be poets, and perhaps it is just as difficult for poets to be rational. Yet reason gets the upper hand, and it is reason, the mainstay of justice, that must govern the world. Miguel de Unamuno, who loved Chile very much, once said: "The thing I don't like is that motto. What is it all about, *through reason or force*? Through reason and always through reason."

I'll talk about Alberto Valdivia, one of the mad poets I knew in the old days. Alberto Valdivia was one of the skinniest men in the world and so sallow-complexioned that he seemed to be made entirely of bone, with a wild shock of gray hair and a pair of glasses covering his myopic eyes, which always had a faraway look. We called him Valdivia the Corpse.

He went in and out of bars and eating places, cafés and concerts, without ever making a sound and with a mysterious little bundle of newspapers under his arm. "Dear Corpse," his friends used to say, embracing his incorporeal body, with the sensation that we were embracing a gust of air.

He wrote some lovely lines packed with subtle feeling, with intense sweetness. Here are a few:

*Everything will go—the afternoon, the sun, life;  
evil, which cannot be undone, will prevail.  
Only you will stay, inseparable  
sister of the twilight of my life.*

This poet whom we fondly knew as Valdivia the Corpse was a true poet. We often said to him: "Stay and have dinner with us, Corpse." Our nickname never upset him. Sometimes a smile played on his very thin lips. His phrases were few and far between, but they were always to the point. We made a rite of taking him to the cemetery every year. On the eve of November 1 we used to give a dinner for him, as sumptuous as the miserable pockets of young students and writers would permit. Our "Corpse" occupied the seat of honor. At twelve on the dot, we cleared the table and headed for the cemetery in a lighthearted procession. Someone would make a speech honoring the "late" poet, in the stillness of the night. Then each of us said goodbye solemnly and we marched off, leaving him all alone at the graveyard gate. The "Corpse" had long accepted this traditional rite, and there was no cruelty in it, since he took an active role in the farce all the way to the end. Before leaving, we would hand him some pesos, so he could eat a sandwich in his grave.

Two or three days later, no one was surprised to see the corpse quietly slip back into our small knot of friends and into the cafés. He could count on being left in peace until the following November 1.

In Buenos Aires I met a very eccentric Argentine writer whose name was, or is, Omar Vignole; I don't know if he is still living. He was a giant of a man and carried a heavy walking stick. Once, in a midtown restaurant where he had invited me to dinner, he turned to me at the table, motioning me to a seat, and said in a booming voice that could be heard throughout the room, which was filled with regular customers: "Sit down, Omar Vignole!" I sat down a bit uneasily and promptly asked: "Why do you call me Omar Vignole? You know that you are Omar Vignole and I am Pablo Neruda." "Yes," he replied, "but there are lots of people in this restaurant who only know me by name. And several of them want to thrash the daylights out of me; I'd rather have them do it to you."

Vignole had been an agronomist in an Argentine province and had brought back a cow that became his inseparable friend. He used to walk all over Buenos Aires with his cow, leading her by a rope. Around that time, he published some books, all with intriguing titles: *What the Cow Thinks*, *My Cow and I*, etc. When the P.E.N. club had its first world congress in Buenos Aires, the writers, who were headed by Victoria Ocampo, trembled at the thought that Vignole would turn up with his cow. They explained this imminent threat to the authorities, and the police cordoned off the streets around the Plaza Hotel to prevent my eccentric friend from showing up with his ruminant at the luxurious place where the congress was being held. It was all in vain. The festivities were in full swing and the writers were discussing the classical world of the Greeks and its relation to the modern meaning of history, when the great Vignole burst in upon the conference hall with his inseparable cow, which, to top things off, started to moo as if she wanted to join the debate. He had brought her into the heart of the city in an enormous closed van that had somehow eluded the vigilance of the police.

Something else I want to tell about this same Vignole is that he once challenged a wrestler. The pro called his bluff, and on the night of the match my friend showed up at a packed Luna Park right on time with his cow, hitched her to a corner of the ring, shed his super-elegant robe, and faced the Calcutta Strangler.

Well, neither the cow nor the wrestling poet's gorgeous apparel could help him here. The Calcutta Strangler pounced on Vignole and tied him into a helpless knot in double-quick time. What's more, adding insult to injury, he placed one foot on the literary bull's throat, amid tremendous whistles and catcalls from an audience that demanded that the fight continue.

