

# CÉSAR VALLEJO'S SEASON IN HELL

BY EDUARDO GONZÁLEZ VIAÑA



**EDUARDO GONZÁLEZ VIAÑA, *CÉSAR VALLEJO'S SEASON IN HELL***

**TRANSLATED FROM THE ORIGINAL SPANISH – ENTITLED *VALLEJO EN LOS INFIERNOS* – BY NICOLETTA ASCIUTO, DAVID BELLIS, KYMM COVENEY, VALENTINO GIANUZZI, DARYL HAGUE, STEPHEN M. HART, ROSIE MARTEAU, RACHEL PARKS, SARAH PHILLIPS, ANNIE PRIME, JEREMY ROE, JESSICA SEQUEIRA, CYNTHIA STEPHENS, JOSÉ STOVELL and CHARLOTTE WHITTLE; TRANSLATION CO-ORDINATED BY STEPHEN M. HART**

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## Prologue

The idea to create an English translation of the novel, *Vallejo en los infiernos* by Eduardo González Viaña, which came out to great acclaim in November 2007, was first floated at the International Conference entitled ‘Re-Visioning César Vallejo in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century’, held at University College London on 16-17 March 2012; the proceedings of that conference – at which Eduardo González Viaña spoke about his novel – have now been published.<sup>1</sup> It then came to fruition as a result of the generous support provided by UCL’s Grand Challenges which funded the ‘Gained in Translation’ project (2013) within the School of European Languages, Culture and Society along with a one-day workshop, ‘The Trade of Translation’, held in May 2014, which focussed specifically on issues relating to the translation of *Vallejo en los infiernos* into English. This translation of *Vallejo en los infiernos* is a collective project and individual translators are acknowledged as the authors of distinct chapters. *César Vallejo’s Season in Hell* is the fifth publication of the Centre of César Vallejo Studies at University College London; the aim of the Centre is to promote knowledge and understanding of the work of the Peruvian writer, César Vallejo, as well as provide insight into the broader remit of Peruvian literature and culture.

*Vallejo en los infiernos*, is, as the author calls it, a ‘biographical’ novel in that the episodes are based on the life of Peru’s most famous poet, César Vallejo, who was born in Santiago de Chuco, a small town in the Andes of Peru, on 16 March 1892 and died 46 years later in Paris, on 15 April 1938. It focusses in particular on the period from November 1920 until February 1921 when Vallejo was imprisoned in Trujillo for his alleged participation in the events which led to the destruction of the house and business premises of a wealthy land-owner from Santiago de Chuco, on 1 August 1920. Vallejo never stood trial for his alleged offenses; he was released before the case came to trial and he got on a boat to France before the trial could take place. We see these historical events re-created before our eyes in the novel.

Why is a novel about this particular Peruvian poet important? Firstly because Vallejo is a poet who is venerated not only in Peru but throughout Latin America and – nowadays – in Europe and the United States as well. His poetry has been translated into Chinese, Czech, Dutch, English, Estonian, Finnish, French, German, Hindi, Italian, Portuguese, Quechua, Romanian, Sanskrit, Scots, Slovak and Swedish. Vallejo is as well known for his political commitment – years later he would pen some moving homages to the Republicans fighting against Franco in the Spanish Civil War – as well as his poetry. The period in which this novel is set was a highly turbulent one. The Peru of Vallejo’s youth had just emerged from the War of the Pacific with Bolivia and Chile and had ushered in the so-called ‘Aristocratic Republic’; it was a period marked by economic stability but also authoritarian leaders who favoured the country’s white landowning oligarchy, a pattern of internal affairs echoed in a number of Latin American countries at the time. The situation reached its peak in 1919 with the re-election of former

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<sup>1</sup> *Politics, Poetics, Affect: Re-visioning César Vallejo*, ed. Stephen M. Hart (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2013). Eduardo’s essay, ‘Vallejo en los infiernos: biografía de una novela biográfica’, is at pp. 147-57 of this work.

President Augusto B. Leguía who, despite initiating some progressive measures, had alienated large sections of the population by harshly suppressing opposition. This opposition was most strongly voiced by the populist, nationalist APRA (Alianza Popular Revolucionaria Americana) movement; its leader, Víctor Raúl de la Torre, was good friends with Vallejo and he appears as a character in the novel. An active Communist, Vallejo was deeply engaged with the social and political issues of his day in Latin America as well as the Soviet Union which he visited on three occasions. Though some would see Vallejo's ideals as outdated we should remember that – in Latin America today – political and social forces closely aligned to Vallejo's own ideals are once more emerging in the Sub-Continent. With the elections of left-wing governments of various stripes, the last fifteen years have seen a continent undergoing profound change.

Eduardo González Viaña's novel is based on the main events of Vallejo's life and these events are interspersed with some of the poems Vallejo is known to have written at the time and which he published subsequently in *The Black Heralds* (1918) and *Trilce* (1922). These poems have different functions in the novel; they sometimes act as a kind of chorus to the conversations which the inmates have with each other and, at other times, they are dramatized in the psychical atmosphere of life in a prison. González Viaña's novel is an imaginative re-creation of the thoughts and emotions running through Vallejo's mind during this tough period of his life; indeed the poetry he is known to have written at this time of his life punctuates and offers counterpoint to the narrative at a number of key junctures.

In this translation we have sought to combine accuracy with naturalness (the translators appear after the chapter in brackets in the Contents page). We have favoured a neutral type of English – i.e. one which is neither obviously UK or US in style or intonation – which would allow for the Peruvianness of the original context to shine through, unhindered. An Italian translation of the novel has been published and we have referred to this translation in order to clarify some issues relating to the translation of the original text in Spanish.<sup>2</sup> In some cases, however – particularly when the novel resorted to the use of Peruvianisms – we sought the advice of the author, Eduardo González Viaña, and Eduardo has been extremely helpful in providing insight into the meaning and resonance of words and expressions used throughout *Vallejo en los infiernos*. In order to retain consistency of Vallejo's poetry we have decided to use one translation for the Vallejo poems which are cited in the novel, Michael Smith & Valentino Gianuzzi's *César Vallejo: The Complete Poems* (2012).<sup>3</sup>

This translation is intended for readers who are interested in the contemporary Latin American novel, in Latin American politics and the life of one of the Sub-Continent's most significant poets. In order to make the context of the book more understandable we decided to include a glossary containing information about the main characters – many of whom were like Vallejo 'real' people – in order to provide some context in an accessible way. This translation has been predicated on some principles of translation theory. Eugene Nida, in his essay 'Principles of Correspondence', highlighted two basic orientations in translating; 'dynamic equivalence' (sense-for-sense translation aimed at bringing the text towards the reader) and 'formal equivalence' (word-for-word translation aimed at reproducing as much as possible the structure of the original text). Where there is a conflict between the two, according to Nida, the intended message of the text must take priority over its style, especially when there are wide

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<sup>2</sup> *Vallejo agli inferi*, traduzioni di Lucia Lorenzini (Rome: Axiara Editions, 2013), 548 pp.

<sup>3</sup> *César Vallejo: The Complete Poems*, translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012).

cultural differences between source and target language.<sup>4</sup> Lawrence Venuti, on the other hand, argues in *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation* that the binary between these two ideas, which he calls domestication and foreignisation respectively, is an ideological one. Far from being a pragmatic approach to translation, Venuti regards domestication as assimilating the original text into the culture of the target language, erasing the cultural values of that original text and removing its potency. As an alternative he advocates a 'resistant', foreignising approach, whereby the translator aims to make an impression on readers in the target language by highlighting the 'differentness' of the original text and bringing the reader away from the culture that he or she inhabits and nearer to the culture from which the text originates. In particular we began to question why it is that translation from one language to another is so frequently viewed in terms of irreparable loss. Walter Benjamin, in contrast to what might be called the 'Original Sin' view of translation, argues that the transferral of thoughts from one language to another leads to a birthing process which occurs within the translated-into language: 'Translation is so far removed from being the sterile question of two dead languages that of all literary forms it is the one charged with the special mission of watching over the maturing process of the original language and the birth pangs of its own.'<sup>5</sup> It is in this sense that translation, in Benjamin's words, 'is destined to become part of its own language and eventually to be absorbed by its renewal'.<sup>6</sup> Drawing inspiration from these three theoreticians we thus avoided imposing a dogmatic, one-size-fits-all model on the text since – as our experience showed – a more dynamic approach was called for in order to create an idiomatic and accessible translation; our aim was to strike a balance between all three approaches and take each individual challenge on its own merits.

When the text used – or re-created – legal texts (such as those used for the pre-trial), we decided to retain the legal equivalents. We also attempted to find appropriate equivalents for the colloquial and slang language – including expletives – which are used throughout the novel. In the process we decided to use, as far as possible, Standard English due to the factual nature of the text. We opted to use universal, generic English as opposed to regional dialects both in order to make the text as accessible as possible to readers in various Anglophone countries and also to avoid falling into the danger of making the novel sound as if it were set in 21st-century London or New York as opposed to early twentieth-century Peru. For this reason we decided to retain the terms of address, 'Don' and 'Doña' which are used extensively in Latin America and are used as a mark of esteem for people of an elevated social standing. In the novel, for example, this form of address is used to refer to Don Abraham, Don Francisco de Paula Vallejo and Doña Angélica Díaz and these forms of address are maintained throughout the text.

We are happy to acknowledge the generous support provided to this project by Grand Challenges which supported the SELCS 'Gained in Translation' project (2013) as well as a one-day workshop entitled 'The Trade of Translation' held at University College London on 10 May 2014; the support from Grand Challenges was also crucial in defraying some of the publication costs of this translation.

José Stovell & Stephen M. Hart

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<sup>4</sup> Eugene Nida, 'Principles of Correspondence', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. Lawrence Venuti (New York: Routledge, 2004), pp. 153-67.

<sup>5</sup> 'The Task of the Translator', in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zorn (London: Pimlico, 1999), pp. 70-82 (p. 74).

<sup>6</sup> 'The Task of the Translator', p. 74.

Mother, Tomorrow I'm Off to  
Santiago to Drench Myself  
in Your Blessing and Your Lament

Night came into Trujillo prison. It advanced deep into its endless passages and moved along, extinguishing conversations, lighting candles and brightening kerosene lamps. It sank down into the cells, blackened the air, erased the floor and, finally, approached one by one the men who languished there and closed their frightened eyes.

Down the passageway between the cells, two guards were leading a prisoner. The man, arms together and extended in front of him, didn't make a single sound and seemed to glide or float.

'They're taking you...they're taking you to hell!' yelled a man who wasn't sleeping.

'Hell!' repeated the voice and its echoes traversed the unending corridor until they crashed against a cruel metal door. One of the policemen opened the padlock and loosened the chains that secured the door. The other freed César Vallejo from the shackles that bound his hands and pushed him towards the blackness of the dungeon where they softened up new prisoners. They called it Hell. There, the night was a different kind of night, deeper and more dense. In contrast with his surroundings, the poet was dressed in a suit of ceremonious black and a white double-cuff shirt. They had arrested him in the middle of a party and they hadn't given him time to change his clothes. He still had a white rose in his lapel.

The door groaned and screeched, then finally shut with a bang. Blind, with his hands in the air like a sleepwalker, Vallejo crept towards the back wall. On his way, he tripped over a bulky shape on the floor – he tried to apologize to the man stretched out there but his voice had left him. He went around. His legs were shaking. Although he was finally free of the shackles, his wrists still burned. Finally he felt the wall and, leaning against it, he took off his tie and put it in his pocket. He unbuttoned his shirt collar. He opened and closed his hands to regain feeling. The icy dust on the wall stuck to his back, painting him the phosphorescent white of a corpse.

'Shit!'

Hearing the shout reminded him that he was not yet dead.

'You, goddamnit. You!'

He propped his feet at an angle so that they would hold him up better but he didn't feel comfortable. His tired body began to slip until he found himself sitting on the floor against the wall. For a long while he sat with his head between his knees, discovering that the fetal position



is best for resting. Later he opened his eyes to the night and closed them again; when he finally opened them anew, he could see better. The blackness had dissipated. The prison was a dense light packed with backbones, skulls, arms, legs, knees, shoes, hands, fingernails, fears, eyes and snores.

‘Hey! I’m talking to you, got it? Shit, who do you think you are coming here in those clothes? Hey! Are you blind? Are you deaf?’

Vallejo couldn’t identify the voice’s owner. He didn’t even know if it was directed at him. He couldn’t see the man but he was certainly visible himself. Maybe the man shouting had spent a long time in the dark and had eyes like a rat or a bat.

‘Don’t you know where you are? You’re in Hell!’

He didn’t answer.

‘You’re already dying!’

The man didn’t seem to be anywhere. Perhaps he was dissolving into the nothingness. Maybe he had stopped having a head or torso or limbs – just skin and rage.

‘I’m going to count to ten. When I get to ten, I’ll kill you...One!’

César didn’t have the strength to defend himself against a physical attack or a voice to respond to the shouts. He couldn’t see his cellmates though he imagined them. As a law student he had attended the hearings at the court of Trujillo and watched prisoners being led in for judgment. The policemen had to drag them because some could no longer hold themselves up. They were swollen, stinking and they didn’t understand the judges. They were barely men. They lived, dying. Their breath, their blood and their souls were draining away.

‘Two!’

Then he remembered that the darkness would never end for him. The prison was always full of men who spent long years without being sentenced and when they left, they moved as though they had never seen the world, with a lost stare, shocked to still have eyes and a body. This was what awaited him, too.

‘You’re already dead, you son of a bitch! Three!’

His enemies had sworn that he wouldn’t come out of there alive. He would emerge from the prison without a mind, without direction, without balance, without control of his neck and without that spark of spirit that is reflected in the eyes of those who are still living. The shouting man was going to finish him off that very night.

‘Fofoooooour!’ the man roared again and almost immediately he howled:

‘Fiiiiiiiiiiiive!’ But the word broke apart and the man stopped counting as though his strength had run out.

There was a long silence and Vallejo thought that his own consciousness was lost in the midst of the blackness.

The respite didn’t last long. After an hour, he began to hear the sound of a club striking the wall. The aggressor was the owner of a blunt instrument and he had to swallow his laughter to shout:

‘Six...Seven! You’re gonna get it. You’re gonna get it.’

The tool hit the metal structure of the door. It crackled and shone like thunder and lightning, dark and cursed.

‘Do you know what this is? It’s a sledgehammer and I’m gonna use it to break your head open.’

He swung the sledgehammer around in the air and Vallejo thought that the man had decided to frighten him to death before finishing him off. It was evident that the man could see

him and could have hit him since the moment he came in. Obviously now he was only trying to terrify him.

‘Eight!’

The man started to advance. He was furious and ready to end it as soon as possible. Brandishing the blunt weapon in the air, he reached the centre of the cell.

There, Vallejo saw him. The proximity of death had opened his eyes. Objects acquired shapes. A table, some outlines and several scattered chairs sketched themselves in the centre of the scarlet shadow.

On the floor in a corner were heaped various prisoners, sleeping or dead. Next to him, standing, like a drawing on the wall, he could make out a man, paralyzed with fear. In the centre of the dungeon the lump he had tripped over was a very dark man who had sat up and was observing the scene. He had something that looked like knitting needles in his hands and this seemed strange to César. He couldn’t believe that anyone would bother with such things in the middle of a dungeon and in the middle of the night.

Then the objects and the people lost importance. There existed only the killer who advanced towards him. First César saw a very inflated belly; behind it his arms shook and the sledgehammer trembled. Finally, he saw his face and it, too, seemed enormous.

‘I said nine, goddamnit!...Prepare to die...’

César Vallejo didn’t try to defend himself. His body remained immobile. His right hand reached into the upper pocket of his jacket and felt that the white handkerchief was still there. He thought about how they would find him, dead but dressed in dignified clothes. That was how they buried the gentlemen in his town. He lowered his arm and saw the assassin’s head up close. Vallejo arched his neck – the man’s eyes were rolling; his nostrils were steaming like geysers.

The assassin looked at nothing besides his future victim. He tripped over a lump on the floor, the same one that Vallejo had come across earlier. It was the man with the knitting needles.

‘I bumped into a cat,’ he said without dropping his gaze from Vallejo. He tried to play the fool:

‘Kitty...here, kitty kitty!’

He didn’t skirt round him. He didn’t want to walk in between the table and the scattered chairs. He prepared to step over the man sitting in the centre but he changed his mind. He gave him a kick.

‘Get a move on, out of my way, you piece of shit!’

He spoke without lowering his eyes.

‘Come on, faggot, get up. Or are you dead? Get up, you carcass!’

Vallejo stood still with his back against the wall and didn’t think to move. Fear paralyzed him. His only defense was to turn into something immobile, into the wall, into no-one. Nearb, he heard the breathing of another man who perhaps was thinking the same thing.

‘Get up, you corpse!’ repeated the man with the sledgehammer and he kept on kicking the lump.

‘Get up and beat it!’

He roared again. Maybe the dead man had come back to life and grabbed him by the leg. He tripped the killer, making him fall over.

‘Ah, shit!’

Now, it was the aggressor who cried and cursed. A fierce battle began on the floor. There were sounds of hammer blows and more yells. César opened his eyes and he saw everything very clearly. His vision had adjusted to the darkness and he could pick out the two shapes, in a tangle on the floor as though engaged in the battle of love. The corpse or the cat or the knitter sank his teeth into his attacker's neck. With an effort the man managed to free himself and got up but his jugular was gushing blood.

Both were standing now. The killer with the sledgehammer took up more space because of the scale of his stomach. He managed to strike the other man's head with the sledgehammer and knocked him to the ground. He struck him again, trying to split open his forehead. He met with success. To Vallejo it seemed as if the knitter had two heads but he was still not dead. He brandished one needle and buried it below the navel of his voluminous adversary.

Then Vallejo saw the man with the sledgehammer burst like a balloon. The needle came out and buried itself again in various regions of the huge belly. Then there was a buzzing sound and the man began to deflate, falling softly as though he were no longer a body.

The poet couldn't lower his eyes. He imagined the scene on the floor where the killer had ceased to exist; he was just skin and some disgusting rags of clothing and he told himself that men are nothing but this and also fear and air.

From the other contender he heard a howl of the kind that wild animals let out when they die and finally there was a dry silence. Little by little, shapes began to sketch themselves before César's eyes – the red silhouettes of two bodies stretched out on the floor. They were still warm but their souls had already fled.

'Mother!' cried the man next to him.

Piled in a corner, the other prisoners slept without emitting a single sound. They didn't seem to be alive. They had not moved during the fight and they didn't more afterward. It wasn't their problem.

'Mother!' repeated the man.

César Vallejo preferred not to look at his cellmate. He lifted his eyes towards the ceiling and exhaustion shut his eyelids.

César described later how the first night in Hell he saw, dreamt or sensed his mother. He believed he heard bells. Maybe he was asleep when the ringing dissolved and one single sentence broke through the silence:

'What did I tell you to do at times like this?'

It was a sweet voice and it rose up in the emptiness like the moon, which holds itself up without sinking into the vastness.

He thought he heard a song his mother used to sing. *The world is inside us, the present and the past*, it went.

The miraculous voice repeated this line and asked him why he insisted on living in the martyrdom of the present if the wonder of remembrance was so close at hand.

'What did I tell you to do at times like this?' it repeated from heaven and César remembered that his mother used to sing all the time and that it was her way of speaking.

'What did I tell you that you have to do at times like this? Why live the sorrow of the present when there is memory?'

From inside the music his mother's voice proclaimed that man's only possession is memory. With memory, travellers and those who live far away extend bridges into the past as well as into the next world.

‘No-one is going to kill you. No-one can kill you because you’re not mortal. If you lose your memory you will become so.’

‘Prison, mother. This is prison!’ César tried to say but he couldn’t even manage a whisper.

In the dream he told himself that it was all just a dream.

The voice, which came from somewhere outside the world, assured him in another song that prisons are prisons in name and nothing more.

‘Your soul walks the lightest and no-one can imprison you.’

Time had passed but his mother’s voice never faded away.

It was not just songs. A vision came too. He closed his eyes and he opened them only to meet other eyes that had been looking at him all his life.

Eyes to eyes. She and he looked at each other. She was his mother and, just as he did as a child, he closed his eyes to see her.

‘César! César, darling!’

Silence. Now everything was mute like the mute heart of the dead. The bells stopped ringing. The prison had been struck dumb. Silence.

The ceiling of the cell faded away. There was only sky. A light descended from the sky bathing everything including the sweet voice that only César could hear.

‘Close your eyes and remember...Come back to Santiago, son. Remember our town and our time. And don’t be bitter because you will survive when everyone else is long dead. But now, hurry off to sleep, my son, and re-wind your memory. Come back to Santiago. Dream of us.’

César Vallejo obeyed and the spirit perhaps departed. Above the shadows of the Trujillo prison there could be heard the voice of a bird that sang until it disappeared.

A frightened voice interrupted his dream.

‘Hey!’

In the centre of the cell the dying bodies gave their last twitches. A sad vapour of ammonia drifted in the air. Fat, blood, skin, guts, mud and filth appeared, spilled on the floor. There in the centre lay a white rose. At some point, it had come detached from Vallejo’s lapel and it was, by some miracle, intact. It seemed to float.

‘Hey!’ repeated the prisoner who was sitting next to him. His eyes burned like two ghosts.

‘Hey! Do you think we’re still alive?’



## I was Born on a Day God was Sick

The night of 6 November 1920 was ending and César Vallejo felt happy to have his memory back. Whoever is without memory is only dust and ashes, especially if he has just arrived in prison and he doesn't yet know whether he will ever leave that place.

'Tell me, please! Are we alive?' repeated his cellmate and the poet didn't know how to respond. The two of them were eventually enveloped by the night. Everything was flashing on and off: the prison, the dead, the walls, the air, consciousness.

César Vallejo began to recall his whole life, the twenty-eight years from his birth in Santiago de Chuco up until the present and he never knew whether the memory came to him when he was awake or asleep.

He remembered Father Hipólito Paredes, the town parish priest who, after his ninetieth birthday, had left religious service and was living in Trujillo. He lived in a house off Apuro Street, which was also called Grau Street, in a lane six blocks down where his son Santiago had found him a home. César used to visit the priest there and listen to his monologues – endless memories of that distant land.

'When you were born, César, a flood of stars fell. It was 16 March 1892, the feast day of Saint Hilary and Saint Clement. The sky was full of black holes and the constellations kept on falling as though they would never stop coming loose. The stars came and went, flying up again towards the heavens. The ones we saw fall had left the confines of what is black in the blackness, up there where God is still creating worlds. On some nights the stars would fly up to a point in the firmament and from there they would soar in a flock towards the outer reaches of the universe. They then descended to the steeple of the church and soared up once more. They pecked at fruits in the orchards and took flight until they were lost in the mountains in the west, when they would then perhaps sink into the sea.

'And what did you do, Father?'

'Nothing, just sat there in the darkness.'

César tried to imagine the old priest on one of the pews of the town church. He thought of the faces of the saints at midnight with the sanctuary closed and imagined them with their faces turned towards the front pew to watch the priest. The image frightened him.

'I remember it was May when they brought you to be baptized and I wondered if that night would black out the Milky Way. Happily it was a nice day or, in fact, a beautiful night –

we looked up towards the heavens and there were the stars, all bunched together. They formed herds and constellations. Silent and obedient as sheep, the stars paraded in front of us as if they were waiting for us to call the roll or count them. This made me realise that light always returns even if there are long periods of blackness.

‘Speaking of your baptism, I remember your godfather, Manuel Rodríguez. He was throwing one and two-cent coins into the street. I swear I can see it all as though it were happening right now and I can even see the coins suspended in the air. Don Francisco, your father, very serious, very noble, the epitome of a governor, I remember that I was invited to his house to celebrate the event. You were son number twelve. Your father told me that God had sent you to serve Him because you were destined for the church.’

‘Like you, Father?’

‘What! A humble sinner like me...? No, you were born to be a bishop.’

César recalled that both his grandfathers had also been priests and thought about Father Hipólito, there in Santiago, sitting in the dark and counting the stars. What would have come of him if he hadn’t had children? Would he have had to stay, old and alone beneath an empty sky?

‘And what if Doña Angélica Díaz had not given you a son as noble as Santiago?’

‘Hush, hush, César and don’t repeat what you have said. You’re a liberal intellectual and university-educated and ordinary people don’t understand these things. Let us say that Santiago is my nephew and the same goes for Ego and Martina, his siblings.’

Then, changing the subject, the priest spoke about angels. He loved to tell how angels can fly in any direction but no matter what course they take, with their body and wings, they always find the face of God before them.

One day, after a conversation with Father Hipólito, César Vallejo ran into his friend Francisco Xandóval and told him that now he finally understood why he dreamt so much of shooting stars.

‘I think there was an error in my birth. I was born on a day when God was sick.’

Now, in the Trujillo prison, he became even more convinced that he was the product of an error in heaven and wrote:

*I was born on a day when God was sick. Gravely.*

Father Hipólito reminded him of his childhood, his first games, his catechism lessons, his participation in the church choir, the gate of his house, the autumnal amber of those days, all the distant vibrations of Santiago. When he was about to turn eight, in 1900, César enrolled in the municipal elementary school to start first grade. In later years he would attend the remainder of elementary school at Central School 271. Abraham Arias, the teacher, wore a lead-coloured overcoat. His face was thin and hard. Seated at his desk, he always had his eyes shut as though he didn’t need to see in order to know. His hat couldn’t quite conceal the white locks that spilled down to his shoulders. When he spoke with a student he looked at his forehead, not at his eyes. When he didn’t speak to anyone he looked upwards. He seemed to be waiting for an order from heaven.

He had lived for a few years in Paris and from there he had returned to Santiago de Chuco but he didn’t speak about his life abroad. His past was a mystery. Some said that he had been involved in a conspiracy to kill the president and that, perhaps, he was using a false name.

Another theory had him fleeing from a painful memory or from an impossible love. That was what César overheard while his parents were talking.

One day Don Abraham took the children to visit the archeological ruins of Las Cuevas de Patarata, la Montaña de la Luna and Huashgón, a few miles from Santiago.

‘You need eager eyes to see Peru’, the teacher said. ‘Ours is a land that few know because they can’t see it or hear what it says. Put your ears to this rock and listen.’

The children did as they were told and they thought they could hear the murmur of a wild river. Another day they heard, from inside the rock, the sound of marching feet.

‘You say you hear marching. Do you think it might be Inca warriors?’

The children kept their ears to the stone and each one heard something different: haughty voices, tumbling rocks, condors taking flight.

‘Those who don’t know how to see or hear can only see our temples of the past as rocks on top of rocks. Black stones on white stones or white stones on black stones, that’s all they think they see.’

‘Stones?’

‘Stones. But he who builds with stone alters the order of the universe. Those who put one stone on top of another, who construct geometric forms, who build a road on the mountain – they are changing the world they arrived in and the world will not go back to the way it was after they’ve passed away. The same happens with those who invent words.

‘You can invent words?’

‘One can, César. Why do you ask?’

‘I want to invent words.’

‘You’re twelve years old, aren’t you?’

‘Yes, twelve.’

‘Twelve! Then you have time. You’ll have time. Plenty of time to invent all the words you like.’

‘But I want to start right now. What can I do to invent words?’

He arched his eyebrows. They were as abundant as a forest. He seemed to want to hypnotize his teacher. Don Abraham chose to change the subject.

‘Hundreds of peoples have walked this earth’, he continued. ‘Almost as many as there are stars in the skies. But most of them took refuge from the cold, the night and the rain in shelters, in caves or tents, which they soon abandoned. They passed through, nothing more and, because of this, their spirits returned to the mud and their destiny was mingled with that of the other beasts of this planet. But our ancient fathers transformed the mountains and they gave the desert form, depth and human shelters and because of this our old cities are sacred and the founders of our world have passed but they’ve not gone. They call them heathens and yet they haven’t died completely; they simply sleep beneath these stones.’

Then the children asked him if it was possible to see a heathen.

‘See one, that is, actually see one, no,’ Don Abraham said. ‘And besides, why do we need to see one? But you can, in fact, hear them. Sometimes, without our knowing it, they speak and even write through us.’

The following day he was visited by Father Francisco who as well as being the parish priest was also the Religious Instruction teacher. He interrupted Don Abraham in the middle of class.

‘You can’t deceive children with this trickery!’ he cried and added: ‘The ruins and the beliefs of the Indians are no more than superstitions.’

The teacher had in his hand a ceramic from the Chimú culture and was explaining the art and creation story of pre-Hispanic Peru. He let the priest continue.

‘Children! If a teacher tells you about heathens or ancient fathers you mustn’t believe it. In the parish church there are plainspoken books available that will explain the history. The Incas

were very organized but they were also savage and ignorant. They didn't believe in the true God.'

'Those books lie', the teacher said with a smile.

'But God doesn't. God doesn't lie!'

'No, He doesn't lie. He speaks through this ceramic, through the songs of the birds, through the voices of poets, through marvellous stories and through all artistic creations.'

'Poor fellow, Don Abraham. He died very young.' Father Hipólito affirmed in their conversations. 'And curse the priest who was in charge of his funeral. None other than Father Francisco, the priest who replaced me during the years I was travelling along the coast.'

Vallejo remembered the Basque priest, with his deep black eyes, as deep as the final judgment, who had established a kind of religious government in the town and prohibited drinking, Carnival queens, licentious songs and close dancing during the Feasts of the Apostles. The priest had refused to attend Don Abraham's funeral.

'I won't go, even if the bishop orders me to, because it's for a Freemason. I cannot deny that he was an honest and decent man but he was a Freemason.'

Some time later, after a riot, the town's residents ran Father Francisco out of town on a mule and warned him never to come back. Then Don Hipólito became the parish priest and he remained in the position for half a century until he became a nonagenarian and decided to leave for the coast. 'Father,' the congregation told him, 'you're like us, stay, at least until you turn one hundred.'

But they didn't manage to persuade him and he left for the coast with his two suitcases. The thinner one contained his clothing, a missal and a spare cassock. The other suitcase had a small and worn statue of the Virgen de la Puerta. Many years earlier they had deconsecrated the statue in the Church and abandoned her in the storage room for saints who no longer perform miracles. There, the angels gradually lost their wings and skullcaps and the plaster saints grew older every day.

In that suitcase he also carried a few clothes that were fit for a princess so that the Virgin Mary could treat herself from time to time. In his home the priest chose a corner of the living room and built a little altar there for the Virgin Mary.

'Go ahead, recite. The Virgin loves poetry.' He entreated Vallejo while he removed the shoes from the small statue and replaced them with some golden boots.

'Her shoes and stockings must be changed frequently...Poor girl!...With so many heavens to traverse...'

Throughout his entire university career César Vallejo never stopped visiting his old friend who brought back so many childhood memories.

'Look at her closely. See how much she resembles your mother.'

'I remember how, when you were very young, you wanted to be a priest, César. You had never seen a bishop before because bishops live in their diocese and rarely visit little towns like ours. They only travel to confirm children and that happens once in a decade. Nonetheless you said, "I'm going to be a bishop. I shall wear a mitre on my head." You were always saying this.'

'I don't remember that very well, Father. I don't understand why I don't remember it. And I don't know why I didn't follow through with the idea.'

'I was the one who dissuaded you, César. It was me.'

Santiago de Chuco is a small town, musty, frozen and hard like mountain cheese. It towers above the mountain ridge at 10,100 feet above sea level, about one hundred miles from Trujillo, which is the capital of the province of La Libertad. Travelling from one city to the other



took ten days. When travelling from the coast to Santiago de Chuco the first three days were by bus and cart. The rest was on a mule's back.

Two big stones at the entrance looked like arms that the city used to support itself against the earth or two columns that confer upon it the solemnity of a church. When they founded the town at what was known as Andaimarca the conquistadores dedicated it to the Apostle of Spain. The houses barely made it off the ground and seemed to weep when the rain slipped down off the roof tiles. At that altitude the cold became trapped between the sky and the rooftops.

A line of chickens crossed the long street just as the day split itself in half. They would say later that it was the clucking that split it. This was where the twelve children of Francisco de Paula Vallejo Benítez and María de los Santos Mendoza Gurrionero were born. They were called: María Jesús, Víctor Clemente, Francisco Cleofé, Manuel María, Augusto José, María Encarnación, Manuel Natividad, Néstor de Paula, María Agueda, Victoria Natividad, Miguel Ambrosio and César Abraham. Because of their closeness in age Miguel and César, the two youngest brothers, were inseparable.

The school visit to the old ruins unleashed an irrepressible passion for archeology in Vallejo. Together with his brother Miguel, his friend Cristóbal Delgado and the Ciudad brothers, they would all spend entire nights exploring the ruins and began to see much more than rocks piled on rocks. The sand turned blue in the light of the moon and, when they looked towards the end of the Inca road, they saw a shower of dust that seemed to fall from the stars. It occurred to them that the ancient builders might have had ancestors in a distant star and that they had not forgotten their origins.

One day Don Abraham fainted in the middle of class. They brought him home and he didn't come back to school again. It was brain cancer and three weeks later it took him. But a few days before his death, when the Vallejo family was visiting him, the sick man asked to have a moment alone with his favorite student.

His face had sharpened. His eyes burned like two embers in the room's penumbra.

'César. Is it César?'

'Yes.'

'Come closer.'

The boy obeyed, frightened.

'Do you remember all my classes?'

'No.'

'Do you remember when you told me that you wanted to invent words?'

'Yes. I remember that every day.'

'Words...phrases...books...That is what writers do.'

'Really?'

'Really. And for the best of them, it's not enough to invent sentences. They construct new words. They give new meanings to the existing ones. Make believe that a word is lost, my son, and look for it. Otherwise invent it.'

'Are you saying that writers are the seekers of a lost word?'

The teacher smiled. It was his way of saying yes. It was difficult for him to talk because the fever had consumed him. He was very weak and weighed half as much as he once had. In the next room the neighbours had arrived to sit with him as he was dying and they said that he was delirious.

'You're going to be a poet, César. I tell you this as a dead man.'

The boy stayed a while, watching and it was true, his teacher already looked as though he were dead. He thought he caught the smell of clay in the air. It occurred to him that his teacher had already been buried but he had come back to life. Later on he would die once more.

His eyes shone. He sweated. Trembled. In the light of the candles his face gleamed. The time was approaching when he would have to leave this world.

‘Raise your right arm with the palm extended and promise that you will not forget what I’m telling you.’

César noticed that his arm was trembling. He thought he wouldn’t be able to lift it. He felt like crying.

‘You’re going to be a poet, César. You have to be one. Do you promise me?’

‘Yes.’

He couldn’t raise his arm.

‘Don’t forget it.’

‘No. Never.’

‘Never. As long as you live.’

‘As long as I live.’

‘As long as you live’, the teacher repeated. ‘As long as you live.’

Don Abraham was buried in an unpainted wooden coffin. He was dressed in the only three-piece suit he had worn in his life. It looked as though he were dressed up for a school occasion in the Kingdom of Heaven. His eyes were closed. On the chairs lined up against the walls the town authorities and chief mourners drank pisco and told jokes all night long. The following afternoon Don Abraham was taken away to be buried. The coffin was carried out of the house by Don Francisco de Paula Vallejo, as the town governor, as well as the deceased’s three brothers. On the way to the cemetery César asked his father why the priest would not attend.

‘He said that Don Abraham was a freemason and that Catholic priests have no truck with these people.’

He went quiet for a moment, and then said:

‘But I assure you that when Father Francisco dies and reaches the gates of heaven, Don Abraham will be there to greet him.’

Even as they laid his teacher to rest César was already inventing words. He thought he heard the phrase ‘For as long as you live... as long as you live’ emerging from amongst the trees.

He never forgot the conversation he had had with his teacher who was now dead. He would remember it during the bleakest times in his life. As he left the cemetery the grass murmured sighs of sorrow beneath his feet. The day turned grey and foggy. The dew was mingled with tears. The morning was turned inside-out as if it were already night-time. That promise gave rise within him to an obsession to know the future, to foresee everything that was going to happen to him when he grew up. Would he become a great poet? Would he travel across oceans and countries? Would he ever meet a mysterious woman and write about her? He spoke about it with his friends and they answered that the future is unknown and what will be, will be.

Time was passing rapidly, as were the clouds. The moon looked like it was about to fade from sight. One day César and his brother Miguel both developed the shared ability to have premonitions. During the night both of them suffered terrible dreams and at dawn they woke up exhausted. It was raining when Miguel turned to look at his brother.

‘I’m going to tell you a secret.’

Their mother was calling them down for breakfast.

‘I’m going to die soon. I’m going to die very young,’ he told him, as he went to sit down at the table, without adding another word. They didn’t speak all day. It seemed as if they were angry at each other. They slept in the same bedroom. At midnight Miguel woke up and said:

‘César.’

‘What?’

‘Have you ever died before?’

‘You’re talking in your sleep.’

‘And what about me, César?’

‘What about you?’

‘Do you think I’m dead?’

‘You’re dreaming. Go back to sleep!’

‘César, my dear brother!’

‘What did I just say to you? Go back to sleep!’

‘I’ve just had a dream.’

‘What have you been eating, Miguel?’

‘I’ve been having the same dream over and over again. It’s been three times now.’

‘Well, what kind of dream was it? What was your dream like?’

“‘Santiago’s burning!’ somebody shouted behind me. ‘Santiago is in flames!’”

‘And why didn’t you go and put out the fire?’

‘Because I was dead, César.’

‘What did you eat last night?’

‘My dream gets worse, César.’

‘Worse?’

‘Worse!... ‘César Vallejo has set the town alight!’ they were shouting... I went out to see what was happening... God gave me permission because I was dead... as I was saying, I went out to see what was going on and the whole corner of the street was in flames.’

‘Can’t you just go back to sleep?’

‘St James the Apostle was rising from the flames towards the sky.’

‘Really?! And what was he doing?’

‘He was riding an orange-coloured horse.’

‘What you’ve just had is a nightmare.’

‘Everything I saw then I can see right now.’

‘No, Miguel, my brother, you can’t see me. You’re dreaming.’

‘Take care of yourself, won’t you. little brother?’

‘I’ll take care.’

‘The voice was saying that it was your fault Santiago was in flames. Just then I went up to heaven where I saw mum and dad. They were very worried.’

‘They’re still alive.’

‘Not in the dream. In the dream we saw each other and we were already dead.’

‘How could you tell?’

‘Mum, dad and I were transparent. The angels were hovering. I could see them as clearly as I can see you now.’

‘No, Miguel, my brother. You can’t see me. I told you. You’re dreaming.’

They never spoke about the future again and Miguel remained sad and quiet like those who have cried in secret or possess awesome gifts. The last time he saw his brother César was a student at Trujillo University and had already spent some time in Lima. He travelled to Santiago

de Chuco in July 1915 for the feast day of St James and found his brother completely normal. He felt inspired and made a prediction.

‘I thought I’d find you dead! What is really going to happen is this: you’ll get married soon and you’ll become a notary public,’ he said to him, and he added that he was already beginning to look like a notary public, with hair growing in his nostrils and his fingers clicking away at the typewriter in an office full to the brim with records and documents.

They had a drink in the steward’s house. César couldn’t stop talking about Lima. He had been to the Palais Concert – a kind of café, cinema and bar all rolled into one – in the capital where whoever went in could say that they had been to Europe because the boats arriving in the port of Callao brought with them shows and orchestras from the Old World to perform at that prestigious venue.

‘The women in the Palais Concert strut about like they’re on a catwalk and they talk in French. One of them even came up to me and wouldn’t stop saying to me “Mon chéri, mon chéri”.’

Miguel couldn’t stop himself.

‘Don’t be so confident, César.’

‘About what? About you having hairy nostrils?’

‘Don’t be so confident, brother.’

‘About you becoming a notary public, do you mean?’

‘I know something about you as well.’

He spoke in a serious tone about ghosts.

‘My poor César! One day you will go somewhere far beyond what you can imagine.’

‘Yes, one day. Why not!’

‘But you will never return.’

‘That’s where you’re wrong. I will never forget where I come from. I can’t.’

‘I didn’t say you will forget. You will want to come back but it will be impossible. You will die far away, little brother, and not even your body will come back.’

The two brothers fell silent as if an angel had passed.

‘César, my dear brother, you will know Hell while you are alive. To be a poet you have to have walked through Hell.’

The following day César Abraham saddled his horse and set off back to the coast. He travelled incessantly across mountains and along paths only known to mule drivers. He stopped at a pass between the mountains and the coastal valley and from there he looked back towards his hometown. ‘If somebody stops me trying to return I’ll come back here’, he told himself as he listened to the horse breathing. The roosters were singing when, a few days later, he arrived in Trujillo. Exhausted, he lay down on his bed and couldn’t stop dreaming about dying far away.

That year César finished his thesis on Romanticism in Spanish poetry. On the day that he was writing up his conclusions a telegram arrived from his father telling him that Miguel had died. It was 22 August 1915 and the twelve words on the piece of paper did not reveal that much about what had happened. Sometime later, on a visit back home, Vallejo asked about the circumstances of his brother’s death and was told there were no circumstances to speak of. They told him that Miguel had been feeling unwell one afternoon, that he then went to sleep and was dead by the morning. Nobody ever found out what he had died of.

‘And why are you so interested in knowing?’ his brother Víctor asked.

‘Illness is a mere pretext for us to fulfil our destinies.’

‘Perhaps you’re right.’

‘Perhaps?’

‘For me death is like a door’, César replied. ‘You’re here one minute and the next you’re on the other side. We never know when the door is going to open and let us go through.’

Víctor was a man of few words. He walked down the passageway while César was speaking.

‘Sometimes we don’t know what side of the door we’re on.’

He tried to talk to his mother but couldn’t. She had gone off to the hills for a walk and was singing. Her empty arms seemed to be cradling an invisible child.

*Brother, today I am on the house’s stone bench,  
where you have left a bottomless void!  
I remember we used to play at this time, and Mum  
used to brush us: ‘But, children . . .’*

*Now I hide,  
as before, all these evening  
prayers, and I hope you don’t find me.  
In the sitting-room, the hallway, the corridors.  
Later, you hide, and I don’t find you.  
I remember we used make each other cry,  
brother, in that game.*

*Miguel, you hid  
one August night, at daybreak;  
but, instead of hiding laughing, you were sad . . .  
And your twin heart of those past  
evenings has become bored not finding you. And now  
the shadow falls over my soul.*

*Listen, brother, don’t be long  
in coming out. OK? It could upset Mum.*

His old friend, Father Paredes, said a mass for the soul of the deceased at St Augustine’s Church in Trujillo. *Miserere. Miserere Nobis!* It was seven o’ clock in the evening when the ceremony drew to a close and as the priest called out to God César thought rain full of stars would fall from those sad skies, and he felt as if he was drawing towards a fuller understanding of the heart of the night. When – years later – he was arrested in Trujillo, Vallejo was wearing the same black three-piece suit he wore during that mass for the dead, and as he hobbled and was occasionally pushed along by the police officers he imagined that he was walking alongside a beautiful, sad-looking woman. Now that he was remembering all of this he had just witnessed two shadows in combat and saw them in their death throes in the middle of the prison cell. They hadn’t yet reached the depths and harshness of death.

‘This is Hell, sir’, the man beside him explained.

He had waited several hours and had at last worked up the courage to approach the dead bodies. As he came back he told Vallejo in a low tone of voice:

‘They’ve already rifled through their pockets’, motioning with his eyes towards the four inmates who were pretending to be asleep.

‘I don’t know precisely when they did it, they didn’t even leave their shoes behind. But in any case these two are already cold.’

‘Do you know what time it is?’ Vallejo asked.

‘How should I know? You can never be sure of the time in a place like this. Only the insomniacs keep track of the time. They know and they feel everything. They can even sense death as it passes from bunk to bunk, taking our measurements from head to foot.’

Everything smelt of melancholy and disinfectant.

‘They’re already cold’, the man repeated, adding as if talking to himself:

‘I wonder who’s next in line?’



## Blind Santiago is Ringing Six and Already it's Very Dark

Sitting down on the floor with his back to the wall, Vallejo was thinking that maybe he was already dead. He had heard that the recently deceased don't know whether they are still in this life or the next and he guessed that perhaps this was what was happening to him. The sound of his neighbour's voice made him change his mind.

'It wasn't our turn to die tonight', he murmured, before adding: 'It wasn't yet our time.'

He could see him now. He was no longer a frightened painting on the wall. He had his body back. In the darkness his face was a confusion of red lines. None of that caught Vallejo's attention – just his large, shiny white teeth.

'It's cold, isn't it?' the man said. He was trying to make conversation but wasn't getting anywhere. He kept trying,

'And who are you? That is, if you don't mind me asking. Who are you?'

Vallejo's attention was focused on the prisoners huddled up in the corner. Maybe they were asleep but he hadn't heard them snore. Without anyone noticing, even the corpses had snuck in to plunder their possessions.

'My name is César Vallejo.'

'Pleasure to meet you. My name is Napoleón Chanduví but they call me Kills-for-kicks.'

Vallejo almost burst out laughing but managed to contain himself. The nickname didn't suit his neighbour at all. He had cried when the lunatic was brandishing his sledgehammer. He had called out for his mother. He was a coward and he was human. He was friendly and cordial.

'Don't worry, you can laugh if you want.'

Vallejo tried to apologise but the man refused to hear it.

'I'm wondering what brought you here.'

His set of shiny white teeth opened and closed a number of times.

'Call me Napoleón if you prefer. You're a doctor. I imagine you don't like using nicknames.'

Once again his teeth shone and faded in the darkness.

'I wonder what brought you here.'

Before Vallejo could answer, Chanduví warned him: 'You need to watch out for yourself, you know?'

'Watch out for myself? Why?'

‘This is the first circle of Hell, the Cooler. There are three circles of Hell but they never bring people like you here. Someone must be trying to liquidate you. Shortly before you arrived the lunatic was brought here.’

‘The lunatic? The guy with the sledgehammer?’

‘The very same. He was a hitman. Now he’s a dead man.’

‘But I don’t know him...’

‘As I said they brought him to this cell an hour before you arrived. I reckon he had been paid to frighten or maybe kill you.’

‘Do you mean that it was my turn to die?’

‘No, I didn’t mean that.’

‘I don’t understand.’

‘It wasn’t your time. The lunatic had been paid but it wasn’t your time. It wasn’t God’s will.’

It was very cold. All of the prisoners were wearing ponchos that covered their bodies. Chanduví took the blanket that that dead man had been sleeping in and offered it to Vallejo.

‘It’s the only thing they didn’t take away from us. Use it. It stinks but better than freezing to death.’

He explained that the man with the sledgehammer was insane. He had been in prison a long time and had killed a number of prisoners.

‘It’s always the same procedure. He dashes their brains out... I’m sure they gave him the sledgehammer before sending him in here. That’s his weapon of choice... or at least, it was. He was always willing to kill. He used to hear voices, you know?’

Vallejo didn’t want to listen any more.

‘A woman used to speak to him. She used to chase him. She flew inside his head. One time I had to sleep in the same cell as him and I couldn’t close my eyes. The guy was talking with that woman all the time. Sometimes they argued and he would tell her to shut up. Then he would scream for forgiveness.’

Vallejo was gobsmacked. His interlocutor interpreted this as indicating he was suspicious.

‘Oh no! Don’t you worry about me. They took me to Trujillo Public Prison six years ago and I haven’t been sentenced yet. I can’t remember anymore whether I’m guilty or innocent of the crime I’m accused of. But that’s normal here. What isn’t normal is bringing doctors here. It isn’t normal for them to bring people like you here.’

‘And what about you? Why are you in the Cooler?’

‘That’s strange as well. I’m the prison carpenter. Somebody stole a few litres of lacquer.’

‘Lacquer?’

‘Yes, lacquer. You must be wondering why. If you apply some lemon juice to the lacquer the varnish comes up to the surface; the alcohol is then separated. The prisoners use it to get drunk. A guard probably sold it and then blamed it on them to avoid an investigation. That’s why they brought me to the Cooler.’

‘Are you going to make a complaint?’

‘Make a complaint? Who to? No, no way. I get on very well with the guards. When they’re certain that I’m not going to talk – perhaps tomorrow or the day after – they’re going to release me from Hell. They’ll get you out of here as well. When they’ve taken your statement they’ll give you a better room than this one. I’m sure of that.’

‘And how about the two dead people?’



‘It won’t be long before they are taken away. The guards will pretend that they’re looking into it but really they don’t care. They’ll ask us some questions. But we haven’t seen anything, have we? You haven’t seen anything, my friend Vallejo. Nothing at all.’

He was right. In the darkness he hadn’t seen anything.

‘You didn’t hear anything either. Like all of these other gentlemen here you were asleep. Agreed?’

Vallejo agreed. The man had a calming presence about him. Vallejo wanted to know why they called him Kills-for-Kicks but he didn’t dare. The man guessed what he was thinking.

‘Names sometimes don’t tell us anything. I was once called Marcos Quesquén, based on a gang leader who took a shine to me. He was illiterate and I wrote his letters for him. He realised that I wasn’t just a piece of prison meat and as a joke he called me Kills-for-Kicks. One day Don Marcos started a rumour that I used to kill people in the dark before sucking their blood. He created an aura of infamy around me. He did it to protect me. From then on the rest of the prisoners began to respect me.’

César look at him more attentively but didn’t interrupt him. Those teeth of his moved and shone as he narrated his story.

‘If you want to know why I ended up in prison it’s going to be difficult for me to explain. Before this happened I worked at the cathedral and I got on ever so well with the priests. That was my line of work for more than ten years. One night, however, the police came to my house looking for me. If I remember rightly they had accused me of stealing a few colonial paintings from the church and, with no proof whatsoever, they had me thrown in here. Two years later they found out that the paintings had gone to a wealthy family who had paid somebody to steal them. So the priests pressed for my release. I wasn’t out very long, though, because, two weeks later, they arrested me and locked me up in here again and, it’s the honest truth, I can no longer remember why. You must remember the golden rule of being banged up: it’s easy to get in but bloody hard to get out.’

Vallejo’s eyes could see much better now. He could make out perfectly the red lines on his neighbour’s face. Now he could see with precision the crow’s feet, the wrinkles on his cheeks, the vertical brow lines and the shape of his ears. His immense teeth then uttered the following words:

‘Don’t forget to visit me. Come by my shop.’

It wasn’t as dark anymore. When the day broke the door was opened and two policemen entered. They were not surprised to find the dead bodies nor did they interrogate anyone. They offered a steaming pot to those who were alive and carried away the dead.

‘It’s coffee, Mr Vallejo. Have some. It will do you some good.’

They drank in silence, before Napoleón piped up: ‘Do you believe in destiny, Mr Vallejo?’

In the daylight his teeth didn’t shine. His eyes looked large and alert as if his very life depended on Vallejo’s answer. Vallejo recalled how he often used to talk about destiny with his friends. He found it strange to talk about such things in these circumstances. Chanduví didn’t wait for his reply.

‘Destiny, my friend, is a limited stack of cards. Six or seven. You’re dealt them when you’re young. They are then either lost or re-arranged. In the future those six or seven cards appear again and come together and they are always the same ones.’

Vallejo found it strange to hear the man talking in this way. He seemed like an actor playing a role that didn’t suit him.

‘Like that white rose, young man’, the man puckered his lips and gestured towards the rose Vallejo was wearing in his button-hole when he was arrested. It now lay on the floor.

‘It must have fallen out last night and you’re not going to pick it up but one day it will return to you.’

Vallejo looked at the rose. It still gave the impression that it was hovering with a white light over the surface of Hell. He wanted to pick it up but this idea disinclined him to do so. The rose and the light began to fade away slowly.

In Hell, on the first day, César thought of a poem but couldn’t write it out since he didn’t have a pencil and paper. He memorised it and wrote it down a few days later. It evoked the image of a farmer he had known as a child.

*What time will the grown-ups  
be back?  
Blind Santiago is ringing six  
And already it’s very dark.*

*Mother said she wouldn’t be long...*

Santiago, as he was called, had been the bell ringer for the city that shared his name during the whole of Vallejo’s childhood. While it was pitch black he would head to the church tower before waking the world with the racket of the Angelus bells. He acted as sacristan at mass and nobody who didn’t already know could tell that he was deprived of his sight. Since he couldn’t read Father Hipólito would read the Holy Gospel out aloud beside him. That was why he sounded like a religious text when he spoke.

He had gone blind at the age of two during a terrible fire which destroyed dozens of houses in Santiago de Chuco. His parents died there and when he was pulled out he was very badly burnt. The town doctor offered him emergency treatment but said that his pupils had been damaged and that the child would never be able to see again. An aunt and uncle of his, his only remaining family, took him in to live with them, and a few months later he recovered from his burns with only a star-shaped scar remaining on his forehead. Perhaps it was the star of misfortune because, when he reached five years of age, his aunt and uncle died from a plague epidemic and the child ended up alone in a world he couldn’t see.

Despite the widespread poverty in the town the people there took it upon themselves to help him and Santiago slept in the house of a family that could only offer him a bed. He received a nutritious breakfast at school and arrived at six o’ clock on the dot to have his afternoon supper with the Vallejo family. When he was a teenager he transported weights for an old carpenter whose surname was Alcántara, helped Father Hipólito Paredes in his parish, rang the bell for mass, ran errands for different families and helped the cemetery guard dig the graves. He got to know and recognise all of the town’s people by their voices. Children thought he spoke to birds.

On his twentieth birthday something miraculous occurred. He was going into the carpenter’s house when one of the roof beams came loose and started to fall in the direction of the carpenter who, as well as being old and deaf, was too focused on his work to see what was about to fall on top of him.

Santiago was entering the house at that time and he heard the sound coming from the roof and, as if he could see, he turned his head towards it. For a fraction of a second he was able to see. He jumped up and threw himself towards Alcántara and managed to push him out of harm’s

way. The beam broke Alcántara's worktable but it didn't kill the carpenter as it would have done. Alcántara later recalled how he saw Death at that moment smiling at him and signalling to him that it wasn't yet his turn to be taken. He wanted to know if Santiago had seen it as well.

'Did you see it? Did you see Death?'

The carpenter realised he was asking a pointless question since if a blind man can't see what is in front of him, how can he possibly see Death?

'What is seeing?'

Perhaps Santiago asked that question or perhaps he only thought it. Meanwhile the carpenter's nasal voice began to turn into a silhouette and then into a frightened old man.

The world then began to acquire for Santiago the square shapes of man-made things. Before his eyes the walls appeared and then the chairs took shape. Doors, houses and dogs came into existence. Trees were born. The church then emerged. The arch of heaven was invented. Immediately a line began to incessantly trace the shapes of mountains, valleys and their abyss against a blue background and, finally, the voices he had heard his whole life began to transform themselves into the schoolmaster, children, old people and young, skinny people and fat, bearded men and beautiful women. It was midday and as the sun weighed down on Santiago de Chuco, the young man's eyes began to bathe themselves in a colour that he hadn't imagined in his wildest dreams. It was the light that shines on everyone who enters this world, except the blind.

Alcántara, who was beside him, said he no longer needed to take him by the hand like a guide. He didn't know what to think or what to believe.

'What did you feel?'

'What should I feel?'

'I don't know but I imagine you must feel something like when you experience a miracle.'

'What's a miracle?'

'Something similar to what happens when you can see from one moment to the next. Do you believe in miracles?'

'What are you on about?'

'Do you think this is a miracle?'

'Do you?'

'You're the one who should believe it or rather should know what it is.'

'I'm willing to believe or know anything you wish', Santiago said.

'Do you believe that God created the world?'

'Imagine that!'

They walked towards the main square. It was there that the carpenter left Santiago and from that moment on, without anyone to guide him, the blind man Santiago walked, danced, and he even danced and flew in the same way he did in the dreams he had had previously. That afternoon César Vallejo, still a boy of eight years old, saw him arrive at his house for supper.

'Blind Santiago is ringing six', he told himself as he always did.

But this time the blind man didn't approach the table with vacant eyes gazing towards the sky nor with the palms of his hands feeling through the air. He didn't move slowly either nor did he need to feel the objects around him. He headed straight towards the chair where the father and head of the family sat and took his hand to kiss it. He then went to the kitchen and hugged María, crying as he did so.

'Mamá María', he said to her, 'can I help you with the plates?'

He had always called her *mamá*. Now he could see her for the first time.

They didn't ask him how the miracle occurred since Don Francisco de Paula Vallejo had brought his children up to be discreet but Santiago was able to recognise them by the voices he had heard every day at six in the afternoon.

'Little Aguedita... little Nativa... little Miguel... and you must be little César Abraham. You're the smallest but you have the deepest voice.'

People in the town didn't ask him questions either because they all knew that great or terrible things had no explanation. They carried on calling him Blind Santiago, however, and some said that as well as having recovered his sight, he could also speak to the dead and although he was illiterate he could read the book of destinies.

For his part the young man Santiago carried on with his daily activities as if nothing had happened and, every day, he rang six at the Vallejo house. When dinner was finished and when the grown-ups had gone off to attend some meeting Santiago got the children playing for a bit and then he would tell them stories he had learned during his prolonged period of blindness. In those stories spectres lurked in the corridors, floated around the bedrooms, hid in the attic or ran away frightened, or spooked people in the patios of the homes they haunted.

*Aguadita, Nativa, Miguel,  
keep away from where  
tolling spectres have just passed  
Twanging out their memories.*

Some said back then that if Santiago had been blind for so long there must have been a reason. Maybe he could perceive what other people who live in broad daylight don't experience. Perhaps his soul continued wandering in the darkness and this was what allowed him to ponder and guess what existed beyond distance and beyond what the eye could perceive.

They asked about the whereabouts of some cows that had gone missing from their pen and Santiago answered that they could well be in the north or in the south and if they were up north they could be found far away from the river or they could be advancing up it in order not to leave footprints. And the owners would follow either of these routes and find what they were looking for. The same thing happened when young girls would go missing at night. The blind man would calm the parents down, assuring them that either their daughter would come home full of remorse or she would come back with a baby boy or girl in her arms, and one of these things always ended up happening.

Santiago was the adult figure who took care of the children on their walks through the fields. One afternoon they were some distance away from the city when César fell into the river by accident. Santiago jumped into the water after him. To reach the child he had to swim for a long time but the current took him away every time he got close. Finally he managed to grab hold of Vallejo's arm and pull him back to the river bank. There they met up with the rest of the Vallejo siblings but also with a few prangsters who had hidden Santiago's clothes.

'Where are my clothes?'

'Clothes? Clothes, you say? We haven't seen any round here.'

'Hey', the other one said, 'isn't that Blind Santiago?' They were from another town and didn't realise that he had recovered his sight.

'Yeah, it's him. But now he sees things that don't exist. He's asking about his clothes.'

'Blind people always make stuff up. Since their eyes are empty they have to see things that don't exist or hear things that don't make any noise.'

‘Hey, if I tell you where your clothes are what will you give me in return?’

Santiago didn’t answer.

‘Answer a few questions and I’ll tell you. Do blind people cry?’

‘They cry. Everyone cries. That’s what you live for.’

‘But I guess they don’t have tears, do they?’

‘I can’t remember now.’

‘I can’t remember where I saw your clothes either.’

‘Hey’, the other joker said, ‘do blind people dream?’

‘Yes, they do dream.’

‘And how do they know when they are asleep?’

‘When in the dream they meet people who aren’t really people.’

‘Are you insulting my intelligence?’

The blind man shrugged his shoulders: ‘Maybe you’re right. Maybe blind people are never asleep or awake. Maybe they’re a voice without a body and everyone else is made up. You, for example, are just a suspicion. A rumour.’

He always spoke in that tone of voice. Not even he knew why he spoke like that. Maybe blind people speak like that because they know there are no witnesses and that nothing is real. For them the only thing that is real are the voices with which they speak and which they hear, when frightened.

One of the men began to panic and was about to give Santiago his clothes back when the other held him back. He took Santiago’s hand and ran it across his face.

‘I’m not a rumour.’

‘You’re a face and.... ? Are you sure you’re anything more than that?’

When they gave him back his clothes the blind man carried on talking. He told them that in his darkness he had learned to see.

‘In darkness man is more man’, he continued. ‘He can invent more worlds’, he argued.

Then the pranksters left and the children, including César, closed their eyes and listened to Santiago as he said that light is a man-made invention because the earth and the other planets groped about in a pitch-black universe. But that light has to exist and must reside in the deepest depths of the hearts of men. Someday we will know more about this light and about ourselves but it will be when we have closed our eyes forever.

Santiago might have been able to see again, the neighbours argued, but by opening so many books of destiny sometimes those with sight forget to read their own book. That is what happened to Santiago when he decided to move away to Quiruvilca. ‘Now that you can see’, they had told him, ‘you should go to school so you can learn to read. Who knows? Maybe you’ll learn fast and move out to the coast. Maybe you’ll end up in Trujillo seminary and become a priest like Father Hipólito.’

But the blind man who was able to see brushed aside these tempting possibilities and answered kindly that he might study one day but that right now he felt too old to learn to read and that he was thinking about earning a bit of money and afterwards who knows? ‘How do I make money? And how?’ How? Easy: he’d move to Quiruvilca and from under the ground gold would call his name and he would strike it rich, he would become very rich and would return to Santiago to help those suffering from poverty.

Throughout his life César Vallejo would recall the blind man who had regained his sight and who rang six in the afternoon and would know that all of that was a mystery but nobody wanted to see it that way. Just being on his earth and in this life was itself a mystery.

Finally, early one morning, Blind Santiago got dressed with no sense of urgency, put on a pair of boots bigger than his feet, put his belongings in a black suitcase, fastened a leather water canteen on his belt and, now out of the house, went all the way up Columbus street towards the town's exit through which people leave in search of their dreams, and he followed that street all the way to Quiruvilca.

*Blind Santiago is ringing six  
And already it's very dark*

Because of his permanent isolation the poet couldn't tell whether it was day or night, whether he was asleep or awake, whether he was in prison or already dead. Maybe he convinced himself that dreams speak to us but we don't understand them. Maybe he thought that the language of dreams is the language we shall speak when we are dead. Maybe he was already dead and didn't know this yet. His body was motionless but he was trembling on the inside. He could feel his own respiration. He thought he heard bells and decided that he was delirious. He worked out that delirium is merely a dizzy, ferocious memory, nothing more. That memory took him right back to his childhood.



## Quiruvilca: The Miners Came Out of the Mine Climbing Over Their Future Ruins

Like a gust of wind the memory of youth swept into Hell, reminding all of its presence. The days of his youth had been piling up next to their door. Instead of water it rained days and weeks. César Abraham looked in all directions and saw only placid colours, innocent skies, reddish roofs and yellow, sleepy grass. At other times the town bore a peaceful white colour like that of sheep and donkeys. Then he turned his gaze towards the black stones and lazy, round, copper-coloured mountains and he never tired of thinking that his land, albeit somewhat quiet, carried all of the world's colours.

César saw his father, first as a farmworker; then as an unqualified lawyer defending the poor in court and, finally, as district chief governor. He thought about it every day recalling how he went with staff in hand from his house to the government building. He was filled with pride at school when Don Francisco de Paula, representing the government, led the people with hand on heart as the national flag was raised for the singing of the national anthem. Those days came to an end at the door of 96 Columbus Street where the Vallejo family lived and it was time for César to leave in order to continue his secondary education. Before dying the schoolmaster Arias had asked Don Francisco de Paula to do all he could to make sure this happened and, one morning in 1905, young César left for Huamachuco to continue his studies.

The governor asked some mule drivers to take his son to the province capital. Egberto Longaray, the group's leader, promised he would take good care of the youngster although the journey would take a few days as they had to buy and sell some cattle.

'You're going to be a mule driver. You'll learn what a journey really is. That's what we men are born for. To talk to our journeys', his father said. He then gave his mule a good whip of his lash and the animal set out on its way.

There were not many towns but there were odd houses scattered here and there and, at that moment of his life, César learned what it meant to wander through the night. Merchants and beasts moved like huge flocks of migrating birds that darken the afternoon sky at the beginning of winter: resting and floating above the clouds, they fly off for a few hours and then return to their paths. The child was fastened to the animal and at night he thought that they were following a drifting star. Finally, as he would recount later on, he would come to the conclusion that men have the same nature as stars. On the road to Huamachuco, amidst the Milky Way, an immense aura crowned that procession of horsemen, mules and sombrero hats.

An old horse fell over a precipice and it took the mule drivers a few hours to get to the bottom to retrieve it. Sitting down like the little horse that accompanies the boy Jesus on altars,

the old horse was staring death in the face. It didn't complain but big, black tears ran down from its immense eyes. The man who had been its owner managed to get to him and gave him a reprimanding gesture. He then approached Longaray to tell him that he was going to put the horse down.

He went up to the animal and, avoiding its gaze, readied the pistol and pointed it at its right temple. He couldn't bring himself to shoot. He knew that the horse was suffering immensely but he didn't want to upset the supreme order of nature which controls the destinies of man and animal and which also controls how long we have in this life. Finally out of the gun came a star and also a bullet. The sound echoed from mountain to mountain to let God know that one of His creatures had returned to Him.

But instead of staying put, with the barrel of the gun pointed at its temple, the horse got up pitifully and started to walk. It advanced slowly towards one of those twinkling stars that carry souls away. César didn't move. The mule drivers looked the other way and one of them devoutly crossed himself. When the horse disappeared around the corner no-one dared to follow it: they knew it was dead and that you should never disturb the peace of the dead.

'What do you say to that?'

'What can I say? It's a soul!'

The mule drivers argued. One of them insisted that at that moment the soul of a dead Christian had possessed the horse. The other was convinced that the soul itself held the bones and joints together. The latter recalled how he had seen the souls of other dead horses: it was quite frightening but sometimes quite pleasant as happens with human beings. He said that if you could understand the souls of horses you could understand other human beings and all the horses in the universe.

It wasn't so easy to travel from town to town. César learnt this from the storms he encountered on the journey and, when the storms subsided, he could see others about to arrive. The darkest clouds moved slowly across the sky and cast themselves over them like a bittersweet shadow. That was what happened once and they had to camp under the overhang of a rock. From there they admired the blue halo emanating from every animal, man and thing on the planet. Underneath them the grazing land was covered by a carpet of purple. Further down towards the east everything was a flashing black line of birds that looked like they wanted to flee from the world.

They set up camp when they thought they were close to their destination but they were wrong. It's common to get lost in the Andes even if you have the best guides and that is what happened to them. Night had no end point, no death, resurrection, peace nor rest. They got lost a few times and the young boy thought they would never get there. His eyes reddened when told that they had arrived at the mines of Quiruvilca.

Quiruvilca? Was that black world Quiruvilca? There was a succession of mud huts aligned straight down the middle of the high plateau. Was that bunch of smoke-stained walls Quiruvilca? Maybe it was and maybe it wasn't. They went down the edge of a large, dark crater and one of the mule drivers told the boy that this was how the land looked when all of the gold was extracted. He wondered how far the crater went and thought that it led to the other side of the world but he didn't ask. He preferred to stare at the sky when Longaray, who had been travelled silently by his side, spoke to him.

'We're here.'

'We're here?'

'We're here! Of course we're here!'



They arrived at night-time. The earth parted at their feet although sometimes it hid behind the clouds and the darkness. The sky was a field of smooth lead. There were no signs from up above that the sun or the moon had once been there. A wind was gushing that seemed to be blown by wolves. It tore its way through houses and fields. It was very cold. They went towards the main square. They stopped there and decided to set up camp. Nobody was sure whether people actually lived in that hell. César would always recall how the cattle owner covered him with a blanket.

‘Rest my boy, rest and don’t ever remember this.’

He would also remember how he once dreamt he had been flying through those dark streets with Jesus by his side. The following morning, when the mule drivers were about to get up, something happened which told them that they were not going to be able to move so easily. Two men were pointing their guns at them.

‘Who are you?’ a shadowy figure asked.

No-one answered.

‘What do you want?’ Longaray asked.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’

As day broke it became clear that the shadowy figure was a man with bronze teeth. He pointed the barrel of his gun at the mule driver’s head:

‘I want to know who you are.’

The mule driver realised that these people were from the Supreme Government.

‘Mule drivers’, he responded.

‘Mule drivers?’

‘Mule drivers.’

‘Yeah right, I’ve heard that one before.’

‘Are you looking for anyone?’

‘I ask the questions here!’

The mule driver looked at the group of police officers and realised the man with the bronze teeth was serious. He asked him: ‘What do you want? What is it you want?’

‘Nothing. I don’t want to beat around the bush.’

‘No beating around the bush?’ Longaray pondered, ‘OK, I get it now. How much?’

‘Now we understand each other. How much, you ask? How much? One cow or two. Two is better. Or how about three?’

The man smiled, took the gun away from the mule driver’s temple, pointed towards the sky and pulled the trigger.

‘Maybe now we understand each other.’

After negotiating, where Longaray showed his ability to deal with members of the government, all he needed to do for the man with the bronze teeth to calm down was to give him two cows.

‘Fine, fine, but don’t hang around too long.’

The mule driver suggested that they needed at least two days to rest a little and to buy some provisions in town.

‘Two days?’

‘Two.’

‘One day. This time tomorrow you need to be long gone from here.’

Quiruvilca had enjoyed great prosperity in 1905. The price of gold and silver shot up on the international metal market. Thanks to that the dealers could work the London Stock

Exchange to their advantage. Although it wasn't registering any income for the State, the government considered mining a source of national pride. Schoolchildren were taught to admire the efforts of generous foreign businessmen who were helping Peru to progress. US businesses had received these lands for free from the Peruvian government. They didn't even pay a nominal fee for the mines but, even so, state officials were satisfied. According to the President of the Republic, thanks to the mines, Peru's name was written in gold letters throughout the world.

The government in Lima had the mines guarded by an ample supply of police. It used to be said that social peace was a given but, from time to time, the army would have to intervene. That happened when indigenous people refused to work or sell their lands to mining magnates. Something similar happened that very night when the terrified travellers realised that they were in the middle of a black hole. The prosperity of the mines attracted all sorts of people. As well as the two Americans who worked in the administration, a number of merchants from the coast had set up groceries and clothes shops. Having been thrown out of other places, they came in search of work. Those who arrived at the mines were generally young, unskilled labourers who were paid in kind with food and coca leaves. Many fell ill and died or aged prematurely and were thrown onto the street when deemed surplus to requirements.

As night fell on Quiruvilca beggars came out. Dirty children, prostitutes and pimps encircled the travellers asking for hand-outs or offering sexual services. The cattle merchant had prohibited the mule drivers from entering the town bars.

