

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, bidden 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

VALPARAÍSO 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 dying to be used, to expand, to burst out. The star of Valparaíso beckoned to us with its magnetic pulsebeat.

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

picture to myself, one remains fixed in my mind, permeated by an aroma of herbs uprooted from the intimacy of the fields. We were going to see a poet and a painter off, they would be traveling to France third-class. We did not have enough money between all of us to pay for even the dingiest hotel, so we looked up Novoa, one of our favorite lunatics in wonderful Valparaíso. It wasn't easy to get to his house. Scrambling and slipping up and down endless hills, we followed Novoa's undaunted silhouette as he guided us along.

He was an impressive man, with a bushy beard and a thick moustache. His dark coattails flapped like wings on the mysterious slopes of the ridge we were climbing, blindly, worn out. He never stopped talking. He was a mad saint, personally canonized by us poets. And he was, naturally, a naturalist; a vegetarian's vegetarian. He praised the secret ties, known only to him, between bodily health and the natural gifts of the earth. He preached to us as he walked along; he threw his thundering voice back at us, as if we were his disciples. His huge figure advanced like a St. Christopher native to these dark, forsaken suburbs.

At last we reached his house, which turned out to be a cabin with two rooms. Our St. Christopher's bed occupied one of them. The other was mostly taken up by an enormous wicker armchair, lavishly crisscrossed by superfluous rosettes and with quaint little drawers built into its arms. A Victorian masterpiece. The huge armchair was assigned to me for sleeping that night. My friends spread the evening papers over the floor and stretched out carefully on news items and editorial columns.

Their breathing and their snores soon told me that they were all sound asleep. Sitting in that monumental piece of furniture, my weary bones found it difficult to coax sleep. I could hear a silence coming from the heights, the lonely peaks. Only the occasional barking of the Dog Stars in the darkness, only the faraway whistle of an arriving or departing ship made this night in Valparaíso real for me.

Suddenly I felt a strange, irresistible force flooding through me. It was a mountain fragrance, a smell of the prairie, of vegetation that had grown up with me during my childhood and which I had forgotten in the noisy hubbub of city life. I started to feel drowsy, cradled in the lullaby of the mother soil. Where

could this wild breath of the earth, this purest of aromas, be coming from? My fingers probed into the nooks and crannies of the huge wicker chair and discovered the innumerable little drawers, and in them I could feel dry, smooth plants, coarse, rounded sheaves, spear-like, soft or metallic leaves. The entire health-giving arsenal of our vegetarian preacher, the complete record of a life spent by our exuberant wandering St. Christopher gathering wild plants with his huge hands. Once this enigma had been cleared up, I fell asleep peacefully, protected by the fragrance of those guardian herbs.

For several weeks I lived across from Don Zoilo Escobar's house on a narrow street in Valparaíso. Our balconies almost touched. My neighbor would come out on his balcony early in the morning to do exercises like a hermit, exposing the harp of his ribs. Invariably dressed in a poor man's overalls or a frayed overcoat, half sailor, half archangel, he had retired long ago from his sea voyages, from the customs house, from the ships' crews. He brushed his Sunday suit every day with the meticulous thoroughness of a perfectionist. It was a distinguished-looking black flannel suit that, over the years, I never saw him wear—an outfit he kept among his treasures in a decrepit old wardrobe.

But his most precious and heart-rending treasure was a Stradivarius which he watched over with devotion all his life, never playing it or allowing anyone else to. Don Zoilo was thinking of selling it in New York, where he would be given a fortune for the famed instrument. Sometimes he brought it out of the dilapidated wardrobe and let us look at it, reverently. Someday Don Zoilo would go north and return without a violin but loaded with flashy rings and with gold teeth filling the gaps the slow passing of the years had gradually left in his mouth.

One morning he did not come out to his gymnasium balcony. We buried him in the cemetery up on the hill, in his black flannel suit, which covered his small hermit's bones for the first time. The strings of the Stradivarius could not weep over his departure. Nobody knew how to play it. Moreover, the violin was not in the wardrobe when it was opened. Perhaps it had flown out to sea, or to New York, to crown Don Zoilo's dreams.

Valparaiso is secretive, sinuous, winding. Poverty spills over its hills like a waterfall. Everyone knows how much the infinite number of people on the hills eat and how they dress (and also how much they do not eat and how they do not dress). The wash hanging out to dry decks each house with flags and the swarm of bare feet constantly multiplying betrays unquenchable love.

Near the sea, however, on flat ground, there are balconied houses with closed windows, where hardly any footsteps ever enter. The explorer's mansion was one of those houses. I knocked repeatedly with the bronze knocker to make sure I would be heard. At last, soft footfalls approached and a quizzical face suspiciously opened the portal just a crack, wanting to keep me out. It was the old serving woman of the house, a shadow in a square shawl and an apron, whose footsteps were barely a whisper.

The explorer, who was also quite old, and the servant lived all alone in the spacious house with its windows closed. I had come there to see what his collection of idols was like. Corridors and walls were filled with bright-red creatures, masks with white and ash-colored stripes, statues representing the vanished anatomies of sea gods, wigs of dried-up Polynesian hair, hostile wooden shields covered with leopard skin, necklaces of fierce-looking teeth, the oars of skiffs that may have cut through the foam of favorable waters. Menacing knives made the walls shudder with silver blades that gleamed through the shadows.

