

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

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



## Luminous Solitude

### FOREST IMAGES

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

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

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

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

goes over the same span on naked feet. Volunteers keep coming forward interminably. Some pause midway along the trough to stomp on the fire, crying out "Allah! Allah!"; howling, with hair-raising grimaces, rolling their eyes to heaven. Others pass over with children in their arms. No one is burned, or maybe they are, but I'm not sure.

Beside the sacred river looms the temple of Kali, goddess of death. We enter, mingling with hundreds of pilgrims who have come from deep in Hindu country to win her grace. Terrified, in rags, they are shoved along by the Brahmans who demand money for something or other, every step of the way. The Brahmans lift one of the execrable goddess' seven veils, and as they lift it, there is the blast of a gong loud enough to wake up the dead. The pilgrims fall to their knees, make their obeisance with joined hands, touch their foreheads to the ground, and move on to the next veil. The priests drive them into a courtyard, where they chop off the heads of goats with one blow from an ax and collect new tributes. The bleating of wounded animals is drowned out by the blasts of the gong. The filthy whitewashed walls are splashed right up to the roof with blood. The goddess is a statue with a swarthy face and white eyes. A scarlet tongue two meters long hangs from her mouth to the ground. Necklaces of skulls and emblems of death weigh down her ears and her neck. The pilgrims contribute their last coins before being swept out into the street.

The poets who surrounded me to chant their songs and their poems were nothing like these abject pilgrims. Dressed in their trailing white garments, squatting on the grass, accompanying themselves with their tambourines, each let out a low-pitched, broken cry, and from his lips rose up a song he had composed in the same form and meter as the ancient, millennial songs. But the songs' emphasis had changed. These were not sensual or joyful songs but songs of protest, songs against hunger, songs written in prison. Many of these young poets I met all over India, whose brooding eyes I'll never be able to drive out of my mind, had just come out of jail and would perhaps return to their cells tomorrow. For they sought to rise up against misery and against the gods as well. This is the time we have been destined to live in.

And this is the golden age of world poetry. While the new songs are hunted down, a million men sleep by the roadside, on the outskirts of Bombay, night after night. They sleep. They are born and they die. There is no housing, no bread, no medicines. Civilized, proud England left her colonial empire like this. She parted from her former subjects without leaving them schools, or industries, or housing, or hospitals, only prisons and mountains of empty whiskey bottles.

The memory of Rango the orangutan is another tender image that comes back in with the waves. In Medan, Sumatra, I knocked at the gate of the run-down Botanical Gardens on more than one occasion. To my amazement, he came to open it for me each time. We used to go down a path hand in hand, to sit down at a table on which he banged with both hands and both feet. A waiter would then appear, and he would serve us our pitcher of beer, not too small, not too large, just right for the orangutan and the poet.

In the Singapore zoo we saw a lyrebird in a cage, glittering, enraged, with the resplendent beauty of a bird who has just flown out of Eden. And farther along, a black female panther, with the smell of the jungle still fresh on her, was pacing in her cage. She was a strange patch of starry night, a magnetic ribbon in constant motion, a lithe black volcano ready to destroy the world, a dynamo of pure, undulating power, and two yellow eyes, two unerring knives, probing with their fire, unable to understand her imprisonment or the human race.

We came to the strange Snake Temple on the outskirts of the city of Penang, in what used to be called Indochina.

This temple has been described over and over by travelers and journalists. So many wars, such repeated destruction, and so much time and rain have come down on the streets of Penang that I wonder if it is still there. Under the tiled roof, a low, blackish building, eaten away by the tropical rains, in a thick wilderness of huge plantain leaves. A dank smell. A scent of frangipani. When we first enter the temple, we see nothing in the dimness. A strong odor of incense, and something moving over there. It's a snake stretching out lazily. Little by little we notice others. Then we