A few months later Vignole brought out a new book: *Conversations with the Cow*. I'll never forget the unique dedication that appeared on the first page. If memory serves me, it read: "I dedicate this philosophical work to the forty thousand sons of bitches who hissed and called for my blood in Luna Park on the night of February 24."

In Paris, before the last war, I met Alvaro Guevara, the painter who was known in Europe as Chile Guevara. One day he called



me on the telephone, with an urgent tone in his voice. "It's something very important," he said.

I had come up from Spain, and our struggle then was against Hitler, the Nixon of that era. My house in Madrid had been bombed and I had seen men, women, and children wiped out by the bombings. The world war was in the offing. Other writers and I had started to fight Fascism in our own way: with books urging people to open their eyes to this grave threat.

My countryman had stayed out of the struggle. He was an uncommunicative man, a hard-working painter, and always kept busy. We were sitting on a keg of gunpowder. When the great powers blocked the delivery of arms for the defense of the Spanish Republic, and later, in Munich, when they threw the doors wide open for Hitler's army, the war had arrived.

I complied with Chile Guevara's plea that I go see him. What he wanted to tell me was very important.

"What's it all about?" I asked him.

"There's no time to lose," he answered. "There's no reason for you to be anti-Fascist. No one has to be anti-anything. We must get down to brass tacks, and I have found those brass tacks. I want to tell you about it right away so that you'll drop your anti-Nazi congresses and settle down to serious work. There's no time to lose."

"Well, tell me what it's all about. Alvaro, I really have very little time."

"Pablo, my idea is really expressed in a three-act play. I've brought it along to read to you." And he stared at me hard—his face, with its bushy eyebrows, like an ex-boxer's—as he pulled out a voluminous manuscript.

Panicky, and stressing my lack of time as an excuse, I convinced him to give me a quick run-down of the ideas that he planned to use to save the human race.

"It's like Columbus's egg, easier to crack than it looks," he said. "I'll explain. If you plant one potato, how many potatoes will it yield?"

"Well, maybe four or five," I answered, just to say something.

"Lots more," he answered. "Sometimes as many as forty, sometimes more than one hundred potatoes. Imagine everybody planting one potato in the garden, on the balcony, anywhere. How

many people are there in Chile? Eight million. Eight million planted potatoes. Pablo, multiply this by four, by one hundred. That's the end of hunger, the end of war. How many people are there in China? Five hundred million, right? Each Chinese plants one potato. Forty potatoes come from each potato that's been planted. Five hundred million by forty potatoes. Humanity is saved."

When the Nazis marched into Paris, they did not take into account that world-saving idea: Columbus's egg, or rather, Columbus's potato. Alvaro Guevara was arrested at his home in Paris on a cold, foggy night. They dragged him off to a concentration camp and held him prisoner there, marked with a tattoo on his arm, until the end of the war. He came out of that hell a human skeleton, and he never recovered. He came to Chile for the last time, as if to bid his country goodbye, giving it a final kiss, a sleepwalker's kiss, and returned to France, where death completed its work.

Great painter, dear friend, Chile Guevara, I want to tell you one thing: I know you are dead, that your non-aligned potato politics did not help you at all. I know that the Nazis killed you. And yet—last June I went into the National Gallery. I was only going to look at the Turners, but I hadn't reached the main room, when I discovered an impressive painting: a painting as lovely to me as the Turners, a resplendently beautiful work. It was the portrait of a lady, a famous lady: her name, Edith Sitwell. And this painting was your work, the only work by a Latin American painter ever privileged to hang among the masterpieces of the great London museum.

I don't care about the place, or the honor, and, at heart, I also care very little about that lovely canvas. What matters to me is that we did not get to know each other better, to understand each other more, and that we let our lives cross without understanding, all because of a potato.

I have been too simple a man: this has been my honor and my shame. I went along with my friends' shenanigans and envied their brilliant plumage, their Satanic poses, their little paper birds, and even their cows, which, in some unexplained way, may have something to do with literature. Anyway, I believe I was born not

to pass judgment but to love. Even the divisionists who attack me, ganging up to gouge out my eyes, after having first nourished themselves on my poetry, deserve my silence if nothing else. I was never afraid I'd contaminate myself circulating among my enemies, because the only enemies I have are the enemies of the people.