I noticed that the virile wooden gods had been emasculated. Their phalluses had been carefully covered with loincloths, obviously the same cloth used by the servant for her shawl and her apron.

The old explorer moved among his trophies stealthily. In room after room, he supplied me with the explanations, half peremptory and half ironic, of someone who had lived a good deal and continued to live in the afterglow of his images. His white goatee resembled a Samoan idol's. He showed me the muskets and huge pistols he had used to hunt the enemy and make antelopes and tigers bite the dust. He told his adventures without varying his hushed tone. It was as if the sunlight had come in through the closed windows to leave just one tiny ray, a tiny butterfly, alive, flitting among the idols.

On my way out, I mentioned a trip I planned to the Islands, my eagerness to leave very soon for the golden sands. Then, peering

all around him, he put his frazzled moustache to my ear and shakily let slip: "Don't let her find out, she mustn't know about it, but I am getting ready for a trip, too."

He stood that way for an instant, one finger on his lips, listening for the possible tread of a tiger in the jungle. And then the door closed on him, dark and abrupt, like night falling over Africa.

I questioned the neighbors: "Are there any new eccentrics around? Is there anything worth coming back to Valparaiso for?"

They answered: "There's almost nothing to speak of. But if you go down that street you'll run into Don Bartolomé."

"And how am I going to know him?"

"There's no way you can make a mistake. He always travels in a grand coach."

A few hours later I was buying some apples in a fruit store when a horse-drawn carriage halted at the door. A tall, ungainly character dressed in black got out of it. He, too, was going to buy apples. On his shoulder he carried an all-green parrot, which immediately flew over to me and perched on my head without even looking where it was going.

"Are you Don Bartolomé?" I asked the gentleman.

"That's right. My name is Bartolomé." And pulling out a long sword he carried under his cape, he handed it to me, while he filled his basket with the apples and grapes he was buying. It was an ancient sword, long and sharp, with a hilt worked by fancy silversmiths, a hilt like a blown rose.

I didn't know him, and I never saw him again. But I accompanied him into the street with due respect, silently opened the carriage door for him and his basket of fruit to get in, and solemnly placed the bird and the sword in his hands.

Small worlds of Valparaiso, unjustly neglected, left behind by time, like crates abandoned in the back of a warehouse, nobody knows when, never claimed, come from nobody knows where, crates that will never go anywhere. Perhaps in these secret realms, in these souls of Valparaiso, was stored forever the lost power of a wave, the storm, the salt, the sea that flickers and hums. The menacing sea locked inside each person: an uncommunicable

sound, an isolated movement that turned into the flour and the foam of dreams.

I was amazed that those eccentric lives I discovered were such an inseparable part of the heart-breaking life of the port. Above, on the hills, poverty flourishes in wild spurts of tar and joy. The derricks, the piers, the works of man cover the waist of the coast with a mask painted on by happiness that comes and goes. But others never made it to the hilltops, or down below, to the jobs. They put away their own infinite world, their fragment of the sea, each in his own box.

And they watched over it with whatever they had, while oblivion closed in on them like a mist.

Sometimes Valparaíso twitches like a wounded whale. It flounders in the air, is in agony, dies, and comes back to life.

Every native of the city carries in him the memory of an earthquake. He is a petal of fear clinging all his life to the city's heart. Every native is a hero even before he is born. Because in the memory of the port itself there is defeat, the shudder of the earth as it quakes and the rumble that surfaces from deep down as if a city under the sea, under the land, were tolling the bells in its buried towers to tell man that it's all over.

Sometimes when the walls and the roofs have come crashing down in dust and flames, down into the screams and the silence, when everything seems to have been silenced by death once and for all, there rises out of the sea, like the final apparition, the mountainous wave, the immense green arm that surges, tall and menacing, like a tower of vengeance, to sweep away whatever life remains within its reach.

Sometimes it all begins with a vague stirring, and those who are sleeping wake up. Sleeping fitfully, the soul reaches down to profound roots, to their very depth under the earth. It has always wanted to know it. And knows it now. And then, during the great tremor, there is nowhere to run, because the gods have gone away, the vainglorious churches have been ground up into heaps of rubble.

This is not the terror felt by someone running from a furious bull, a threatening knife, or water that swallows everything. This is a cosmic terror, an instant danger, the universe caving in and

crumbling away. And, meanwhile, the earth lets out a muffled sound of thunder, in a voice no one knew it had.

The dust raised by the houses as they came crashing down settles little by little. And we are left alone with our dead, with all the dead, not knowing how we happen to be still alive.

The stairs start out from the bottom and from the top, winding as they climb. They taper off like strands of hair, give you a slight respite, and then go straight up. They become dizzy. Plunge down. Drag out. Turn back. They never end.

How many stairs? How many steps to the stairs? How many feet on the steps? How many centuries of footsteps, of going down and back up with a book, tomatoes, fish, bottles, bread? How many thousands of hours have worn away the steps, making them into little drains where the rain runs down, playing and crying?