César would forever remember the man who had only his torso and two arms and used a pitiful looking cart to get around. Further ahead, the blind were gathering at a small church. He would also remember a strange woman babbling in the middle of the night.

They bought everything they would need. They checked in at an old hotel and heated up some water so they could have a bath. They ate three pieces of goat's meat and a piece of pork at an expensive price at a dusty little restaurant. Early in the morning the wind was blowing and there was no sunlight but there was light, perhaps one of those ghostly lights that are attracted by terror or the misfortunes of men.

They ran into the police. Their chief winked at the animals' owner, smiled at him with his bronze teeth but then gestured to him to leave as soon as possible.

They left Quiruvilca at three o'clock in the morning but not before passing by the church to pray an Our Father. That was a mistake. One of the side doors of the church was open and through there they entered not knowing what they would find. The ghostly light showed two or three dozen human beings lying there with their skulls like incandescent melons. They had been murdered. The head of the group ordered his men to leave the church and César could make out an old Indian woman on her knees on one of the front pews. He thought he could give her his arm, lift her up and get her out of there. When he tried, the woman's head rolled across the floor. It had been cut off with a machete.

Among the heap of people there were a few who were just about still alive. One of them, a very strong young man, managed to get up and walk as if he were heading towards the altar to receive the bread of communion. But, just as he did so, the chief of police approached him from behind, lifted his rifle and finished him off with a shot in the back of the neck.

'You? What are you doing here? I told you to leave within a day. You shouldn't be in this church nor should you be sticking your noses in government business.'

Without any preamble he proceeded to explain to them what had been happening:

'We had to liquidate a group of subversive Indians for defying the law of military conscription. They had been brought to the mines because that's where the progress of this

country lies. But they refused to work because they are anti-Peruvian. Or perhaps anarchist saboteurs. They didn't understand that if there are no people to work in the mines, they have to be brought in by force so foreign investors are not put off from doing business here. Peru is a beggar sitting on top of a goldmine. Peru is a rich country but the average Peruvian is lazy and needs to be made to extract from the mines what is his. We don't just recruit for war. We also recruit conscripts to serve the nation in peacetime.

As the police offer was saying all of this he had his rifle pointed at the group but maybe he was tired of killing as he suddenly raised his weapon up and ordered:

'Get out!'

He repeated the command, adding that no-one needed to know what had happened.

The men didn't need to hear it repeated but the officer repeated it anyway insisting that nobody should know about this and that government orders must be upheld.

'Get out!'

The men proceeded to leave, each one accompanied by an animal and César walked beside the horse as if asking it to explain to him what was happening. Quite soon afterwards night fell, darkening the sky and filling it with stars and César wondered to himself if that was the human condition and if there was any end to all the world's suffering. Just ahead the stars formed an arch in the sky, shining and fading endlessly in the darkness, showing glimpses of other worlds forever deprived of people and of God.

A week before ending up in Trujillo prison Vallejo had confided to his friend Antenor Orrego:

'A novel of mine is set in Quiruvilca.'

'Have you written it?'

'No, but I've lived through it.'

'So you should write it then.'

'I'd be crying as I write it, I would have to be screaming until the angel choirs can hear me but when I think about Quiruvilca I fear the angels as well.'

Antenor put his fears at rest:

'Don't worry. The books are already written – the right people will write them when it is their time.'

'I would have to sit in front of a typewriter and begin with a sentence like:

'We have received the following telegram from the Department Senior Prefect: Subprefect. Require quota of blood by end of month without fail. Signed Prefect.'

And the quota of blood will come from Indians forced to work as part of their obligatory military service. What do they know about obligatory military service? What possible conception do they have of notions like fatherland, government, public order or national security? '

'Start the novel right away', Antenor said.

'I'll start when I'm free from this persecution. I'll begin with the law. It has to be part of the novel:

'Article 46: Peruvian citizens between the ages of 19 and 22 who fail to register for obligatory military service in their respective regions will be considered as enlisted.

Article 47: Those enlisted will be pursued and obliged by force to carry out their military service upon arrest and will not be able to exercise the rights or mitigating circumstances accorded to the rest of the conscripts.'

César Vallejo spoke with his eyes and by his eyes he was heard.

‘Ok, that’s enough’, Antenor was alarmed to see him like this. ‘It’s not good for you to dwell on those memories.’

‘But if I don’t remember them now I’ll remember them at night. I’ll remember those voices for the rest of my life.’

‘Voices?’

‘My heart hears them as if it were listening to the voices of the saints but it’s a voice that comes from a very different heaven. So many of the dead speak to me and recount their deaths; what do they want from me? What do they want from me? Maybe they want to live on earth again. And I think they do live on earth, they live in our dreams. It’s hard work being dead.’



## Dreaming about a Round School

‘César Vallejo! Get up! You must leave.’

The door opened with a bang. The light flooded in and, behind it, barely two shapes were visible. The prisoner took a long time obeying the order because he had been sitting on the ground for a number of hours and it was not easy for him to get up. Then the shape that had shouted came into the cell and took him by his right arm and dragged him outside. After being dragged for a few metres Vallejo managed to make do by himself and move forward.

It all began to change at that moment. He moved immediately in the light of day but he couldn't know what time it was or estimate how much time had elapsed since they had imprisoned him. He had had many dreams in the cell although in dreams and in ravings all life memories slip away in minutes. Besides he was not sure of anything anymore, not even of his own existence. Going in and out of hell was like being there and at the same time not quite being there. Two silent guards were escorting him. They made him go through a wide but empty courtyard. They moved to another building inside the prison, they went up two flights of concrete stairs, crossed a steel door and went through a corridor. After that a man in uniform told him to go in, take a seat and wait in what looked like the prison office.

He was left waiting there for at least one hour. Eventually an old hunchbacked man appeared carrying an enormous notebook under his arm and a pencil behind his ear.

‘Vallejo, César?’

He gave no reply. He was very hungry. His sense of smell and his sight had become sharper. The table in front of him seemed to be changing colours. He thought he could see little stars in the air. He had no voice left. The old man sat at a colonial desk of dark wood. His hair, combed back with oil, was shining and it smelled like a fresh cut. There was no other furniture apart from his desk and the bench where Vallejo was sitting.

Behind the man there hung an illustrated calendar with a little chubby Arabic odalisque. The old man pointed at it with his forefinger, winked and smiled faintly and yet devilishly. An opaque veil covered the woman's body. The only visible part of her body was a fleshy cheek, some long eyelashes painted green and the naked ankle of her right leg adorned with three rings of solid gold. The calendar showed the month of November.

‘How time flies! Doesn't it? The year is already at its end’, he remarked and stopped winking. He became solemn.

‘The year 1920 is about to end. The year 1921 will follow. When do you think the world will end?’

He didn't wait for a reply. He opened the notebook he was carrying. He brought the inkwell closer. He picked up a pen and put the quill inside. Vallejo couldn't understand why he needed to keep the pencil between his temple and his ear. He never found out.

'I'm asking you if you're Vallejo, César.'

'César Vallejo? Yes. I'm César Vallejo.'

The old man left the quill to rest in the inkpot. He examined him closely.

'You don't look dangerous', he said. He smiled.

'They brought you in on a charge of arson, right?'

He didn't let the prisoner reply.

'Good heavens! This is serious. Arson! Hey! They arrested you yesterday. Why on earth didn't they bring you here? I'm the governor, the highest authority in this prison, like saying the owner of the hotel. Every prisoner must be brought before me so that I can take down their personal details.'

César Vallejo tried to make himself comfortable on the narrow wooden bench. He wanted to lean back but he couldn't reach the back of the bench. Because of his posture, sitting with his hands on the table, he looked as if he were paying homage to the grumpy little man in front of him.

'May I know where they've kept you? ... Yes sir. I'm asking you. It says here that you were taken in yesterday at six o'clock. It's already two o'clock today. Where have you been all this time?'

The poet was surprised to hear himself reply:

'In Hell.'

The governor looked at him, astonished.

'What? Say that again. I didn't hear.'

'In Hell.'

The old man fell silent and Vallejo explained:

'In Hell. They took me to the Cooler.'

More silence. The governor looked over the prisoner's head. He took the pencil from behind his ear and began picking his teeth. Finally he put the pencil down and hit the table. He went from wrath to a conciliating gesture.

'Mr Vallejo, I think you must be mistaken. In this prison there is no Cooler nor any place which goes by the name of Hell.'

Vallejo began to think he was dreaming.

'I understand what you mean though. You're an educated man and must not say those infamous words again.. Where you were taken was the Quiet Room.'

This time Vallejo wanted to speak but the old man didn't let him.

'They kept you nearly an entire day there. The prison police must have forgotten about you.'

Again he smiled: 'And yet you're still alive!'

He became serious.

'I'm Cipriano Barba, the prison governor. I'm a civilian, not a policeman. You need fear nothing from me. The first thing I'm going to do with you is to open a file on you.'

'A file on me?'

Barba talked looking at the palm of his hands most of the time as if he were reading the future in his hands.

‘Yes, a file on you.’ His gaze moved from the palm of his left hand to his right hand. He didn’t seem to notice anything untoward and so he raised his gaze to determine the prisoner’s physical features. He asked him his age, his place of birth and his level of education. He made him stand with his back against the wall which had the measurement of one metre painted across it. Finally he wrote a paragraph and read it aloud:

‘Record no. 2

File 387. César Vallejo entered on 6 November 1920 as a result of his involvement in the incidents that occurred in Santiago de Chuco on 1 August.’

‘It’s quite well written, isn’t it? ... Now, affiliation. Affiliation... Affiliation.. You said you were born in Santiago, is that right? ... Beautiful place...but so cold!’

‘Affiliation: native of Santiago de Chuco

Age: 28 years old’

‘And where it says race, what shall I put? ... Let’s see, let’s see. Let’s see, stand sideways by the errr, by the window... Err, err.’

Vallejo found it difficult to follow his directions as the old man didn’t enunciate his words clearly. Besides he was eating bread with pork.

‘It’s stuffed pork. I like pork like that. I don’t know what concoction they use for the sauce but it turns out really tasty. Would you like to try a bite?’

Vallejo shook his head and the old man choked on the bit of bread he had just offered him.

‘Just outside the prison is the Buenos Aires Café. Have you been? They make the best turkey and the tastiest stuffed pork sandwiches in Trujillo. You’ll have to try them when you get out. That’s if you do get out, of course.’

Then, without pausing, he wrote:

‘Race: mixed

Face: aquiline

Colour: olive...’

- Marital status: marital status?

‘Single.’

‘Single? Did you say you’re single? Makes sense! If you were married you wouldn’t be meddling in politics. Politics can be good and then again it can be bad. You have to stay with the winners, keep your nose clean and don’t stick your neck out.... No, if you keep your eye open you can definitely see what’s round the corner!’

‘How tall are you? ... Stand against the wall again. Yes, like that.’

‘Height: 170cm.’

‘Neither tall nor short. The prisoners here are not usually like that. They’re little Indians, almost midgets. A degenerate race, don’t you think? ... Last month, they sent us a monster of a nigger. He was more than two metres tall but he had a voice like a little child. You know, those are the worst ones. Me and the guards couldn’t sleep a wink.. that’s until some bright spark came up with the idea of binging him in the Quiet Room.. Three days later we found him torn to pieces.. Isn’t it better this way? Those antisocials are better dead than alive.’

The governor took some more bread out of his pocket and put it into his mouth. ‘Mmm, this is much easier.’ He went back to writing without stopping:

Hair: Black

Distinguishing features: None.

Forehead: Wide  
Eyebrows: Bushy  
Eyes: Brown  
Nose: Aquiline  
Mouth: Protruding  
Lips: Thin  
Beard: Thick

‘Education? ... Professional, right? Let’s put ‘Higher’ here. Naturally, Higher Education. The truth is, I don’t understand how an educated man like you could get into such trouble.’

He wrote:

‘Education: higher

Ears: big’

‘I was forgetting about the ears. Imagine! Are you happy with this description?’

In reply to the old man’s comment Vallejo moved his hand across his face. It astonished him that the governor described him as someone with a thick beard. He didn’t think so much time had passed since they had detained him.

The old man treated him kindly.

‘You don’t need to worry. As I’ve already told you, I’m the governor here; and not one of the officers. They take care of the prison. The civilians run it. I’m wondering, though, why they kept you for so long in the cell.’

He stood up. César thought that they would take him back to the Quiet Room.

The old man stooped down even more and seemed to read his mind.

‘No. From now on you’ll stay in a normal cell. I’ll have to find it first though. I’ll look for one with not too many inmates - people you can trust and who are not going to harm you. I’ll find one. You’ll have to wait a while.’

The governor stood up again: ‘I’m sorry but there are no books here for your enjoyment. Please do make yourself at home though. You may sit on my chair if you wish.’

He moved his face to look again at the odalisque in the calendar. He noticed a wooden bookcase with a heap of sealed papers, inkwells, towels and a broken alarm clock.

‘Hey!’ he approached the bookcase and picked up some creased leaflets:

‘Look at what I’ve found here! A collection of Bristol almanacs! Take them! You can read the predictions of past eclipses as well as the eclipses which will take place before the year ends.’

Vallejo felt confused by so much friendliness. The old man came closer to him. He got close to his back and whispered: ‘Your friend Antenor Orrego is concerned about you. He knows me.’

He patted Vallejo on the shoulder. He went back to his seat and opened the huge notebook where he had noted the poet’s details.

‘There are too many strange elements. Firstly they hide you and I’m not even told you simply arrived at the wrong place at the wrong time. Afterwards, without my permission, they put you in the Quiet Room. Only the really dangerous criminals are put there when they are causing problems, so that they can meditate on it or, better, so that they can learn their lesson...’

César closed his eyes and put his hands on the table.

‘And they even put shackles on you!...’, he stopped to read the book and went on talking:

‘The judge who gave the order of imprisonment is Dr Elías Iturri. So strange!’



‘Strange? Why do you think it’s strange?’

‘Finally you say something!... It’s strange because Dr Iturri was never a judge.’

‘They appointed him to the post *ad hoc*. The Higher Court appointed him to work on this trial entirely’, Vallejo explained but the governor paid no attention.

‘I only know Dr Iturri as lawyer for the Casagrande estate. Every time he’s been here it’s been to condemn in court workers accused by the estate of being anarchists and Bolsheviks. He always wanted them to receive the harshest treatment. Don’t tell me you’re an anarchist! Mmm... No, sorry, you might be a politician but you can’t be an anarchist.’

He didn’t give Vallejo a chance to take part in his reasoning. He got up from the table in a hurry.

‘You stay in my office. I’m going. I’ll be back later and I’ll give you your definitive, new location.’

‘Where you are sitting now, opposite the window, there’s a nice view of the prison. Have a look at it. Don’t you think it looks like a school?’

Vallejo obeyed. He turned to look at the prison courtyard and it really did look like the school where he had studied. He went back to the memories of that school in his mind.

A house as round as a globe. The National College of San Nicolás in Huamachuco was not a round-shaped building although César Vallejo occasionally described it as such. Nevertheless it was the biggest house he had ever seen until then. Compared with the school centre in his village the college’s classrooms in the provincial capital were enormous and the windows seemed to look out onto every side of the world.

In the School Centre 271 in Santiago, due to an overall shortage of teachers one teacher in particular, Abraham Arias, went from one classroom to another to deliver all kinds of different courses. In Huamachuco, on the contrary, there were dozens of teachers and teaching assistants.

In the morning the children from the main streets of the city, the hills, the suburbs and the adjoining villages would converge on that round house. César Abraham lived in the Cinco Esquinas neighbourhood and didn’t have far to walk but he kept a low profile while walking to school because he didn’t dress with the same elegance as the arrogant, unpleasant children who lived on the main square in Huamachuco. The children of the most important families appeared with their standard navy blue three-piece suits and their shiny shoes and they were always wrapped up in red jumpers woven with sheep’s wool. Their hair was brushed with oil and pinned back and it looked like an independent part of their body.

For his part César Abraham flaunted that elegance of the poor man that, many years later, would be evident in the photographs taken of him. The first thing one would notice about him were his shoes that he would polish until he could see his face reflected in them. His jacket was always the same but his black eyes and his upward-tilted face always gave him a mysterious, dignified appearance.

The difference between the clothes of Huamachuco’s wealthy children and those of the countryside children coming barefoot from the hills – they walked for one or two hours to get to the school – was immense. Some teachers who were very formal would be shocked and wouldn’t let in anybody into their classes if they were not wearing shoes but the school headmaster had to accept them since the number of children from the poorest backgrounds was extremely high.

‘It’s not their fault’, he would insist.

‘No; not theirs but it is their parents’ fault,’ the moaning teachers would reply.

‘You cannot require this from them. They haven’t got money to buy shoes.’

‘They haven’t got any money to buy shoes but they do have enough money to get drunk.’

The biggest contrast was that between small peasants and the children of the employees of the Quiruvilca mines. The latter ones had been sent to Huamachuco by their families since there were no schools in the mining centre. One of them was Humberto Grieve. He used to wear dark cashmere coats. He had long hair which was combed with a parting in the middle. They told him that one day he would have to take on his father's business and handle hundreds of people. Amongst his servants there were many of his classmates then, especially those walking day after day down the mountainside surrounding Huamachuco.

Humberto didn't even look at them. His father recommended that he shouldn't do so, lest he lost his authority. 'You'll have to mix it up with the Indians,' he added, 'remember though... close, but not too close.' If Humberto's gaze lingered on the head of one of his classmates it was only to think that one day they would disappear down the tunnels of the mines or work as servants in their house. Humberto was taller than most children. You would always find pupils from some families employed in a similar business to his father's or some children of the middle classes by his side, all of whom had formed an entourage around him.

Vallejo would remember him as the Sun-Child as he was blonde and tall and his tousled hairstyle would occasionally look like a halo around his globular, rosy face. Despite their differences the most absolute social peace reigned over the school because the children from the higher class would ignore their more humble classmates or would look through them as if they were invisible. If occasionally there was conflict it was as a result of some cruel joke about the little Indians' clothes although the latter wouldn't protest as they knew it was forbidden to raise their hand against the upper classes.

At lunchtime the students were supplied with food from their own homes or from some boarding houses in town. The young girls who brought in the meals for the barefoot children were their sisters. There were long tables for the majority of the pupils and a smaller one for Humberto and his friends. Some children who travelled to school from the hillside lay down to rest in the school's football pitch so that sleep would make them forget about lunchtime.

Vallejo was living in a pension house on Balta street. The house was spotless and smelled of disinfectant. He would come to school with his lunch box to ease his hunger at lunchtime. A few children would sit with him but none of them was part of the Sun-Child's entourage.

'The twentieth century has just started, children. You are very lucky because you are living through a very important moment in history,' Andrés Aguirre Lynch, the ancient history teacher, told them. 'You're coming into the world in one of the world's most prodigious civilizations', he added and his words wafted out of the school until they vanished into the peaks of the Andes. He was very thin and he almost had no eyebrows. When he came to class he would simply be looking down at his shoes but gradually the narrative he was telling transformed him into a passionate orator.

'From the peaks of the Andes up to the turbulent waters of the Amazon, from the largest wood in the universe to Tierra del Fuego, all this land is America and it will be a major topic of conversation in the twentieth century.'

Vallejo thought that professor Aguirre was a spirit. His light blue three-piece suit was too much for him, he almost floated in it.

'I talked to you about the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Greeks and now we are getting to the Romans. In this century America will change the world.'

He was most probably an angel cast into a good man's body. His sweet, faraway voice sounded as if it came from the past.

'We have been talking about the Muisecas and the Aztecs, the Moches and the Nazcas, the

Tiwanakus and the Incas. They are prodigious peoples who turned this continent into a place of wonder, something which you must continue.’ The children were looking at the teacher’s gestures, amused.

‘Are you listening to me?’

César Abraham nodded his head.

‘Which other civilisation from the other side of the world can be considered equal to the Moche civilisation, Vallejo?’

‘The Mayas, who came before the Aztecs. The Ancient Greeks, who came before the Roman civilisation.’

‘Exactly.’

The Sun-Child and his court looked at each other indignantly. Since this newcomer had arrived, coming from only God knows where, it was always he who replied to the master’s questions straightaway. At the end of his first year of study, César was awarded an honorary mention in the Ancient Eastern History class and in Applied Arithmetic, as well as a silver medal for his determination and good behaviour. His talents were appreciated by his teachers although not so by Grieve and his entourage. The reason for this was that Grieve, throughout primary school, had been the best pupil in his class and had received all the awards for application and conduct. Now this newcomer Vallejo was overshadowing him.

A plump child with big eyes was looking at the Sun-child with fascination. This admiration was based on his favouritism towards the upper classes and by the unbearable personal magnetism that brought him closer to the other children. Pepe Quesada was unctuous and flabby. He would smile every time the Sun-Child smiled in his direction and he would get angry whenever César Vallejo talked.

One day, at the end of the class, the teacher Aguirre Lynch called César Abraham:

‘You must ask your parents to come and see me.’

‘They’re not here.’

‘Aren’t they at home at the moment?’

‘They don’t live round here.’

‘Do you live alone?’

‘No. I live in Mrs Desposorio’s boarding house.’

‘Then ask her to come and see me.’

‘She can’t come.’

‘I need to talk to a grown-up. Or somebody that can be considered your guardian. Someone from your family.’

‘My brother Víctor visits me every now and then.’

‘Then ask him. Is he an adult?’

‘He’s the eldest in my family.’

‘Then ask him to come and see me.’

A month later Víctor Vallejo was listening to the teacher’s remarks.

‘He’s a clever lad. You have to ensure he will finish secondary school. He mustn’t leave school and be one of those children who give up on studying after their first or second year.’

Víctor smiled, flattered.

‘I wouldn’t like Cesítar to end up as a shop assistant. More importantly, higher things await him’, the teacher Aguirre Lynch repeated, and then fell silent. Sitting still the teacher looked like a stone statue from an old native Indian temple.

In the classroom there were 47 schoolchildren. 35 of them didn't have shoes but the poorest boy's name was Francisco. As well as being poor his sight was impaired and he looked very weak. The Sun-Child's entourage picked on him.

'Paco, Paco, how many fingers do I have here?' Pepe Quesada, the flabby child, asked him one day. 'How many fingers do I have here?' He repeated showing him his fat finger. He wanted Francisco to get confused and say that he had two fingers there. He also wanted to one of Humberto Grieve's smiles.

'Paco!'

Paco lowered his head.

It was time to leave and there was nobody in the school. Only Humberto Grieve's gang were still around, and Grieve was waiting for the arrival of his driver. Suddenly they saw Paco leaving the school gates on his own. It was enough for them to exchange glances for the fun to begin.

'Get him! Get him!' – somebody shouted and they all started hitting Paco round the head with their bags until they got him on the ground.

'Let's get him!'

Pepe Quesada took advantage to kick Paco when he was on the ground and then he jumped arse-first on Paco's head. He rubbed his buttocks against Paco and felt frissons of delight while doing so.

During the religion class, Father Cristóbal Herrera explained the nature of sin to the students:

'It's a sin to disobey any of the Ten Commandments. It's a sin to look at girls. It's a sin to let a bad thought cross our minds. Bad thoughts are the most serious sins. When we sin we are adding one more thorn to Christ's crown of thorns. Christ cries in silence, my children. Nobody listens to him but he does cry. When you're committing a sin in silence, when you do it in the toilet, you're hitting Christ with a hammer. Precisely like the Jews did. Sometimes we sin in our sleep. In that precise moment we are also piercing his hands and his feet like the evil Jews did. Children, God sees us. Children, there are eyes observing you all the time. Children, those eyes follow you. Children, those eyes go after you. Children, never think you will be free from those eyes.'

Father Cristóbal had a special preference for Humberto.

'Grieve, could you tell us what the Commandments are?'

Humberto stood up and recited one after the other very precisely, exactly like he had learnt them from his catechism book.

'You all need to be like Humberto Grieve. He studies at home after school. You can see that he doesn't spend time thinking about impurities. On the other hand, there are some of you who never come near the confessional box.'

Humberto looked at everybody smiling and his gaze alighted on Paco. Paco couldn't go to confession nor even to church because every day he had to walk to school back and forth from his village and he couldn't come back on Sunday for the Mass.

'Who is God, Vallejo? Let's see, Vallejo, who is God?'

César Abraham couldn't remember it by heart. He started talking about his own conception of God even though he knew that Father Herrera in any case wouldn't agree with him.

'Then you mean that the Father is God.'

'Yes, He is.'

‘And the Son is God too?’

‘Yes, He is.’

‘And the Holy Spirit?’

‘He’s God also.’

‘Did you use the word ‘also’? Do you mean there are three gods?’

Humberto raised his hand and stopped Vallejo:

‘Three distinct beings and only one true God.’

‘That’s right. You have to study, César Abraham or you will turn into a heretic.’

‘But that is exactly what I was saying.’

‘Don’t tell me what you were saying because you’re lying. What you were trying to say is that the Son is of a different nature than the Father. Or did you not say that the Son is different from the Father?’

Vallejo was left confused, thinking his thoughts.

‘Arian. Vallejo is an Arian. The Arians were the heretics who said Christ was son of the Father but he was not God himself. Children, these heretics are the very individuals who handed Spain over to the Moors.’

Vallejo lowered his head:

‘Can I sit down now?’

When he lowered his head, Grieve and his friends roared with laughter.

‘Sit down? What you have to do is go out outside into the courtyard and stay there as punishment.’

Father Cristóbal went on explaining the terrible harm the Arians did to Christianity.’

‘There are people who should not even be in this classroom.’

They all kept silent.

‘There are children who could be working in the street instead of attending secondary school. They would serve their country better in this way. As Dr Deustua, the most famous Peruvian philosopher of our times, has pointed out, there is no reason why school should be for everybody at all levels. It’s fine that primary school should be for everybody but secondary school should only be attended by those who are going to manage firms, provinces and regions.’

Despite the hostility of some teachers, every year Vallejo would be awarded honorary mentions in the majority of his courses. What is more, even though he wasn’t strong, there was something in his look that inspired fear. The children in the King-Child’s entourage felt a strange fear of Vallejo and, when he was around, they would refrain from tormenting Paco because they knew that he would come to Paco’s rescue. One day, César was studying by one of the school’s railings overlooking a cliff. He was absorbed in his own thoughts and he didn’t notice that Grieve’s gang had silently got closer in order to play a prank on him.

Pepe Quesada moved quickly towards Vallejo and, taking advantage of Vallejo’s distraction, he punched him on his right temple with such force that the young student fell on his side. Vallejo saw him for a moment from the ground. After that everything around him became cloudy.

‘I hate you, asshole!’ Pepe Quesada shouted. His friends got closer and seeing that Vallejo was unconscious, they stared accusingly at his aggressor.

‘I don’t know. I don’t know why I did it but I hate him!’

‘I think you’ve just killed him’, the King-Child said.

‘I don’t know why but I hate him. I hate those stupid clever kids. I hate them.’

Afterwards, he looked at the King-Child's eyes. He searched the King-Child's face for a smile but found none there.

'We'd better get out of here', he ordered and all his entourage followed him.

Half an hour later Vallejo opened his eyes and met the inquisitive gaze of Captain Guerra who was responsible for discipline in the school. He was called a Captain although he had never graduated beyond the level of subaltern in the army. In the school he trained pupils in military discipline and he would tell everyone that they should get ready for a second war against Chile.

'And now what have you done, César Vallejo?'

From the ground where he found himself lying, César could see in the foreground the prefect's muddy boots, boundless belly and, eventually, his enormous, perpetually moving hands.

He didn't reply. At first he didn't know how to formulate his thoughts. Afterwards he started remembering Pepe Quesada's flabby body stretching out towards him. He remembered the fat boy's punch. He wanted to talk but he couldn't. He was interrupted by Guerra who talked while all the time looking at his nails. They were very nicely trimmed. He seemed very proud of them.

'I'm going to tell you what you did since you cannot remember it, can you?'

No reply. The captain went on: 'Can't you remember? Well, you were leaning against this railing trying to run away from school. You wanted to play truant for a day and you were going to lower yourself onto one of the nearest trees. But then you fell, little César.'

César answered with his eyes and shook his head.

'Are you saying that I'm lying?'

'No.'

'No what?'

'No, Captain Guerra'.

'Ah, that's better. You have to address your superiors according to rank. But now it turns out it's you who is lying.'

'No, not at all.'

'Not at all, Captain!' Guerra corrected him.

'Not at all, Captain!' the terrified child replied.

'Here the only one who is lying is youuuuu, little Céééésar', the soldier swallowed the word little César. After that, he let the word emerge through his upper teeth and finally he spit it out.

'Liiiiittle Céééésar.'

He repeated:

'Liiiiittle Céééésar. You tried to run away from school and you fell down. God punishes.'

'No, it wasn't like that.'

'Say that again, you blockhead: It wasn't like that, my captain!'

'It wasn't like that, captain!'

'Ah, was it not?'

'I'm saying it wasn't like that, Captain.'

'Captain, captain, blockhead! Get used to saying 'my captain'! Imagine that the world is made up completely of barracks and in barracks there are lower ranks and upper ranks. You have to call your superiors my lieutenant, my captain, my major, my commander... Do you understand?'

César didn't understand and didn't show any sign that he was going to understand at any time soon. Captain Guerra went back on the attack.

‘Are you saying that Humberto Grieve is lying? He came to my office and reported everything that you did. You should appreciate him because it’s because of him that I came here, so that you can’t hurt yourself any more. You’re not hurt though – you only fell asleep for half an hour. Surely you don’t want me to lift you up in my arms and take you to the sickroom?’

While talking to César, the prefect took up a pair of nail clippers and began to sort out his left hand. Meanwhile Humberto Grieve’s group got closer and Guerra hurriedly put his nail clippers back in the top pocket of his jacket.

‘Isn’t it true, Humberto? Isn’t it true that you saw him precisely when he was running away?’

‘That’s what I said.’

‘And so it is. Liiiiittle Cééésar.’ Once more captain Guerra let the word César go through his upper teeth.

‘Liiiiittle Cééésar, this time you will be punished. You’re not going to leave the school this weekend, do you understand? On top of that you’ll spend all the afternoon on your knees.’

‘And the school? The school, Captain?’

‘The school? What school?’

‘The afternoon class, Captain Guerra.’

‘You wanted to run away and now you miss school! This isn’t good. It’s not good.’

The children laughed, amused. Pepe Quesada looked for the King-child’s eyes and smiled at him one more time. He was waiting for him to respond to his smile this time and so he did. Then both exchanged a glance full of stars and flatteries. Pepe felt a shiver through all his body and thought that Humberto Grieve would take him aside and would teach him some of those things that he still didn’t know. Everything he had been longing for, with goose bumps, in the darkness of his bedroom, when he thought about the King-Child’s beloved body.

‘You... go to the detention room.’

Guerra took César Vallejo by his right arm.

‘Get a move on, blockhead. Get a move on!’

César obeyed.

‘Very well, you have to write on this piece of paper two hundred times: I will not try to run away from school again. Here, at the top, put your name and that of your village.’

The child wrote:

César Abraham Vallejo.

Calle Balta 2, Huamachuco.

City of origin: Santiago de Chuco.

Then he held out the piece of paper and the task began.

‘Wait a moment, I think there’s a mistake here. You wrote your name and address correctly. But then as hometown you wrote “Santiago de Chuco”.’

César didn’t reply.

‘I’m talking to you.’

‘Yes. That’s what I wrote.’

‘Santiago de Chuco is not a city. It’s just a village.’

The child didn’t understand what the difference was.

‘It’s a small, infected village. A village where there are Indians and ignorant people. When you talk of Santiago de Chuco you cannot use the word ‘city’. Here the only cities are Huamachuco, Huamachuco province’s capital city, region of La Libertad. And if you want to list all the cities then you can say Huamachuco, Trujillo, Lima. And so on and so forth.’

When Vallejo finished writing the sentence two hundred times, the teacher had already left his office. He had to wait for him to return for an hour..

‘So?’ he asked, devouring a chicken sandwich.

‘I’ve already finished, Captain.’

‘Finished the task?’

‘Yes, I’ve already finished, Captain Guerra.’

‘Let’s see. Let’s see... Lying, again. You have written the sentence two hundred times but I didn’t say two hundred. I said five hundred times. Start again.’

Vallejo lifted up his pen and dipped it into the inkpot. He thought that the ink in the pot would finish and then he wouldn’t have enough money to buy another one. As a result he wouldn’t have enough ink to do his own homework at school. He looked at the disciplinarian in the hope that he would exonerate him and the latter seemed to understand.

‘Alright, it’s not necessary for you to do this task. Open that door instead.’

Vallejo looked at the door. It was a small supplies cupboard set against the wall and it was where they kept the school supplies.

‘I told you to open it.’

The church clock nearby struck five o’clock. César Abraham couldn’t understand why it was already late and yet the captain insisted on punishing him for a mistake he hadn’t made. He thought he only wanted to scare him.

‘I told you to go inside.’ He pushed him in. He then closed the cupboard after him and locked him in.

‘OK, I’ll see you in the morning,’ he shouted. ‘I hope that by tomorrow morning you will have made up your mind not to run away from school again.’ He left the room which was now filled with an intense smell of chicken.

From within the cupboard César tried to look everywhere around him but it was all black and it was getting darker and darker. After a while he began to get very, very scared. The space he was in had to be two metres in length and two in width, a seated man’s height and yet it felt like it contained all the darkness of earth and Hell. He was a prisoner. He was too afraid to fall asleep. Among the shadows the world of the dead penetrated his eyes, his ears and his nostrils. He thought he was going to be a prisoner for the rest of his life.

He tried to close his eyes and suddenly fell asleep. That night was the longest one of his adolescence. He dreamt of screaming in silence in a place where no-one could hear him. He dreamt that he was in Santiago de Chuco but under a rock and that it was late and all his family were out looking for him. He saw his father and his mother and all his siblings running through the plains and shouting his name. He went up and down the mountains before losing himself in the sky. He dreamt of becoming insane and that they would punish him for that. He dreamt of failing the religious studies examination and that for this they would submit him to a special treatment to turn him into a good, clever Christian. He dreamt that morning came and they found him dead on the cell’s floor.

In his dream his body was buried under an acacia. He saw his limbs scattered and preserved in formaldehyde. He even smelt the formaldehyde and perceived that once more they re-assembled his limbs back together and would put them onto an operation table where they took him apart and put him back together again various times. They pierced three statutory holes on his body during the autopsy: one in his head, one in his throat and one on the top of his stomach and a man came up to him and smelled him. Then Captain Guerra arrived, wearing



spotless white garments like a physician and he opened up César's head. They took away his heart and put it inside a book to dry. Later on the anatomy students roared with laughter.

Overnight the weather changed. The day was approaching and the air was fresh. The cockerel's song reached him from both sides of the world. One would start with a cry of surprise for daylight and another one would respond with a crowing at a higher volume. They sang and responded to one another and one could tell that they had been doing this since the beginning of time.

When morning came, César heard the children's footsteps invading the courtyard and the hallways. He wanted to shout to let them know he was there but he heard more footsteps and he knew it was captain Guerra. Sunlight quickly reached him through the cracks in the cupboard but César's metamorphosis was complete; he would never be the same again.

The captain tried to open the cupboard now that the punishment was finally over. César Abraham, in that moment, had become a different person. He had now gained a crystal-clear conscience that would let him know that there were holy beings and evil beings, people who were generous and mean, civilized and savage. Whilst in the darkness he had perhaps realised that the world belonged to the beasts. Perhaps, during his captivity, his eyes had learnt to see the human heart. A hand opened the cupboard completely and Guerra materialized against the light, with his military appearance, his little upright head, his huge hands, his sparkling nails and his boots in a steady position.

The child twitched his eyes and stood up. During that long night he had lost his innocence. He had now learnt that he was the son of a depraved country where the mestizos and the rich humiliated and slaughtered the poor and the Indians. In this perpetual fight he had to choose his place in the battle and so he did. He was going to be on Paco Yunque's side, on the side of Quiruvilca's beheaded Indians, with the social fighters, with those who experienced imprisonment, with the world's poorest.

'You're not going to tell anybody what happened!'

Vallejo was silent.

Captain Guerra took advantage of that silence to look at his nails; the corners of his mouth curling up into a smile of inner satisfaction.

'You won't tell anybody! Or, if you do, you'll stay in this hole forever', he insisted. He then put his hands back into his pockets.

Vallejo couldn't speak. After so many hours in the cell the light was dazzling and paralyzing him. He was immersed in his own sleepiness and in the fragrance of a revelation.

The door opened and Vallejo finally crossed the courtyard. The children were not out yet to play at that hour in the morning. He felt like he was flying towards the sky and he couldn't tell if it was a ball or if it was the whole planet running along with him.

There, under the lintel, the King-Child and Pepe Quesada met, holding each other's hands and looking at one another with a dumb, though sweet, expression on their faces.

## There are Two Old, White, Roads, Curving

The bells of the nearby Santo Domingo church called the congregation to prayer and Vallejo thought it was a Requiem mass. It occurred to him that the bells were speaking to him and telling him he would never get out of jail. The governor had not returned to his office yet. On the wooden bench César had already re-read the Bristol almanacs and he was sorry he didn't have a book with him. Instead of running his eyes over letters and words, they were now following an ant's steps over the yellowish walls. He got up a number of times to look out of the window but there was nobody outside. Up until that point the sun was severe but it soon lost its warmth and brightness and by five o' clock it had turned into an old star.

His eyes knew by heart the whole area of the office including the floorboards which had lifted up from the floor. He noticed a room at the end of the office. The room was locked but there was a crack between the half-opened doors. It was possible for César to get closer and peek at what was being kept in there but he didn't do it as he was afraid Don Cipriano Barba might come in and catch him.

At an indeterminate time they offered him a jug of rather diluted coffee but he didn't touch a drop. At half past five in the evening he felt he had already become part of that room, his head was aching and the veins in his temples were throbbing. Only then did he hear approaching footfalls and he thought that the governor was coming back with news that he had finally found the right cell for him. The office door opened and two police officers stepped in. They each carried a wheelbarrow and in each of the wheelbarrows there was a shape hidden under bloodstained sheets. César guessed the shapes were the dead bodies of the two prisoners who had killed themselves the night before in hell. The officers, with their macabre load, acted as if they had not seen him. Without bothering to glance at him, they went to the room next door and deposited their load there. Then they left, put the lock back on and acted once more as if César were not there. They made their way back towards the main courtyard.

It had to be already nearly six o' clock and the prisoner was still waiting for the governor. Until that point in time he had been walking all around the premises and then he was sitting in the place taken by Cipriano Barba when he asked him for his personal information. Again the office door opened and an officer took an old man inside; the old man had a face like a mouse and a hat which was the wrong size for his head.

'Good evening!'

The mouse-faced man took off his hat in front of Vallejo who simply gazed at him.

‘It looks like you’ve increased your prices.’

The man thought that Vallejo was an employee of the prison. He didn’t reply to the old man.

‘New? Are you new here? Ha, I know. You must be the person who is going to work with Don Cipriano Barba.. Don’t tell me they’ve fired the old man!’

The man went off on a soliloquy.

‘A new broom sweeps better, of course. You’re the new governor and you’ve raised the prices to earn more from the business. Could you please show me what materials you have?’

Without waiting for a reply the man approached the door of the adjoining room and – without much difficulty – lifted the padlock off, which had not been latched. He entered the room and took his time. He shouted out from within:

‘They are quite expensive but they are worth the money.’

He then came back again and sitting next to Vallejo said:

‘If you want, I can carry them away at once, right now. Obviously a little discount would be very welcome. You can always count on my service.’

The man extended his flabby hand.

‘My name is Vladimiro Valverde. Please don’t call by this name since nobody would recognize me and sometimes names can bring bad luck. Call me, as my friends and customers do, call me, Pato Negro (Black Duck). I’ll be at your service whenever you need me. My business is mainly in Moche and I don’t want to sound pretentious but they say I’m one of the best at this job in the whole of Northern Peru.’

Even though Vallejo had not lifted up his hand to accept his invitation, Pato’s flabby and dirty hand reached out for his and held it tightly.

‘You must be wondering why I need those heads. This is what everyone wants to know and I never answer this question. Still, I quite like you and so I’ll tell you.’

The mouse-faced man brought his nose closer to César’s right ear.

‘Heads are the finest organs in the human body; this is undeniable. After death, our heads go on living. When I prepare the tables for my magic rituals I question them. I ask them to search for what I wish to know. In the case of these two bandits their heads will be very useful to learn what it’s like at the bottom of Hell. In other situations the skulls are able to tell me which herb I have to prescribe to someone who is sick, which woman a capricious husband is having fun with, which roads a runaway wife is travelling on, what needs to be done to oppose a spell, how to be acquitted in a trial, how to produce an amulet guarding against poverty, hatred, illness, cold, injustice or lack of love... And now that you know what I do, will you let me carry on with my business?’

His musine eyes brightened and all his body seemed to fill with strength. He went into the adjacent room again with a small saw and he stayed inside for longer than half an hour. One could only hear a rhythmic sound and the little man’s voice:

*Sawdust, they saw off*

*The timbers of San Juan*

*Ask for cheese, ask for bread.*

*Sawdust, they saw off...*

He sounded like a carpenter. He came back into the room with a blood-stained saddlebag. He closed the door carefully. César thought he was dreaming. At that precise moment in time the governor entered the room. His eyes alternated between the prisoner and the healer.

‘So you know each other.’

The governor was noticeably furious. He addressed Vallejo:

‘I’ve bad news for you.’

*My father sleeps. His august aspect*

*Portrays a peaceful heart;*

*He is now so sweet...*

*If there is any bitterness in him, it will be me.*

Don Francisco de Paula Vallejo Benítez always dreamt the same dream. As soon as he closed his eyes he would see flocks of condors flying. One flock after the other, the condors would circle his house, surround Santiago de Chuco and finally draw a black line on the horizon which stopped him from seeing the setting and rising sun. He would wake up startled, thinking the birds were watching him from the sky. He was looking at the window and was afraid he would find some of those creatures watching him. His ears buzzed from having listened to the birds’ flight throughout his dreams. He wouldn’t sleep very much during the night; during the day, he would take long naps. At other times he would lie down on the stone bench within the house, wondering where those bizarre dreams were coming from.

When César Abraham was born his older brothers had already moved out of their family home; some had settled down and were living in the village while others had moved to cities along the coast and were now employed in different activities. It occurred to Don Francisco de Paula that the condors represented his fears of not seeing his sons anymore, whose letters he would wait for and which would sometimes reach him late. His wife had put rue stems on the door to keep the evil spirits away and scare the enemies’ compact desires. Apart from fears such as these he was an impartial man who had carried out his duties as village governor with equanimity and common sense and he was accepted by everybody. The Indians outside the village not only cared a great deal for him but also held him to be their protector.

Could those condors be the signs predicting the magnificent, though unhappy, destiny of one of his children? He discussed this more than once with his wife. One evening, when he had finished his everyday activities but it was still too early to go to bed, he sat down on a rocking chair thinking of times running fast. He fell asleep immediately.

He dreamt of somebody chasing a small condor in order to kill it. He found himself in a white place where a hunter was shooting against the sky waiting for the bird to fall down. He had fallen asleep with his hand over the left side of his chest to listen to the sound of his heart pumping against his ribs.

Suddenly he moved his hand off his chest and started shaking his forefinger as if he were delivering a sentence:

‘We will have to take care of him’, he said.

‘Take care of him?’ asked his wife, who was knitting a jumper sitting in the armchair opposite.

‘Take care of him!’

‘Of whom?’

There was no reply. He simply gazed at her with a sorrowful look.

She then questioned him again: ‘You say we have to take care of him. Of whom? Who do you mean?’

In answer to her wife’s questions Don Francisco de Paula stood up, ran to little César’s room and found him sleeping placidly. He made a gesture of relief and went towards the window. Outside the endless bursts of crickets resounded and above the stars were flying, stumbling and getting lost forever.

‘He’s alive’, he said. He breathed with ease. He went back to his rocking chair and he let himself fall onto it. A few hours later, his wife woke him up and took him to bed. His dreams there were better. He laughed and rejoiced in his dreams, all night long.

‘Well done, well done. This is my son!’ these were the words Doña María understood.

Afterwards the old man munched letters and words. Soon the cock crowed and the hens clucked. The house filled with an intense red light but Don Francisco was still asleep. His wife got up early to take care of her daily chores. The man was so happy he preferred to go on sleeping.

The red light turned silvery. The cock crowed a second time. His father rubbed his eyes with his fingers. He got up. He heard his wife singing. Everything was the same and his son was alive. The sun was insanely bright. A hummingbird flew past his eyes like a shot.

*My mother strolls down by the orchards,  
savouring an already flavourless flavour.  
She is now so gentle,  
so wing, so forward, so love.*

*There is solitude in the tranquil hearth,  
Without news, without green, without childhood.  
And if there is anything broken this afternoon,  
and that descends and crackles,  
it is two old white roads, curving.  
My heart goes along them on foot.*



César was spending some days of his vacation in the village. After a few days he would go back to the school in Huamachuco. He heard his parents talking and so he pretended to be asleep so that they could talk as much as they liked but their conversation stopped in that very moment. His mother grew near to him and stroked his head.

‘Mummy, mummy, do you want to say something?’

‘I want you to know, my little son, that I’m going to be with you as long as I live.’

‘As long as you live?’

‘Don’t worry my child. For you, I’ll always be alive.’

He went back to sleep. He woke up soon afterwards but his father was already walking through the fields and a skinny dog was trotting along too. Then César got up, folded the quilt, smoothed out the pillow and went to the toilet. Outside it was six o’ clock in the morning. The trees were restless as if they were waiting for wind and rain. The cold air swirled around from one side to the other.

After that he heard his mother’s footsteps moving in the kitchen and her voice humming a song. Her voice was supernatural. It brightened the rooms and it made objects lose their weight and density. While listening to her voice and without realizing it César let his coffee cup slip from his fingers to the floor though it made no sound when hitting the ground. When his mother walked and sang at the same time the world resumed the musical nature of its beginning. Light broke up. The streams and the mountains, the wind and the trees sounded like they were singing. Night was approaching and even the moonlight started trembling.

For all of this César remembered that his mother would always be alive for him. Any one of these songs would recall her in his mind. The days were grey and lumpy when he went back to Huamachuco and the sky was somewhat empty. School gave him knowledge but it didn’t alleviate his loneliness nor did it help him to understand what he had seen in Quiruvilca. Little by little he discovered that years got shorter and shorter and that days decreased. He felt he was growing up. He dreamt that he was growing enormously, overtaking the ceiling in his room, growing and growing. After this in his dreams he turned into a puma, a frog, a cat, a rocking chair and finally a condor.

## The Smell of Blood and Honey Molasses

‘The bad news is that you’re not getting out of here’, declared the prison warden while examining César Vallejo’s face. He wanted to see the impact of his words.

He continued: ‘I inquired into your case because I knew nothing about it and I found it strange that we would have you in the Quiet Room. A professional in there? Hmm, I said to myself. That’s odd. But your case looks bad. There is evidence supporting everything for which you stand accused. The Santa María family lawyer has been here in the prison for quite a few hours and told me some stories about you that I had not been aware of.’

Vallejo told him that, in accordance with the law, he should not be kept in isolation.

‘And so I want to know when I can receive visits and when the investigating magistrate arrives.’

‘Forget about legalese. I already know you’re a lawyer or something like that. In this world, those who can, can. Your case is very serious, Vallejo my friend. You won’t be getting any visitors yet.’

He finished his speech and waited for a reaction, but in vain. He thought that his prisoner was overwhelmed and decided to take advantage.

‘You were conversing with Pato Negro. Isn’t that so?’

Pato Negro emerged from the corner where he had remained almost invisible. He seemed more like a mouse than a duck.

‘No, that’s not so,’ he said. ‘It was I who spoke to him. I don’t think he even listened to me. I took him for an officer or somebody higher up because his clothes don’t look right for this place.’

‘Do you mean to say that he didn’t ask you any questions?’

‘The man knows nothing. I think he’s a mute... But just tell me who I have to pay off.’

‘Silence!’ bellowed Don Cipriano Barba. ‘Our business needs no strangers as witnesses.’

He then turned to Vallejo with a sympathetic face:

‘We all get it wrong sometimes, don’t we?’

He went with the shaman into the next room and returned a while later, very pleased with himself.

‘Don’t keep raising the prices because I’m going to have to work with morons on this case.’

‘Silence, you animal. Let’s see how long it takes until you’re here as a prisoner yourself.’

The man with the mousy face started laughing. The warden joined in the laughter. Two gold teeth stuck out of the warden’s mouth. The shaman was toothless.

‘Vallejo my friend, I’ll permit myself one piece of advice for you. You haven’t seen or heard anything. As you will understand, in this profession we have to get ourselves a few extras. The government doesn’t pay us enough.’

The man with the mousy face had disappeared and only came back for a minute to get the hat he had forgotten. The warden continued explaining to Vallejo the rules for living in the Trujillo prison and the conduct that he should aspire to in order to maintain a good relationship between the two of them.

‘Now, the good news. First of all tomorrow is Sunday and your friend Antenor Orrego is coming to visit you.’

‘Antenor! But didn’t you just say that I couldn’t have visitors...?’

‘Don’t hold it against me. Forget it already... It was a misunderstanding!... I was under the impression that you were talking with Pato Negro... and I don’t appreciate nosy people... In terms of Mr Orrego... he’s been trying to see you since the beginning of this affair but he hasn’t been allowed. Orders from above, you know...?’

As he spoke his eyes looked down at the floor as if he had lost something a long time ago and was still looking for it. Afterwards he glanced from side to side to check no-one was watching and came a little closer to Vallejo. In a secretive tone he said:

‘Your friend Orrego is coming very early, at seven o’clock in the morning, and he can talk to you here in my office for an hour... That’s the longest I could get you, got it? You can’t have longer than that because I don’t want any problems with anybody.’

He went back to gazing at the floor:

‘With anybody, understand? No, I can already see that you don’t understand me. I’ll explain better... As I told you before, the lawyer of the Santa María family has been here and has given orders to keep you in complete isolation. What’s more, he has made very good friends with some of the police. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’d paid them off. You know well enough... if it were up to that family you’d be locked up and forgotten about in some cell for the rest of your life.’

‘What are you saying? That the lawyer of the other side has given orders? How can this be?’

The warden Barba gave him a pitying look.

‘Maybe I’m talking too much but never mind. It’s better that you know how things are done around here; it’s not like what you’ve studied at university in your jurisprudence classes. It’s better.’

He removed the pencil from behind his ear and sketched some drawings on the paper in front of him. He drew a figure:

‘This is the lawyer,’ he said.

He drew another.

‘And this is one of the magistrates.’

Then he drew the symbol of the pound sterling.

‘Money. Money buys everything that exists in the universe...’

Vallejo continued watching the movements of the pencil on the sheet of paper but something stopped him.

‘Anyway, you’ve got a bigger problem, Vallejo my friend: politics. Politics!’

He put the pencil back behind his ear. He spoke fluently:

‘The Santa María lawyer explained to the director that the fire wasn’t just a criminal attack, it was politically motivated. “Don’t give me that. That young Vallejo isn’t political”, the



director replied. Then the lawyer came right up close like he was going to whisper in his ear but I was also listening and he told him: "It's not just terrorism, it's not just political. They're ideas and the worst kind. This young Vallejo is linked with a group of poets and you well know what they're like." "What are they like?" the director asked him. "Anarchists and Bolsheviks of the worst kind", the lawyer replied. "The worst of all is Antenor Orrego. According to his newspaper, he has always defended the labourers at the Casagrande and at all the sugar plantations."

'Wait, wait, I'm not sure I understand', Vallejo said. But the warden was not prepared to repeat what he had said. He only added that the administrators of the Casagrande were personally interested in the matter.

'They want you to put him in solitary confinement.'

'How can this be if nothing has been proven yet? Vallejo could be innocent.'

"Innocent or guilty, he must be sent down", the lawyer said. "We have to make an example of him to show these young intellectuals who are in solidarity with the workers."

'And the director gave you orders that I should be kept in solitary confinement?'

'He couldn't give those orders to me. They're only given in writing. But he told me that it was already decided. Meanwhile the lawyer was talking with some police officers. But don't worry, Mr Vallejo. I won't behave in such a way with you... I'm fond of poets.'

Finally he seemed to forget everything he'd said before and became very managerial. He spoke moving his fingers:

'As of today the rules are simple: you can walk around the entire prison during the day. In the prison yard you can get everything you want and even make friends. At six in the evening, you will shut yourself in the excellent cell I've got for you.'

He opened and closed his fists.

'It's been recommended to me to stave off rheumatism', he explained.

He opened his hands again. He looked at his palms with a certain affection.

'On Sunday afternoon, will have two visitors, Father Toño and Pato Negro.'

'Father Toño and Pato Negro?'

'Yes, of course! Father Toño and Pato Negro. Who else?'

The warden's gaze was directed at the poet's alert face. He was moving his hands whilst talking as though kneading the words.

'Pato Negro comes every Sunday afternoon to heal some of the prisoners and help them sort their life out. I promise you this is not my business. Father Toño is a young priest and a good man. People say that he's a mystic and that he wanders in heaven. He knows nothing about what goes on in Trujillo but it now happens that he gives mass here every Sunday even though it's already been explained to him that you can't offer the gospel to beasts. He's on the hunt for souls, the poor guy, but it will happen... the mass is given on that side of the yard where there's a little crucifix. Of course nobody is obliged to attend.'

The Trujillo prison was built on the grounds of the old Dominican convent. During the colonial period the prisoners of the Inquisition were held in the dark underground chambers of this religious order. In 1885 the Trujillo Municipal ordered the construction of a prison on the grounds. On Cipriano Barba's orders Vallejo was taken that night to his rather large and light cell. He had two companions. He didn't speak with them as they were already asleep but he saw that one of the prisoners had piled up around twenty books on his bedside table.

He had a vaulted niche for a bed, set inside the colonial wall. The bed was clean and smelled of disinfectant. He lay down on it, fully dressed, looked at the ceiling and the light went

out. He thought that all the lights in the universe had been snuffed out for him. He fell asleep at once into a dreamless sleep but at five o' clock in the morning he was awakened by a conversation between his two companions. He thought it was time to present himself. He sat up on the bed. He opened and closed his eyes to be sure he wasn't still sleeping but before he managed to speak, one of the men asked him:

'Who are you? You're not one of us!'

'Relax! In prison, we're all one of us', muttered the other prisoner who appeared old and wise. He emphasised: 'One of us.'

'Where are you from? Where did they keep you before you came here?' insisted the man who seemed furious.

'You don't have to ask the gentleman these questions. You're making him feel uncomfortable.'

'But I want to know where he comes from and where they kept him before he came here!'

'Where I'm from? Honestly, I don't know anymore. They told me a name but the warden calls it something else. Everything was very dark,' Vallejo replied.

'And it smelled like shit, right?'

The men looked at him with renewed interest.

'I asked you if it smelled like shit. Well, prison always smells like that. Of shit more than any other smell in the world.'

Vallejo nodded.

'Then they had you in "Hell". Only the crazy and the evil go there. Which one are you?'

There was no response.

'You're not crazy. Are you evil? A gang leader?'

Vallejo felt that they were looking at him with respect.

'Well!'

'Can't you see that he's a doctor... and you already want him to be the gang leader, an evil man. It's most likely he was brought here for political reasons.'

There was a silence.

'Excuse me, my name is César Vallejo. I'm from Santiago de Chuco.'

The quiet prisoner made no gestures while speaking. He was fairly old. He inspired respect. He was as wrinkled as an old potato. He presented himself: 'Salomé Navarrete, at your service', and he added: 'I've been here for five years.'

Vallejo asked himself why they had arrested a man of his age.

'Nice to meet you', he replied and kept quiet. The silences in prison are long but not always noticeable.

'And you don't want to know who *I* am? Don't you want to know my name or why I'm here?'

'Come on, come on! Be nice to Mr Vallejo. Of course he wants to know your name. Tell him at once.'

'My name, sir, is Pancho Marrón but they call me the Black Marrón and I'm here for splitting a bastard-son-of-a-bitch in two...'

He went quiet to see what impression he had caused but neither Vallejo nor Navarrete seemed interested in the matter.

'From top to bottom... First I axed him in the jawbone and it split in two. Then I got into it. I chopped him all the way down the middle of his body. My axe was well sharpened. A

blacksmith sharpened it for me on the fire... I carried on down the chest and belly button. I only stopped when there were two bastard-son-of-a-bitches instead of one.'

While he was speaking he raised and lowered his right arm, tracing circles. Nobody made a comment.

'It was woman trouble, you know what I mean? Every time I've got myself in trouble it's always been over a woman.'

The silence continued. Black Marrón paced the cell while he was talking. He continued swinging his right arm around his body. It seemed likely that that limb was an axe. However the silence forced him to quieten down. He walked up to his bed and half-jumped half-fell onto it in a seated position.

'And all for some old bitch. That's what we men are like though, isn't it? We're fucked... Oh yes, sir! Woman trouble. Always woman trouble,' he seemed very proud of it. He added: 'What would my dead father say!'

He lay down to look at the ceiling with a complacent expression. His eyes closed. He snored as happy men do. After a silence which no clock could measure Vallejo noticed that the angry man was crying like a baby and didn't care whether or not anyone heard him.

'What's wrong? May I ask?'

'They're going to kill me!'

Vallejo gestured inquisitively to Navarrete.

'Don't believe him. He exaggerates. He told me that when I first arrived.'

'They're going to kill the three of us!'

'You're talking like an old crone.'

'They're going to kill us. I know because I dreamt it. I just dreamt it...'

'You seemed happy in the dream. You were laughing.'

'I wasn't laughing. I was watching people coming into this cell and I couldn't scream. I only moved my lips but I couldn't find my tongue. They came to kill him,' he pointed at Vallejo. 'They put his head on a stake. It looked like a monument. And they didn't want witnesses, so they disembowelled everybody.'

'Give it a rest!' Navarrete advised. 'Rest in peace!'

Black Marrón sat down on his bed and spoke as though he weren't himself.

'What do you mean rest in peace? Can anybody in this world rest in peace?'

He retorted.

'No human being will ever rest in peace.'

Then Black Marrón became the Black Marrón again. He forgot his dream. He spoke again with pride about his crime:

'I cut him in two perfect halves from top to bottom. He looked like a butcher's cut. The two parts must be looking for each other in the other world... Bastard-son-of-a-bitch!'

At six o'clock in the morning the cell door opened and then, in the middle of the dawn light, a previous scene repeated itself. A silhouette shouted:

'César Vallejo. Out!'

Not knowing if the silhouette and the shout belonged to a nightmare Vallejo didn't move. The voice repeated the call.

'I said César Vallejo come out.'

The man entered, took him by the shoulders and led him towards the door.

'Follow me! I've orders to take you immediately to the office...'

Vallejo let himself be carried along like a ghost. When they got to the office he found himself face to face with Antenor Orrego.

‘You must have faith, César’, he said, giving him a hug. ‘We’ll fight for you.’

He was chewing his lips to hide his disgust as the filthy prison. He wanted to inspire some peace in him though he himself was on the point of losing all sense of peace. Some time later he would write that Vallejo, at that moment, was devastated by misfortune. He felt dishonoured and wrapped up in disgrace. In the street he had frenzied enemies who would do whatever they could to get rid of him. In his pale and sharp face, in his most characteristic features, he showed despair.

He gathered his strength and repeated several times that everything would be ok.

‘You’re the only one I trust, Antenor. Don’t abandon me at this time.’

There was a pause.

‘The others will avoid me like the plague.’

‘Brother, have faith, we will get you out of here.’

‘They’ll avoid me like the plague’, Vallejo repeated; he didn’t seem to have listened to his friend.

‘There is something I must warn you about, César. You’re in danger in here too. Only eat the same food as everybody else is eating. Don’t accept food or drink that’s only for you. We will try to get you fruits through secure methods.’

He continued: ‘It was lucky that José Eulogio and Zoila Rosa were witness to your capture... by the way, why was Zoila Rosa in the main square at that time? Had you been on a date with her?’

He winked at him: ‘Or did you call her through telepathy? Ah, my dear César, there will always be a very beautiful woman in the darkest moments of your life.’

Vallejo smiled and realised that he hadn’t done so in a long time. He thought that despite the disgrace he was happy to have such extraordinary friends. Antenor continued: ‘As soon as José Eulogio Garrido saw them taking you to prison, he ran to tell me. We’ve organised ourselves to defend you.’

‘Do you know what’s happening with the preliminary investigations?’

‘There have been changes. Lots of changes. You remember, at the beginning you were only a witness to what happened in Santiago. But you also know that they changed the investigating judge and nominated a judge *ad hoc*.’

César knew about this but found it difficult to believe.

‘I don’t know what the new judge has done to turn around the preliminary investigations. You were a victim. Now you’re the suspect. He has persecuted you because, according to him, you’re not a witness but a suspect.’

‘A suspect?’

‘Now that you’re already in prison, you’re the principal suspect. According to judge Elias Iturri Luna Victoria, on 1 August 1920, in Santiago de Chuco, you opened fire at the policemen, who are now dead, who were keeping order in the city, in the Santa María family home.’

‘And how about my lawyer? What does Dr Ciudad say?’

‘The bad news is that they detained you in his house. The judge has threatened to prosecute him for obstructing the administration of justice. It wouldn’t be surprising if they also mixed in what happened in Santiago de Chuco because he’s the brother of the citizen killed by the police. So as not to harm you, Dr Ciudad won’t continue advising you but Dr Carlos Godoy will do so... Godoy accepted immediately. He’s an excellent person. You know him well.’

For a while not a word was spoken.

‘Now, the good news. I have got some...! After giving the detention order the judge Iturri has returned to Trujillo. Your lawyer has accused him of bias and is arguing that judge Iturri’s order is invalid. If he wins you’ll be out of here by the end of the month.’

The door opened and it was the warden calling Orrego. He came up to him and they chatted alone for a brief time.

When he came back Orrego explained: ‘He says time’s up.’

‘He’s a crazy old man.’

‘Not that crazy. He has asked us for some money to protect you and we’ve pooled our funds... But we trust him. He’s loyal to money. He’s reasonable. He has mind...’

‘Minds!’ Vallejo replied bursting into laughter. Orrego, not understanding the joke, left the prison somewhat surprised. At eight o’clock in the morning he said goodbye. Leaving early was part of the agreement made between Orrego and the warden. That way Vallejo’s enemies wouldn’t notice that his solitary confinement had been broken.

César held in his hands a basket of fruit and a feeling of security. His friends would fight for him. He felt happy for the first time in a long time and walked through the prison yard wrapped in a sea of bell tolls. They were ringing the whole time from the rafters. They reminded him that it was Sunday and that there were masses every hour in the churches in Trujillo. ‘Blessed be the dawn and the Lord who sends it to us’, his mother would sing. The bells were scattered in the Cathedral, in San Agustin, in Santo Domingo, in San Francisco, in San Lorenzo, in Santa Ana and maybe in the far off church of Huamán. For the first time César felt happy and wanted to believe that the bells of the temple of Huanchaco were also reaching his ears from the sea twenty kilometres away and he felt like he was there and could see the footprints of the wind shining along the sea.

He counted fourteen attendees at Father Toño’s mass. The prisoners received their relatives. Walking vendors were allowed to come in. A boy was running through the yard selling fried bread snacks. Vallejo sat down on the last bench and thought he was a boy again listening to the mass in the church of Santiago de Chuco. During the celebration some twenty people gathered into the congregation. The majority were women on visits. Every time someone arrived they had to go all the way to one of the front benches which were still free. On those occasions the congregation turned their head in unison like a group of marionettes.

Father Toño was thirty years old but his face was as childlike as that of an altar boy. His thin body, his lean cheeks and his desperate eyes revealed austerity and struggle to the death against the demon. He had wanted to become a missionary to convert the savages of the Amazon but his family managed to get the religious order to prevent him from embarking on that mission. The superior was constantly prohibiting fasting and flagellation and all sorts of suffering that the mystic imposed on himself. At the beginning of the gospel he spoke of poverty and said that Jesus was the brother of all the poor of the world.

‘Of people living in this shit...? Of the prisoners as well?’ asked the voice of somebody who wasn’t on the benches. Nobody knew who asked but the answer came back immediately: ‘Of prisoners too. Of course!’

In the middle of the sermon a sudden hush fell on the other side of the yard and distracted the attention of the assembled parishioners. Someone had entered the prison and their presence was provoking astonishment amongst visitors and visitees. Then came the sound of clacking heels coming towards the place of mass. The parishioners preferred to continue looking towards the altar but curiosity overcame Vallejo. He turned around and saw the strangest woman he had

ever seen. She was very tall and her head was topped with a Pompadour-style wig which made her look much taller. Her eyelashes extended out beyond her face. Accentuated by mascara they seemed to be made of wire and were swinging with every step. Then came her eyes enclosed inside a painted arch of golden make up. The short, tight dress accentuated shapes which had once been very attractive. It was incredible that this entire structure sustained itself on a couple of minute shoes with sharp high heels.

‘It’s María Pipi!’ the lady sitting in front of the poet said.

‘María Pipi? The madame of the brothel? Unbelievable!’ the other lady replied.

The priest was uncomfortable but didn’t want to show or express his discomfort. The woman had come to his parish and he had refused to receive her. In the street she had approached him and begged him to listen to her but it seemed to him improper to speak publicly with a libertine. Even though everybody had heard of her few knew her by sight. The girls in the brothel would strut around the streets openly but she preferred not to be seen. At night she reigned in a bar close to the Trujillo wall which was frequented by elegant youths and some suspicious travellers.

Prostitution was illegal but the authorities of the city tolerated it. In any case they received substantial shares paid by the madame who hence enjoyed great power and influence. The recent arrival looked for a free bench and sat down. One prisoner wanted to laugh but his laugh was muffled by the silent respect of the others. The women stopped praying to contemplate the madame as if wishing to compare themselves to her. Then María Pipi clapped her hands twice so that people would stop looking at her and the religious ceremony could continue. Everything went silent again. A flock of pigeons had decided to settle in the roof right by the altar. They crossed from one side of the vast yard to the other, soaring, cooing and making a racket. At the consecration of the host members of the congregation looked up at the birds rather annoyed as if to demand their silence but none of the pigeons took the slightest bit of notice. The prisoners who didn’t take communion gave the faithful their space and treated them with respect. Suddenly, there was a shout: ‘Bullshit!’

The man who had interrupted the service was the one who had questioned the priest before. He appeared to be about forty years old. He looked drunk and, after shouting out his vulgarity, he turned his face to the congregation and his back to the priest: ‘Who are you looking for?’ Two nearby prisoners took him by the arms and tried to pick him up. The man was laughing and crying in equal measures. He asked and then answered his own question: ‘Who are you looking for? God? God doesn’t live here anymore!’ He had considerable strength. He pushed out his arms and freed himself from the men holding him. He sent them back to their bench with a shove. Then he brandished a sharp knife and shouted that he would kill anyone who came close.

‘Where does God live? Where did you say God lives?’ he demanded of Father Toño and made a gesture to approach to take the pyx.

Nobody tried to stop him not even the two guards who attended the mass. He was armed, he was very strong and didn’t seem to fear God. The priest kneeled before him and begged him not to commit sacrilege.

‘Don’t do it, for the love of God!’ he began to say but then went quiet. It was pointless using the divine name before somebody who claimed God’s inexistence.

The man distanced himself from the chalice but stayed by the altar. He seemed intent on having fun. He found the jug of unconsecrated wine and drank it in a few gulps.

‘Do you want to see God? Very well, you’ll see him now. He’ll descend from heaven to save one of his own.’

He put the knife to the throat of the still kneeling priest and with the other hand he took him by the hair. He was ready to slit his throat and nobody could stop him. He held the priest by the hair and pointed to his neck.

‘Is God here?’ he asked.

The silver blade pointed to his heart.

‘Or here?’

The priest had his eyes closed but tears were spilling down from them.

‘Open your eyes, bastard, so you can see God!’

There was no way to contain the man. Nobody dared even ask him to leave Father Toño.

‘Right now, we are all going to see God!’

The pigeons quietened down. They were posed in rows on one of the walls. They seemed to be contemplating the scene.

‘Stop!’

Everybody turned towards the place where the voice had come from. From one of the last benches the madame stood up. Vallejo could only see the Pompadour wig advancing towards the altar.

‘You? You bloody whore?’

María Pipi ignored what he said and continued walking.

‘Don’t come any closer! I’ll cut the priest’s throat and then I’ll cut yours!’

The sharp heels were all that could be heard. The penetrating smell of her perfume ‘Paris Verbena’ inundated the space and overpowered the smoking mystical incense. The woman had already drawn up alongside the man and his future victim. The knife was gleaming.

‘I’m telling you that God is not here!’

The madame didn’t say a word. She just looked the attacker in the eye and stayed that way for a good while. At last she spoke: ‘Give me the knife! Give it to me!’ she repeated in a motherly voice.

She had interposed her voluminous anatomy between the priest and the assassin.

‘Give it to me, I’m asking you! Give it to me, my son!’

Nobody could remember what happened next. The man let go of the priest and headed for the woman with the weapon in his hand. When he reached her he took the knife in both hands and raised it up into the air. He then handed it over to her in tears and left. Then María Pipi lifted up the young priest who could barely walk and made him sit down on one of the benches at the front. She sat down next to him. Fear had made the minister of God weak. He wanted to say something but the woman put her finger on his lips to impose silence. Then she began to talk to him almost in his ear. The people held back. Only César Vallejo walked up to them and sat on the bench by the pair. The woman looked at him sadly but let him listen.

‘This is all I ask, Father. I know it’s a lot but it is within your power to do this.’

The priest could barely be understood. He was so frightened that he swallowed his words.

‘Relationship? You ask what relationship there was between me and Odilón Bocanegra? He was my husband! No, Father. Not in the eyes of the church but that is not what matters...’

She continued speaking to the priest.