see that there may be dozens. Later we realize that there are hundreds or thousands of snakes. There are tiny ones coiled around the candelabras, there are some that are dark, metallic, and slender, they all look drowsy and sated. Sure enough, fine porcelain bowls can be seen everywhere, some brimming with milk, others filled with eggs. The snakes don't notice us. We pass down the narrow labyrinths of the temple, brushing against them. They are over our heads, hanging from the golden architecture; they are sleeping on the stonework, or curled up on the altars. Over there is the dreaded Russell's viper; it's swallowing an egg, near a dozen lethal coral snakes, whose scarlet rings advertise their insatiant poison. I made out the fer-de-lance, several enormous pythons, the coluber de rusi, and the coluber noya. Green, gray, blue, black serpents filled the hall. A dead silence everywhere. From time to time, a bonze dressed in saffron robes crosses the shadows. The brilliant color of his tunic makes him look like one more snake, stirring lazily in quest of an egg or a bowl of milk.

Were these snakes brought here? How did they adjust? Our questions are answered with a smile, we are told that they came on their own, and will go on their own when they feel like it. The doors, in fact, are open and there is no graving or glass or anything forcing them to stay in the temple.

The bus was to leave Penang and cross the forest country and villages of Indochina to get to Saigon. No one understood my language, nor did I understand theirs. We made stops along the interminable road at out-of-the-way places in the jungle, and passengers got off, peasants in unusual clothes, slant-eyed and quietly dignified. By now, only three or four remained in the undaunted old rattletrap that whined and threatened to come apart in the sweltering night.

All of a sudden, I was seized with panic. Where was I? Where was I going? Why was I spending this endless night among these strangers? We were crossing from Laos into Cambodia. I took in the inscrutable faces of the last of my fellow travelers. Their eyes were wide open. They looked like robbers. No doubt about it, I was among the sort of bandits usually found in Oriental stories.

They exchanged knowing glances and watched me out of the corner of their eyes. Just then, the bus came to a dead stop right

in the middle of the jungle. I picked the spot where I would die. I wouldn't let them carry me off to be sacrificed under those unfamiliar trees whose dark shadows cut off the sky. I would die here, on this bench in the rickety bus, trapped among baskets full of vegetables and chickens in crates, the only friendly things around at that terrible moment. I looked about me, ready to face the fury of my killers, and I noticed that they, too, had vanished.

I waited a long while, alone, with my spirit completely crushed by the intense darkness of the alien night. I was going to die and no one would hear about it. So far from my small, beloved country! So far away from my books and from all those I loved!

Suddenly a light appeared, and then another. The road came alive with lights. There was the sound of a drum; an outburst of shrill notes of Cambodian music. Flutes, tambourines, and torches filled the road with music and patches of light. A man got on and told me in English: "The bus has broken down. Since there will be a long wait, perhaps till daybreak, and there is no place to sleep here, the passengers went out to look for a troupe of musicians and dancers to entertain you."

For hours, under those trees that were no longer intimidating, I watched the lovely ritual dances of a noble and ancient culture and listened, till sunup, to its delightful music flooding the road. The poet cannot be afraid of the people. Life seemed to be handing me a warning and teaching me a lesson I would never forget: the lesson of hidden honor, of fraternity, we know nothing about, of beauty that blossoms in the dark.

#### A CONGRESS IN INDIA

This is a glorious day. We are present at the congress of the Indian National Congress Party. A nation in the thick of its fight for liberation. Thousands of delegates pack the galleries. I meet Gandhi. And Pandit Motilal Nehru, another patriarch of the movement. And his son, the elegant young Jawaharlal, recently back from England. Nehru is all for independence, while Gandhi favors simple autonomy as a necessary first step. Gandhi: the sharp profile of a very cunning fox; a practical man; a politician along the lines of our early creole leaders; a mastermind at committees; a shrewd tactician, indefatigable. As the multitude passes by in an endless

stream, touching the hem of his white tunic worshipfully and crying "Gandhiji! Gandhiji!" he gives them a perfunctory salute and smiles without taking off his glasses. He receives messages and reads them; he answers telegrams; all this without effort; he is a saint who never wears himself out. Nehru: the intelligent promulgator of their revolution.