Apollinaire said: "Mercy on us who explore the frontiers of the unreal." I quote from memory, thinking of the stories I have just told, stories about people who are no less dear to me because they were eccentric, and no less valorous because I did not know what to make of them.

#### BIG BUSINESS

We poets have always believed we could come up with brilliant ideas that would make us rich, that we are geniuses at planning business deals, but geniuses no one understands. I recall that in 1924 I was prompted by one of those money-making brainstormers to sell my Chilean publisher the rights to my book *Crepusculario*, not for one edition, but for eternity. I thought this sale would make me rich, and signed the contract before a notary. The fellow paid me five hundred pesos, a little under five dollars in those days. Rojas Giménez, Alvaro Hinojosa, Homero Arce, were waiting for me outside the notary public's door, to celebrate this commercial success with a big banquet. And in fact we ate in what was then the best restaurant, La Bahía, with exquisite wines, cigars, and liqueurs. But first we had our shoes shined until they glittered like mirrors. The restaurant, four shoeshine boys, and a publisher profited from this business deal. Prosperity stopped short of the poet.

Alvaro Hinojosa claimed he had an eagle's eye for all kinds of business. We were impressed by those grandiose schemes of his that, put into practice, would make money rain down on our heads. For us down-at-the-heels Bohemians, his command of English, his Virginia-blend cigarettes, his years of study at a university in New York, spoke volumes for the pragmatism of his great business brain.

One day he called me aside, very confidentially, to let me in on a fantastic plan aimed at making us rich quick. I could go in fifty-

fifty with him simply by contributing a few pesos I would get somewhere. He would put up the rest. That day we felt like capitalists beyond God and the law, capable of anything.

"What kind of merchandise is it?" I asked the unappreciated king of finance timidly.

Alvaro closed his eyes, expelled a mouthful of smoke that broke up into small rings, and finally answered in a hushed voice: "Pelts!"

"Pelts?" I echoed in amazement.

"From seals. To be precise, from hair seals all the same color."

I couldn't bring myself to ask for more details. I didn't know that seals, or sea lions, had hair of any color. When I had watched them on a rock, on southern beaches, I had seen a shiny skin that glistened in the sun, had never noticed the slightest hint of hair on their lazy bellies.

I converted everything I owned into ready cash with lightning speed, without paying my rent, or my tailor's installment, or the shoemaker's bill, and I placed my share of the money in my business associate's hands.

We went to look at the pelts. Alvaro had bought them from an aunt of his, a southerner who owned several uninhabited islands. On those desolate rookeries, the sea lions carried out their erotic ceremonies. And they were here now, before my eyes, as huge bundles of yellow pelts riddled by the carbines of the wicked aunt's hirelings. The packs of skins were stacked all the way up to the ceiling in the storehouse rented by Alvaro to impress prospective buyers.

"And what are we going to do with this enormous mass, this mountain of pelts?" I asked sheepishly.

"Everybody needs this kind of pelt. You'll see." And we left the storehouse, Alvaro shooting off sparks of energy, I with lowered head, wordlessly.

Alvaro made the rounds with a portfolio made of our genuine pelts from "hair seals all the same color," a portfolio filled with blank forms to make it look business-like. Our last money went for newspaper ads. Just let one interested and appreciative magazine read them, and that was it. We'd be rich. Alvaro, a very elegant dresser, wanted to have a half dozen suits made out of English cloth. Much more modest, I harbored among my unful-

filled dreams the dream of buying a good shaving brush, now that the one I had was well on its way to turning unacceptably bald.

A buyer showed up at last. He worked in leather goods, a short, robust man with fearless eyes, sparing with words, and with an air of candor which, I thought, verged on rudeness. Alvaro received him with guarded indifference and set a suitable time, three days later, for showing him our fabulous merchandise.

During those three days Alvaro bought some superb English cigarettes and some "Romeo y Julieta" Havana cigars, which he stuck in his breast pocket, in plain sight, just before the client was expected to arrive. We had laid out the better-looking skins on the floor.

The man showed up for our appointment right on time. He did not take off his hat and barely greeted us with a grunt. He glanced scornfully and quickly at the skins spread out on the floor. Then he ran his sharp, stern eyes over the crammed shelves. He raised a pudgy hand, and a suspicious fingernail pointed out a bundle of skins, one of those highest and farthest away. Exactly where I had jammed the worst ones into a corner.