‘How can you not know! He was a livestock thief... The most famous livestock thief in Cajabamba! He came to Trujillo to visit me and the police respected that. “How are you, Don Odilón, how’s business?” they’d say to him. Yesterday afternoon the police came up to him in

Moche. He let himself be arrested thinking that they'd ask for money and then let him go but that didn't happen. Someone had made them believe that my Odilón was a revolutionary and in cahoots with the anarco-sindicalists. They told him they were going to ask him some questions. They told me they started interrogating him and, to start with, they broke his teeth. When they tried to strip him, my man managed to get up. You know how strong he was! He took the gun from one of the guards and fought back. But he couldn't fight against so many. When he was already injured all over his body and they were about to catch him again, he shot himself in the mouth and there he stayed... Father, I've paid everything the police have asked of me and now I have a dead body in my house!

The priest managed to get up. His voice had returned to him.

'I owe you my life. What do you want from me?'

'Father! I've moved heaven and earth to be able to bury him in the cemetery but the church won't let me. They say that a suicide cannot be buried in consecrated ground. Be that as it may, I'll open a grave for him but first I want you to come to my house and give him your blessing. This is why I came to find you...'

The woman kneeled down. The priest did the same before her. He begged her – shouting and crying – not to ask this of him. He explained that he was only a humble servant of the Lord and he wasn't anybody to contradict the teachings of the Santa Madre church. He admitted that he was indebted to María Pipi and said that she could even ask for his life but never, never ever could she demand what she was demanding. He said it in screams with his eyes shut. When he opened them he noticed that nothing had changed in the universe. There on her knees in front of him was the woman.

'Father, please, if you don't bless him now, his soul will never rest.'

He replied that God was terrible in his vengeance and that his powerful voice was crying out from the other side of the ocean. He added that without Him the impious couldn't expect anything more than a base life and an eternity in darkness. The priest extended his arms to explain the dimensions of his limitless Go – without centre or circumference, without forgiveness or oblivion for sinners – and he began pacing as though he were preaching. Then César remembered his friend, Father Hipólito, and thought that he had not refused the sinner nor those who had committed suicide. He looked at the woman and it was as if she had read his thoughts when she exclaimed: 'Father Hipólito would have done it. He came to visit me many times and gave me confession. He pardoned my sins. He taught me that the kindness of the Lord was infinite and that I hadn't committed any crime that couldn't be pardoned.'

The woman was also shouting.

'He assured me that God was infinitely greater than my sins. I told him that the church had always condemned me. He thought about it and said that God both was and wasn't in the church. He made me see that a congregation of individuals found it hard to understand the Lord.'

'Father Hipólito said that? Remember he's very old. I can't understand why he'd say that. And why haven't you gone back to him?'

'Don't you know, Father? Where have you been? He died a month ago but before his death he asked to be buried in Santiago de Chuco.'

César Vallejo couldn't carry on. He got to his feet. He saw the priest let himself go and he heard him cry out:

'Don't insist, woman! When he killed himself, this man put himself out of the infinite grace of the merciful God. Not even God could pardon him.'



His eyes looked like those of a corpse which had been recently buried and then brought back to life. He smelled like the earth of the grave. The woman was still gazing at him with a surprised look. She stared at the young priest's sweet eyes and cruel mouth, and an instant later changed her attitude. She stopped begging him. She seemed to pity him.

'Poor Toño! You must suffer so much, my son', she said and held him towards her.

The priest obeyed as though hypnotised. The woman smiled with tenderness. She remembered that in her prime they had called her the deflowerer. She was a specialist in turning adolescents of Trujillo into young men but she wasn't going to try this now; she only wanted to give him a little affection. She made him sit by her side. She took him by the head and stroked his hair. Then she combed through it with her fingers, calmed him and brought him to her bosom.

'Poor child! You must have suffered so much...'

Vallejo couldn't believe it. Father Toño's head was resting on the low cut dress of his saviour; the young man looked very much at ease. She murmured in his ear and he did nothing but breathe in and out slowly as though experiencing for the first time an oily, desirable scent. The only thing Vallejo could hear was the order:

'Yes, now. Let's go so you can bless him!'

The air smelled of blood mixed with honey molasses and Parisian perfume.

They left together.

*I feel God journeying*

*So deep within me, with the evening and with the sea.*

*With him we go together. Night falls.*

*With him we spend the nightfall orphanhood...*

*But I feel God. And it even seems*

*That he commands me I don't know what good colour.*

*Like a Hospaliter, he is good and sad;*

*A lover's sweet disdain withers:*

*His heart must hurt so much.*

*Oh, God of mine, only now I reach you,*

*This afternoon in which I love so greatly; today*

*In the false balance of some breasts,*

*I measure and weep a fragile Creation.*

*And you, how you will weep.. you, in love*

*With so many huge spinning breasts...*

*I consecrate you GOD, because you love greatly;*

*Because you never smile; because always*

*Your heart must hurt you so much.*

## Who is César Vallejo?

In 1910 the young Vallejo's vocation veered towards medicine. Without the money to study this degree course in Lima he enrolled in the first year of Arts at the National University of Trujillo. He was hoping to get a job in the city to pay for his university fees but months passed without finding one. A restaurant wanted him as a waiter but this didn't give him enough time for his studies. The schools didn't need teachers until the following year. A family wanted to contract him as a tutor for two children but only offered him food and board. When his resources became insufficient to survive he made his way back to Santiago de Chuco. During the journey he wondered if he would ever complete his university studies and if he really would fulfil the promise to become a poet he had made before his dying master. This reminded him that a great friend of Don Abraham lived in Quirivulca. 'If you ever pass through Quirivulca, give him my regards. He's like a brother to me and he will help you.'

Then the young man headed for Quirivulca. The Justice of the Peace of this mine enclave, Eleodoro Ayllón, was tall, thin and large-nosed. He wore oversized tortoise shell spectacles with a black frame. He was sitting in front of a small portable writing desk with a stack of sheets on one side, several stamps and a dust to dry the documents. Behind him there was a portrait of the president of Peru and a spittoon. He took his pen out from a jar of indigo ink and was scratching on a piece of paper. The judge said what he was writing out loud. It was as though he was speaking to the paper. He didn't stop to present himself to Vallejo because he was telling the piece of paper the story of a couple whom he had reconciled.

'On the basis of which Santiago Roncal and Florcita de Roncal agree before this court to forgive each other in a reciprocal manner and abandon the dispute they presented...'

He chuckled at the end and wanted to know the opinion of the shy young man in front of him. He looked up at him over his spectacles: 'Don't they seem to you like a pair of idiots? Would you...! Would you tell a stranger everything that happened in your house and your bed? Everything? Please! They should have gone looking for Dr Sigmund Freud and not the Justice of the Peace of Quirivulca.'

César couldn't answer because he hadn't paid attention to the story.

The judge asked him to sit down and carried on writing: 'Now, I was settling the dispute between two farmers with neighbouring lands. The cows were grazing in the pastures of the other. For all of which, before me and before this Justice of the Peace, the owner of the cow agrees to yield a litre of milk every day to his neighbour..'

He stirred the ink. He looked up again and commented:

'Everything that exists on the planet needs me to register its existence.'

Vallejo had wanted to present himself. He thought that he was in the presence of a deluded man and was quite dubious but didn't restrain himself:

'Why do you say this?'

'Because I'm a man!' the judge replied. 'And not one of the creatures in nature exists before the human being discovers it and gives it a name...'

He touched the earth: 'This is mine', he said. 'As a man I'm sovereign of nature and of my own destiny.'

'He's not a fool', the young man thought and presented himself:

'My name is César Vallejo. My teacher was Don Abraham Arias. He told me that if I ever passed through this town I should look out for you.'

'Abraham! My brother! But tell me, young man, what do you want from me?'

'I'm looking for work. I came to say I'm looking for work. But I realise that, as well as being a judge, you are a philosopher. What could I tell you? I think that rather than work what I'm looking for is my destiny. I only find failures. Failure after failure.'

'Failures? Do you want me to applaud you for this? If you only find failures then you're already close to your destiny...! Failure after failure, what you must search for is your name and the reason for that name. You have to find out what you want to be, where you're going and who you are. What did you say your name was? Did you say César Vallejo? Then you must ask yourself who is César Vallejo. When you know that, you will begin to head towards your destiny and nobody will be able to stop you.'

He offered him work as a scribe. He had little money and said so but César accepted. Now he had the feeling that he would arrive anyway at the university he wanted to get to. So any position, however badly paid it was, gave him reason to hope.

Not long afterwards César would replace Mr Ayllón in many tasks. He did so fairly and with a sense of justice to the point where, quite incredibly, there were many occasions where both parties were happy with his verdict. The appellants at the court started referring to him as 'doctorcito' on account of his eighteen years of age, his wisdom and his mysterious gaze.

A week after his arrival, in the door of the market he met a corpulent bearded man who smiled at him. He didn't recognise him at first and thought that he must have confused him with someone else.

'Little César! Don't you recognise me?'

Close up he knew who he was. Through the yellowish beard the smile of the blind Santiago was unmistakable.

'Blind Santiago! It's you!'

Although he was no longer blind he still had the habit of looking people straight in the face.

'What? What are you looking at?' asked César but remembered that that's how blind people look and maybe also ex-blind people.

He was working in the pits. He directed two teams of miners. He had married. He was happy and didn't need much to be so. His eyes were shining. They would see each other every Sunday. Some time later on, in Trujillo, Vallejo told his friends that the light of the world is in the men's eyes. If it weren't so we would spin aimlessly in a persistent darkness. He discovered this in Santiago's eyes.

The city was bigger and darker than when he had passed through it with the muleteers many years before on the way to Huamachuco. One of the hills he'd seen in his childhood had been removed from the slope. In its place a crater boasted its blackness. The company failed in

its attempt to find minerals and left it abandoned. Ashes and gases still emanated from its interior as well as an unbearable smoke and odour that enveloped the houses early in the morning.

The tussles between co-habitants, farmers and small businessmen were easy to resolve for the judge and his assistant. There was, however, a group of people over whom no-one had jurisdiction and they were the ferocious police of Quirivulca. They robbed the houses, raped the girls and more than once caused a neighbour to disappear in mysterious circumstances. No judge was permitted to prosecute them. Like all companies the mine had additional features to its service. The Peruvian state assigned an army squad to the production managers to defend them against the workers' protests. In this way, as the Supreme Government in Lima assured, the free enterprise, foreign investment and sanctity of private property were protected against the evils of social unrest.

In Quirivulca protest was slowly brewing amongst the workers. The working week lasted six days. The workers rested on Sundays but it was obligatory to go to mass and listen to a long sermon which almost always spoke about the sin of social unrest. The day began at six o'clock in the morning and ended at eight at night, they were paid less than the agreed amount and no measures were taken to prevent the frequent accidents. The wives and children of the victims couldn't count on any help and almost always ended up resorting to having to beg in order to survive. The company owned the only grocery shop and the two markets for clothes and footwear and the workers received the products in the form of a credit that was deducted every month from their miserable salaries. The high interests turned this credit into a permanent debt. Leaving Quirivulca under these conditions was impossible. Whoever left owing money was considered a criminal whom the police pursued and hunted down like an escaped animal. Thousands of hectares of land had been devastated by the smoke from the mine. The landowners didn't know how to deal with the dead land; all it produced was stunted plants and weeds. The middle men then offered them work in a foreign company which, according to the propaganda, paid excellent salaries and even included clothes, food and all types of provisions. The reality was completely different.

For their part the soldiers enjoyed their state salary as well as the additional pay. They were paid by the owners of the mine to buy utter loyalty. However they didn't face popular uprising because the day was so long and so exhausting that the miners had no strength to initiate protest. From Lima the superiors demanded that the police justify their salary. They sent them telegrams and letters. They urged them to uncover and capture anarchist agitators. According to the letters from the capital the country was full of anarchists. In the street and in the factories these men were propagating the idea that one day everybody would be equal and live like brothers. Then there would be neither rich nor poor, no masters nor slaves, no weapons nor armies, no property nor hate.

There were some clashes between the security forces and the workers but nothing that could be called organised subversion. On 11 April 1910 a mine-shaft collapsed and dozens of workers were trapped. Those lucky enough to be rescued were seriously injured, and were then dismissed by the company. The relatives of the victims marched to the administration to demand justice but were met with gunfire. The result was eight dead women. The chief of police celebrated the action and assured that the widows had been reunited in heaven with their husbands.

*They have their head, their trunk, their extremities,  
They have trousers, their metacarpal fingers and a little stick...*

On another occasion the armed forces waited in the mouth of the mine for protestors complaining about the rise in price of goods. They wanted to teach them a lesson but the workers were prepared and some of the workers who were never identified threw a cartridge of dynamite which blow one police officer's hand off. After that the security forces chose to retreat.

*The miners came out of the mine  
Soaring over their future ruins,  
Swaddling their health with gun reports  
And, elaborating their mental function,  
Closed with their voices  
The adit in the shape of a deep symptom.*

This was the moment when Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois decided to get himself a promotion. The young soldier needed it urgently because he was a 'poor gringo'. In Peru those who were born white felt they had the right to be rich and important. When they weren't they were called 'poor gringos'. Such was his case. He found himself so poor and so lacking in influence that he had been sent to serve in what he called 'the asshole of the world'. Since he hadn't achieved promotion in the army he had joined the police at the rank of captain.

But now everything would change for him. Dubois wanted to rise to lieutenant by slitting the throat of a social revolution even before it had begun. This would impress his superiors in Lima. Therefore he would have to find the alleged leader of the anarchists, punish him and thereby strike fear in the hearts of his cohorts.

On the night of 28 July he met up with his men and spoke to them about the colours of the national flag. 'The white signifies the purity of our conscience and the snow of our mountain peaks. The red is the blood of those who have sacrificed themselves to give us freedom....' The men were annoyed because this was a day of rest and the chief – with his speech – was wasting their valuable free time. He went on to tell a story about the war. Before long he approached a soldier, who happened to be unprepared.

'Why did the Chileans conquer us?' he asked.

'Honestly, I don't know, Captain.'

'What? How can you not know? They conquered us because we were unprepared. When Chile buys a boat we have to buy two.'

The men nodded in agreement. One of them showed agreement by flexing the index finger of his right hand.

'They conquered us because we were generous. We are very generous. When Miguel Grau sank the Esmerelda what did he do with the conquered sailors?... Let's see who knows...'

Nobody responded.

'He saved them from drowning and brought them on his boat. Should we do things that way?'

'Yes, Captain, of course. We should be like Grau', the sergeant responded.

'Are you crazy? This is why we lost the war... We cannot be so generous that they take us for stupid assholes. They should have cracked the Chilean's skulls open with their oars.'

A general guffaw of agreement.

'Neither generous nor unprepared. This is how here in Quirivilca we must find the anarchists and destroy them. Crack their skulls open.'

They agreed.

‘And where are we going to find them?’

Nobody answered. Few of them knew what it meant to be an anarchist.

‘Do you know what an anarchist is? What! You don’t know? An anti-Peruvian. Someone who wants to share out the land with the Indians. People who claim that education should be free. Do you know any people who are like that here in town?’

Everybody remained silent.

The sergeant said that he had read about anarchists in Lima but luckily they still hadn’t come to Quirivilca.

‘They haven’t come here? The chief of the anarchists is that Santiago, the one with the star on his forehead.’

‘But, Captain, that man is illiterate. The anarchists are educated men’, the sergeant replied.

‘Pure tactics. He’s the strongest of them all. Everybody respects him. He meets up with everybody. He has definitely already organised a group of saboteurs.’

At nine o’clock that evening they went to look for him at home. They told his wife it would only take a couple of hours because the superior wanted to speak to him.

‘Don’t worry, ma’m. We aren’t arresting your husband. We just need to talk to him.’

They took him to the station. As the captain was at a party they didn’t interrogate him at that point but they left him tied to a stake in the yard with the horses.

The ropes were unnecessary because Santiago didn’t want to run away. He thought it was all a mistake and that, as soon as it was cleared up, the captain would let him go. Even though he could have untied himself and escaped he stayed in the straw loft talking to the horses whose luminous eyes burned slowly in the thick night of Quirivilca.

At nearly three o’clock in the morning they took him to the Prevention Office. Dubois was already there and wanted to interrogate him:

‘Your personal details?’

‘My what?’

‘Hey, Ramirez’, he called to one of his subordinates.

‘Yes, Captain.’

‘Have this man’s personal details already been taken?’

‘Yes, Captain... Sorry, no, Captain. Sorry Captain, what are the personal details?’

‘How long have you been here, you brute? The personal details are the name, surname, age, origin, religion and level of education of the accused.’

‘We were waiting for you to arrive, Captain.’

‘Do we have to waste time like this? Then what have you been doing with him? Playing cards?’

‘No, Captain. Sorry, Captain.’

‘It’s fine, it’s fine! Let’s let it go today. We’ll get his details after interrogation.’

He lit a cigarette. He pretended to read the newspaper. Then he spat.

‘Your name is Santiago, right? Do you recognise this paper? Is this your writing?’

‘I don’t know how to write.’

‘You don’t know how to what?’

‘To write.’

‘To write, sir. Learn how to say “sir”.’

‘To write, sir.’

‘Maybe tonight you will learn to write and read fluently. Do you recognise this knife?’

‘No, sir. Can I go now?’

‘This knife is yours, dammit. My men found it together with other sharp weapons that you and your men were keeping to strike and kill the bosses. I want to know who your accomplices are.’

‘My accomplices?’

‘Simple. You give us their names and you walk out of that door.’

He didn’t understand anything he saw. He didn’t understand why they hung him by the arms. He didn’t understand why they whipped him. He spent three nights like a dead pig hanging from the butcher’s hook. Most of the time he was unconscious. In the breaks between torture they woke him up with a bucket of water. Then he saw the thin moustache of the captain demanding him to confess.

On the fourth day they took him down from the hook and sat him in front of Dubois.

He couldn’t hold his head up. His neck wouldn’t obey him.

‘Tie him up against the back of the chair. I’m already tired of this guy, dammit.’

They immobilised him. It wasn’t necessary because he couldn’t even hold himself up. They had depleted his strength. He couldn’t hold up against three days of hunger, of beatings, castration, the pain of destroyed teeth, exposure to cold, infection in uncured wounds. Captain Dubois got up from the place where he had been interrogating him. He walked around the room and came up behind his back. But Santiago didn’t sense it because he had remained asleep.

‘Are you sleeping? It looks like you’re sleeping.’

He placed his fingers on his eye sockets.

‘They told me you used to be blind. Now you’ll be blind again... if you don’t change your mind and give us a list of your friends.’

Santiago woke up and looked at the captain’s face.

‘Give us the names of your friends and the sergeant will be kind enough to take good aim.’

This was the last thing he saw. He felt the fingers of the young soldiers plunge in and experienced a greater pain than all the others he had suffered. Then everything went dark. He returned to the darkness he had emerged from a few years before. Or maybe he went back to the infinite darkness from which we all come when we enter into this world.

‘It seems this guy is already a gonna, Captain. He’s already kicked the bucket and he hasn’t even said a single word.’

‘Don’t worry. I know how to make dead men talk. Sergeant, you’ll be the secretary. This is a police report. Copy out the names. These are the names that Santiago was going to give us...’

Informed by Santiago’s wife that day César Vallejo and a group of citizens turned up at the station to demand news about the missing man.

‘What are you saying, Sergeant? That they’re coming to demand news about this man? Are they terrorists or just insolent? No, I won’t receive them. Who’s leading the group? César Vallejo? Who is César Vallejo?’

‘César Vallejo is the judge’s assistant.’

‘Who is César Vallejo, did you say? The snotty brat who works with the Justice of the Peace? Oy, wait, better we nip this in the bud. Tell them to wait for me and that I’m coming to have a word with them.’

He went out to talk to the group.

‘What do you want?’

‘We have come for an explanation about what has happened to Santiago...’, Vallejo began to speak.

‘One moment... If you want to speak to me, address me in the appropriate way. Say ‘We have come, Captain...’

‘I won’t say this because I’m not your subordinate.’

Dubois didn’t react immediately. He was used to the humble villagers bowing their heads. He asked himself who this guy could be who dared disobey him. Perhaps he was important and from a good family. Perhaps he was Colonel Vallejo Uribarri’s nephew. He would ask him some other time. For now he preferred to be careful.

‘What do you want? Armed forces to come out looking for some guy who has run away from his wife?’ He laughed and wanted the sergeant to join him in the joke but it didn’t work.

‘This is not the information we have’, Vallejo retorted. ‘We know that Santiago was arrested three nights again by your officers and he hasn’t come home.’

‘Oh God! You’ve got the wrong man. You’re referring to the terrorist who was arrested on Tuesday night.’

‘We are referring to Santiago Castillo, a mine-worker. He’s not a terrorist.’

‘How do you know? He wouldn’t be your party colleague by any chance? You wouldn’t be an anarchist as well, would you?’

‘The question is how you know what you know. Where did you obtain the information that Santiago is a terrorist? There haven’t been any acts of terror in Quirivilca. In any case we want to know where he is.’

‘An anti-Peruvian Terrorist! A saboteur of our natural resources! An anti-Peruvian sell-out to the Chileans... just like all the Indians!’

‘Mr Dubois: All the men of this land along with their fathers and grandfathers have given their blood in defence of this nation. When the foreigners invaded Peru it was they who formed guerrillas. The enemy didn’t spare them their lives. Hundreds of men and women died. Wherever you look the land is sprinkled with their blood. They are the men and women who accompanied Cáceres. They are the descendants of Grau and Bolognesi. They are Peru and they’re not just some poor folk. They’re not just cowards disguised as soldiers.’

By this point Dubois was convinced that Vallejo had an important relative. How else could he speak to him in this way? At that time Judge Ayllón had joined the group of people demanding news about Santiago. The captain restrained himself.

‘Calm down, Mr Vallejo. Don’t treat me disrespectfully. This man was arrested because he was organising a plot against the mine. They were going to assassinate the superintendent and his family. We found out in time and stopped the conspiracy.’

‘We want to know where Santiago is. Where are you keeping him?’

‘Where is he? Well, if you find out, let me know. He was arrested on Tuesday but when they were bringing him in he escaped. He wanted to kill one of my officers and he escaped... No, go away. Go away, please!’

The Justice of the Peace, Eleodoro Ayllón, received a telegram four days later from the High Court of Trujillo in which they relieved him of the post in which he had worked for more than thirty years and expressed their appreciation ‘for the important services rendered to the nation.’

‘It’s my fault, your honour! You weren’t in the group from the beginning.’



‘It pains me that you didn’t let me know, César. I’m not so old. I joined the protest because I had to. My conscience dictated what I must do.’

The moon was in the west under the dark silhouette of the mountains. If what the captain said was true Santiago would have gone via those routes towards the coast. If it wasn’t true his spirit would be flying away. For the judge and his assistant it was also time to go.

César asked: ‘And now do you still not accept that failure follows me everywhere?’

‘Failure, young man?... Now you know why you exist. Now you also know who you’re defending. Before long you will know exactly who César Vallejo is.’

‘And what will you do?’

‘What will I do?... Pack my bags! The mine administration has told me I have to leave my house to the next judge.’

His wife came up to him.

‘I’m going with her to Trujillo. We never had children. She’s old and if anything happened to me she would be left completely on her own. And you as well, you must leave immediately. You could be the next terrorist and Captain Dubois’s next victim.’

The tall, thin, large-nosed judge sat down for the last time in front of the desk in his office, picked up his pen, dipped it in indigo ink and began to scratch away on a page.

‘So what are you writing now? Or rather, who are you writing to?’

‘What? To the Court! They’ve given me thanks for the important services rendered to the nation...’

He wrote two lines and poured drying powder on them. As if addressing the page, he muttered: ‘Lady Court, Lady Nation: go fuck yourself.’

Now without a job, César followed the judge’s advice and left for his hometown. He would be late arriving. During this time several things happened in Quirivulca.

The captain and his two trusted soldiers took Santiago’s body to the avenue at the town entrance. It was early morning and nobody saw them while they looked for a tall enough tree. It was there they hung up the corpse. When they had finished the task the captain walked about ten metres away. He contemplated his work, enraptured as if he were an artist. The dead man was swaying like a scarecrow.

Dubois spat out his words: ‘We should have hung up the other one as well’, he said.

Three days later he made them take the body down from the tree. Then he ordered an officer to take a box of his remains to Santiago de Chuco and hand the box over to the priest of the town.

‘The captain says that here is your bell ringer. He wants his congregation to find out what happens to anarchist rebels.’

Dubois didn’t get his promotion. The superiors were very impressed by what was in the newspapers on 1 August 1910: ‘Centre of anarchist trade-unionist agitation disbanded. Terrorists on the run.’ The next day the papers added: ‘The town gets justice. Humble folk capture terrorist and hang him from a tree.’ But they didn’t promote Dubois. Another more influential white man from Lima got the promotion.

César Vallejo went with his family to the burial of the bell ringer’s remains. It rained throughout the ceremony. He raised his right hand and extended it with the palm turned towards the ceiling.

‘The memories are dripping. How can we forget?’

At the exit of the pantheon the water had formed a lagoon. César saw himself in it and thought that he was no longer the César of yesteryear. The face he saw reflected in the water had

received tremendous blows from life. He was different. His feet were making footprints in the mud.

*It's as if they were counting my footsteps.*



## Rita of the Wild Reed and the Dusk Berry

César Vallejo had no future. He'd messed up his university studies in Lima and Trujillo because of a lack of money. Neither was his freedom a given as his recent experience in Quiruvilca had shown him. He arrived in Santiago de Chuco on 19 February 1911 and, as he was approaching the village, he told himself that in a land as ferocious as Peru the rights and lives of the people were of far less import than the belongings of the rich.

At the entrance to the town the man driving the pack of mules said, 'Whoa! Whoa!' to bring the animals to a halt and deposit the travellers there. It was seven in the morning and, weighed down by only a small bag, the young man began the walk towards the paternal home.

All of a sudden, a girl came running after him and he speeded up to the same pace.

It all seemed fairly amusing and he greeted her with a nod of the head. She smiled at him and said cheerfully: 'Hello there!' She was rather a pretty girl and she carried on laughing and trotting along at his side. She seemed to know him.

'Your name's César Vallejo, isn't it?'

He was tempted to ask her how she knew but, despite how pretty she was, he was in a rush and he didn't want to get into some daft conversation.

'Aha!'

She then started trotting a bit faster but when she found herself a block ahead she turned round so as to face him again.

'You're not going to say hello then?'

'I think I already did. Anyway I don't know your name'.

'Men's memories are pretty disagreeable', the girl said. She turned her head back and adopted the tone of an older woman. She pulled up a blade of grass and started to chew it. She watched him out of the corner of her eye.

'What are you up to?'

'You can see what I'm doing. I'm here on a visit.'

'I can see that. But I don't know what it is you were doing away from Santiago. Oh, I do know. You're a student and also a magistrate.'

She then kicked a stone with the point of her shoe.

'Oww!' she shouted.

'Are you going to let me carry on?'

'Feel free.'

He began to recognize her.

'What's your name?'

‘What’s it to you?’

‘No. It can’t be. You’re...?’

‘I’m Rita. And you’re a senile old man.’

Then they both laughed out loud. César arranged his bag on his shoulder and walked along with Rita by his side, each of them trying to see who could kick the stones the furthest.

She was his neighbour. He hadn’t seen her since he was very little and now she was a very beautiful teenager. When she was little she’d ask for his handkerchief and iron it for him. Now, as they were arriving at the Vallejo-family house, she said to him.

‘Let’s make sure we catch up. We’ve got a lot to talk about.’

César was a little taken aback and he asked himself what he might have to talk about with the girl.

‘How long are you here for? For the holidays?’

‘Pretty much, yes, for the holidays.’

‘We’ll have plenty of time then. I want you to tell me all about Trujillo.’

*Beloved purity, that my eyes never  
came to enjoy. Absurd purity!*

*I know that you were in the flesh one day,  
when I wove still my embryo of life.*

*Purity in a neutral school skirt;  
and blue milk inside the tender wheat...*

They carried on seeing one another. César would hang about next to Rita’s window. The bars and the shutter were all he could see. He spoke as if he were having a conversation with himself whilst Rita would play along and do the same inside. Sometimes she couldn’t contain herself and she would open the window.

*Over is the stranger whom, late  
at night, you returned with, endlessly chatting...*

The girl’s parents noticed that these conversations were rather frequent and they were none too pleased at the prospect of a romance. The social gulf between the two youngsters was unbridgeable.

The young man was from one of the middle-class families of the town but that didn’t make him an ideal suitor. The owners of the huge Julcán Ranch assumed that, when the time was right, their daughter would marry some young buck of the highest social and economic standing. It would be better if he were from Trujillo or Lima. The youngsters saw each other and chatted a great deal during the remaining months of 1911. In 1912 the parents took drastic action. Rita was sent to Trujillo under the strict custody of the French Dominican mothers who presided over the Santa Rosa College.

Although the education there was suitable for someone of her standing it was nothing more than a precautionary measure, and was almost punitive. In Santa Rosa College the entire primary education was covered but the most important classes were those which dealt with home

management and etiquette and were designed to turn the girls into refined and fashionable young ladies capable of finding a good match at the appropriate time.

In 1913 César arrived in Trujillo and, towards the middle of the year, their relationship had resumed. Everything was so secret that not even César's friends knew about it. The strict boarding-school regime prevented Rita from going out into the town. She was only allowed out with her classmates to visit the cathedral on Sundays for mass. Afterwards the pupils would walk, two abreast on the pavement, along the four blocks which separated the church from the college. César Abraham would wait at the corner where Progreso street met Orbegoso street and there they would look longingly at each other. Then he would have to wait to see her again until the following Sunday.

César Abraham managed to smuggle some letters to her and she would reply by the same means. They needed the involvement of a friend and Carlos Valderrama proved to be that friend. The musician would visit the college in his capacity as pianist with the choir. Rita, who was a soprano, would manage to get close to him and they would exchange the letters.

One day Vallejo decided to open his heart.

'Thanks, Carlos. I really ought to tell you. I think I've always been in love with Rita. Perhaps it was her voice that drew me to her, a voice which always sings, as my mother used to sing. I don't know if it's that. The only thing I'm sure of is that after mass on Sunday I looked at her and looked at her and I realised then how I had to die.'

Finally what had been an adolescent conversation in Santiago de Chuco became in Trujillo, because of the hostility of the parents, a storm that was difficult to contain and which was on the verge of getting out of control at any moment. What other choice could one make apart from allowing oneself to be carried along by the winds? Passion was more than just a sentiment for them; it was destiny.

'They're taking me back to Santiago de Chuco, César. Shutting me up in a boarding school isn't enough for them. They know you're in Trujillo and they want to split us up for good. My parents have written to the headmistress and have told her that they plan to remove me from the college. Mother Marie Antoinette told me. They'll keep me at the ranch for a few weeks and then they'll take me to Lima. I'm leaving on 14 March. Perhaps this letter will be the last you hear of me...'

César was well aware that his life would always consist of losing what he loved most.

'I understand. I love you. I understand.'

He couldn't write any more. She replied: 'I'll be going to Menocucho by train. There I'll be met by the ranch foreman and some armed men who will escort me on to Santiago. It's possible that I'll reach there a day before they do. You could get the earlier train and wait for me.'

That was what they decided upon.

*The terrestrial sphere of love  
that lagged below, turns round  
and round without stopping a second,  
and we are condemned to suffer,  
as a centre, its rotation.*

The carriages of the train trundled slowly and heavily along. The carriages twisted and turned as they entered and left the tunnels which appeared from nowhere, as valleys and

mountain ridges appeared before them, above and below the world. From the window of the train to Menocucho César Vallejo's gaze emerged and it rested on the first and the last of the carriages whose wheels, like the terrestrial sphere of love, turned around and around without stopping for a second. At last the train came to a halt at a sleepy station. There, along with dozens of other travellers César advanced without being completely sure if he was entering or leaving a dream.

The poet made his way towards an inn on the outskirts of the town. The streets were two parallel lines strewn with houses which looked as though they'd be more suitable for birds and along the roofs of which, every so often, wild fowl were scavenging. He eventually reached the posada where they gave him a key and he went up to the first floor. His room was huge and it was furnished with a bed and a wardrobe with a mirror which returned to him his bright stare through the murky humidity.

In the patio he could make out a donkey next to a geranium and various exquisite flowers. He would have to wait there for three days before the next train from Trujillo brought him the apparition he so desired. During this interlude, which seemed to him eternal, his life would be reduced to a handful of basic activities, such as sitting on the bed, taking up a piece of paper, trying to write on it, discovering that he couldn't do it and finally, going over to the window to see the outline of the donkey and the tub of geraniums and in the hazy distance, the station at which the next train was yet to arrive.

Although he dreamt a thousand times that it would never come the train finally arrived. Sound came before image and once more César heard the hundreds of wheels that sobbed and trailed behind and which turned around and around without let up like the terrestrial sphere of love. It was the train which arrived from Trujillo at six o' clock in the evening when darkness had already conquered Menocucho. But he had to carry on waiting. It had been agreed that he wouldn't go to the station to greet her but that they would meet in the hostel. He could see the group of travellers who fanned out from the station to the various posadas in the town. They were going to see one another for the last time whilst night, dark and warmth encircled Menocucho. The heavens seemed drenched in a dark water from which millions of illuminations surged forth in waves.

He was not supposed to speak to anyone, nor ask for the young girl, simply resign himself to waiting.

When it was half past six and everything was dark Vallejo finally emerged from his room, went a few steps and entered the adjacent room, the door of which was ajar. In spite of the fact that every room contained a kerosene lamp the light from this lamp was cast on thousands of mosquitoes but it didn't light up, nor give form to, the two bodies which were moving towards each other, trying to find one another.

Eventually they got close enough to realise that they both existed and that they were alone. Like two heavenly bodies lost in the silence of the universe. Like two stars descending together into the abyss. The whole universe had disappeared except for the two brightest stars but they were melting away. They seemed transformed into two burning and spinning suns. Someone switched off the moon.

*What will be doing at this very hour, my sweet Andean Rita  
of the wild reed and the dusk berry;  
now that Byzantium smothers me and that blood  
dozes, like insipid brandy, inside me.*

*Where will her hands be that on those evenings,  
in a contrite posture, ironed-out forthcoming whitenesses;  
now, in this rain that strips away  
my desire to go on living.*

*What of her flannel skirt; of her  
worries; of her pace;  
of her zest of those May sugar-canes of the place.*

*She must be at the door staring at the cloud-lined sky,  
and then trembling she will say: 'Jesus! . . . How cold it is!'  
And on the roof-tiles a savage bird will cry.*

It rained the whole night. The tiles on the roof chatted with the rain. They were the only thing to chat that night.

Beneath the tiles someone was crying. Or perhaps they dreamt that they were.

'It's very nearly dawn.'

'Yes.'

'Are you sure you're here? Are you sure we're together?'

'I can't be. I think we slept a while and I think that even whilst asleep I still saw you. That might be the dream.'

'You're very thin.'

She barely had enough breath to speak; he kept quiet. It simply occurred to him to tell her that he had never believed she was so beautiful.

'Are you sure you're ok?' Rita asked.

'I'm only sure of one thing.'

'Yes?'

'That everything is predetermined and that time is marching on.'

'But, do you think everything means something? What I mean is, if we're only going to see each other this one time ever', she asked and then provided her own answer:

'Yes. Of course it does', she affirmed as if in that moment she had reached maturity. 'This doesn't even last for two days. This doesn't pass by.'

'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure. What we're going through is not one day. It's much longer than that. It's a memory. It's one of your poems.'

She kissed him without any passion as the breeze kisses a garden. She kissed him in solemn fashion as the sea kisses the image of the moon. She kissed him again, without let up, as though the storm had returned. Later on they went down for breakfast. They had never been together in any public place but they both had the sensation that it had all happened before and that it would go on happening for ever. They had spent the night together and now they were tasting breakfast whilst none of the other travellers or the owners of the posada paid them any attention. Although they were together they were two invisible people who were trying to fix their eyes on the coffee but, when she raised her eyes, she was crying.

'What happened? How did they find out?' César asked.

'They found out?' Rita answered with a question.

'I don't know. I suppose so.'

‘What is it that they ought to have found out?’

‘I’ve no idea what.’

‘Is this what we should be talking about at this moment, the final moment.’

‘I’ve told you lots of other things’, César insisted.

‘You’ve told me things that are impossible.’

‘Impossible?’

‘César, for God’s sake. We’re living in a time that isn’t ours. Different times will come but they’re not meant for us.’

‘I’m reluctant to believe in impossibilities.’

‘You know better than I do that it’s impossible. To elope, run off together. Where? We’ve already discussed this. There’s no point thinking about it.’

‘So what are we going to think about?’

‘My parents went to Trujillo six months ago and asked me if we were still seeing one another. I asked them how on earth we’d manage that. They stared at me and chose not to answer rather than give me ideas.’

‘But we’ve never been so close. It’s the first time.’

‘In this life. Do you think there will be another life?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘They carried on asking me and I kept replying with the question about how would it be possible for us to see each other. Perhaps it was them who gave me the idea about all this that we’re doing now.’

‘You said that we’re doing this. Are you sure?’

‘And how about you, are you sure?’

He closed his eyes. He raised both his hands to touch her face.

‘Did you tell them anything?’

‘What could I tell them?’

‘I don’t know. Something.’

‘I told them we were lovers.’

César Abraham smiled. They had never been closer to one another than three metres. They had never known one another except in dreams... until now.

‘Maybe I was right. Maybe we’re going to be lovers for the rest of our lives... in the other life.’

‘And how about your father? What did your father say?’

‘He stared at me.’

‘When was this?’

‘They arrived from Santiago and they went to the college. They spoke with the mother superior and told her they had a great deal to discuss with me and also with her.’

‘And why didn’t you tell me?’ Vallejo asked and then it dawned on him that it would have been impossible.

‘Why did you tell them we were something which we weren’t then?’ he said, changing the question.’

‘I don’t know. It was my parents’ pride. It hurt me.’

She turned and looked round the restaurant. He hadn’t raised his eyes the whole time. He had only moved his shoulders when he spoke.

‘Don’t cry, Rita. Please don’t cry.’



‘We’ll talk about this later. Let me tidy up your hair.’ Smiling now, Rita tugged on César’s locks.

‘No, this world isn’t meant for us. No, my dear Beethoven. No, no, no! I’ll say it until I’m blue in the face. Us and these days are nothing more than a memory.’

‘They’re wonderful days.’

‘Miraculous, that’s what they are. Memories are always miraculous.’

Whilst they were speaking he wasn’t sure if he was laughing or crying. In any case he took out a hanky and dried his eyes.

‘All that remains for us is these few hours together. It was decreed that we would see each other for forty-eight hours. Well... it’s as though it were decreed.’

‘Are you sure we’re seeing each other?’

‘You say it was decreed.’

‘In a book’, she exclaimed and repeated: ‘Was it written or will it be written?’

They returned to the room where they dozed on and off.

‘Guess what? I’ve seen you in an extraordinary dream.’

‘And isn’t this also a dream?’

‘In that dream you were dead and surrounded by strangers. Your sparkling gaze wasn’t there. There was nothing left on the planet.’

‘And?’

‘I think it was towards the end of the night when I saw you. The nuns in my college were praying and praying. Your mother was crying up in the heavens. I was also crying and I was shouting that I was going with you on the train.’

*Muleteer, you go fabulously glazed with sweat.*

*The Menocucho estate*

*charges a thousand daily troubles for a life.*

*Twelve. Let’s go to the waist of day.*

*The sun that hurts a lot.*

The sun was hurting. They went back to the hotel and they embraced as though they were trying to form a jigsaw puzzle. They wanted to go to sleep and never wake up ever again.

‘I can’t do what you’re asking’, she said. ‘You know that we can’t elope together. We don’t even know where we’d go.’ She added: ‘I’m not even old enough to get married.’

He looked at her and realised that time was passing and that his life’s actions would always lead him towards the impossible. They wanted to convince themselves that they were together and so they made their way through Menocucho’s two streets holding hands. The wind was blowing through a ravine, twisting around the last trees in the valley and making its way towards them. The sun came closer and closer to them and the world was turning red. They sat down in the tiny plaza in the centre of the town. The door of the church was open but they didn’t go inside to swear any oath because there was no oath they could swear. So they simply looked at one another. Perhaps in those moments they started becoming invisible for ever. Perhaps Rita feared that the entire scene was a dream. So as to convince herself that she was awake she grabbed hold of César’s hand and set off with him in the direction of the lodging. The final conversation between them was as follows:

‘Do you think we can be considered lovers?’

‘How could we not be?’

‘What I mean is, always, from before there was anything.’

Perhaps this conversation went on throughout the night. Perhaps she shut her eyes and he told her to sleep. She dreamt of him again and in between dreams she asked him:

‘Do you think they see us as criminals?’

‘Aren’t we?’

‘For how long would you like to sleep?’

‘For at least a thousand years. Go to sleep.’



## Trujillo is a Mirage

César arrived in Trujillo in 1913. ‘Trujillo is a mirage’, he remarked to Judge Eleodoro Ayllón as they were parting. According to César everything in the city was intense as if everything and everyone—the streets and the people—sought to overcome the false hopes and chimeras of the extensive Peruvian desert.

‘The houses are painted a muted yellow but love, passion and even the wind are vibrant and alive there’, he told the judge.

‘The city is an oracle’, César continued. ‘The shaman says it’s filled with messages. They say that when a person comes to Trujillo, he needs to sleep there only one night in order to understand everything or nearly everything about life. The rest, they say, needs to be lived.’

He told the judge about Chan Chan which lies two or three kilometres from Trujillo. He explained that it had been the largest adobe city in the world at the time when Christ was preaching in Jerusalem.

‘It never rains there’, he informed the judge. ‘But that’s not quite true. Massive storms do hit the area once or twice every hundred years and they can destroy a city or even an entire civilization.’

Both men needed to leave as soon as possible but the old justice of the peace harked back to the end of the Jurassic Era.

‘The cold air of the Pacific Ocean flows towards the coast and runs into the Andes. In an area that should be hot and tropical, the channeled air creates an eternal spring. That must be why everything there seems to remain unchanged and time doesn’t seem to pass by.’

To make a little money Vallejo worked for the Roma Ranch, a modern sugarcane company that employed more than 4000 ranch hands. Like all the other workers Vallejo lived in shared housing. The ranch owner, Don Víctor Larco, had created a kind of detention centre. He established mandatory rest periods for his employees and he took satisfaction in waiting for them at the door or walking into a party to announce that it was time for bed. People had to get up early the next morning and go to work. In any case César couldn’t complain. In contrast with his own situation the life of the *macheteros* was horrific. Many became mutilated or disfigured, having no alternative but to leave the ranch and join the group of invalids who displayed their misery in the plazas and begged for pity and alms outside the churches. Every day in the company’s immense courtyard, César watched a painful spectacle. The ranch hands lined up for roll call at barely 5 o’clock in the morning. From there they went to work on the plantation until the sun set in the west with nothing to eat but a handful of cooked rice.

‘That scarred me’, César said later.

By February 1913 he felt he had had enough. He received his final wages and then set off for Trujillo. The practically monastic existence that Larco imposed on his workers had allowed César to save his money. He now had money to attend classes at the university and live modestly for a year. He packed his meager belongings into a small valise and climbed onto a train.



‘I’ve been scarred’, he repeated to himself in the passenger car.

He arrived a few minutes before they locked Mansiche Gate which they usually did at 6 o’ clock in the evening. He walked towards the main square. The cupolas of the cathedral floated above a dense fog. He stopped to study the university’s old convent building. It seemed that he could see the shadows of the Jesuits who had lived there until the eighteenth century. He saw them rushing to comply with Carlos III’s decree which expelled them from his lands under a strict deadline for conspiring to seek independence. César remembered Bolívar who converted the convent into the first university in independent America. His old friends—his teacher Abraham Arias and Judge Eleodoro Ayllón—had told him that this was the place where his destiny would be fulfilled. He smiled as if he had always known that. The cathedral bells rang out.

*Doleful dead bells buried  
in the grey coffin of the bell-tower,  
are like souls of bards, forgotten  
in a tragic solitary dreaming.*

*Abstract, silent and in mourning,  
like shades of visionary martyrdom,  
in the evening rays, the tears  
that the bell-tower tolls are golden.*

Shortly after arriving he rented an apartment in the old Hotel del Arco just one block from the main square. The next day, very early, he began the procedures necessary to register for classes at the university. The first of these was a tedious physical examination in which he had to

answer dozens of questions about his health and that of his parents. Afterwards he was given a vaccination and warned that it would probably burn and give him a fever. Finally he was told to join a group of candidates standing in front of a long wooden bench.

‘One, two ... One, two. When I say one, step up onto the bench. When I say two, step down.’

César stepped up and down for half an hour to show that he had no heart problems of any kind. It was the last week of February 1913. After spending an entire day satisfying bureaucratic requirements César was successfully admitted to the first year of literature study at the University of Trujillo. He had gone the whole morning without food while waiting for the doctor who examined future students. In the Chávez Notary Office he had had to attest that his baptismal certificate was genuine. He had run around carrying his documents from one office to another and at last – at around four o’ clock in the afternoon – he had his registration card in his jacket pocket.

He sat down to rest on one of the benches in the main square. Finding himself in the plaza once again he contemplated the immense sky and wondered about his destiny. He dozed a bit and then, once awake, he picked up the copies of *La Industria* he had taken with him to read during his free time on registration day. In every edition of the paper the word ‘Mexico’ stood out in huge letters. César read all about the convulsions of a social revolution that had been raging for two years and would seemingly never end.

We follow principles, not men. Our fundamental claim is this: ‘Land is for those who work it with their hands.’ Our motto: ‘Land and liberty.’

Francisco Madero, Mexico’s first democratic president, faced serious challenges. Armed only with his courage and honourable character, he had been the one who had put an end to the long tyranny of Porfirio Díaz. But he had left the army intact and the military leaders had rebelled.

Vallejo quickly scanned the headlines:

Sunday, 9 February 1913.—Rebels free Bernardo Reyes and Félix Díaz. Madero goes to Cuernavaca seeking Felipe Ángeles to defend the plaza.

Monday, 10 February.—Mexico City newspapers not printed. General panic. Transportation systems down and stores remain closed.

Tuesday, 11 February.—Citadel attacked. Two battalions destroyed.

Wednesday, 12 February.—Prisoners escape from Belén jail. City has no services.

Thursday, 13 February.—Fighting intensifies in citadel and surrounding areas. A thousand cannon shots per minute.

Friday, 14 February.—Several government buildings damaged. Many civilians dead from ‘stray bullets’.

Saturday, 15 February.—Madero refuses senators’ demand for resignation. Citadel filled with smoke from burning bodies.

Sunday, 16 February.—Cease-fire declared but broken shortly after. Approximately 300 non-combatants die in fighting.

Monday, 17 February.—Conflicts continue.

Tuesday, 18 February.—Embassy Pact signed by Félix Díaz and Huerta with the approval of U.S. ambassador Henry Lane Wilson. Madero and Pino Suárez captured while leaving National Palace.

Wednesday, 19 February.—Madero and Pino Suárez forced to resign. They are assassinated three days later. Huerta assumes presidency.

On an inside page of the paper, Vallejo read the proud confession of Francisco Cárdenas, who killed Madero:

When they saw what was happening the prisoners realised what was in store for them and began to protest, criticizing my General Huerta with harsh words. But the order had to be carried out: I had them pushed inside the stable and placed in the back so my men could shoot them. The vice president was the first to die because when he saw that he was about to be shot he began to run. I gave the order to fire and they pumped him with bullets until he fell dead on a pile of hay. Mr Madero watched the whole thing and when I told him it was his turn he tried to reason with me, telling us not to be murderers, saying that the Republic would die with him. I just laughed and grabbed him by the neck, pushed him against the wall, took out my revolver and shot him in the face whereupon he immediately fell to the ground. The blood sprayed all over my uniform.

It seemed to Vallejo that this story could also have occurred in Peru. Why? Because the photo reminded him of someone.

‘Francisco Cárdenas is the double of Emile DuBois. The two criminals look alike’, he said to himself.

Other pages of the paper were more encouraging. Emiliano Zapata, the caudillo of the south, was working his way across the long map of Mexico, taking from the rich and giving land to the poor campesinos. In the north Pancho Villa terrorized the world.

Suddenly César sensed that he was being watched.

‘It’s going to happen in Peru too. Don’t you think?’

He looked up and saw a tall, thin young man he had noticed earlier inside the university’s cloister.

‘I’m Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre’, the young man said. ‘And it looks like we’re going to be classmates.’

In fact they were going to be lifelong friends. Haya de la Torre introduced César to Antenor Orrego. Although Orrego was three months younger than Vallejo and only three years older than Haya he would become a mentor to both young men and have an influence on everything they did. Orrego was the editor-in-chief of *La Reforma*, a newspaper that took a progressive approach to social issues. The paper also published essays and poetry. At that time a group of young writers and artists known as La Bohemia de Trujillo began to meet together

regularly. Peru would never again see such an assemblage of talented minds whose social and aesthetic goals transcended borders.

There were poets like Vallejo himself, Alcides Spelucín, Francisco Xandóval and Óscar Imaña. Carlos Valderrama was the musician in the group. Macedonio de la Torre was the painter. The political and philosophical thought of Orrego and Haya de la Torre would become the foundation of a project with continental scope: encouraging all of America south of the Río Grande to unite, adopt a socialist system and reject any U.S. interference in creating their destiny. For Orrego Latin America was a continental people.

The young men found in Orrego their orchestra conductor and, at the same time, a persistent voice reminding them that they were called to fulfill a mission in history. They met together in various places. One was the apartment of José Eulogio Garrido's apartment which was just a few metres from the main square across the street from the cathedral. Other meeting sites included Antenor Orrego's place on the first block of Salaverry Avenue, the apartment of the unmarried Juan Espejo Asturrigaza and Macedonio de la Torre's family mansion.

Artists and writers from other parts of the country came to see them. In 1916 the poet Juan Parra del Riego published an article about them in *Balnearios*, a Lima magazine, in which he recounted his meeting with the group in Garrido's garçonnière:

'The poet Parra del Riego', twenty voices said, imitating my voice.

'Such a pleasure, gentlemen.' Smiles. Handshakes. Bows. We were now friends. We sat down. And then the journalist Garrido spoke up:

'And now I should explain our Bohemia to you. All of the men you see here—poets, novelists, psychologists, a few geniuses—... (Laughter. I began to understand Garrido's witty character.) ... meet in this room on Wednesdays and Saturdays for 'two hours of reading.' Naturally, connected as we are by this intellectual interest, we take walks together. Occasionally, we eat lunch together or we take group excursions in the afternoons to the ruins of Chan Chan or on moonlit nights we go to the beaches nearby. This is our terrible Bohemia.'

Abraham Valdelomar remembered the group in a travel memoir:

'Moonlit nights in the solemn dead city of Chan Chan; the happy sun shining over the verdant groves of Ascope; salty hostility on Salaverry Avenue; a hill facing the sea, crowned by the cemetery's graves, which stand like masts in some fantastic squadron in Pacasmayo ...'

César Vallejo had never met so many people like himself. At the national academy in Huamachuco the boys his age had made him feel that he didn't fit in. He had few common interests to talk about with them, a limitation that pushed him into solitude. The world of books was his own; he didn't share it with many friends. In contrast life in Trujillo was very different.

He completed his years of literature study with honours. In 1915, his thesis was approved and recognized as outstanding. 'Romanticism in Castilian Poetry' appeared as a tidy edition published by Tipografía Olaya. It was his first book.

.....  
*La Reforma*, 24 September 1915

## REMARKABLE ACHIEVEMENT

The day before yesterday, at five o'clock in the afternoon, César Vallejo presented himself as a candidate before the university's General Assembly. Mr Vallejo read a brilliant thesis about literary Romanticism, demonstrating his exceptional knowledge of the subject and earning

extended ovations from those in attendance. He also received many congratulations thereafter. Critiquing the thesis were Mr Boloña and Mr Quevedo. The candidate answered their questions with grace and style, receiving as a result a final grade of nineteen points. Once the examination was completed, Mr Vallejo invited his classmates to the Americano Bar, honouring them with a glass of champagne.

.....

Even though Pato Negro was scheduled to arrive at eight o' clock in the morning he didn't enter the prison until one o' clock in the afternoon. The prison had a doctor on contract with the state but he never made an appearance. Pato Negro, the shaman, was the solution to that problem. He cured illnesses with herbs that he provided himself and he demanded no payment for his services. The patients who could afford to do so would either pay him with money or with food brought by family members.

During the morning while the patients waited for him many declared that he was the greatest maestro of the north. Neither Caballo Blanco nor Águila Negra could come close to him in importance. Petra Divina was his disciple and that was saying a great deal. The inmates had special faith in Petra because she could change herself into a sow and a donkey and in particular because she could fly. The night-shift gendarmes swore that they had seen her flapping her wings as she went by. A man had only one way to protect himself from being cursed when the Flying Woman passed over him: he had to urinate on the sand, drawing the sign of the cross with the stream.

Nobody complained about Pato Negro's tardiness because everyone was used to it. The sick, their relatives and some of the guards fought to get close to him and greet him. All afternoon they filed under his canopy. He saw them one by one, in private. He took their pulse, examined their eyes and wrote prescriptions down on slips of paper. He didn't spend more than a minute with any of them. In another area of the prison an assistant gave patients their prescribed medications.

Pato Negro finished his work quickly. The men who took most of his time didn't see him for health reasons. Instead, they wanted information about their enemies on the outside, about the activities of their wives and girlfriends or about the judges' coming verdicts. The shaman spat mouthfuls of Florida water upon them to cleanse them or he gave them magical protections designed especially for them. When clients asked him to do a particular job they gave him some personal object which Pato Negro took to study during his nighttime sessions at the 'table'. At home, under the guidance of many skulls and the deceased healers who worked with him from the other world, the shaman brought peace back to his clients and harmony to the universe. At 3:30 p.m., having seen everyone in line, the shaman decided that his visit was finished. His pharmacist announced that the doctor would return the following Sunday. For his part, a guard whose life he had saved came over to offer his service.

'Whatever you ask, Maestro.'

'I'm going to stay a while longer.'

'Visiting hours end at six but you know that you can stay as long as you like.'

'No, no, just a while longer. I want to talk with a friend and I don't want any of you interrupting me,' he ordered. He hesitated for a moment. 'Wait, wait. I don't see him in the courtyard. Maybe he's in his room. I want you to bring me the poet ..., the poet ...'



‘Do you mean Mr Vallejo? ... I think he’s receiving special treatment ..., if you take my meaning. He’s not allowed to have visitors but don’t worry. I’ll go and get him.’

A moment later Vallejo walked under the small canopy.

They greeted each other with a handshake. Vallejo was somewhat confused.

‘Yes? What is it? ... The guard told me that you wanted to see me. What can I do for you?’

‘Oh, no! Nothing at all! ... I’m the one who’s going to do something for you.’

Before the poet could respond, Pato Negro begged him to keep calm and sit down in a spot he was showing him.

‘I’ve brought you some things from a mutual friend.’

César couldn’t guess who that mutual friend might be, nor what things the friend might have sent with such an extraordinary person.

Pato Negro ordered his assistant and the friendly guard to leave. Then he removed a bulky object that had been disguised among the bags of herbs. It was a package wrapped in newspaper. When he opened it Vallejo couldn’t believe what he saw: there in front of him were Rilke’s *Letters to a Young Poet*, Maeterlinck’s *The Intelligence of Flowers* and finally *The Flowers of Evil*, the book he had always wanted to read. While the original Baudelaire volume had been published in 1857 its translation had been delayed for more than half a century due to religious censorship in Spain.

‘I have enough here to read and re-read for an entire year!’ he exclaimed, enchanted. Then he realised that he had just predicted that he would remain in Hell for a year.

‘Even better, two!’ the shaman countered as he handed over another bundle. This one contained Blasco Ibañez’s *The Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse*, Victor Hugo’s *Les Misérables* and Valle-Inclán’s *The Glory of the Bonfire*.

‘Francisco Xandóval gave them to me. You understand that your friends have certain restrictions on them ... That is, they’re not allowed to visit you ... But I’m a friend of your friends ..., of some of them, anyway.’

An affectionate note from the sender confirmed Pato Negro’s words.

‘Will you have a cup of coffee with me?’

At a signal from the shaman the assistant brought a steaming teapot. On the side lay some pieces of cheese and roasted meat which the patients had given to him. The two men talked. The poet was surprised at the shaman’s warm personality and knowledge of the world.

‘I would have thought you’d be a little more careful about what you eat’, Vallejo said. As he spoke the shaman was holding an enormous turkey leg in his right hand. ‘In other latitudes, you understand, a shaman is a man who subjects himself to strict diets and other privations. An ascetic, let’s say.’

‘An ascetic?’

‘Yes, an ascetic.’

‘The problem is that a shaman can’t be an ascetic here. We’re very poor people.’

Then he moved closer to the poet, adopting a confidential tone.

‘There is something I’d like to do for you, my friend Vallejo. And I beg your permission to do it.’

As surprise followed surprise César couldn’t imagine what the man could do for him. Abruptly, however, an idea came to him. For inmates with access to money the shaman provided magical aids to order.

‘No, my friend. The truth is that you’re mistaken. I don’t have much money ...’

‘Who said anything about money? ... I think you’re the victim of a curse.’

Now it was Vallejo’s turn to laugh.

‘Curses? ... Look, I don’t believe curses have anything to do with this ... They’ve accused me of a crime. They’ve hounded me. They’ve thrown me into prison. I can’t communicate with my friends, with my people ... Honestly, no, I can’t believe that on top of that they’re having a bit of fun with witchcraft.’

‘Let me try! Don’t you want my help?’

‘Do what you want. To tell you the truth the only thing that interests me is getting out of this place—and as soon as possible. I don’t even care if I find out my enemies’ names.’

‘All right, all right, my friend César! ... I’m not going to ask much of you ... I’m not even going to say much to you. I just want you to drink a glass of sampetro with me.’

‘Sampetro? Do you mean the cactus that grows in the desert?’

‘The very same. We maestros use it in our work and we have great success with it.’

‘Sampetro! ... You’re going to take my curse away with sampetro!’

‘I haven’t said that and I’m not going to lie to you. No-one is going to take away any curses. Instead of that I’m thinking of something much more important. I want you to be able to see yourself.’

The shaman explained that sampetro would allow him to see, to truly see.

‘You’ll see what it means to see! You’ll see beyond what our senses allow us to see! That is to say, you’ll see what allows us to see ourselves. When we truly see ourselves, we can know where we’re going and what is our destiny.’

And then he added enthusiastically: ‘Sampetro takes you across the sea, the mountains and the forests. It takes you where you want to go and you don’t have to move at all. But the most important thing is that it can also take you to yourself.’

He explained: ‘I want you to see that you can only see when you have your eyes shut ...’

Vallejo closed his eyes.

‘Don’t do it yet! Do you see this flask? ... It contains sampetro that has been boiled all night. I’ve mixed it with trumpet flowers. It has a delicious taste. A taste that’s a bit ... sharp. It’s almost like a beer—a rather weak beer.’

‘Sampetro! ...A rather curious name, don’t you think?’

‘Maybe they call it that because San Pedro—Saint Peter—holds the keys to the gates of heaven ... It doesn’t matter whether you believe it. Regardless nothing is going to happen to you. We’ll drink together.’

‘If that’s all there is ...’

‘Stand up, please.’

Once Vallejo was on his feet the shaman waved a censer to envelop him with smoke. Then, he bathed his head with a pungent liquid.

‘Is that Florida water?’

‘Mixed with Kananga water. It’s to keep your auras in order.’

César couldn’t believe what he was doing. His friend Xandóval, who was addicted to all kinds of esoteric practices and occult knowledge, had told him about these things. But he had never expected that he would receive such a treatment.

‘Now, then! To your health, Mr Vallejo!’

Each man drank every drop of liquid contained in a small gourd.

‘Now you need to rest!’ the shaman said, pointing at a poncho and a pillow lying on the ground. ‘It’s four o’ clock. At five o’clock I’ll come back to get you. I think I still have a few patients left.’

He left Vallejo under the canopy.

‘I don’t feel anything. Anything strange.’

‘Please rest. I’ll be right back.’

Vallejo didn’t know why he obeyed. He felt very tired. He stretched out on the poncho, closed his eyes and felt sleep coming on but he didn’t sleep. His senses had become highly attuned.

He heard the clip-clop of a horse, the rattle of a snake, the snort of a bull, the hoot of an owl, the heavy flight of a coal-black bird and the howl of wolves begging for mercy.

He saw himself walking in the darkness with bandaged eyes, guided only by his hands and he touched misfortune. He touched poverty. He touched death.

He smelled the dirt of graves. He smelled a kind of cherished blood.

He moved his tongue and tasted a flavourless taste.

He saw the river. He saw men and women dressed in white. He saw a mountain that kept reaching up and up. Behind it came the rain which carried him to the ocean. He saw a horse in the heavens. He saw a ship. He saw the ship once again. Then he saw himself standing on a pier along with two of his friends and he heard the shaman’s voice.

‘Get onto the ship! Get aboard quickly! If you don’t get on it soon you’ll have to stay in Hell forever!’

He saw; he heard; he smelled; he tasted; he touched.

Next to the dream ship stood his friends Julio Gálvez and Antenor Orrego.

‘Get on the ship, César! Don’t waste any time!’ Antenor begged him.

‘You’re going to sail with me’, Julio said.

‘If you don’t get on the ship, you’ll stay in Hell forever!’

He remained stretched out under the shaman’s canopy in a state that was neither wakefulness nor dream. All of his senses were razor-sharp. He saw himself by the ship and then he saw himself sailing along seas and clouds. But he remained perfectly aware the whole time that he was in the Trujillo prison.

‘It looks like you’re flying, no doubt about that!’ a man shouted, dressed in white and perhaps the ship’s captain. The wind made the ship tremble and water covered the bridge. The waves broke violently against the ship’s leaning side.

‘Don’t worry, Mr Vallejo!’ the captain said. ‘The ride gets bumpy when the ship leaves Hell.’

The waves were the colour of fine china and they fell constantly onto the deck. The captain ran to take his place at the helm.

‘To Paris! ... To Paris!’ he shouted. He splashed across the deck to the bow. César tried to open his eyes completely and wake up but once again he heard the voices of Antenor Orrego and Julio Gálvez begging him not to leave the ship for any reason whatsoever.

A mass of water crashed over the deck. César knew that it was dream water but he shivered nevertheless.

He finally saw himself safe upon the high seas. He saw a relief map. He saw Europe’s coasts. He saw a port and the thought occurred to him that it was Le Havre and that Paris was just a few kilometres away.

He had now awakened completely and he decided to get up and find out what Pato Negro was doing.

Meanwhile the shaman had found a man lying on the ground near the canopy. The man was sick. His arms and legs were tucked in. His eyes were open but they were blank. No part of him was moving. The only parts of him with signs of life were his large hands; they were almost blue and they trembled from time to time. The rest of his body didn't seem to be in a hurry to live.

'And this one?' the shaman asked.

A man moved over to Pato Negro to remind him.

'We brought him so you could cure him. You told us to leave him lying down.'

'Ah ... yes but no ... There's nothing that can be done for him now.'

He moved the man's head.

'This man is no longer here. He's in hell now.'

The sick man's relative reminded the shaman how much he had paid for his help.

'Regardless, I can't do anything.'

The relative persisted and his tone became threatening.

The shaman lit a black cigarette and inhaled. He kept smoking until the cigarette was half-gone. He sucked in the smoke. No-one saw any smoke leave his mouth. Finally he went over to the sick man and blew in his face three times.

'Arise, soul, arise!' he repeated with devotion.

White smoke rings fell from his mouth and shrouded the prostrate man's head. The man didn't respond.

'Arise, soul! Arise, dear soul! I beg you!' the shaman insisted. Now he was breathing black-and-white smoke over the man's mouth, chest, stomach and armpits.

The sick man's relative was watching him with a fierce gaze.

'Arise, soul! Hurry now, please!

He kept trying to resurrect the man. He had enveloped him in a cloud of smoke but the man still didn't respond.

Now fully recovered from his hallucinogenic dream Vallejo walked over to the small group. There he watched as the shaman opened the sick man's mouth so that everyone could take in the sight of his enormous white tongue.

The cigarette cloud surrounded the group. No-one could explain how Pato Negro had stored so much smoke.

'Arise, soul and make this man walk! Let him awaken at once!'

The shaman asked the others to sit the man up. Between his open shirt and lowered pants, the man's fat, pale flesh was spilling out. Pato Negro embraced him.

'Now arise, soul! Arise, damn you!'

Perplexed, everyone watched the sick man's stomach. While they did so, the shaman used his other hand—a movement no-one saw—to put out his cigarette on the dead man's tailbone. The man finally reacted by crying out. The man came back to life that very night and he was once again working in the carpentry shop by the next day.

## You Don't Have Mariás who Depart

In November 1915 the San Andrés winds ran howling through Trujillo's perfect main square. They flew along the endless yellow streets but they didn't find many pedestrians. Most residents preferred the solemn darkness of their churches, the discretion of their homes or the intimacy of some book. In the Artisans League library, César Vallejo was reading a translation of the *Rubbayat* when a smell like orange leaves began to permeate the air. The library's small garden had no plants aside from a hundred-year-old grape vine that grew at the back of the house, sixty metres away from where he was sitting.

'Grapes have no scent', he said.

The fragrance radiated peace and filled him with a sense of security. It seemed like the essence given off by lime peels or the coarse leaves of lemon verbena. His gaze moved along the shelves and tables but he couldn't see anyone or anything that could be the source of the fragrance.

'Grapes have no scent. But poetry does ... Poetry has to have a scent.' He smiled and decided that Omar Jayyam was the one to blame for the phenomenon. He looked back at the book he was reading and his eyes fell on a page where the ancient Persian predicted that his grave would be found in a place where, during the spring, the north winds would cause flowers with an inexhaustible perfume to rain down.

He could imagine that poetry had a scent but he couldn't understand how philosophical texts could produce a similar fragrance. The week before, that fragrance had embraced him as he was reading Kropotkin's *Modern Science and Anarchism*. 'The universe is nothing but matter in perpetual and free evolution', the Russian prince said. 'There is an anarchy of worlds. This anarchy of evolution is the law of things.' Could Kropotkin's declaration produce such an aroma?

Later he read in a text by Bakunin that all history is the progressive denial of human beings' animality. As a result when a man rebels against an unjust society he obeys his own nature and thereby becomes more of a man.

'Do philosophers' pages give off a scent?'

Bakunin added that man is good, intelligent and free. For that reason, every State, every theology, assumes that man is essentially perverse and evil. Some day, Bakunin concluded, we human beings will deserve neither police forces nor governments.

Antenor Orrego had recommended these readings to him but they couldn't explain the fragrance that undulated throughout the spacious library's rooms. In any case the books

reminded him about the long battle and sacrifices of the labourers' league in its fight to change society.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century anarchism arrived in Peru from Argentina, Chile and even as far as Italy. Manuel González Prada had been anarchism's secular apostle. He had spread its principles among intellectuals, artisans and the nascent working class. Anarchists taught that liberty was the primary condition for all social revolution. They sought to destroy the State in order to establish a classless society and they used violence to achieve their objectives. They kept the working class at the margins of politics. Indeed they were absolutely opposed to politics and their efforts marked the beginnings of the labour-union movement in Peru.

Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Vallejo's friend, considered the anarchists to be secular saints because of their complete and unrestrained dedication to a hopeless fight. Their vows of poverty and their honesty in the face of all challenges made them look like members of some evangelical force. Together with Víctor and Antenor, César read – almost as if he were reciting – a passage from González Prada that he eventually learned by heart:

This doesn't mean that we find ourselves on the cusp of establishing an anarchic society. Between the beginning and the end of the journey lie the ruins of empires, lakes of blood and mountains of victims. A new Christianity is being born, one without Christ but with persecutors and martyrs. And if the world has not become Christian after twenty centuries how many centuries will it take to become anarchic?

Anarchy is the shining and far-off point we seek in an intricate series of ascending and descending curves. And even if the shining point moves away as we advance towards it and even if the creation of an anarchic society is reduced to a philanthropist's dream, we shall still have the great satisfaction of having dreamed. Oh! that men could always have such beautiful dreams!

In Trujillo Julio Reinaga was anarchism's main proponent. The very young writer Antenor Orrega was a proponent as well. The Artisans and Laborers League of Peru had been founded in that city and the league maintained the library. The bookshelves there contained more books than those of the university library. The league's library was open to groups of people who were traditionally excluded from reading, such as artisans and women.

A red flag with a white triangle in the centre was the league's symbol and 'La Marseillaise' was its anthem. The most important union action occurred in April 1912 when a group of *braceros* went on strike at the Casagrande Ranch which had been purchased by German capitalists from the Gildemeister family. The strike began with fires in the sugarcane fields. After that came the sacking of the company store that provided food for the workers and made them perpetual debtors. The strike received immediate support from two newspapers: *La Razón*, run by Benjamín Pérez Treviño and *El Jornalero*, run by Julio Reinaga.

In the end all these efforts amounted to merely a single flame. In an act of solidarity the workers at the Laredo Ranch joined the strike and other trade groups soon followed. But harsh political and military repression prevailed. Fifteen workers died in the first confrontation between troops armed with rifles and *braceros* armed only with machetes. The army arrested Reinaga and Pérez Treviño, shutting down their newspapers. The strike lasted more than a month. Troops from Lima put the strike down, leaving more than one hundred people dead. Calm returned by mid-May.

Until that time anarchists in Peru were simply considered to be well-intentioned fools. They were viewed as harmless because they refused to participate in the battle for congressional seats or the country's presidency. The corrupt politicians in Lima's domed buildings simply didn't pay attention to them. Congress was the place for reaching understandings and dividing things up among leaders of one group and another. The government could make easy agreements in Congress with opposition leaders. The country's business owners and foreign businessmen were satisfied to either negotiate with congressmen or buy them. It was during this time that foreigners were given Peruvian mines—considered among the richest in the world—without having to pay royalties to the State. According to government leaders, the important thing was to promote foreign investment, the engine for creating jobs. Manuel González Prada, the leader of anarchism in Lima, renounced the political circle that he himself had created when its members became involved in shady congressional deal-making.

During this era newspapers began to use the word 'anarchist' in a new way. It now became associated with rebellion, criminal behavior and genocide. The semantic war was guided by the country's leaders. Then all that remained was for someone to reveal the anarchists' vision of the future as a society without abuses so that the movement could be labeled 'reprobate' and become the target of State political persecution and terrorism. The working class's spirit of liberty had barely been born and it wouldn't be eliminated easily. The anarchists were sure that only education would make them free. For that reason their principal activity in the city was to get large numbers of people to go to their libraries. Trujillo's library was established in 1885.

