



The Country Boy

THE CHILEAN FOREST

UNDER the volcanoes, beside the snow-capped mountains, among the huge lakes, the fragrant, the silent, the tangled Chilean forest . . . My feet sink down into the dead leaves, a fragile twig crackles, the giant ratli trees rise in all their bristling height, a bird from the cold jungle passes over, flaps its wings, and stops in the sunless branches. And then, from its hideway, it sings like an oboe . . . The wild scent of the laurel, the dark scent of the boldo herb, enter my nostrils and flood my whole being . . . The cypress of the Guatecas blocks my way . . . This is a vertical world: a nation of birds, a plenitude of leaves . . . I stumble over a rock, dig up the uncovered hollow, an enormous spider covered with red hair stares up at me, motionless, as huge as a crab . . . A golden carabus beetle blows its mephitic breath at me, as its brilliant rainbow disappears like lightning . . . Going on, I pass through a forest of ferns much taller than I am: from their cold green eyes sixty tears splash down on my face and, behind me, their fans go on quivering for a long time . . . A decaying tree trunk: what a treasure! . . . Black and blue mushrooms have given it ears, red parasite plants have covered it with rubies, other lazy plants have let it borrow their beards, and a snake springs out of the rotted body like a sudden breath, as if the spirit of the dead trunk were slipping away from it . . . Farther along, each tree stands away from its fellows . . . They soar

up over the carpet of the secretive forest, and the foliage of each has its own style, linear, bristling, ramulose, lanceolate, as if cut by shears moving in infinite ways . . . A gorge; below, the crystal water slides over granite and jasper . . . A butterfly goes past, bright as a lemon, dancing between the water and the sunlight . . . Close by, innumerable calceolarias nod their little yellow heads in greeting . . . High up, red copibues (Lapageria rosea) dangle like drops from the magic forest's arteries . . . The red copibue is the blood flower, the white copibue is the snow flower . . . A fox cuts through the silence like a flash, sending a shiver through the leaves, but silence is the law of the plant kingdom . . . The barely audible cry of some bewildered animal far off . . . The piercing interruption of a hidden bird . . . The vegetable world keeps up its low rustle until a storm churns up all the music of the earth.

Anyone who hasn't been in the Chilean forest doesn't know this planet.

I have come out of that landscape, that mud, that silence, to roam, to go singing through the world.

CHILDHOOD AND POETRY

I'll start out by saying this about the days and the years of my childhood: the rain was the one unforgettable presence for me then. The great southern rain, coming down like a waterfall from the Pole, from the skies of Cape Horn to the frontier. On this frontier, my country's Wild West, I first opened my eyes to life, the land, poetry, and the rain.

I have traveled a lot, and it seems to me that the art of raining, practiced with a terrible but subtle power in my native Araucania, has now been lost. Sometimes it rained for a whole month, for a whole year. Threads of rain fell, like long needles of glass snapping off on the roofs or coming up against the windows in transparent waves, and each house was a ship struggling to make port in the ocean of winter.

This cold rain from the south of the Americas is not the sudden squall of hot rain that comes down like a whip and goes on, leaving a blue sky in its wake. The southern rain is patient and keeps falling endlessly from the gray sky.

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The street in front of my house has turned into a huge sea of mud. Out the window, through the rain, I watch a cart stuck in the middle of the street. A peasant wearing a heavy black woolen cloak beats his oxen; the rain and the mud are too much for them.

We used to walk to school, along the unpaved sidewalks, stepping from stone to stone, despite the cold and the rain. The wind carried off our umbrellas. Raincoats were expensive, I didn't like gloves, my shoes got soaked through. I'll always remember the wet socks hanging next to the brazier, and lots of shoes, steaming like toy locomotives. Then the floods would come and wash away the settlements along the river, where the poor lived. The earth shook and trembled. At other times, a crest of terrifying light appeared on the sierras: Mt. Llaima, the volcano, was stirring.

Temuco is a pioneer town, one of those towns that have no past, though it does have hardware stores. Since the Indians can't read, the stores hang their eye-catching signs out on the streets: an enormous saw, a giant cooking pot, a Cyclopean padlock, a mammoth spoon. Farther along the street, shoe stores—a colossal boot.

Temuco was the farthest outpost of Chilean life in the southern territories, and therefore it had a long bloody history behind it.

When the Spanish conquistadors pushed them back, after three hundred years of fighting, the Araucanian Indians retreated to those cold regions. But the Chileans continued what they called "the pacification of Araucania," their war of blood and fire to turn our countrymen out of their own lands. Every kind of weapon was used against the Indians, unsparingly: carbine blasts, the burning of villages, and later, a more fatherly method, alcohol and the law. The lawyer became a specialist at stripping them of their fields, the judge sentenced them when they protested, the priest threatened them with eternal fire. And hard spirits finally consummated the annihilation of a superb race whose deeds, valor, and beauty Don Alonso de Ercilla carved in stanzas of jade and iron in his *Araucana*.

My parents had come from Parral, where I was born. There, in central Chile, vineyards thrive and wine is plentiful. My mother, Doña Rosa Basoalto, died before I could have a memory of her, before I knew it was she my eyes gazed upon. I was born on July

12, 1904, and a month later, in August, wasted away by tuberculosis, my mother was gone.