Stairways!

No other city has spilled them, shed them like petals into its history, down its own face, fanned them into the air and put them together again, as Valparaíso has. No city has had on its face these furrows where lives come and go, as if they were always going up to heaven or down into the earth.

Stairs that have given birth, in the middle of their climb, to a thistle with purple flowers! Stairs the sailor, back from Asia, went up only to find a new smile or a terrifying absence in his house! Stairs down which a staggering drunk dived like a black meteor! Stairs the sun climbs to go make love to the hills!

If we walk up and down all of Valparaíso's stairs, we will have made a trip around the world.

Valparaíso of my sorrows . . . ! What happened in the solitudes of the South Pacific? Wandering star or battle of glow-worms whose phosphorescence survived the disaster?

Night in Valparaíso! A speck on the planet lit up, ever so tiny in the empty universe. Fireflies flickered and a golden horseshoe started burning in the mountains.

What happened then is that the immense deserted night set up its formation of colossal figures that seeded light far and wide. Aldebaran trembled, throbbing far above, Cassiopeia hung her

dress on heaven's doors, while the noiseless chariot of the Southern Cross rolled over the night sperm of the Milky Way.

Then the rearing, hairy Sagittarius dropped something, a diamond from his hidden hoofs, a flea from his hide, very far above. Valparaiso was born, bright with lights, and humming, edged with foam and meretricious.

Night in its narrow streets filled up with black water nymphs. Doors lurked in the darkness, hands pulled you in, the bedsheets in the south led the sailor astray. Polyanta, Tritetonga, Carmela, Flor de Dios, Multicula, Berenice, Baby Sweet packed the beer taverns, they cared for those who had survived the shipwreck of delirium, relieved one another and were replaced, they danced listlessly, with the melancholy of my rain-haunted people.

The sturdiest whaling vessels left port to subdue leviathan. Other ships sailed for the Californias and their gold. The last of them crossed the Seven Seas later to pick up from the Chilean desert cargoes of the nitrate that lies like the limitless dust of a statue crushed under the driest stretches of land in the world.

These were the great adventures.

Valparaiso shimmered across the night of the world. In from the world and out into the world, ships surged, dressed up like fantastic pigeons, sweet-smelling vessels, starved frigates held up overlong by Cape Horn . . . In many instances, men who had just hit port threw themselves down on the grass . . . Fierce and fantastic days when the oceans opened into each other only at the far-off Patagonian strait. Times when Valparaiso paid good money to the crews that spit on her and loved her.

A grand piano arrived on some ship; on another, Flora Tristan, Gauguin's Peruvian grandmother, passed through; and on yet another, on the *Wager*, the original Robinson Crusoe came in, in the flesh, recently picked up at the Juan Fernández Islands . . . Other ships brought pineapples, coffee, black pepper from Sumatra, bananas from Guayaquil, jasmine tea from Assam, anise from Spain . . . The remote bay, the Centaur's rusty horseshoe, filled with intermittent gusts of fragrance: in one street you were overwhelmed by a sweetness of cinnamon; in another, the smell of custard apples shot right through your being like a white arrow; the detritus of seaweed from all over the Chilean sea came out to challenge you.

Valparaiso then would light up and turn a deep gold; it was

gradually transformed into an orange tree by the sea, it had leaves, it had coolness and shade, it was resplendent with fruit.

The hills of Valparaiso decided to dislodge their inhabitants, to let go of the houses on top, to let them dangle from cliffs that are red with clay, yellow with gold thimble flowers, and a fleeting green with wild vegetation. But houses and people clung to the heights, writhing, digging in, worrying, their hearts set on staying up there, hanging on, tooth and nail, to each cliff. The port is a tug-of-war between the sea and nature, untamed on the cordilleras. But it was man who won the battle little by little. The hills and the sea's abundance gave the city a pattern, making it uniform, not like a barracks, but with the variety of spring, its clashing colors, its resonant bustle. The houses became colors: a blend of amaranth and yellow, crimson and cobalt, green and purple. And Valparaiso carried out its mission as a true port, a great sailing vessel that has run aground but is still alive, a fleet of ships with their flags to the wind. The wind of the Pacific Ocean deserved a city covered with flags.

I have lived among these fragrant, wounded hills. They are abundant hills, where life touches one's heart with numberless shanties, with unfathomable snaking spirals and the twisting loops of a trumpet. Waiting for you at one of these turns are an orange-colored merry-go-round, a friar walking down, a barefoot girl with her face buried in a watermelon, an eddy of sailors and women, a store in a very rusty tin shack, a tiny circus with a tent just large enough for the animal tamer's moustaches, a ladder rising to the clouds, an elevator going up with a full load of onions, seven donkeys carrying water up, a fire truck on the way back from a fire, a store window and in it a collection of bottles containing life or death.