Vallejo had witnessed how government authorities and property owners had reduced the Quiruvilca miners and farm laborers to a sub-human state. Throughout the sugar plantations in the Chicama Valley people worked from dawn until late into the night. Instead of receiving money as their pay they received rations and a few services. The unmarried peones slept in heaps in filthy community quarters. Families were housed in tiny rooms. Workers had no breaks on the weekends. As compensation they were given coca leaves to chew, which gave them greater strength to withstand their labors. In addition the ranch had its own justice system for dealing with peones accused of stealing or being lazy. Some were whipped; others mysteriously disappeared. In the Casagrande public clock tower an inscription proclaimed the ranch's motto: 'Tace ora et labora.' The foremen took it upon themselves to remind the workers that this meant 'Keep quiet, pray and work hard.' César made a habit of asking for several books and moving from one text to another throughout the afternoon. In one instance, his eyes fell upon a book by González Prada where the words seemed to leap off the page: 'The condition of indigenous people can improve in two ways: either the hearts of their oppressors become so softened that they grant rights to the oppressed or the spirit of the oppressed takes on such energy as to teach the oppressors a lesson...' He raised his eyes to look at the anarchists' emblem shining on the wall. Then he returned to the words of the man he admired, González Prada, who continued his discussion of indigenous peoples: '... If a man had a weapon hidden in some corner of his shack or in a hole in a rock he would change his condition, make his life and property respected. He would answer violence with violence and teach the boss a lesson...' No, no. These books could carry the scent of burnt sugar to César's nose and perhaps even envelop him in a cloud of pain but they were not the cause of that green brilliance of orange leaves. He stood up and began to walk through the empty room. No-one was reading in the next room but he thought he saw a shadow in the third.

He walked towards the shadow and found that he was not mistaken. A woman had arisen from the reading table and was returning several books to their proper shelves. When she was finished she sat down again. It was at that point that César caught sight of her.

She was the pretty young woman with rings under her eyes who lived a block from his house, across the street from the church of Santa Ana. He regularly saw her in the afternoons but he had never gotten close enough to say hello. Why? Perhaps out of respect. He saw her and she seemed like one of those creatures described by Chocano as half mystery and half miracle.

He tried to leave so as to avoid bothering her but she had already smiled at him in greeting. He was not a timid man but this woman—so beautiful, with the power to change nature's fragrances—made him hold back a bit. And he thought that perhaps his lack of audacity was natural, that perhaps it was vital to flee from birds and angelic apparitions so as to avoid startling them. He returned her smile and lowered his head, thinking that the opportunity to be introduced had arrived.

'You're César Vallejo, aren't you?'

He couldn't believe it.

'My name is María.'

Of course, her name had to be María. Her full name was María Rosa Sandoval. She was the afternoon librarian. César had not seen her when he entered the building because another person had helped him.

'My goodness! I finally get to talk to you. It looked like you were running away from me. Do I scare you?'

He was about to admit that she did in fact scare him a bit but the aroma of orange leaves close to her enfolded and relaxed him. He allowed himself to plop down in the chair she was showing him.

'It's amazing that you're so hesitant. I heard you on 23 September.'

On a spring day in 1915, on the occasion of the student parade, Vallejo had recited his poem, 'On Springtime', from one of the balconies of tiny O'Donovan Square in front of the Superior Court of Justice building. From memory without any notes he recited the eighteen quatrains of eleven-syllable lines comprising the poem with a voice so deep that it seemed to have been ripped from the bowels of the earth. César recognized that that spring day divided his life in two. Until that time he had been invisible but afterward he had a body. By then he had met most of the people who were going to be his friends for the rest of his life and his name had already begun to be spoken with admiration throughout Trujillo.

'*Sublime youth! Garden of gold! Throbbing of love! Eastern Glory!* What comes next?' asked María Rosa.

'*Sonorous echo of celestial rhythm! Bearing the sun on every brow ...!* But surely you're not going to make me recite, are you? Especially not here. We shouldn't raise our voices in libraries.'

'Does that mean you're asking me to take a walk with you? Of course, I accept. But just from here to my house. It's time for me to go home.'

Lean, of medium height and with a wide forehead, the young Vallejo of those days had a profile similar to that of Beethoven. He also had a head of abundant, straight and untidy hair. But the feature that everyone would remember about him was a pair of very dark eyes: submerged in two deep pools, each practically lost in an abyss. That is how Vallejo was described by Antenor Orrega for whom those eyes seemed to plumb the mystery of life. Because he was leaving the library in such a hurry he neglected to pick up his jacket and a black notebook. With a smile



never leaving her face, María Rosa pointed those things out to him and together they walked the six blocks that separated them from the small Plaza Santa Clara. They moved slowly and avoided the lines on the walkway, as people do when they want a moment to last an eternity. They talked about many things but neither one would remember later what they talked about. The November winds bore down, clamoring along the solitary streets of Trujillo. The strands of César's black hair became tangled and windblown, blocking his vision at times. María Rosa seemed to glide along, floating above the ground. The city, majestic and yellow, stood firm against the gusting winds under a pallid sky. When they reached the enormous main square night had already fallen. A star fell to the earth. The heavens dominated the landscape.

'Oh!' María Rosa exclaimed. 'I wonder if there are other worlds like this one. I hope this is the only one.'

The road was real as were the two people walking. Everything was real: César and María, the sky, the street paved with stones. Everything was real and yet everything felt like a dream. They agreed to see each other again. It was November 1915 when their story began. She had just turned twenty-one and she was an orphan. She lived across the street from the church of Santa Ana in the house of some relatives, along with her much-older sister, Carmen and her brother, Francisco, aged fifteen, who was studying at the time in the San Carlos and San Marcelo Seminary. One week later Vallejo went to the house for María and she waited for him at the door. Then they went off for a walk with no particular destination in mind.

She wanted to know everything about him: What was he going to write next? Did his other lyric poems use the same form and cadence as 'On Springtime'? What books did he like to read? What was his favorite music? César found that by staying quiet he could avoid talking about himself and learn more about her. That's how he learned that María Rosa kept a private diary.

'What we live must be written down to be eternal,' she declared but she instantly contradicted what she had just said. 'And yet, it's impossible!... I think it, I dream it and then I write it but I can't produce anything but nonsense. I'll admit it: I can't write.'

'I can't either. Nobody can but we have to. You write and you write and one day you say what you wanted to say.'

The young woman closed her eyes halfway.

'And what if I never manage to say it?'

'What did you say your name was?'

'What? I've already told you: María. María Sandoval.'

'No. That's not your name.'

'It's not?'

'No!'

'What's my name then?'

'Your name is María Bashkirtseff.'

'Bashkirtseff? Bashkirtseff?'

'She was a Russian,' Vallejo began.

'... a Russian who wrote her diary when she was 20 years old,' María said, completing his sentence. 'Of course I remember. She died just a few years ago.'

'You're like her! ... And your name is María too! It's your duty to write every day.'

'I don't have the freedom to write every day,' she answered. She chose not to tell him that her aunt and uncle considered her and her siblings to be freeloaders. 'What are you writing?'

they had asked her. 'My diary', she had answered, embarrassed. 'Bah! What a waste. A diary's not worth anything at the market.'

'I asked you what you're going to write next.'

César didn't answer immediately. Both of them fell quiet but they kept moving. They passed the Mansiche traffic circle and the road took them towards Chan Chan.

'I don't know what I'm going to write next but I ask myself that question every day. I want to go further, far beyond conventional poetry. I'd like a word to say much more than it says in the dictionary. I'd like to abandon a word alone in a field like a lost sheep and watch where it goes.'

She responded that she didn't know if that kind of poetry yet existed.

'No. I don't believe it exists. It has to be invented.' After uttering these words César raised his eyes to the sky as if he were looking for the new poetry. María changed the subject: 'What do you think about the twentieth century?'

She had the feeling that she had been born in a time that was not yet the most propitious for human beings. She considered the co-existence of poverty, hunger, war and the diabolical cult of property worship profoundly wrong.

'The ranch owners go to mass at noon in the cathedral', she said. 'But on Saturday night they kiss the demon's feet and tail.'

'You're right. And yet I have hope for this century. I think it will be a time of great revolutions. It will have to be. In the end, there will be no rich or poor, no war or borders. The men of the future will think that we lived in a time of cannibals.'

They were in agreement about that and about Johann Sebastian Bach as well.

'Maybe I love him because, like me, he had already lost his mother and father by the time he was ten.'

'There can be no pain deeper than that', responded Vallejo. He added that only anguish could have carried the great artist to the splendour of baroque music.

'I'm telling you, María. Only pain can explain Bach's mystic power, his expressive innocence, all the influence he had on Beethoven and Mendelssohn.'

'And Chopin as well. Didn't he once say that the Maestro had possessed his soul?'

'And what about poetry?'

'Poetry? Rubén, of course. Rubén.'

'My father and my teacher', César exclaimed.

María looked at the clouds which were already beginning to surround them. She remembered the night. She remembered her own nights. She heard César's voice:

*Those of you who auscultated the heart of the night,  
who with tenacious insomnia have heard  
the closing of a door, the rumble of a car  
in the distance, a vague echo, a soft noise...*

*In moments of mysterious silence,  
when the forgotten emerge from their prison,  
at the hour of the dead, at the hour of repose,  
you'll know how to read these verses steeped in bitterness.*

The night was upon them. César took long strides as he was speaking and in the process he had moved several meters away from the young woman. He recognized this and turned back to her, reaching for her with his arms the way a blind man would do. Perhaps, at that moment, both of them felt the music of the celestial spheres. He offered her his hand and she took it. María Rosa was as pale as the sky and she appeared to be burning. César could no longer see her but he could still make her out because of the slight fragrance of orange-tree leaves. He could see her and then he couldn't see her. Both of them began to burn without flames, like the moon burning above the high, truncated pyramids of Chan Chan. She may have put her arm around his neck. But perhaps it was he. They would never know. Never.

'Don't say anything more.'

'Do you love me?'

'Oh! but of course, María! You don't know how much!'

The two couldn't spend all the time together that they wanted because of César's work as an elementary-school teacher at the Colegio Nacional de San Juan and María Rosa's many responsibilities. Nevertheless they saw each other almost every day even if only for an instant or on a corner. These encounters never occurred at María Rosa's house because her aunt and uncle had warned her that they wouldn't look kindly on 'that shaggy-haired boy you make a spectacle of yourself with in the streets and the plazas'.

At Vallejo's request she agreed to lend him one of the notebooks she used for her diary. She chose carefully. Naturally, she gave him only the pages that contained nothing indiscreet.

'I told you. I told you. You're María Bashkirtseff.'

'I don't just record my experiences. I also write down my reactions to books. But more than anything I write my mysterious, beautiful dreams.'

As Christmas neared, at about six o' clock on a Saturday morning, César went to pick her up at the house.

'At this hour of the day no-one will say that this is a romantic tryst', María joked as they walked to the train station.

They were traveling to the Chiclín Ranch where César was going to present a reading of his poems. Antenor Orrego didn't go with them although he was the one who had convinced César to attend the event. The Artisans and Laborers League arranged weekly discussions in the plantations. During those meetings the lecturers promoted their ideas by addressing all kinds of subjects, whether scientific, philosophical or literary. After a gruelling week of hard work the field workers attended these gatherings en masse. They participated by asking numerous questions and lavishing great attention on the intellectuals who visited them. For Vallejo this was his first time. The event was scheduled to begin before noon. The afternoon train would take them back. After slightly more than an hour the long thread of cars reached the summit and began to descend through the desert terrain. A few kilometres away the wind made the undulating sugarcane plantations shine. To the east the leaden silhouette of the Andes was their constant companion. Outlined against the sky the region's hills followed a long horizontal line that remained unbroken until it reached the Chiquitoy Ranch.

'Can't you see it?' María asked. 'Doesn't it look like something strange up there? Over there on top of the hill.'

'It looks like a rock.'

'It does.'

'What can it be?'

'They say it's an idol. An enormous stone skull. Its empty eyes look towards the east.'

‘Is it bad luck to look at it for a long time?’

‘They say that as well.’

‘Well, then, nothing will happen to us’, César affirmed. Instead of watching the landscape go by the couple had kept their eyes fixed on each other.

‘Do you want me to blush?’

The poet never had a chance to answer. Abruptly the engineer stopped the train. Bangs, crashes and whistles could be heard as each car crunched into the cars next to it. They had arrived at the beginning of the Chicama Valley and a group of armed men boarded the train. The men moved from car to car studying the occupants’ faces. They asked no questions but they seized a dozen passengers and ordered them to get off the train. Then they pushed them towards a waiting truck. When the soldiers had finished their task one of them made an announcement:

‘This train is stopped until further notice. We don’t know yet whether it will be able to continue to the valley or if it will have to go back to Trujillo. You passengers have nothing to fear. While we wait for the order you can get down from the train and stretch your legs. This will take several hours.’

Because César and María Rosa had left so early they knew nothing about what was happening. From time to time the army undertook the task of terrorizing the field workers and today was Chiclín Ranch’s turn. A group of gendarmes dressed as civilians had attacked the village there during the previous night. The recent arrivals blocked the exits and stayed overnight in the small central plaza where several ranch employees waited for them with two baskets of ham sandwiches and a keg of cane liquor. While the commanding officers were getting drunk the soldiers went into the houses and dragged about twenty men outside. No-one understood why they did this.

‘What do you mean you don’t know? Are you or are you not sympathetic to the cause?’

‘What cause?’ a young man finally asked.

‘No questions! Go on! To the town square! The square!’

Women demanded the return of their husbands; children demanded their fathers. It was an uproar.

‘Nothing’s going to happen to those stupid mutts! We’re just going to ask them some questions...’

‘Sir, my son is just a child. He’s only twelve.’

‘And who told you to listen to the anarchists?’

‘Anarchists!’

‘I-will-say-it-again: Nothing’s going to happen to those mutts! We’re just going to ask them some questions... As for all of you, go back home.’

The soldiers shoved the men along. They left the women in a ranch warehouse, securing the metal doors with a lock. At midnight gunshots began to ring out. They sounded like the fireworks launched during religious festivals. The soldiers shot each man several times making quite sure they were all dead. They set several houses on fire. At daybreak the killers left Chiclín. Almost immediately twenty uniformed policemen arrived and took charge of the situation.

‘All of you people, bury your dead this afternoon. You have all morning to mourn over them,’ the police chief said. ‘It’s essential that the agitators don’t take advantage of this situation and try to blame the central government,’ he added.

For his part the ranch owner asked his people to keep calm, promising them that justice would be done. But he didn’t explain who the killers were nor why his own employees had given

them liquor and sandwiches. César and María's train managed to get through the military cordon and arrive in Chiclín quite late.

'There's been bloodshed here', a very young gendarme who was traveling with them on the train said. He added that the authorities were investigating what had happened.

'Ladies and gentlemen, you have been allowed to come here so that you will not be inconvenienced. It's crucial that you conduct your business as planned and that you leave Chiclín immediately thereafter.'

Suddenly the young gendarme appeared to recognize Vallejo. He walked over to the couple and sat down in front of them.

'Mr Vallejo, you don't know me but I know you. I'm from Santiago de Chuco and I remember when your father was governor...'

He glanced over at the aisle to see if anyone was coming. Then he spoke more quietly: 'Get out of here as soon as you can. The soldiers are looking for an anarchist leader, a man named Montoya. They didn't find him in Chiclín and they've killed several people... We have orders to arrest anyone suspicious. You're a university student. You and your girlfriend may be in danger...'

He said nothing more. He stood up quickly. Another gendarme who was standing in the aisle studied the travellers' faces and smiled: 'Go back to Trujillo on this train. You don't want to be considered suspicious, you know. You're not under suspicion. For now...'

César and María Rosa left the station and began walking without knowing exactly where they should go. A few houses were still smoking. The couple heard some isolated gunshots. Dogs pawed through the dead bodies. The dead were lying on top of newspapers in the same place where they had fallen. Their families had placed lit candles around each body. Two old men moved from one side to the other turning in senseless circles. It appeared that they had not found their dead relative. Swarms of green flies pursued them.

A wagon pulled by two mules carried the bodies, one by one, to the cemetery. The wagon driver did his work with tears streaming down his face. César and María encountered various groups of mourners whose paths converged on the road to the cemetery. Lost in the crowd and dragged along by a particular group they wandered among newly dug graves, women dressed in black and elderly people looking up to the sky. María saw a young woman kneeling next to a grave and a pile of fresh dirt. She embraced her and tried to raise her to her feet but the woman didn't react at all. Without warning, however, the woman broke her silence, took María by the hand and pointed to a bulky object: 'He was my brother.'

Like the others he was going to be buried without a coffin. Two men came towards them and picked up the body. Then, they laid it reverently in the bottom of the hole. One of them managed to place the arms in the form of a cross. Then they began to toss shovelfuls of dirt on top of the body.

'Why? ... Why?'

Later, the men brought another bulky object and placed it where the prior one had lain. A man wearing prescription glasses was reading Psalm 23. His voice could be heard above the groans of the mourners and the clinks of the shovels:

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.  
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:  
He leadeth me beside the still waters.*

They repeated this performance mechanically. They picked up another body and laid it in a grave dug alongside the other. They had dressed the man in a Sunday suit. It might have been the only suit he owned. When they threw the first shovelful of dirt the young woman let loose a fierce cry.

*And the veil of the temple was rent in twain from the top to the bottom. And when the centurion, which stood over against him, saw that he so cried out and gave up the ghost, he said, Truly this man was the Son of God.*

The pastor was now reading from the Gospel of Mark but he couldn't continue because his voice broke. César and María tried to comfort the young woman but she was lying on the ground, her enormous eyes looking up into the heavens: 'Why? Why?'

'Another brother?' César asked the pastor.

'Her husband. They're recently married. Now she has no-one left.'

César and María wanted to walk the young woman home. With a gesture, however, the pastor begged them not to insist.

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil: for thou art with me;  
thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.*

The pastor quickly stored the Bible in a briefcase and took César by the arm: 'Please leave. Both of you. Take the train back to Trujillo. Even I'm not sure.'

They went back. The following day only *La Reforma* published the telegraphic dispatch. There were no more news reports because the authorities prohibited additional reporting—under penalty of the newspaper being shut down and legal action being taken against the owner. In January 1916 María Rosa began to attend the young intellectuals' evening literary gatherings. One night she found the courage to read one of her 'Dreams'. The result was that they christened her with the name of María Bashkirtseff.

Every member of the group had a pseudonym. César had been baptized as Korriskosso; Antenor Orrego was given the name of Fradique; and José Eulogio Garrido was known as José Matías. These three names came from characters in the work of Eça Queiroz whom all of them read. Federico Esquerre was called Ruskin; Julio Gálvez was Julito Calabrés; Víctor Raúl de la Haya was the Prince of Gran Ventura; Macedonio de la Torre was known as 'Little King', after a character in a comic strip; Eloy Espinoza was Benjamín; and the precocious poet Francisco Xándoval, brother of María Rosa, was the moor Tarrarura. Within this group of young people María Bashkirtseff would meet Carmen Rosa Rivadneyra, who wrote under the pseudonym Violeta but whom everyone called Safo; Marina Osorio, whose nickname was Salomé; Lola Benítez, known as Cleopatra; and Isabel Machiavelo, who was Carlota Braema.

The group met together often. Their gathering places might be a café table or a member's apartment, the ruins of Chan Chan or the lawn at Mansiche. Before publishing his articles about Emerson, whose work had just been translated into Spanish, Orrego read the articles to the group. Rodó, Unamuno and Nietzsche dominated their conversations. In French María Rosa read to them the works of Baudelaire, Samain, Verlaine and Laforgue. Almost everyone in the group knew French. César took lessons from María. Juan Espejo Asturrizaga, a member of the group, would later recall that he had never seen César Vallejo so happy. Espejo said that of all the

women who interested César during his time as a student in Trujillo, María Rosa was the most intelligent and the one who best understood or perceived his destiny in a mysterious way. She was the one everyone loved the most.

On 10 February 1916 she accompanied César to José Eulogio Garrido's apartment for an homage to Rubén Darío who had just died. They read poems from *Prosas profanas*, *Cantos de vida y esperanza*, *Los raros* and *Azul*.... It fell to María Rosa to read 'What Awaits Us'. She read the poem slowly as if conducting a séance and the poet were speaking through her:

*[A]nd suffering because of life and because of shadow and because of  
what we don't know and scarcely suspect,  
and the flesh that tempts with its fresh-picked bunches,  
and the tomb that awaits with its funeral bouquets,  
and not knowing where we are going,  
nor from where we have come...!*

Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, who was living in Lima at that time, came to Trujillo for a visit. He met up with his friends from the group and encouraged them to create a huge campaign to redeem the working class. Together they went to several ranches and interviewed the leaders of the workers' leagues.

During those days the newspapers' front pages were filled with reports about the Great War which bathed Europe in a bloody glow and seemed about to envelop the entire world. The Germans attacked Verdun. *Popular Culture*, the city's only bookstore, obtained copies of Romain Rolland's *Jean Christophe*. Rolland had won the Nobel Prize for literature the year before. Written at that time and supposedly lost forever, one of María's diary notebooks was found ninety years later. The notebook serves as a kind of self-portrait.

15 March 1915

Today I was surprised as I saw myself—my entire body—naked in the mirror. I've seen my shoulders, my firm long arms, my breasts. I've looked closely at my thighs, sleek and strong; the angle, the refined cupola, of my sex; and my small agile feet. Then I look at my forehead, old and mute, something I see every day. I note the expression of my eyes; they're black. I study the dark hedges of my eyelashes, where sleep awaits. Fine, I'm not beautiful. I already knew that. Next I go to my hands. I look at them. They are, of course, my hands, the same as always. I've known them forever. I move them and they talk, they pick up, they grab, they live. My hands? How strange! Now they're different—they're something else. Now I look at them with surprise and the concept, the idea, the form all evaporate. My hands? I see filaments, strands, spiders. Hands ..., signs..., hands..., hands..., signs..., spiders..., hands... The word has lost its meaning. I feel a bit lightheaded. I see only my body, elongated, in the mirror as if it were a different person. I blush and dress quickly. Silly girl!

Although María Rosa and César lived only a block apart they wrote to each other every day. They left their letters to each other in the foliage of one of the trees in Santa Ana Park.

18 February 1916 (2 o' clock in the afternoon)

César, my love:

Today I'm sending you two petals from the humble geranium that lives in the church across from my window. Soon they will change colour and when that happens the miracle will burst forth. The entire garden will speak and it will no longer be possible for you to resist the mysterious forces that have brought us together and mixed us up in this life.

And the leaves that I sent you last month? What do they tell you?

12 March 1916 (almost midnight)

María, María, María:

Today, according to the arbitrary edict of your beloved czar and czarina, is not a day I can see you but we'll see each other at midnight. I'll talk to you then from here, from far away and you'll hear me even if you're sleeping. That's what we've agreed to, isn't it?

Well, I've spent the time waiting for midnight to come so that I can be with you and now the time has come and now you can touch me. You touch me and we're together and life opens before us forever.

You know this, María, because you welcome me into your life every day and because when it's our time, the earth spins in reverse, time becomes distorted, the sea forgets to live and stars become lost forever and we don't even realise it because at last we're together.

Do you know what true passion is? This is it and it means being together even if we're not together and to make love and live love always until time gets pulled out of shape and the stars race like crazy to find us.

You know this and you already know what's waiting for you.

César, of course.

3 April 1916 (noon)

María, maríamaríamaríamaría:

There was fog this morning and it was so dense that I can't honestly say whether I arrived at the Colegio Nacional de San Juan by way of a cloud or a road. Perhaps I'll never know whether I actually arrived or if there was even a road at all. Maybe sadness swallowed it up.

César, the same as always.

This correspondence created a substantial collection of short letters from Vallejo that María Rosa kept jealously locked away in her office. Among María Rosa's papers several kinds date from this period: pages from her diary written both before and after she met the poet; images from her dreams; and a few brief missives from Vallejo. One day the communications abruptly stopped. All of the papers were erased.



## An Artist, Sir, is a Suspicious Character

18 May 1916 (night-time)

Beethoven, Mad Beethoven:

You've asked me to tell you about my mother. Mother looked after my happiness, my basic needs, my purity as a poor girl. My younger brother and I were both very happy at home.

Mother was extraordinarily good, mild, filled with pain. She was much more than other mothers. Mother, sister and friend. She wasn't an educated woman but on her forehead she carried the seal of the Holy Spirit. She was upright and long-suffering, manly and arrogant. My memory of her is almost like an old song.

P.S.: My aunt and uncle never stop talking about your wild mane. That's why I call you Beethoven today. My Beethoven.

César knew this letter by heart because he had read it many times. When he remembered that María called him Beethoven he ran his hand through his hair and smiled. He had spent all afternoon reading in the prison's small chapel and, from time to time, he thought he heard the notes of a harmonica. Initially he assumed they were just a fantasy, so he ignored them. Later the low hum of the Brandenburg Concertos wafted near him but the sound disappeared as soon as he tried to pay attention to it.

He told himself that it was impossible to hear Bach within that herd of unfortunate men. Furthermore the music seemed to be coming from the heavens. The harmonica has an advantage over instruments that employ bellows: the pitch and harmony of each note can be dramatically transformed by the musician's determination and soul and that was precisely what was happening. The music reverberated: sometimes it was a whisper, at others a peal of thunder. The harmonica player couldn't possibly be in the prison. Perhaps what the breeze carried now and again was coming from a nearby house. Several hours went by and although there were some intermittent silences, the music didn't disappear. The poet thought it strange that the musician didn't get tired.

It was now nearly six o' clock in the evening and the inmates were supposed to return to their cells. In view of the need to move quickly César took the most direct but least advisable route. He walked along the corridor that led to Hell. From there he would climb some stairs to the second floor which was where his cell was located.

The corridor floor had not been cleaned. It was stained with blood and human filth. Suddenly he stopped in front of a door. He was taking the risk of being punished with a night in Hell for not returning on time but his curiosity was stronger than the threat of punishment. The harmonica chords emanated – clearly and vividly – from that cell. He looked through the window and saw the musician. He materialized before César as a very thin man sitting at the room's only table. Three men were lying on their beds listening, completely absorbed.

When César tried to lean into the window one of the men growled, roared, got up and ran aggressively to the door. Vallejo couldn't forget that face pressed so close to his own. He thought that it must be same as the face of the man with the sledgehammer he had sensed in the shadows during his first night in Hell. He looked like a caged animal. Vallejo realised that he had intruded on the inmates' privacy and that, under the circumstances, what he had done was extremely dangerous. He moved away immediately and walked on without stopping. He managed to enter his cell just as the final bell tolled six o' clock and the watchmen's whistles began to sound.

'You're late', Salomé Navarrete said.

'Did you hear it? Did you hear him?'

'Hear what? Who?'

'There's a man who plays the harmonica. He spent the entire afternoon playing Bach.'

'The way you walked here isn't that safe', Navarrete replied. 'You've just walked through a very dangerous area. It's for men who are real criminals. And if they weren't criminals when they got here they are now. They've lost the veneer of humanity. It's the only way they could survive.'

'I asked you if you heard the man playing the harmonica.'

'You should have taken the other corridor. You must have already recognised that most people here are farmers from the valley haciendas. Honest men with no criminal past. They began coming here whenever some boss got nervous or the government wanted to show its resolve in the face of social unrest. Soldiers would take over a ranch at midnight. After killing a number of people they'd seize others at random as they found them. It's always been like this. I assume that's the way it is now, isn't it?'

'I saw forty people, more or less', Vallejo said.

'There are more than that. Many never leave their cells. Disease, understand? Tertian fever, typhoid, tuberculosis. More than half of the people being held here are sick.'

Vallejo kept asking his question about the harmonica player.

'It's raining. How strange!' Navarrete answered.

Either he was avoiding the subject or perhaps he simply had no interest at all.

'Raining! ... It never rains on the coast...'

Navarrete stood up from the chair where he was reading and walked over to the window that gave onto the courtyard. The rain fell in buckets. Outside, the cement floor began to twinkle and shine. Tossed about by the wind the raindrops fell in a zigzag pattern bouncing off the ground at times.

In his cell the poet lowered his eyes and stared at the floor. That was what everyone in his village did when it rained. When he asked his question again his cellmate couldn't hear him. He had fallen asleep. The rain continued its meticulous tune. It probably cleared up around midnight and then the moon and the bright stars came out.

19 May 1916 (six o' clock in the evening)

Letter about birds: I'm going to keep telling my story, María.

Mariísima: It was about six o' clock in the morning and I was walking towards Huanchaco. All of us—Julito, Antenor, Macedonio de la Torre and I—had decided to go on foot.

All of a sudden the sky became closed and belonged only to the sea birds. I could provide a description of their flight but it wouldn't be sufficient. I could say that they fly in an inverted 'V' and that each tribe consists of approximately twenty birds and my description could add further that all the groups formed a gigantic 'V' in the sky that had its starting point at the Temple of the Dragon and ended at the beach. But then I stopped and watched closely and I realised that the sky moves as well and that the birds are the ones carrying it along.

But that's as much as I could tell you. I couldn't tell you what happens to a man who looks up at the sky. You will know only what that man confesses to you now: only a real man can face up to his memories.

During subsequent afternoons, from his reading corner in the church, César heard the 'Magnificat in D Major', the 'Saint John Passion', the 'Mass in B Minor', the 'Saint Matthew Passion', the 'Concerto for Oboe and Violin', the 'Concerto for Harpsichord' ... and yet the Johann Sebastian Bach repertoire didn't end. The harmonica player didn't venture out to the courtyard and Vallejo didn't dare pass by the cell again. Nor did he have the means to persuade Salomé Navarrete to tell him more about the fantastic musician.

In the meantime the poet's mood suffered highs and lows. He felt happy when first Orrego and later his other friends were able to visit him. The presence of his attorney, Godoy, filled him with hope that everything would come to an end soon. The long waits between one judicial procedure and the subsequent one depressed him. Several reports about the outrageous behavior of Judge Iturri Luna Victoria made him throw himself to the ground. One afternoon he didn't go out to the courtyard.

At that moment he didn't care whether he was in the courtyard's burning sun or the dank shadows of his cell. When people don't know how long they'll be incarcerated they begin to confuse night and day. For them the flow of time becomes hazy, the experience of being awake loses focus and rather than seeing people walking, they perceive them as if they were floating through the universe. That was why Vallejo was stretched out on his bed looking at the ceiling. Recently, however, Navarrete had remembered the subject of music.

'Weren't you talking to me about that harmonica?'

This time it was the poet who didn't answer.

'You were talking about the Musician, my friend Vallejo. That's what they call him. I don't know his name. But yes, of course... He's an extraordinary man...'

He then went to the table and picked up a teapot. He filled a mug with lemon verbena tea and offered it to Vallejo.

'Take it! It's quite hot...'

The poet appeared to take an interest. Sitting on the bed he reached out his hand, took the mug and began to thank Navarrete. But before he did so he made a declaration: 'Tomorrow I'm going to talk with him.'

'That's impossible.'

‘Impossible? Because of the men who guard him?’

‘No, it’s not them...’

‘Is he unsociable?’

‘Worse than that! He’s mute, Mr Vallejo! Mute!’

Faced with Vallejo’s stunned silence Navarrete explained that the Musician had not always been mute.

‘He must have come to the prison about ten years ago. When I arrived he could still speak. I think he got tuberculosis or some kind of respiratory illness. He developed complications with his larynx. He ended up mute.’

The Musician was an educated man from the middle classes. That was all Navarrete knew about him. He couldn’t tell much more than that.

‘He looked young when they brought him here. Now he looks like those people who live half-dead. How did he get here? I’d love to know. Somebody’s revenge, I suppose. And then...well, no-one leaves this place. Are you surprised that he lost his voice?... It’s normal. Entering this prison is like entering death. Just like the dead, people here start to decompose.’

César Vallejo didn’t know what to say. He leaned out the window and looked towards the courtyard.

‘Decompose. That’s right: decompose. They lose their sight, their minds, their voices... Unless, of course, some fearsome passion drives them.’

César wanted to believe that he was dreaming. At some point he’d have to wake from this nightmare.

‘In the kingdom of the dead the deceased begin by losing their faces. Then they become invisible.’

The poet shook his head the way people do when they want to wake up.

‘I didn’t want to talk to you about the Musician because you look too much like him... in a lot of ways.’

The courtyard was outside. Enormous walls surrounded it. Beyond the walls lay freedom but where was César? Was he out there or in here? Out there, outside, the palm trees swayed in the main square, the wind howled, the sizzling earth crackled and people greeted each other with a tip of their hats. ‘Am I out there or in here?’ César asked himself and he felt like he was walking in the air, as if the earth had begun to abandon him.

‘Revenge! It has to be!’ Navarrete shouted without warning. ‘I’m sure it was.’

Vallejo said nothing.

‘The men in his cell are vicious murderers. People say that one of them is a cannibal. He killed another prisoner and started to eat him. They put the Musician there so he would die bit by bit. So fear would eat him up.’

The kerosene lamp started to flicker due to lack of fuel.

‘But they failed, see?... The Musician has tamed them. He plays the harmonica and soothes them. They become like children; they beg him to help them go to sleep.’

César pricked up his ears and it seemed he could still hear the harmonica’s echo.

‘They put him in that cell to kill him. Now the murderers protect him...’

‘And his enemies? What have his enemies done?’

‘It looks like they got tired or perhaps they died. Nobody seems to remember him, not even someone who might want to hurt him.’

‘If he doesn’t have enemies any more then he could re-open his case and ask for his freedom.’

‘His freedom?... I don’t think he wants it...’

When the kerosene lamp went out, Navarrete explained in the shadows that once people lose their other senses, they also lose the spice, the smell and the many flavors of freedom. He said nothing more about it.

15 June 1916 (I don’t know what time it is)

Letter on a cloud:

Mariísima:

Today I write you only this letter and in it I tell you that one of the most important events of my life happened today. Today I saw you at my side. Today we were travelling on a cloud and everybody knows that clouds don’t lie.

No date:

César, my crazy César, today I felt a strange fear: I could never bear to die. My body is young and wants to be fed.

I love. I loved. I would love. Conjugation of the verb: We loved! We loved! We loved!

I feel calm. But my body will give way tomorrow. Under the weight of the years.

The rosebushes will remain. In the garden, the roses will bloom again. There will be other children and other lovers. The day, the sun, the air: everything will be just the same. But my body will give way to the years.

Conjugation: preterite tense: I loved; I loved you; you loved me... But it will be very late when time, my body, my dream and the rosebushes fade away.

It will rain...

November 1920 was a month of fog. Until noon each day the courtyards of the Trujillo prison were a white land of ghosts. The inmates were free to walk these areas until six o’ clock in the evening; in the fog, they did so without being able to see each other clearly. The ground was covered with golden sand that the wind brought from the ocean and water droplets twinkled upon it. The droplets looked like fallen stars. While walking over them on the last day of the month César Vallejo asked himself what stars were made of and what human beings were made of.

‘Mr Vallejo, do you remember me?’ he heard a voice ask.

A man wearing a white shirt came over to him. In spite of the dense fog, César recognized him because of his voice and his enormous white teeth. He was the prisoner who had accompanied him during his first nights in Hell.

‘Mr Chanduví.’

‘Call me Kills-for-Kicks—or whatever you want but don’t call me “Mr”. I’m not posh. Anyway you said you would visit me in the prison carpentry shop but you’ve never showed up.’

They talked. The man told César about the land where he was born, his parents, his school and his childhood friends. It was as if he had just left them. Freedom creates a huge empty space when you don’t have it and memories fill that space. The poet didn’t really listen. He simply let the man talk, which is all he really wanted anyway.

César asked him if he knew about the Musician and Kills-for-Kicks reacted with surprise.

‘How odd! I dreamt that you would ask me about him’, he said.

He looked from side to side as if he were about to reveal a secret.

‘What a coincidence!’ he finally blurted out. ‘You and he look very similar and I just happen to have spent time in Hell with you both.’

‘Hell!’

‘Yes, Hell. They took me there for some reason which I can’t now remember. The gendarmes always come up with a good reason. I was there with two men: two animals like the ones you saw in the Musician’s cell. Fortunately I’m practically an invisible man. Truth be told, Mr Vallejo, the best way to protect yourself is to avoid other people’s space and field of vision and that’s what I do best. I hug the walls and no-one sees me. I’m not going to say that I’m not afraid. Terror eats away my insides but I’ve managed to survive until today.’

Chanduví looked all around to assure himself that no-one was watching. When he felt sure, he barked a command: ‘Follow me!’

Together they went to the small chapel.

‘Do what I do, please.’

They took their places in front of the cross as if they were talking with the Lord.

‘Do you know something? Chancho Marino was a good man.’

‘Chancho Marino?’

‘The very same.’

‘Who is Chancho Marino?’

‘The man that the Musician and I were locked up with. Like I was saying before, Chancho Marino couldn’t talk very well but he was good. Legal! Legal!... He was a beast, almost two metres tall and carrying around I-don’t-know-how-many kilos of fat. He killed several men here in prison. He’d break their necks or hang them. That was his specialty but he only did it because he didn’t know how to do anything else. The gendarmes ordered him to do it and then they rewarded him with food. You and I can survive on the stale bread and cup of soup they give us here for lunch but not a beast like him.’

‘They used him to murder people.’

‘That’s right. But these animals aren’t complete animals, sir. The day comes when they finally see their own faces and feel their own pain. I think that was already happening to Chancho Marino. He was always alone, always in a corner of the courtyard all by himself. He was there, his huge body lying in the sun. He was like an axe waiting to be used.

‘An axe?’

‘I think he reached a point where he got tired of being an axe. And a pig. And a beast.’

Chanduví paused. He sighed.

‘I have difficulty believing that he could have been happy in his role as executioner but he was. Here they impose the death penalty, sir. The gendarmes act as judges: they choose whose turn it is to die and then they put him in Hell with the beasts. Of course the gendarmes are paid by someone on the outside who orders the execution. Later they say that the whole thing was a prison brawl, just criminals settling scores and an investigation is ordered. That’s all that happens.’

Chanduví raised his eyes to the heavens and spoke as if he were not even addressing Vallejo.

‘I remember it as if it were today: they locked me up with Chancho Marino and hung a gas lamp over the window. I was frightened out of my mind. I had no idea who would want me dead but I quickly realised that I wasn’t the target. One of the gendarmes came in and told Chancho Marino that he had a little job to do. He gave him some rope and then he said that his reward would be two weeks of double rations.’

‘If you weren’t the target, why were you there?’

‘It’s always like that. They need at least one witness to tell everybody else so the whole thing can serve as a lesson. The gendarmes need the prisoners to be afraid of them... Chancho Marino took the rope in his hands, inspected it like a professional and checked it with his tongue. Like any professional he wanted to know his tools. The gendarme explained that the victim was a Jew. He also said that the Jews had killed Christ and that the man was probably an anarchist.’

‘A Jew?’

‘When they brought Marcos here he was straight-backed and blond. He looked like a foreigner. To the guards every poor foreigner is a Jew.’

‘And what did Chancho Marino do?’

‘Chancho Marino... Chancho Marino looked at the gendarme with a certain tenderness and then he licked the rope again.’

‘And then they brought the Musician in?’

‘The Musician? Oh, yes. Of course. The Musician. Let me tell the story, Mr Vallejo. But let me say this: Anything they’ve told you about him is false.’

Vallejo reassured Chanduví that no-one had told him anything. He added that he didn’t even know the Musician’s name.

‘He told me his name when he could still speak. His name is Marcos and he’s from Lima. He played the piano in theatres and I believe everything was going well for him. I’m not saying he was a concert pianist. He didn’t have any money. He wasn’t some little rich boy who could dedicate himself completely to art. All he did was play the music for movies.’

César remembered the films that were shown in Trujillo’s only theatre. A pianist sat near the screen and played a score by Camille Saint-Saëns without stopping. The music was always the same but the pianist changed speeds to reflect the emotions depicted onscreen. The projector’s racket, the constant interruptions from switching reels and the audience’s reactions all contributed to the noisy spectacle. There were brief silences so that the audience could hear the voice of the narrator who read the intertitles to help the illiterate follow the plot. The piano music changed according to the story’s rhythm, imposing gravitas and atmosphere on the experience.

At this point in his story Chanduví looked back again to reassure himself that no-one was watching them.

‘Without any warning the pianist went crazy. Instead of playing the music he was supposed to play he wouldn’t stop playing a song by... Was the name Chopin?... Yes, that’s what he told me. Chopin. He had fallen in love and he wanted to impress a girl who sat in the audience every day... The worst thing happened when they were showing *The Great Train Robbery*. When the robbers were being chased Marcos was supposed to play energetically, frantically. Instead he gave himself over to a romantic *nocturne*. They fired him from the theatre.’

‘And that’s why they sent him to prison?’

‘The theatre owner was the girl’s father and he wanted her to marry well. He felt that Marcos was scaring off potential suitors from good families. He wanted to make an example of him so he accused him of stealing from the ticket office. Finally he managed to have him thrown in prison and, as always, things got complicated here... An artist, sir, is a suspicious character. The gendarmes saw Marcos as cultured, educated, poor... and so the second he arrived here they labelled him an anarchist.’

‘And the girl?’

‘The girl... Ah yes, the girl. I suppose she immediately came to her senses because she never came to visit him. That’s the way it always goes, right, sir? That’s the way the world works. I don’t know why God doesn’t just intervene and turn off the sun once and for all.’

He fell quiet for a moment. Then he looked up to the sky as if he were spying on God.

‘You were telling me that Chanco Marino was going to kill him...’

‘Line upon line, Vallejo my friend. I already told you that they hung a lighted gas lamp in the cell to help the executioner’s work. I was lying on the floor pretending to be asleep although I couldn’t shut my eyes because they were paralyzed by fear. The gendarme noticed, of course, and I had been put there so I could tell other people what happened but the gendarme was mistaken about me. This is the first time I’ve told anyone and I’m only doing it because you’re a writer. You’ll tell the story and if not you then somebody else will do it when they write about this part of your life.’

Chanduví’s efforts to avoid being overheard by other people in the prison turned out to be unnecessary because the courtyard was so vast and every prisoner maintained an orbit around him like a special planet with its own particular problems. In addition the sun fell straight across his shoulders, turning them transparent.

‘You won’t believe what happened next, sir. Chanco Marino went over to his intended victim and measured his neck with the rope as if he were selling him a tie. Then he spent quite some time trying to make a good slipknot which he tied and untied repeatedly like a perfectionist. The gendarme leaned up to the window in the door and shouted at us not to play around. Then he let out a laugh and his footsteps moved away.’

‘When the knot was ready Chanco Marino climbed up on the table and passed one end of the rope over the roof beam. He did it all with great care. I almost thought he was going to ask the Musician for some help. And do you know what he did next? He put the gas lamp on the floor and got back on the table. Then he grabbed the slipknot and tested it on his own neck.’

‘I’ll bet you’re wondering what Marcos did next. He was frozen with fear but he knew his time had come and he prepared himself to die. I imagine he probably really is a Jew and that that’s what they do before they die. I don’t know. He took a harmonica out of his pocket and began playing it. The executioner made no objection. I think he was granting Marcos a last request.’

‘It was a very sorrowful melody, so melancholy that I told myself: It’s the tempo. The tempo is the thing that twists songs and breaks guitars. I felt that the music was moving beyond the mountains and carrying me back to my pueblo. I remembered my mother and without realising why I began to cry.’

‘I hadn’t been drinking, Mr Vallejo. I wasn’t drunk. I swear that I saw Chanco Marino kneel down. He prostrated himself and began to cry too. He got down from the table and went over to the Musician. He didn’t moan or anything but the tears were definitely pouring down. It was as if a tree were mourning without mourning without making any noise. The place smelled like death. Believe me, sir. The cell was filled with shades waiting to take someone down to hell. There’s no question. I felt them.’

He fell silent again. Vallejo didn’t want to interrupt for fear that Chanduví would change the subject.

‘Chanco Marino climbed up on the table again, licking the rope once more to ensure that it was strong enough to take the load. He passed his head through the noose and placed it around his neck. Then he kicked the table leaving himself hanging there. He kicked a few times



against the empty air until he ran out of breath. Finally his body stretched out and he became immense. His feet practically touched the floor.'

'And what did the two of you do?'

'What did we do? Nothing, of course. If somebody cries out or calls for the guard in situations like that, things can get complicated. Instead I signaled to Marcos that he should stop playing the harmonica. Then I went over to the lamp and put it out. The next morning a guard asked me to help him take the body down. No-one ever said anything again about what happened. They left the Musician alone for a while. Then they found him a permanent cell which he shares with those animals.'

'They've told me he has tuberculosis. I don't know where he gets the strength to keep playing the harmonica.'

'Where? I can't believe you're asking me! Who or what plays music? The tongue? The blood? The heart? The lungs? No, sir! It's the soul! The Musician is going to die soon and his soul is ready to go. His soul is in the process of leaving and that's what we hear when we hear the harmonica.'

In September 1916 seven months after their romance began María disappeared. She seemed to have been erased by the wind. She didn't show up at the library or go out to the street on a single day. Two weeks went by this way and César didn't know what to think. He remembered her frequent colds. Whenever she had a cold she didn't even have the strength to look out the small window on Zepita Street. Even so there was something very odd about the situation. At the beginning of the month María's brother, Francisco, had taken the boat to Chimbote. He was going to work for the municipality and it was possible that he would stay there for quite some time. For that reason Vallejo couldn't ask Francisco to tell him what was happening and he certainly couldn't confront the goalkeeping aunt and uncle by knocking at the front door. There is a letter dating from this period that Vallejo slipped through Francisco's window. The letter fell to the floor. Francisco found it and kept it for the rest of his life.

15 September 1916

A letter in the dark:

What are you looking at, María, if you're not looking at me now and where are you walking now if you're not walking by my side and what are you listening to now if you can't listen to me and who are you now if you're beginning to cease to exist and who am I now if I'm losing my face and, finally, who are we now if our time for being able to see each other and love each other has passed by and where are our shadows now that we are only shadows and we cross the threshold and we cease to be the people that we were and we begin to become shadows?

And so like so, from the air to the air, I ask you these questions, even though you may have already lost the face you used for me on the day before the creation of faces and lights.

Come out again. You know how much I need you. Come out!

From that time on, they would never see each other again. César received only a few hard, cheerless words in a letter that María dropped off at the local post office. The letter spent a month in transit before reaching him.

Farewell, César. When you get this letter, I'll already be gone. I beg you not to look for me. In order for dreams to stay dreams it's better not to dream them again.

Don't ask me for explanations. There are none. All we have are words like those in which we've been living during this entire marvelous time. Ten months, like ten years or ten centuries. It doesn't matter how many months we had when we were so happy!

Vallejo gazed at the paper; essentially he saw only words. Later the thought occurred to him that the universe was composed of black stones on white stones. For a brief moment María's outline appeared in the air. Then everything was erased. Just like in a theatre the stagehands came in, rolled up all the props and scenery and carted everything off: Trujillo, the sea, the mountains, the trees, love, words and the birds. He couldn't believe it but it had to be that way. His entire life story was about loss, a complete and terrible loss, the loss of everything he loved, with no explanations. As a result of all that destruction he could only turn out in one of two ways: he could either be drained of everything or be the master of a new, definitive and indestructible beauty. Only poetry could save him. The words in the letter stretched out and changed shape. But there it was, the girl's hard, implacable determination: There are no explanations. I haven't been able to talk about this with you. I could never look into your eyes.

## The Little Girl in the Fig Tree



On Monday, in jail, César slept in a lot later than usual. Speaking with his friend Orrego, walking around the courtyard on Sunday and sleeping in a bed was just too much happiness rolled up into one. The story about María Pipí made him smile but the excitement caused by the thought of fleeing on the Sanpedro unsettled him. Would a boat really be able to get him out of prison? What was the connection between Antenor and that boat? And was Paris his destiny? Why Paris? ‘You will know why one day’, the shaman told him, adding: ‘Dreams must be taken seriously.’

He had a very long dream. He was travelling along the river in his village, the Tablachaca. His parents emerged along the river. He was playing with his brothers and sisters in his dream and he wondered without stopping: ‘For how long will Santiago the Blind Man ring the six o’ clock bell?’ Then he saw Santiago the Blind Man arrive. He came towards him without showing his face and he asked him: ‘César, my child, how long is all this going to carry on for? How long will this valley of tears which I never asked them to bring me to carry on like this? How long?’

‘The day is dawning’, César tried to reply in his dream. ‘The day is dawning, brother, put your soul on.’ When Santiago tried to put his soul on he couldn’t find it. Neither could he find his decapitated head. The soldiers and the businessmen of Quiruvila had hidden them. He woke up screaming. Salomé Navarrete, the prisoner he met the day before, was standing at the end of his bed.

‘I knew Santiago too’, he said.

César looked upwards and he wondered if the man who was looking at him could see other people's dreams.

'I'm telling you this because I'm from Santiago de Chuco as well', the guy was smiling. That explained it but it still meant he had read his mind.

'I left there a long while ago... when you were a child. I got to know the Blind Man in Quiruvilva.

Navarrete made no gestures. Not a single line moved on his face which was covered in wrinkles and cracks. His hands were enormous and he spoke slowly as if he was praying.

'Don't worry about the other prisoner. They took him away early and he won't be coming back. He was half mad... There's an empty. Let's see who they bring in to replace him.'

'I guess you're an educated man', Salomé continued. He added: 'You're welcome to any of the books you can see. I'm probably going to be here for a while and I've decided to educate myself. I've been reading Camille Flammarion.'

'Now it's my turn to guess. You were reading *Life after Death* and you want to know what I think of it. Am I right?' Vallejo was in a good mood.

'Yes. It's true that prison gives us certain powers. Probably you will become a magician while you're here. Suddenly we'll become invisible and escape.'

Their conversation was interrupted by the sound of a discreet knock at the door.

'Mr Vallejo, I must speak to you.' It was the mayor.

'Don Cipriano, may I enquire as to when my lawyer will arrive?'

'Your lawyer... That's what I wanted to talk to you about...'

'Antenor told me that he would come today. Will it be this afternoon?'

'Above all, make yourself comfortable.' He pointed to the small table where the prisoners would eat, read or converse. The inmates retired discreetly to their beds.

'Come this way.'

'Is he going to come or not?'

'Don't be like that! Let me explain! Since you're pulling a face like that I'm going to have to tell you that he won't. He won't come... And, what's more, the Santa María family have requested continuation of solitary confinement and they've got it.'

'I cannot be refused the right to a defense.'

'That's what your lawyer has said and he has managed to get permission to see you.. That is, in a week's time.'

'Another week! You've come here to tell that I'm in solitary confinement for a further week?'

'Theoretically, yes... but you won't have to go to the Quiet Room. I'm not going to allow it. You will remain here with this gentleman. I can see that you have become friends... The only problem is that you're not allowed to have visitors.'

Cipriano Barba left. Vallejo remained seated for hours with his elbows on the table, his head in his hands. At twelve o'clock food was brought but César didn't touch a thing. Until that moment he had believed that he would be given bail until the case came to court because he was not a dangerous criminal and he had no intention of fleeing, not indeed could he do so. Now he realised that they intended to crush him.

The other inmate respected his silence. He went out for a while to the courtyard – which Vallejo was forbidden to do – and in the evening he came back to be with him. They tried to talk about things that had no bad memories. They didn't want to talk about the crimes of which they were accused; they wanted to talk about dreams. Salomé Navarrete averred that dreams were

messages from God and he opened a page of the Bible which referred to prophetic visions. He was interested in knowing whether a repeating dream he had had in which he was flying meant that he was close to freedom. He asked Vallejo for his opinion:

‘I cannot know this unless I know what you’re accused of. But I’m not going to ask you that.’

‘Do you want to know?’

‘Providing you want me to know.’

‘They say I’m here because I’m a heretic.’ The poet was on the point of bursting out laughing but the man in front of him was old and he was being serious.

‘That is not a crime according to the Penal Code.’

‘They arrested me five years ago when the prohibition against any religion other than Catholicism was still in force.’

‘But the Constitution at that time didn’t legislate against a crime of that kind.’

‘That’s right. My lawyer presented a writ two months ago demanding I be set free. But now they’ve invented another crime.’

Navarrete was a very well known shaman in Chocope. The people of Trujillo took the train to pay him a visit and ask him to cure different and strange ailments. The man attended to their needs sitting on a chair. He didn’t examine the patient nor did he ask them about their pain. He would simply stare at him while watching the swinging of a pendulum. This was sufficient for his diagnosis. Herbs from different parts of the country were used by him as powerful medicines. They talked of numerous terminally ill patients to whom he had given back their lives and their happiness.

‘Does that mean that you’re friends with Pato Negro?’

Don Salomé laughed out loud.

‘Pato Negro is a witchdoctor. He’s into black magic. He holds night séances to capture lovers and harm his enemies. He also does some small cures. He sells charms. He says that the dead give him advice. Let’s say that I’m a curer. I’m not into other stuff.’

Navarrete didn’t require payment either for his services. The grateful patients left – according to their inclination and as much as they could – a few coins in a wooden box. He would take what he needed from that box for his sustenance and to buy herbs. He offered the rest to a small Pentecostal church.

‘The parish priest came looking for me and he threatened to have me charged if I carried on supporting the Protestant church. In a nutshell, in October 1915 the police came to get me and they threw me in jail. First of all they accused me of being a heretic. Now they’ve added crimes against body and health. They accuse me of having poisonous herbs and causing an abortion. All of this is false. But if you ask me, frankly yes, I’m a heretic.’

In 1916 Europe was still ablaze with the Great War. César Vallejo scanned the news in the newspapers but he couldn’t concentrate and he forgot about the world. He folded up María’s letter, he flattened it out and he tried to decipher it. Sometimes he thought that he had unintentionally offended her. On other occasions he thought she was unfaithful. There were also times when he thought she was dead. To his unfailing black suit he had added a tie of the same colour which gave him the appearance of a pained widow. In his mind the only woman in the universe was María. María, María, María. If the sea which spills out around the world were to be filled with love rather than cold water it would be named because of its love María and not just sea as it now called. On countless occasions the ill-fated letter he received from her displayed a

different meaning. He finally concluded that 1916 was the year of shadows and that María was probably no longer in this universe.

On 13 February 1917 Zoila Rosa Cuadra had her fifteenth birthday and various events shook her to the roots. The first was to find out that something was happening in a remote country that was destined to turn the world upside-down and have a decisive influence on the young men she knew at that time.

The newspaper, *La Industria*, began to provide information about an incredible revolution. In Russia the empire of the Czars had been caged in by a crushing rebellion of workers, farmers and soldiers who fought under a red flag. It all began when the maintenance of order in the streets of Petrograd was handed over to the army which was made up of ill-fed young men who were subject to humiliating discipline. When the order was given to fire at the striking workers the soldiers rioted and turned their guns on their superiors. The following day the soldiers fraternised with the workers, they set free the political prisoners and proceeded to establish councils made up of workers and soldiers called soviets. This event transformed the popular movement into a revolutionary proclamation whose true significance was not grasped either by the Czar or official government circles. All power to the Soviets! was the rallying cry. The property of the landowners throughout Russia was to be transformed into co-operatives and the serfs would be liberated, free to walk, to read, to fall in love, to live, converse and be human.

The second event in Zoila Rosa's life was her acquaintance with the young members of the so-called Bohemian set of Trujillo. Once upon a time a straight-laced little village with illusions of grandeur Trujillo had become a cultural centre which had influence over the whole country. A number of the young men felt that they come to the world with a mission to set it ablaze and change it forever.

The third and final of the events in Zoila Rosa's life – the most important one for her – was becoming acquainted with a man who was ten years her senior and the proud owner of an impressive mop of hair. Perhaps that was the matrix of the mysterious force which emanated from his eyes and the magnetism of his chiselled face. His name was César Vallejo and she met him when she attended the opening of an exhibition of the sculpture of Macedonio de la Torre. She had read some of his poems and she had seen him from afar, dressed as was his wont in stark black. He would have been about 25 years old. While he was inspecting the sculptures Vallejo had passed close by her but he had not even looked at her. Because of the austere look on his face she imagined that he had been the victim of a tragic love affair. She was saddened to think she had not been its cause.

Some people can feel it when someone behind them is looking at them. The poet swivelled round and, naturally, didn't see her. The young lady said 'hi' and made a gesture. But he looked in the direction where Zoila Rosa was and, once more, his eyes looked through her and settled on striking example of Macedonio de la Torre's sculpture. She persisted and approached him once more but Vallejo was absorbed in a conversation with one of his friends.

'An artist? .... Macedonio is more than an artist. He's a soul', Vallejo said.

'For me, no, he's more a bird. I close my eyes and I see him as a hummingbird searching out colours and the secret of nature.'

'There's something more. Macedonio considers nature to be man's route to salvation.'

'My dear César. more than an art critic, you seem like a monk or a blind man or a widow. You have not even deigned to look at the prettiest girl in the room. She seems to be looking for you.'

Vallejo's friend disappeared. All at once César noticed the girl who was talking to him:

'Are you a poet?'

'That's what my friends say.'

'You have the look of a great poet.'

Vallejo smiled. He was flattered: 'And yourself, what's your name?' He was about to use the familiar form but then corrected himself.

'Zoila Rosa'.

The poet made a polite gesture and made as if to retire, when she had an idea. She reached her hands towards a nearby table, took a plate and offered it to him: 'Would you like a bite to eat?'

'Thank you.'

'I suppose everyone wants something to eat.'

'I'm sure you're right.'

She took a sandwich:

'I suppose they're not that bad.'

She was no longer looking at him. She was looking at her hands instead.

'How do you like the sandwiches?' she asked, raising her gaze to the centre of her interlocutor's forehead.

Vallejo retorted: 'Are you looking at my third eye?'

'Excuse me?'

'It feels like you're drilling into the space between my eyebrows.'

They began making small talk about various issues when, suddenly, she came up with a topic out of the blue: 'I love horses.'

As if she were talking to herself, Zoila Rosa said horses had a soul like human beings. She said that she had seen the shadows of dead horses travelling through clouds. Now vehement, she thought that if anyone knew a horse's soul they could understand what real nobility and dignity are like.

Vallejo believed he had heard something similar said to him when he was a child. Zoila Rosa's family ranch bred cows and caballos de paso. She was not interested in cows at all. She felt they were docile and a bit stupid.

'I feel as if cows are green. They are like walking grass. Cows are green, green, green!'

Vallejo had not spoken at all during her monologue. He didn't want to interrupt her. He was fascinated. He told her so.

'I have the feeling you want to come into my life.'

'Would you let me in?'

César was silent for a second. Then he changed the subject.

'Why are you so fascinated by horses?'

'I don't know. Perhaps it's because they're free.'

'Free?' But they're part of a herd. And they belong to a cattle farmer.'

'Even so, they are still free.'

He asked her if she thought there was a heaven for horses.

'What for?' she said. 'What for!'

'I'm asking you if you believe that there is a heaven for horses.'

'And my answer is that they don't need one.'

Vallejo guided their conversation towards the theme of reincarnation.

'I believe in resurrection but we'll be something different and very tired.'

At that point Vallejo's friend, Antenor Orrego, appeared. 'We are still talking about Macedonio's works', he said. 'His sculptures are amazing. They seem to be moving.'

'And his paintings are like eternal grass. Green, green, green!' Vallejo exclaimed.

Vallejo and Zoila Rosa looked at each other and repeated in unison: 'Green, green, green.'

'I can see you have a little secret', Orrego observed with a smile and he was about to leave when at that moment Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre joined the group and began to speak about the recent news of the February revolution.

'They are taking over the whole of Russia.'

'That's right', Antenor interjected. 'But all the nobles are waiting in Paris for the day they will return and the *ancien régime* is restored.'

'They'll have to wait a little while, I suppose. Even a little more than a little while', Vallejo emphasised his words and all those present greeted his comment with a smile.

'It was always thought that the workers were unable to govern themselves' Orrego said. 'But look at what's happening in Russia. They're creating a socialist state and they're intent of lighting the flame of social justice in the whole world. Europe is on fire.'

Víctor Raúl had his say: 'If we bring about a revolution here the first thing our peasants must regain is their humanity.'

'You're right. Even that has been taken away from them', Orrego opined. Various of their friends had joined the group, Alcides Spelucín, José Eulogio Garrido and Carlos Manuel Porras.

'If the Bolsheviks triumph, do you think there will be a counter-revolution led by the European powers?'

'Nothing can be ruled out', Orrego assured them. 'Although this would be difficult. I think all of their soldiers are being swallowed up in the Great War.'

'We have to create a revolution like the Russian one', Haya de la Torre repeated. Vallejo and Zoila Rosa were following the conversation but, instead of watching the speakers, they were looking at each other. In the whole world there were just the two of them.

'One day we'll organise a political party which is capable to creating a revolution', Haya de la Torre proclaimed. He was now vehement.

'Not a party. We should establish a school' Orrego countered.

'A party for the oppressed classes, the Peruvian mujiks, the farm labourers, the Indians, the middle classes.'

'I'm telling you it should not be a party,' Orrego insisted. 'And I'll tell you why.'

He thought for a moment:

'If you do this you could end up like Manuel González Prada. He set up a party and then he had to leave his own party. He did this because the members used it as a way to get a seat in the Congress. You know this full well.'

'That will not happen in the party that I set up', Haya de la Torre said.

'Not while I'm alive', he added.

'You're right. No, while you're alive but afterwards the politicians will take control of your party.'

Then no-one spoke for a while. It was as if an angel was walking past. Later on Orrego added: 'A politician is not always the same thing as a revolutionary. Sometimes they are completely different.'

'Could you explain the difference then?'



‘Of course. Revolutionaries give up their life and their liberty for an idea or a cause. Politicians by contrast hand over the cause in order to achieve power and fortune.’

‘Don’t exaggerate.’

‘I’m not the one who is exaggerating. It’s the politicians. Their greed is never sated. Their ideas are the first thing they devour.’

‘You may have convinced me. I think we should set up a school so that the Indians, the farm labourers and everyone will begin to know their rights and, in the long term, fight to obtain those rights.’

‘And in that school there should be no room for politicians’ Orrego emphasised.

‘What have you got against politicians? We shouldn’t follow the advice of the anarchists to that extreme.’

‘I’m telling you, the politicians will take control of your party. If not during your lifetime it will happen afterwards and they will snuff out one by one your principles. They will not be interested in the Revolution, just Parliament and the pleasures of power.’

In Orrego’s view it was necessary to set up an alliance between the workers, not a party: ‘Not a party. A movement. A co-operative. A school. A fraternal alliance. Whatever you want to call it...’ He added: ‘In an alliance or a fraternity there are no bosses. The workers take power and they get rid of the bourgeois state. They don’t create another state which in the end would be as brutal as the one which oppressed them. They don’t create a political party because the political party will end up devouring them.’

Orrego, in his work as a journalist, had participated in the social struggles of the workers in the Chicama Valley who had rebelled before the Russian Revolution had even occurred. They spoke with Vallejo about aesthetic issues but they all shared the same vision of the world. They were in Trujillo – and not in Lima – in a slow, late-coming colonial city and their group was attempting to change the world.

Vallejo and Zoila Rosa, without a word, knew that it was time to escape. They made a sign to each other with their eyes and they separated from the group while walking towards the door.

‘I have to go home. They don’t let me stay out too late.’

‘I had forgotten you were still a child.’

Zoila Rosa didn’t reply but she shot him a furious look.

‘Until I see you again or perhaps I never will.’

‘Don’t get mad at me. Please don’t get mad at me.’

‘I’m not mad at you. I accept your offer of accompanying me.’

They needed to walk five blocks. Horses once more dominated their conversation.

‘Birds believe they’re free but look at them. Look at them in the eaves of the houses. They’re all together looking at the same place.’

‘And what do you deduce from this?’

‘That they believe they are free but they aren’t. They obey the rules of their species. The same happens to us as human beings.’

Zoila Rosa told him that when she first met a horse she would touch its face. Sometimes she would put her cheek next to the horse’s cheek.

‘I think that horses can recognise the soul.’

‘Don’t you think that if the horse disappeared from earth that its soul would also disappear because it would no longer have a body to inhabit?’

‘God wouldn’t allow there to be a world without horses. The world of mankind is an incomplete world because it lacks freedom. That’s why horses exist. There couldn’t be a world without a fast, free animal.’

‘I’d like to see you again.’

‘It’s very difficult.’

‘I said that I’d like to see you. I didn’t say that I would see you.’

‘It’s very difficult. My uncle and aunt don’t like me to have friends. And I escaped so I could go to this exhibition. If you wanted to see me, you would need to come to my house.’

‘I’ll do it.’

‘But they won’t let you in.’

Then Zoila Rosa told him that she spent most of her time on the branch of a fig tree in the second patio. It was there that she had read the work of Eça de Queiros, Romain Rolland and Rubén Darío.

‘You have no idea how much I’d love to read Rubén Darío with you on the fig tree!’

‘If I can’t come in through the door, could I come in through the sky?’

## My God, if You'd Been a Man...



‘I think I’m a heretic’, Don Salomé Navarrete assured him firmly. The veins on his forehead were bursting with blood but this altered none of the lines on his face.

‘The thing is that I don’t believe in self-determination. We are not the men we choose to be. Destiny is born before we are. When we are crawling we are already on the way towards where we have to go. Sometimes we attempt to abandon this path and we believe that we’ve done it but we’re wrong. We believe that we’ve stopped but path is moving beneath our feet.’ Salomé put his arched right hand on the table and then made his fingers walk along the surface of the table.

‘We are told that the Lord offers us the ability to decide but the people who are rotting in this hell hole didn’t choose to be here. I can assure you of this. I’ve known them for five years. Since the day they started being breastfed they were condemned to ending up here.’

He made a gesture as if his fingers were playing an imaginary piano and then he smiled.

‘Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti! You, Mr Vallejo, are an intellectual. You know a lot more than I do. I’m talking about what I’ve seen in the time I’ve been in here... And I’ve never yet met one single person who was not predestined to end up in this hell hole.’

Vallejo looked at the wall. He was surprised to find it so clean. Navarrete went on:

‘A jail is like a hairdresser’s. Here everyone knows everyone else’s business. Crime has a public in here as it does out there but in here we’re closer to the actual source. All of these men, believe you me, even the ones who seem like beasts, were pushed into committing evil... Other human beings are born in order to be abusive or to govern. I suppose there are some who are born to be saints... Our paths are marked and all of them lead to the last bourn. We pretend that we don’t know this.’

Vallejo looked him in the eye. He wanted to tell him that he was sick of his soliloquy.

‘Sometimes we try to even ignore the fact that we’re going to die one day. Isn’t that stupid? We are no more than beings who are condemned to a brief life...’

Vallejo never uttered a word.

‘In one of these books I’ve read that we are born walking. And while we’re walking we are swimming towards our destiny. You will have realised that we move our arms as we walk. This is because the air is water.’

‘Have you ever played the piano?’ Vallejo enquired.

‘Why do you ask?’

‘While you’re speaking you’re always playing the piano on the table.’

‘You don’t mind, do you?’

‘No, I don’t mind at all. It reminds me of my friend Carlos Valderrama. He’s a great pianist and he always doing what you do.’

‘Are you asking me if I’ve ever played the piano?’

The shaman raised his eyes to the heavens as if searching there for an answer.

‘Yes, I’ve played once or twice. It wasn’t a piano. It was an organ. I haven’t told anyone here about it. I was training to be a priest.’

‘You don’t need to hide it.’

‘Priest, shaman, evangelist, heretic. There’s been a lot of church in my life.’

‘Same here.’

‘But I’m not talking about myself.’

‘Who are you talking about then? Me?’

The shaman smiled. His smile was visible because his eyes had lit up. His voice was breaking. The wrinkles on his face remained unmoveable.

‘No, I’m not talking about myself or about you. I’m remembering a man who was born and condemned to be a bandit, to live and die in that way bandits do... He nearly died on a number of occasions but he never seemed worried. Perhaps he knew his destiny and when everyone assumed he was going to die he didn’t believe it... I’m going to talk about him but I’m not going to tell you his name...’

His fingers stroked imaginary piano keys once more.

‘Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti!’

Navarrete spoke. He alternated long silences with piano melodies which his fingers tapped out. Sometimes he would pause for more than an hour to recall some detail or other. César Vallejo realised that, once the notion of time has been suppressed in jail, someone can tell a story without any concern as to whether anyone is listening and without the need to make any concessions to the audience.

The poet observed the orator, he blinked, closed his eyes and observed him once more out of courtesy and he stayed there the whole time. Salomé Navarrete drumming his fingers on the wooden table as if it were a piano, reciting his story or unpacking it:

‘Let’s say his name was Pedro. He’s already retired but he continues to be a legend and a name that travels by word of mouth among the poor. The son of an itinerant farm labourer in a ranch near Chocope, he experienced hunger there. His father went mad and he walked through the desert on his way to Pacasmayo. I don’t know if his mother was eaten up by sadness or killed by an earthquake. It doesn’t matter either way. What does matter is both of his parents died when he was very young.’

In the sugar plantations he listened to the anarchist trade unionist workers who read Proudhon and Eliseo Reclus. They revealed to him that poverty is not a natural phenomenon like trees or rivers but an aberration caused by infamous men. But he didn’t try to set up trade unions. He did something better than this. He was bored with being a farm labourer so he became a bandit. He was on the run from the authorities of Casagrande and he got to Quiruvilca. He was the scourge of the big businessmen and the exploiters. He would attack them and rob them, reducing their houses to ashes. Then he would appear in a poor family’s house and leave them some money. He became a local hero. Everything burst into flames when he arrived. On numerous occasions there were raids but he also escaped with his life. On one occasion they had caught him and tied him up and were escorting him to a cliff face; they told him:

‘That’s your lot, Negro Losada!’

Pedro tried to break free and attack his executioners but he was mowed down by a hail of bullets.

‘Didn’t I just tell you, Negro Losada? You’re already a dead man!’

It’s not known how many bullets penetrated his thorax and came out the other side. Lying on the ground, he felt a kick in the ribs. A soldier finished him off. It was a stormy night and the police left. The man was lying motionless on the ground but, some hours later, his eyes opened up. That was neither heaven nor hell. It was still the indigo sky of Quiruvilca.