Life was difficult for small farmers in the central part of the country. My grandfather, Don José Angel Reyes, had little land and many children. To me, my uncles' names were like the names of princes from far-off kingdoms. Amós, Oseas, Joel, Abadías. My father's name was simply José del Carmen. He left his father's farm while he was still very young and worked as a laborer at the dry docks in the port of Talcahuano, eventually becoming a railroad man in Temuco.

He was a conductor on a ballast train. Few people know what a ballast train is. In the southern region, with its violent gales, the rains would wash away the rails if gravel wasn't poured in between the ties. The ballast had to be taken out of the quarries in hods and this coarse gravel dumped onto flatcars. Forty years ago, the crew on this type of train had to be made of iron. They came from the fields, from the suburbs, from jails, and were huge, muscular laborers. The company paid miserable wages and no references were asked of those looking for work on these trains. My father, the conductor, had grown used to giving and taking orders. Sometimes he took me along. We quarried rocks in Boroa, savage heart of the frontier, scene of the terrible battles between the Spaniards and the Araucanians.

There, nature made me euphoric. Birds, beetles, partridge eggs fascinated me. What a miracle it was, finding them in the ravines, blue, dark, and shiny, the color of a shotgun barrel. I marveled at the perfection of the insects. I collected "snake mothers." This was the grotesque name given to the largest beetle, black, glistening, and tough, the titan of insects in Chile. He gives you quite a turn when you come upon him suddenly, on the trunk of a ginger, wild-apple, or coihue tree, and I knew he was so strong that I could stand on him and he wouldn't even crack. With his mighty shield to protect him, he had no need of venomous pincers.

My expeditions filled the workers with curiosity. Before long, they started taking an active interest in my discoveries. The moment my father's back was turned, they slipped off into the jungle, and with more skill, strength, and intelligence than I, they found fantastic treasures for me. There was one fellow

called Monge. According to my father, he was a dangerous man with a knife. He had two huge incisions on his swarthy face. One was the vertical scar left by a knife, and the other his white, horizontal grin, full of charm and devilry. This fellow, Monge, would bring me white copihues, furry spiders, sucking ringdoves, and once he found for me the most dazzling of all, the beetle of the coihue and the luma trees. I don't know if you have ever seen one. That was the only time I ever did. It was a streak of lightning dressed in the colors of the rainbow. Red and violet and green and yellow glittered on its shell. It escaped from my hands with the speed of lightning and went back into the forest again. Monge wasn't there to catch it for me. I have never quite recovered from that dazzling apparition. Nor have I forgotten my friend. My father told me about his death. He fell from a train and tumbled down a precipice. The convoy was stopped, but by then, my father told me, he was just a sack of bones.

It's difficult to describe a house like ours, a typical frontier house of sixty years ago.

In the first place, these homes intercommunicated. Through the patio of the Reyes, and the Ortégas, of the Candia and the Mason families, tools and books, birthday cakes, liniments, umbrellas, tables and chairs changed hands. These pioneer homes formed the hub of all the activities of the village.

Don Carlos Mason, a North American with a white mane of hair, who looked like Emerson, was the patriarch of this particular family. The Mason children were true creoles. Don Carlos respected the law and the Bible. He was not an empire builder but one of the original settlers. No one had money, and yet printing presses, hotels, slaughterhouses burgeoned in this family. Some of the sons were newspaper editors and others just worked for them. In time, everything crumbled and everyone was left as poor as before. Only the Germans kept a stubborn hold on their assets, and that singled them out in the hinterlands.

Our houses, then, had something of a settlers' temporary camp about them. Or of an explorers' supply base. Anyone who came in saw kegs, tools, saddles, and all kinds of indescribable objects.

There were always rooms that weren't finished, and half-completed stairways. There was, forever, talk of going on with

the building. Parents were already beginning to think of a university education for their children.

In Don Carlos Mason's home, the most important holidays were observed. For every birthday dinner there was turkey with celery, lamb barbecued on a wooden spit, and floating island for dessert. It has been many years since I last tasted this custard. The white-haired patriarch sat at the head of the interminable table with his wife, Doña Micaela Candia. Behind him, there was a huge Chilean flag with a tiny American one pinned onto it. Those were also the proportions of their blood. Chile's lone star predominated.

In the Mason house there was also a living room that we children were not allowed to go into. I never knew what color its furniture was, because it was kept under white covers, until a fire swept it away. There was an album in there with photographs of the family, finer and more delicate than the horrid colored blow-ups that invaded the frontier later on.

There was a picture of my mother. She was a lady dressed in black, slender, with a faraway look. I have been told that she wrote poems, but I have never seen them, only the lovely portrait.

My father had married again; his second wife was Doña Trinidad Candia Marverde, my stepmother. I find it hard to believe that this is what I must call the guardian angel of my childhood. She was devoted and loving, and had a countrywoman's sense of humor and a diligent, inexhaustible kindness.

As soon as my father came in, she would turn into a quiet shadow, as did all the women there in those days.

I saw mazurkas and quadrilles danced in that living room.

At home we had a trunk filled with fascinating things. A marvelous parrot preened on a calendar at the bottom of the chest. One day, while my mother was going through that sacred ark, I reached for the parrot and fell in, head first. As I got older, I used to open the trunk on the sly. There were some lovely fragile fans in it.