Alvaro made the most of this crucial moment to offer him one of his genuine Havanas. The small-time merchant grabbed it, bit off the end, rammed the cigar into his mouth, and went on calmly pointing to the bundle he wanted to inspect.

There was nothing to do but show it to him. My partner climbed up the ladder and came back down with the thick bundle, smiling like a man sentenced to death. Pausing now and then to draw more and more smoke from Alvaro's cigar, the buyer examined all the skins in the package, one by one.

The man picked up a pelt, rubbed it together, bent it double, tossed it aside scornfully, and immediately went on to the next, which in turn was scratched, rubbed, sniffed, and dropped. When he was finally through with his inspection, he once more ran his vulture's eyes over the shelves brimming with our pelts from hair seals all the same color, and at last halted his gaze on the forehead of my partner, the business expert.

Then, in a hard, dry voice, he uttered words that, for us at least, became immortal: "My dear sirs, I'm not getting hitched to these skins." And he walked out forever, with his hat still on, smoking Alvaro's superb cigar, without saying goodbye, implacable slayer of our millionaire's dreams.

## MY FIRST BOOKS

I sought refuge in poetry with the intensity of someone timid. The new literary movements hovered over Santiago. I finished writing my first book at 513 Maruri Street. I used to write two, three, four, five poems each day. In the late afternoon, outside my balcony, there unfolded a spectacle I never missed for anything in the world. It was the sunset with its glorious sheaves of colors, scattered arrays of light, enormous orange and scarlet fans. The middle section of my book is called "Maruri Twilights." No one ever asked me what Maruri is supposed to mean. Maybe a very small number of people know it's only a modest street frequented by the most extraordinary twilights.

In 1923 my first book, *Crepusculario*, appeared. I had setbacks and successes every day, trying to pay for the first printing. I sold the few pieces of furniture I owned. The watch my father had solemnly given me, on which he had had two little crossed flags enameled, soon went off to the pawnbroker's. My black poet's suit followed the watch. The printer was adamant, and in the end, when the edition was all ready and the covers had been pasted on, he said to me, with an evil look, "No. You are not taking a single copy until you pay me for the entire thing." The critic Alone generously contributed the last pesos, which were gobbled up by my printer, and off I went into the street carrying my books on my shoulder, with holes in my shoes, but beside myself with joy.

My first book! I have always maintained that the writer's task has nothing to do with mystery or magic, and that the poet's, at least, must be a personal effort for the benefit of all. The closest thing to poetry is a loaf of bread or a ceramic dish or a piece of wood lovingly carved, even if by clumsy hands. And yet I don't believe any craftsman except the poet, still shaken by the confusion of his dreams, ever experiences the ecstasy produced only once in his life, by the first object his hands have created. It's a moment that will never come back. There will be many editions, more elaborate, more beautiful. His words will be poured into the glasses of other languages like a wine, to sing and spread its aroma to other places on this earth. But that moment when the first book appears with its ink fresh and its paper still crisp, that enchanted and ecstatic moment, with the sound of wings beating

or the first flower opening on the conquered height, that moment comes only once in the poet's lifetime.

One of my poems seemed to break away from that immature book and go off on its own: "Farewell," which many people, wherever I go, still know by heart. They would recite it to me in the most unlikely places, or ask me to do it. I might find it annoying, but the minute I was introduced at a gathering, some girl would raise her voice with those obsessive lines, and sometimes ministers of state would receive me with a military salute while reciting the first stanza.

Years later in Spain, Federico García Lorca told me how the same thing kept happening to him with his poem "La casada infiel" ("The Faithless Wife"). The greatest proof of friendship Federico could offer anyone was to repeat for him his enormously popular and lovely poem. We became allergic to the unshakable success of just one of our poems. This is a healthy and natural feeling. Such an imposition by readers tends to transfix the poet in a single moment of time, whereas creation is really a steady wheel spinning along with more and more facility and self-confidence, though perhaps with less freshness and spontaneity.

I was now leaving *Crepusculario* behind me. Deep anxieties stirred my poetry. Short trips to the south renewed my powers. In 1923 I had a strange experience. I had returned home to Temuco. It was past midnight. Before going to bed, I opened the windows in my room. The sky dazzled me. The entire sky was alive, swarming with a lively multitude of stars. The night looked freshly washed and the Antarctic stars were spreading out in formation over my head.