But these hills have profound names. Traveling through these names is a voyage that never ends, because the voyage through Valparaiso ends neither on earth nor in the word. Merry Hill, Butterfly Hill, Polanco's Hill, Hospital, Little Table, Corner, Sea Lion, Hauling Tackle, Potters', Chaparro's, Fern, Litre, Windmill, Almond Grove, Pequeenes, Chercanes, Acevedo's, Straw, Prison, Vixens', Doña Elvira's, St. Stephen's, Astorga, Emerald, Almond Tree, Rodríguez's, Artillery, Milkmen's, Immaculate Conception, Cemetery, Thistle, Leafy Tree, English Hospital, Palm Tree,

Queen Victoria's, Caravallo's, St. John of God, Pocuro's, Cove, Goat, Biscayne, Don Elias's, Cape, Sugar Cane, Lookout, Parrasia, Quince, Ox, Flower.

I can't go to so many places. Valparaíso needs a new sea monster, an eight-legged one that will manage to cover all of it. I make the most of its immensity, its familiar immensity, but I can't take in all of its multicolored right flank, the green vegetation on its left, its cliffs or its abyss.

I can only follow it through its bells, its undulations, and its names.

Above all, through its names, because they are taproots and rootlets, they are air and oil, they are history and opera: red blood runs in their syllables.

CHILEAN CONSUL IN A HOLE

A literary prize at school, some popularity my new books enjoyed, and my notorious cape had given me a small aura of respectability beyond artistic circles. But in the twenties, cultural life in our countries depended exclusively on Europe, with a few rare and heroic exceptions. A cosmopolitan elite was active in each of our republics, and the writers who belonged to the ruling class lived in Paris. Our great poet Vicente Huidobro not only wrote in French but even changed his name, making it Vincent instead of Vicente.

In fact, as soon as I had the first little bit of youthful fame, people in the street started asking me: "Well, what are you doing here? You must go to Paris."

A friend spoke to the head of a department in the Foreign Ministry on my behalf, and he saw me right away. He knew my poems.

"I also know your aspirations. Sit down in that comfortable armchair. From here you have a good view of the square, of the carnival in the square. Look at those cars. All is vanity. You are a fortunate young poet. Do you see that palace? It belonged to my family once. And here I am now, in this cubbyhole, up to my neck in bureaucracy. When the things of the spirit are all that matter. Do you like Tchaikovsky?"

Giving me a parting handshake, after an hour-long conversation about the arts, he told me not to worry about a thing, he was

the head of the consular service. "You may now consider yourself virtually appointed to a post abroad."

For two years I visited, from time to time, the office of the diplomatic department head, who was more obsequious each time. The moment he saw me appear, he would glumly call one of his secretaries and, arching his brows, would say, "I'm not in for anyone. I want to forget everyday prose. The only spiritual thing about this ministry is this poet's visit. I hope he never forsakes us."

I am sure he spoke with sincerity. Right after that, he would talk without respite about thoroughbred dogs. "Anyone who doesn't love dogs doesn't love children." He would go on to the English novel, then jump to anthropology and spiritism, and end up with questions of heraldry and genealogy. When I took leave of him, he would repeat once more, as if it were a terrifying little secret between the two of us, that my post abroad was guaranteed. Although I didn't have enough money to eat, I would leave in the evening breathing like a diplomat. And when my friends asked me what I was up to, I put on important airs and said, "I'm working on my trip to Europe."

This lasted until I ran into my friend Bianchi. The Bianchi family of Chile is a noble clan. Painters and popular musicians, jurists and writers, explorers and climbers of the Andes give all those with the Bianchi name an aura of restlessness and sharp intelligence. My friend, who had been an ambassador and knew the ins and outs of the ministries, asked me: "Hasn't your appointment come through yet?"

"I'll get it any moment now, I've been assured of it by a high patron of the arts in the Ministry."

He grinned and said: "Let's go see the Minister."

He took me by the arm and we went up the marble steps. Orderlies and employees scurried out of our way. I was dumbstruck. I was about to see my first Foreign Minister. He was quite short, and to disguise this, he swung himself up and sat on his desk. My friend mentioned how much I wanted to leave Chile. The Minister pressed one of his many buzzers, and to top off my confusion, my spiritual protector suddenly appeared.

"What posts are available in the service?" the Minister asked him.

The elegant functionary, who could not bring up Tchaikovsky

now, listed various countries scattered over the world, but I managed to catch only one name, which I had never heard or read before: Rangoon.

"Where do you want to go, Pablo?" the Minister said to me.

"To Rangoon," I answered without hesitating.

"Give him the appointment," the Minister ordered my protector, who hustled out and came back in nothing flat with the official order.

There was a globe in the Minister's office. My friend Bianchi and I looked for the unknown city of Rangoon. The old map had a deep dent in a region of Asia and it was in this depression that we discovered it. "Rangoon. Here's Rangoon."

But when I met my poet friends some hours later and they decided to celebrate my appointment, I had completely forgotten the city's name. Bubbling over with joy, I could only explain that I had been named consul to the fabulous Orient and that the place I was being sent to was in a little hole in the map.