One of the great figures at the congress was Subhas Chandra Bose, impetuous demagogue, violent anti-imperialist, fascinating political figure of his country. In the war of 1914, during the Japanese invasion, he sided with the invaders against the British Empire. Many years later, here in India, one of his friends tells me how the fortress of Singapore fell. "Our weapons were trained on the Japanese besiegers. Suddenly we began asking ourselves why. We had our soldiers do an about-face and we pointed our guns at the English troops. It was quite simple. The Japanese invaders were just passing through. The English seemed to be here for all eternity."

Subhas Bose was arrested, tried, found guilty of high treason, and sentenced to death by the British courts in India. The protests triggered off by the independence movement multiplied. At last, after many legal battles, his lawyer—Nehru himself—won amnesty for him. He became a popular hero from that moment on.

#### THE RECLINING GODS

... Statues of Buddha everywhere, of Lord Buddha . . . The severe, upright, worm-eaten statues, with a golden patina like an animal's sheen, deteriorating as if the air were wearing them away . . . In their cheeks, in the folds of their tunics, at elbows and navel and mouth and smile, tiny blemishes: fungi, pockmarks, traces of jungle excrement . . . Or the recumbent, the immense, recumbent statues, forty meters of stone, of sand granite, pale, stretched out among the rustling fronds, emerging suddenly from some corner of the jungle, from its surrounding site . . . Asleep or not asleep, they have been there a hundred years, a thousand, one thousand times a thousand years . . . Yet there is something soft about them and they are known for an other-worldly air of indecision, longing to stay or go away . . . And that very soft stone smile, that imponderable majesty which is

nevertheless made of hard, everlasting stone—at whom, at how many, on the bloodstained planet are they smiling . . . ? The fleeing peasant women passed, the men from the fire, the visored warriors, the false high priests, the tourists who devour everything . . . And the statue remained in place, the immense stone with knees, with folds in its stone tunic, with a look lost in the distance and yet really here, thoroughly inhuman and also in some way human, in some form or contradiction a statue, god and not god, stone and not stone, under the screeching of black birds, surrounded by the wingbeats of red birds, of the birds of the forest . . . We are reminded of the terrible Spanish Christs we inherited wounds and all, pustules and all, scars and all, with that odor given off by churches, of wax candles, of mustiness, of a closed room . . . Those Christs had second thoughts about being men or gods . . . To make them human beings, to bring them closer to those who suffer, midwives and bearded men, cripples and avaricious men, the inner circles of churches and those outside the churches, to make them human, the sculptors gave them the most gruesome wounds, and all this ended up as the religion of suffering, as sin and you'll suffer, don't sin and you'll suffer, live and you'll suffer, leaving you no possible way out . . . Not here, here the stone found peace . . . The sculptors rebelled against the canons of pain, and these colossal Buddhas, with the feet of giant gods, have a smile on their stone faces that is beatifically human, without all that pain . . . And they give off an odor, not of a dead room, not of sacrifices and cobwebs, but an odor of vegetable space, of sudden gusts of wind swooping down in wild swirls of feathers, leaves, pollen from the infinite forest . . .

#### HAPLESS HUMAN FAMILY

In several essays on my poetry I have read that my stay in the Far East influenced it in some ways, especially *Residencia en la tierra*. As it happens, the poems of *Residencia en la tierra* are the only ones I wrote at that time, but without going so far as to defend my statement categorically, I say that this business of influence is mistaken.

All the esoteric philosophy of the Oriental countries, when confronted with real life, turned out to be a by-product of the

anxiety, neurosis, confusion, and opportunism of the West; that is, of the crisis in the guiding principles of capitalism. In the India of those years there was little room for deep contemplation of one's navel. An existence that made brutal physical demands, a colonial position based on the most cold-blooded degradation, thousands dying every day of cholera, smallpox, fever, and hunger, a feudal society thrown into chaos by India's immense population and industrial poverty, stamped such great ferocity on life that all semblance of mysticism disappeared.

The theosophic centers were generally run by adventurers from the West, including North and South Americans. Of course, there were people among them who acted in good faith, but the majority exploited a cheap market where exotic amulets and fetishes wrapped in metaphysical sales talk were sold wholesale. These people were always spouting Dharma and Yoga. They reveled in religious acrobatics, all empty show and high-sounding words.