I became star-drunk, celestially, cosmically drunk. I rushed to my table and wrote, with heart beating high, as if I were taking dictation, the first poem of a book that would have many titles and would end up as *El hondero entusiasta*. It was smooth going, as if I were swimming in my very own waters.

The following day, filled with happiness, I read my poem. Later, when I got to Santiago, the wizard Aliro Oyarzún listened with admiration to those lines of mine. Then he asked in his deep voice: "Are you sure those lines haven't been influenced by Sabat Ercasty?"

"I'm pretty sure. I wrote them in a fit of inspiration."

Then I decided to send my poem to Sabat Ercasty himself, a great Uruguayan poet unjustly neglected today. In him I had seen realized my ambition to write poetry that would embrace not only man but nature, its hidden forces: an epic poetry that would deal with the great mystery of the universe and with man's potential as well. I started an exchange of letters with him. While I continued my work and mellowed it, I read with great care the letters Sabat Ercasty addressed to me, an unknown young poet.

I sent Sabat Ercasty, in Montevideo, the poem I had written that night and I asked him if it showed any influence from his poetry. A kind letter from him promptly answered my question: "I have seldom seen such a successful, such a magnificent poem, but I have to tell you: Yes, there are echoes of Sabat Ercasty in your lines."

It was a flash of light in the darkness, of clarity, and I am still grateful for it. The letter spent a good many days in my pocket, wrinkling until it fell apart. Many things were at stake. I was particularly obsessed with the fruitless rush of feelings that night. I had fallen into that well of stars in vain, that storm of stars had struck my senses in vain. I had made an error. I must be wary of inspiration. Reason must guide me step by step down the narrow paths. I had to learn humility. I ripped up many manuscripts, I misplaced others. It would be ten years before these last poems would reappear and be published.

Sabat Ercasty's letter ended my recurrent ambition for an expansive poetry. I locked the door on a rhetoric that I could never go on with, and deliberately toned down my style and my expression. Looking for more unpretentious qualities, for the harmony of my own world, I began to write another book. *Veinte poemas* was the result.

Those *Veinte poemas de amor y una canción desesperada* make a painful book of pastoral poems filled with my most tormented adolescent passions, mingled with the devastating nature of the southern part of my country. It is a book I love because, in spite of its acute melancholy, the joyfulness of being alive is present in it. A river and its mouth helped me to write it: the Imperial River. *Veinte poemas* is my love affair with Santiago, with its student-crowded streets, the university, and the honeysuckle fragrance of required love.

The Santiago sections were written between Echaurren Street

and España Avenue, and inside the old building of the Teachers Institute, but the landscape is always the waters and the trees of the south. The docks in the "Canción desesperada" ("Song of Despair") are the old docks of Carahue and Bajo Imperial: the broken planks and the beams like stumps battered by the wide river: the wingbeat of the gulls was heard and can still be heard at that river's mouth.

In the long, slender-bodied, abandoned lifeboat left over from some shipwreck, I read the whole of *Jean Christophe*, and I wrote the "Canción desesperada." The sky overhead was the most violent blue I have ever seen. I used to write inside the boat, hidden in the earth. I don't think I have ever again been so exalted or so profound as during those days. Overhead, the impenetrable blue sky. In my hands, *Jean Christophe* or the nascent lines of my poem. Beside me, everything that existed and continued always to exist in my poetry: the distant sound of the sea, the cries of the wild birds, and love burning, without consuming itself, like an immortal bush.

I am always being asked who the woman in *Veinte poemas* is, a difficult question to answer. The two women who weave in and out of these melancholy and passionate poems correspond, let's say, to Marisol and Marisombra: Sea and Sun, Sea and Shadow. Marisol is love in the enchanted countryside, with stars in bold relief at night, and dark eyes like the wet sky of Temuco. She appears with all her joyfulness and her lively beauty on almost every page, surrounded by the waters of the port and by a half-moon over the mountains. Marisombra is the student in the city. Gray beret, very gentle eyes, the ever-present honeysuckle fragrance of my foot-loose and fancy-free student days, the physical peace of the passionate meetings in the city's hideaways.

Meanwhile, life was changing in Chile.