‘I swear to you, Mr Vallejo, that this man knew when his time was up and also when it wasn’t. He knew that the bullets went in and came out again but they never touched his soul. When we really look at it we all know deep down. Once he came to Chocope so I could cure him. I don’t remember the illness he mentioned. I didn’t know him at that time but I felt his pulse and it was perfect. Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Ti! No, I told him, Don Pedro, you know that you’re not going to die. Why did you come?’

‘Out of curiosity’, he said.

‘Curiosity about what?’ I asked him.

He wanted to know about the man who robs souls from death. And haggles with God.

‘Pedro, do you have accounts to settle with God?’

‘As the song goes, the accounts I settle are with men not with God.’

‘Oh, I see, with the police.’

‘Do you call them men?’

‘With cattle ranch owners then?’

‘Yes, I suppose, though I don’t see them as men either.’

‘I did some massage for him to soothe his tension and off he went.’

‘What were you asking me about?’

Vallejo had not asked any questions.

‘Were you asking me if I have political beliefs? Apart from knowing where poverty comes from? No, sir, he didn’t have political beliefs. He didn’t believe in the power of men to act with wisdom for the common good. He was a bandit. Or perhaps he wasn’t only that. Probably he was a herald of something that he himself was ignorant of. He was sure that in this world a better and different order could exist but until that new order arrived his mission in life was to reduce everything to ashes. This was the destiny for which he had been prepared since the cradle.’

Now it was Vallejo who put his hands on the table. But he did so with the palms of his hands pointing upwards. He stared at them and then he said slowly:

‘I believe... I believe I know who that man is.’

‘Do you believe that a man like that can believe in divine providence?’ Salomé continued without listening.

‘No! Not at all!’, he answered his own question. He then added:

‘In this valley all you see is perversity and poverty. Look at the farm workers’ faces. Look at the miners’ faces. Get behind the prisoners’ eyes. Close the dead man’s eyelids. No, my friend. Nothing can change the destiny of the poor.’

He paused. He spoke and then looked down at the palm of his right hand:

‘Are you asking me if that man ceased to believe in God?’ Vallejo tried to speak but Navarrete wouldn’t hear him out.

‘No, my friend, you’re wrong’, Navarrete continued his speech. That man does believe in God but he believes God is capable to terrible deeds...’.

*My God, if you’d been a man,  
You’d know today how to be God;  
But you who were always fine,  
You feel nothing of your creation.*

‘Can you hear me?’ Navarrete said. He insisted: ‘That man dreamt of God. He dreamt that he saw him but he had to join a queue to be seen...’

‘I’m telling you that I know that man’, Vallejo was persistent but Navarrete ignored him.

One night, perhaps, he saw himself sitting before God. There was so much light in the room that Pedro had become transparent and was no longer asking questions. He no longer knew why he had gone to see God. He found Him very alone. He was sitting in the glory of his own loneliness. He moved his fingers, weaving the nothingness and the stars. He was distracted from this task and turned to smile at him. He just gave him a look and Pedro understood. He understood that – until that moment – he had understood nothing.

‘That man is Pedro Losada and they call him El Negro’, Vallejo assured him. He was sure that he wouldn’t be listened to that time either.

‘Pedro Losada, yes, that’s his name... He was the one who rebuilt the church after the earthquake which happened in the year of the comet. He spent a lot of money. At the end it

looked like a glass temple. The dome was quite amazing. Look at it, my friend, on a moon-lit night. You will see it floating in the air as if it were held up by the sky. They say it will last beyond the day of Final Judgement.'

Vallejo wanted to know what Navarrete believed in and why he was a heretic.

'Doubting man's self-determination doesn't mean you reject God. Being a heretic is a way of asking for Him and loving him dearly. Although some churches reject me I love Him. I love Him and celebrate Him and I'm sure that one day He will prevail. But, in the meantime, my friend, we have to fix things ourselves. Like Pedro Losada who is walking on this side and on the other side, setting fire to the world.'

He was silent for a moment. He asked: 'And, César, do you believe in providence?'

'I don't know if I believe in Providence but I do believe in Grace. I don't understand the mystery of Grace though. I only know that it finds us how we are but it doesn't leave us as we were. It never leaves us.'

'Of course, you're a poet. Grace works through you. By the way, have you had a dream about God?'

Vallejo stopped to think. He closed his eyes. He gave him a rag.

'Wipe your tears away', it was an order.

Vallejo ignored him. He kept his eyes tightly shut.

'I don't dream about Him but I've listened to Him', Navarrete interjected. 'It's like a murmur. You can hear it in a place like this. Don't you recall that Jesus went down to Hell?'

Now it was Vallejo who wasn't listening.

'I know the man you're referring to. It's Pedro Losada. Pedro Losada saved my life', he said firmly and this time he was not ignored.

'I believe it. There are times when we are helped by someone. Providence tires of being so weak and it sends someone to us to help us along. Don't think that I'm a pessimist. Our feet are blind, my friend, and you have to get out of this hell hole. Your feet will get you out of here. But for the time being, César, for the time being you have worked things out on your own.'

The following morning Don Salomé went out to visit some sick people. He did it secretly because it was forbidden. Vallejo was left on his own. The solitary confinement regime didn't allow him to walk around the courtyard.

*Oh the cell's four walls.  
Ah the four whitish walls  
Yielding ever the same number.*

*Cradle of nerves, fateful breach,  
How day after day, with its four corners  
It tears apart the fettered limbs.*

*Loving wardess with countless keys,  
Were you here, could you see to what  
Late hour these walls are four.  
Up against them, with you, we both  
Would be two, more two than ever. Nor would you cry,  
Right, rescuer!*

*Ah the cell's walls.  
Of these I ache, meanwhile, more  
From the two long ones which tonight  
Evoke mothers long dead  
Leading down bromide slopes,  
Each a child by the hand.*

*And only I am left behind  
With a right hand that works for both,  
Raised, on the look out for both,  
Raised, on the look out for a tertiary arm  
That between my where and my when  
My pupil this disabled maturity of manhood.*

The poet's friends had set to work to get him out of prison. They wrote to Lima, to Arequipa, to Chiclayo, to Cusco and other places. They petitioned for the support of writers, journalists, artists and university students. The first declaration transmitted by the Federation of Trujillo University was about to set in motion a groundswell of opinion the length and breadth of the country. Once the solitary confinement order was lifted Orrego – who was going to the jail to interview the poet – met Carlos Godoy, the lawyer, on his way there and he asked him:

‘Do you believe, sir, that with this groundswell of support we will be able to get him out soon?’

The man of law peered at him over the rim of his spectacles.

‘I've read the statement. I don't know, I just don't know. They've truly stitched him up. It's going to be a hard slog. A hard slog.’



## I'm Going to Call You Mirtho

Two days after she met César, at quarter past four in the afternoon, Zoila Rosa was resting on one of the branches of the fig tree when she heard a dull thud behind her. It was as though someone had fallen in the garden but she didn't turn round to look.

The person or the bird which had flown in seemed to have got up. It made noises on the grass and called to her by her name. She didn't seem to get it. A moment later César Abraham Vallejo was climbing up the tree until he reached Zoila Rosa's favourite branch.

'Do you think it'll be able to take the weight of both of us?'

'I rather hope so.'

'And what if it breaks?'

Vallejo didn't answer but he smiled whilst Zoila Rosa stretched out her hand to a nearby branch to show him where he perhaps really ought to sit.

She took a fig from the basket and offered it to him.

'No, thanks. They give me nightmares.'

She smiled and placed the fig next to the book she was reading.

'I've always had very strange dreams but I don't think they've got anything to do with figs.'

'I bet you dreamt of me after you met me.'

Zoila Rosa acted as though she wasn't listening.

'They're dreams that I have and they've been coming back to me for two or three years now', the girl said.

'Do you think they mean anything?'

She gave him a surprised look.

'Of course. And don't you?'

'Well, I just haven't really thought about it.'

She smiled again.

'You're very sure of yourself, well, aren't you?'

This time it was Vallejo who didn't reply.

'They're very strange dreams, in which I see myself walking through Trujillo, through these very same streets. The people are different and they wear bizarre clothes. Sometimes I come across some friend and she looks very old.'

'And how about you?'

‘I don’t get old in the dream. I’m exactly the same as now. Well, I can’t really say that because I don’t see myself. The people don’t see me either.’

Vallejo looked from one side to the other of the vast courtyard. The wall he’d climbed over was about ten yards away.

‘Are you scared they’ll come back? Do you think they’ll call the police?’

‘No. All I was doing was having a look at the courtyard.’

‘My aunt and uncle usually never ever come here. All day long they don’t move from their bedrooms. They only move from there if they’re going out somewhere. This courtyard and this tree don’t come on their radar.’

She drove the point home:

‘They’re mine. Mine alone.’

‘I don’t doubt it’, Vallejo said. Then, with a tinge of doubt, he added:

‘You didn’t seem startled when I arrived here.’

‘Should I have been?’

‘Now it’s you who seems a bit sure of herself.’

‘Do you think my dream means anything? Or rather, do you think they’re omens? Perhaps I’ll live to be old, very old. Perhaps I’ll outlive all the people I know. Perhaps I’ll get to know everything that’s going to happen in the world.’

‘It would be a rather distressing privilege.’

‘You’re right. It would be a fatal privilege. That’s what I sense and what I fear.’

‘And can you tell me why you were so sure I’d come?’

She carried on watching him.

‘You’ve fallen in love with me’, she solemnly announced.

He gulped and changed the topic.

‘Horses seem to exist outside time. A horse is alone in the woods and it remains there for a century.’

Vallejo tried to think about horses and he imagined them in the night. The horses came out of the darkness and they found themselves on the edge of the light beneath black clouds, with their eyes shining like burning coals, setting the night ablaze.

However, he couldn’t avoid the subject and he asked:

‘And have you?’

‘Have I what?’

‘Have you?’

‘Me? I think I have too’, she stared at him intently.

A dark light ignited in César’s eyes.

‘I think I also have...’, the girl in the tree reaffirmed.

He tried to move closer to her so as to take hold of her hands and kiss her but that proved impossible given that they were perched on different branches and one false move could lead to a nasty fall. They both smiled.

‘Have you dreamt of me?’

She made a gesture as if she were trying to remember.

‘I try to dream of you. I want to dream of you. I want to know if you’re in my future.’

She was quiet for a moment.

‘And what about you?’

‘Me?’

‘Do you also have strange dreams?’

‘Can you tell me why? Why you’re asking me this?’

‘Why? Why?’

‘Yes.’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘I don’t know. I thought you wouldn’t have an answer and you’d make something up. I like it when you make up stories.’

‘Yes. I do have strange dreams. They’re strange because they keep coming back, because they’re obsessive. They’re in some of the poems you’ve read.’

‘I knew it.’

‘The whole time it’s the same dream. I dream I’ve finally managed to write the poem I’ve been searching for but that once it’s written and I try to read it, my life becomes enveloped in darkness. I’m locked up in a filthy prison with no light. Only the rats can read the poem.’

Zoila Rosa listened to him with fear and sadness.

‘That’s just a dream.’

Vallejo looked at her and carried on.

‘Sometimes I dream that I get out of that prison. I dream that I’m sailing across a sea that’s a deep blue colour. I dream that the boat frees me from the prison and carries me away, far away and I’m filled with joy because I’ve written the poem.’

‘You asked me why I want to know everything about you. I want to because I love you’, said Zoila Rosa. Without realising it they’d both come down from the tree and he held her hand whilst he spoke.

‘... and I sail. I sail in the dream!’

She moved closer to him. His deep eyes appeared to be witnessing the dream that he related.

‘So I’m free and I feel as though I can enjoy my freedom in the most intense way. I feel I can create the poetry I’ve always longed to create.’

Now they kissed one another.

A roar came from the heavens. During these months in Trujillo the wind raced through the streets, it got into the houses and tempted the people with memories. The wind was in the north, in the south, in the east and in the west. It brought them the fresh scent of the sea and, occasionally, the panting of the horses in the mountains and their hooves with the horseshoes leaving imprints in the paths of stone.

It was getting late. César felt that within every woman was a mother eager to listen to our nightmares.

‘At other times that ill-fated dream returns. I’m imprisoned and that’s it for the rest of my life. Wicked enemies have managed to get me locked up and the judges have decided that I’m never ever going to get out of there... and then the boat carries me far away but there is no return voyage.’

‘You don’t need to be afraid. Now I’m with you.’

It was already the time when the family came together to pray. The youngsters understood this. Without saying a word they went their separate ways. Vallejo went towards the wall and jumped up. Before doing so they had already arranged a date. They would see each other again next to the tree.

César and Zoila Rosa saw one another several times in the fig tree but after a month they met in the street on the main square. On Thursday nights there was an open-air concert and all Trujillo would congregate there. Those belonging to the lower orders would gather in the centre

of the square next to the colonial fountain and, in spite of being the most numerous, they wouldn't move from there, feeling themselves forbidden from wandering into the other areas of the square. Some gardens ran along the centre and further out from these there came another circular avenue along which the middle classes would promenade. The green spaces around the square were the preserve of the important residents. The students and intellectuals such as Vallejo and his friends could pass along any of the three paths.

'Zoila Rosa. Zoy the Roar. Zoy the Rose... Zoy the Russian. Zoy the Race. Zoy the Mass. Zoy the Maid. Zoy the Muse. So many names! I think I like calling you Mirtho.'

'Mirtho?'

'Because its leaves are evergreen and everlasting.'

'Mirtho! It's a beautiful name and completely bonkers. I've already made it my own.'

'It was yours before you were even born. In the last century, Gerard de Nerval wrote a sonnet for you. But I can't remember it just now.'

The following Thursday he arrived with a book of Nerval's poetry and he recited:

*Je pense à toi, Myrtho, divine enchanteresse,  
Au Pausilippe altier, de mille feux brillant,  
À ton front inondé des clartés de l'Orient,  
Aux raisins noirs mêlés avec l'or de la tresse.*

*C'est dans ta coupe aussi que j'avais bu l'ivresse,  
Et dans l'éclair furtif de ton oeil souriant,  
Quand aux pieds d'Iacchus on me voyait priant,  
Car la Muse m'a fait l'un des fils de la Grèce.*

*Je sais pourquoi là-bas le volcan s'est rouvert...  
C'est qu'hier tu l'avais touché d'un pied agile,  
Et de cendres soudain l'horizon s'est couvert.*

*Depuis qu'un duc normand brisa tes dieux d'argile,  
Toujours, sous les rameaux du laurier de Virgile,  
Le pâle hortensia s'unit au myrte vert!*

'Mirtho, Mirtho! Thank you for calling me that.'

'Now you have to use it.'

She did use it. She would later sign various poems with that name.

Whilst walking through the square they bumped into Víctor Raúl. He was with his brother, Agustín and he insisted on telling them what he'd seen in Cusco. For his part Vallejo remembered the voices of the men forced to serve in the mine, pushed into the deep tunnels and condemned to forget the warm light of the sun. He'd seen them coming out, already decrepit, even though they were still in their teens and he sensed that thousands of voices were howling beneath the earth but that no-one wanted to listen to them. At that juncture Antenor Orrego appeared and came over to join them.

'We were talking about how in our country there are many people forced to toil without seeing the sun.'

‘People! That man doesn’t treat them like human beings. There’s dissent and a dreadful pain that perhaps one day will explode. For now that dissent is just pain. It’s still just tears.’

There wasn’t just pain in Cusco or in Quiruvilca. Just a few miles away, on the sugar plantations which surrounded Trujillo, the workers cut cane from dawn to dusk and for doing so they were paid next to nothing. Whenever there was the slightest protest the governor would send in groups of police and soldiers to silence them with bullets. There’d be dead and injured all over the place then. The women would be handed over to be raped by the soldiers and then have their heads shaved so that they were branded as prostitutes. The slums were then ransacked and set on fire. César knew this all too well.

‘I think I arrived at the right moment to read this to all of you’, Antenor said.

In the pages of a new paper called *Freedom*, Antenor had launched a series of articles in which he called on the workers to put an end to this abuse. Juan Espejo, Federico Esquerre and Carlos Manuel Porras were working with him. Faced with the landowners’ protests the governor Temístocles Molina Derteano, who was nicknamed ‘Chucky’, had ordered the paper’s closure. The final edition contained a ‘Protest to the nation’ signed by Orrego and Espejo:

‘At the top of our voices and with our hands placed on our hearts, we call for justice for the millions of wretched toilers who today are the anonymous victims of exploitation and the murderous bullets of the forces of order; we want to shout it to the four corners of the earth so that we are heard; we want you all to hear us, you our fellow journalists who carry out the same spiritual activities as us and, like us, are threatened with persecution for telling the truth and defending right.’

At the next meeting in the fig tree the conversation was dominated by talk of the future.

‘Do you think things will ever change?’

‘I think they will.’

‘When?’

‘César couldn’t answer because he didn’t know. He stayed silent.’

‘I want to know. I’m dying to know what the future holds. It must be why I’m not scared now of those dreams in which I become an old woman.’

‘You’re never going to be an old woman.’

‘You say that because you love me.’

‘I don’t know. Perhaps I say it because we share so many things. Perhaps because you’re so crazy.’

Vallejo peered out of the small window that looked onto the courtyard but it was already getting dark. What with reading the whole time in his cell, he hadn’t noticed the time. Anyway, he focussed his eyes and went closer to the window.

‘What are you looking for? ... What you’re looking for isn’t there anymore’, joked Navarrete. ‘Are you looking for the vine? The artesian well?.. Maybe you haven’t realised but everything’s already fading away. It’s almost seven o’ clock.’

The warders and most of the inmates had also faded away. However it still wasn’t time for the prisoners to retire to their cells.

The only ones who remained in the courtyard were the ‘survivors’. Vallejo could make out that they were on their feet, standing still. They looked like ghosts. They always stuck together and they were very quiet. They came from the plantations in the Chicama valley. They were taken during one of the punitive raids made by the armed forces under the pretext of rooting out anarchists.

‘They look like statues, don’t they?’

‘They never speak. Not even amongst themselves’, Vallejo pointed out.

‘And what would they talk about?’

Vallejo was quiet.

‘Yes. What would they talk about? Do the dead speak in the cemetery?’

Vallejo carried on watching them. He tried to make out any movement amongst them. One of them leaned against the opposite wall. All the others had stopped and were looking up.

Without looking at Vallejo Navarrete said: ‘They don’t even know what they’re accused of. Most of them haven’t even been sentenced. The judges have forgotten all about them.’

He seemed to read his cellmate’s mind: ‘Why do they do it? You’re asking yourself why they don’t move. It’s their way of being dead, Mr Vallejo. And of forgetting they’re dead. They work the whole time. They weave mats and make bedding. They sell their things on a Sunday. That gives them a bit of money to keep their loved ones going. Their women visit on Sundays.’

He went quiet again and then carried on talking.

‘They call them “the survivors” because that’s exactly what they are. I think it was in 1912. One infamous midnight the soldiers went into all the plantations and attacked the families. Many of the workers went straight from sleep to death. Those that were left were brought to prison.’

Navarrete was at boiling point.

‘These ones at least kept their lives. There are others who died but didn’t die. They made them disappear. They took them off to be interrogated and they were never heard of again. It seems they took them to the desert and burnt them alive. In any case, their families live with the hope that one day they’ll come back... or that their remains will be found.’

Night came and the courtyard and the sky also faded away. In the cell, they hadn’t lit the lamp. Navarrete’s voice emerged from the nothingness.

‘I’ll explain it to you. When they went to claim the bodies, the soldiers said that the men had fled and since then nothing’s been heard of them. I’ll tell you again: they died and they didn’t die. People say that they roam the sands without voice and without earthly form. They say their souls spin round and round the world. They say they’ll only rest once their remains have been buried.’

He went quiet and tried to carry on watching them. Although everything was already very dark, he was able to make out that they hadn’t moved and that they carried on looking high above.

‘It’s as though they were waiting to see their people passing across the sky. Don’t you think?’

There was no reply to his comment. Then, everything became submerged into the nothingness but, an hour later, he lit the lamp and asked:

‘Do you think, Mr Vallejo, that the rich and their mercenaries will be the masters of the situation until the end of time?’

The interrogee didn’t respond. He’d gone back to the table and was engrossed in writing a poem or a letter. It didn’t appear as though he was listening but this didn’t bother Navarrete because in a prison colloquy it didn’t matter all that much if the other person took part or not. Rather, he peered out of the window and directed his gaze towards the Southern Cross and saw that the Full Moon was slowly rising. And it was to the Moon that he addressed himself.

‘I went around reading the Bible and going from house to house curing people but sometimes I’d be overcome by a terrible fear. I felt myself to be the envoy of a mocking God, deaf to the misery of the poor.’

He said that he'd seen various governments come and go and he maintained that the important civilians, involved with these regimes, the doctors, acted as though they believed that nothing like this went on and that all that was in the past.

'They say that now the rule of law prevails and they have no problem with shaking the blood-stained hands of the assassins.'

He said that there were two constants in Peru and that these were cruelty and cowardliness. Then he repeated the question about the rich and their mercenaries but he didn't get a reply this time either.

César Vallejo read aloud the poem he was composing:

*'The day will surely be upon us. Take your soul...'*

In the courtyard the phantasm of the 'survivors' was already fading away but they remained standing, stock still.



## Mirtho Dreams She Disappears



## Dreams in July 1917

- 1) A buffalo standing on a ridge. He paws the ground with his hooves and bellows.
- 2) A rock facing the sea upon which the sun rests.
- 3) An eagle carrying away its prey.
- 4) A man and a woman leading a child by each hand.
- 5) A stampede of untamed colts. They are preceded by various heralds dressed in black.
- 6) A powerful man with a whip in his right hand. Before him go two slaves in chains.
- 7) A man standing up with no head or whose head is covered with a black handkerchief.
- 8) A man and a woman, standing up, turning their backs on one another.
- 9) A white rose is lost in a dream and it reappears in the following day's dream.
- 10) A woman in the Moon singing. The place into which she sinks every night is different. The song is the same.



They had decided to make a note of their dreams and to search for all possible interpretations. Mirtho had yet to reveal the paper with hers written down but she was listening to César's list.

'You don't need to read all of them. I've already found the dream that refers to us.'

'Are you talking about dream number four?'

'The fourth? Why would I be thinking about that one?'

'Well, I was just saying...'

'Don't kid yourself. You and I aren't going to have a child.'

'Two children then? Three? Loads of them?'

'Not a single one.'

'So?'

'I'm referring to the one that you've got down here as number eight: A man and a woman, standing up, turning their backs on one another. It's crystal clear.'

'Are you afraid we'll split up?'

'Afraid? I'm saying that we're going to split up and the sooner the better.'

'Are you saying that you don't love me?'

'On the contrary.'

'But it doesn't make any sense.'

'Does everything have to make sense?'

'For God's sake! Mirtho, I don't understand you.'

'I've discovered that I'm in love with you and that you're in love with me. This is awful and things can't carry on like this. We have to split up.'

Faced with a silent César Vallejo the girl added that one shouldn't let love dictate one's life and that love was a form of madness.

'Ever since I was a little girl I never believed that I was going to get married. I used to be fascinated by wild horses because they're free. I can't turn into a slave to love. You'd end up getting tired of me. You'd spurn me.'

'This can't be. It can't be. This conversation isn't real. It's a bad dream.'

But Zoila Rosa Cuadra's persistence convinced him that she was telling the truth and that made him think that his whole life was going to be like this: constant defeat or the unexpected loss of that which he loved. His dreams were always heralds of terrors to come. He would always expect disaster when he was on the verge of arriving at some desired point or, as in this case, when he loved a wonderful woman and when this feeling had become an unstoppable passion.

They stopped seeing one another. César wrote:

'Yes. Her womb, more daring than her very brow; beating more than her heart, the very same heart. Falconry of hawkish futures, of aquiline twinkles above the shadow of mystery. Who more than he? Adorable eternal breeding ground... Womb carried above the vaginal arch of all happiness and within the very intercolumniation of the two legs, of life and death, of night and day, of being and not being.'

*Oh, womb of the woman, where God has his only inscrutable hypogeum, his only worldly tent in which he shelters when he descends, when he comes down to the land of pain, of pleasure and of tears. God can only be found within the woman's womb.*

Two weeks of that separation went by. Vallejo came out from the Colegio Nacional de San Juan where he was the teacher of the first year of primary. He'd stopped to talk to two of his little pupils. Suddenly he heard a voice which he knew well.

'Will the children we have be like this?'

It was Mirto.

'Say hello to the lady. Introduce yourselves like gentlemen.'

'My name's Alfredo Tello Salavarría.'

'I'm *Ciro Alegría*', a little red-haired freckled boy said.

The boys started giggling and they were just escaping when Mirto stopped the one who was closest to her.

'Ciro, *Ciro*, wait... You say your name's *Ciro Alegría*, isn't it?'

'That's my name.'

'Would you introduce me to your teacher?'

The boys ran for it.

'I asked him to introduce us because it seems as though you don't know me, *César*. It's a long time since you came to see me.'

'You're saying that...?'

'I'm not saying anything. Are you coming with me or would you prefer to leave me on my own?'

Mirto had been waiting for him when school finished. They made up and, two weeks later, they split up again. It started happening all the time. When *César* went looking for her he had no idea what sort of mood he was going to find her in, whether charming and passionate or intent on breaking up with him. Between love and bitterness he wrote three poems: 'The poet to his beloved', 'September' and 'Evening Star'.

*Beloved, on this night you have been crucified  
on both curved timbers of my kiss;  
and your sadness has told me that Jesus has wept,  
and that there is a Goodfriday sweeter than that kiss.  
On this strange night when you looked at me so long,  
Death has been happy and has sung in its bone.*

*On this September night my second fall  
has been officiated and the most human kiss.  
Beloved, the two of us shall die together, close together;  
our sublime bitterness will be drying-out at every pause;  
and our demised lips will have touched at every shade.  
And there will be no more reproaches on your blessed eyes;  
nor will I offend you again. And in your grave  
the two of us will sleep, like little brother and sister.*

Life alternated between good days and miserable days. A letter dated 15 July 1917 was to fill him with joy.

'Your verses appear admirable to me for the richness of their music and imagination and for their painful depth. I was already familiar with some of your compositions, having asked after you on more than one occasion, with the feeling of not having engaged enough in prose,

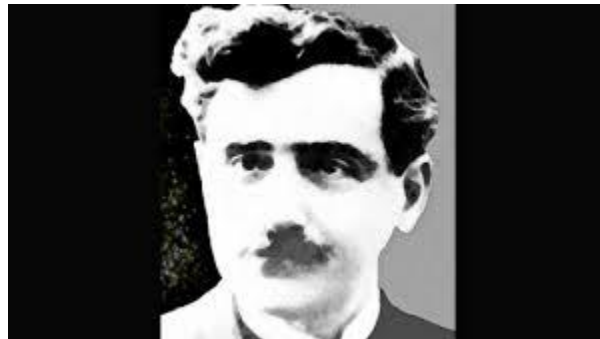
since your poems lend themselves to an expert study... Receive the sincere acclaim of your José María Eguren.'

It was none other than Eguren, a poet from Lima considered by the young people who made up the group 'La Bohemia' as a maestro. Ten years older than most of them and as odd as Vallejo, he had inaugurated a different lyric style in Spanish America. A subtle use of vocabulary expressed in his work visions that were both ethereal and remote, full of Nordic suggestion and devoid of the ornamentation of *modernismo*.

*La Reforma*, 21 July 1917

José María Eguren, the inimitable bard of 'The Ballad of the Figures' has sent to César Vallejo the letter which we transcribe here and which is evidence of the fame and transcendence which the work of our contemporary is beginning to acquire.

A part of this triumph belongs to us because it was in *La Reforma* where César A. Vallejo made the first painful revelations of his talent. We still remember the warmth with which we shook the hand of the young poet, when he handed over to us the first copy of his verses, which, even then, revealed a powerful and intense literary individuality (Antenor Orrego Espinoza).



In that same edition of the newspaper the poem 'This bread of ours', which Vallejo had just written, was published.

*One drinks breakfast . . . The graveyard's  
humid earth smells of beloved blood.  
Winter town . . . The corrosive crusade  
of a cart that seems to be dragging  
a chained feeling of fasting!*

*One would like to knock at every door,  
and ask for I don't know who; and then  
to see the poor and, crying silently,  
to give bits of fresh bread to everyone.  
And to plunder the vineyards of the rich*

*with the two blessed hands  
that on stroke of light  
flew unnailed from the Cross!  
Morning eyelash, do not rise!*

*Give us today our daily bread,  
Lord . . . !  
All my bones belong to others;  
maybe I stole them!  
I came to give myself what perhaps  
was assigned for another;  
and I think that, if I had not been born,  
another poor one would be drinking this coffee!  
I am a lousy thief . . . Where will I go!*

*And in this cold hour, when the earth  
smells of human dust and is so sad,  
I would like to knock at every door,  
and ask forgiveness from I don't know who,  
and make him bits of fresh bread  
here, in the oven of my heart . . . !*

‘Do you remember, César, the seventh dream on your list?’

‘I don't remember, my dear Mirtho. I didn't bother keeping the list. The list itself belongs in a dream.’

‘You forget that I have it. Listen, it says: ‘Dream 7: A man standing up with no head or whose head is covered with a black handkerchief.’

‘Don't tell me that. . .’

‘Yes. I've found an explanation for it.’

‘What am I doing or what is my head doing covered with a black handkerchief?’

‘Nothing. It's just that the man isn't you.’

César gave a sigh of relief thinking that this was not another of Mirtho's goodbyes. His friends had told him he ought to be patient and to remember that the girl was only fifteen.

‘A man with his head covered by a black handkerchief is a stranger and an impossibility. He's the man who is looking for me.’

Mirtho, back to being Zoila Rosa Cuadra again, explained to him that the story of the love between them had to come to an end. She was in love, she told him, with an impossible being and this impossibility was not César.

‘Do I know him?’

‘I don't even know him.’

She had always loved him, perhaps without the necessity of knowing him. César accepted the explanation as one who would agree without conditions nor previous agreements, life or the sun, the sun or death.

The black days had hardly even begun. A scandal sheet attacked the poet and his friends.

*La Industria*, 25 July 1917

You may be unaware, sir, but up there in Trujillo ten or twelve individuals have come together to form a group and are calling themselves poets, geniuses, adept and bohemian...

Vallejo, that man, sir, sings paeans to the 'green alfalfa', perhaps the instinct is drawn from a backward family desire... he maintains with the greatest nerve that 'a cart seems to be dragging a chained feeling of fasting'. He also wants to be a baker and thinks that his heart is an oven... He wants to live knocking on every door, thinks that his bones are a foreign body and that he's a thief.

Finally, Clemente Palma, the most important literary critic in Lima, slated him without mercy.

In the Peruvian capital it's the norm to mistreat people from the interior. There is contempt for those who are closest to the ancient and Andean world. For many people in Lima, the pre-Hispanic past is simply an impediment.

There is, in addition, racial discord. Clemente Palma, because of his origins amongst black and mulatto, looked down on the Indians and 'provincials'. 'I discovered the sierra through my mountain-dwelling servants', was his stock phrase and it was repeated at different times, by men of letters who wanted to be considered 'white' and so that their throwaway work would be remembered because of this supposed social worth.

Someone, who signed with Vallejo's initials, sent the text of 'The poet to his beloved' to the magazine in which Palma worked. They asked for his comments and the official critic of Lima let them pour forth:

*Varietades*, Lima 22 September 1917

Post-free

Mr C. A. V. – Trujillo.

You're also one of those people who comes along with the notion that here we encourage all those who think they can play a lyrical tune, those youngsters who have the nerve to write a poetic nonsense which is more or less out of tune and affected. And this notion gives you the impression that we are somehow obliged to publish your rubbish. You sent us a sonnet entitled 'The poet to his beloved', which in truth I suggest would be better suited to the accordion or the ocarina than to poetry.

*Beloved, on this night you have been crucified  
on both curved timbers of my kiss;  
and your sadness has told me that Jesus has wept  
and that there is a Goodfriday sweeter than that kiss.*

What the hell do you mean by the curved timbers of your kisses? What's all this about the crucifixion? What's Jesus got to do with this disgusting claptrap? Up until the moment of chucking your scribbles in the wastepaper basket we know nothing more about you than the dishonour you do the people of Trujillo and, were those people to

discover your name, they'd tie you up and use you as a sleeper on the railway line to Malabrigo.

In his personal diary from that time, Antenor Orrego wrote:

Palma's words were wielded like a flag of victory by the poet's detractors. They were talked about in every way. They were reproduced in pamphlets... According to them, Vallejo's verse was utterly condemned and finished. How far Palma was from realising that the only words from 'Post-free' that would pass into posterity, defeating their poison pen and natural purpose, almost with the rank of immortal, were precisely these, under the aegis of the poet, with those which had dismissed and insulted him. Unexpected ironies sharpened with sarcasm that contrives, from time to time, the arbitrary and mischievous destiny that is life.

Mirtho or Zoila Rosa had become an addiction. She would distance herself and then return and he could do nothing but accept her one day and on the next accept the inevitable end of their relationship.

'You shouldn't do it.'

It was she who gave him this advice. She insisted that they should separate as soon as possible unless César resigned himself to wait with her until the time when the footsteps of the unknown one arrived from afar.

He was adamant:

'We can't split up because we're mixed up in the same destiny.'

Mirtho's reply didn't give him much cause for hope:

'I don't doubt it. Each of us is the destiny of the other. But the most profound destiny of each one is to destroy the other. It's the curse of love.'

They split up. Vallejo dreamt many times of the buffalo standing on a ridge, pawing the ground with his hooves and of the eagle carrying away its prey. He dreamt that the buffalo, with the cry of an injured beast, announced to him a painful destiny. He dreamt that the eagle carried him above, higher and higher, to vertiginous heights. He dreamt that he began a flight from which he was never to descend.

He shut himself up in the tiny room of the Hotel del Arco and he left there a week later with various new poems.

He grew weak at times and seemed on the verge of fainting but he couldn't stop himself. There was no way he was going to let down the friends who believed in him and hoped to see him produce a more towering poetry than that of Rubén Darío. The night after the break up he was due to give a recital which he couldn't miss for anything. He turned up. He read 'For the impossible soul of my lover' and 'The eternal nuptial bed'. He wanted to do it with a voice devoid of emotion and he managed it. They had never seen him so cool and serene. However, by the end, several of them were crying.

'I don't know what came over me', Alcides Spelucín tried to explain later. 'Or rather, I don't know what came over us. We didn't know that they'd already split up. I think it was the poetry. It left us in a state as much of recollection and silence so that the articulation of an admiring word would have sounded like a desecration.'

Antenor Orrego, however, was not altogether happy. He wanted Vallejo to progress a lot more, and transcend the *modernista* influence of Herrera y Reissig.

‘I don’t want to stop the momentum, my friend, of creativity but I see these poems as practice. We all expect more from you, a lot more.’

‘I know that, Antenor, you’re my brother. I can accept this from you.’

‘You have to do it, César’, he added in the presence of the members of the group. ‘To break with the law and the traditional rules and niceties, it’s essential to completely submit to them, to dominate them with skill and real mastery and technical rigour.’

Vallejo had sat down and was staring at the ground.

‘I want to say something else. What I call practice is in reality a set of extraordinary poems. Perhaps they should already form a book. But this book should precede another in which you completely break with the poetry of the past.’

‘What worth does poetic expression have for you?, Vallejo asked, breaking out of his silence.

Orrego thought about it for a while before answering. His friends accused him of giving speeches rather than engaging in conversation. Finally he answered in this way. In his way.

‘The function of the poet or of the artist in general is, above all, the expressive role and his only instrument for realising this is form. Every man – or at least many of them – might possess poetic intuition or emotion but only the poet is capable of transmitting it. Beyond where the rest are silent, the poet speaks, he has the mysterious power of speaking and of speaking with beauty. This power of speaking is the power of creating form, without which nothing can be expressed.’

Vallejo then looked up at the ceiling.

‘When I was a child’, he said, ‘I promised my teacher that I would invent words. I think that I’ve spent the whole of this part of my life in search of that lost word.’

The black days continued to pile up. One night, when returning alone to his room in the hotel, he was attacked by some twenty individuals. They weren’t delinquents nor did they make any attempt to rob him. They were simply young thugs who took exception to the presence of intellectuals in the prudish city. They set upon him with scissors and tried to cut off his luxuriant flowing locks. They hadn’t expected that mysterious strength which César was capable of and he defended himself – until he finally fell to the ground almost dead but with his hair intact. Several of his friends turned up at that point and scared the gang off.

## Invent or Repent

Salomé Navarrete was shaving in front of a tiny mirror hanging from the wall of the cell. All of a sudden he stopped looking at his jaw, raised his eyes and noticed his hair. It was so pale it appeared white. When he first arrived at the prison gates it had been jet-black.

‘What a carry-on, Mr Vallejo!... The year’s flown by... In just one more week 1920 will have come to an end and I’ve already been here for five years.’

There was no response.

‘I said... “The year’s already gone. Since I’ve been in this hell we’ve had a new government and a new constitution.” I remember when they first brought me here, my lawyer told me: ‘Don’t you worry, in one or two weeks everything’ll be sorted out and you’ll walk’.’

He trimmed an inch off one of his sideburns.

‘Time’s just flown by.’

Vallejo was sitting writing at the table. He put down the pen and looked at him. He remembered that, in one more week, he’d have been locked up for two months. He didn’t have any news either. It was as though both of them had been in that cell in the same positions since the beginning of time. In the meantime God had created the oceans and sketched the stars and the mountains. Then he moved his arms like a choirmaster and burst into a birdsong... The walls of the prison had also grown.

‘Tell me if I’m wrong, Mr Vallejo. In the past time used to pass much more slowly.’

He wasn’t bothered by his companion’s silence.

‘Time... time... time... Do you remember when Halley’s Comet passed by? That was in 1910, wasn’t it? It started crossing the sky in February. By November we could still see the tail.’

Vallejo suddenly remembered: ‘In 1917 they said that the comet had completely disappeared. It was travelling at breakneck speed but its tail was very long. So long that seven years after the nucleus had passed close by us, the Earth was still in danger.’

At the beginning of 1917 astronomers announced a cosmic disaster. A big wave of meteors collided with Jupiter. As a result of that an entire region, bigger than the land surface of America, had been wiped from the map. If that planet were inhabited by intelligent beings the collision would have meant a total catastrophe for civilization. But the story didn’t end there. Only some of the asteroids had fallen on Jupiter. The rest of them continued their silent and infernal procession through space and one night they were to pass streaming above the Earth or to smash into it. No-one knew where they would fall.

The news was on the front page of every newspaper. Some people speculated that the meteors were dazzling rocks that had been shed by the bustling tail of the comet. For eight years



they had jaunted through the abyss of the heavens. They were to fall on 24 September. No-one knew where.

In May of that year the Swiss ballerina Norka Rouskaya scandalised Lima. Accompanied by journalists and friends she danced Chopin's 'Marche funèbre' half-naked inside the Presbítero Maestro Cemetery. Her companions ended up in prison. Amongst them were the poet Abraham Valdelomar and the essayist José Carlos Mariátegui, a 26-year-old man who had recently joined the Committee for Socialist Propaganda and who was soon to become the first Marxist theorist of the Americas.



On 17 September, when everyone was talking about the end of the world, Norka arrived in Trujillo to perform in the 'Ideal' theatre. Paderewski, Grieg, Saint-Saëns, Chopin and Schubert formed her repertoire. People packed the theatre and because of a lack of seats many had to remain standing in order to witness the performance. However, before the start, the ballerina asked to be allowed to speak. 'The rich have become vampires and they control the world', she pointed out and then added: 'Since things are like this I'll dance in honour of the coming catastrophe.' The young members of 'La Bohemia' applauded her. In *La Reforma*, Antenor Orrego wrote that 'this transparent woman dances over lights brought from another dimension.' José Eulogio Garrido called her an 'ethereal sprite.' Óscar Imaña declared his love for her in a poem:

*She descends and flies. The veil flies.  
She sleeps, she is suspended and levitates.  
And she speaks the truth because she heard it in the heavens.*

Norka's legs, her rebellious words and the enthusiasm of the young artists, were all condemned by *La Opinión Pública* in a somewhat chiselled editorial: 'As was also the case in Lima, Norka Rouskaya has shown us that shamelessness knows no bounds. If this is art then art ought to make itself scarce. The artists and intellectuals belonging to the so-called Bohemia Group of Trujillo are decadent, immoral, wicked, licentious, dissolute, lewd, lecherous, libertine, shameless, indecent, loose-living, scandalous and profligate. The editor, Apolonio Moreno, revealed that he'd searched the dictionary 'and there aren't the adjectives to do justice to such insolence'.

Moreno's view was, sadly, shared by a number of others. Many in the small city worshipped a rhymester by the name of Víctor Alejandro Hernández and anything which deviated in any way from orthodox composition was considered seditious. Those who didn't read 'The little flowers of San Francisco' were suspected of heresy and of indecent habits. Anyone who didn't dedicate a poem to the Supreme Government was called an anarchist terrorist. In Lima that year a group of army officers beat up the young thinker José Carlos Mariátegui while pinned motionless in his wheelchair. When they bragged about their exploits someone commented that they hadn't exhibited quite so much bravery when faced with the Chilean army. 'Here in Trujillo as well we must launch ourselves into the attack against dishonest and sinful art. Our anger is saintly' – bellowed, at the end of his text, the editor of *La Opinión Pública*.

So the Bohemia Group got to work. 'Art answers back: Music for the end of the world', was the title of a piano concert organized by *La Reforma*. At Orrego's request Carlos Valderrama would perform it in the Ideal Theatre on 24 September, the night of the predicted cosmic disaster. 'One must develop in the midst of the tragedy', the editorial declared. 'Art is the most transcendental expression. Man becomes man through art. Art is the only thing which can live beyond death,' it emphatically pronounced.

'What you're proposing is *épater le bourgeois*. Is that not so?' Valderrama asked.

'Damned right', Antenor Orrego replied.

'Count me in.'

The young musician from Trujillo was trying to bridge the gap between the musical heritage of the Andes and classical harmony. He had composed some masterful works which were recognized internationally and were acclaimed in such notable settings as the Carnegie Hall in New York.

Although he was as young as the rest of his companions he was already the author of a prolific body of work. Standing out amongst his creations of that time were the march 'Los Peruanos Pasan', 'Ópera Ballet Inti Raymi', 'Tristeza Andina' and 'Idilio incaico.' He did nothing but compose. When he was with his friends in some café he would place his hands on the table and act as though he were playing the piano. When Antenor Orrego came across him, he was drinking coffee with some friends and playing the above-mentioned invisible piano: 'First movement'

They close their eyes, I open them:

'Second movement.

Intensity, rhythm, counterpoint,  
colour, tone, tension, equilibrium, contrast.

Do, re. Do, re. Do, re, mi, fa, sol, la, si.'

Valderrama lifted his hands from the imaginary piano and repeated: 'Count me in!' Giving a classical concert on the day the world was to end was an irresistible invitation. He knew that his action was not going to be popular. Apolonio Moreno and his supporters were calling on people to pray in the streets and were assuring everyone that the catastrophe was divine punishment for impiety and anarchism.

'The truth is that it doesn't bother me if some people call me immoral, wicked, licentious, dissolute, lewd, lecherous, libertine and shameless.'

He was to be accompanied by the soprano Andrea Yannuzzi who had arrived in Lima two months earlier and had immediately made her way to Trujillo. Andrea had been born to save the world. She'd known this since she was a little girl but love had got in the way, a love, as intense as it was deadly, for a Sicilian who had emigrated to New York and who was allegedly killed in a criminal squabble.

In 1910 she became one of the favourites of La Scala in Milan and was one of the stars of the resurrection of early nineteenth-century composers which took place around that time. She became known as the performer par excellence of the female roles of Donizetti and Bellini. The notes of Puccini's *Turandot* ran through her blood. However, all of a sudden, she disappeared from the scene. She disembarked in Buenos Aires in 1915 with a broken heart and a false name. But Tango – 'a feeling that is danced' – brought her back from the dead. In 1916, at the time of the Radical government of Hipólito Irigoyen, she began to sing again and became 'la Yannuzzi'. Her close friend, Regina Pacini, who was also a singer and who would later marry the president Marcelo de Alvear, saved her from depression and arranged for her to be invited to the spectacular Teatro Colón. In 1917 Andrea was touring Peru. When the Trujillo 'Bohemians' put the proposition to her 'to save the world' she accepted straight away.

On the 24th, the day when the calamity was due to take place, many people went to church so as to ensure their souls were at peace. The rich stocked up on provisions and the poor danced in the street. Some very cautious mothers unpacked from trunks the holy candles with which their children took the First Communion. These would be the only things that could provide any light amidst the final darkness. The final hour was approaching. According to the scientific estimates, at quarter past ten in the evening, Peruvian time, the stars of the Apocalypse would begin to smash, one after the other, onto the terrestrial surface. The side of the planet which escaped the impact would find itself plunged into a night which would last for 400 years. Well, that's how long it would take for the smoke of destruction to disperse.

In the Ideal theatre the night began with Puccini. 'E lucevan le stelle.../e olezzava la terra.../strideal'uscio dell'orto.../e un passo sfiorava la rena.' (The stars were shining and the earth was scented, whilst the garden gate creaked and a footstep brushed the sand). Andrea mumbled the opening to 'Addio alla vita' whilst the theatre listened to her in reverential silence and, in the street, people were asking one another whereabouts on the earth the stray stars would begin to fall.

'Monde nouveau, tu m'appartiens!', from Meyerbeer's opera, was being performed by la Yannuzzi and it was already half past nine at night. At ten o'clock, with the hour of the catastrophe fast approaching, Valderrama and Yannuzzi played Puccini again: 'Nessun dorma! Nessun dorma!' (None shall sleep. None shall sleep); and shortly after:... 'guardi le stelle che tremano/d'amore e di speranza' (look at the stars tremble with love and hope...) From ten onwards, the spectators had their watches in their hands. They awaited the terrible hour. At half past ten and at eleven o'clock nothing was happening. The concert continued.

The earth was saved on 24 September 1917. For some inexplicable reason the blazing stars came very close to our planet but they then stopped for an instant and then changed direction. They went, jolting off, to plunge and disappear into the oceans of the universe and its depths of nothingness. Rather than being anxious with worry that night Trujillo listened to the piano of Carlos Valderrama and the brilliant timbre and high register of Andrea Yannuzzi. At eleven o'clock they took to Puccini: 'Dilegua, o notte! Tramontate, stelle!/Tramontate stelle! All'alba vincerò! Vincerò! Vincerò!' (Vanish, o night! Fade, you stars! Fade, you stars! At dawn, I will win! I will win! I will win!)

'We're using a metaphor but it's rather more than that. Valderrama and Yannuzzi, in Trujillo, the centre of the world, played the role of universal priest and brought together in one voice all the hopes of humanity. The function of music is exactly that: to join every man in a single note and discover in that note our divine origins.'

That's what *La Reforma* said. The opposition kept quiet. In the Sunday edition Alcides Spelucín dedicated a poem to Vallejo, one whose images invoked the cosmic experience:

*Steep yourself in the light of the unknown,  
and this way, dripping stars from the damp suit,  
you'll leave a trail of brightness!*

César had been one of the main organizers of the concert but he didn't turn up at the Ideal Theatre and neither had he been seen since. On the morning of the 24th he'd received a missive from Zoila Rosa: 'On the day of the end of the world I want to go with you to the concert. Wait for me at six o'clock outside the bar on the corner of your house.'

At the corner of the Hotel del Arco there was a tiny bar with a counter, a table, two chairs and a few sacks of rice which were also used as seats. They sold coffee and pisco and closed at midnight. There were no customers that night. Vallejo got one chair and reserved the other. He ordered coffee after coffee and the girl didn't arrive. She never ever arrived.

Full of sadness he fell asleep. The kind bar owner didn't disturb him. When he woke at eleven o'clock, all there was in the world was a light rain. He could hear the beating of his heart. The publican's dog was lying down and it watched him with its head resting on its front legs. César stretched out his hand to stroke it. The dog got up nimbly and started sniffing him. There was no wind. The earth was giving off a sad scent of rain. Two days later César showed his friends a lyrical composition which went beyond the boundaries of rational language, distorting phonetic standards and on occasion arriving at pure onomatopoeic representation:

*999 calories,  
Rumbbb... Trraprr... rrach... chaz...*

'What I have to say to you has already been said', pronounced Orrego on reading the text, 'It was once said by Simón Rodríguez, Bolívar's teacher: In Latin America, we invent or we repent.'

## María's Unexpected Death



In October 1917 Francisco Xandóval came back from Ascope where he had been working for a year and the first thing he did in Trujillo was to look for César. He wanted to uncover the truth about María.

María's younger brother, Francisco, had changed the 'S' in his last name for an 'X' and with this name he signed the poems which he had started to publish in the newspapers. It didn't take him long to become an outstanding poet, of whom Orrego would write that he 'possessed timid and bewitching mediumistic powers'.

'When did you see her for the last time?' Francisco asked.

Vallejo lowered his head and started to scan the café table as if searching for an answer.

'There was no last time.'

It was impossible to forget that last September! More than a year had gone by, gone as swiftly as the incredible story of Mirtho but César still saw himself, in the ninth month of 1916, by María's side. He could hear the pulse of that year still beating. Death had trodden upon the world in 1916. The Germans didn't need bullets to kill. It only took toxic gases for people in Ypres to run out of their houses with bleeding noses. Thousands of soldiers and civilians had

been left lying in Belgian soil. Such an atrocity was not expected. In Verdun, however, the war of attrition was being implemented. The high-ranking officers were convinced that the war had no solution. Then somebody had the idea of exchanging casualties. Very early in the morning each side sent thousands of young men who were not to return in the afternoon. The new weapons, the grenades, the flamethrowers, the tanks and the gases didn't even leave bodies behind. Victory would belong to the side left with soldiers. Six hundred thousand fell in a month, with no side having a significant advantage.

'I remember. I remember everything.'

'We were talking and Víctor Raúl said that on that year the nineteenth century was just dying. María corrected him: 'Or rather, the whole history of man is starting to die', she said.

He remembered. He would always remember her.

'Do you remember her coughing? Or that she was losing her voice? You left with her and I suppose you walked her home close to midnight. She couldn't sleep because of the coughing and the fever. My uncles were furious and told her that it was because she was coming back so late. I had to leave early to Chimbote. I had just started a job there but I wanted to stay to help her. My sister assured me that she would see a doctor. 'Just go, little brother. Work for a while because we are going to need some money', she ordered me. I lingered for a minute by her side. I talked about our parents, about you, about the future. I asked her to have a swift recovery, to take care of herself. I asked her if she had told you about her possible illness. 'I've always wanted César to love me... not to have pity on me', she told me and begged me never to tell you about all this. I think that two or three days later, when I was away, my uncles put her in one of those carts that go to the Otuzco highlands. I'm sure she wanted to tell you but she hadn't the time. Or did she?'

'She did. In her own way.'

Vallejo couldn't forget the strange letter declaring the end of their relationship and could only now understand everything.

Francisco continued his narrative. According to his uncles the doctor discovered in María an advanced state of consumption and suggested that she be moved to a town in the highlands to avoid contagion and to allow the benign climate to mitigate the effects of her fever.

'Have you not known everything about her, all this time? I'm not surprised. My uncles sent her away as soon as they could, to get rid of her. Then, as usual, they became silent. They didn't want the neighbours to know. You know they think consumption is an embarrassing illness.'

'I have to go and see her.'

'Don't. After all we talked about that night, I know María Rosa wouldn't like for that to happen.'

Vallejo insisted.

'She never wanted you to consider her a sick person. She doesn't want you to see her in that state. Can't you see that?'

He could see that. He decided to wait but not for too long.

*Summer, now I'm off. And the resigned little hands  
of your evenings sadden me.  
You arrive devotedly; you arrive old;  
and now you will find no-one in my soul.*

*Summer! And you will pass my balconies  
with a great rosary of amethysts and gold,  
like a doleful bishop who arrives  
from afar to seek and bless  
the broken rings of some dead lovers.*

*Stop crying, Summer! In that furrow  
a rose dies that is often reborn . . .*

On 1 September 1917 César left for the highlands. His trip would have two stages. First he would go to Otuzco to look for María Rosa. He would beg her to let him stay by her side. If all that failed he would go to Santiago de Chuco. These were dry summer days in the coast but the nature of the mountains do not coincide with the nature of the shores. Fields and ravines were caked with mud because of the rains. The road unfolded itself and seemed to growl to those who would tread it. The brown, rough mud made the road burdensome and slow to travel. The hills were red and yellow, gold and blue, with a glow like that of Judgment Day. The world below was packed with a blue mist which hovered over the open fields.

He asked for her in the small town but nobody could give him any information. Otuzco was surrounded by the villages and huts where the sick would take shelter. Easier to find were those which belonged to the rich. They lived their last days in a prolonged celebration, languid but sumptuous. Sometimes people from Trujillo would come up to enjoy with them happy and generous days, full of drink and memories. They told jokes and the sick ones would prepare for their final voyage. The poor consumptive had to do with rented rooms and coffin-dark pigsties. It was as if they were already underground and their names had faded from the wooden cross. It was very difficult to reach them. That is why nobody could inform him of María Rosa's whereabouts. Rather they advised him to carry on with his own journey lest he should also fall ill. But César insisted. A whole week he traversed towns whose names seem to have been created by birds. Huadagal, Charat, Sanchique, Mache and dozens of huts which housed skeletal beings. He asked just to hear the expected answer. He slept in the open, heard the winds moaning and perceived the joy of the sunlight. The only thing that bothered him were the mosquitoes. He told himself, however, that when he would finally find María, there would be no mosquitoes or filth or poverty.

He thought he saw her one night. He felt he was close to the hammock where she slept. And all her face was honey for his mouth, though at times it turned completely white and he would cease to see her. Her slender and light arms would touch him. She didn't speak but it wasn't necessary. Although he was not touching her he could feel her beating limbs and perceive her luminous and light feet, her elastic and generous thighs, he could hear the sweet accent of her voice floating in the mist. The whole world was steeped with the scent of the orange tree. Aflame like an unceasing fire, María's silhouette crossed before his eyes a thousand times. At times she would stop to look at him but she didn't speak. At other times she would beckon him to follow her. He foresaw her embrace, her scent and her kiss but he didn't see her. Perhaps she sat by his side to take care of him and beg of him to stop his quest. He never saw her. He couldn't see anyone because he was burning with fever.

The doctor who was treating him diagnosed malaria and applied high doses of quinine. César awoke and slept many times and dreamt he was sleeping and didn't want to wake up.

'Bear in mind that if you go to sleep again you most probably will never wake up again.'

‘I need to die, doctor’, that’s what he said or thought he said. Perhaps he understood that the need to die is sometimes deep and irresistible, more imperious even than that of existing.

‘Wake up, César. Don’t go to sleep. No-one needs to die.’

‘No-one needs to be born.’

‘You say strange things! Please, take these pills. Swallow them with a glass of water’.

At last César emerged from his langour but he couldn’t find María. The doctor by his side explained that he was already out of danger but that he had to leave Otuzco as soon as possible. Besides he would have to continue his treatment because latent malaria could be reignited within one to ten years and take him to his death. On 20 November he resumed his journey through Agallpampa, Julcán, Hierbabuena, to Santiago de Chuco. He would then return to Trujillo. Lastly he would embark on the ship ‘Ucayali’ for Lima in the last week of 1917.

The following year, in February, Francisco Xandóval managed to extract from his uncles information about María’s exact whereabouts. Something told him that the end was near. After a journey of several hours and an exhausting walk he arrived at the village where his sister now lived. When he had the chance to see her she had already embarked on the sort of rapture which occurs in those people who are on their final voyage. The doctor informed him that he had done everything possible but that death was only minutes away. María Rosa had never harboured any hope of overcoming her sickness. Otuzco was a climactic colony situated within the first Andean buttresses which scarcely made the final days of the sick more bearable.

‘Francisco... Francisco, is that you?’

‘It’s me, sister’.

‘Are you sure?’

‘Sure?’

‘Are you sure this is not a dream?’

Both went silent. Xandóval took the right hand of her sister in his own. She slept for about an hour.

‘I’ve seen him, you know... He’s a tragic, angelic man dressed in a black suit. He came down from heaven with no angels to accompany him.’

She looked at Francisco. She examined the room. She looked through the windows. She did everything she could to keep her eyes open.

‘Don’t leave me, little brother. I don’t want to be alone. Don’t let sleep overwhelm me. Don’t let me depart.’

Francisco wanted to know if she was going to leave a message for César.

‘Is there something you want me to tell him?’

Her eyes turned bright.

‘Something? Tell him everything. Tell César everything. Tell him I’ve been seeing him all this time.’

‘I know, María Rosa. I’m sure he knows as well.’

‘There’s something he doesn’t know’.

‘What?’

‘He doesn’t know he’s an eternal poet.’

She beckoned him to open a small cardboard box. In it he found some poems by César and his letters. This, along with some clothes, was everything she had brought with her from Trujillo and which she read and re-read all the time. The rest of her papers suffered the harsh scrutiny of her aunt. ‘Nonsense’, the woman said as she threw them into the fire. The girl slept



for a while and woke up again. Now she seemed to have forgotten the tragic, angelic man dressed in the black suit. She had a moment of doubt:

‘Do you think there’s something?’

‘Something? Something where?’

‘Something beyond all this. Beyond the beyond’.

As Francisco came up with an answer María’s eyes were already seeing what was beyond the beyond. Her cheeks were almost transparent but a sudden rosy flame made them incarnate. She looked quietly at her brother and started to depart. The room filled with a scent of orange or lemon leaves. María’s soul circled a few times around the bedroom, explored the papers she left behind, contemplated her body with tenderness, approached the door ajar and departed. Perhaps she walked for ten metres before she ascended. Sensing the presence of her soul the patients lying by the door opened the way for the soul to pass by, and they began to pray. Perhaps it was then she stopped sensing the ground beneath her feet. Perhaps it was then she started to fly. Those looking at the peak of the mountain later said that the sky had turned violet and had opened and that through it a white dove escaped from the world. As if she had seen the spirit, a nurse who had been at some distance rushed from the clinic, entered the house and walked in to close the eyes of the deceased.

‘You’re her brother, is that right? See? This is all that happens and it happens quickly.’

*On the verge of a tomb in blossom  
two weeping marys linger,  
weeping inconsolably.*

*The rhea of remembrance plucked  
to a last feather tenders this,  
and with it Peter’s negative hand  
engraves on a palm sunday  
echoes of obsequies and of stones.*

*From the edge of an unsettled tomb  
two singing marys depart.*

The other Mary, his mother, died on 8 August 1918 and César couldn’t be present for the funeral rites because he was in Lima at the time. In October he wrote in a letter to his brother Manuel:

‘I live while dying... There is nothing left in this world anymore. Only the wellbeing of our dear father’s life. And when even that is finished I too would have died for this life and for the future and my path will go downhill... This is how I spend my orphaned days, far from everything and crazed with pain...’

‘There’s no doubt’, Navarrete repeated. ‘Time would last longer not long ago’. But his cell partner could comment no further. At that moment someone knocked the door twice. Then tried to open it.

*Rumbbb... Trraprr... rrach... chaz...*

The lock resisted. At last it gave in: ‘Vallejo, come with me.’

The poet stood back from the chair and looked at his partner. He always feared that they would send him back to ‘Hell’.

‘I entrust you with my papers, Mr Navarrete.’

‘Don’t worry. Nothing will happen to them. I’ll look after them.’

‘Come with me, quick!’

He obeyed. They traversed long corridors and walked among conversations and secretive chatting. They went downstairs and into the underground pathway that led to the Quiet Room.

But they didn’t stop in any of the ‘Hells’. They passed by their doors and took another stairwell. They entered an office where a man was seated. He stood up to greet him.

‘Mr Vallejo.’

‘Mr Godoy.’

The poet’s lawyer perceived that the guard had stood a few metres from them. He had decided to remain present as long as the interview lasted. He leaned his shoulders against the wall and tried to light a cigarette. He was fat and his legs were sprawled far apart. The lawyer said nothing. He just stared into his eyes. The guard held the cigarette in his lips and lowered his right hand towards his standard issue pistol.

‘What are you still doing here? Get out immediately!’

The big man dropped the cigarette and was able to say with a coarse voice: ‘I have orders to...’

But the doctor didn’t let him continue. Without saying a word he raised his index finger and pointed at the door. Now wracked with doubt, the guard stubbed the cigarette out with his foot and stood to attention.

‘Get out.’

The soldier raised his hand and gave a military salute. He turned around and left the room rapidly.

‘Mr Vallejo, I want you to know that it’s always an honour for me to represent you.’

‘Thank you, doctor. Is there any hope?’

‘Let me tell you something. As you know we have asked for the annulment of the investigation. There are enough reasons to justify this. The investigating judge is a real con-artist when it comes to swapping documents. He came up with an attorney general and a court clerk. He falsified the signatures of two worthy citizens. Everything this magistrate has done is appalling as well as null and void. Despite all this our appeal has been denied.’

‘What? So is there any hope, Mr Godoy?’

‘I’ll tell you later. First, I want you to tell me everything that happened in Santiago.’

#### Complaint from the Attorney General Rodolfo Ortega

The attorney general Rodolfo Ortega sends the Criminal Court the following complaint:

That in the court case filed against Vicente Jiménez, Héctor Vásquez, César Vallejo and others, who stand accused of various crimes, in the presence of the Investigating Judge Dr Elías Iturri, the undersigned acted as court clerk and was present when the majority of those writs were served but did not sign the COURT VIEWING, as issued. I did not sign nor did I issue the same after viewing the court process but state that those involved have undoubtedly forged my signature and have falsified the integrity of the report because when I went to the Court to be informed of the trial, Judge Iturri had already left for Trujillo, without the undersigned, I repeat, having issued the viewing or having signed the same.

Therefore I fiercely protest against the forgery committed and request that the Court take into account this scandalous action regarding the aforementioned trial. By due decree. Santiago de Chuco, 30 October 1920. Signed Rodolfo Ortega.

A Complaint lodged on behalf of Mr Víctor M. Guerrero

In a notarially recorded statement made in the presence of the Notary of Trujillo, Gerardo Chávez, declares:

- Firstly: That I travelled to Santiago de Chuco as a friend of Judge Elías Iturri and that, since he was unable to find a trustworthy person, he named me Court Clerk in the investigation regarding the setting on fire of the property of the Santa María family and other crimes, despite my acknowledgement that I have no understanding of judicial matters.
- Secondly: I declare that I have not participated in the drawing-up of any writ as court clerk of the aforementioned trial, for I have on occasion visited and left the Court but only as Judge Iturri's friend, without having intervened in the writs he issued.
- Thirdly: I declare I have not written any report of writs in the trial.
- Fourthly: I declare that the writs relating to court proceedings were registered by me two days after we arrived in Trujillo with Judge Iturri, in his place of residence; that their quantity goes up to a high number and that I signed some of them in Santiago de Chuco.
- Fifthly: I declare that I sign this document as a truthful document and as a defense of my reputation. Statement provided in the presence of the Notary Gerardo Chávez who signs and seals this statement on 19 September 1921.

Court's Resolution

In re-opening the hearing the President declared that the Court had decided to DISMISS THE PETITION OF ANNULMENT, as stated separately, and has arranged to open an investigation into the *ad hoc* judge Mr Elías Iturri for the crime of forgery which has been lodged, after which the hearing was adjourned to be continued on the following day.

The lawyer read the complaints made by Ortega and Guerrero and then the preposterous decision of the court. Vallejo couldn't believe his ears.

'Do you know what this is, Mr Vallejo?'

The lawyer didn't wait for an answer. He lifted the proceedings book with the left hand. With the other one he leafed through the pages swiftly as cashiers do with wads of bank notes.

'Trash. It's all trash!'

He left the hand-sewn book on the table. He repeated:

'Don't you realise, César?... They've forged the signature of the so-called Attorney General. The so-called Court Clerk has declared that he has no acquaintance with judicial affairs, that he has not participated in the drawing-up of any writ and that Judge Iturri has taken advantage of him. This strange Judge Iturri administers matters of justice in his own home and makes his friends provide signatures...'

He raised the proceedings book once again and re-read the court's resolution:

‘...and because all of this, they will open a new trial against Iturri... but they then dismiss our petition for annulment! It’s a contradiction!... An appalling contradiction! I smell a rat – or several rats – behind all this.’

Doctor Godoy reaffirmed his petition:

‘Mr Vallejo, I want you to tell me everything that happened in Santiago de Chuco on 1 August 1920. Start with the beginning of the celebrations of the Apostle in July... No, no... wait, I want to know more. Tell me about Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois and the Santa María family. Tell me about it in whichever order you wish but tell me everything. But before all of that I want to ask of you a big favour...’

## Margarita, from *Las Azulas*

Dr Godoy quickly unwrapped a small bundle and from it produced the book *The Black Heralds*.

‘Would you please sign the book for me?’

The poet was astounded. The lawyer before him, who had wished to charge nothing for his services, had been decent enough to purchase the book and now honoured him by requesting his autograph. He took the pen and started to sign.

‘In my hometown, Chepén, you have a league of admirers. Male and female... my two daughters will jump with joy when I bring them these Heralds...’

César had spent 1918 and 1919 in Lima. He resumed his Literature Doctorate in the University of San Marcos. He met the poets Abraham Valdelomar and José María Eguren and the venerable iconoclast Manuel González Prada. These three were the main figures in Peruvian literature and felt an immediate sympathy for Vallejo. His relationship with Luis Alberto Sánchez would begin in that university which was the oldest of the Americas. Soon afterwards he would meet José Carlos Mariátegui. Their close friendship would be sustained continuously over a number of years because of their ideological coincidences. By working in Barrós School he was able to combat his economic hardships and he managed to save enough money to pay for the production of *The Black Heralds*. The book carried, by way of prologue, the biblical phrase ‘Qui pótest cápere capiat’. It was in the hands of Juan Espejo Asturrizaga – who would later describe the events – that Vallejo left the first copies of the book for the Aurora Literaria bookshop, at 758 Baquíjano Street. Then the two men loitered by the bookshop entrance, chatting. Not an hour had gone by when a priest entered the bookshop and bought the book. It was the first copy sold.

They then went to the post office where César dispatched an envelope with a copy dedicated to his father. They walked to a bar in the city centre and there he wrote a dedication to Antenor and his friends from Trujillo:

Brothers, *The Black Heralds* are here and they make their way to the North, their native land. They announce piecemeal that there’s somebody’s coming over every Himalaya and over the circumstantial Andes; and behind such heated and panting monsters, through the corner of the morning one can hear an acute and absolute Steel Solo.

Let’s raise our ears! A confession: on the other side, that good fellow, that suffering Korriskoso of yore, with a trembling gesture in the face of life.

And if this book should mean an offering one makes with all one’s heart, it would be to you, my dear brothers from Trujillo.

César

Lima, 1919.

He wouldn't stay in Lima. At the end of that year he lost his job. His economic difficulties intensified, coupling with further personal problems. On the final days of that year he wrote:

*In a car arteried with vicious circles,  
December returns so changed,  
his gold in disgrace. What a sight:  
December with its 31 fluttered hides,  
poor devil.*

On 30 April 1920 he came back to Trujillo. Disembarking on the Salaverry harbour he remembered his brother Miguel's ominous dream: 'César, little brother, you will know hell in this life. To be a poet one must have gone through hell.'

His destiny was yet to be fulfilled. On 2 May 1920 César travelled with his friend Juan Espejo Asturrizaga to Santiago de Chuco. Before going back to Trujillo, on 3 July, they went through two months of visits, dances, recitals and parties and it would have all turned out to be the stuff of great memories, had it not been for two fatal incidents. The first one was finding out that Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois was the new chief of the garrison of Santiago de Chuco. Vallejo remembered he was still a child when he had seen him in Quiruvilca, on his way to Huamachuco and he had seen him again in the same mining post when he was a judge's assistant. On both occasions Dubois was linked to a crime. He was probably now beyond forty but he remained in the same military rank. He saw him everywhere and he seemed eternal and damned.

The Second Lieutenant fixed his moustache in the church and in the consistorial hall at the council. He made his shiny boots thump in the market and in the houses of important families. He took off his cap and made a reverential bow before the passing of the beautiful *santiaguinas*. He entered the canteen but didn't drink; he only watched the others drink. Maybe he drank by himself. He never seemed to sleep. He walked slowly but confidently the way spiders walk. It seemed to Vallejo that this man would have something to do with his life and that it would be frightful. The other fatal incident occurred one late evening in May. The notary of the trial judge went to Vallejo's family home to talk to him.

'Leave, Cesítar!' he said outright but his voice came out coarse and faded; and Vallejo answered by thanking him for his visit but he had not heard him correctly. The notary was short and hairy and he had been employed as an assistant in the school of Mr Abraham Arias. He always walked with clenched fists, as if ready to get into a boxing match. His name was Salomón Díaz but the kids at school called him 'Wise Salomón'. Just seeing him, the man started to sob.

'Cesítar, Cesítar... I beg of you, leave, right away'.

He produced a sound in his voice and cleared his throat:

'You're in danger, child! Leave Santiago!'

Then he took a handkerchief and blew his nose and asked him not to tell anyone what he was about to tell him. He added that he preferred to talk without witnesses so Juan Espejo stepped outside. César begged Wise Salomón to calm down and offered him a glass of pisco. He served one for himself.

'A crime! There's been a crime!'

When he made sure that he had been properly heard and that there was no-one in the house Salomón unleashed his words.

‘Do you remember Margarita Calderón? She was a shepherdess who went to school with you. She was in the lower years when you were already in fifth grade. She lived in the highlands in Las Azulas and she walked all the way from there. Don Abraham gave her breakfast and lunch so that she could study.’

It was impossible not to remember her! César said he remembered her as if he had been looking at her right there and then. He had spoken to her once in Las Azulas, a place with lakes and herons and where the herons turned blue in February.

‘She only made it to fourth grade and, after the death of Don Abraham, she quit.’

‘The same one, Cesítar... she’s been the victim! Some peasants who were travelling through the highlands found her dead at the door of her house and went to see the judge and notify the relevant authorities about their discovery. We had difficulties while investigating this case. In this job we have seen deaths but none as cruel as this one.’

He went silent for a moment. Then, plucking up courage, he drank the cup.

‘They killed her many times, César!’