For these reasons, the Orient struck me as a large hapless human family, leaving no room in my conscience for its rites and gods. I don't believe, then, that my poetry during this period reflected anything but the loneliness of an outsider transplanted to a violent, alien world.

I recall one of those tourists of the occult, a vegetarian and a lecturer. He was a little middle-aged character named Powers, with a shiny bald dome and very light blue eyes, whose cynical look pierced right through you. He came from North America, from California, was a Buddhist, and he always closed his lectures with the following dietetic prescription: "As Rockefeller used to say, eat an orange every day."

Powers's cheerful openness appealed to me. He spoke Spanish. After his lectures we used to go off together and feast on huge bellyfuls of roast lamb with onions. He was a Buddhist theologian—whether or not he was the real thing, I don't know—but his voracious appetite was more authentic than the contents of his lectures.

He soon fell in love, first with a half-caste who was crazy about his tuxedo and his theories; she was an anemic young lady with long-suffering eyes who believed he was a god, a living Buddha. That's how religions are born.

After several months with this woman, he came to see me one day about attending a new marriage of his. On his motor-cycle, provided by the commercial concern for which he was a refrigerator salesman, we quickly left groves, monasteries, and rice paddies behind us, finally coming to a small village with Chinese houses and Chinese inhabitants. Powers was received with fireworks and music, while the young bride, looking like an idol in her white make-up, remained seated on a chair that was higher than any of the others. Music was played while we sipped refreshments of all colors. Not once did Powers and his new wife say a word to each other.

We returned to the city. Powers explained that only the bride took part in this wedding ritual. The ceremonies would go on without his having to be there. Later he would go back to live with her.

"You realize you're a polygamist, don't you?"

"My other wife knows about it and will be very happy," he said.

This statement had as much truth in it as his story about an orange a day. When we got to his house, his first wife's home, we found her, the long-suffering half-caste, almost dead, with her cup of poison and a farewell note on the night table. Her dark body lay completely naked and motionless under the mosquito net. Her agony lasted several hours.

Although I was now beginning to find him repulsive, I stood by Powers because his suffering was obviously sincere. The cynic in him had gone to pieces. I went to the funeral with him. We placed the cheap coffin on a pile of firewood, on the bank of a river. Powers lit some kindling with a match, muttering ritual phrases in Sanskrit.

A few musicians dressed in orange-colored tunics chanted or blew on some very sad-sounding instruments. The pyre kept burning a little, then going out, and the fire had to be revived with matches. The river flowed on between its banks indifferently. The eternal blue sky of the Orient also displayed absolute unconcern, infinite disregard for the pitiful and lonely funeral of a poor forsaken creature.

My official duties demanded my attention only once every three months, when a ship arrived from Calcutta bound for Chile with hard paraffin and large cases of tea. I had to stamp and sign documents with feverish speed. Then three months of doing nothing followed, of solitary contemplation in markets and temples. This was the most painful period for my poetry.

The street became my religion. The Burmese street, the Chinese quarter with its open-air theaters and its paper dragons and its brilliant lanterns. The Hindu street, the humblest of them, with its temples operated as a business by one caste, and the poor people prostrate in the mud outside. Markets where the betel leaves rose in green pyramids like mountains of malachite. The stalls and pens where they sold wild animals and birds. The winding streets where supple Burmese women walked with long cheroots in their mouths. All this engrossed me and drew me gradually under the spell of real life.

The caste system had the Indian people arranged like an amphitheater of parallelepiped galleries superimposed one above the other, with the gods sitting at the top. The English, in turn, maintained their own caste system, starting with the small shop clerks, going on to professionals and intellectuals, then to exporters, and culminating on the system's garden roof, where the aristocrats of the Civil Service and the bankers of the Empire lounged in comfort.