I recall something else in that trunk. The first love story that intrigued me passionately. It consisted of hundreds of postcards sent by someone who signed himself Enrique or Alberto, I don't remember which, all addressed to María Thielman. These cards were marvelous. They were photographs of the great actresses of

the day, embossed with little chips of glass and sometimes with real hair pasted on the heads. There were also castles, cities, and foreign landscapes. For years I found pleasure only in the pictures. But, as I grew older, I read those love notes written in a flawless hand. I always imagined the suitor as a man with a derby, a cane, and a diamond stickpin. His messages, sent from all corners of the globe, were filled with reckless passion expressed in dazzling phrases, with love that threw caution to the winds. I, too, began to fall in love with María Thielman. I imagined her as a haughty actress diademed, covered with pearls. But how did these letters come to be in my mother's trunk? I never found out.

The year 1910 came to Temuco. That memorable year I started school, in a rambling mansion with sparsely furnished rooms and a gloomy basement. In the spring we could see from the school the graceful Cautín River winding its way down below, its shores bordered with wild-apple trees. We used to sneak out of class to dip our feet in the cold water running over the white stones.

The school opened infinite vistas for this six-year-old. Anything might contain a mystery. The physics lab, which I was not allowed to enter—filled with glistening instruments, retorts, and test tubes. The library, forever closed. The sons of settlers had no love of book learning. Still, the cellar was the most fascinating place of all. There was a deep silence, a deep darkness, but with candles to light it up for us, we used to play war games there. The victors would tie their prisoners to some ancient columns. The odor of dampness, of a hideaway, a tomb, given off by the school basement in Temuco, still haunts my memory.

I grew older. Books began to interest me. Buffalo Bill's adventures and Salgari's voyages carried me far into the world of dreams. My first loves, the purest ones, found expression in letters to Blanca Wilson, the blacksmith's daughter. One of the boys had fallen head over heels in love with her and asked me to write his love letters. I don't remember what these letters were like exactly, but they may have been my first literary achievement, because one day, when I ran into this schoolgirl, she asked if I was the author of the letters her sweetheart brought her. I couldn't deny my work and I said yes, very embarrassed. Then she handed me a quince, which of course I would not eat and put away like a

treasure. Having thus replaced my friend in the girl's heart, I went on writing endless love letters to her and receiving quinces.

The boys in school didn't know I was a poet and wouldn't have respected me for it. The frontier still had its marvelous quality of a Wild West without prejudices. My companions' names were Schnake, Schler, Hauser, Smith, Taito, Seranis. All of us, including the Aracenas and the Ramírezes and the Reyes, were equal. There were no Basque family names. There were Sephardim: Albalas, Francos. And Irish: McGintys. Poles: Yanichewskys. The Araucanian names gave off a mysterious light, an aroma of wood and water: Melivilus, Catrileos.

Sometimes we would fight with acorns in the huge closed-in shed. Anyone who has never been hit by an acorn doesn't know how much it really hurts. Before reaching school, we would stuff our pockets with ammunition. I had little skill, no strength, and not much cunning. I always got the worst of it. While I was busy examining the marvelous acorn, green and polished, with its gray, wrinkled hood, or while I was still trying clumsily to make one of those pipes they eventually would grab away from me, a down-pour of acorns would pelt my head. During my second year, I decided to wear a bright green rain hat. It belonged to my father, like the heavy woolen cape, the red and green signal lanterns, which I found so fascinating and took to school as soon as I got the chance, to strut around with them . . . This time it was pouring and there was nothing so fantastic as the green oilskin hat that looked like a parrot. The moment I reached the shed, where three hundred roughnecks were chasing around like madmen, my hat flew off like a parrot. I ran after it, and each time I was about to catch it, off it flew, followed by the most deafening howls I have ever heard. I never laid eyes on it again.

Among these memories I can't see clearly the precise order of time. I confuse insignificant events that were very special to me, and this one coming back to my mind now seems to have been my first erotic adventure, strangely mixed in with natural history. Perhaps love and nature were, very early on, the source of my poems.

Across from my house lived two girls who were always giving me looks that made my face turn red. They were as precocious and diabolical as I was timid and quiet. This time I stood in my

doorway trying not to look at them; they were holding something that fascinated me. I went closer, gingerly, and they showed me a wild bird's nest, woven together with moss and tiny feathers; in it were several marvelous little turquoise-blue eggs. When I reached for it, one of the girls told me that they would have to feel through my clothes first. I was so scared I started to tremble and scurried away, pursued by the young nymphs holding the exciting treasure over their heads. During the chase, I went into an alley leading to a vacant bakery owned by my father. My assailants managed to catch me and had started to strip off my trousers, when we heard my father's footsteps coming down the passage. That was the end of the nest. The marvelous little eggs were left shattered, while under a counter we, the attacked and the attackers, held our breath.

I also recall that one day, while hunting behind my house for the tiny objects and minuscule beings of my world, I discovered a hole in one of the fence boards. I looked through the opening and saw a patch of land just like ours, untended and wild. I drew back a few steps, because I had a vague feeling that something was about to happen. Suddenly a hand came through. It was the small hand of a boy my own age. When I moved closer, the hand was gone and in its place was a little white sheep.

It was a sheep made of wool that had faded. The wheels on which it had glided were gone. I had never seen such a lovely sheep. I went into my house and came back with a gift, which I left in the same place: a pine cone, partly open, fragrant and resinous, and very precious to me.

I never saw the boy's hand again. I have never again seen a little sheep like that one. I lost it in a fire. And even today, when I go past a toy shop, I look in the windows furtively. But it's no use. A sheep like that one was never made again.