MONTPARNASSE

One day in June 1927 we set out for faraway regions. In Buenos Aires we turned in my first-class for two third-class fares and sailed on the *Baden*. This German ship supposedly had just one class, but that must have been fifth class. There were two sittings for meals: one to serve the Portuguese and Spanish immigrants as fast as possible, and another for the remaining sundry passengers, particularly the Germans, who were returning from the mines and factories of Latin America. Alvaro, my companion, immediately classified the female passengers. He was a very active lady-killer. He divided women into two groups: those who prey on man and those who obey the whip. These distinctions did not always apply. He had a whole bag of tricks for winning the affection of the ladies. Whenever a pair of these interesting passengers appeared on deck, he would quickly grab one of my hands and pretend to read my palm, with mysterious looks and gestures. The second time around, the strollers would stop and beg him to read their future. He would take their hands at once, stroking them far too much, and the future he read always indicated a visit to our cabin.

But the voyage soon took a different turn for me and I stopped seeing the passengers, who grumbled noisily about the eternal fare of *Kartoffeln*; I stopped seeing the world and the monotonous Atlantic to feast my eyes only on the enormous dark eyes of a Brazilian, an ever so Brazilian girl, who boarded the ship in Rio de Janeiro with her parents and two brothers.

The carefree Lisbon of those years, with fishermen in the streets and without Salazar on the throne, filled me with wonder. The food at our small hotel was delicious. Huge trays of fruit crowned the table. Houses of various colors; old palaces with arched doorways; cathedrals like monstrous vaults, which God would have abandoned centuries ago to go live elsewhere; gambling casinos in former palaces; the crowds on the avenues with their child-like curiosity; the Duchess of Braganza, out of her mind, walking solemnly down a cobbled street, trailed by a hundred awe-struck street urchins—this was my entry into Europe.

And then Madrid with its crowded cafés; hail-fellow Primo de Rivera teaching the first lesson in tyranny to a country that would later learn all the rest. The first poems of my *Residencia en la tierra*, which the Spaniards were slow to understand and would only understand later, when the generation of Alberti, Lorca, Alexandre, and Diego appeared. And for me Spain was also the interminable train and the sorriest third-class coach in the world, taking us to Paris.

We disappeared into Montparnasse's swarming crowds, among Argentinians, Brazilians, Chileans. Venezuelans, still buried away under Gómez's reign, did not yet dream of coming. And, over there, the first Hindus in their full-length robes. And my neighbor at the next table, with her tiny snake coiled around her neck, drinking a *café crème* with melancholy languor. Our South American colony drank cognac and danced the tango, waiting for the slightest chance to start a battle royal and take on half the world.

Paris, France, Europe, for us small-town Bohemians from South America, consisted of a stretch of two hundred meters and a couple of street corners: Montparnasse, La Rotonde, Le Dôme, La Coupole, and three or four other cafés. *Bôtes* with black

singers and musicians were just beginning to become popular. The Argentinians were the most numerous of the South Americans, the first to pick a fight, and the richest. Hell could break loose at any time and an Argentine would be lifted up by four waiters, and would pass, in the air, over the tables, to be summarily deposited right out in the street. Our cousins from Buenos Aires did not care at all for this rough handling that wrinkled their trousers and, worse still, mussed up their hair. In those days, pomade was an essential part of Argentine culture.

Actually, in those first days in Paris, whose hours flitted past, I did not meet a single Frenchman, a single European, a single Asian, much less anyone from Africa or Oceania. Spanish-speaking Americans, from the Mexicans down to the Patagonians, went about in cliques, picking on one another, disparaging one another, but unable to live without one another. A Guatemalan prefers the company of a Paraguayan bum, with whom he can idle the time away exquisitely, to that of a Pasteur.

Around this time I met César Vallejo, the great *cholo*; a poet whose poetry had a rough surface, as rugged to the touch as a wild animal's skin, but it was magnificent poetry with extraordinary power.

Incidentally, we had a little run-in right after we met. It was in La Rotonde. We were introduced, and in his precise Peruvian accent, he greeted me with: "You are the greatest of all our poets. Only Rubén Darío can compare with you."

"Vallejo," I said, "if you want us to be friends, don't ever say anything like that to me again. I don't know where we'd end up if we started treating each other like writers."

My words appeared to unsettle him. My anti-literary education prompted me to be bad-mannered. On the other hand, he belonged to a race that was older than mine, with viceroyalty and courtesy behind it. When I saw that he was offended, I felt like an unwelcome boor.

But this blew over like a small cloud. We became true friends from that moment on. Years later, when I spent more time in Paris, we saw each other daily. Then I got to know him really well.

Vallejo was shorter than I, thinner, more heavy-boned. He was also more Indian than I, with very dark eyes and a very tall,

domed forehead. He had a handsome Inca face, saddened by an air of unmistakable majesty. Vain like all poets, he loved it when people talked to him this way about his Indian features. He would hold his head high to let me admire it and say, "I've got something, haven't I?" And then laugh at himself quietly.

His self-regard was nothing like that sometimes expressed by Vicente Huidobro, a poet who was Vallejo's opposite in so many ways. Huidobro would let a lock of hair hang over his forehead, insert his fingers in his vest, push out his chest, and ask: "Have you noticed how much I look like Napoleon Bonaparte?"

Vallejo was moody but only on the outside, like a man who had been huddling in the shadows a long time. He had a solemn nature and his face resembled a rigid, quasi-hieratic mask. But his inner self was something else again. I often saw him (especially when we managed to pry him away from his domineering wife, a tyrannical, proud Frenchwoman who was a concierge's daughter), yes, I saw him jumping up and down happily, like a school-boy. Later he would slip back into his moroseness and his submission.