They found her naked and petrified by the extreme cold. The judge verified that she had died from strangling and that she had been disembowelled subsequently.

He talked as he looked at the bottom of the cup and said that the killer had placed the girl’s body on a chair in the doorway. A rope held her to the seat and her head was raised in the air, showing a horrible grimace. The blood had attracted the vultures and when the men finally discovered her, the vultures had already devoured her eyes; over her body a flock of birds of prey rose and fell, with their accursed fluttering and their red eyes. César remembered Margarita and it was agony to hear Salomón speak of this crime, but he couldn’t understand why *he* had to leave town.

‘What about the murderer? Do we know who he is?’

‘We know who he is but it’s like not knowing’.

There was only one witness to the crime, Margarita’s younger brother, a 13 year-old boy who was believed to be mentally retarded. When they asked him what had happened and what he had seen he didn’t answer. He didn’t even look at the investigating judge. The magistrate insisted and the boy raised his head and looked straight at his forehead as if he was looking through him.

‘Are you hungry? Maybe you’re hungry...’

He made no gesture. They placed a bowl of soup before him and the boy couldn’t resist it. He hadn’t had anything to eat for two days since the crime. He devoured everything that was given to him. Then he closed his eyes and spoke with a voice that wasn’t his own as if he was a saint.

He described the man who attacked his sister; he said he was green and that his feet were shiny.

‘Green?’

‘Green! Green! Green!’

The judge and the notary exchanged a glance of helplessness. There were no further questions but the boy, with stuttering phrases, had begun his narrative. No-one could stop him then. The notary had to write down all he could as fast as possible. He told how up there, in the hills, Margarita was grazing two cows when the incident happened. She wanted to take her animals to a warmer place. She had a thatch-roofed cottage nearby where she would sometimes take them when the temperature dropped. Suddenly a horseback rider appeared at her side.

‘Hello Margarita! Hello Margarita! Hello Margarita!’





He tried several times but he was also soft. The man started crying. Then he calmed down and had an idea. Drunk, the man picked her up and pretended to dance with her.

‘Dead. Dead. Dead’, he sang into her ear. ‘Hey, you seem made of wood, of stone, of ice... Your name is not Margarita anymore. Now your name is dead.’

He stopped dancing and smiled with shiny teeth: ‘Look at me!’

With his right hand he raised her head and perhaps the dead girl looked back at him. She lowered the head again and saw the man’s hand buried in her stomach. The fist went in and out a few times and finally a knife fell to the floor with the splatter of entrails. The child was stunned observing the man giving orders to the dead. Moonlight went into his mouth, his nose and his eyes.

‘If you say anything, damn it, you know what’s going to happen to you...’

The man straightened Margarita’s hair and sat her in the bench outside the house. He grabbed a piece of lipstick and filled her body with obscene drawings. Due to the cold she was once again wooden and purple.

‘Did you know him? Who was the man?’

The child said that the blue herons were visible and that the lagoon seemed to have dried up and that the sky was upside-down. The child said what he said and it was difficult to understand him. The clerk pleaded:

‘Look, we’re about to go! If you don’t tell us who that man was, there won’t be a way to find him’.

‘The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant. The Second Lieutenant’, he spoke with his hands, with his eyes, with his fingers. His voice became clear and he spoke once again with the voice of a saint, one of those saints who have been condemned to death.

Worried about the child’s words and by the fact that the words themselves did not constitute sufficient proof the investigating attorney returned to Santiago de Chuco that evening and he was trying to come up with a way to proceed when they slammed open his door. It was Second Lieutenant Dubois, his boots shining like mirrors.

‘The guards and the armed forces are holy institutions of the country’, he reminded the attorney. And added: ‘I know that you have been carrying out an investigation of the crime and I want to imagine that there are no bad intentions on your part. I know that you have interviewed the victim’s brother, an imbecile.’

He didn’t say how he knew this but he warned him: ‘I don’t want unacceptable gossip to leave this office. The guards and the army are here to defend the country. You cannot judge us. There’s a special court to judge us. Are you aware of that? Are you pro-Chilean? Are you a communist-Bolshevik? The Bolsheviks have triumphed in Russia. But not here! Never! Our institution will not let them in or out.’

He banged the table many times as he spoke and when clerk Salomón wanted to leave he stopped him:

‘You as well. You’ve been warned’.

Then he calmed down:

‘Of course, I cannot help you find the criminals. You know that I respect and I help the court authorities. If you authorise it, attorney, we will search the town for everyone who has arrived recently from outside, the intellectuals, the Bolsheviks. We’ll bring you the criminal in a question of hours’.

The clerk finished to tell him about the events and it was as if he had lost his soul.

‘Leave, Cesítar, leave Santiago as soon as you can! You and your friend, you have to leave! The Second Lieutenant is going to start looking for people to accuse and it’s evident that he’s got it in for you.’

Wise Salomón’s voice again went coarse:

‘The attorney has asked me to tell you this as if it was my own idea.’

César Vallejo remembered what had happened to the blind man Santiago in Quiruvilca. He knew that the clerk was right but, nevertheless, he didn’t want to believe that he had been born in a time and a place without justice. That very night, on 3 July, he left with Juan Espejo Asturrizaga for the coast. During the whole trip he looked at the mountains and didn’t believe they were there. The shadows grew cold among the trees and the night fell on the world. Everything was as if it didn’t exist.

Some time later the court case was filed. The shepherdess turned to dust, air and holy water and into a memory which nobody dared remember out loud. The boy disappeared. When clerk Salomón went to look for him to take him to live with his family he couldn’t find him. Weeks later they identified his head among the remains which several pigs were devouring in a town pigpen.

On 4 July both friends returned to Trujillo. However, almost two weeks later, César would travel back to Santiago de Chuco and this time he was alone. To Juan Espejo Asturrizaga this seemed strange and dangerous.

‘Things are getting restless in Santiago. Since they changed the subprefect Santa María and named Ladislao Meza in his place, things are restless. The rich want the power they once had back again. It’s better if you don’t go.’

‘That’s exactly why I’m going!’ César answered. Then, he explained:

‘I fear for my brothers. Something may happen to them.’

‘That monster Dubois is on the loose. Don’t go back!’

‘One more reason to go. I’ve always thought that poets walk the earth to do away with monsters. Remember, Juan, my brother! That’s what we pledged when the massacres in the sugar plantations occurred. But I’m not going to face him. I don’t have strength for that. But one day I will!’

## Invulnerable and Eternal

César Vallejo reached Santiago de Chuco on 22 July. It was quite late and nobody answered when he banged the knocker of his father's house. He insisted but behind the squeaking of the wood there was nothing but the vast silence and a holy scent of dampness. He hid his luggage in a secret place by the portal and he went for a walk around Santiago. He found the church open and went in. An owl fluttered in fear, flew towards the door and escaped. Even though the religious feast had already started, there was no-one there. It was as if everybody had gone dancing. Not even Saint James the Greater was there. Apparently they had taken his effigy to some wake festivity. The temple was shrouded in a sheen akin to moonlight: solemn, sad and without a precise origin.

'The entire creation has left', César murmured.

He took a seat in a bench with a back and leaned his head there. He spent the night entering dreams and many memories. Then he went back to staring at the air. Nodding off, César asked himself what strong force had made him come back to his land. On his way to Santiago he had stopped at Huamachuco to visit his brother Néstor who worked there as a coroner. Many of his friends who worked at San Nicolás School invited him to give a poetry recital. There was a group of young men who wrote poetry. They asked him a thousand questions, asked for his autograph and gave him the first issue of *Fiat Lux*, a magazine they had edited and whose director was his friend Santiago Gastañadú.

The editorial denounced the fact that the foreign franchises of Quiruvilca didn't pay the concessions for the use of the land nor the taxes owed to the state. They had turned the land into a dark and smoking hole. The smoke of their chimneys killed the cattle and destroyed the fertile soil. Everyone who entered the hollow didn't come out alive. The army would enrol Indians and sell them to the gringos. The poets of 'Fiat Lux' declared war on the 'murderers of Indians'.

'Youth is all about this', Vallejo exclaimed. 'One has to be brave. Sometimes, excluding oneself from rebellion means one becomes an accomplice. Instead of remaining inactive, we have to protest, we have to fight. We even have to commit a crime.'

It was already six o'clock in the morning when the memories flew off and he woke up in the church bench. Saint James the Greater was back in his temple. The parishioners who had taken it imagined that César had been drinking at some party and didn't wake him up. Only then did César realise he was back in his land. His heart filled his chest with diverse emotions and memories. He travelled the two blocks which separated his house from the church and walked up to the door. It was wonderful to have a family like his. His brothers and his ageing father were

happy to see him again after so little time. In the afternoon he walked through the streets with his old acquaintances. Vallejo and his inseparable friend Antonio Ciudad were excellent dancers. Both would jump in the middle of the troupe and would spend the whole day dancing. The girls would compete to dance with them.

People would remember those days of festivity as unforgettable times. The sky was tinted with a blue that was so intense it had never been seen before. The trees were painted with an effulgent green. At night the city was fluorescent as if it had kept the light and the warmth of daytime. In the sky, Mars started to shine as a star of high magnitude and it was almost the same size as the moon. At the conclusion of the festivities, on 1 August, César decided to say goodbye, as he had to leave for Trujillo the following day. Early in the morning he entered the cemetery to visit his dead friends one last time.

As he walked he told himself that this land was holy. He saw himself inside a coffin, eternal. He told himself that it's within us and not anywhere else where one can find the eternity of the universe, the past and the future, heaven and hell. He thought that, buried under that holy soil, the men and women and children of Santiago de Chuco slept with crossed arms for all eternity. He imagined them tired of the sad journey in this earth. He imagined them turned into bone, sand and stars. He guessed they were holding hands and flying together to the moon. He saw them silent and sad, turning and spinning with the planet around other worlds during the time that stops being time and during timeless time. When somebody who dreams of us dies a part of us dies too. He knew this when his steps took him to the tombstone he was searching for:

#### MARÍA DE LOS SANTOS MENDOZA VALLEJO

Eighth of August 1918

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord. (Luke 4, 18-19)

Moss had grown over the tombstone. The rusted ring disappeared into greenness. César caressed the stone and remained absorbed as if listening to a song from far away. He walked silently through the cemetery. He spent the morning visiting the new dead, those who had passed away during the time he had been away.

At the far end a rough cross stood as a reminder that Margarita Calderón, the shepherdess murdered by Dubois in early July, rested there. In a nearby hole pious hands had placed a canvas bag with the remains of his brother's body that could be located. César remained a long time before those graves. His head looked at the sky. Perhaps he raised his eyes to look for justice up there; or perhaps to swallow his tears. Before leaving he returned to his mother's grave and read again Luke's gospel. He decided to leave the cemetery but he was not able to do so because of an incoming funeral procession. The casket was followed by a group of old musicians. It seemed to him that they arrived from another time or from another town because he knew no-one. The casket was carried by four men dressed in black. Behind them one could see the mourners who appeared to be the relatives. Everybody looked at the floor as if they were counting their steps.

He stepped aside to let them pass but he had to wait a while longer because at that point some people who had lagged behind in the journey started to catch up. They were a group of crying women who had to run after their little children every now and again. The children

followed the musical band and pretended with gestures to be playing the trumpet or the drums. One of the women left behind for a moment a basket of flowers. The children seized their chance to distribute among themselves the geraniums and the roses. As their parents watched attentively the interment of the casket the children cut the stalks until they were very short and played around putting the flowers between ear and temple.

The trumpets issued clanging notes. It was something strange in that place and at that time. Even stranger was the fact that the mourners walked close to César without looking at him. He was not, however, invisible to everyone. A boy came up to him and started to jump until he could reach Vallejo's lapel with his hands. He wanted to place a white rose in it. The poet took the flower he was being offered and wore it. Then he wanted to say thanks but the child had disappeared.

Something made him think that he had already lived that scene before and that, perhaps, the white rose was going to come back to him later in his life. At that precise moment someone came back from the past and he couldn't believe what he saw. It was Rita, his sweet Andean Rita, of the wild reed and the dusk berry. He hadn't seen her since 1913 when he had say goodbye to her forever at the train station in Menocucho.

'Rita! It's impossible! We said goodbye forever... You must be 22 now...'

The girl brought her right index finger to her lips.

'Hush!... You shouldn't enquire as to a lady's age.'

She seemed to be in a rush but César's gaze stopped her.

'I have a question.'

'Say it or forever hold your peace.'

'Am I dreaming?' César asked her.

'What makes you think you're dreaming?'

'You. You and I. We were supposed never to meet again.'

'There's no "never again". You yourself said so.'

'We were supposed to meet in Lima or in a foreign country.'

'They took me to Lima. But I've been back in the ranch for three months.'

'I didn't see you in the festivities.'

'I didn't go. My parents didn't want me to go. Neither did I.'

'You didn't?'

'No but I'll tell you why later. There's something that I have to tell you urgently.'

'Urgently? So I take it you've come looking for me...'

'Exactly.'

'I left early from my family's house. I came to see my mother's grave and say goodbye to her.'

'And I went to your house and asked after you. They told me you would surely be here.'

The procession of mourners had left already. The sky glimmered like crystal. It smelt of smoking logs. There seemed to be nobody else in the world. It was the perfect scenery for a dream.

'I would like to know something', Rita said. 'Do you know where dream comes from?'

The question made him think that she was a dream playing with him. He thought about it only for an instant. Immediately he became aware that she really existed because he could hear and feel the damp whispering of her breath. A bird started to chirp and another one answered from the other side of the cemetery.

‘But, César, I haven’t come to talk about dreams. I’ve come to warn you; you’re in danger. A lot of danger’.

He took her by the hand and led her to a place where they could be alone.

‘Where should I begin?... I better not start. It’s better for you to leave as soon as possible and to warn several of your friends to be extra special careful.’

Before she could continue Vallejo seemed to have read her mind.

‘Is it Second Lieutenant Dubois?’

‘Yes. It’s Second Lieutenant Dubois.’

He had gone to the Julián ranch several times. He arrived uninvited and Rita’s father was forced to receive him. He was a flatterer. He was persistent. At first Mr Uceda took him for the usual bootlicker who tried to befriend those who had power. There was, however, something else. He gave Rita presents and sent flirting gazes her way. It was evident that he was after the rich heiress.

‘Some time before the party, he went to talk to me and my father. He asked my father for his permission to accompany me in the balcony during the bullfights’.

She looked into César’s eyes.

‘I didn’t deny him, of course. I had to give him an excuse so that my father wouldn’t feel that I was insulting the visitor... But I wouldn’t go out with him even if he was the last man on earth’.

‘What about Dubois?’

‘He was not offended. He laughed in my face and assured me that he would insist.’

‘That’s why you didn’t come to Santiago in any of the days of the festivities.’

‘Of course!... I told him that I felt really unwell by just seeing the bulls and, even though he might not believe me, I had to be coherent. But what I have to tell you is even worse.’

César held her hand and she held on to him.

‘The night before last he came to the ranch and told my father that there was going to be a revolt in town. In fact he wanted to make it up to him and to show that he was really important. He told him that the guards were very unhappy with the authorities because they hadn’t been paying them their salaries. “I won’t be able to contain them, Mr Uceda”, he told him, “And, you know... when these young men rebel they’re not going to stop with the subprefect. Perhaps they’ll reap their justice on a few insurgents and Bolsheviks who are on the loose in Santiago de Chuco. You know what I mean. These guards have a profound love for their country.” He mentioned many names. He said yours. He didn’t know I was listening. He doesn’t know that there was something between us’.

‘Was?’

‘There is something between us, César. Do you remember what I told you seven years ago in Menocucho? I told you that what we have occurs in a time but this time doesn’t go by... But let’s not talk about this. I have to go back to the ranch and you must warn your friends. Please, be careful, please.’

Vallejo knew that Rita was right. There was no time to lose.

‘Goodbye!’ she said. She turned around and walked away. She started to fade.

‘Goodbye!’ César Vallejo answered, adding:

‘Where were you before I dreamt you?’

At seven o’ clock in the morning of the last day of November 1920 gunshots were heard coming from the prison. This was strange because the prisoners didn’t own firearms and their quarrels were fought with knives and hammers. The guards started to run through the courtyard

ordering everybody to go back to their cells. From his vantage point César had a privileged view and he could see that the gunshots came from high up. Holed up in the armory, behind a window, there was a sniper. It was going to be difficult to stop him because that's where all the guns of the prison were kept. Besides, strangely enough, the guards didn't try to stop him. The man approached the entrance of his hideout and nobody shot him.

'Take cover... Take cover; they're coming to attack us...!' he shouted.

At that moment he became recognisable. It was the same person who wandered around the prison wearing a tattered soldier's uniform. He had been an official and had gone mad after a peasant massacre that he had been part of. All the time he thought that the dead would come back and he would speak with them. He begged for forgiveness and explained how he had only been following orders. He talked to himself. He was a harmless madman. Since there were no asylums he had been put in prison. His former colleagues liked him and respected him and he was free to roam the prison. Taking advantage of that he had now taken possession of the armory and was shooting. He shouted out that he was firing at the hundred dead who wanted to assault the premises.

'Take cover, please!' he begged the guards, 'it's the workers from the Chiclín ranch. They've come out of their tombs and they've come to denounce us for setting fire to their homes.'

He shot again. He changed guns quickly as soon as he ran out of bullets. He didn't bother to recharge. The few prisoners who had a view which overlooked the armory were contemplating the scene silently. The guards were petrified. One of them crept into Vallejo's cell, trembling. Then the voice of the warden, Cipriano Barba, became audible:

'What can you see, sergeant?'

'Peasants and anarchists. They're climbing the wall and they're about to jump on us.'

'Do you need reinforcements?'

'Yes, send me some reinforcements, please.'

'I will. I'm the commander. Do you know who I am?'

'Yes, commander but please, hurry up'.

'Anything else?'

In the struggle of his imaginary combat, the man was thirsty.

'Send me some water, as well, commander.'

'I'll take you some myself', Don Cipriano said. He knew that none of the guards would dare do it.

A few minutes later, through the winding stairwell, the major went up to the armory. He took with him a glass of water in which they had dissolved some tranquilizers they usually gave the madman.

'I'm coming up. Don't shoot, now. Do you know who I am?'

'Yes, commander!'

Without even looking at him he accepted the water and gulped it down. He pointed to the north and the west walls of the prison and said that the attackers were coming from them.

'Now I'm going back down and I'll send you some backup. Keep vigilant. But don't shoot.'

'Understood, commander!'

Don Cipriano came back down and ordered the guards to keep cover and to wait. An hour later the man gave no signs of life.

‘The attackers have retreated. We have captured a few’, the warden shouted from downstairs and then said: ‘Now it’s time for you to come down’.

He wouldn’t come down because by now he was placidly asleep. It was easy to bring him down and place him in a cell. The next day he didn’t remember his imaginary combat and kept wandering around and talking to himself.

However he had given up on life. On 6 December the man hung himself on a beam. Despite Pato Negro’s request the dead man’s head was not sold to him. They were opening up the morgue at Trujillo’s prison and the man was placed on marble table. The coroner and the apprentice attorneys participated in a session in which the corpse was disemboweled. The coroner’s assistant sawed off his head, extracted the brains and placed them in a formalin flask. The other entrails were also extirpated. The rest of the remains were put in a bag and taken to a common grave at the public cemetery. The day the morgue was inaugurated a bearded man walked through the premises of the prison. Afterwards they ordered the prisoners to line up in the courtyard to listen to him.

The mayor of the city and the subprefect of the region were present alongside a group of important men. The highest authority of Trujillo explained that the bearded man had arrived in a ship from Lima and that he was representing the Minister of Justice and Worship. He added that finally the country was entering the twentieth century. Finally – he claimed – the recently-opened morgue would be fundamental in forensic justice as well as the medical sciences, when the first Faculty of Medicine would finally open its doors in the university. In turn the representative of the minister harangued the prisoners with a speech about the progress of science in Peru... despite the incomprehension of some.

He was referring to the Catholic Church. The Archbishop of Lima had condemned the creation of morgues because they were considered an interference of the secular authorities into the sacred Sundays of death. No priest had attended the inauguration.

‘You’re going to be the pioneers of progress, the new men, the paradigms of modernity’, the bearded man said while pointing with his cane at one group of prisoners, then another. He added:

‘You must know that your bodies will be used for the unstoppable advancement of the sciences in Peru, overcoming our envious neighbours in this Sub-Continent. One day, not very far from now, the Medicine students, the youth of tomorrow, will ask about those who generously offered their bodies for science and they will remember you. This prison is and will be a living monument of progress and science. Forever.’





## Santiago's Burning

On 13 July 1920 Santiago de Chuco began its celebration in honour of the town's namesake, Saint James the Apostle. Inhabitants of nearby villages paraded into town. They waved banners and standards as they came. The men of Conra and Pueblo Nuevo wore white canvas trousers cinched at the waist with wide, brightly coloured belts. The men of Chambuc, Huamada and Congoyape were proud of their black outfits and the Havana ponchos draped over their shoulders. Married women displayed the dignity of their status: they were dressed in black and their white hats were adorned with blue ribbons. The young single women let their availability be known with colourful percale dresses, flowers in their hair and defiant looks on their faces.

From the most remote parts of the city the religious brotherhoods—or guilds—gathered together. Guilds from neighbouring districts came as well. All of them vied to bring the most people, the best music and the prettiest girls. Everyone had the obligation to honour the town's patron saint. His bearded, sorrowful figure bounced upon a sedan chair atop worshippers' shoulders, casting glances at the balconies from which people tossed flowers and streamers at him. Some people remarked that he already looked tired of all the pageantry. During the three weeks of festivities in his honour the Apostle went visiting from house to house in the neighbourhoods of Santa Rosa, San Cristóbal, Santa Mónica and San José. He had to enter the houses of his compadres and his friends, presiding there over the libations meant to honour him. Some people said that he also went to visit his maidens.

The festivities began on 13 July and they would last until 2 August. Because the Apostle had so much work to do he had to designate a representative. While the main statue—the normal size for a person—remained in the church, the 'stand-in statue' which was about a half-metre tall took the Apostle's place for the less onerous duties. 14 July marked the beginning of the *novenario's* nine special days of prayer and ritual which ended on 22 July. It was a tremendous honour to be named as a *novenante* and pay for one of the nine masses. Various people vied for the honour including those who were simply generous and those who hoped for a special blessing from the city's patron saint. On 23 July, two days before Saint James' Day, there was dancing throughout the city. Filled with colour and movement troupes appeared on every corner and joined the other celebrants. Showing off their sporting tunics and hats with the brims turned up in front the young men swaggered continually among the crowds, jangling the bells concealed below their knees. The young women were gliding rather than dancing. They were in two places

at the same time. The Turks wore turbans and palm-leaf hats. They carried small swords in their right hands and white handkerchiefs in their left. The dark *negrito* masks were gigantic that year. No-one could imagine women more beautiful than the *quiyaya* dancers dressed in black skirts and blue blouses. They danced slowly and soberly to the sounds of a drum under the watchful gaze of a man wearing a black cape. The Quishpe Condor interrupted random groups of dancers. He displayed his feathered wings to the young women, inviting them to fly up to the sky.

On the main feast day, 25 July, the sound of twenty-one exploding firecrackers was heard. Afterwards the sweet notes of a single trumpet touched the skies of Santiago de Chuco. Then the local parish priest walked towards the rock of El Chorro Chico. He carried a bottle of holy water with him. He raised his embroidered chasuble with devotion and put his head through the opening in the middle. Standing upon the enormous rock, he reenacted the baptism of the city just as Father Francisco de Asís Centurión had done four centuries before:

‘I ask you, city, do you want to be Christian?’

The people shouted out as one: ‘Yes! Yes, we do!’

‘Do you renounce Satan, all his works and all his pomps?’

‘Yes, we do!’

The priest filled his metal aspergillum with holy water and sprinkled drops towards the north, south, east and west.

‘Are you sure about what you’re saying, pagan city?’

‘Yes, we’re sure!’

‘Do you accept the king of Spain?’

The people hesitated for a moment.

‘To hell with you!’ shouted a raspy voice.

The priest stopped reading the sheet that contained the formula he was following and his gaze fell on the man who had shouted.

‘To hell with the king of Spain!’ the man said, correcting himself.

‘Don’t take it the wrong way’, the mayor Vicente Jiménez said, reprimanding the man. ‘The padre is simply following a very old ceremony. They used it during Columbus’s time.’

‘But Don Vicente, we’re in Peru, not Spain . . .’

‘That’s why it’s all right’, added the mayor who was known as a peacemaker. ‘That’s why it’s all right and it’s better this way. It’s better that it’s a king and not a president. Kings today are made of paper like the kings on poker cards . . . So, a far-away king is less dangerous than a president who lives close by.’

The man with the raspy voice went quiet. The crowd took advantage of the silence to shout together: ‘Yes, yes, yes! Of course we accept him!’

‘In light of your acceptance I baptize you. Henceforth you shall be known as Santiago. And your surname shall be “de Chuco”. *In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Ghost.*’

*Quenaing deep sighs, the Pallas,  
as in rare century-old prints, enrosarize  
a symbol in their gyrations.*

*On his throne the Apostle shines, then;  
and he is, amid incense, tapers and songs,  
a modern sun-god for the peasant.*

Every July afternoon the sky turned deep crimson and the people thought that the procession would be magical and the planting season would be even more magical. Finally, marking the commencement of the festivities, the bearded Apostle burst onto the city streets. He left the church in the main square on a covered litter and then took almost two hours to circle around the square. Slowly worshippers moved forward to the drumbeat of the band . . . Two steps forward, one step back. Two steps forward . . . The music was sad and nostalgic although playful and sensual at times. Finally the trumpets sounded a long and penetrating blast, a blast that was soon lost in the mountains.

*Melancholy musics in profound  
triumphal throb, sigh beautifully,  
and the native souls among them  
tremble blessed in graceful circling.*

*The balconies are peopled like ships;  
the merry breezes are silken;  
balloons fly, like luminous birds.*

While musicians played along different sides of the main square Santiago the Apostle seemed to be trembling. His eyes watched the people with both curiosity and fear but that didn't prevent the pious from patronizing the bars and consuming copious amounts of alcohol. On the night of 31 July a procession unlike any other in those times made its way through town. The dark figure of Christ, lying within a glass catafalque, was towed along the streets in a horse-drawn cart. Members of a local guild—shoeless and dressed in black—escorted Christ. Many people cried as the figure of the Saviour of the World passed by. His blood gushed forth ever more abundantly and his tears fell one after another, soaking his beard. Suddenly several men tilted the platform upward and managed to make the image of Christ lift his gaze, focussing on the second floor of the Santa María family's home.

'He's sending a greeting!'

'Bravo! Bravo!' shouted two women from a window.

Then a group of men appeared at the window next to that one and praised the Saviour of the World. There, in the home of the Santa María family, dinner had not yet begun. Nevertheless, roast duck and pork were paraded around on trays so that guests could see what awaited them on the menu. A marble staircase preceded the family's great hall. Two Doric columns in the back lent the room a sober atmosphere. As master of the festival Carlos Santa María was required to pay for the music, the fireworks and several feasts for the town. The pious saved their money all year and deposited it in Santa María's store; the money—a considerable amount—was used to cover the master's costs.

None of that prevented Santa María from holding private gatherings as was the case that evening. The honoured guest that night was Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois. Only three months before Dubois had come to the city to command the garrison of gendarmes. When Carlos Santa María saw Dubois in the hall's enormous bronze-framed mirror he felt that he and Dubois could understand one another. He was not his double. He was not identical to Dubois nor did he look like him at all but Dubois was exactly what Santa María would have liked to be. Dubois

was tall, Caucasian, blonde and Lima-born and he sported a straight mustache with two sharp tips. Money was the only thing that distinguished one man from the other.

‘They don’t pay those poor saps anything’, Alfredo, Carlos’s brother, said. ‘A young man from a good family like Dubois should be in Lima, commanding a regiment. It’s a shame that he’s just a poor white boy!’

Dubois saw Santa María in the mirror as well but their eyes didn’t meet because both men were extremely careful and discreet. Two people who see each other in a mirror are thin and transparent and they cease to exist in the three-dimensional world. Hiding from each other is a simple thing to do.

‘Hillbilly piece of shit! If only I had your money!’ murmured Dubois. Sergeant Benítez, one of his subordinates, overheard him and smiled.

‘But you don’t have it, my lieutenant! . . . They say he’s the richest man in town. And now, on top of that, he’s the master of the festival. Imagine all the money that the people must have piled up over the past year. I’ve heard that even the mine has donated some silver. Wouldn’t you bet that he’s got some extra cash stashed away?’

Dubois ignored him.

‘And yet with all that, Santa María still complains! . . . He says that the Leguía administration has taken his subprefecture away. And now the new subprefect is Ladislao Meza, one of his worst enemies. He gets nervous around Meza, a crippled old man who can’t hear a thing.’

‘But no-one has taken his money away’, Sergeant Benítez retorted and he raised his right hand to point out the magnificent columns that formed the room’s entrance.

‘Who cares? . . . Santa María says he’s a victim of the government.’

When President Augusto B. Leguía took power he announced in 1919 that a ‘New Homeland’ would begin with him. He harshly criticized the institutions and values that had prevailed in Peru since colonial times and he promised that everything would change from that time on. He proclaimed himself the defender of the indigenous peoples and he promised to create laws that would change the sad plight of the Andean population. His impassioned speeches and slogans – repeated over and over again by the new regional leaders – earned him the support of thousands of farm labourers living under the oppression of the haciendas. In a large regional meeting of Quechua and Aymara peoples Leguía was given the title of Wiracocha.

Leguía’s ideas represented the Peruvian version of a phenomenon that was spreading throughout the Americas. A revolution against feudalism had shaken Mexico for a decade. Before land could be distributed there millions of people had to die and acres of ranch holdings had to be torn from the hands of those who had no right to them. In Argentina two events put an end to the power of the old plutocratic oligarchies that had held control for so long: the election of schoolteacher Hipólito Irigoyen as president and the triumph of the Radical Party. In Chile the election of Arturo Alessandri to office exuded the same revolutionary feeling.

Unfortunately Leguía’s pronouncements never went beyond the words themselves. Conservative and religious influences eventually managed to file down the rebels’ claws. The country’s elite suffered no lasting effect from the Leguía ‘phenomenon’ and those representing Lima and foreign investors eventually ended up controlling everything. In the interior’s mountain villages and towns the first radical change under Leguía was the removal of regional leaders. Carlos Santa María had not yet got over the shock he received when, out of the blue, a telegram arrived ordering him to appear before the new subprefect. Perhaps he was thinking about that when he saw himself in the dining room’s large mirror and once again he found

himself looking at the lieutenant. Two people in a mirror are like two fish. They cross each other's paths but they don't touch each other in the water's multiple dimensions. They pass through life slowly but they never meet. Santa María was not yet alone with his guest of honour.

Being a good host Carlos Santa María had made sure that everything was perfect. He didn't feel burdened by the need to meet the needs of any of his guests because his servants took on that task. Servants filled the guests' cups before they became empty. The meal had not yet begun. Santa María walked from one side of the room to the other and eventually arrived at the mirror where his eyes fell once again on the reflection of his most important guest. He was so close to the mirror that he could breathe on it; he blew a puff of air at the mirror. It clouded over. He asked himself: 'Do we really have a soul?' And he answered by thinking that without a soul there would be no reflection in the mirror. But now Dubois was close by, offering a respectful bow.

Santa María returned the gesture and asked: 'Are you enjoying yourself, Lieutenant?'

By way of answer Dubois bowed again. The noise of so many voices speaking at once prevented him from hearing his host.

'Are you enjoying yourself, Lieutenant?' Santa María asked once more.

Dubois answered with a change of expression. But Santa María couldn't understand its meaning because the mirrored finish on Dubois's military glasses concealed his eyes. Santa María decided to begin with a joke.

'They say you've come to improve our race, Lieutenant.'

Dubois reacted quickly: 'If you believe that talk...'

'It's just a saying. What I'm trying to say is that here you are, a young officer from a good family and you could marry a local girl with a good name and good prospects. That's all I mean. That's what we mean by 'improving our race'. Does that sound acceptable?'

This time the Second Lieutenant smiled. He had assumed that Santa María was referring to his passion for hunting down Indian girls but he had been mistaken. They parted from each other with a nod of the head. The master of the house went to welcome other guests. Later he met alone with his brother Alfredo, who was Dubois's friend and regular compatriot when Dubois went out on the town.

'Did you talk with Dubois?' Carlos asked.

'I did. I've already told you that. I talked with him a week ago and he's willing to do it.'

'How much?'

'You're going to have to talk to him about it. Convince him.'

'Convince him?'

'Actually, he's already convinced. But he wants to talk with you about ... the money.'

'How much?'

'I've already told you! That's up to the two of you but he's already said that he's willing to do it.'

That was the reason why Carlos Santa María had invited Dubois to the dinner party on the night of 31 July along with the garrison's eight gendarmes. One by one the gendarmes climbed up the dining room's wooden staircase, their boots echoing much louder than was necessary. They had bathed and shaved and they made exaggerated courteous gestures to try to match the quality of the family they were visiting. Dubois continually smoothed the tips of his moustache and frequently checked his boots. Because they were made of patent leather they had a lustrous shine; he used them only for special occasions. His dark eyeglasses with their gold frames lent him a hardened, military air. The servants continued to give cigarettes and cups of

grape liquor to the guests. Before any of the soldiers accepted anything, however, they looked to their commanding officer for approval.

‘In the fiesta of Santiago, discipline doesn’t matter. Happiness is the point!’ announced Santa María, trying to make the soldiers comfortable.

‘Happiness, yes, but discipline as well,’ Dubois said, correcting him. ‘I hate to contradict you’, he added, ‘but our sacred army is the result of discipline and love for our country.’

‘Don’t exaggerate, Lieutenant’, Santa María answered with a smile. He was watching himself in the lenses of Dubois’s mirrored eyeglasses.

The Apostle Santiago passed by the window of the Santa María home. The women tossed flowers at him. In the main hall the toasts began. They toasted Bolognesi, Grau, the glorious army and Peru’s gendarmes. They raised their glasses to the state’s government leaders and to the health of the federal government. They drank to honour the archbishop of Trujillo and Pope Benedict XV. Finally the food arrived and everyone went quiet for about an hour. The only things that could be heard were the sounds of people taking long sips of soup and of forks battling to ensure that plates were left completely empty.

‘Honoured soldiers, the beef you’re eating is from El Manchado. It’s the bull that gored the torero in the first fight,’ their host explained.

The guests responded with shouts and snorts of applause. What they said was inaudible because they were speaking with their mouths full.

‘Eat up! Eat up, young soldiers ..., because that’s what makes you strong! Stroooooong!’

He winked and repeated the word strong. The gendarmes ate and ate. Before getting back to the business of drinking Santa María tapped his glass several times. Everyone went quiet.

‘I’m going to make a toast’, he said, ‘a toast to Santiago de Chuco, a city that the federal government has forgotten.’

The Second Lieutenant showed his assent with a change of expression.

‘A city’, Santa María continued, ‘that has been deprived of its legitimate leaders. It’s not good for me to say so but I’m not a man who suffers from false modesty. When I was subprefect here did anyone not get their salary?’

Suddenly the gendarmes stopped belching.

‘If there wasn’t enough money, I took it out of my own pockets. I never left our noble guardians of law and order to go hungry or to live on nothing...’

‘Bravo! ... Damn right! Bravo!’ shouted one of the soldiers but the Second Lieutenant’s eyes ordered him to be quiet.

‘And what now? And now what do we have? ... I ask myself and I ask you, honoured soldiers, do you have a subprefect who hears you?’

The soldiers broke out in laughter because everyone knew that the new subprefect, Ladislao Meza, was deaf. The master of the festival was not satisfied to simply make allusions: ‘Go and talk with our deaf Ladislao Meza. Go and demand from him the salary he hasn’t paid you!’

‘Let’s do it! Let’s go right now!’ someone shouted.

Dubois’s men began to bellow. Their words couldn’t be understood. Two men standing on a table tried to make speeches.

‘And how about the mayor? What do you think about the mayor? What do you say about that little puppet?’

‘Let’s not talk about him. Now isn’t the time. It’s still not the time’, Santa María answered, restraining them. ‘This is a night when you must enjoy yourselves.’

The table on which the two would-be orators were standing broke. The men fell to the floor accompanied by wisecracks and guffaws. A violinist began playing the first chords of a regional huaino. Now all of them were drinking and clamoring. Santa María and Dubois, seated at the head table, spoke in quiet tones. They had come to an agreement: the city's leaders had to be eliminated.

'Remember, Don Carlos, that I'm not doing this for selfish reasons. I'm doing this for the love of my country and my soldiers.'

'Subprefect Meza ... That deaf piece of shit!'

'He won't even hear the bullet. He'll have no idea.'

'The bullet? What bullet?'

They sniggered.

'Ah, Lieutenant! It's great to do business with you!'

'Let me repeat what I said before. I'm doing this for the good of my men', answered Dubois and then he began reviewing several aspects of the plan. After Meza was dead – and perhaps some of his allies – the gendarmes would intervene to establish calm. They would arrest the mayor and a few other people and accuse them of being anarcho-syndicalists, socialists, Bolsheviks ... whatever. If the prisoners resisted they'd be killed. The soldiers would need to take over the telegraph office early. From there they could send messages to the federal government about how Dubois and his men had heroically quashed a conspiracy.'

The violinist moved closer to the table playing the coastal songs which Dubois applauded enthusiastically. He and Santa María continued talking while making no effort to prevent others from overhearing them. The alcohol was having its effect.

'The men need to be well prepared.'

'Don't worry on that score.'

The violinist played a waltz several times, a tune that seemed to remind Dubois of a recurrent memory.

'The advance you've given me is fine but tomorrow, as soon as everything is done, I'll need all of the money.'

'Don't worry about that either, Lieutenant.'

The money was coming from all the donations that the faithful had deposited in Santa María's store. Over the course of the year the money amounted to a genuine fortune.

'You'll send your soldiers to protect my store. Later we'll say that some insurrectionists broke in and stole the money ... You and your men prevented them from taking more ...'

The procession was going by once again. One after the other three figures appeared: the Apostle Santiago, the Crucified Jesus and the Virgin Mary. Next to the Santa María family's door a woman had begun selling incense. The incense devoured all other smells and seemed to transform people into saints.

'Don't worry about that, Don Carlos. Tomorrow Santiago will burn.'

Those who talked with Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois had the impression that they had spoken with a knife. Dubois was thin and methodical. Very early in the morning he awakened his soldiers and reviewed what had to be done. In the afternoon he went to wait in a small grocery store about a block from the garrison. When the town clock tolled three o'clock the gendarmes began shooting into the air. As agreed Dubois waited a fairly long time, then walked quietly towards the garrison. There he found his men who continued shooting. They shot at houses, trees and even the church's tower. As they did so they kept shouting 'Death to the mayor!' and 'Death to the subprefect!' The next step of the plan was to go out to the streets and

kill anyone who stood before them. They would hunt down the city's leaders and probably give them a swift execution.

Then the inconceivable happened. Ladislao Meza, the old and deaf subprefect, decided to confront them. He didn't even have a pistol nor did he know how to handle a gun but he trusted that his mere presence would inspire some respect. He put his clothes in order, smoothed his coat and adjusted his tie just so. Then he moved to go out to the street. At the door he met a group of civilians. There were very few of them and they were unarmed. Héctor Vásquez, Benjamín Ravelo and José Moreno were the first to arrive. They were followed by the Vallejo brothers and Manuel Antonio Ciudad.

'We're here to accompany you, Mr Subprefect', César Vallejo said, greeting him. 'We aren't the kind of people who use weapons but, even so, we'll always be better than the animals.'

'Well then, gentlemen, there's nothing more to say. Come with me to the square. I'm going to stop these soldiers.'

No-one said anything in response. A moment later the group of gentlemen appeared at the northeast corner of the square. They were elegantly dressed and they walked with their heads held high as if the bullets were nothing more than puffs of smoke. The gendarmes didn't know how to react. They stopped firing. Corporal Lucas Guerra shot a questioning, fearful look at Dubois.

'Don't be an idiot. The subprefect already took the bait! ... What I didn't expect was that so many stupid pricks would come with him!' Dubois said.

He beckoned the corporal to come over to him. He then took Guerra aside and said something to him in private. Both men smiled. Then the silent and methodical Dubois adopted a conciliatory attitude and began to negotiate with Ladislao Meza.

'What do you want?' Meza asked.

'You already know.'

'They've been told that the money is almost here. You know that.'

The soldiers maintained their combative stances but the voice of their commander echoed down the street.

'Troops,' he repeated. 'Troops. You've heard what the subprefect is saying. Now you see. You need to be patient and wait a little longer.'

'Wait? How much time do we have to wait before they pay our salaries? A month? A year?'

'No, no! Not that long! You just need to wait a little longer', Dubois said, taking a puff of his cigarette.

'Enough play-acting, Lieutenant. We know you're in this with them. We know.'

'What did you say?'

'You heard.'

'Come over here, then, Mr Subprefect. Let's talk. Intelligent people understand one another by talking.'

The subprefect walked towards Dubois but Dubois took four steps backwards, continuing to try to confuse him.

'Deaf piece of shit!'

'What did you say?'

'What did I say? Do you want to know what I said?'

'Yes, I believe I do.'



Antonio Ciudad recognized that Dubois was trying to buy some time and draw Meza closer to the rebellious soldiers. He noticed the signals that passed between the soldiers and their commander. Then he shielded Meza with his body and tried to hide him from the soldiers' range of vision.

'Four steps back! Fire!' Dubois shouted.

Corporal Guerra raised his gun and took aim. The subsequent explosion could be heard throughout Santiago de Chuco. It was a powerful, scorching detonation as if the sky had suddenly opened and one of the Apostle's lightning bolts had struck a man down, cutting short his life. The subprefect didn't fall to the ground. Two thick ropes of dark blood and two thinner ones rose from Antonio Ciudad's neck and curved to the ground, bubbling and seething. A gaping hole the size of a fist appeared in a vomit of sticky blood on the other side of the wound. The impact was so immense that Ciudad's body continued shielding Meza but his head, which was no longer attached, rolled to the left with its eyes wide open.

'Bravo! Damn right!'

Shouts of enthusiasm rang out from the gendarmes. The murderous Guerra saw the spent cartridge fall to the ground and began to reload the cylinder but he could no longer see the subprefect's group. Without warning a group of black clouds had appeared, plunging Santiago de Chuco into darkness. Antonio Ciudad's body fell slowly, finally landing next to his head. The sun went down. There was no moon and the entire universe was submerged in silence.

'Kill them! Kill them all right now!' Dubois ordered and his men stepped forward. They now had the subprefect and the Vallejo brothers in their sights.

'Fire!'

Then something extraordinary happened. The soldiers fired but they were the ones who fell to the ground. It was a question of just a few seconds. Shots were being fired at Dubois's men from the place they least expected. The Second Lieutenant looked for the shooter and found that someone was even stealthier than he. It was Pedro Losada, a dark-skinned indigenous man whom Dubois had met and learned to fear during his time in Quiruvilca. He was indigenous but everyone called him Black Losada — El Negro — and he was shooting at the killers. Dubois saw Losada enter the scene. He moved as if some impenetrable shield protected his entire body. Dubois had instructed his men to shoot to kill. Given their excellent weapons they should have been able to accomplish their goal. Losada's apparition changed the course of events.

El Negro had taken the gun from one of Dubois's men and he was using it to clear a path with bullets. An hour later two soldiers lay dead: Lucas Guerra and Julio Ortiz. Dubois recognized that he had nothing to gain by staying in the garrison. So, without his men seeing him, Dubois took advantage of the momentary darkness to escape. Later, when the soldiers realised they had no commander, they ran away across the rooftops.

But where could Dubois run to? It seemed that everything was lost. Where could he go? He asked himself that question and the answer came to him quickly... He would seek out Carlos and Alfredo Santa María. After all they would have some idea about how to get out of the situation. He ran three blocks to the house which was located next to the large grocery store and went inside. As soon as he was in he went down the hallway and pushed open the office door.

'Where did you come from?'

No answer.

'I want to know where you came from.'

'Ask me where I'm going.'

'Where are you going? ... Where are you going?'

‘Now that is a very good question. I’m going back home or rather, I’m going towards the coast. And I would suggest that all of you do the same.’

‘Are you saying that ...’

‘Yes, the subprefect is alive.’

‘That son of a bitch.’

Santa María had known from the beginning why Dubois had come but he feigned ignorance. He was trying to buy some time.

‘That means that the people will come here. I have guns below. We have to take them with us and get out of here. We can’t take the chance that they’d get stolen during some Indian rebellion.’

‘You know why I’m here.’

‘I know, I know. But first, go down to the armory. You can’t go around with nothing but a pistol.’

‘I may be a son of a bitch but I’m not a stupid son of a bitch. What were you thinking? That maybe I’ll go down to the armory? And then what? You’ll lock the door behind me.’

‘So, tell me, what are you here for?’

‘I’m here to get what’s mine. My cut ... I’m here to get the money I deserve.’

‘Your cut? What cut? Do you do what you were supposed to do?’

‘This isn’t the time for arguments. Besides, I have a gun’, Dubois said aiming at Santa María’s head.

‘And what do you want?’

‘I’m speaking plainly, am I not?’

‘You really are a son of a bitch!’

‘Son of a bitch or not, I want my money. I’m sure that you don’t want me to go to a judge and tell him how the richest man in the city, the master of the festival, planned to keep the people’s money and hired me to form a mob and kill the authorities.’

‘That pistol makes me nervous. Put it down. I’ll give you the money but you don’t have to kill me. Both of us are up to our eyeballs in this.’

Santa María managed to convince Dubois. Then, taking all the necessary precautions, he removed a leather bag from his desk and showed it to him.

‘I suppose that’ll be enough.’

‘For now’, Dubois retorted.

‘Now we have to hide.’

‘So we have to hide together? Who am I now? Your lady-in-waiting? Your bodyguard? The important thing now is to understand that it’s not a good idea to stay in Santiago. The people are outraged: the gendarmes killed Antonio Ciudad. Antonio Ciudad.’

‘The gendarmes?’

‘The gendarmes.’

‘I don’t believe it was the gendarmes. I think it was a single gendarme chosen by you. But that’s none of my business. Anyway that’s good news. We need to leave as soon as possible. We have to leave together.’

‘Do we have to?’

‘Yes, we have to!’

‘Can we get out through the roof? You go first, Don Carlos, with your people! ... I’ll stay behind and watch your backs.’

One by one everyone in the house climbed through the office skylight. The Santa Marías escaped. A group of armed men accompanied them. They didn't go towards the centre of town: they were neither heroes nor insane and they had no desire to meet their Maker. Dubois stayed behind for another half hour. He searched and searched the desk drawers and the mattresses. He wanted to see if he could find some more money. He didn't leave until he saw a bright orange glow licking across the roof above him. At that moment he didn't know whether the house was on fire or the Devil was calling his name.

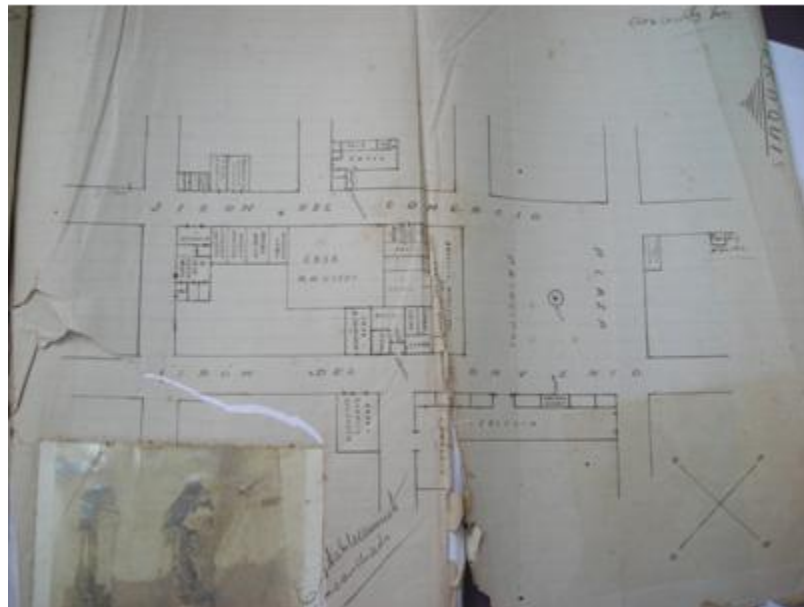
Meanwhile Subprefect Ladislao Meza and the mayor of Santiago de Chuco, Vicente Jiménez, met in the city government building where they debated how best to respond to the serious events of that morning. Advanced age had taken its toll on both men. Meza was almost completely deaf while Jiménez struggled to walk with a cane. One of the captured gendarmes had confessed that both men had been targeted for death. They had been saved by Antonio Ciudad's heroic actions and Negro Losada's timely intervention. No-one knew what would happen next. For that reason it was necessary to send a report to the state's government authorities and ask them to send military reinforcements. The Vallejo brothers had been among the civilians who accompanied the city leaders during the morning's most critical moments. Subprefect Meza asked where César was now.

'He should be here any time', Manuel Vallejo answered. 'He's furious. You know how close he was to Antonio Ciudad. He went with a group of young men to look for that murderous Dubois and he says he'll take him to a judge.'

'Dubois...! Dubois! ... That bird has flown. He's the one who gave the order to shoot and he practically died of laughter when they killed Antonio. But when things got nasty he abandoned his men. He turned tail and ran off. In the middle of a shoot-out all we could see were his shiny boots as he beat it.'

'You're right. César won't find him and he'll be here soon. Do you need him, Mr Meza?'

'Of course! I want your brother to write our reports,' answered Meza.



## The Second Lieutenant's Shiny Boots

*Northeast wall, Antarctic wall, east wall, double-thick wall, windowsill, west wall:* through a window, César Vallejo studied the tall, bitter walls of Trujillo Prison one after the other and the thought occurred to him that everything outside his cell was softer, shinier.

Once again he remembered that afternoon of 1 August and he saw himself with his hands and shirt stained with blood. The head of his friend, Antonio Ciudad, lay shattered at his side. Once more he felt battered by gunfire which seemed to be coming from everywhere. He saw Negro Losada emerging victorious from the garrison. He smelled the perfume of the church's incense which announced the arrival of things sacred and tragic. A moment later he heard the church bells sound an alarm. He realised that the bells were calling the townspeople to pursue the criminals and César's mind pursued them once more as well.

César heard the voice of one of his neighbours cry out: 'They're running across the rooftops!... Don't let them get away!'

'And what about Dubois?' César asked.

'Dubois?... He must be at the Santa Marías' house.'

César ran towards the house. A large crowd was gathered around the front door. The door was closed.

'There's nobody here! Dubois and the Santa Marías have escaped together!'

Not everyone believed it. Hostile cries rang out from the people at the door.

'Dubois is a murderer! Dubois is a murderer!'

César realised that one of the balconies was open and that it would be accessible if he climbed up the biggest window. He approached the window. People tried to stop him.

'No, César, no! The man has a gun!'

He managed to enter the house and then walked the length of a great reception hall. He was burning with heat and anger but he ran like a shadow trails a body. He felt a sudden sense of déjà vu. He remembered the verse from Saint Luke on his mother's gravestone and he realised that he was invincible. He had the feeling that the events of this day would have a lasting effect and that future generations would long remember this moment. He sensed that someone was hiding in the office near the back of the hall and he walked towards it. Clouds of smoke billowed through the hinges.

He pushed the door open but no-one was there. The safe had been left open. He looked up and saw that the skylight had been raised. He climbed on top of a table and leapt towards the

skylight. He swung up and reached the roof. He saw flames. They burned wildly all around him. He told himself that Dubois was probably waiting for him behind one of the small towers and he began moving towards one. He had no weapon and he would have to confront a completely ruthless criminal all alone but he kept going. A sudden ball of fire devoured the spot he had been approaching in seconds. His eyes turned red. His hair was singed. Flames covered the entire roof. The shattering of glass made a constant racket. Unexpectedly a human figure appeared. It was Dubois but he looked like a soul from hell. He was enveloped in fire. César stood and watched, making no attempt to stop him. He assumed that Dubois was about to suffer a horrific death that very instant – but it was not to be. The glowing lieutenant continued walking towards César and passed by him. He turned towards the place where the strongbox was and took out something that he had forgotten. It was a leather bag, the kind used to carry gold coins. He picked it up and continued on his way. Every part of his body was burning. After he had walked a few metres he turned back to look at the poet and smiled with the mournful eyes of a dead man. Finally he arrived at the wall that gave on to the street and he jumped from there. No-one ran after him. They considered him a burning tree. They supposed he would dissolve away. Smoke and ashes flowed out of him.

For his part César found himself immobilized. He couldn't believe what he had seen. There wasn't much room for escape. He could hear the crashing and crackling of the oak floors and then he thought he heard the howl of the flames. The house looked like a castle of fireworks. He soon realised that he had come to an empty corral and he jumped down to San Martín Street. From there he went to the subprefect's office.

*Northeast wall, Antarctic wall, east wall, double-thick wall, windowsill, west wall.* He kept studying the walls. He turned his head and found that his cellmate was watching him.

'Not finding that man was a huge disappointment', César said as if he believed that his cellmate could see his memories.

Salomé Navarrete made a face that looked like a smile.

'And have you had other disappointments?'

'Many! ... But, right now, the biggest one is not being able to finish this book.'

'Have you written other books before now? How many?'

'I published *The Black Heralds* in Lima last year.'

'And are you happy with that book?'

'Yes, I am but what can I tell you?'

He wanted to express himself in a language that was more accessible so that the shaman could understand. He abruptly began a monologue. He said that in Peru society only saw poets as loveable clowns.

'... And I don't see myself that way!... For them, a word is just a decoration: a dainty green garden where the bushes are trimmed to look like cute little animals. I want to give words back to men.'

'Words, words!... You have to do what we shamans do, Vallejo. You have to tame them first!'

In *The Black Heralds* Vallejo had mixed symbolism with a dark and tragic view of the world. Nevertheless, his poems retained the polished smoothness of the classic forms. In prison he told Salomé Navarrete that he desperately wanted to produce a revolution in poetry and then move beyond that.

'We have to transform words if necessary. If necessary? But what am I saying? It's always necessary!'

‘You have to tame them first, Don César! Do what I’m telling you!’

‘Tame them?’

‘Yes, that’s what I do with each illness. I tame it. Don’t even think what you’re thinking! Don’t assume that being a shaman is easy! Sometimes you have to spend a day or a night observing the illness. You have to talk to it, use kind words. You have to ask it to come out, allow itself to be seen.’

He revealed his techniques to César. The first technique involved observing how things move.

‘Sunrise, sunset, the flight of bees, changes in the light, the movement of this rocking chair.’

Don Salomé had the ability to observe all of these natural phenomena for hours and examine their smallest details. Sometimes a bird flew from the north to bring him the secrets of medicinal plants. The second technique involved carefully scrutinizing the stars at night.

‘Converse with them. Praise the way they move across the sky but don’t speak audibly. Think the words!’

The third technique was to go to sleep after having the experiences of the first two. Dreams always provided an answer.

‘And if you don’t get an answer ... talk directly to God!’

*I feel God who walks so inside me, with the evening and with the sea. With him we go together. Night falls. With him we darken. Orphanhood . . . But I feel God. And it seems that he dictates to me I don’t know what good colour. Like a hospitaler, he is kind and sad; he languishes with a lover’s sweet disdain: how much his heart must ache.* The Santa Marías fled on their own mules. It was late at night when they finally reached the high point of the road to Huamacucho. They could see Santiago de Chuco from there but they couldn’t see the light of the gas lamps. A single ball of fire rose up from a point close to the main square. The flames changed colours: red and blue, green and yellow, grey and then fleshy red once again.

‘It’s an inferno!’

‘It’s my house!’ cried out Carlos Santa María.

Carlos Dubois had money to spare but he didn’t have a horse. He walked as fast as he possibly could while carrying a pistol and the heavy leather bag filled with gold coins. His body was unharmed. The poncho and the thick vest he wore had protected him from the flames. He left Santiago and walked several kilometres. He then left the main road and followed a ravine. He found an abandoned hut and went inside. He chose a pile of straw for a bed and, exhausted, threw himself down to rest. He couldn’t sleep. Through a hole in the roof he saw the tail of the Milky Way. Then the moon began to plough through the immense dark spaces of the night. Even so there wasn’t enough light for him to use the mirror he always carried with him so he stroked his moustache and eyebrows to determine whether they had been burned. Everything was in its place but today was not his lucky day. A few clouds floated below the moon and they looked like cadavers to him. Then his gaze moved to the threshold of the hut. A group of men arose from the floor but he didn’t believe they were men. They were just dreams.

A voice asked him a question: ‘Hey! What are you doing here?’

He didn’t try to answer because a man doesn’t talk to dreams.

The voice persisted.

‘You! Who are you?’ it repeated and Dubois was forced to answer.

‘Me? ... Who am I? I sell cattle feed.’

‘Ah! ... You sell cattle feed ...’

Dubois recovered his equilibrium. He decided to invent a story: 'I was at the festival in Santiago when the shooting started and I had to find a place to hide.'

'So you sell cattle feed, right?'

'Right. Cattle feed.'

Dubois was confident that the men wouldn't recognize him. An enormous woollen hat obscured most of his face.

'Nice boots.'

'Thank you.'

'I didn't know that salesmen wore patent-leather boots.'

Dubois looked at his boots. His shiny boots and pointed moustache had always been his greatest source of pride. In the only surviving photograph of Dubois the brilliant light reflecting from his boots cuts across the picture's black and white surface. In his right hand he's holding a regulation sword and he's raising it. Obviously he has just done so quickly: his pointed moustache, destined to terrorize indigenous people and debase young women, looks somewhat uneven due to the rush of the air.

'Nice boots!'

'They are good boots', he admitted.

'Yes! ... But mine can't take any more walking.'

Dubois looked at the feet of the men which were sheathed in coarse sandals. Only the man speaking wore boots but they had cracks and splits. He was the oldest.

'That's very fine leather!'

Dubois thought that perhaps the men were bandits or maybe cattle thieves.

'Can you tell me how much they cost?'

Dubois' mouth had become quite dry. He answered: 'No...no. I don't remember.'

'Ah ... you don't remember.'

'I think they were a gift.'

'That's some gift! ... Did somebody pay you for a bit of dirty work?'

Dubois felt that he was being subjected to the kind of interrogation that he usually did himself. He assumed that the man would eventually become much more harsh. But that didn't happen. Instead, the man began talking about the roads he had walked in the mountains of northern Peru.

'Boots are the most important thing when you're walking. I took these old things from a dead man but they've served me well for a long time.'

It was obvious that the old men wanted to take the lieutenant's boots. For Dubois his boots were the best part of his wardrobe and the thought of losing them was hard. However if he didn't give them up voluntarily the men would come closer and they would probably discover the sack of money. He decided not to resist and he began to remove the boot on his right foot.

The other man puckered his lips and spat.

'Oh no, don't do that! ... I was just admiring your boots, Lieutenant.'

The men were mule drivers. They didn't live in the city but they knew him well. Everyone in the area had heard about Dubois and his abuses. The man who was talking to him moved closer.

'Now then, stand up!' he ordered.

Dubois wanted to draw his service weapon and point it at them but he realised that doing so would be foolish. They were armed with machetes and there were a lot of them. In a short

amount of time his hands and feet were tied with strong knots. They took him out of the hut and tied him to a post.

‘This is where you’ll stay.’

‘And what about you? Are you just leaving me here?’

‘We’re going to the festival in town.’

A spark of relief shined in the lieutenant’s eyes but it died quickly.

‘We’re going to bring the authorities back here. We want to know why you’re here and what you’re accused of.’

He looked furtively at the leather sack filled with money. The men hadn’t seen it. He wanted to say something. They interrupted him before he could say a word.

‘Oh, don’t worry. You’re not going to stay here all by yourself, boss. Alberto will stay with you.’

Alberto was a strong twenty-year-old. He was much more solid, harder than the lieutenant. He was also armed with a machete and he was scratching the head of a dog with slobbery eyes.

‘Don’t be afraid, boss. He’ll be good company.’

Between going and returning with the authorities the muleteers would be away for about two hours. That time was perhaps all that remained in the world for Dubois before he ended up contemplating the heavens. Or hell. Once the men were far away Dubois tried to talk with the young man. He looked at him.

‘What did they say your name was?’

The young man didn’t answer.

‘I think it was Antonio. Antonio or Alberto. It doesn’t really matter, don’t you think?’

Alberto rubbed his dog’s head.

‘What do you think they’ll do to me?’

The young man seemed to be mute but he responded with a gesture of his hand. He raised his fingers to his throat and then sliced through the air.

‘But what am I accused of? I’m asking you. What am I accused of?’ he insisted but the young man kept his gaze fixed on the upper part of the lieutenant’s forehead.

‘You people don’t even know me. You have no reason to hate me.’

But in fact they did have reason enough to hate him. The lieutenant’s moustache and sword had travelled the countryside around Santiago de Chuco raping indigenous girls, sacking the homes of the girls’ parents and leaving people dead. The peasants couldn’t file charges against Dubois because they would be considered rebellious or insubordinate if they did.

‘What do they think I did?’

Alberto remained silent.

‘They’re crazy!’

The dog barked twice as if in answer to Dubois.

‘Come over here and let’s talk. Come here. We have a lot to talk about.’

Alberto looked him over from head to toe. His gaze focussed on the boots; he was fascinated by their extraordinary gleam, a gleam that was more vivid than the flames of a fire and brighter than the light of the sun.

‘Do you see that leather sack? The one in front of you. Bring it here, please. Bring it over to me.’

The young man burst out with a hearty laugh.

‘You don’t trust me. Don’t you trust me?’



Alberto shook his head.

‘Open it, then. It has a zipper. Open it and you’ll see that I have a proposal for you.’

After checking to make sure that Dubois was tied securely to the post, the young man saw no danger in obeying. He picked up the leather bag and pulled down the zipper. He was blinded by the sight of hundreds of gleaming objects which were brighter than the lieutenant’s boots. They were gold coins.

‘Do you trust me now?’

Another shake of the head answered no.

‘Don’t be an idiot. This could be the chance of a lifetime. Do you have a girlfriend? Are you thinking about getting married?’

Alberto smiled and then shot him a negative look.

‘But I’ll bet you’d like to see the coast.’

The lieutenant realised that he had hit the mark. He described the marvels of the coastal lands where opportunities were everywhere. On the coast a man needed nothing more than a bit of imagination and the determination to succeed. He gave the young man a gleaming smile.

‘Like you, young man. Like you, Alberto, Antonio or whatever your name is.’

Alberto asked a question with his eyes.

‘I know a place, you know? A place where we can find an entire coffin filled with coins like these. We’ll divide it between us, young man, and then you’ll let me go. But you have to act as soon as possible because your men are coming back soon.’

They left. Each was riding a mule and they looked like nothing more than a couple of traveling muleteers. They rode to a point where the mountains intersected and continued until the void swallowed them up. After they had travelled about twenty kilometres and found themselves on the road to Huamacucho, Dubois, who had been leading the way, turned and saw that Alberto never took his eyes off him. Dubois slowed his mule’s pace and waited for the young man at a corner. The muleteers had taken the lieutenant’s pistol but Alberto didn’t know that Dubois still had a service pistol hidden in one of his pockets.

‘I think we’re lost. Wait just a bit’, the lieutenant said and he began to look down into the abyss as if he could see a map that showed him the way. Alberto looked down as well and the lieutenant inched a bit closer to him. Then, he raised his right arm and put the pistol to Alberto’s temple. The mule brayed and took off at a gallop but it had no rider: Alberto had fallen backwards, his head shattered and his brains exposed. Dubois got down to close his eyes and grab the money-laden leather bag from under his right arm. He also took a bag of coca leaves. He looked at Alberto for a while. He asked himself if the boy had ever spoken a single word in his entire life. Then he mounted his mule again and disappeared from history.

A short time later the name of Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois, charged by the judge in Santiago de Chuco as the man behind the murder of Antonio Ciudad, would disappear from the case files. The prosecuting attorney who investigated the case said that the civilian found dead in Santiago had been shot between the eyes. Such marksmanship was inconceivable among Dubois’s soldiers, the prosecutor affirmed. His investigation suggested that Ciudad had committed suicide.

The lieutenant’s thin moustache was never seen again in Santiago de Chuco. One day, however, the shiny boots tapped together respectfully in the presence of a superior. With a humble tone the lieutenant asked for a new appointment and his wish was granted.

## Losada's Signature

The hour had passed quickly. The lawyer would have to leave the prison and head home as soon as possible.

'Thank you for everything you've told me, César. Everything is clear to me now. It was a deliberate act and a criminal one. The Santa Marías obviously plotted with Dubois. But the most amazing thing is what they did afterwards... they spoke to the Trujillo legal authorities and asserted their influence over them. The Trial Court appointed an *ad hoc* judge overnight who undid the proceedings his incumbent had already undertaken. It seems unbelievable that the new judge should put the complainants on trial. You've been transformed from victims into defendants from one minute to the next. Your poor friend Ciudad who was shot in the head is made to look like he virtually committed suicide. At what point did you realise, César, that you were a fugitive?'

'Héctor Vásquez came to my house to tell me everything on 25 August and I couldn't believe it. "We've got to escape", he insisted. "I'll come for you early in the morning...". "Are you crazy? We'll become wanted men!" I answered. "We already are!" Héctor replied.'

'Something still puzzles me, though. You told me that Pedro Losada managed to thwart the scheme by breaking through the policemen and seizing a weapon. Am I right?'

'Correct.'

'That's what puzzles me, César. I've just come from the Court and I had another look at the case. The scribe had just filed a document that implicates you directly. It's a confession by Pedro Losada himself.'

'Losada?'

'As you know he's in custody in Santiago de Chuco. He claims in the confession that you were the one who distributed the weapons. According to him it was you who provided him with the gun to kill the policemen. I saw his signature on the confession!'

'Did you say you'd seen his signature?'

'I can see it now!'

'That document is forged, Dr Godoy.'

'Forged?'

'Forged!'

'How can you be so sure?'

'You said you'd seen Losada's signature. Pedro Losada is illiterate.'

Never in all his career had Dr Godoy witnessed so much fraud. Both the judge and the other side, the criminals who had plotted it, clearly enjoyed impunity. If he didn't act immediately the poet sitting before him would be a dead man.

‘Mr Vallejo, you can be sure that I’m going to fight this one. I’ll fight as if I were the victim rather than the lawyer. I’ll fight with every resource in my possession. There’s no other way to fight a criminal.’

There was a silence. Godoy realised that Vallejo had become accustomed to the hopelessness of waiting. The silence persisted, as if they were having a speechless conversation. After a while the lawyer spoke:

‘I know you approached the police unarmed. I know what happened afterwards. But there’s something else I need to know. When the Santa Marías’ store caught fire, what did you do?’

‘And what would *you* have done?’

‘The same thing’, the lawyer replied and he withdrew.

Appeal by César Vallejo, dated 15 December 1920

César Vallejo, in custody for the events in Santiago de Chuco, states with due respect: That the Court has not yet been able to examine this case; but we are certain that when they read into the case they will be convinced that it is motivated merely by the political fervor which can so quickly lead to slander and other criminal acts when its agents lack the moderating element of moral integrity.

It is this which has led to our groundless implication in the unfortunate events which occurred in Santiago de Chuco. Our political opponents blamed us for those events, finding this a favourable opportunity to brand us as criminals, meanwhile showing themselves to be delinquents, knowing that we were not nor have ever been such, since fortunately we are made of different stuff, and the fact that we were not born to do harm and that we have lived our lives according to the austere principles of justice and respect for the rights of others is proof of this.

NOR HAVE WE HAD THE OPPORTUNITY TO STUDY THE INVESTIGATION CLOSELY OR TO DEMONSTRATE NOT ONLY ITS ERRORS BUT ALSO THE LEGAL OFFENCES COMMITTED IN THE UNDERTAKING OF THESE PROCEEDINGS: THERE WILL BE TIME FOR THIS TASK OF SALVAGING OUR REPUTATION AND OF RESTORING JUSTICE AND SOCIAL MORALS.

The Investigating Judge pronounced our guilt and found causes to justify our imprisonment according to his criteria, perhaps believing that he had adequately fulfilled his duty. With regard whether the question of whether this case against us was ever really valid likewise shall be reserved for a more appropriate occasion since our intention is that the trial should be concluded and a verdict issued.

For the time being, however, despite having received no word of the warrant since being imprisoned, it is therefore perfectly appropriate for us to express a PROTEST against arbitrary imprisonment to which we had recourse before the Court and via which we seek our freedom unconditionally and, in an ancillary manner, with bail. For us to obtain such the Court must take the following strictly legal considerations into account:

Granted these facts, we shall proceed to formulate our plea: for the very reason that the events that took place in the city of Santiago de Chuco were varied and of such a complex nature it is legally impossible for the file to contain accurate and unequivocal proceedings that would

affect the denunciation of the accused or any evidence of or statement by them proving their alleged guilt.

Suffice it to recall that the attack on the Santa Marías's home was carried out by a mob that did nothing but protest at the death of the honourable citizen of Santiago de Chuco, Antonio Ciudad, dealt to him moments before by the soldier. It is not even necessary to record that the mob carried out the attack since it is clear from the case documents that only the subprefect and those appointed by him entered the house and that nobody was treated discourteously, much less were the inhabitants subjected to any violence.

In an incident or a crime of this nature it is not merely difficult but impossible to individually identify the perpetrators of the offenses alleged by Santa María, offenses that, moreover, were not committed and that were invented solely to distance us from Santiago de Chuco and from the region's politics. Concerning the fire nobody in good conscience can name the perpetrator or perpetrators, however hard the accusing parties may have tried to charge us with the responsibility for such a crime.

We have knowledge that the witnesses appealed to by the complainants have contradicted one another so remarkably that the evidence given can by no means be considered to be truthful. This is hardly surprising bearing in mind the difficulty of preparing more than thirty people to give consistent evidence. This would not even be possible in the case of witnesses possessing a clear knowledge of any of the events; it becomes simply utopian in the case of people who have been deliberately hand-picked in order to dishonour the truth and carry out a political plan by such immoral means even when the execution of the plan makes a mockery of justice, offends the dignity of the law and ruthlessly tarnishes the reputations of many respectable men.