ART AND THE RAIN

Just as the cold, the rain, the mud in the streets—that is, the nagging and crumbling winter of the southern part of America—came down on us, so too the yellow, scorching summer visited these regions. We were surrounded by unexplored mountains, but I wanted to know the sea. Providentially, my obliging father

was loaned a house by one of his numerous railroad friends. In total darkness, at four o'clock in the night (I have never found out why they say four in the morning), my father woke up the whole house with his conductor's whistle. From that moment on, there was no rest, or any light either, and surrounded by candles whose tiny flames were battered by the drafts filtering in everywhere, my mother, my brother and sister Rodolfo and Laura, and the cook ran to and fro, doing up mattresses into enormous balls wrapped in burlap that were hastily rolled out of the way by the women. The beds had to be put aboard the train. The mattresses were still warm when they left for the nearby station. Sickly and weak by nature, and started out of sleep, I felt nauseated and chilled to the bone. All the while, the fuss around the house went on, never ending. Everything was taken along on that month-long, poor man's vacation. Even the wicker dryers that were laid over the lit braziers to dry the sheets and clothes ever damp in that climate were tagged and bundled into the cart waiting outside for the luggage.

The train's run was the stretch of that cold province between Temuco and Carahue. It crossed immense, unpopulated, uncultivated terrain, crossed virgin forests, rumbled through tunnels and over bridges, like an earthquake. The way stations were isolated in that wide countryside, among mimosas and flowering apple trees. In their ritual dress and ancestral majesty, Araucanian Indians waited at the stations to sell lambs, chickens, eggs, and textiles to the passengers. My father always bought something, after endless bargaining. His blond goatee was something to watch as he picked up a hen in front of some inscrutable Araucanian woman who would not lower the price of her merchandise by half a cent.

Each station had a lovelier name, almost all of them inherited from the ancient Araucanian. This was the region of the bloodiest battles between the invading Spaniards and the first Chileans, deep-rooted sons of the land.

Labranza was the first station. Boroa and Ranquileo followed. Names with the fragrance of wild plants, the sound of their syllables captivated me. These Araucanian names always signified something delicious: buried honey, lagoons or a river beside a forest, or a woodland with the name of a bird. We passed the

hamlet of Imperial, where the poet Don Alonso de Ercilla was nearly executed by the Spanish governor. This was the capital of the conquistadors in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. During their war of independence the Araucanians invented the tactic of "scorched earth." They did not leave one building standing in the city described by Ercilla as beautiful and proud.

And then we came to the city on the river. The train whistled cheerfully, darkening the countryside and the station with giant plumes of coal smoke, bells clanged, and you could now smell the wide, sky-blue, and tranquil Imperial River as it ran to the ocean. Taking down the countless pieces of luggage, getting the small family organized and going in the oxcart to the boat that would ride down the Imperial River was quite a production, directed, of course, by my father's blue eyes and his railwayman's whistle. We squeezed both the luggage and ourselves into the small boat that would take us to the sea. There were no berths. I sat near the bow. The wheels churned the river currents with their paddles, the small vessel's engines snorted and whined, and the taciturn southerners were spread about on the deck like motionless pieces of furniture.

An accordion broke into its romantic plea, its love call. Nothing can flood a fifteen-year-old's heart with feeling like a voyage down a strange, wide river, between steep banks, on the way to the mysterious sea.

Bajo Imperial was only a string of houses with red roofs. It was situated on the river's brow. From the house that had been awaiting us and, even before, from the rickety piers where the little steamer tied up, I heard the ocean thundering in the distance, a commotion far away. The sea swells were coming into my life.

The house belonged to Don Horacio Pacheco, a giant of a farmer who, all during the month we took over his house, went up and down the hills and impassable roads driving his tractor and thresher. With his machine he harvested the wheat of the Indians and those peasants cut off from coastal towns. He was a huge man who would suddenly burst in upon our railwayman's family with a booming voice, his body covered with cereal dust and straw. Then he would return just as noisily to his work in the mountains. For me he was one more example of the hard life in our southern region.

I found everything mysterious in that house, in the neglected streets, in the unknown lives around me, in the deep roar of the sea far off. The house had what seemed to me a huge, straggly garden and, in the center of this, a summerhouse battered by the rain, a summerhouse of white slats covered with vines. No one except me, a mere nobody, ever penetrated this gray solitude, where the ivy, the honeysuckle, and my poetry thrived. And there was another fascinating thing in that strange garden: a huge lifeboat, orphaned in some great shipwreck and now stranded in this garden without waves or storms, a castaway among the poppies.

The strange thing about this unkempt garden was that, by design or through neglect, only poppies grew there. The other plants had disappeared from this gloomy corner. Some were huge and white like doves, some scarlet like drops of blood, some purple or black, like widows forgotten there. I had never seen such a wilderness of poppies, and I have never seen another like it. And though I had a deep respect for them, and a superstitious dread only they, of all flowers, inspire in me, that did not stop me from snapping one off, now and again, the broken stem leaving sticky milk on my hands and a whiff of unearthly perfume. Then I would stroke its sumptuous petals lovingly and put them into a book to keep. To me they were the wings of huge butterflies that couldn't fly.