The Maecenas we had been waiting for but who never showed up rose suddenly out of the Paris shadows. He was a Chilean writer, a friend of Rafael Alberti's, of the French, in fact almost everybody's friend. Also, and far more important, he was the son of Chile's biggest shipping magnate. And well known as a big spender.

This messiah who had just fallen out of the sky wanted to fete me, so he took all of us to a White Russian *botte* called the Caucasian Wine Cellar. Its walls were decorated with Caucasian costumes and landscapes. We were soon surrounded by Russian or phony Russian girls dressed as peasants from the mountains.

Cóndon, for that was our host's name, looked like the last of the Russian decadents. A frail-looking blond, he ordered bottle after bottle of champagne and did mad leaps in the air, imitating Cossack dances he had never seen.

"Champagne, more champagne!" And, all of a sudden, our pale millionaire host collapsed on the ground. He lay there under the table fast asleep, like the bloodless corpse of a Caucasian done in by a bear.

A shiver ran through us. The man would not come to even with ice compresses or bottles of ammonia uncorked under his nose. Seeing our helplessness and confusion, all the dancing girls deserted us, deserted one. In our host's pockets we found an impressive checkbook that, in his corpse-like condition, he could not use.

The head Cossack demanded immediate payment and closed the exit door to stop us from getting out. We escaped from his custody only by leaving my brand-new diplomatic passport as security.

We departed with our lifeless millionaire on our shoulders. It took a herculean effort to carry him to a taxi, settle him in it, and then unload him at his de luxe hotel. We left him in the arms of two huge doormen in red livery, who carried him off like an admiral fallen on the bridge of his ship.

The one girl from the *botte* who had not deserted us in our misfortune was waiting for us in the cab. Alvaro and I invited her to Les Halles to enjoy the early-morning onion soup. We bought her flowers in the market, thanked her with a kiss for being a good Samaritan, and noticed that she was rather attractive. She was neither pretty nor homely, but her turned-up nose, so typical of Paris girls, made up for that. Then we invited her to our seedy hotel. She had no objection to coming with us.

She went with Alvaro to his room. I dropped into bed exhausted, but all at once I felt someone shaking me roughly. It was Alvaro. His harmless maniac's face seemed a little odd. "Listen," he said. "This woman is something special, fantastic, I can't explain to you. You've got to try her right away."

A few minutes later the stranger got into my bed, sleepily but obligingly. Making love to her, I received proof of her mysterious gift. It was something I can't pin down with words, something that rushed up from deep within her, something that went back to the very origins of pleasure, to the first upsurge of a wave, to the erotic secrets of Venus. Alvaro was right.

At breakfast the next morning, Alvaro warned me, on the side, in Spanish: "If we don't leave this woman right away, our trip will be doomed. We will be sunk, not at sea but in the unfathomable sacrament of sex."

We decided to shower her with little gifts: flowers, chocolates,

and half the francs we had left. She confessed that she didn't work in the Caucasian nightclub; she had gone there the night before for the first and only time. Then we got into a taxi with her. The driver was passing through an unfamiliar neighborhood when we told him to stop. We said goodbye to her with big kisses and left her there, confused but smiling.

We never saw her again.

VOYAGE TO THE EAST

Nor will I ever forget the train that took us to Marseilles, loaded, like a basket of exotic fruit, with a motley crowd of people, country girls, and sailors, with accordions and songs chorused by everyone in the coach. We were heading for the Mediterranean Sea, toward the doors of light . . . This was 1927. I was fascinated by Marseilles, with its commercial romanticism and the Vieux-Port winged with sails seething in their own ominous turbulence. But the Messageries Maritimes ship on which we sailed for Singapore was a piece of France at sea, with its petite bourgeoisie emigrating to occupy posts in the remote colonies. During the trip, when the crew noticed our typewriters and our writers' manuscripts and papers, they asked us to pound out their letters on our machines. We took down the most incredible letters, dictated by the crew for their girls in Marseilles, in Bordeaux, in the provinces. Deep down, they were more interested in their letters being typewritten than in the message. Still, the things they said in them sounded like poems by Tristan Corbière, artless, tender messages, all of them. The Mediterranean with its ports, its carpets, its traders, its markets, slowly opened before our prow. In the Red Sea I was impressed by the port of Djibouti. The calcined sand, tracked so often by Arthur Rimbaud's comings and goings; Negresses like statues with their baskets of fruit, the miserable huts of the native population; and the ramshackle look of cafés lit by spectral overhead lights . . . They served iced tea with lemon there.

The thing to do was to see what went on at night in Shanghai. Cities with a bad reputation draw you like deadly women. Shanghai opened its night mouth for us, two country boys set adrift in

the world, third-class passengers with little money and a joyless curiosity.

We went to the big nightclubs, one after the other. It was a weekday night and they were empty. It was depressing to look at those enormous dance floors, big enough for hundreds of elephants to dance on, and nobody dancing there. Women from the Tsar's Russia, thin as skeletons, came out of dark corners, yawning and asking us to invite them to drink champagne. So we did the rounds of six or seven dens of sin and lost souls, where all we were losing was our time.