The Chilean people's movement was starting up, clamoring, looking for stronger support among students and writers. On the one hand, the great leader of the petite bourgeoisie, Arturo Alessandri Palma, a dynamic and demagogic man, became President of the Republic, but not before he had rocked the country with his fiery and threatening speeches. In spite of his extraordinary personality, once in power he quickly turned into the classic ruler of

our Americas; the dominant sector of the oligarchy, whom he had fought, opened its maw and swallowed him and his revolutionary speeches. The country continued to be torn apart by bitter strife.

At the same time, a working-class leader, Luis Emilio Recabarren, was extraordinarily active organizing the proletariat, setting up union centers, establishing nine or ten workers' newspapers throughout the country. An avalanche of unemployment sent the country's institutions staggering. I contributed weekly articles to *Claridad*. We students supported the rights of the people and were beaten up by the police in the streets of Santiago. Thousands of jobless nitrate and copper workers flocked to the capital. The demonstrations and the subsequent repression left a tragic stain on the life of the country.

From that time on, with interruptions now and then, politics became part of my poetry and my life. In my poems I could not shut the door to the street, just as I could not shut the door to love, life, joy, or sadness in my young poet's heart.

#### THE WORD

. . . You can say anything you want, yes sir, but it's the words that sing, they soar and descend . . . I bow to them . . . I love them, I cling to them, I run them down, I bite into them, I melt them down. . . . I love words so much . . . The unexpected ones . . . The ones I wait for greedily or stalk until, suddenly, they drop . . . Vowels I love . . . They glitter like colored stones, they leap like silver fish, they are foam, bread, metal, dew . . . I run after certain words . . . They are so beautiful that I want to fit them all into my poem . . . I catch them in mid-flight, as they buzz past, I trap them, clean them, peel them, I set myself in front of the dish, they have a crystalline texture to me, vibrant, waxy, vegetable, oily, like fruit, like algae, like agates, like olives . . . And then I stir them, I shake them, I drink them, I gulp them down, I mash them, I garnish them, I let them go . . . I leave them in my poem like stalactites, like sivers of polished wood, like coals, pickings from a shipwreck, gifts from the waves . . . Everything exists in the word . . . An idea goes through a complete change because one word shifted its place, or because another settled down like a spoiled little thing inside a

*phrase that was not expecting her but obeys her . . . They have shadow, transparency, weight, feathers, hair, and everything they gathered from so much rolling down the river, from so much wandering from country to country, from being roots so long . . . They are very ancient and very new . . . They live in the bier, hidden away, and in the budding flower . . . What a great language I have, it's a fine language we inherited from the fierce conquistadors . . . They strode over the giant cordilleras, over the rugged Americas, hunting for potatoes, sausages, beans, black tobacco, gold, corn, fried eggs, with a voracious appetite not found in the world since then . . . They swallowed up everything, religions, pyramids, tribes, idolatries just like the ones they brought along in their huge sacks . . . Wherever they went, they razed the land . . . But words fell like pebbles out of the boots of the barbarians, out of their beards, their helmets, their horseshoes, luminous words that were left glittering here . . . our language. We came up losers . . . We came up winners . . . They carried off the gold and left us the gold . . . They carried everything off and left us everything . . . They left us the words.*



## *The Roads of the World*

### ROAMING IN VALPARAÍSO

**V**ALPARAÍSO is very close to Santiago. They are separated only by the shaggy mountains on whose peaks tall cacti, hostile but flowering, rise like obelisks. And yet something impossible to define keeps Valparaíso apart from Santiago. Santiago is a captive city behind walls of snow. Valparaíso, on the other hand, throws its doors wide to the infinite sea, to its street cries, to the eyes of children.

At the wildest stage of our young manhood, we would suddenly—always at daybreak, always without having slept, always without a penny in our pockets—board a third-class coach. We were poets and painters, all of us about twenty years old, brimming over with a precious store of impulsive madness that was beckoned to be used, to expand, to burst out. The star of Valparaíso

It wasn't until many years later that I felt this same inexplicable call again. It was during my years in Madrid. In a tavern, coming out of the theater in the small hours, or simply walking the streets, I would suddenly hear the voice of Toledo calling me, the soundless voice of its ghosts and its silence. And at that late hour, with friends as crazy as those of my younger days, I took off for the ancient, ashen, twisted citadel. To sleep in our clothes on the sands of the Tagus, under stone bridges.

I don't know why, but of all the trips to Valparaíso I can