The first time I stood before the sea, I was overwhelmed. The great ocean unleashed its fury there between two big hills, Huilque and Maule. It wasn't just the immense snow-crested swells, rising many meters above our heads, but the loud pounding of a gigantic heart, the heartbeat of the universe.

The family laid out its table linen and tea things in that spot. The food reached my mouth sprinkled with sand, but I didn't care. What terrified me was the apocalyptic moment when my father ordered us to take our daily swim. Far back from the giant rollers, my sister Laura and I were splashed by the water's icy lash. And we trembled, believing that some wave's finger would hook us into the mountains of the sea. When, our teeth chattering and our ribs blue, my sister and I prepared to die, hand in hand, the railwayman's whistle blew and my father's voice freed us from martyrdom.

I'll tell about other mysteries in that place. One of these was the

Percherons, and another the house of the three enchanted sisters.

Several big buildings stood at the end of the small village. They may have been tanneries, owned by French Basques, who almost always ran the leather industry in southern Chile. I don't really know what they were used for. All I was interested in was watching the huge horses that came out of the front gates toward sundown and crossed the town.

They were Percherons, gigantic colts and mares. Their long manes fell down their very tall backs like human hair. They had enormous legs, also covered with tufts of hair that waved like huge plumes when they galloped off. They were deep red, white, roan, powerful. That's how volcanoes would have moved, if they had been able to trot and gallop like those colossal horses. They would go down the dusty, rocky streets like the violent shock of an earthquake. They whinnied huskily, producing subterranean sounds that sent a shudder through the quiet air. I have never again in my life seen such arrogant, massive, and statuesque horses, except perhaps for those I saw in China carved in stone for the tombs of the Ming dynasty. But even the most venerable stone cannot provide a sight like those huge animals that seemed, in my childish eyes, to emerge from the darkness of dreams, headed for some other-world of giants.

In fact, that untamed world was filled with horses. Chilean, German, and Araucanian riders, all wearing ponchos of black Castilian wool, mounted and dismounted in the streets. Scrawny or well fed, shabby or sleek, the horses stayed where the riders left them, munching on the grass, with steam coming out of their nostrils. They were accustomed to their masters and to the lonely life of the settlement. Later they would return, loaded down with sacks of food or farm implements, to the labyrinthine highlands, climbing up dreadful roads or endlessly galloping over the sand by the sea. From time to time an Araucanian rider would come out of a pawnshop or a dim tavern, mount his unperturbed horse with difficulty, and take the road back to his home in the hills, swaying from side to side, drunk to the point of unconsciousness. As I watched him start off on his journey, it seemed to me that the tipsy centaur was about to fall every time he lurched dangerously, but I was wrong: he always righted himself, only to double over again, swaying toward the other side and always recovering, glued to the saddle. He covered mile after mile, sitting

his horse like that, until he merged into the wild world of nature like an animal unsure of its way but mysteriously protected.

We returned many other summers, with the same household ceremonies, to that fascinating region. With the passing of time, between the bitter winters in Temuco and the wonder-filled summers on the coast, I was growing up, reading, falling in love, and writing.

I got used to riding on horseback. My world expanded upward and onward along the towering mud trails, over roads with sudden curves. I encountered the tangled vegetation, the silence or the sounds of wild birds, the sudden outburst of a flowering tree dressed in scarlet robes like a gigantic archbishop of the mountains, or snowed under by a riot of blossoms I had never seen before. Or from time to time, when least expected, the copihue bell-flower, wild, untrimable, indestructible, dangling from the thickets like a drop of fresh blood. Slowly I got used to the horse, the saddle, the stiff, complicated riding gear, the cruel spurs jangling at my heels. Along endless beaches or thicketed hills, a communion was started between my spirit—that is, my poetry—and the loneliest land in the world. This was many years ago, but that communion, that revelation, that pact with the wilderness, is still a part of my life.

MY FIRST POEM

Now I am going to tell you a story about birds. In Lake Budi, swans were brutally hunted. They were stalked quietly in boats and then, rowing faster, faster . . . Swans, like the albatross, take to the air clumsily, they have to make a run, skimming the water. They lift their huge wings heavily, and so were easily caught, and finished off with sticks.

Someone brought me a swan that was half dead. It was one of those magnificent birds I have not seen again anywhere in the world, a black-necked swan. A snowy vessel with its slender neck looking as if squeezed into a black silk stocking, its beak an orange color and its eyes red.

This happened at the seaside, in Puerto Saavedra, Imperial del Sur.

It was almost dead when they gave it to me. I bathed its wounds and stuffed bits of bread and fish down its throat. It

threw up everything. But it recovered from its injuries gradually and began to realize that I was its friend. And I began to realize that homesickness was killing it. So I went down the streets to the river, with the heavy bird in my arms. It swam a little way, close by. I wanted it to fish and showed it the pebbles on the bottom, the sand the silver fish of the south went gliding over. But its sad eyes wandered off into the distance.

I carried it to the river and back to my house every day for more than twenty days. The swan was almost as tall as I. One afternoon it seemed dreamier, it swam near me but wasn't entertained by my ruses for trying to teach it how to fish again. It was very still and I picked it up in my arms to take it home. But when I held it up to my breast, I felt a ribbon unrolling, and something like a black arm brushed my face. It was the long, sinuous neck falling. That's how I found out that swans don't sing when they die.