In a trial of the aforementioned degree of fairness it should be stated that the Investigating Judge possessed no legal criteria on which to order the imprisonment of the accused, citing only the contradiction he claims to have noted in their statements and in the merit that in his opinion any other proceedings may have provided. If such contradictions exist they can be no more than details given that it is impossible to suppose that any one of them has declared himself criminal and truly responsible of the aforementioned crimes.

Mr President, it appears that the imprisonment was ordered based on the statement given by one of the defendants, Mr Pedro Oscar Losada. However, we must call the Court's attention to the fact that Losada has demonstrated that he never gave any such statement given that three days after the date of the proceedings, he sent an appeal to the prosecutor, Mr Rodolfo Ortega, explaining that he was imprisoned in the jail at Santiago de Chuco and that, despite the number of days that had passed, nobody had taken his statement. And it was the prosecutor who sent the appeal to the Investigative Judge, along with the corresponding documents, urgently calling his attention to it.

As many as four magistrates might pursue me once I'm back.  
 They might judge me a peter.  
 Four equitable humanities together!

Héctor Vásquez went to look for him early and reminded him that they had to run away from Santiago de Chuco.

'Ready?'

'Ready. But wait, do you really think this is necessary? If we leave it will be like confessing our guilt.'

'Come on, let's go!'

'Wait, I need to take some documents with me.'

'We don't have any time to waste.'

'Wait for a second, just a second.'

'You'll be late for your own funeral.'

'It isn't even two o'clock in the morning. I think we're ahead of time.'

'The mule drivers are waiting for us. We'll get lost without them.'

They mounted their horses and departed. The mule drivers joined them. Perhaps, instead of moving forward, they let their animals trot on their way to the depths of the earth. They let the distance swallow them up and search for them in a thick, cloud-compacted night. For hours all they could hear was the sound of the road beneath them and the monotonous ring of horseshoes on the stones. On the way they encountered ghostly winds and will-o'-the-wisps but runaways do not have eyes nor ears but only a purposeful speed.

*As many as four magistrates might  
 pursue me once I'm back. They might judge me a peter.  
 Four equitable humanities together!*

They rode along the mountains, up and down the bridges, in the cold and in the heat. They rode in the puna where the horses delayed while the stars tried to gather around the blackness. They rode through the darkness where you can hear the sound of bells and guess whom they were tolling for. They kept trotting as if they were going around the dark earth and carried on until they started fusing with the white paths of the Milky Way.

They didn't run into their pursuers because they had gone in a direction which didn't lead back to Trujillo. They came across small groups of sick, ragged, wretched people, both Indians and mestizos, who were migrating from Quiruvilca towards Trujillo. Men and women and starving children moved forward in lines, wobbling at times and piling their belongings onto donkeys and skinny mules. They stopped to drink some water in the small garbage dumps amongst the rocks and moved forward in the shrubs to get something to eat. Exasperated with hunger, they barely stopped to greet the people they met with so much as a 'good morning'. They knew perfectly well that the police officers wouldn't even consider these people and if they asked them questions, they wouldn't know what to say, having left their absent soul inhabiting the hideous mines of Quiruvilca.

These were the ones who had been sent away from the mine as they were old, sick or crippled. They went to the coast. They had the terrible luck to know their fate and to know even the day of their death but they thought it better that death should find them in freedom rather than in the black captivity of a tunnel. Many would die on the way, suddenly stopped in their tracks by malaria. The coastal mosquitoes would feed on their veins and would leave them with a russet-coloured body. One day later they would experience the trembling fits and the shivers of death. The survivors would arrive in Trujillo through the Portada de la Sierra between Trujillo and the Laredo property and end up begging for God's mercy at the door of some church. Those who went to the big sugar plantations in the Chicama valley would have to take on some auxiliary work. As they were poor – poorer than the poorest on this earth – they would do errands for the workers of Casagrande, Roma, and Laredo. Their wives would provide cooking services and their male children would wait to be recruited by their country and to serve her at the dangerous borders.

'Did you get to speak to the new judge?'

'I didn't. Did you?'

'I saw him from a distance', Vásquez replied, adding: 'But I've heard he questioned the subprefect quite aggressively. He spent two days and two nights with him. The poor old man had not been given anything to eat and they questioned him over and over again. They had no respect for his age. The man was standing the whole time.'

The judge and his secretary examined the documents.

'What did they say?'

'I don't know.'

'What did he say to them?'

'I don't know.'

'And did you ever get to meet him? I mean the judge.'

'Yes.'

'What do you mean by meet in this context?'

'He studied with me at the University of Trujillo', Vallejo replied.

'Do you think he's an honest man?'

'I'm not sure.'

'You're not sure?'

'I don't believe he's an honest man. I don't believe he can be honest. I don't believe he wants to be honest.'

'Is it true he worked as a lawyer for the Casagrande ranch?'

'Yes. As soon as he finished studying, he started working for them.'

‘And yet you’re not sure whether he is honest or not? Don’t you know by any chance what lawyers in that business do? They justify all their crimes. They justify any bloody repression against the workmen. They ruin the lives of those unfortunate men who try to protest against the farm by sending them to jail.’

Vallejo’s eyes flickered in the darkness like the eyes of a horse. Now riding along the coast, as the ups and downs of the Andes had come to an end, they sped up their progress. They seemed to have left the wind behind and in the empty and flat space of the coast they could hear and even feel the animals’ breath. They rode with the setting sun enveloping them and turning the world into a red star. When they reached the Laredo property they went in separate directions. From that moment on César Abraham walked towards his friend Antenor Orrego’s house, in Mansiche, west of Trujillo, through vegetable gardens and horseshoe paths. He arrived at the gates of El Predio when it was already midnight. The door opened as soon as he knocked on it. They were waiting for him.

‘Antenor!’

‘César!’

‘How...? How did you know I would get here at this hour of the night?’

‘I got your message. Even though you had not arrived yet, Julito and I have been waiting for you.’

Julio Gálvez Orrego, Antenor’s nephew, was in the kitchen making coffee.

‘I didn’t want to bother you’, César said.

‘You’ll stay here for as long as you need to. And you’ll finish your book here’.

He slowly sipped the coffee they offered him. It seemed to him the world was changing once again in his favour. On the breeze there came the sound of bellowing from the sea, the flapping of wings and the chattering of the pelicans. He stayed with Antenor for three months.

## Dreaming of Riding a Horse

Vallejo feared the night. As a child he was told sleeping was a way of learning to forget daylight until the moment when we have to forget it forever. The spring of 1920 was cold and cloudy and at times night would fall without even seeing the day go by. That was the moment when nightmares approached his bed. The most obsessive dream recalled his escape to the coast. On a night like all the others he dreamt he was riding towards the sea without a break and yet he never seemed to get there. The sun sank below the horizon, night came, the moon rose and the stars were raining down. César clenched his teeth.

Near Trujillo he heard a loud noise at his back. He turned his eyes and discovered a dozen riders coming after him from the horizon, like the black heralds sent by death. They were riding remorselessly on his heels and they were not going to stop until they caught him. He decided to run away. He avoided the rain of stars, forded muddy rivers, climbed savage mountains, crossed green valleys and slid on yellow deserts. Fright devoured him. The horse neighed. His pursuers were always at the same distance.

‘César, César... Hey... César!’

He thought he had been fleeing all the nights of his life and he had decided to surrender. He reduced speed but the riders did the same. He stopped to wait for them and remembered that it had always been like this. He was twenty-eight years old and all his life something disastrous had happened to him when he was going to reach a desired place, when he loved some wonderful woman or when he was about to find the word giving the secret rhythm of poetry.

‘Welcome! We’ve been close by you all your life, hot on your heels’, one of the pursuers said.

‘Welcome to Hell’, the voice explained.

He then felt his body had turned into a shadow. Frightened, he tried to talk or scream. His throat was emitting a variety of sounds which failed to become words.

‘Wake up, César. You were shouting in your sleep!’

He tumbled out of the bed, rolled around the floor, tried to run but the shadows wouldn’t leave him. Eventually he opened his eyes. He had been shouting so much that in the rooms downstairs his friends had woken up, climbed the stairs and run to his room. Julio and Antenor were by his bed. One of them took him by the shoulders and started shaking him to wake him up completely. Now he was not in the middle of that cursed dream anymore. He had returned to reality and woke up in his room at El Predio. It was situated in the town of Mansiche a couple of



kilometres away from Trujillo where his friend Antenor had offered him shelter. He remembered he had arrived in August.

‘The same thing. You were shouting again, César.’

He lifted his head up and saw his friends.

‘This time, though, they caught up with me.’

‘You’re still dreaming. They were just shadows. Shadows!’, Antenor Orrego was trying to calm him down.

‘Shadows? They were so real... they were more real than you guys are.’

Julio advised: ‘They caught up with you? You should have resisted them.’

‘Why?’

‘Why? What do you mean why?’

‘They’re going to be there in the midst of my dreams all the time. They’re always watching over me.’

Antenor Orrego opened the door and the dawn’s salty wind entered the room suddenly. If there were still shadows hidden somewhere the cold air current would end up scaring them but they would come back again the following night. He had been sheltering Vallejo for three months now and, nearly every night, Vallejo suffered from this kind of nightmares. Julio Gálvez, his nephew, preferred to laugh the matter off.

‘What are you complaining about? Put your nightmare in a bag. After that you can tie it up securely and we’ll throw it into the sea.’

‘Julito is right. Everything that is tormenting you now you can convert it into poetry’, Orrego affirmed. ‘Besides, some day, those shadows will become famous.’

‘Just drown them’, Julio offered him a glass of water. Through the window one could see Rocinante’s collar and jawbone, the horse living with them which helped them to buy groceries in the city. Emma the dog was barking in the distance as if she wanted to scare the sun which was already peeping through the window.

‘Look how nicely Rocinante is showing off. Tomorrow I’m going to Huanchaco with him and will bring back some crayfish. A nice crayfish soup will do you a lot of good’, Julio insisted.

Yet Vallejo was not easily persuaded by his friends’ kindness. He had been in that house for three months and couldn’t even go to the door for a second as the police were looking for him.

‘These dreams are trying to tell me something. Maybe I’ve been pinpointed and they may be coming to get me any moment now.’

There weren’t many neighbours next door to Antenor Orrego’s small house on the road from Trujillo to the sea. There was no danger there of the type that he could expect in some house in town. His friend reminded him of this.

‘Freud says that dreams express our unconscious. Maybe unresolved problems of our childhood. Not warnings though. No, don’t worry about them, please.’

‘They’ve got it in for me. If they catch me I’m never going to get out of jail.’

‘That won’t happen, César. Wait for another week here, lying low with us and you’ll see, everything will change.’

‘Do you know what they say? If the police do arrest me they’ll move mountains to make sure I rot in jail. They could even hire a killer to have me murdered in prison. It’s easier there.’

‘I’m telling you, that won’t happen. When the trial began they were the accused. It was they who took up arms for the revolution. It’s they who are responsible for a death. I don’t know

how they managed to turn the legal action against their accusers. They are very influential people but this won't help them forever. The evidence is on your side.'

'Do you think so? Do you really think so?'

Antenor didn't reply.

'Thank you, Antenor but the jail is full of miserable human beings who spend years there before being judged and if they get to the pre-trial and if they survive until then and if by chance they are found to be innocent, they will be involved in another trial and afterwards in another one still. You know that.'

'I know, I know. I'm not a journalist for nothing. That won't happen with you now though. We live in the twentieth century. Stay here safe with us.'

'I wouldn't want to involve you in anything. I've already sent a message to my lawyer and I'll change refuge next week. Nobody is going to suspect I'm hiding in the centre of Trujillo itself and even less so in Andrés Ciudad's house, right beside where the prefect lives. If I manage to get there I could wait there until this matter gets resolved.'

A gust of wind opened the window once more and there was Rocinante. He was sleeping standing up with his eyes wide open. He looked like a horse sketched by a child. By his side, Emma, the dog, pretended to be asleep but her pointed ears showed she was attentive to the conversations in the house. Suddenly she growled.

'She's taking care of us. Don't you realise that?'

Emma growled once more and turned to look at her owners.

'With her by our side we are protected against the police officers as well as the shadows.'

'I won't be there for much time. My lawyer is going to present an appeal against this unfair persecution. If it ends up being unsuccessful I could sail on a boat to Lima.'

The dog growled once more and once more the day passed by and night arrived. And at night the same dream of the night before returned. This time the black heralds were already in front of him. This time a different nightmare seized him. He knew he was inside a dream and wanted to wake up and yet couldn't. When he managed to wake himself up he got up. He ran to the dining room and found Antenor reading a newspaper.

'I just saw myself in Paris', he told him, 'with strangers and, next to me, a woman I've never met before. Or rather I was dead and saw my corpse. Only the unknown woman was crying for me. My mother was levitating in the air and reaching out her hand to me.'

'In Paris? How did you know it was Paris?'

'It was Paris! I know it was Paris. It was raining in the graveyard.'

'You have just dreamt you were dying in Paris...?'

'No. I wasn't dreaming. I was awake. I had a vision when fully awake and with such real people that they seemed real. I think I'm going insane.'

It was day once more and then night and then again day and the bad thing was that night would always follow. Eventually a whole week went by before the nightmare returned to pursue César once more. Then, quite early on 6 November, after groping his way around as there was no light, he folded the bedspread he had been using and smoothed out the pillow, went to the bathroom and, after spending a little while there, looked for his three-piece suit in the wardrobe. He then polished his shoes until they started reflecting the light of dawn and, eventually, in front of the mirror, he tried a yellow tie on and then another one, a dark burgundy in colour but felt they wouldn't match that well on that day. He realised that it all depended on the tie's length and the knot's shape and in the end he was satisfied with the dark burgundy one. He didn't want to

make any noise in order not to wake his friends up and so he went down the stairs on tiptoe but when he reached the first floor he met Antenor in the kitchen, making coffee for him.

‘Once again, César, I beg you not to leave.’

In response Vallejo looked at him sadly and hugged him without saying a word. The black Ford that would take him to his hideout in the town was already outside the door. The car had been obtained by his friend José Eulogio Garrido and the driver was entirely trustworthy.

‘Get in by the back door. Stretch out on the floor.’

Emma gave a sweet yelp. She then barked various times as if providing advice to the departing guest. The driver honked the horn and its bellowing echoed in the desert. The man felt very proud and honked it a second time. Its wailing climbed up the high temples of the millennium city of Chan Chan nearby.

‘It’s loud, don’t you think?’ he said looking at the back seat as if he didn’t know that its occupant was stretched out on the floor.

‘You know what kind of car this is, right?’

Vallejo didn’t answer but the man launched off into an enraptured description of his vehicle.

‘It’s a 1914 Ford model and so it’s only six years old. It has a V engine. Yes, sir. Nothing less than a V engine. It was bought in Ascope. It was imported by the D’Angelo house. It was brought over from the United States.’

Maybe he was a little hard of hearing and thought the noise coming from the pavement had something to do with his passenger’s voice.

‘1914. After the war production was interrupted. I don’t think they’ll ever make another car like this one.’

In order to underline his own words he revved the engine and made the exhaust pipe vibrate noisily.

‘Can you feel it? That’s power. Yes, sir. Power.’

Vallejo had to reach the house where they were waiting for him at a precise time. He ran the risk of being arrested.

‘At the start of the war the Americans used this type of technology in their tanks.’

There seemed to be no way of convincing the driver to get a move on.

‘This car is a tank. Yes, sir. A war tank.’

César pulled a Swiss Longines 3 star watch out of his trouser pocket which his father had given him as a present. It was 6.45 am and he could tell by the car’s leaps and bounds that they were still in the countryside and had not yet entered the city limits.

‘Listen’, the driver said.

‘Listen to me’, he repeated, stopping the car so that Vallejo could have a look at it. He was black, tall and well-shaven.

‘Listen carefully to what I’m going to tell you so that you won’t forget about it. Cars will replace ships in this century. In the future only goods will travel by steamboats, not people. We shall be able to get to Lima over land and over land it will also be possible to get to the United States... Obviously you will still have to take the steamboat in order to get to Paris but it will always be for a shorter stretch.’

César begged him to speed up.

‘Remember what I’m telling you and before too long you’ll admit I’m right. There won’t be only cars and steamboats in the world but cars will get you where you want to go much more quickly.’

Vallejo didn't reply to avoid their unnecessary conversation holding them up any longer. Then the driver got the car moving again and for about five minutes he didn't resume his eulogy of the car.

Yet he couldn't keep silent for long. Suddenly he stopped looking at the motorway to observe the passenger who was lying down on the floor next to the back seat.

'Listen. I suppose you don't want to be noticed, right?'

A pothole made the vehicle jolt.

'Then you should wear regular clothes.'

They had left the ruins of Chan Chan behind but the car was still not going towards the town. The driver turned and headed towards the sea instead.

'I tell you, with that black three-piece suit and that long hair, you could be an anarchist or a poet and you're going to be noticed.'

The car sped along a recently built road. It was very noisy and the man was shouting.

'Your friend told me there are some people after you or something along those lines. Hey don't worry about it, man. They're paying for my silence.'

He carried on talking. Vallejo asked him if they were already in Trujillo.

'Mine? No, not at all. I couldn't even dream of being the owner of such a car. At any rate, the boss is involved in his own business. Besides, he doesn't ask too much of me.'

They turned many times before taking the final path. When it was 7.01 am the car stopped outside an open door at no. 422 San Martín Street. It was a very safe place. The Prefect lived next door and a highly respected man of the cloth lived just opposite. César Vallejo went in the door. He was received by a servant who showed him the room which had been reserved for him and opened a cedar wood wardrobe. After that he was shown around the house.

'The Lady is out but she will be back by noon. The little girls will be back from school in the afternoon. Dr Ciudad will be arriving at one o' clock. He asked me to attend to your needs and provide you with anything you might need. Dr Ciudad believed you might wish to spend some time in the library.'

The first courtyard was paved. In the second courtyard there was a fountain and a water trough for the horses. They crossed the main dining hall and Vallejo could tell that the mahogany table's legs were in the shape of a lion's paws. The main living room boasted nineteenth-century furniture. It was a typical colonial house of Trujillo. The poet stayed in the library, completely isolated from the rest of the house. At one o' clock he heard his host's footfalls approach.

'César, please make yourself at home.'

Andrés Ciudad had spent the morning between the High Court and his law office dealing with sundry legal matters. Vallejo began to apologize and said he didn't want to inconvenience his host.

'Remember, César, I'm the one who invited you to come here. You were my brother's best friend and I'm defending his memory when I support you. Besides, you're not going to stay for long. You shall see that within a week we'll make sure to have your arrest order lifted.'

They conversed for a short while. At half past one they went into the dining hall where they waited for Ciudad's wife to arrive. It was a short lunch. At the conclusion of the meal Mrs Ciudad said:

'César, it's an honour to have you as our guest. It will be an immense delight for my daughters. They so want to meet a poet... A great poet... They've organized an afternoon tea in your honour. Despite being just us, they asked us to get dressed as if we were going to a feast.'

Gentlemen, I'll leave you to it now. Please remember we are meeting in the dining hall at six o' clock.'

The afternoon went by. At six o' clock Vallejo went into the dining hall. He was completely dressed in black. His white shirt was double cuffed and he greeted the young girls. Elisa, the younger one, ran to the garden and there she cut a white rose. She drew near him and stood on her tiptoes to place the rose into his buttonhole.

'It really suits you.'

César felt happy and thought he had already witnessed a similar scene earlier on in his life. He was dressed in the same way and with a rose of the same colour in his lapel in the photograph taken of him with his friends at the reception for the poet Parra del Riego. He had the feeling that a white rose would appear often in his life.

The lawyer and his family only used the thin false door which opened onto the Calle Independencia on that day. Nobody else apart from Vallejo arrived or left through the San Martín door during the entire day and only the howling winds of November were fighting to sneak into the house. The mansion's windows were protected by bars of forged iron. Two stony columns framed the door. The sculpture and the decoration were baroque and the wood was from Nicaragua. The entrance hall was full of splendour and graced by two large colonial door knockers made of bronze and shaped like little mermaids. The mansion used to belong to the archbishop Juan Benedicto Mora in the seventeenth century and in those times it was enough to touch one of the door knockers to assert one's right of asylum. In the nineteenth century the mansion was at the core of the insurgent struggles when liberator Simón Bolívar established his headquarters there. That day – once it had let Vallejo enter – the mansion had no intention of opening its doors to anybody and thus it remained closed. Indeed nobody requested entry that day. The architecture was a symbol of power and security. The superb baroque door remained shut until six o' clock when nine police officers, without touching the door knockers, started smashing in the wood of the enormous doors with their battering rams until they completely broke them down and forced an entry into the house with their guns blazing and shouting:

'Where is Vallejo?'

## Mirtho's Other Dream

On 6 November 1920 Zoila Rosa Cuadra dreamt that all of a sudden the twentieth century had passed her by and she had become an old woman. No longer was she the lithe schoolgirl the poet Vallejo called Mirtho, all her friends had passed away and she shuffled around the streets of Trujillo. She awoke and felt an old draught envelop her.

'Get out, girl, and go for a walk!' her aunt Isabel recommended as a remedy for the nightmares, adding that the bad dreams weren't helped by living in that old mansion, close to Trujillo's colonial wall.

'There are lost souls in the bedrooms, in the windows, the dining room and the corridors... We get all sorts in these old houses...' she explained.

The walls were more than a metre thick.

Her other aunt, Margarita, was more modern.

'How can you say those things to her, Isabel! They're just stories. It's 1920 for goodness sake, the century of progress!'

'I'm telling you, we've got ghosts.'

'1920, dear. It's nine-teen-twen-ty and it's the sixth of no-vem-ber.'

Aunt Isabel pursed her lips and gestured towards the mirror: 'Look. Look properly. There are even lost souls in the mirror. And if you look closely you can see the mirror beating.'

The two aunts were at least agreed that a walk would do Zoila Rosa good and she remembered that she was due to see José Eulogio Garrido that afternoon. She headed for the centre of Trujillo, walking as in a dream. She reached the Plaza del Recreo and headed down the length of Progreso Street towards the main square as if she was floating. She walked along in silence passing by young men who greeted her with flirtatious remarks. They told her everything about her was a dream, her long, almost see-through neck, her shifting-blue eyes, her precise and perfect silhouette and lastly, her poise while walking without seeing them as if she were being transported body and soul in a dream. Girls who are young, pretty and from good families have to pretend that they don't see other people. That's what she had been taught by her aunties and so she didn't even look to the sides. Being elegant is a must, they had told her, along with another piece of advice that she followed religiously: to raise her eyes and nose contemptuously as if about five miles to the west, at Buenos Aires beach or somewhere near there, something was rotting.

Zoila Rosa may have followed the advice but everything else she did appalled her family, not least her love of fashionable novels and her friendship with Trujillo's bohemian crowd. On

the corner of Calle Colón she bumped into her friend Hermelinda Melly who had spent the afternoon reading in the Artisan League library. The coincidence didn't surprise her because the two of them always met up without arranging it.

'Before now, you didn't exist. I just invented you', joked Zoila Rosa.

'Well I was dreaming you.'

They walked on together along the main street. They reached the Palacio de Iturregui and stopped there for a moment to watch the sunlight darting through the Palace's great open gates, as it reflected off the sixteenth-century building's windows and suffused the white of the colonial walls with gold.

'It reminds me of the sun from *Like the sun*.'

'Like the sun?'

'Like the sun. Like the sun,' Zoila Rosa repeated. 'Didn't you read Antenor Orrego's aphorism? They published it last Sunday in *La Reforma*.'

Hermelinda shook her head and her friend took a newspaper cutting out of her purse and read: '...Neither time nor space are obligatory. You can be here and there in the very same moment. In both the present and the future, as the desire takes you. Like the sun.'

'That's how I feel', Zoila Rosa said. 'In one era and another. In one time and another, all at once. I have horrible dreams, you know? I dream I'm very old', she added.

'That's not horrible.'

'Yes it is... seeing yourself decrepit at the end of the century.'

They continued on towards the main square. Zoila Rosa was going to meet José Eulogio Garrido at the colonial fountain at the centre of the square, who would bring her news about César. There was still an hour to go, though, until the meeting and she wanted to kill time chatting with her friend. They got to the little square of the Iglesia de los Mercedarios and chose a bench. Hermelinda didn't sit down. She explained that she was going into the church.

'I've asked you to come with me. Please, stay with me a while longer.'

'Listen, how long have you been having these dreams?'

'Weeks, months...'

'Wait a minute. You say you see yourself at the end of the century. Maybe you can find out what's going to happen.'

This time Zoila Rosa shrugged her shoulders. Why would she care to know the future? She thought about it for a moment. She did want to know if César Vallejo would emerge unscathed from his legal problems. Although her romantic liaison with the poet had ended some time ago they were still good friends. Great friends. On top of that she wanted to know if the world would one day recognise Vallejo as a brilliant poet. She kept silent.

'Do you know what I was reading in the Artisan League library?' Hermelinda asked but Zoila Rosa seemed to be in another world.

'It's terrible, you know... In the dream, I'm surrounded by wondrous people from another time. I guess they're my descendents. They treat me like an old queen dowager.'

'I was reading *The Time Machine* by H.G. Wells...' Hermelinda persevered.

'If I had one of those machines I wouldn't use it. I've been warned off by my dreams.'

'A man fast-forwards through the whole twentieth century in his machine. There are amazing inventions, a little bit too childlike to be believable. After some horrendous wars peace is restored and the people live in a socialist era.'

Zoila Rosa had achieved her aim. Her friend, who was now sitting beside her, had started talking about H.G. Wells and didn't know when to stop. Before long there was a pause and she got up to leave.

'I've asked you to come with me. You could ask José Eulogio what he thinks about the time machine.'

She had hit the bullseye. It was no secret that the writer had once tried in vain to woo Hermelinda.

'I could... Of course I could. But then, he hasn't arranged to see me', she answered, smiling and freeing herself from her friend who wanted her to stay with her at all costs.

A moment later she buried herself in the darkness of the church, the convent of which had served as the Holy Inquisition's court room in colonial times. Zoila Rosa got up from the bench and continued on her way. It was still not yet the time they had agreed and her friend hadn't arrived yet. Then she realised she had stopped in front of the Bar Americano on the corner of Progreso Street and the main square. Although it was inconceivable for a young woman to go in there, let alone take a look around the place, she stood in the doorway and peered inside as if she was searching for a friend.

The regulars gave not the slightest impression that being watched bothered them or maybe they just didn't even notice. The Bar Americano had, at times, been an elegant establishment. On other occasions it was little more than a sleepy bar frequented by idlers, interlocutors, bar room heroes, washed-up types and university students who would read in silence and occasionally strain to take a look at some pretty woman walking past the front door. Smoke came pouring out of the front door of the bar but the young woman didn't mind. There was a mirror behind the bar staff but it was shrouded in smoke. A snub-nosed man with drowsy eyes looked towards the door without seeing her or perhaps he did. A waiter came and placed a drink with a morello cherry in the guy's right hand but he just kept on staring at the door, as if he recognised her.

'How strange!' the snub-nosed guy said at last. 'I thought I could see an old woman appearing and disappearing in the doorway there.'

The man was drunk but his comment didn't best please the girl so she gave up watching the bar and carried on her way towards the corner. From that vantage-point she would at least be able to spot José Eulogio. He was seven years her senior and Zoila Rosa thought him mysterious and brilliant but most of all a great friend. Over the last few months he had been the messenger bringing the letters Vallejo had sent her from his hiding-place. When their eyes met she wished for the sun to stop moving so that all time would stand still at the same time, this one. Nine-teen-twen-ty, like her aunt said. She wished it with every ounce of her being and then she made the mistake.

She had been told that pretty, young girls from good families should never be in a hurry unless the king of the world was waiting for them but she couldn't contain herself and rather than continuing to float along she ran into the road. In Trujillo two or three hours could go by before one of the city's four motorised vehicles put in an appearance at the main square and confident of this, the young woman ran towards the other side of the carriageway. At that very moment, however, although the sun didn't seem to be moving, time did change and dozens of speeding tuk-tuks filled the road and trapped her like a swarm of buzzing flies. She tried to avoid them and return to the pavement but a huge black, glossy vehicle slammed on the brakes suddenly in front of her.



‘You stupid old woman’, the driver shouted and, swerving to avoid her, continued on his way.

Her legs couldn’t hold her. She fell to the ground.

‘It’s Doña Zoila Rosa Cuadra’, someone nearby said. ‘How can they let her out on her own! And at her age!’

As they helped her to her feet she looked up and tried to make out the centre of the square but neither José nor the colonial fountain were there anymore; they had been replaced by an unfamiliar marble plinth that she had never seen before and above it a naked man, also in stone, balancing on a bronze ball.

‘None other than Doña Zoila Rosa Cuadra de Navarrete’, said the man who was helping her up while a woman, probably his wife, held her gently:

‘Don’t worry. We’ll get you home, dear, but you’ll have to promise not to go on your own again. What were you thinking!’

They took her home. One of her grandchildren met her at the door and took her to her room.

‘But neither time nor space are obligatory. You can be here and there. In both the present and the future, as the desire takes you’, she recited, perhaps, before falling asleep.

*Time Time.*

*Noon trapped between the dews of night.*

*The bored shell from the barracks shrinks*

*time time time time.*

*It was It was.*

She awoke late the next day, not knowing whether she was really awake or if she was still dreaming. On the four-poster bed where she had spent the nights of sixty years of marriage, ten of separation and five as a widow, Doña Zoila Rosa Cuadra de Navarrete told herself that these were blank, interminable and idiotic days. Her house seemed more like a tomb than a home. She was not lying completely flat. She was sitting half-way down the bed on a sort of throne, festooned with pillows. She tended to sleep in this position because her children were afraid that she would drown if she lay fully flat. They had put an enormous colour television in front of her.

‘Ladies and gentlemen’, a very amiable man pronounced from the screen, ‘in a few weeks 1999 will come to an end and we’ll enter the year 2000. A new century and a new millennium are upon us. Prophecies are all the rage. In Europe Nostradamus’s old prophecies are doing the rounds again. In the United States there is talk of a cyber collapse. They say that computers won’t be able to recognise the digit two and this will mean that banks will destroy their files, shops won’t recognise their customers, food provisions will end, cities will be paralyzed and jets, ships and metro trains will lose their way.’

‘Let’s see now, what’s my name?’

At the foot of the bed a slim woman was asking her questions, tenderly, her eyes soft and pleading. She had opened the blinds to let the gelatinous sun seep in.

‘Do you recognise me? Who am I, what’s my name?’

‘What’s your name?’

‘You just need to open your eyes and look at me. They say I’m the spitting image of you when you were young.’

‘What an aspiration!’ murmured the old woman, Zoila Rosa.

Her granddaughter didn't hear her. The watery sun finished bleeding through the blinds, stretched itself out like a cat across the rug, leapt up and onto the bed.

'With all that light now you can see me easily now. Open your eyes wide. The prettiest eyes in all of Trujillo in the happy years of the 1920s.'

María Elena begged her to remember that they were grandmother and granddaughter. Doña Zoila Rosa didn't even look at her.

'Come here, young lady, would you?'

The young woman came closer.

'A little more.'

The slim woman came towards her but this wasn't enough for Doña Zoila Rosa, who insisted that she came even closer.

'Look into my eyes.'

María Elena was somewhat frightened but she obeyed the order and looked into her eyes like an optician. But she felt dizzy, floating on a sea of Atlantic blue.

Once she had hypnotised her Doña Zoila Rosa decided to ask her a question.

'It's a real secret.'

'What's the question?'

'Listen, my dear. Why do you think I don't recognise you? Do you think I'm an idiot or that I've just gone soft?'

María Elena smiled with relief and knew that this was, indeed, her grandmother and that her sense of humour was never going to change.

'An idiot, no. Just a bit far gone, like I've always been. But don't tell your uncles – it'll be our secret.'

The girl couldn't help but laugh and promised to be discreet.

'I'd like to have my hair done.'

'And what do you think I'm here for? I've already rung the hairdresser and she'll be here soon to make you look beautiful.'

'When's the lady getting here?'

'Not long now, grandma, but I've brought you a mirror so you can take a good look at yourself and decide what kind of hairdo you'd like.'

She reached for the mirror that the girl handed to her but couldn't find the woman with the beautiful eyes that she was supposed to be anywhere. In her place the looking-glass offered her the image of an aged, blue-eyed elephant although the truth is she was neither huge, nor ugly. When she was in her fifties people had compared her to María Félix and now she was an old lady as sweet and thin as a ghost.

'You've got to admit that we do have the same nose.'

Doña Zoila Rosa didn't dare examine her own nose because it left her with the impression that it was growing and growing like an elephant's trunk. Vanity made her fear that the excessive care she was receiving would lead to a serious gain in weight and body mass. It was natural that she should feel like this because ever since she had turned ninety, her children had shut her up in the family home to stop her from going out into the street and getting lost and indulged her with great affection and care in a world that began at the centre of her bed and throne and ended at the high bronze railings of her four-poster bed.

There were fifteen thousand people in Trujillo in 1920. By 2000 there would be more than a million. Rather than the tens of thousands of cars of the future there were very few motorised vehicles in the city then and their passing was heralded by the smoke and splutter of

engines, the clattering of wheels along the cobbled streets and the admiring gasps of the people who never stopped remembering that they were inhabitants of the twentieth century. Right in the heart of the coastal desert and some ten leagues from the sea the city was founded by the Spanish conquistadores with the perfect outline of a chess board. The square was enclosed by a high, yellowish ring, a city wall with six gates which at the inauguration of the twentieth century were still closed at night and opened at dawn.

The city was halfway between the Pyramids of the Sun and Moon and the thousand-year old Chan Chan, perhaps the largest city in the world in Jesus Christ's time. But whether in the 1920s or the turn of the millennium, Trujillo has always been Trujillo and there are times when it seems as if nobody would populate its slow, convent-like streets. On moonlit nights the façades of its baroque churches gleam with light and forgotten memories and dead days come out to stroll. One by one her children had got married and gone to live in more modern residential areas. Her granddaughter, María Elena, was divorced and lived alone in a luxury apartment but still came to see her every day. The colonial mansion in the centre of Trujillo was left practically empty and, apart from Zoila Rosa, the only thing that moved within it were the two girls that looked after her, the hands of the ancient clock, a pair of cats and the dreams sent by her myriad memories.

*Nobody lives in the house anymore. The sitting room, the bedroom and the courtyard lie abandoned. There is nobody left, because they have all left. And I tell you: when somebody leaves, someone stays. The place a man has passed through is no longer alone. The only place that is truly alone, with human loneliness, is wherever no man has been. New houses are more lifeless than old ones, because their walls are made of stone and steel but not of men. A house joins the world not when they finish building it but when it is first lived in. A house lives by men alone, like a tomb. Herein lies the irresistible similarity between houses and tombs, except for a house feeds on a man's life, whereas a tomb feeds on his death. That's why the former stands while the latter lies down. In reality, everyone has left the house but in truth, they've all stayed. And it's not just their memory that remains but them themselves. And nor is it that they stay in the house but rather that they go on throughout the house. Their functions and actions leave the house by train, plane or horseback, either on foot or dragged along. In the house, their feet, lips, eyes and heart persist. Their denials and their assertions, the good and the bad, have been scattered. What is left behind in the house is the subject of the act.*

'I'm not an idiot yet, young lady. But don't tell your uncles I said so. In life it's almost always better to pass yourself off as an idiot.'

María Elena gave a sigh of relief but not completely because, although she was chatting with her grandmother and she was bright and smiling now, there were still times when she seemed to drift over to the other side, from this waking life to the land of dreams.

'Listen María Elena, do me a favour. Let me escape for a bit. I want to go out into the street and I don't want you to tell your old grandfather.'

'And where are you thinking of going, may I ask?'

'To meet José Eulogio, who must be waiting for me.'

María Elena preferred not to interrupt her. Her grandfather had died fifteen years ago and José Eulogio Garrido some years before him. She let her speak and recount with remarkable coherence the events of 1920 that led to the poet César Vallejo's imprisonment but just as the

story was getting interesting the hairdresser arrived. She led Doña Zoila Rosa from her bed to a wooden chair where the woman arranged some towels around her neck.

‘How fabulous! You’ve got dream hair!’

The years had turned her hair silvery and luminous and the hairdresser spent an hour telling her again and again that she had only ever seen a head of hair like this in dreams. She said it so many times that in the end the old lady closed her eyes and fell asleep. Dead still. Then she crossed the road that separated Progreso Street and Mariscal de Orbegoso Street from the centre of the square and as she looked up she could once again make out the greenish bronze of the fountain installed there in the time of the viceroys and the drops of water that sprung from the spout as if they were tiny, transparent stars.

‘I’m sorry, Zoila Rosa but I have no news’, whispered José Eulogio beside her.

He had anticipated her question and explained that for now he didn’t know how Vallejo was faring. He neglected to tell her that Vallejo had left his hiding-place that morning because this still had to be kept secret. They went round and round the square, the largest in Peru, and at last decided to sit on a bench that gave onto the city, in the opposite corner to the cathedral.

‘Don’t worry, José. There’ll be news before long. I’m sure César will soon find a way to solve his problems.’

‘I’m very sorry.’

‘Let’s change the subject. I also came here to be with you and for you to read me some of your stories. Read for me, please, the story you promised me the last time we saw each other.’

‘Won’t it scare you?’

‘Scare me? Why?’

‘My character is called Zoila Rosa.’

The story was succinct and delivered in three pages typed in blue ink. In the Zoila Rosa of the story, two people coexisted in mutual ignorance of one another. One of them, already a very old woman, dreamt stubbornly about a period of her life between the ages of 15 and 22 years old. The other was a young woman who, from one day to the next, awoke transformed into a grand old matron, her head resting on perfumed pillows and her world restricted by high bronze railings, which she probably thought was a horrible dream.

‘Please, José Eulogio, is that what you wish upon this friend of yours?’

‘It’s not finished. Actually, it’s not a story. It’s the summary of a novel that will perhaps write itself.’

‘And when does the action take place? In our prosaic years of the twenties or at the end of the century when we’re all dead and gone?’

At that moment they heard a series of blasts and a group of people started to run diagonally from the corner of the main church towards them. Garrido wrapped the young woman in his arms to shield her from any possible risk although there was no need for him to do so. On the other side of the square, a group of armed police officers were shoving a man along roughly, which had caused the commotion among the group of lads. In their attempt to get the people to disperse and clear a path, one of the armed men had fired shots into the air.

A moment later the square was almost empty and nothing else obstructed the men in uniform. From where the couple stood they still couldn’t completely make out the scene but when the officers reached the fountain at the centre it dawned on them that they knew the gentleman dressed in a black, three-piece suit. He continued to hold himself upright despite his hands being tied in front of his body. The guards were constantly shouting at him to speed up but he carried on walking at a normal pace as if he were just out for a stroll. There was no need to

handcuff him but they had done so anyway and not even this had made him lose his dignity. Just as the pair recognised him the silence of the square began to resonate with a peculiar howling sound. It was the winds of San Andrés which disturb people's lives each November, delving their way into houses, digging down into memories and taking possession of everyone. Time can pass right by with the only sound being those winds that speak in the tongues of hounds. The cathedral clock rang six o'clock in the evening on 6 November 1920 and the man with the black hair, broad forehead, heavy brows, dark eyes, aquiline nose, wide mouth and thin lips continued on as if he were leading the police officers. He was dressed impeccably in black as if he had come from dinner and wore a white rose in his lapel. It was César Vallejo. When he was ten paces from his friends he gestured towards José Eulogio as if trying to smile at him and say something to Zoila Rosa. Vallejo's hands were bound. The metal of the shackles shot sepia glints against the dying six o'clock sun on the sixth day of November in 1920.

'You have no right to do this.'

'Who are you?'

José Eulogio had moved towards the officers and tried to use his slight body to stop them from advancing.

'And you? Are you another dissident?'

'Me? Do you know who I am? I'm José Eulogio Garrido. I'm the director of *La Industria*. I'm César Vallejo's friend and you cannot treat him like this. He's no criminal.'

The police captain gathered himself. He was somewhat surprised by the spirit and courage with which Garrido, who was small and had a limp, had approached them. He signalled to a subordinate to step aside and then attempted to justify himself:

'We are taking Mr Vallejo into custody because there is a court order against him.'

'But you can't take him like this. You can't cuff him. Let me tell you again that he – is – no – criminal.'

The captain responded: 'We make the rules for how people under arrest are treated, not you.'

Zoila Rosa approached the group: 'What José Eulogio is saying is right. You can't treat César like this. No way! We won't allow it!'

The police captain was taken aback. He had never spoken to a woman of such beauty and character. He altered the tone of his voice.

'I'm simply obeying orders but rest assured that I've been instructed to give Mr Vallejo special treatment.'

'Special? Special and in chains?'

'Special, yes. Special. He's a professional man and a poet.'

'Then let us come with him.'

'I can't authorise that but there he is. Go and greet him, if you wish. Then he's coming with us.'

They went up to him. César took two steps towards them and tried to embrace them but quickly remembered that his hands were cuffed.

'Tell Antenor what has just happened. Please, tell him I've been arrested at Dr Andrés Ciudad's house and that they're taking me to prison.'

'We'll tell him right away. Don't worry, César.'

'Right, well, you've said your hellos. We are under instructions not to let the detainee speak to anyone but I'm making an exception for you.'

The captain stood in between Vallejo and his companions and repeated:

‘You’ve said hello now. You two are staying put.’

‘You can trust us, César. We’ll do as you ask.’

The group had stopped on the corner of the main square where Calle Progreso and Diego de Almagro meet. Two officers took the prisoner by his arms and forced him to walk on. From the corner Zoila Rosa and José Eulogio watched their friend right up until he went into the prison building. They turned and walked back to the bench in the square where they had been talking before.

‘I’ll be seeing Antenor and some other friends at eight o’ clock. Before then there’s no way of finding him. If you want I’ll take you home.’

‘We have little more than an hour to speak. Let me stay and talk with you’, pleaded Zoila Rosa, adding: ‘I don’t know if what I just saw was part of reality or one of those damned dreams that I’ve been having.’

A weak moon ushered in the night of the sixth day of November. Everything was real but there was something out of place in the scene. The square and the fountain were real and the people too but for Zoila Rosa it still all felt like a dream. José Eulogio had regained his kind and charming manner, he smiled and said:

‘It’s alright. We knew this was going to happen, we just didn’t know when. César has been in hiding for all these months. Maybe now things will turn out differently. Perhaps it will sort itself out once and for all. I have faith that he’ll get justice.’

‘Do you really have faith in justice?’

‘In justice, no. I have faith in César.’

The young men in the literary group believed in fate and thought that they already knew what would happen. Meeting by night in the pre-Hispanic ruins of Chan Chan, César Vallejo, Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre, Alcides Spelucín, José Eulogio Garrido, Federico Esquerre, Macedonio de la Torre, Oscar Imaña, Juan Espejo and others, would sometimes just sit in silence.

‘It was as if we wanted, amidst the other-worldly ruins of the past, to glimpse the enormity of the task awaiting us’, Antenor would say, many years later.

‘No, I don’t believe in justice but I do believe in César’s destiny’, Garrido repeated, with conviction.

‘Promise me something, José Eulogio.’

‘I promise!’

‘Promise me that we’ll meet again. Promise me that we’ll see each other once more, just as we are now, young.’

Zoila Rosa passed into the first courtyard of the ancestral house that was her home.

## Don Salomé's Rocking Chair

An aggressive appeal filed with the Criminal Court by Godoy put an end to the solitary confinement imposed on César Vallejo. His lawyer also demanded an explanation for such shameful treatment. None was given. There was talk of someone having forged the signature of the president of the Court but no-one looked into it. Others pointed out that the poet had been imprisoned in an infernal cell and was later denied contact with the outside world by corrupt police officers who were paid off in bribes. If this was true he was in constant danger. At any rate, he was allowed visitors from early December. On Saturday the 17th at 8 o' clock in the morning his friends Crisólogo Quesada and Julio Gálvez arrived. They had a proposition to make him.

'The idea is Crisólogo's and we're all for it. You have to enter the contest!'

'Tell me again what you just said! You want me to take part in a poetry contest in which the judges are my enemies? You're all crazy!'

'Not so crazy. According to the guidelines the contestant's identity is protected by a pseudonym.'

'But they'll recognize my style and they'll want to make a fool of me. They're forever trying to make me look stupid.'

'César! You're not telling the truth.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean you're not telling the truth. You can write in whatever style you want. You can write like Víctor Alejandro Hernández and become the city's best corny poet.'

'Thanks for the compliment! I hope I do! But what will happen if I write like the best corny poet in Trujillo?'

'You're asking me? You'll write like him but better. And they'll give you the prize thinking that you're him.'

All three laughed. Vallejo was quiet for a bit.

'The idea isn't a bad one. But the jury usually opens the envelopes to find out who's taking part in the contest.'

'If they do they won't find your name!'

'Help me understand this. I must be getting old.'

'All right. We won't put your name inside the pseudonym envelope either. We can use mine, for example,' Julio said. 'It would be an honour! Of course if we win I'm getting on the first boat to Europe. I'll be sure to send you a postcard.'

They laughed at the wisecrack.

‘What are the guidelines, if you don’t mind my asking?’

‘The most important one is the prize money. A thousand *soles*, brother. A thousand! A whole year’s worth of your teacher’s salary.’

Vallejo fell silent. That amount would come in very handy. Even though the lawyer wasn’t charging him for his work several debts had been accumulating. Also he had to keep paying for his apartment at the Hotel del Arco.

‘I’ll do it!’ he said, almost shouting.

‘Calm down, brother. You still haven’t read the contest guidelines’, Quedada laughed.

‘It doesn’t matter, I’ll do it!’

‘Here they are. Let me read them to you,’ Julio Gálvez said. He took a copy of *La Industria* out of his briefcase.

The contest was called ‘Fabra de Gesta: Elogio al Marqués’. The city of Trujillo was holding an Epic Poem Competition in honour of José Bernardo Tagle y Portocarrero, Marquis of Torre Tagle. This aristocrat and politician had represented Peru in the Cortes de Cádiz in 1815 and on 29 December 1820 had proclaimed Peru’s independence in Trujillo, seven months before Lima did.

‘Torre Tagle deserves it. Thanks to him Trujillo, the faithful city – a favourite of the King and Queen of Spain – was the first to declare independence from peninsular rule’, Vallejo affirmed. Then he wanted to know more about the specific guidelines.

‘How long?’

‘Sixty quatrains long.’

‘Sixty quatrains!’

‘Sixty quatrains, dear César. Two hundred and forty verses. Alexandrine, of course. Don’t forget that it has to be an epic poem.’

‘Just a minute! The anniversary is two weeks from now. It will be one hundred years on the 29th. But this also means that the deadline for submitting the poems must be very soon.’

‘How did you guess?’ Crisólogo feigned astonishment.

‘All right, then. The deadline?’

‘It’s Monday. So hurry up. You have two days left.’

‘I’ll need to do some research.’

‘That’s what friends are for!’ exclaimed Julio. ‘In this briefcase I have *The Annals of the Region of La Libertad in the Era of Independence*. Nicolás Rebaza’s book provides the best information there is on that historic era.’

‘Read me the list of jury members, please.’

‘They’re all attorneys from Ignacio Meave’s law firm. These people are stuck in the early nineteenth century. They’ve never even heard of Romanticism. They’ve yet to read Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer whom they consider to be a dangerous rebel. I’ll read you their names. First there’s Julio Víctor Pacheco, who’s the president of the jury.’

‘Julio Víctor Pacheco! Enough! Read no further! He attacked us in an article in *La Industria*. He said I sang hymns to the green alfalfa...’

‘...and maybe the instinct stems from a regressive family appetite. Fa-mi-ly ap-pe-tite!’ added Crisólogo, who knew the piece by heart.

‘He certainly has a sense of humour!’ Vallejo smiled. Then he added resolutely, ‘I’ll participate in the contest and I’ll win it. He’ll have to award the prize to me.’

‘Enough discussion! On Monday we’ll be back for the poem.’



‘Hold on. Hold on. My pseudonym will be Korriscoso, that character from Eça de Queiroz. And, Julito, you’re right. You’ll stand in for me because you’re a newcomer to Trujillo and they don’t know you. When they open the envelope they’ll see your name so that won’t be a problem.’

‘Then we’ll see you later, César! We’ve got to go because I’m sure you want to start working right away. Au revoir, César!’

‘César? My name isn’t César! As from today and until Monday, I’m Víctor Alejandro Hernández, Trujillo’s pet poet. I’ll write in his outmoded style but I can still make it a good poem.’

‘See you Monday, then, César. Sorry! Korriscoso. Sorry! Mr Víctor Alejandro Hernández.’

‘Go on, hurry along now, because I need to start writing!’

At two o’clock in the afternoon, Salomé Navarrete came back. The day before, the Court had given him a twenty-four-hour pass so he could attend his wife’s funeral, in the company of two police officers. He was returning from the cemetery.

‘I’m sorry! I’m so sorry, Don Salomé!’

‘Thank you! Thank you, Vallejo my friend! We were together for forty years. Forty years! We were never apart until they put me in jail’, the elderly chaman recounted. ‘She never lost hope of seeing me free again.’

Vallejo said nothing. He didn’t know what to say.

‘Hope, Mr Vallejo. It comes at a very high price. The price of her living the way she did. Waiting up for me night after night. Cursing the days, the months and the years. Cursing every minute of time for not bringing me back to her side.’

Perhaps Vallejo murmured: ‘So much love and it can do nothing against death!’

‘What did you say?’

‘Nothing. I was thinking.’

‘I was too. I was thinking that hope is a curse.’

Everything was quiet. No visiting-day uproar was heard from the prisoners and their families. The world was turning ever more slowly.

‘Did you know I’d got used to jail? It’s like getting used to being invisible. Getting used to being an empty chair in one’s own home. When I saw my children and grandchildren, I felt how little I’ve been there for them. How little I’m going to be there!’

‘Exactly when will your case be heard?’

‘She’s more mine than ever. Now that she’s a memory, she’s with me much more than she ever was. When all’s said and done we’re only masters of what dies with us.’

‘I was asking about your case.’

The man didn’t interrupt his monologue.

‘Look. Look, tell me, why all this living? What’s it for? What?’

Vallejo tried again to distract him.

‘When will they hear your case?’

‘When? When? Do you know anything about yours, Vallejo my friend? No, of course not. When we come here, we’re already dead.’

‘Please excuse my question! I had no intention...’

‘Dead! When I saw her in the casket, I didn’t know which one of us had died first.’

Next to Navarrete’s bed was a rocking chair. It was a gift from a jailed carpenter who was grateful for having been healed. He went to sit down on it. He spoke no more – just rocked

rhythmically. He held his head up looking at the skylight in the ceiling of his cell. Vallejo thought that, in spite of everything, the only thing alive in the man was hope. Maybe patience, as well. Ignored by the judges, he was just a man, a lonely man in a waiting room, a man alone against the world. He wasn't aware of the walls that had enclosed him for the past five years. He wasn't aware of anything. The rocking chair might start to rise and, rising, pass through the skylight and carry him flying up to the heavens. Perhaps he wouldn't have even noticed.

He stopped watching him, heard him humming a tune from the mountains. His voice was soft and remote. After a while he stopped humming but continued making a sound that came from somewhere between his throat and his nose. It sounded like the buzzing of a bee. And so passed the hours of that Saturday afternoon and, later, the hours of the night and after that, of Sunday.

At one o'clock in the afternoon on Monday 19th, Vallejo's lawyer arrived.

'The news is no better, César. The truth is I don't understand the proceedings. As you know, under our legal system the examining magistrate carries out an investigation, formulates conclusions and lays them before the Court. In this case there are two examining magistrates and their actions couldn't be more different.

'The examining magistrate of Santiago, José Martínez Céspedes, found Second Lieutenant Dubois and his officers responsible for the bloody attack on 1 August and ordered their arrest. However, the Court then designated the attorney Mr Elías Iturri as *ad hoc* judge and he ended up turning the victims into the guilty parties. Not only that, in the end, he included the very same examining magistrate who initiated the proceedings among the guilty parties.'

Vallejo started to interrupt him but Godoy went on: 'Yes, I already know what you're going to tell me. This lawyer, Mr Iturri, has forged documents and invented people. We all know this. But he's done a fine job of it and his conclusions seem irrefutable.'

'Irrefutable?'

Godoy didn't answer the question.

'Now, the most important bit, César. You had not been included in these proceedings. You were a witness. Now you end up as a looter and instigator of the events.

'Proof, sir! Proof!'

'I'm very sorry to tell you that there's a confession and it incriminates you.'

Neither spoke.

'Will you have a cigarette?'

'A confession!'

'I'll read it to you, César but before I do, as your attorney, I beg you to please tell me how you were involved and where you were at the time of the fire.'

#### Decision Issued by Examining Magistrate Martínez Céspedes

Examining Magistrate José Martínez Céspedes, hereby issues the following decision.  
Santiago de Chuco, 5th August 1920.

Having found grounds to suspect that Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois, Captains César Pereira and Jesús Mendoza, Sergeant Luis Bardales and Officer Fernando Calderón are the authors of the crimes in question and under the provisions of Article 62 of the Code of Criminal Procedure, the detention of the aforementioned accused persons is hereby decreed and the Subprefect shall be authorised to carry out their arrest.

Complaint filed by Carlos Santa María before the Criminal Court of La Libertad High Court of Justice in Trujillo.

Through their attorney, Mr Saniel Chavarri, Carlos and Alfredo Santa María make the following statement.

It was not until today, 10 August 1920, that the defendants were finally able to speak with me despite the fact that they had been searching for a way to do so since the night of 1 August 1920 when the tragic events took place in Santiago de Chuco. These events caused the ruin of two upstanding families who had managed by dint of many years of hard work and perseverance to accumulate a modest capital and attain a solid commercial standing in their place of residence in the province of Santiago de Chuco, the city of Trujillo and the surrounding region.

On the night in question, according to the information supplied to me by Mr Santa María, a group of people led by His Honour Judge José Martínez Céspedes and his son, the mayor of Santiago de Chuco, Vicente Jiménez, Héctor M. Vásquez, Albano Vásquez, Mr César Vallejo, Don Manuel Vallejo, Don Víctor Vallejo, Dr Aurelio Calderón Rubio, Benjamín Ravelo, Marcos Paredes, José Moreno Rojas, Octavio Delgado, Telésforo Paredes, Francisco Vásquez Pizarro, Manuel Jesús Sánchez Aguilar, Demetrio García, Pedro Peláez, Néstor Medrano and the man known to this Court and the Courts of this province, Pedro Losada, raided the places of business owned by Carlos Santa María. The assailants broke down the doors and they all entered, armed with rifles and firearms, with intent to kill Mr and Mrs Santa María and their family and to rob the raided premises.

Later on, at around twelve o' clock midnight, having stolen as many items as they could, the assailants took advantage of the thirty-odd boxes of kerosene that Mr Santa María had in storage and set fire to his properties. All the while keeping up heavy rounds of gunfire.

Meanwhile the Subprefect for the province, Ladislao Meza, was unable to provide protection because at that very moment he found himself practically held hostage at Héctor Vásquez's house, having been led to believe that peace and quiet reigned in the city. Advantage was taken of the fact that the aforementioned official was very hard of hearing and that the police officers had been disarmed beforehand.

Later on the assailants took over the town, spreading panic and subsequently attacking the offices of the Department of Mines, Telegraphs and Telephones, whose staff miraculously escaped being killed. When the Subprefect learned of the situation the events had already taken place and he was unable to offer any protection because he was left with three poorly-armed police officers who offered him no backup whatsoever.

As a result of these tragic events Mr and Mrs Santa María have lost a total of at least 20,000 Peruvian pounds in circular cheque banknotes and cash, merchandise, stolen furniture and burned buildings.

#### Appointment of an *Ad Hoc* Judge

In response to the request by Mr Carlos Santa María's attorney, Mr Saniel Chavarri, the Criminal Court of La Libertad in Trujillo, by dint of the authority conferred on him by Article 44 of the Criminal Procedure Code, appointed as *ad hoc* judge Mr Elías Iturri Luna Victoria, who accepted his appointment on 16 August 1920, offering to travel immediately to Santiago de Chuco in order to carry out in as timely a manner as possible the task entrusted to him by Trujillo's Criminal Court.

Extension Order by the *Ad Hoc* Judge

In effect, on 24 August 1920, the *ad hoc* judge extended the investigation proceedings against Héctor Vásquez, Vicente Jiménez, Marcos Paredes, Telésforo Paredes, Oscar Jiménez, Néstor Medrano, Francisco Vásquez Pizarro, Octavio Delgado, CESAR VALLEJO, Manuel Vallejo, Benjamín Ravelo, Pedro Losada and Manuel Meléndez.

## Cerberus Four Times a Day Wields his Padlock

‘Morning’, Don Salomé said looking up at the skylight. He guessed his companion, who was lying in the bed on the far side of the cell, was already awake.

‘Morning’, César Vallejo answered.

‘Morning’, the elderly shaman repeated. His voice sounded distant and gentle, as if time had stood still, and he returned to the topic they had been talking about a few days earlier.

‘You’re right to doubt words, Vallejo my friend. I would doubt everything that is written. Writing cannot copy speech. It cannot imitate gestures, tone of voice, accent, the gaze, the movement of hands: the word is a clumsy imitation of all that and all that is men’s language.’

‘What would you do?’

Don Salomé didn’t brook interruptions. He continued with his line of argument.

‘The animals understand all this better than we do and they don’t speak. Think about a flock of sea gulls travelling thousands of kilometres along our coastline. Day and night they fly without maps and without words. Or do they have them? ... No, no, I’m probably wrong, Mr Vallejo. Explain it to me please!’

But he wasn’t asking for Vallejo’s opinion. He went on:

‘Is there one word that is equal to what it represents? And I would answer that there isn’t. Definitely not. No such word exists.’

‘What would you do?, Vallejo insisted.

‘I don’t know!... Perhaps invent it... Do you know what I would do?... Raise my pen... and let it write freely. Let my hand write for me. Like the birds. The birds don’t think about the word flight. The birds let their wings fly for them.’

Time doesn’t exist in prison. Vallejo felt he had the authority to change the subject.

‘All my life I’ve had the feeling that death was sitting in front of me, staring at me. It’s not that I think he’s come to take me, he’s just there in front of me. It’s more like he wants to tell me something.’

‘Death?’

‘Death. Yes, it’s as if death knows everything that is to going to happen to me and, like a loving mother, is prepared to forewarn me. Death warned me about everything that was about to happen to me that night at Antenor’s house. She didn’t reveal that I was going to be locked up. No. It went well beyond that, well beyond. Death showed me lying stretched out in a coffin and surrounded by strange people, in Paris, during a downpour. A strange and pretty woman was weeping at my side.’

‘Doctor, do you believe in heaven?’

‘Don’t call me Doctor.’

‘You’ve been to university. I haven’t. Do you believe in heaven?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘Perhaps I do. It’s necessary to believe heaven exists when hell is so near at hand.’

‘You’re right. It’s necessary.’

‘Is it necessary? Do you believe it’s necessary?’

‘I believe that one can believe whatever one likes.’

‘At times I believe that suddenly a light will descend from above’, he looked up at the ceiling, ‘and it will give us the ability to speak all the languages of the world.’

‘That is called glossolalia’, Vallejo reminded him. ‘I’m amazed that you can imagine such a thing in this cell.’

‘I’ve experienced glossolalia on a number of occasions. The last time was after two years of being in prison when I wanted to kill myself. I had taken some poison and I fell asleep. I dreamt that I escaped from prison and the guards were pursuing me. Suddenly, the heavens opened and someone from above said: “Salomé, take that path on the right.” Are you giving me advice, Lord?, I asked. Me? A bad man like me. “There are no good men nor bad men, Salomé”, God informed me. “There are only men.” Then I took the path the voice had told me to take and my pursuers took the other. Heaven didn’t open for them.’

The old man pointed with his finger to the skylight in the cell’s roof:

‘Sometimes I sense that one day a light is going to come from up there and take me away... My companion will probably be behind that light.’

The door creaked and light entered. César Vallejo and his companion squinted as they grew accustomed to the midday glare. The Prison Warden entered.

‘Leave me with them. Vargas, bring me a chair.’

His aide brought him a chair. The warden sat astride the chair with the door ajar.

‘I’ve come to say hello. Or to be precise, I’ve come to say hello to you, Licenciado.’

‘Say hello to me?’

‘To say hello to you.’

‘You already have done.’

‘Don’t be rude. I’ve come to say hello because you’re a man with a degree through and through. I’ve worked and lived in this prison for many years and I know that at times some important people – politicians and professionals – pass through here but then the tables are turned and things change. So when the time comes for the tables to turn I ask you to remember me, Licenciado Vallejo.’

He gave a wink with his right eye.

‘Whatever you might wish for. Paper, pen, a table, whatever you want. Just let me know.’

He seemed to have grown even fatter than the day before. He was much more obsequious and affable. He wore the same clothes all week he didn’t leave the prison that week, not even once. He felt proud to be so important and spent very little time at home.

‘Don’t you forget, Licenciado. Don’t forget about me when you’re back in your kingdom. You politicians live through up and downs. When you’re on the up remember me.’

‘I’m not a politician.’

‘It’s as if you were. You’re a writer. Remember me when you write. You could even come up with a poem for me.’

‘Fulfilling my duty, Mr Licenciado, here nobody has to tell me anything. They’ve been to see me asking me to give you a hard time. You know who... But remember that as long as I’m here think of this as your home...’

The man continued talking. He had brought some cakes that César later shared with his cellmate. The warden got up, nodded, turned around and left, mumbling under his breath to himself.

*Cerberus four times  
a day wields his padlock, opening  
and closing our breastbones, with winks  
we understand perfectly.*

*With his sad, baggy-assed pants,  
boyish in transcendental scruffiness,  
standing up, the poor old man is adorable.  
He jokes with the prisoners, his fists*

*jammed into their groins. And even jolly  
he gnaws some crust for them; but always  
doing his duty.*

Not even half an hour had gone by. The warden returned bursting in: ‘You have visitors, Mr Vallejo. You wait and see. Although it’s not a visitors’ day, your friends are my friends... and they can come in.’

It was Antenor, Crisólogo Quesada, Alcides Spelucín and Julio Gálvez Orrego.

‘Good news!’ Julio said, waving in the air an envelope stamped with the Trujillo City Council crest.

Given his plight Vallejo couldn’t imagine what the news might be. It couldn’t have anything to do with the trial. According to Doctor Godoy the judge had extracted a confession from Pedro Losada that cleared him at the same time.

‘Do you remember the poetry competition organised by the Trujillo City Council?’

Before Vallejo could answer, Quesada explained: ‘The Torre Tagle, César. The one that’s been running for a hundred years.’

‘Competition! Competition! How could I not remember it! ... Sixty quartets! Two hundred and forty alexandrines! They should have announced the results by now and they haven’t! What happened? Have they declared it void?’

Antenor Orrego cleared his throat. The others remained silent. The previous night a solemn municipal session had been held during which homage was paid to the Marquis of Torre Tagle. The council chamber was packed with people and the members of the jury could be seen sitting in the first row of benches. The audience were euphoric. They created a real furore and were constantly leaping to their feet. And they did this when the jury chairman was announced. Julio Victor Pacheco had to ask them to be silent so he could say a few words. He declared that the result of the competition revealed how in Trujillo true poetry was being created and not those dangerous innovations, the fruit of sick minds. In his words the jury hadn’t been faced with an enormous task because between the prizewinning composition and the rest of the works submitted there was an unbridgeable chasm. He also said he didn’t know the winner’s name

because he had signed under a pseudonym but that in a moment he would open the envelope to identify him. He called out for the Notary Fernando Chávez who was amongst the audience and asked him to identify the winner. Chávez, who was sitting at the back, made his way towards the stage and opened the envelope...

‘What happened then? Who got the prize?’

‘You’re the winner, César!’ shouted Julio. He corrected himself.

‘Or in other words it was won by Korriscoso. In other words I won it. They’ve given me this envelope containing the mayor’s congratulations. They’ve invited me to dinner this evening, which is when I’ll receive the diploma and an envelope containing the money... That’s one thousand *soles*, César!’

‘... And as soon as Julio has cashed the cheque, *La Reforma* and *La Industria* will publish the story... Then we’ll say who the true winner is,’ Orrego concluded.



## The Judge's Interrogation

In Santiago de Chuco Pedro Losada had become a trouble-free citizen. After a questionable past he had given up his illicit activities; he was no longer a robber. Nowadays he's considered as retired and money gives him a level of respectability. This has always been normal in Peru where many criminals can make high-ranking political positions and, if they reach old age, are revered by the press as venerable patriarchs at their funerals. Perhaps Losada had bribed a judge or a policeman. Any criminal proceedings against him had long since expired. There were no arrest warrants hanging over him and he had stopped causing trouble. He lived in tranquillity and seemed to have chosen the city as a safe place for retirement. He was Héctor Vasquez's partner in a livestock raising business. The day the police officers rebelled, however, he deduced it was Alférez Dubois's way of committing some type of robbery. He knew him from Quiruvilca and he knew that he had a habit of using the status he had been appointed to appear honourable.

His rapid intervention put a swift end to Dubois's intentions and saved the mayor and subprefect's life. The following day he appeared before the authorities with one of the police officers who confessed he had acted under orders from his superior and declared that those orders were met without hesitation or grumbling and that the only person responsible was the superior who had delivered them. On 25 August the investigation performed a volte-face with the witnesses now becoming the guilty parties under the new judge. When they went to break the news to them Losada got ready to run away of his own accord. He walked calmly through the town centre. He made his way amongst wafts of dung and a commotion of bird feathers from the market to the town paddock where there was a mule ready. He took the mule by the reins and rode it towards the edge of town. He had no idea what awaited them.

'Stop!' he felt the barrel of a gun in the back of his neck. 'Turn around.'

'Are you talking to me? It was one of the police officers who had arrived with the new judge. Losada shrugged his shoulders and held out his hands as a sign of innocence.

'You'd better fire that at the floor.' He lowered his arms.

'At the floor!?! At the floor? What?'

'I said fire at the floor... the gun damnit!' He put his right hand in his jacket and tossed the gun away.

'Turn around.' He didn't have a choice.

'Come here.' He came.

'Wait a second, don't come too close. Raise your hands.'

A few hours later they found themselves at the disposal of the *ad hoc* judge Dr Elías Iturri Luna Victoria.

‘I’ve been wanting to meet you. I’ve heard a lot about you.’

‘Is this a social visit?’

‘How many men have you killed?’

‘Why don’t you ask those who say I’ve killed people?’

‘You’re a real smart-aleck. Let’s hope you’re in the know. As of now you will be escorted to my office. You’re in the police officers’ hands now; they’re also going to investigate you. They’ve got their own methods; you’ll find out.’

Losada knew what was meant by police investigations. It was almost impossible to resist torture. He raised his eyes and continued looking at the sky.

‘What are you looking at?’

‘I was just looking.’

‘They told me you’re a sorcerer, is it true?’

‘Can you explain to me what I have to say or do?’

‘Tell the truth! Is it or isn’t it true that you set fire to the Santa María residence?’

‘No!’

‘Is it true you killed several police officers on the subprefect’s orders?’

‘No!’

‘Is it true that everything was planned? That Antonio Ciudad and César Vallejo gave you the weapon?’ The man remained silent. ‘What’s your answer?’

‘What’s my answer to what?’

‘To what I’m asking you.’

‘Are you the judge, sir?’

‘I’m the one asking the questions.’

‘And who pays you?’

‘Is it true that when the subprefect’s conspiracy failed, Antonio Ciudad lost all hope and shot himself in the head?’

‘And they actually call you a judge! A judge!’

‘You’re not being very cooperative. But the police officers will see to it that you are. They have their methods.’

In reaching the shack where Losada was being kept prisoner, Dr Iturri Luna Victoria’s white shoes had been covered in Santiago’s reddish mud. At times he went there but he didn’t speak to him. He only did it with the new head of police.

‘No, it seems he isn’t weakening.’

‘Isn’t weakening? Maybe his cooperation wasn’t as necessary as it seemed. Perhaps he doesn’t even know how to sign. They showed it from a window. The prisoner’s fingers had appeared through the door’s hinges and they pulled at them violently.’

‘Now you’re dead, you’re dead, you son of a bitch’, he muttered. They heard him screaming in pain.

‘Son of a bitch, now you’re dead’, the screams quietened down.

‘You’re dead!’

The torture didn’t defeat him. Pedro Losada point-blank refused to involve the authorities with what was happening in Santiago. Several weeks of ‘special treatment’ left him half dead in an empty cell. The window had iron bars but no glass. They were sure that the freezing cold from the mountains would end up slowly killing him.

Judge Iturri found an efficient way to obtain the confession.

‘I didn’t tell you!.....this guy can’t sign. But one of us can do it for him.’

‘And what are we doing with this man? He can’t stay in our power for any longer. The town might find out about it and we don’t want another outcry launched against us.’

‘He’ll be put away in the public prison. I’m ordering the arrest warrant right now. Scribe, note this down. And don’t forget when you tie up the file that the warrant should go after the informative statement signed by Losada.’

‘Signed?’

‘So to speak, it’s a saying.’

They still didn’t manage to touch him. Negro Losada survived. Vallejo’s defence lawyer asked that Losada, on whom the entire accusation was based, should appear before the Supreme Court in Trujillo. Antenor Orregor informed Vallejo that ‘The Trujillo Criminal Court have ordered them to bring him to Trujillo’.

‘But how? I don’t understand how the court has been encouraged to call him to the witness stand. We have proved *ad nauseam* that the entire case was a farce yet the authorities have yet to declare it as invalid and that’s why I’m stuck in prison.’

‘You owe it to a little bird.’

‘He didn’t think about it for long.’

‘Mirtho?’

‘Yes. But she doesn’t want you to know. She spoke to her uncle who used to be the Court Chair and who still wields influence. Indeed she promised him that if you get out she wouldn’t see you ever again. The old man spoke with the authorities; he ordered them to do it.’

‘Bravo! Bravo! Pedro Losada’s alleged statement is the only weapon the Santa Marías have. What’s more, you can trust him. El Negro is one of us.’

‘One of us?’

‘One of us. Don’t you remember, Antenor, when you spoke to us about the perfect revolutionary felon?’