These two worlds never touched. The natives were not allowed in the places reserved for the English, and the English lived away from the throbbing pulse of the country. This situation created problems for me. My British friends saw me in a gharry, a little horse-drawn cab used mainly for ephemeral trysts in transit, and offered me the kindly advice that a consul should never use these vehicles for any purpose. They also suggested that I should not frequent a lively Persian restaurant, where I drank the best tea in the world in little translucent cups. These were final warnings. After that, they stopped greeting me.

This boycott couldn't have pleased me more. Those intolerant Europeans were not really interesting, and after all, I had not come to the Orient to spend my life with transient colonizers but with the ancient spirit of that world, with that large hapless human family. I went so deep into the soul and the life of the people

that I lost my heart to a native girl. In the street she dressed like an Englishwoman and used the name Josie Bliss, but in the privacy of her home, which I soon shared, she shed those clothes and that name to wear her dazzling sarong and her secret Burmese name.

#### WIDOWER'S TANGO

I had a troubled home life. Sweet Josie Bliss gradually became so brooding and possessive that her jealous tantrums turned into an illness. Except for this, perhaps I would have stayed at her side forever. I loved her naked feet, the white flowers brightening her dark hair. But her temper drove her to savage paroxysms. The letters I received from abroad made her jealous and furious; she hid my telegrams without opening them, she glowered at the air I breathed.

Sometimes a light would wake me up, a ghost moving on the other side of the mosquito net. It was she, dressed in white, brandishing her long, sharpened native knife. It was she, walking around and around my bed for hours at a time, without quite making up her mind to kill me. When you die, she used to say to me, my fears will end. The next day she would carry out mysterious rituals to make me remain faithful.

She would have ended up by killing me. Fortunately, I received official notice of my transfer to Ceylon. I made secret preparations for my departure and one day, abandoning my clothes and my books, I left the house as usual and boarded the ship that was to carry me far away.

I was leaving Josie Bliss, a kind of Burmese panther, with the deepest sorrow. The ship had barely started pitching and rolling in the Gulf of Bengal, when I started to write "Tango del viudo" ("Widower's Tango"), a tragic poem dedicated to the woman I lost and who lost me, because a volcano of anger boiled constantly in her blood. The night looked so vast, the earth so lonely!

#### OPPIUM

... Entire streets were set aside for opium . . . The smokers stretched out on low benches . . . They were in the true holy places of India . . . These contained no signs of luxury, no up-

holstery, no silk cushions . . . Nothing but unpainted planks, bamboo pipes, and pillows of Chinese porcelain . . . An air of decorum and austerity prevailed which was not to be found in the temples . . . The dreamers never stirred or made any sound . . . I smoked one pipe . . . There was nothing to it . . . Just a haze of smoke, warm and milky . . . I smoked four pipes and was sick for five days, with a nausea that rose from my spinal cord, that descended from my brain . . . And hatred for the sunlight, for life itself . . . Opium's revenge . . . There had to be more to it than this . . . So much had been said, so much had been written, there had been so much poking into briefcases and bags, in attempts to intercept the poison in customs, the famed, sacred poison . . . I would have to overcome my queasiness . . . Become familiar with opium, experience it, before I could pass judgment . . . I smoked many pipefuls, until I knew . . . There are no dreams, no images, there is no paroxysm . . . There is a melodious draining of strength, as if an infinitely soft note lingered in the air . . . A blacking out, a hollow feeling inside oneself . . . The slightest movement, an elbow, the neck, any far-off sound of a carriage, a horn, or a street cry, became part of the oneness, a delicious, sleepy sensation . . . I understood why hired hands from plantations, day laborers, rickshaw-men who pull and pull the rickshaw all day long, would lay there dazed, motionless . . . Opium was not, as painted to me, the paradise of the exotic, but an escape for the exploited . . . All those in the opium dens were poor devils . . . There was no embroidered cushion, not the slightest hint of luxury . . . Not a flicker of light in the place, not even in the half-closed eyes of the smokers . . . Were they resting, were they sleeping . . . ? I was never able to find out . . . No one spoke . . . No one ever spoke . . . No furnishings, no rugs, nothing . . . On the worn benches, smoothed by so much contact, a few small wooden bolsters could be seen . . . Nothing else, except silence and the aroma of opium, strangely repellent yet powerful . . . No doubt, here was a path to destruction . . . The opium of the magnates, of the colonizers, was reserved for the colonized . . . At the entrance, the smokers found their authorized ration, their number and their permit ready for them . . . Inside, a vast, smoky silence reigned, an immobility that eased away unhappiness and sweet-

ened fatigue . . . A hazy silence, the dregs of many broken dreams, found a placid retreat here . . . The dreamers with their half-closed eyes were living an hour submerged in the sea, an entire night on a hilltop, delighting in a subtle and delicious repose . . .