Summer is like fire in Cautín. It scorches the sky and the wheat. The land would like to shake off its lethargy. The houses are not prepared for summer, just as they were not prepared for winter. I wander off into the countryside and I walk, walk, walk. I become lost on Nielol Hill. I am alone, my pocket filled with beetles. In a box I carry a hairy spider I just caught. Overhead, the sky can't be seen. The forest is always damp, my feet slip. Suddenly a bird cries out, it's the ghostly cry of the chuco bird. A chill of warning creeps upward from my feet. The copihues, drops of blood, can barely be made out. I am only a tiny creature under the giant ferns. A ringdove flies right past my mouth, with a snapping sound of wings. Higher up, other birds laugh harshly, mocking me. I have trouble finding my way back. It's late now.

My father is not here yet. He will be back at three or four in the morning. I go upstairs to my room. I read Salgari. The rain pours down like a waterfall. In less than no time, night and the rain cover the whole world. I am alone, writing poems in my math notebook. I am up very early the next morning. The plums are green. I charge up the slopes. I carry a little packet of salt with me. I climb a tree, make myself comfortable, bite a little chunk out of a plum carefully, and dip the plum into the salt. I eat it. And I repeat this, up to one hundred plums. I know I'm overdoing it.

Our other house burned down, and this new one is filled with mystery. I climb up on the fence and I watch for the neighbors. There is no one around. I lift up some logs. Nothing but a few measly spiders. The toilet is at the back of the place. The trees next to it have caterpillars. The almond trees display their fruit covered with white down. I know how to catch bumblebees without harming them, with a handkerchief. I keep them captive for a little while and hold them up to my ears. What a beautiful buzz!

How lonely a small boy poet, dressed in black, feels on the vast and terrifying frontier wilderness! Little by little, life and books give me glimpses of overwhelming mysteries.

I can't forget what I read last night: in faraway Malaysia, Sandokan and his friends survived on breadfruit.

I don't like Buffalo Bill, because he kills Indians. But he's such a good cowpuncher! The plains and the cone-shaped tepees of the redskins are so beautiful!

I have often been asked when I wrote my first poem, when poetry was born in me.

I'll try to remember. Once, far back in my childhood, when I had barely learned to read, I felt an intense emotion and set down a few words, half rhymed but strange to me, different from everyday language. Overcome by a deep anxiety, something I had not experienced before, a kind of anguish and sadness, I wrote them neatly on a piece of paper. It was a poem to my mother, that is, to the one I knew, the angelic stepmother whose gentle shadow watched over my childhood. I had no way at all of judging my first composition, which I took to my parents. They were in the dining room, immersed in one of those hushed conversations that, more than a river, separate the world of children and the world of grownups. Still trembling after this first visit from the muse, I held out to them the paper with the lines of verse. My father took it absentmindedly, read it absentmindedly, and returned it to me absentmindedly, saying: "Where did you copy this from?" Then he went on talking to my mother in a lowered voice about his important and remote affairs.

That, I seem to remember, was how my first poem was born, and that was how I had my first sample of irresponsible literary criticism.

And all the while I was moving in the world of knowing, on the turbulent river of books, like a solitary navigator. My appetite for reading did not let up day or night. On the coast, in the tiny town of Puerto Saavedra, I found a public library and an old poet, Don Augusto Winter, who was impressed by my literary voracity. "Have you read them already?" he would say to me, handing me a new Vargas Vila, an Ibsen, a Rocambole. I gobbled up everything, indiscriminately, like an ostrich.

Around this time, a tall lady who wore long long dresses and flat shoes came to Temuco. She was the new principal of the girls' school. She was from our southernmost city, from Magellan's snows. Her name was Gabriela Mistral.

I used to watch her passing through the streets of my home town, with her sweeping dresses, and I was scared of her. But when I was taken to visit her, I found her to be very gracious. In her dark face, as Indian as a lovely Araucanian pitcher, her very white teeth flashed in a full, generous smile that lit up the room.

I was too young to be her friend, and too shy and taken up with myself. I saw her only a few times, but I always went away with some books she gave me. They were invariably Russian novels, which she considered the most extraordinary thing in world literature. I can say that Gabriela introduced me to the dark and terrifying vision of the Russian novelists and that Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, and Chekhov soon occupied a special place deep within me. They are with me still.

THE HOUSE OF THE THREE WIDOWS

One time I was invited to a threshing; it was to be done in the old way, with mares. The place was high up in the mountains and pretty far from town. I liked the adventure of going off by myself, figuring out the right route in that mountainous country. I thought if I got lost, somebody would help me out. On my horse, I left Bajo Imperial behind and narrowly made it across the sand bar of the river. There the Pacific breaks loose and attacks, again and again, the rocks and the clumps of bushes on Maule Hill, the last height, standing very tall. Then I turned off along the shore of Lake Budi. The surf pounded the foot of the hill with savage blows. I had to take advantage of the few minutes that elapsed

when a wave smashed and pulled itself in to regain its strength. We would hurry across the strip between the hill and the water, before a new wave could crush us, my horse and me, against the rugged hillside.

The danger past, the smooth blue sheet of the lake opened out to the west. The sandy coast ran on endlessly toward the mouth of Lake Toltén, a long way off. These coasts of Chile, often rugged and craggy, suddenly turn into endless ribbons and you can go for days and nights over the sand, close to the sea's foam.

The beaches seem infinite, forming, along the length of Chile, something like a planet's ring, a winding band, pursued relentlessly by the roar of the southern seas: a trail that appears to go around the coast of Chile and beyond the South Pole.