It was late to be getting back to the ship we had left a long ways behind, beyond the crisscrossing, narrow streets of the waterfront. We each took a rickshaw. We weren't used to this kind of transportation provided by human horses. In 1927, those Chinese trotted for long distances, pulling the little cart without ever stopping to rest.

Since it had started raining and the rain was coming down harder now, our rickshawmen thoughtfully halted their carriages and carefully covered the fronts of the rickshaws with rainproof cloth so that not one drop should spatter our foreign noses. "They're such a refined and considerate people. Two thousand years of culture have not gone for nothing," Alvaro and I thought, in our mobile seats.

And yet something began to make me feel uneasy. I couldn't see a thing, shut in under the hood considerably put up for our protection, but through the oilskin I could hear my driver's voice sending out a kind of buzz. The sound of his bare feet was soon joined by the rhythmic sounds of other bare feet trotting alongside on the wet pavement. The sounds finally became muffled, it was a sign that the pavement had ended. Apparently, we were now traveling over open ground, outside the city.

All at once my rickshaw halted. The driver skillfully undid the cloth that protected me from the rain. There wasn't the shadow of a ship in those deserted outskirts. The other rickshaw was standing beside mine, and Alvaro climbed down from his seat, obviously alarmed.

"Money! Money!" seven or eight Chinese who circled us kept repeating steadily.

My friend moved as if to reach for a weapon in his trousers

pocket, and it was enough to earn each of us a rabbit punch. I fell back, but the Chinese caught my head in mid-air, keeping me from crashing down, and gently laid me out on the wet ground. With lightning speed they went through my pockets, shirt, hat, shoes and socks, and my necktie, like sleight-of-hand artists putting on an extravagant display of skill. Not one inch of clothing remained unaccounted for, not a penny of the little money we had. But one thing: with the traditional consideration of Shanghai thieves, they scrupulously respected our papers and our passports.

Once we were alone, we walked toward the lights we could make out far off. Before long, we ran into hundreds of Chinese who were out at this hour and yet were honest. None of them knew French, or English, or Spanish, but all wanted to help us in our predicament, and somehow we were guided to the yearned-for paradise of our third-class cabin.

We got to Japan. The money we were expecting from Chile was supposed to be at the consulate. In the interim, we had to put up at a seaman's shelter in Yokohama. We slept on dreadful straw mattresses. A glass pane had been knocked out, it was snowing, and the cold went right through our bones. No one noticed us. One morning, at daybreak, an oil tanker split in two off the Japanese coast and the refuge was filled with stranded seamen. Among them was a Basque who could only speak Spanish and his own language. He told us his adventure: for four days and nights he had stayed afloat on a piece of the wreck, surrounded by waves of burning oil. The survivors were supplied with blankets and rations, and the Basque, a big-hearted fellow, became our benefactor.

The Consul General of Chile, on the other hand—I think his name was De la Marina or De la Rivera—received us in a high-handed manner, letting us know our place as lowly castaways. He had no time to spare. He was dining with Countess Yufu San that evening. The Imperial Court had invited him to tea. Or else he was immersed in profound studies of the reigning dynasty. "The Emperor is such a refined man"—and so on.

No. He didn't have a telephone. Why have a telephone in Yokohama? They would only call him up in Japanese. As for news about our money, the manager of the bank, a close friend of

his, hadn't mentioned it. He was very sorry but he must leave. He was expected at a gala reception. See you tomorrow.

The same story, day after day. We would leave the consulate shivering, since the robbery had reduced our wardrobe and all we had were some bedraggled sweaters given to us castaways. On the last day, we found out that our funds had arrived in Yokohama ahead of us. The bank had sent the consul three notices, and the pompous mannequin, the high-and-mighty functionary, had overlooked this minor point, so far beneath his station. (Whenever I read in the papers about consuls murdered by their crazed countrymen, I think longingly of that distinguished, benedicated official.)

That night we went to the best café in Tokyo, the Koraku, on the Ginza. There was excellent food in Tokyo in those days; besides, our week of hunger gave the delicacies an added flavor. In the pleasant company of lovely Japanese girls, we drank toasts to all the unfortunate travelers neglected by perverse consuls all over the world.

Singapore. We thought we were next door to Rangoon. What a bitter letdown! What had only been a few millimeters on the map had become a gaping abyss. Ahead of us we had several days on board a ship, and what's more, the one making the regular run had left for Rangoon the previous day. We had no money to pay the hotel or our fares. More funds were waiting for us in Rangoon.

Ah, but my colleague, the Chilean consul in Singapore, was there for a purpose. Señor Mansilla hurried in. His smile dwindled little by little until it disappeared completely, giving way to a wry grimace. "I can't do a thing for you. Get in touch with the Ministry."

I suggested that we consuls must stick together, but it was no use. The man had the face of a heartless jailer. He grabbed his hat and was already making a dash for the door when a Machiavellian thought struck me: "Señor Mansilla, I'll be forced to give some lectures on our country, with paid attendance, to put together enough money for our fares. Please get me a hall, an interpreter, and the necessary permit."