‘Do I remember? We were reading *Sacha Yegulev* by Leonidas Andrewiev. Yes, of course, he’s a type of working-class hero, the type of hero that changes the world.’

## Proletarian killed by the Universe

Around midday Cornelio prepared the group to break for lunch and freed the prisoner from his ties.

‘Go and have a piss if you want.’

Losada restrained himself, preferring to remain sprawled on the ground floating within his glorious dreams. When they hoisted him up to balance him once more on the horse, Cornelio Romero repeated the invitation.

‘Go have a piss, you motherfucker. Don’t be so stubborn!’

Manuel Meza elbowed the prisoner as a warning to him to watch himself since they would attempt to apply the law of flight. Policeman Meza was from the same town as Negro Losada and fond of him, something which the official who’d been appointed to guard him hadn’t been aware of. Once again El Negro refused to piss. Already mounted on the beast, he preferred to wet his pants. The march continued. To the prisoner it felt as if they were passing through a labyrinth of pines and that every so often the trees were greeting him with their branches. At one point he even thought his body had taken leave of him but he resisted, remaining within the dream in which the star of his death had already passed. The group moved forward through sinister trees that seemed to ask them where they were headed.

‘Where are we going? This isn’t the most direct path to Trujillo.’

‘You, Meza, shut your mouth’, Cornelio snarled. ‘We’re just following orders.’

‘And if we die?’

‘And if we die?’ José Collantes repeated the question.

‘Oh God. God’s truth, we might die, isn’t that so?’

In the silence of that hour only a fatigued and distant bark could be heard. They descended a hill the colour of blood. A moon rose between the trees. Night fell.

‘Stop,’ ordered the chief. ‘We’re going to stay in that hut. We’ll ask for lodging.’

They halted.

‘Hello!’

‘Hello?’ asked someone from the hut.

‘Hello!’ answered Cornelio.

‘Who are you and what do you want?’

‘We need somewhere to stay. We’re policemen.’

‘Policemen? And how do I know that you’re telling the truth?’

‘Bring your lantern and come and have a look.’

‘Alright,’ a voice spoke from the hut, ‘but lower your weapons first.’

Cornelio ordered the policemen to lower their weapons. The owner of the house came out and light from his lantern played over their faces. Two dogs accompanied him while the policeman watched, cautiously. At last he appeared to give them his approval.

The owner of the house walked ahead of them, his lantern lighting the way. They entered a wide courtyard.

‘This is the only place I have.’

They made preparations to bed down for the night.

They lowered Losada from the beast and untied him. Cornelio invited him to smoke a cigarette.

‘What’s this? You’re just trying to make me like you.’

‘No!’

‘What’s with the cigarette then?’

‘Can’t I just offer you one?’

‘No, because you don’t smoke.’

Cornelio made a gesture of surprise. His boss had given him the cigarettes before leaving, which he’d accepted unwillingly. Obviously Negro Losada had been observing him.

‘Smoke and don’t ask questions!’ he said, smiling.

He tried to make the man understand that they’d been ordered to kill him. A sick desire filled him: he wanted to listen and learn a little more about what his future victim was like.

‘And now?’ Negro Losada asked.

‘Now what?’

‘Yes. Now what?’

‘What do you want to know?’

‘You’re going to kill me now. Isn’t that right?’

‘Kill you?’

‘You feel generous for having stood me a cigarette. Now you’ll aim and... fire.’

He made the shape of a gun with his fingers and pulled the trigger.

Cornelio laughed, in good spirits.

‘You know the law of flight doesn’t work that way.’

Negro Losada smiled and said to Cornelio:

‘You’re dying of fear, aren’t you?’

The two of them continued talking. Once again the prisoner interrupted him:

‘Do you mean I still have some life left?’

The policeman assented, winking.

‘Do you see that bag?’

‘Bag? Which?’

‘The one coming on the mule without a rider. The one bringing my belongings.’

‘Ah yes. Your bag.’

‘It has some money in it and I want to spend it with you lot. I mean... before you kill me.’

When they arrived in Huamachuco Cornelio agreed that Negro Losada could lead them to the inn of a friend and probable partner of his. There Negro Losada provided them with food and beverages to eat and drink and invited them to go to a brothel.

‘Don’t take me for such an idiot’, Romero said.

‘Idiot?’

‘Yes, idiot. You want us to get busy with the women so that you can escape.’

‘You could take turns.’

José Collantes and Manuel Mezo smiled as a sign of approval. Cornelio Romero couldn’t oppose them. In those quarters, one might suspect him of impotence.

‘Alright. You guys take turns but I don’t want to be with a woman. I’ve already done it with mine.’

Collantes and Meza shot each other complicit glances. Cornelio was a known informer, a policeman charged with pursuing those responsible for political crimes. The tortures carried out during the interrogations were so atrocious that even those who committed them felt their effects. After so many martyrdoms the torturers began to suffer from impotence.

‘They say it stops him but... only below the waist,’ murmured Collantes.

The next day they were on their way again. They went with deliberate slowness to as not to tire out the animals, which allowed them to converse.

‘Negro Losada, how do you feel?’ asked Romero.

‘Soggy. And you?’

José Collantes and Manuel Meza exploded with laughter.

‘You’re going to wet your pants again soon, Negro Losada.’

‘Maybe. You never know.’

‘Lads, this is going to be a long journey. And a very entertaining one.’

‘Don’t you think so, Negro Losada?’

Negro Losada was tied to the horse. It was impossible to know if he was smiling or not. The policemen continued their journey in excellent humor, equipped with enthusiasm and cigarettes. In Huamachuco Negro Losada bought them a few bottles of cane liquor. As they left town a group of dogs followed them out. They took the road to the coast and four hours later sat down to eat. In the immense setting they crossed, the road was very narrow and seemed to have been cut at the edge of the abyss. A majestic river ran a kilometre below. They arrived at a summit from which they could make out the gleam of the ocean far away.

‘I need to have a piss,’ Cornelio said. The horse to which they had tied Negro Losada stood still. The beast’s eyes followed the policeman’s face attentively, as if enquiring what would happen next.

‘And what about all of you?’

They walked towards the grass.

Cornelio Romero checked that there was no other group of travellers in the immediate vicinity.

‘Now you.’

Losada smiled.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you.’

Cornelio ordered the prisoner to be untied.

‘Take care of your necessities.’

Negro Losada walked, limping, towards the group.

‘We’re waiting for you.’

‘Take off your boots.’

Negro Losada didn’t take them off.

‘You won’t need them to piss.’

‘If you’re going to do something, just do it. If you’re going to shoot me, shoot me in the front.’

Negro Losada looked Cornelio in the eye.

‘Who told you to talk?’

‘I’ll say it again. If you want to shoot me, just do it.’

Cornelio didn’t dare raise the weapon.

‘The things that occur to you. We want to rest. Later we’ll serve ourselves a drink.’

The horses chewed on the grass. The wind did somersaults in the emptiness. In the early hours of the night stars formed squadrons within the curve of the hemisphere and launched themselves towards the darkness of the world’s outer limits. Negro Losada thought his heart would go and join those stars at any moment. Distracted for a moment he stopped looking to both sides.

Cornelio Romero summoned up his courage, picked up his rifle, aimed at Losada’s head and fired. The shot missed and Losada continued walking. He limped and ran towards Romero at the same time. Romero fired two more times but Negro Losada was already very close and, though unarmed, tried to grab hold of him. The policeman continued firing in all different directions like a madman as if he were afraid Negro Losada’s soul would escape him. Losada managed to get hold of him squeezing him against his chest. The policeman fainted from the fright of seeing himself embraced by a dead man. Negro Losada remained where he was looking at his own blood. He examined his hands and realised they were dead. He took a few steps and realised he was a dead man walking.

Recovered now from the fright and having verified that the man sprawled on the ground didn’t even tremble, Cornelio ordered him to be picked up, covered him with a poncho and tied him once more to the horse.

‘Sorry, boss. No-one is going to believe this is a result of the law of flight. The bullet wounds are on his face not his back.’

‘And what do you think? That I’m an idiot? Negro Losada hasn’t died here yet.’

They tied him to the horse and moved through the high Andean reaches of Machaytambo towards some land owned by Andrés Espinola. Once they arrived at the house they yelled:

‘Is Don Andrés there? Is Don Andrés there?’

‘Who’s calling?’ a voice from within replied.

‘Good people.’

Andrés Espinola went out with his men and recognized the policemen.

‘What’s that you’re carrying?’

‘Come take a look.’

The landowner, still doubtful, came up to the horse on whose saddle the corpse rested.

‘It’s Negro Losada.’

‘Negro Losada?’

‘Negro Losada.’

‘You killed him?’

‘Let’s say he escaped from us’, corrected Cornelio. ‘Let’s say he escaped from us and came here to steal a horse from the ranch.’

‘I understand.’

The landowner added: ‘It’s good to end with the enemies of order by whatever means necessary.’

The policemen remained quiet. They hadn’t quite understood.

‘What I mean is that maybe it’s necessary to kill him again...’

They laughed and let the body fall to the earth. Andrés Espinola had come out with a pistol to receive the strangers and now used it to complete Pedro Losada’s second death. The landowner from Machaytambo raised the weapon he’d brought with him and made as if he were pointing it at some remote star. Lowering it slowly, he took aim at the motionless body. He discharged all the bullets into Negro Losada as if wanting to be sure the body passed from night to nothing, killing him several times over.

Verdict of the District Attorney of the Trujillo Court, Doctor Francisco Quiroz Vega:

Regarding Pedro Losada, whose active participation in the rebellion and fire I consider proven, I request that a verdict on civil action be dismissed, given that the defendant was the victim of a publicly known assassination in the Machaytambo region of Santiago de Chuco province.

As for as the policemen, the following has been decreed.

The Correctional Court of Trujillo, in the lawsuit pertaining to Pedro Losada’s escape, lays down the following statements of fact:

First. It has been proven that the three policemen on trial were commissioned to transfer Pedro Losada from Santiago de Chuco to Trujillo.

Second. It has been proven that Losada was tied by his feet to the strap of the horse’s saddle but that his hands were free, on the orders of Lieutenant Octavio Cabrera.

Third. It has been proven that Losada escaped from his guardians while climbing up the gully of Pachachaca.

Fourth. It has not been proven that there was collusion between the policemen to facilitate Losada’s flight.

On these grounds:

Those present who stand accused, José Collantes, Cornelio Romero and the absent Manuel Meza, are absolved as accomplices of the defendant Pedro Losada.

From that moment on César Vallejo’s fate was decided. With Losada dead there was no proof that the entire document had been drawn up by Judge Iturri with false witnesses and false proof, including a confession signed by an illiterate. No force on earth could save César Vallejo from the Faustian document.

He thought of his fate and discovered that all roads led to prison.

‘This must be the hell my brother Miguel saw.’

Summer had already begun. There was fire in the air like a hell that couldn’t be seen. All was lost but the campaign for the poet’s freedom continued. In the *La Reforma* newspaper a memorial signed by intellectuals and prominent figures of the city demanded justice. Students released more statements than ever and achieved the support of all the country’s universities. Newspapers in the north of Peru published editorials like the one in *La Industria* on 17



December 1920, which printed a telegram from the Minister of Justice Dr Oscar C. Barrós asking for reports and requesting speed in the judicial authorities' procedures.

The night he found out about Losada's death, the dream that had tormented César while hiding out in the Orrego home was repeated. Riding between the stars he observed the uncertain light in which night was about to change into day. He came to a halt on a hill. Looking back, he discovered that a dozen riders were furiously chasing him from all corners of the horizon... like the black heralds that death sends us.



## Dubois's Patriotic Campaign

'Yes, sir. Here I am in Huamachuco! Huamachuco, no less!' Carlos Dubois was talking to himself.

Having just escaped from Santiago he had managed to get assigned to Huamachuco, a much bigger and more prosperous town. In the house on Jirón Bolívar where he was living he had just finished shining his boots and was starting to arrange his moustache. It took him half an hour to pluck his eyebrows. He spoke to the mirror.

'I never managed to become a full lieutenant. They didn't give me promotion. That's reserved for half-caste Indians with money and blacks with power.'

He had washed his hair and then he dried it by rubbing the towel roughly so it fluffed up. He looked at his green eyes with pride.

'Peru is changing. There's no place for the whites nowadays. But good people are good people even if no-one recognises them. In any case I'm here to make money.'

It was October 1920. He had neglected his beard and it had grown blond.

'Good people are good people', he repeated.

'What a fantastic main square Huamachuco has!' The mayor congratulated him and welcomed him to the town when he made a formal visit. He insinuated that he could marry a girl from a good family.

'I don't think I was born for marriage, Mr Mayor. In the future we'll see. We'll see.'

'There are other ways of making money', he told the mirror.

He was quite right. His boots flashed as he waited in his office for the great visitor. Douglas W. Harris, superintendent of the Quiruvilca mines, would be with him within a few minutes. He knew a few things about Mr Harris. Everyone said the Yank was an escaped criminal from Sing Sing. The company contracted him because people like that were the best at dealing with Peruvian politicians. All the superintendents Dubois had known had been like that. He remembered Bud Grieve and thought there were no other perverts quite like him; and that was a family matter. According to the gossip his son, Humberto Grieve, had died a short time ago in a homosexual brawl. One thing was true, the Yank Harris dressed well; so he should meet with him similarly dressed. However, when there was knocking at the door, the superintendent didn't appear but rather a tall sambo half-breed fellow dressed in black.

'Fucking Yank!' he murmured. 'He won't stoop to come over here. For him it's enough to send an emissary.'

The messenger was from Lima like himself. That could be seen from a distance because in spite of his youth he used a cane as was fashionable in the capital.

‘Lieutenant Dubois, it’s a pleasure to meet you’, he addressed the Second Lieutenant. ‘I’ll introduce myself. My name is Enrique Armenteros and I’m head of public relations at the mine.’

‘Couldn’t Mr Harris come?’ Dubois chewed on his words. The other man pretended he hadn’t heard him.

Dubois repeated the question.

‘Mr Harris? Ah ... These jobs, you know. Can we get straight to the point?’

The Second Lieutenant didn’t reply. He was comparing his eyebrows with those of the recently arrived guest.

‘Specifically, we need workers for the mine ... new blood ...’

Quiruvilca was expanding. All the time more people were needed who would go down into the bowels of the earth. Dubois knew that. It meant they needed a contractor ... They were looking for him ... He smiled. He would forgive the Yank Harris his rudeness if it was a good proposal.

‘New blood, that’s what Mr Harris wants. The mine is ending up without people. There are no Indians left in Quiruvilca. They are put into the pit and a month later they come out with black vomit. It’s harder work burying them. As you know, a dead Indian is worth more than a live one. Their burial has to be paid for and the widow must be given some money ...’

‘And the communities?’

‘The communities? What communities? The collective farm workers, the *comuneros*, have abandoned their land and are leaving for the coast.’

‘Anti-Peruvian. Communists. They don’t understand what foreign investment means!’

The lawsuit against the poet Vallejo over there in Trujillo doesn’t do us any good either. In the country’s universities the young people are rising up. They’re demanding freedom for Vallejo. Some of them even say that the mine has paid Judge Iturri to dump him in jail ... So you can imagine the amount of work that I have as head of public relations for the mine.’

‘So?’

‘So? You’re the one asking! Mr Harris says that the only person capable of facing up to this problem is you. He’s confident that you can start up a civic campaign in order to drum up volunteers ...’

‘How much?’

‘Seventy a head.’

‘Seventy? The door’s over there!’

‘Ninety, Lieutenant.’

‘One hundred and fifty. Not a single *sol* less.’

They agreed a price of one hundred *soles*. They went to the Torres printing house to get some posters made, calling on people to be mobilized.

YOUNG MAN, SAVE YOUR HOMELAND  
THE ECUADORIANS ARE ARMING THEMSELVES  
YOUNG MAN, STOP THE INVADERS  
THE HOMELAND IS UNDER THREAT  
COLOMBIA IS COMING STRAIGHT AT US  
CHILE IS ARMED TO THE TEETH

‘I don’t know how Mr Harris does things but that doesn’t work here. If they want results let me work in my own way.’

The superintendent of the mines wanted Dubois firstly to use a tactic of persuasion. According to him it was better to get volunteers for the ‘civic duty’ of working in the mines, rather than recruiting them by force. In December 1920 Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois, head of Huamachuco command, started a nationalist campaign. Before starting the campaign he visited the municipality and met the local dignitaries there. He demanded their moral and economic support. He made them see that any reluctance to cooperate could be seen as antipatriotic. He opened the mayor’s archive and there he deposited several hundred leaflets which he had been entrusted with.

‘Keep them there, Mr Mayor! ... and look after them. They are now part of history’, he proclaimed.

Spurred on by the frenzy of patriotic love he travelled to villages and indigenous communities recruiting young men to enlist in a possible future war against Ecuador and Colombia. The expansionist ambitions of those countries, he assured them, threatened the northern frontier. He made fiery speeches in the local main squares, in which he urged them to form a contingent to save Peru’s honour and the integrity of her frontiers. The bad thing was that only the dignitaries and the teachers listened to him; only those who didn’t want to be accused of being communists or traitors to the homeland. Young people tended to hide and keep a good distance from the great man. His speeches were moderated.

‘Not everyone is obliged to go to the war front’, the Second Lieutenant explained. ‘Many will be assigned to looking after the companies that make the country prosperous. Young men will be trained to form a force capable of saving the dignity of the nation. For now there will not be a war.’

He added that the Supreme Government had not made any decision about going to war; but when it did decide, the heroic blood of the men of Huamachuco, accustomed to gunfire from a thousand battles, would fly to the frontiers, would attack trenches and would make the enemy bite the dust. They would have to embark on a campaign to recover the territories snatched by Chile in the traitorous war of 1879, apart from the land bordering the north. Even when he spoke with moderation, no-one followed him. So then he decided to get a hold of patriots by force. With him in charge, twelve policemen went up and down the mountains. They invaded seven communities. They enlisted the boys with ropes. They executed those who resisted. They beat the women who pleaded for their husbands and sons. They walked and rode day and night, were enveloped by sleep in mountain ranges; and they were pursued by bats in dark places, which were potential hideaways for those who refused to comply with their patriotic duty. They advanced through places that seemed to be at the end of the world. They were cold, dry and inhospitable lands. At night they sat beside a fire with their overgrown beards and their clothes all rags and talked about the hunger they had suffered. One night their two dogs were gobbled up. Wherever they went, they discovered hell. They had kept a donkey so they could eat it but the animal slipped into a ravine. Leaning over the abyss they saw it roll further and further down, until its body fell, hundreds of metres below, into a hole; which might have been the door into another life.

They crossed a field of strange and juicy flowers. It was night-time and they went closer, so as to touch them. When they did so out flew a gang of vampire bats. Dubois was not prepared to go back. As they were going down a mountainside they guided the horses on foot. There were

no paths there, only steep rock and some little streams with filthy water. They tried to prevent the animals dropping down dead with exhaustion. At the end of the first campaign they had taken 112 young men. Several had escaped or died on the route. They made the count when they were already trotting along a ghastly piece of land, where black air circulated and where the yellow sky of Quiruvilca was outlined above. That was where they handed them over. The campaigns lasted four months from 2 December 1920 until 8 March the following year. Dubois couldn't complain. Even if his efforts hadn't been completely understood, he reached Quiruvilca seven times and received big juicy payments. Because of his initiative and to encourage him to continue in his patriotic campaign the mine's employers ended up paying him double and then triple the amount per head. Finally the price for each 'volunteer' reached three hundred and fifty *soles*.

The task of reconstructing European countries after the Great War had raised the price of metals in international markets. Consequently the mine had to increase its production several times over. Other deposits were excavated; and copper, which was so essential, was discovered. For this it was necessary to work day and night and to increase the size of the workforce. In his civic campaign, the Second Lieutenant allowed everything, except deceit. Two communities of Indians disappeared from the map because they tried to hide their young people. The survivors of Tamboyauyo and Cerro Colorado never rebuilt their settlements after Dubois passed. In cases like that the Second Lieutenant encouraged rape and pillage. The *comuneros* of Sausacocha had hidden three deserters and Dubois found out about this. He arrived at the village at the crack of dawn. He made his people surround the houses; then he set them alight. As the desperate people were coming out, he shot them. It was a moonlit night. No creatures were moving under the porcelain sky and only red stains could be seen on the ground.

'They're all dead, lieutenant!'

'Not so dead ...'

He ordered them to shoot at the ground and at the rocks nearby. Then from one side or the other men and women came crawling out. Some managed to escape. The survivors had their clothes stripped off and their hair shaved off; they were then released so as to teach a lesson to anti-Peruvian people. The soldiers felt happy during the plundering but they had started to murmur about the Second Lieutenant not being fair when it came to sharing out the profits. They didn't receive a single *sol* of the money paid by the mine.

'As the wise man Raimondi said, *Peru is a beggar in a bank of gold*'; Dubois stressed this, in front of one of them. 'If we don't progress', he added, 'this is due to indolence and lack of patriotic love. Open the paths to outside commerce; open our doors to investors; open our treasures to the world. Here we have everything; incredible trees, medicinal roots, abundant land, precious minerals. Everything springs from the earth here. Everything preaches love towards our native land.'

He was sobbing quietly. He was talking on a high mountain path during the return journey to Huamachuco. He was carrying the money they had paid him for his recent contribution to mining development. Only Sargent Rodolfo Pereira accompanied him. The rest of the men had set off towards a nearby community.

'But the gold remains in just a few hands, my lieutenant.'

Dubois pretended not to have understood the allusion and he spoke with love about mother earth.

'Pachamama, as the Incas call her, is round and generous.'

‘I suppose she will think about sharing what she earns. We break our backs and wear ourselves out. We go hungry, we get tired and we take risks.’

‘That is what is called patriotism.’

‘Our families are always at risk. The Indians are not so naive now. Right now we are close to Sausacocha. The people from there killed a landowner recently, you know. They’ve said if they manage to hunt us down, they’ll make us vomit the blood of their children. They’ve decided to take vengeance.’

‘Vengeance? Against what or against whom? ... Everything we do helps their children to occupy an honourable place in the history of Peru. The country will be the winner.’

‘I suppose you would be prepared to share out the money, my Lieutenant.’

‘I don’t suppose you’re threatening me, are you? Shilico.’

The nickname referred to the region he came from. Pereira was a young sergeant, from Celendín. He had carried out the orders given by Dubois but he didn’t like the job.

‘It’s nothing personal, Lieutenant. The boys decided to speak to you. They’re tired of moving about the mountains killing Indians or enlisting them. They don’t believe this idea, that the money from the mine will be used to buy arms and warships. They’re thinking about their families.’

‘Ah ... so, are they all then? ... What a lack of confidence! Why didn’t they speak to me beforehand about this matter? I understand you, son. I understand them. As soon as we arrive at Huamachuco, I’ll take you all to my house and we’ll open the safe box. There will be enough for everyone. I’m a soldier of the homeland. I assume my word will be enough, isn’t that so?’

The sergeant assented by nodding his head and he gave him a shy look. He was like a son saying sorry to his father. Then the Second Lieutenant drove his horse forward and passed next to his subordinate. He gave him a little slap on the shoulder.

‘That’s how I like it, son. Frankness before all else. We’ll sort it out in Huamachuco. Now, I’m going to go a little ahead, just about a hundred metres. We’re on dangerous ground and I need to see if there are any enemies in sight. You see now ... I take risks too. The greatest ones of all...!’

An hour later they could just make out the Sausacocha lagoon. The yellow sun reflecting on its water reached them where they were, high above. They had to get down off the horses and walk, leading them by the reins. They went down along twisted paths traced out through the rocks. When they arrived Pereira lost sight of the Second Lieutenant. That was an error on his part.

‘Drop the pistol!’

He didn’t obey. He tried to see where his boss’s voice was coming from. It came from all around.

‘Drop it, I said!’

A bullet whistled high up in the air. It didn’t go through the sergeant’s heart but it did pierce his left arm. The man frightened away his horse and managed to get behind a rock. He had seen where the explosion came from. There were two more but they didn’t reach him. Pereira was a man of the mountains. He knew these paths perfectly. He slid towards another rock; then he decided to take the initiative. He allowed his boss to shoot twice more. He worked it out and made his decision. Finally he fired just one shot. The explosion whistled along the whole mountain and finally reached the water. At last there was silence. Sitting on the sand Second Lieutenant Dubois was starting to die. An accurate bullet had penetrated his lungs. The pursuer

and the pursued were both wounded but lucid. The only one of the two who had a weapon in his hands was Pereira. At times the Second Lieutenant's pain was unbearable.

'Listen! Put an end to this once and for all', he screamed at the man who had wounded him although he couldn't see him.

Pereira didn't reply.

'You don't have any bullets, do you?'

The sun was going down from one side to the other. It was cutting the world in half. Nothing moved.

'And how about I leave you here, Lieutenant?'

'*My Lietenant.* You should say *my Lieutenant.*'

'I'm going to leave you here, my Lieutenant.'

'Up yours, mother fucker!'

The Second Lieutenant was still sitting down. From all sides the breezes of life were coming towards him but he knew that he was dead.

'You want me to die, don't you? ... Do it once and for all ...'

'Why do you think that, my Lieutenant?'

Dubois kept quiet.

Pereira made a furrow in the sand with the heel of his boot.

'You decide, my Lieutenant.' He spoke to him but didn't allow himself to be seen.

'What? Are you going to leave me here alive?'

'The truth is, I don't know.'

'Kill me once and for all!'

'The truth is, I don't know. Although you won't believe this, I don't know how to do it. I don't know how to kill people who are already dead.'

'Kill me, damn it!'

'I'm not going to do it, Lieutenant.'

'You fucking son of a bitch.'

Pereira started to scan the horizon.

'So, are you going to let me die then?'

Pereira didn't reply.

'It's a horrible place to die. But you already decided that.'

'Is there a place where it wouldn't be horrible to die?'

The Second Lieutenant looked at Pedreira and couldn't hold back his tears.

'If you don't know what to do with me, leave me for a while.'

'Is that what you want?'

'Well, let me live for a while more! ... I want to taste Hell and get a liking for it, before I go there...'

Pereira watched him put saliva on his fingers and arrange his eyebrows. Afterwards he made the sign of the cross. He took the Second Lieutenant's horse by the reins. He checked that the bags with the money were there. He raised his weapon and marched off. The wounded man raised his head; and he caught sight, through eyes blurred with blood, of images from his past in the air around him. He saw himself in Santiago de Chuco, in Huamachucho and in Lima. He saw himself in a parade with his face looking towards the right. He saw himself polishing his boots. He saw himself clothed in full dress military uniform but he never saw himself wearing the promotion stripes. He didn't die. He was feverish all night. In the morning the innocent air of the lagoon dispersed. He supposed that his end wouldn't come just yet. His senses were getting

sharper. He could hear all the sounds, the chiming of a bell and the voices of the earth. He heard the footsteps of people approaching and hope told him it was a group of merciful pilgrims. When they arrived close by he saw they were carrying crowns made from fresh flowers. They were going to the cemetery nearby to crown their dead. When they came in front of him he knew they were *comuneros* from Sausachocha; and he closed his eyes.

‘Lieutenant!’

He didn’t reply.

‘Lieutenant!’

He half-opened his eyes.

‘Do you remember us, Lieutenant. Or did you think we were dead?’

He waited. One of the men suggested setting him on fire.

‘You’ll remember the lads you took to the mine.’

The people who had just arrived were arguing.

‘Better that you tell us where they are, the ones you captured last week. Maybe they’re still in Huamachucho. Ah, Lieutenant. Do you know where the lads are?’

‘I don’t know anything,’ he managed to say.

‘Is that your final word?’ asked an old man who seemed to be the leader.

‘I don’t know anything. Nothing. Shit!’

A guy passed a rope around his neck.

‘Can you get up?’

He preferred to remain lying down. He thought that the rope would kill him in a matter of seconds. It didn’t happen though, because he had a very hard neck. He was forced to get up and follow them. They took him to a small wood on the edge of the lagoon.

‘Do you want to choose the tree?’

‘No need to hang him. Better if we take him to the judge.’

‘To the judge! ... He would string us up!’

‘Do you want to choose the tree?’ Someone repeated the question.

The oldest man there condemned this decision.

‘It’s not a Christian thing to do.’

‘So, we shouldn’t do anything then. We should leave him here and wait for the vultures to tear out his guts.’

‘What do you say, Lieutenant?’

He didn’t reply.

‘Do you want to choose the tree?’

They chose it for him. They found quite a high one. They passed the other end of the rope over a thick high branch. They forced the man to go up onto a rock. The rope tightened. The *comuneros* pushed the stone away and the Second Lieutenant started to kick his legs in the air. He opened his mouth and his tongue was stretched out. It was an extremely long tongue. His boots shone from the distance. After a few hours his legs became tucked in and shrank; like spiders’ legs, when they die.

For weeks the Second Lieutenant’s tree attracted vultures from all sides of the Andes. Never had so many been seen. It was a miracle. At the foot of the tree a bright red and merciful flower came into bud; a blood-red flower of the kind that tend to grow in places where people have been hanged. The investigating judge from Huamachucho found out too late. When the judge made them lower the dead man to the ground, he resembled a white plant smothered with moss.



The papers from Saturday 19 February 1921 recorded the news item. They attributed it to women trouble.

‘I don’t know what is happening to me but I write and I write and I keep on writing ...I think that now I’ve found what I’ve been looking for ...I don’t know what will happen with this trial. Now that Losada is dead I don’t have much hope but I write and I keep on writing.’

It was four o’clock in the afternoon of Saturday 26 February. Vallejo wanted to talk to his prison cellmate but his companion had nothing to say at all. The poet carried on working on the little table which served as a writing desk.

‘I don’t know what to do in these circumstances ... The time has arrived when I’m not even concerned about my fate but I write ... What do you think is happening to me?’

He didn’t find a reply. He turned to look at Navarrete and caught him unawares resting on the rocking chair. His eyes were wide open. He was looking towards the cell’s skylight as if he was dead and waiting for the angels to come down and take him away. A gentle light spread out and around, coming from on high.

At quarter past four the jailer pushed the door open:

‘Mr Vallejo, you must come immediately.’

The poet wanted to arrange the papers that he had on the table but he didn’t manage to do so.

‘Come!’

He got up and followed him to the office. There he found his lawyer, Dr. Godoy; and with him were Antenor, Alcides and Julio.

‘The others are waiting in the street.’

‘Waiting? Waiting for what?’

‘Waiting for you’, Dr Carlos Godoy replied. Then he added in a more formal tone:

‘Mr Vallejo. I’ve brought you the court order dismissing charges, giving you your freedom!’

‘Freedom? Freedom!’

The lawyer had kept his word. He had argued with all means available to him. He had fought as if, instead of being the lawyer, he was the victim. The people who had ordered Pedro Losada’s death didn’t know that Godoy would revert the legal situation. According to them there was now only evidence incriminating Vallejo. Negro Losada was not going to appear in court to free him of blame. They called for him to be sentenced as soon as possible. Godoy made the court see that, even though this was true, there wasn’t any confirmation of the things allegedly said by Losada either. Now he was dead there wasn’t any proof against the poet either.

‘Do you mean to say that I’m being released? That I’m free now?’

‘Now! Right now!’

The jailer Barba celebrated the news:

‘I always said so. I always said so! ... Mr Vallejo, allow me to accompany you to the door. And let me deliver your suitcase personally tomorrow morning to wherever you tell me. Do me this honour!’

It was five o’clock in the afternoon. Vallejo beckoned his friends with his hand.

‘Wait for me a moment. I’m going to say goodbye to my cellmate ... You, Mr Barba, thank you but let me go alone to the cell, please ...’

He walked to the cell. He pushed the door and ran towards the rocking chair but Salomé Navarrete wasn’t there.

The rocking chair was moving rhythmically as if a person had just got up out of it; or as if that individual had been captivated and snatched up towards the heavens. He looked at the skylight. It was wide open. The sun's rays were an intense golden colour. They penetrated the room, with a tinge of gold. When he reached out his hands towards them, his fingers shone as if they were covered with a sparkling metallic powder or smeared with glitter.

#### Legal Proceedings

#### Court Order Dismissing Charges

Trujillo, 24th February 1921

Whereas the records having been considered, it was decided:

In agreement with the judgement issued by The Prosecutor on folios 482, 507 and 535, **THEY DECLARED:** as overruled, that of Alejandro Cerna Rebaza, defence lawyer for the accused Héctor M. Vásquez; **THEY APPROVED:** the decisions on folio 386 verso in the current journal and folio 152, which declared there were no grounds for the lawsuit against the accused Aurelio Calderón Rubio, José E. Moreno, Cristóbal Delgado, Manuel Jesús Sánchez Demetrio García, Víctor Vallejo and José Cruz, for the crime of arson and other crimes; and against Carlos and Alfredo Santa María, Baldomero Jara, Masías D. Sánchez, César Puente, Telésforo Paredes, Héctor M. Vásquez and Sargent Luis Bardales, for the homicide of Manuel Antonio Ciudad and of the policemen Guerra and Ortiz. **THEY DECLARED** that there was no merit in commencing a pre-trial against the accused Second Lieutenant Carlos Dubois and the policemen Fernando Calderón, César Pereira, Fermín Díaz and Jesús Mendoza, for the same crime; nor against the accused José Hilario Ortiz Ramírez, José Moreno Rojas and Benjamín Lihón Rojas, for the crime of stealing circular cheque banknotes; **THEY ORDERED THAT WITH RESPECT TO THE ACCUSED CESAR VALLEJO**, information concerning the matter should be returned to the Prosecutor so he can widen the charge with respect to the aforementioned accused, because of declarations against him by witnesses Baltasar Ravelo on folio 186 verso, Manuel Ravelo on folio 327 and Gustavo Pinillos on folio 332 of the current journal, who charge him to be a participant in the attack on the telegraph and telephone offices; **WITHOUT PREJUDICE TO SETTING HIM AT LIBERTY ON THE DATE HEREOF** since the sentence that would pertain is only a second-degree imprisonment lasting between one and six months, and he has already been detained since the 6th of November of last year.

## Zoila Rosa Gets Lost in the Future

In Trujillo some people are walking in the main square and suddenly they think they are dreaming. The mansions of bygone times, the yellow walls, the windows with their baroque-style metal grills, the enormous doors and the silent, austere, haughty churches, cannot be anything other than the setting for a dream. In the city people doubt and they cannot tell where waking life and the world of dream begin and end.

On 26 February 1921 Zoila Rosa went through the Plaza del Recreo, she carried along the whole length of Progreso Street and she arrived at the main square. When there she thought she heard someone calling her name but it was the wind which was whistling and which seemed to have human voice. She turned to the right along Mariscal de Orbegoso Street. When passing by Archbishop's Palace she listened to the jubilant sound of car horns as they drove triumphantly along the side of the main square which led down to the prison. Without being told she guessed that they were celebrating César Vallejo's release. She was aware that the legal decision was due at around that time.

She thought about crossing the road and greeting the crowd of celebrating bystanders from the centre of the square. But something held her back. What would happen if – while crossing the road – she were suddenly to find herself in the future? What would happen if suddenly it was the year 2000? She would have become an old and respectable lady but she would also have stopped being herself – for ever. Herself! She smiled at such a silly thought but she remained transfixed in the street; and she found out that she had not been wrong. César Vallejo had, indeed, just been set free.

'Vallejo! Vallejo! Vallejo's free!' a crowd of adolescents were shouting out; they were the poet's students at San Juan National College. The four cars had stopped. On the opposite corner she glimpsed Vallejo as he got out of one of the cars and hugged some of the people there. She was about to cross the road the run to him but, gain, something held her back.

He was no longer her betrothed. There was probably some young girl in the car with Vallejo. No, she couldn't bear it. But why? Weren't they now just good friends? It wasn't logical but she couldn't bear it. She remembered that she had been the one who had broken off their engagement. She forbade him to think about an eternal romance. She told him that she was in love with a ghost although she didn't know who that ghost was and she told him that he wasn't the ghost of her dreams!

'Good grief! What fancies are these? I faced up to César with a ghost!' she mumbled to herself and walked no further than the parked cars. She wondered:

‘And what if he really is the ghost that I’ve been waiting for?’

The door to the cathedral was open. Zoila Rosa went in to avoid being seen by Vallejo. That was the last time she would see him. Thirty minutes later, when she calculated that Vallejo’s companions would no longer be in the square nor nearby, Zoila Rosa emerged from the cathedral and she felt happy because the Trujillo she had left behind her was still the same. The centenary font bequeathed by the Spanish conquistadors was still there, spouting water and life. People were dressed like her. She sighed with happiness that she was no going to wake up as an old woman. Then she had a premonition that everything she had seen and lived through that day would one day become historic and she pleaded with St Anthony, the patron of good memory, to help her to retain and transmit her most precious memories. Something, nevertheless, *had* changed. It was still 26 February 1921 but time seemed to have speeded up. She went home to have a sleep and the following day it seemed to her as if a month had elapsed.

Suddenly it was April. Someone told her that César Vallejo had travelled by boat to Lima in March and she smiled to herself as if she had always known that she would never see him again. And then – bit by bit – it was 1923. On 16 August that year Zoila Rosa got married to a charming man. Towards the end of the year she met Alcides Spelucín at an art exhibition and they spoke for a long while. She found out through him that César had left for France on 17 June 1923 on the Oroya steamship. He was accompanied by Julio Gálvez Orrego. According to Alcides, Gálvez ‘el Chino’ had received an inheritance and had decided to share it with his uncle Antenor.

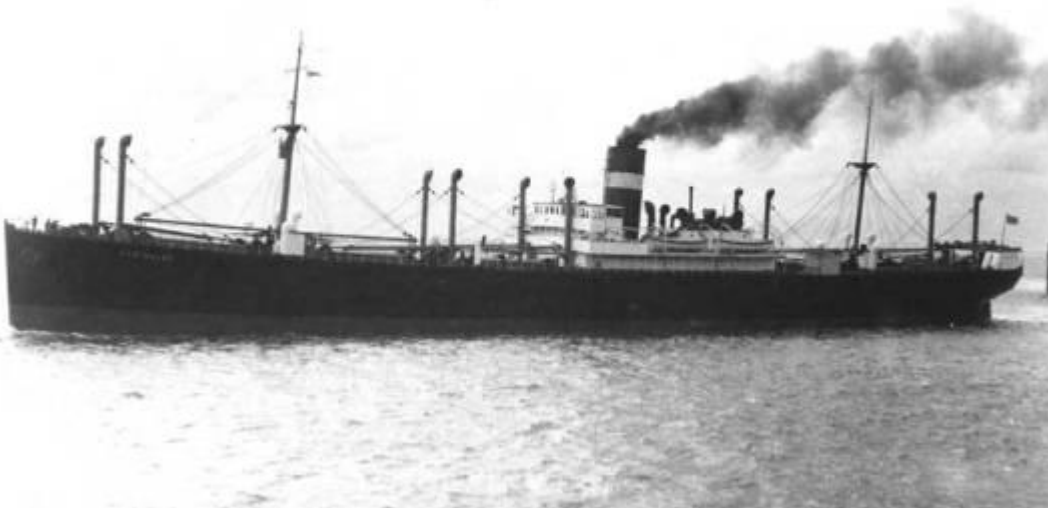
‘They’ve left me enough money for a first-class trip to France. Instead of that I’m going to buy two third-class tickets and we’ll go together to France.’

Antenor became pensive.

‘You have always wanted to travel to Paris. Now we can do it together’, Julio insisted.

‘It would be better for César to go’, Antenor said and he sacrificed his European dream.

‘In Lima nobody will pay attention to this work. In Europe they will. Let’s go to the post office and send him a telegram! We’ll tell him he’s going with you on a boat to France!’



He added: 'In Europe his destiny awaits him. Here a prison sentence.' The trial had been reopened as a result of the Santa María family's demands. It would never be closed. In the event that Vallejo returned one day to Peru legal action would be taken against him and he would be accused of being a terrorist.

Trujillo carried on being the same dream it had always been for Zoila Rosa but ten years had flown by and it was now Christmas 1931. In previous years Víctor Raúl Haya de la Torre had established APRA, the Popular Revolutionary American Alliance, a movement which was destined to spread throughout the Sub-Continent the ideal of the unity of all Latin Americans and the aim of nationalising land and industry while overthrowing the feudal agrarian system.

On Christmas Eve Zoila Rosa was taking the turkey out of the oven when she heard machine-gun fire. A few moments later her husband told her that the army had burst into APRA's premises. They forced an entry into the kitchen and machine-gunned down the women who were preparing the Christmas dinner. The same fate awaited their husbands and children soon afterwards. There were dozens of dead and wounded. Later on the news surfaced of Haya de la Torre's imprisonment and the persecution of many of his friends whom he had got to know at César's side.

On 7 July 1932 the people of Trujillo rose up against the dictatorship of Commander Luis M. Sánchez Cerro. Manuel 'Buffalo' Barreto, a cane-sugar worker, was the ring-leader of the rebellion. Armed with machetes the farm labourers of Laredo took control of the cannons and captured the barracks. By a stroke of bad luck Buffalo fell, killed by one bullet, as he entered the barracks. He was succeeded in command by the young and courageous Alfredo Tello Salavarría. Zoila Rosa saw him in the main square organising the city's defences and she recognised him: he was standing next to Ciro Alegría, one of the pupils who was loved the most by César Vallejo. The army attacked Trujillo by air, sea and land. From then on Trujillo was under siege from the constant rattling of machine-gun fire and gunshots. Then something happened which Zoila Rosa had read about in the library of the League of Artisans in a book on the Paris Commune. People hoisted red flags atop public buildings and they resolved to live the last and unique days of freedom socialism behind the barricades of a rebellious city.

For the inhabitants of Trujillo time stood still for a week. Then time began to accelerate once more. The army entered the city and, along with the army, desolation and death. The soldiers made a forced entry into people's homes. They ordered Zoila Rosa's husband to take off his shirt so they could examine his shoulder. Since his shoulder didn't have any mark whatsoever they concluded that he had not used a gun and so they set him free. They shot some 5,000 APRA members. The city at the time had 20,000 inhabitants. She wanted to know what had happened to Antenor. She read *La Industria* and she found an announcement which had been published by the philosopher:

'Because of mechanical difficulties the newspaper *El Norte* cannot be printed. We ask our readers to accept our apologies.. and wait.' Antenor Orrego, Director.

'He will never lose his sense of humour', she told herself. From that moment onwards the philosopher was to suffer twelve years in prison and much persecution. From 1936 the newspapers were providing information on a daily basis about the Spanish Civil War. She read an article that Vallejo had written in Barcelona, where he was working on behalf of the Republican cause. She found out that Julio Gálvez Orrego had joined up to the International Brigades to fight against Fascism. She saw him in a photograph dressed as a militiaman,

accompanying César in 1937 to the Anti-Fascist Writers' Congress which was taking place in Valencia at that time.

Three months later *La Industria* three months later announced the tragic news that Julio had been shot. On the same day a demand was published in the legal section for César Vallejo to appear before a judge. The document was sent to the diplomatic offices of Paris and Madrid announcing that Vallejo was ordered to return to Peru. Seventeen years after the events of Santiago de Chuco his indefatigable enemies had managed to get an international arrest warrant issued for him. On Saturday 16 April 1938 she saw Vallejo's photo on the front page of *La Industria*. Beneath it there was an article signed by José Eulogio Garrido:

#### THE POET CESAR VALLEJO HAS DIED IN PARIS

The news had arrived suddenly in a copy of *El Comercio* which had arrived in a plane from Lima.

And thus without time to take stock of our memories or weigh up the gravity of the event, in its desolate grandeur, we can do no more than simply transcribe the news which arrived by telegram which states laconically: 'Paris 15. – The Peruvian poet César Vallejo, who received the religious rites from Abbé Jarnet, has died. The funeral will take place on Tuesday in Santo Domingo Church.'

Vallejo was a poet who had a long, eternal curve. He was born in Santiago de Chuco, a province of La Libertad department. His name belongs not only to this land and this region but also this Sub-Continent and the Spanish tongue, despite those who thought – and indeed said – differently a few decades ago, here and in other parts of the world.

We lack the time for a biography of Vallejo or an exegesis of his work as a result of this painful news.

All we have time for at the moment is to wonder if this telegram is really telling the truth, which would allow us to dismiss the painful news as a lie. But the terrifying monotony of the news drilling into us hardly leaves us enough time to think about anything else.

She read some more details about this death later on in *El Comercio*. She discovered that César's last words had been: 'To Spain... I'm going to Spain!'

Toto Mould Távora wrote from the Peruvian Embassy:

#### **César Vallejo has died**

*El Comercio*, 1 May 1938, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition.

César Vallejo had an anguished soul like Beethoven's. Endowed with an Indian stoicism and one of Seneca's disciples he was never heard to utter a complaint. Like every spiritual person who looks deep into the depths of the human heart Vallejo was a good man. Christianity, an intrinsic part of his education, left an indelible imprint. His questioning later on never destroyed that seed. César Vallejo has been one of the great Christian poets of Spanish America...

In Montrouge cemetery the French poet, Louis Aragon, read out a message in which he pointed to Vallejo as 'not only a poet' but also as a 'fighter for socialism'. The document concluded with the sentence: 'The legend begins'. That very same year Zoila Rosa found a sketch of Vallejo's face by Picasso in a magazine. 'He knew he was drawing one of the immortals', her teacher said to her. He drew three portraits of the poet with an awl directly onto a stencil. 'Just one portrait wouldn't be enough to portray him', Picasso explained to Juan Larrea, who had provided him with a photo of Vallejo on his death bed. 'That man had already walked though hell itself.'

The war ended in Spain in 1939. A month before the end the Republican *militiamen of the Aragon Front* published an edition of Vallejo's book, *Spain, Take this Cup from Me*. When the resistance was vanquished Franco's troops created a pyre on which to destroy the communist poet's book. In 1941 Zoila Rosa's son, Carlos, who was at university at the time, returned home one day with the news that Ciro Alegría had won an international fiction prize. His work, *The World is Wide and Alien*, portrayed the struggle of an indigenous community against the exploitation of the landowners. She remembered him. He was the other pupil that accompanied César at the time when she developed a friendship with him. The book went from coast to coast and Ciro Alegría became one of the most famous novelists of Latin America.

In 1945 the Second World War ended. This resulted in Latin America in the inauguration of a spate of democratic governments. In Peru dozens of thousands Peruvians began to walk the path of freedom. Their love of justice and their support for social change had led them to hate tyranny and, along with tyranny, death; for the others it was secrecy, prison or exile. One of those who was able to see the path of freedom was Antenor Orrego. He had married Alcides Spelucín's sister, Carmela and rented a house next door to Zoila Rosa's. The two families grew closer over time. In 1945 Orrego was elected rector of the National University of Trujillo. Then, in 1948, another ominous dictatorship led by a semi-illiterate called Odría, took control of Peru. When the repression began Orrego was forced to flee Trujillo.

'I'm going to have to leave. I'll fight in the resistance movement', he confided in his neighbours, just before he left. 'I already have some experience of this.. but, I beg of you that, if it comes to that, please look after my wife and children.'

In Christmas 1951 Carmela and her children were about to spend Christmas Eve in Zoila Rosa's house. But they didn't arrive. She found out early next morning what had happened. For Alicia Orrego that night was the worst as well as the happiest night of her life. She was not feeling well as a result of an intense toothache which was irritated by the slightest movement. She missed the affectionate smile and daily kiss and embrace of her father who, once more and for reasons that he found difficult to understand, was on the run from some vicious policemen. They had burst into the house on a number of occasions looking for him and, when they couldn't find him, they had stolen some of the few belongings of the Orrego family. Nevertheless, at 10 o'clock that night, mummy came up to the girls' bedroom and made a sign to be silent with her index fingers on her lips. Moments later the young girls saw – through the crooked hat and thick moustache – the sweet face and blue eyes of their father who had managed to escape the watchful eyes of his persecutors in order to bring home a pair of dolls.

'And where does this little doll have a tooth-ache?' Antenor Orrego asked and when Alicia replied that it was a tooth on the left side of her jaw, her father smiled and began to stroke her cheek just where the tooth was. He was stroking her cheek for quite some time while mummy was telling him about the excellent school marks that his daughters had achieved, his relatives' health and what people was saying in the street about Odría's dictatorial regime...

And, suddenly, the young girl realised that her father's presence and his stroking of her cheek had got rid of her tooth-ache.

Time flew by. In 1960 Teodoro Rivero Ayllón, Juan Paredes Carbonell and Eduardo González Viaña of the 'Trilce' literary group visited Zoila Rosa and conversed for a number of hours with her. They took flowers with them and they treated her affectionately. They wanted her to talk about Vallejo but they forgot and they drank many cups of tea and ate lots of King-Kong cake, laughing and telling jokes. Teodoro read an unpublished poem by Francisco Xandóval.

'And how about Pancho? Why didn't he come with you?'

They looked at each other. Teodoro's eyes, full of sadness, lowered to the floor. He took a while before he spoke: 'He's very ill. He doesn't go out much.'

'Ill? Tell him not to pay attention to doctors. Tell him that poets never die.'

She added: 'I know that Antenor was in Trujillo a little while ago and that you held a homage in his honour in the Municipal Theatre. He phoned me up to say hello and he spoke a great deal about you.'

The young men grew quiet, feeling timid. Then they had another King Kong cake and they became more chatty. Behind Zoila Rosa there was a reprint of *Guernica*.

'Which one of you is the narrator?'

A hairy and rather gaunt young man raised his eyes and looked at her, nervously. He had forgotten all the questions that he had planned to ask her.

'You're Eduardo, aren't you? Antenor spoke to me about you and he assured me that one day you will write a history about those times.. I mean the time when I knew Vallejo.. and you know.. I have something for you...'

She got up and walked towards a small cupboard. She opened up one of the drawers and there, in the front of the drawer, was the paper on which Vallejo had written down ten of the dreams he had had from February to March 1917.

'He was amazed by Freud. César asked me, very spontaneously, if I could suggest some interpretations of the dreams... and I replied rather perversely.. I don't know why I did it. Sometimes I think that perhaps I was still just a little girl. Sometimes I think not! I think I might have done it out of jealousy. I had a premonition that he wouldn't be in Trujillo for ever. He would need to grow and grow and leave... Perhaps I just wanted to break up with him, before he broke up with me.'

Although Eduardo did not want to accept the document Zoila Rosa had offered him, she put it in an envelope and placed it on the table.

'It's for you' she said, imperiously. 'Keep it.'

They resumed their tea-drinking and cake-eating. Zoila Rosa told the young men the story of the dreams she had as a young woman.

'I saw myself in the future and I was really scared... José Eulogio Garrido interpreted my dreams and he told me that I would live until the year 2000 at the very least.'

The lady carried on talking to Eduardo: 'I'm sure that you will write that history. But don't forget things. When I lose something I ask Saint Anthony to make me remember where I put it down. Commend yourself as well to him and don't forget your promise.'

'What promise?'

The young man had no recollection of having made a promise.



‘Let’s make an agreement! If you’re still alive in the year 2000 and if I am as well and if you’re passing through Trujillo at that time I want you to visit me. Then we’ll be able to confirm that everything I dreamt is true...’

In 1965 Luis Felipe de la Puente Uceda, a young lawyer from Trujillo, took up arms against the government. Supported by students, lawyers, some doctors and by farm labourers, none of whom had military training, they unleashed themselves on the army in order to construct a socialist country. The resistance of the weapons as well as the technical support provided by the United States proved to be too much for them. It took the government a year to destroy them. Zoila Rosa remembered that Luis Felipe was the son of Rita Uceda, whom César had called ‘my sweet. Andean Rita of the wild reed and the dusk berry’.

They killed De la Puente and buried him in a secret grave. All they sent to his widow was his wedding ring, his glasses and a yellowing copy of *The Black Heralds*. In October 1967 Zoila Rosa witnessed on television the fall of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara, the most famous socialist guerrilla of the twentieth century. Among the books found in his hideaway was a copy of *Spain, Take this Cup from Me*. On 20 July 1969 a spaceship flew into space and Neil A. Armstrong and Edwin E. Aldrin landed on the moon. Zoila Rosa spent the whole night in front of the television waiting for the historical landing. In her life-time the human race had leapt into the air and now had reached the stars themselves. The first time she saw a plane was on 26 February 1921. At the precise moment that Vallejo was freed from jail, Elmer Faucett flew three times over Trujillo in a Curtiss-Oriole biplane.

The months were slipping away and the years were flying by. In 1990 she read in *El Comercio* of Lima an article on *Trilce*. The author of the article noted that the first edition of Vallejo’s book had a print-run of 200 copies. Now there were 20,000,000 copies of *Trilce* and it had been translated into almost all of the world’s languages. In the 1990s Zoila Rosa believed that people mumbled rather than enunciating their words clearly. She had to ask them repeat their words in a louder voice as well as spell-them-out. Later on she was unable to recognise at night who was greeting her. There was not one but three or four moons in the sky. The stars grew and turned into ill-formed bright lights.

‘Mummy, listen, your sight is failing. Don’t go for walks on your own. Be careful.’

‘Are you trying to tell me I’m getting old? It’s not true!’

The year 2000 arrived even more quickly. All of her friends had died and she wondered if she was still alive. She wanted to know if the predictions which people had made about the new millennium had been true or not. But then she began to forget about the predictions. Her husband has passed away 15 years before and her children had left her in the hand of two female employees in her old mansion which was full of colonial remembrances. María Elena, her favourite grand-daughter, would visit her frequently. Some years later María Elena got to know Eduardo, one of the members of the *Trilce* group. Alicia Orrego presented them to her. When she found out about the conversation Eduardo once had with her grandmother she asked: ‘And have you finished the book?’

She greeted his negative reply with a wiggle of her nose.

‘Hmm...’, she said, disapprovingly. ‘To encourage you to complete it once and for all, I’m going to invite you to her birthday party on 19 November in Trujillo. Bring two presents because it’s my birthday as well.’

Eduardo accepted. María Elena joked with him:

‘I can’t promise you that we’ll see her because sometimes she goes out of the house saying she’s going to see some friends.’

While María Elena was speaking to him, Eduardo was distracted by the thought that Trujillo is a city in which some people suddenly discover that they are dreaming.

‘You look like you’re not listening to me. I’m telling you that sometimes my grandmother goes out of the house to go and see some friends.’

The guest didn’t turn up. On 21 November when he rang up to apologise, María Elena informed him in tears that her grandmothers had left the house and had never come back.



## With his Hand in the Air

César Vallejo took the boat from Salaverry, Trujillo's port, on 18 March 1921, only three weeks after obtaining his conditional discharge. He was travelling to Lima and, as burdened as he was with dreams, he was accompanied by his friend, Francisco Xandóval. During his imprisonment Vallejo had finished writing *Trilce*, a book which he would later – in September 1922 – publish in Lima. A week after its release he happened to be passing by the bookshop which had been commissioned to sell it. The generous lady, the owner's wife, settled up with him for two copies. None had been sold but the lady put on an act so that the poet wouldn't be depressed.

In the Peruvian capital *Trilce* was received in silence by the critics. Antenor Orrego's prologue, however, announced that the book was a revolution in Spanish poetry: 'Latin America – I believe – has never witnessed such a case of poetic virginity. It would be necessary to reach as high as Walt Whitman in order to find an equivalent, in terms of an attitude towards life, of the childlike genius of the Peruvian poet. An intelligent critic will take on this task; if not now, in the future.'

The print-run of 200 copies only led to indulgent pats on the back if not to ironic sniggers. As Vallejo wrote in a letter to Orrego:

'The book has been born in the greatest vacuum. I am responsible for this. I accept responsibility for its aesthetics. Today and more than ever, perhaps, I feel that an unprecedented and most sacred need is weighing down upon me, which I feel as a man as much as an artist, the need to be free. If I am not to be free, I shall never be free. I feel that the arch of my forehead is gaining the most imperative strength of heroism... God only knows how much I've suffered in making sure that the rhythm should not exceed the limits of this freedom and fall into the libertinage of chaos! God only knows what hair-raising borders I've peered over, overwhelmed by fear, fearful that everything will be vanquished just so that my poor soul should be able to survive...'

On 17 June 1923 César Vallejo was once more sailing. This year he was going to France. When ships leave they take a very long time to reach the horizon and for that reason time stops and the port takes for ever to disappear. The farewells are long. For the traveller who watches the coast the time stays the same for many hours.

The Oroya set sail at 5 o'clock in the afternoon but the images of terra firma didn't disappear immediately. Lima and Callao remained for hours on the travellers' retina until it was changed during the night into a vibrant light in the distance and subsequently into a dead star which eventually evaporated. The following day the poet, now on his own on the deck, scanned to the horizon. The coast was no longer visible although the blue silhouette of the Andes would

still just about be made out. At 10 o' clock in the morning the snowy peak of Huascarán mountain lit up the sky with white fire. The mountains subsequently disappeared and, now in the open sea, the ship set forth for the mist, accelerated and began to sail into nothingness. Then Vallejo retrieved from one of his pockets Antenor Orrego's urgent telegrams and began to read them once more. His generous friend had urged him to accept the offer that he and Julio were extending to him to travel to France.

YOUR TRIP TO PARIS FIXED STOP JULIO MANAGED TO SUBSTITUTE YOUR NAME FOR MINE STOP PACK YOUR BAGS STOP ANTENOR

César had replied to this telegram with a definite no. But Orrego insisted:

URGENT CESAR STOP TRAVEL WITH JULIO STOP I'LL GET MY CHANCE STOP I'LL SEE YOU IN PARIS STOP DON'T FORGET COURT CASE RE-OPENED STOP ANTENOR

The last telegram simply said:

IN PARIS DESTINY AWAITS STOP PERU JAIL STOP ANENOR



*Julio Gálvez Orrego.*

Vallejo was initially reluctant to accept the philosopher's sacrifice but after two telegrams the third telegram alluded to a terrifying reason why he should leave. The court case had been re-opened and he was being notified that he should appear before the Trujillo law court with the threat of imprisonment. When he realised that the prison had its mouth open ready for him once more, he said yes.

Escaping from Peru was escaping from hell. Once on the open seas he began to breathe in the sea air deeply as if wishing to feed on freedom. Then he folded up the telegrams once more and put them all inside one envelope. He turned his gaze towards the horizon and discovered that the sky had become immense and emitted flashes of obstinate blue.

Julio Gálvez Orrego, his travelling companion, was not with him on the deck. As soon as they had set sail from Callao he had met a very beautiful Spanish girl and he clung to her side. Since the previous night both he and the Spanish girl seemed to have become invisible.

Hardly had the mist dissipated when the ship began to approach the islands of Lobos de Afuera. Fragrant voices which merged with the clash and the thunder of the waves appeared to emerge from the islands.

‘It’s the song of the sirens’, someone standing next to him explained. Vallejo looked askance at him. He could only make out that he was dressed in white. The man continued: ‘That’s what the sailors say.’

The Oroya accelerated away out of the reach of the sirens who were crying loudly for the crew members.

Hours later a storm descended suddenly from the skies. The ship rose up on a monstrous wave and then plunged downwards to the depths. There was a hair-raising drop and then it jumped back up again.

‘It’s at times like this that you can see your destiny, isn’t that right?’

The poet was not in the mood to strike up a conversation given the circumstances. The wind made the ship shudder and the sea water was flooding onto the bridge. The sea waves were breaking violently on the bow. After a brutal jolt the Oroya righted itself proudly and it began to slip towards the depths. Before it a mountain of green water grew endlessly until it reached as high as the heavens.

‘Can you see it? It’s destiny. Don’t tell me you can’t see it!’

The stranger’s words and the scene with the ship facing a gigantic wave seemed to Vallejo like a *déjà-vu*. He turned round to look at the man beside him.

‘Don’t you worry, sir!’ the man in white told him. ‘The ship rears up when it’s coming out of hell. But, as I was telling you: that’s destiny for you.’

Suddenly, from the depths to which it had sunk, the ship began to climb up the terrifying wave. It worked its way up bit by bit, even though the crest of the wave was still higher up. The engines roared and, finally, at the top they saw on the other side the peaceful surface of a becalmed sea.

The ship advanced smoothly on an unending, flat surface of green water.

‘How do you feel!’ Vallejo whispered.

‘How do you feel!’ the stranger replied.

The man had dark glasses and had not moved from his seat on the deck. He was wearing an impeccable, white suit. He wore a white rose in the button-hole. In his right hand he held a walking stick. He had not turned to face him when he returned the greeting.

‘Have we met before?’ the man asked.

‘No, sir. I don’t recall.’

Vallejo noticed that he held his head aloft and he spoke as if he were addressing the heavens. He was blind.

‘I think I’ve met you before. I never forget a voice.’

The poet simply smiled, as a reply.

‘It’s possible that I’ve met you in a dream’, the blind man added.

The conversation was beginning to make Vallejo feel uncomfortable.

‘Excuse me’, he said, taking his leave.

‘Not so soon! Let’s talk for a while.’

The weather had improved. Vallejo resigned himself to standing there. The blind man lit up a cigarette. Two columns of smoke emerged from his nostrils and evaporated into the air.

‘Do you believe in destiny?’ The man was clinging obsessively to his conversational theme.

‘May I ask you where you’re heading to?’ Vallejo said in order to cut off the discussion.

‘And yourself? Is it possible to know where you’re going?’ the blind man asked, now annoyed. He added that it was not polite to cut off conversations. Not only was the ship a *déjà-vu*, the blind man was too. The poet took out of his pocket his Longines watch and it was exactly 6 o’ clock in the evening. All blind people strike 6 o’ clock, Vallejo told himself.

‘Destiny, sir, is a limited set of cards. Six or seven. You receive your hand when you’re young. Afterwards they get lost or get mixed up. In the future the six or seven cards appear once more and come together and they are always the same.’

‘How intriguing!’ the poet replied, in a spirited manner since he didn’t wish to be called impolite once again. He was suddenly struck by the idea that he had already heard that definition of destiny before.

‘Intriguing? Is that all you can say? You’re already in the future? In this ship we are all sailing towards our destiny.’

The blind man got up from his chair, took his walking stick in his right hand and raised it into the air. He went off, waving the stick in the air and feeling his way. The morning storm had been followed by a bright afternoon and they were already sailing a long way off the coast. The wind died down. The waves became calm. The squawks of the aquatic birds evaporated under the sun amidst the vast, salty distances of the horizon.

A man and his son were having a conversation nearby.

‘What’s over there in the distance?’

‘Sea. Just sea, my son.’

The young boy, who was dressed in sailor’s clothes, pointed towards the west.

‘I mean what is behind all that.’

‘Australia, Asia...’

‘No, Daddy. Behind the water and the world’, the little boy insisted. ‘Over there where everything is dark. Do souls go over there? Don’t mothers go there when they die?’

The father didn’t respond. When the sun had already set Vallejo thought he heard the sound of bells and the sweet singing of a woman crossed through the silence. It was a harmonious voice and it emerged in the emptiness like the moon which is sustained without falling into deep space. César, who had been close to her for all of his childhood, soon recognised her and he closed his eyes in order to carry on listening to her. He remained so until the first stars came out and they slipped away between his tears.

‘Sir! Sir!’

César heard the call of the young boy dressed as a sailor and he turned towards him smiling.

‘Me?’

‘Yes, you’, the boy sitting by his father replied. He approached with a white rose and he offered it to the poet.

‘At some point you lost this.’

Vallejo thanked him and took the rose. Then he looked for the blind man on the deck but he was not there. He couldn’t even find the chair on which he seemed to be rocking. It was as if the sky has absorbed them.

They had been informed that at midnight they would be passing by Salaverry port. Then the poet screwed up his eyes for a moment but he remembered that he wouldn't see anything if he did this. He remembered the blind man, he closed his eyes and began to dig up his memories. As a result he was able to see the tall walls of Chan Chan, the steep road of the Sierra, the red balconies of Santiago de Chuco and the seigneurial glow of the city of Trujillo. He thought he could hear the bells of all the churches. Then someone opened and closed a lock many times and the poet became afraid. But then he heard a harmonica and he saw himself in the centre of the main square. Trujillo was drifting away into nothingness. Vallejo decided to say goodbye to everything he had most loved in the world, he peered over the bridge on the deck and he stopped motionless with his hand in the air.

## GLOSSARY OF CHARACTERS AND CULTURAL REFERENCES IN THE NOVEL

Crebilleros Paredes, Santiago: the blind town bell ringer of Santiago de Chuco who is alluded to in some of Vallejo's poems, including Tr. III.<sup>7</sup>

Cuadra, Rosa Zoila: Vallejo had an affair with her in 1917 and she inspired a number of the poems of *Los heraldos negros*. Her nickname was Mirtho, no doubt an allusion to Gérard de Nerval's famous poem 'Myrtho' from *Les Chimères* (1853).

Darío, Rubén (1867-1916), Nicaraguan poet and founder of the literary poetic movement, *modernismo*, which was highly influential on Vallejo's early poetry

Dubois, Carlos: second lieutenant who was involved in the events which occurred in Santiago de Chuco on 1 August 1920.<sup>8</sup>

Eguren, José María (1874-1942): Peruvian poet who was impressed by Vallejo's early poetry, and who corresponded with him.<sup>9</sup>

*España, aparta de mí este cáliz* (Spain, Take this Cup from Me; 1939); a collection of 15 poems published posthumously which Vallejo wrote on the subject of the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939). Vallejo supported the Republicans and visited Spain on a number of occasions; he died before the war ended, on 15 April 1938.

Espejo Asturrizaga, Juan: a friend of César Vallejo who knew him in Trujillo and who wrote an important biography, *César Vallejo: itinerario del hombre 1892-1923* (Lima: Mejía Baca, 1965). Espejo's biography has important information about the poetry Vallejo was writing in the 1910s

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<sup>7</sup> *César Vallejo: The Complete Poems*, translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012), pp. 162-63.

<sup>8</sup> Juan Espejo Asturrizaga, *César Vallejo: itinerario del hombre* (Lima: Juan Mejía Baca, 1960), pp. 94-96; see also Germán Patrón Candela, *El Proceso Vallejo* (Trujillo: Universidad Nacional de Trujillo, 1992).

<sup>9</sup> For more information see Ricardo Silva-Santisteban, 'José María Eguren y César Vallejo: simpatías y diferencias', in *Actas del Congreso Internacional Vallejo Siempre*, ed. Gladys Flores Heredia (Lima: Cátedra Vallejo, 2014), vol. II, pp. 221-241.



and 1920s as well as his love affairs with María Rosa Sandoval (q.v.) and Zoila Rosa Cuadra (q.v.).

Gálvez Orrego, Julio: Antenor Orrego's nephew who provided Vallejo with his fare, allowing him to travel to France with him in 1923. He and Vallejo travelled to France on the steam boat Oroya on 17 June 1923; Julio Gálvez Orrego's name was 'El Chino'.

Haya de la Torre, Víctor Raúl (1895-1979): the founder of APRA, the American Popular Revolutionary Alliance, a highly significant 20<sup>th</sup>-century political movement whose presence is still felt to this day in modern-day Peru. Vallejo was good friends with Haya de la Torre at university in Trujillo, and they also met up years later in Paris.

*Los heraldos negros* (The Black Heralds; 1918); Vallejo's first collection of poems, which was printed in 1918 but which only became available the following year in 1919. The book is written in the *modernista* style but already the originality of Vallejo's poetic voice can be seen to be emerging.

Mirtho, the nickname of one of Vallejo's lovers in Trujillo, Zoila Rosa Cuadra (q.v.)

Orrego, Antenor (1892-1960): an important member of the El Norte literary group of Trujillo, he was Vallejo's most loyal defenders in Peru; he wrote the perceptive prologue to Vallejo's second volume of poetry, *Trilce* (1922) (q.v.), and praised its innovations at a time when others rejected the volume

Paula Vallejo Benites, Francisco de (1840-1924): Vallejo's father to whom a number of the poems of *Los heraldos negros* and *Trilce* allude. He married María de los Santos Mendoza Gurrionero (q.v.) on 22 June 1869 and Cesar Abraham Vallejo, born on 16 March 1892, was their twelfth child.

*Poemas humanos* (Human Poems, 1939): collection of poems written in Europe by Vallejo and published posthumously by his widow, Georgette de Vallejo.

Rita: the mysterious young girl who inspired perhaps the most famous love poem of *Los heraldos negros*, 'Idilio muerto'.<sup>10</sup> One possibility is that Rita is a coded reference to Vallejo's niece.<sup>11</sup>

Sandoval, María Rosa: a pretty young girl that Vallejo had a torrid love affair with sometime in 1916 and who inspired a number of the love poems of *Los heraldos negros*. She was given the nom de plume of María Bashkirtseff; she died tragically young at the age of 24 on 10 February 1918 of TB.

Santa María, Carlos: a landowner and businessman from Santiago de Chuco who was locked in rivalry with Vallejo and who accused Vallejo of burning down and destroying his premises in

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<sup>10</sup> César Vallejo: *The Complete Poems*, translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi, pp. 86-87.

<sup>11</sup> See Stephen M. Hart, *César Vallejo: A Literary Biography* (Woodbridge: Tamesis, 2013), pp. 27-29.

Santiago de Chuco on 1 August 1920. Carlos Santa María accused Vallejo of being the intellectual instigator of the attack on his premises.<sup>12</sup>

Santos Mendoza Gurrionero, María de los (1850-1918): Vallejo's mother to whom a number of the poems of *Los heraldos negros* and *Trilce* are dedicated; wife of Francisco de Paula Vallejo Benites (q.v.)

Spelucín, Alcides: one of the members of the El Norte group who wrote an excellent essay on Vallejo's literary apprenticeship in *modernismo*

*Trilce* (1922); an avant-garde, Dadaist work by Vallejo with an untranslatable title; a number of the poems in this collection were written during the period that Vallejo spent in prison in Trujillo (6 November 1920—26 February 1921) and a number of these are quoted in the novel.

Vallejo, Miguel Ambrosio (1889-1915): Vallejo's older brother and eleventh child of the family who died tragically young and to whom Vallejo dedicated his famous poem 'A mi hermano Miguel'.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> For more discussion of the rivalry between Carlos Santa María and César Vallejo, see Stephen M. Hart, *César Vallejo: A Literary Biography*, pp. 71-86.

<sup>13</sup> *César Vallejo: The Complete Poems*, translated by Michael Smith and Valentino Gianuzzi (Bristol: Shearsman Books, 2012), pp. 146-47.