On the forested side, hazel trees with shining dark green branches waved to me, some trimmed with clusters of fruit, hazelnuts that seemed to be painted vermilion, so red are they at that time of year. The giant ferns of southern Chile were so tall that we could pass under their branches without touching them, my horse and I. Whenever my head brushed against their green, a shower of dew would drench us. Lake Budi spread out on my right: a steady blue sheet bordered by far-off woods.

It was only at the end of the lake that I saw some people. They were strange fishermen. In that strip where the ocean and the lake join, or embrace, or clash, between the two waters, there were some salt-water fish, cast out by the rough waves. The huge loaches were specially coveted, broad silver fish, strays thrashing about on those shoals. One, two, three, four, five fishermen, erect, concentrating, watched for the wake of the lost fish and suddenly brought a long trident down on the water with a terrific blow. Then they lifted high the oval-shaped silver fish, shuddering and gleaming in the sun before dying in the fishermen's baskets. It was growing late. I had left the banks of the lake and moved inland looking for the road along the jagged spurs of the hills. Darkness was inching in. Suddenly the wail of a strange wild-bird passed overhead like a hoarse moan. An eagle or a condor high up in the twilight sky seemed to halt its black wings, as a signal that I was there, following me in its heavy flight. Red-tailed foxes howled or barked or streaked across the road, and small predatory animals of the secret forest that were unknown to me.

I realized that I had lost my way. The night and the forest which had made me so happy became menacing now, they filled me with terror. One solitary traveler appeared unexpectedly in front of me, in the darkening loneliness of the road. As we approached each other, I stopped and saw that he was just one more of those rough peasants, with cheap poncho and scrawny horse, who emerged from the silence every now and then.

I told him what had happened to me.

He answered that I couldn't get to the threshing that night. He knew each and every corner of that terrain. He knew the exact spot where they were threshing. I told him I didn't want to spend the night outdoors and asked if he could tell me where I might find shelter till daybreak. He instructed me, in a few words, to go two leagues down a small trail that branched off from the road.

"You'll see the lights of a big two-story frame house in the distance," he told me.

"Is it a hotel?" I asked him.

"No, young man. But you'll be welcomed. They're three French ladies, in the lumber business, who've been living there thirty years now. They're nice to everybody. They'll put you up."

I thanked the horseman for his meager counsel and he trotted off on his rickety nag. I continued along the narrow trail, like a lost soul. A virgin moon, curved and white like a fragment of fingernail newly clipped off, was starting its climb up the sky.

About nine o'clock that night, I made out lights that could only be a house. I spurred my horse on before bolts and crossbars could block my way to that God-sent haven. I went in the gate of the property and, dodging logs and hills of sawdust, I reached the entrance, or white portico, of that house lost so far out of the way in the wilderness. I rapped on the door, softly at first, and then harder. Some minutes passed, the dreadful thought that no one was there running through my head, before a slender white-haired lady dressed in black appeared. She examined me with stern eyes, opening the door part way to question so late a traveler.

"Who are you? What do you want?" a quiet, ghostly voice asked.

"I've lost my way in the forest. I'm a student. I was invited to

the threshing at the Hernándezes'. I'm very tired. Someone told me you and your sisters are very hospitable. I'd just like a corner to sleep in, and I'll be on my way at daybreak."

"Do come in," she said. "Please feel at home."

She led me to a dark parlor and lit two or three paraffin lamps. I noticed that they were lovely art-nouveau lamps, opaline and gilt bronze. The room had a dank smell. Long, red draperies shielded the tall windows. The armchairs were under white slipcovers to protect them. From what?

It was a room from some other century, hard to place and as disquieting as a dream. The white-haired lady, wistful, in black, moved about on feet I couldn't see, with steps I couldn't hear, her hands touching first this, then that, an album, a fan, here, there, in the silence.

I felt as if I had fallen to the bottom of a lake and lived on, exhausted, dreaming down there. Suddenly two ladies, just like the one who had received me, came in. It was late and it was cold. They sat close to me, one with the vague smile of someone flirting just a little, the other with the melancholy eyes of the one who had opened the door.

Suddenly the conversation wandered very far from that out-of-the-way countryside, far also from the night drilled through by thousands of insects, the croaking of frogs, and the songs of night birds. They wanted to know all about my studies. I happened to mention Baudelaire, and told them I had started to translate his poems.

It was like an electric spark. The three dim ladies lit up. Their lifeless eyes and their stiff faces were transfigured, as if three ancient masks had dropped from their ancient features.

"Baudelaire!" they exclaimed. "This is probably the first time since the beginning of the world that anyone has spoken his name in this lonely place. We have his *Fleurs du mal* here. We're the only ones, for five hundred kilometers around, who can read his marvelous pages. No one in these mountains knows any French."

Two of the sisters had been born in Avignon. The youngest, also of French blood, was Chilean by birth. Their grandparents, their parents, all their relatives, had died a long time ago. The three had grown accustomed to the rain, to the wind, to the sawdust from the mill, to having contact with only a very few

primitive peasants and country servants. They had decided to remain there, the only house in those shaggy mountains.

An Indian servant girl came in and whispered something into the ear of the eldest lady. We went out then, down chilly hallways, until we came to the dining room. I was stunned. In the center of the room, a round table with trailing white tablecloth was illuminated by two silver candelabra with many burning candles. Silver and crystal glittered on that amazing table.