The man went white. "Lectures on Chile, in Singapore? I

won't allow it. I am in charge and I am the only one who can give lectures on Chile here."

"Calm down, Señor Mansilla," I said. "The more people like us there are talking about our remote country, the better. I don't see why you are so upset."

In the end, this crazy proposition that boiled down to patriotic blackmail led to a compromise. Shaking with anger, he made us sign receipts and handed us the money. When we counted it, we remarked that the receipts were made out for a larger amount.

"That's the interest," he explained.

(Ten days later I sent him a check from Rangoon, but without the interest, of course.)

From the deck, as the ship drew into Rangoon, I saw looming ahead the gold funnel of the great pagoda, Shwe Dagon. A multitude of strange costumes clashed their vibrant colors on the pier. A broad dirty river's mouth emptied there, into the Gulf of Martaban. This river has the most beautiful name of all the rivers in the world: Irrawaddy.

Beside its waters, my new life was about to begin.

ALVARO

... A hell of a guy, Alvaro . . . His name is now *Alvaro de Sikua* . . . He lives in New York . . . He has spent most of his life in the New York jungle . . . I imagine him eating oranges at outlandish hours, burning cigarette paper with a match, asking a lot of people annoying questions . . . He was always an undisciplined teacher, had a brilliant intelligence, an inquisitive intelligence that seemed to lead nowhere but to New York. It was 1925 . . . Between the violets that almost slipped from his hands as he rushed them to some passing stranger he wanted to go to bed with right away, without even finding out her name or where she came from, between this and his interminable lectures on Joyce, he revealed to me, and to many others, unsuspected opinions, viewpoints of the man of the world who lives in the city, in his lair, and goes out to investigate the latest in music, painting, books, the dance . . . Forever eating oranges, paring apples, impossible in his eating habits, amazingly up on everything,

in him we finally saw the urbane model of our dreams, what all of us provincials wanted to be, no labels pasted on suitcases, but carried within, an assortment of countries and concerts, cafés in the small hours, universities with snow-covered roofs . . . He reached a point where he made life impossible for me . . . Wherever I go, I settle into a vegetable dream, I set my mind on one spot and try to put down roots, so as to think, to go on existing . . . Alvaro was always jumping from one wild enthusiasm to another, fascinated by any film we could work in, immediately dressing up as Moslems to go to the studio . . . There are pictures around somewhere of me in a Bengalese costume (I went into a cigarette shop in Calcutta and did not speak, and they took me for a member of Tagore's family) when we used to go to the Dum-Dum studios to see if they would hire us . . . And then we'd have to leave the Y.M.C.A. on the sly because we hadn't paid our bill . . . And the nurses who loved us . . . Alvaro got tangled up in fabulous business ventures . . . He wanted us to sell tea from Assam, cloth from Kashmir, clocks, ancient treasures . . . Everything fizzled out quickly . . . He left samples from Kashmir, his little tea bags, on the tables, on the beds . . . He had already grabbed another suitcase and was somewhere else . . . In Munich . . . In New York . . .

I have seen many writers, steady, inexhaustible, and prolific, but he is the greatest . . . He almost never publishes anything . . . I don't understand . . . In the morning, without getting out of bed, with glasses mounted on the little hump of his nose, he's already at it, banging away at the typewriter, consuming reams of every kind of paper, of all the paper he can get his hands on . . . And yet his mobility, his criticism, his oranges, his periodic communications, his lair in New York, his violets, his muddle that appears to be so clear, his lucidity that is so muddled up . . . He never turns out the work everyone's always expected of him . . . Maybe it's because he doesn't feel like it . . . Maybe it's because he can't do it . . . Because he's doing too many things at once . . . Or because he's not doing anything . . . But he knows everything, he sees everything across continents with those impulsive blue eyes, with that fine sensibility, nevertheless letting the sands of time sift through his fingers . . .



Luminous Solitude

FOREST IMAGES

IMMERSED in these memories, I suddenly have to wake up. It's the sound of the sea. I am writing in Isla Negra, on the coast, near Valparaiso. The powerful winds that whipped the shore have just blown themselves out. The ocean—rather than my watching it from my window, it watches me with a thousand eyes of foam—still shows signs, in its surf, of the terrible persistence of the storm.

Years that are so far away! Reconstructing them, it's as if the sound of the waves I hear now touched something inside me again and again, sometimes lulling me to sleep, then with the abrupt flash of a sword. I shall take up those images without attention to chronological order, just like these waves that come and go.

1929. Night. I see the crowd pressing together. It's a Moslem holiday. They have made a long trough in the middle of the street and filled it with burning coals. I move closer. My face is flushed by the powerful heat of the coals heaped, under a thin sheet of ashes, on the scarlet ribbon of living fire. All at once, a fantastic personage appears. With his face smeared red and white, he comes on the shoulders of four men dressed in red. They set him down, he starts to walk drunkenly over the coals, shrieking as he walks: "Allah! Allah!"

The huge crowd devours the scene, stunned. The magician has now walked unharmed over the long ribbon of coals. Then one man breaks away from the multitude, kicks his sandals off, and