After that, I did not go back to the smoking dens . . . I already knew . . . I had experienced . . . I had touched the untouchable . . . hidden far back behind the smoke . . .

## CEYLON

In 1929, Ceylon, the most beautiful of the world's large islands, had the same colonial structure as Burma and India. The English had entrenched themselves in their neighborhoods and their clubs, hemmed in by a vast multitude of musicians, potters, weavers, plantation slaves, monks in yellow, and immense gods carved into the stone mountains.

Caught between the Englishmen dressed every evening in dinner jackets and the Hindus I couldn't hope to reach in their fabulous immensity, I had only solitude open to me, and so that time was the loneliest in my life. Yet I also recall it as the most luminous, as if a lightning flash of extraordinary brightness had stopped at my window to throw light on my destiny inside and out.

I went to live in a small bungalow recently built in the suburb of Wellawatte, near the sea. It was a sparsely populated area, with the surf breaking on the reefs nearby. The music of the sea swelled into the evening.

In the morning, the miracle of this newly washed nature was overwhelming. I joined the fishermen very early. Equipped with long floats, the boats looked like sea spiders. The men pulled out fish of vivid colors, fish like birds from the teeming forest, some with the deep blue phosphorescence of intense living velvet, others shaped like prickly balloons that shriveled up into sorry little sacs of thorns.

With horror I watched the massacre of those jewels of the sea. The fish were sold in segments to the poor. The machetes hacked to pieces the God-sent sustenance from the deep, turning it into blood-drenched merchandise.

Strolling up the shore, I would come to the elephants' bathing hole. With my dog alongside, I couldn't get lost. Out of the smooth water surged a perfectly still, gray mushroom: soon it turned into a serpent, then into an enormous head, and finally into a mountain with tusks. No other country in the world had, or has even now, so many elephants doing work on its roads. They were an amazing sight, far from any circus or the bars of any zoo, trudging up and down with their loads of timber, like hard-working giant journeymen.

My dog and my mongoose were my sole companions. Fresh from the jungle, the latter grew up at my side, slept in my bed, and ate at my table. No one can imagine the affectionate nature of a mongoose. My little pet was familiar with every minute of my day-to-day life, she tramped all over my papers, and raced after me all day long. She curled up between my shoulder and my head at siesta time and slept there the fitful, electric sleep of wild animals.

My tame mongoose became famous in the neighborhood. The constant battles mongooses wage so courageously against the deadly cobras have earned them a kind of mythological prestige. I believe in this, having often seen them fight these snakes, whom they defeat through sheer agility and because of their thick salt-and-pepper coat of hair, which deceives and confuses the reptiles. The country people believe that, after battling its poisonous enemy, the mongoose goes in search of antidotal herbs.

Anyway, the fame of my mongoose, who accompanied me every day on my long walks by the seashore, brought all the neighborhood kids to my house one afternoon in an impressive procession. An enormous snake had appeared in the streets, and they had come to ask for Kiria, my celebrated mongoose, whose sure victory they were ready to cheer on. Followed by my admirers—entire bands of Tamils and Singhalese youngsters wearing nothing but loin-cloths—I led the fight-bound parade, with my mongoose in my arms.

The ophidian was the dreaded black polonga, or Russell's viper, which has a deadly bite. It was sunning itself in the weeds on top of a white water main, silhouetted like a whip on snow.