I was overcome by great timidity, as if Queen Victoria had invited me to dine at her palace. I had arrived disheveled, exhausted, and covered with dust, and this was a table fit for a prince. I was far from being one. And to them I must have looked more like a sweaty mule driver who had left his drove at their door.

I have seldom eaten so well. My hostesses were masters of the art of cooking and had as a legacy from their grandparents the recipes of their beloved France. Each dish was a surprise, tasty and aromatic. From their cellars they brought out vintage wines, aged by them in the special French way.

Although weariness would suddenly close my eyes, I listened to them speaking of strange wonders. The sisters' greatest pride was the fine points of cookery. For them, the table was the preservation of a sacred heritage, of a culture to which they, separated from their country by time and great oceans, would never return. Laughing a little at themselves, they showed me a curious card file.

"We're just crazy old women," the youngest said.

Over the past thirty years they had been visited by twenty-seven travelers who had come as far as this remote house, some on business, others out of mere curiosity, still others, like myself, by chance. The incredible thing was that they had a personal file for every one of them, with the date of the visit and the menu they had prepared on each occasion.

"We save the menu so as not to repeat even a single dish, if those friends should ever return."

I went off to sleep and dropped into bed like a sack of onions in a market. At dawn I lit a candle, washed up, and got dressed. It was already getting light when one of the stable boys saddled my horse. I didn't have the heart to say goodbye to the kind ladies in

black. Deep in me, something told me it had all been a strange, magical dream, and that, to keep from breaking the spell, I must try not to wake up.

All this happened forty-five years ago, when I was just entering adolescence. What became of those three ladies exiled with their *Fleurs du mal* in the heart of the virgin forest? What happened to their bottles of old wine, their resplendent table lit by twenty wax candles? What was the fate of the sawmill and the white house lost among the trees?

The simplest fate: death and oblivion. Perhaps the forest devoured those lives and those rooms that took me in, one unforgettable night. Yet they live on in my memory as in the clear bed of a lake of dreams. Honor to those three melancholy women who struggled in that wild solitude, with no practical purpose, to maintain an old-world elegance. They defended what their ancestors had forged with their own hands, the last traces of an exquisite culture, far off in the wilderness, at the last boundaries of the most impenetrable and lonely mountains in the world.

LOVE IN THE WHEAT

I reached the Hernández camp before noon, fresh and cheerful. My solitary ride over empty roads, and a good night's sleep, had given my reticent young face a certain glow.

The threshing of wheat, oats, barley was still done with mares. There is nothing gayer in the world than the sight of mares circling, trotting around a heap of grain, under the goading shouts of the riders. There was a splendid sun, and the air, an uncut diamond, made the mountains glitter. The threshing is a golden feast. The yellow straw piles up into golden hills; there's noise and activity everywhere; sacks rushing to get filled; women cooking; runaway horses; dogs barking; children who are constantly having to be plucked—like fruit borne by the straw—from under the horses' hoofs.

The Hernándezes were a unique tribe. The men were unkempt and unshaven, in shirtsleeves, with revolvers in their belts, and almost always splattered with grease, with dust from the grain, with mud, or soaked to the bone by rain. Fathers, sons, nephews, cousins all looked alike. They spent hours on end working under a motor, on a roof, perched on a threshing machine. They never

had anything to talk about. They joked about everything, except when they got into a brawl. Then they fought, with the fury of a tornado, knocking down anything that stood in their way. They were always the first to get to the beef barbecues out in the open fields, to the red wine and the brooding guitars. They were frontiersmen, the kind of people I liked. Studious-looking and pale, I felt puny next to those vigorous brutes; and I don't know why, but they treated me with a deference they generally didn't show anyone.

After the barbecue, the guitars, the blinding fatigue brought on by the sun and the threshing, we had to find a makeshift bed for the night. Married couples and women who were alone bedded down on the ground, inside the camp walls put up with freshly cut boards. We males had to sleep on the threshing floor. This rose into a mountain of straw and a whole hamlet could have settled into its yellow softness.

All this lack of comfort was new to me. I didn't know how to go about spreading out. I put my shoes carefully under a layer of wheat straw, and this was to serve as my pillow. I took off my clothes, bundled myself up in my poncho, and sank into the mountain of straw. I lagged far behind all the others, who gave themselves up to their snoring at once, as one man.

I lay stretched out on my back for a long while, with my eyes open, my face and arms covered with straw. The night was clear, cold, and penetrating. There was no moon, but the stars looked as if they had recently been watered by the rain and, high above the unseeing sleep of all the others, they twinkled in the sky's lap just for me. Then I fell asleep. But I woke up suddenly, because something was coming toward me, a stranger's body was moving through the straw and coming closer to mine. I was afraid. The thing was slowly drawing closer. I could hear the wisps of straw snapping, crushed by the unknown shape that kept moving toward me. My whole body stiffened, waiting. Maybe I ought to get up and yell. I remained stock-still. I could hear breathing right next to my head.

Suddenly a hand slid over me, a large, calloused hand, but it was a woman's. It ran over my brow, my eyes, my whole face, tenderly. Then an avid mouth clung to mine and I felt a woman's body pressing against mine, all the way down to my feet.

Little by little my fear turned into intense pleasure. My hand

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

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

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

2



Lost in the City

ROOMING HOUSES

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

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

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

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