My followers dropped behind silently. I followed the pipe and released my mongoose about two meters from the viper. Kiria

sniffed danger and crawled slowly toward the serpent. My small friends and I held our breaths. The great battle was about to begin. The snake coiled, raised its head, opened its gullet, and fixed its hypnotic eyes on the small animal. The mongoose kept edging forward. Only a few centimeters from the monster's mouth, however, she realized exactly what was about to happen. Then, with a great leap, she streaked wildly in the opposite direction, leaving serpent and spectators behind, and did not stop running until she reached my bedroom.

That's how I lost caste, more than thirty years ago, in the suburb of Wellawatte.

The other day, my sister brought me a notebook containing my earliest poems, written in 1918 and 1919. Reading them over, I had to smile at their childish and adolescent melancholy, that literary sense of solitude given off by all my youthful work. The young writer cannot write without that shudder of loneliness, even when it is only imaginary, any more than the mature writer will be able to produce anything without a flavor of human companionship, of society.

I learned what true loneliness was, in those days and years in Wellawatte. During all that time I slept on a field cot like a soldier, an explorer. All I had for company were a table and two chairs, my work, my dog, my mongoose, and the "boy" who did the housework and returned to his village at night. This man was not, properly speaking, a companion; his status as an Oriental servant forced him to be quieter than a shadow. His name was, or still is, Bhrampy. There was no need to give him any orders, since he always had everything ready: my meal on the table, my freshly ironed clothes, the bottle of whiskey on the verandah. He seemed to have forgotten how to speak. The only thing he knew how to do was smile, with huge equine teeth.

Solitude, in this case, was not a formula for building up a writing mood but something as hard as a prison wall; you could smash your head against the wall and nobody came, no matter how you screamed or wept.

Across the blue air, across the yellow sand, past the primordial forest, past the vipers and the elephants, I realized, there were hundreds, thousands of human beings who worked and sang by



the waterside, who lit fires and molded pitchers; and passionate women also, sleeping naked on thin mats, under the light of the immense stars. But how was I to get close to that throbbing world without being looked upon as an enemy?

Step by step, I became familiar with the island. One night I crossed all the dark neighborhoods of Colombo to attend a gala dinner. From a darkened house came the voice of a boy or a woman singing. I had the rickshaw stop. At the humble door, I was overwhelmed by a strong scent, Ceylon's unmistakable odor: a mixture of jasmine, sweat, coconut oil, frangipani, and magnolia. Dark faces, which blended in with the color and the odor of the night, invited me in. I sat down quietly on a mat, while the mysterious human voice that had made me stop sang on in the dark; the voice of a boy or a woman, tremulous and sobbing, rose to an unbelievable pitch, was suddenly cut off, and sank so low it became as dark as the shadows, clinging to the fragrance of the frangipani, looping itself in arabesques and suddenly dropping with all its crystalline weight, as if its highest jet had touched the sky, only to spill back quickly in among the jasmynes.

I stayed there a long while, caught in the magic spell of the drums and fascinated by the voice, and then I went on my way, drunk with the enigma of an emotion I can't describe, of a rhythm whose mystery issued from the whole earth. An earth filled with music and wrapped in fragrance and shadows.

The English were already seated at the table, dressed in black and white.

"Forgive me. I stopped along the way to listen to some music," I told them.

They, who had lived in Ceylon for twenty-five years, reacted with elegant disbelief. Music? The natives had musicians? No one had known about it. This was news to them.

This terrible gap between the British masters and the vast world of the Asians was never closed. And it ensured an inhuman isolation, a total ignorance of the values and the life of the Asians.

There were exceptions within this narrow colonialism, I found out later. Suddenly an Englishman from the Service Club would go off the deep end about some Indian beauty. He was immediately fired and cut off like a leper by his countrymen. Something else happened at about this time: the colonists ordered the burning of a Singhalese peasant's hut, to rout him out in order to

expropriate his land. The Englishman ordered to burn the hut to the ground was a modest official named Leonard Woolf. He refused and was dismissed from his post. Shipped back to England, he wrote one of the best books ever published about the Orient: *A Village in the Jungle*. A masterpiece true both to life and to literature, it was virtually eclipsed by the fame of his wife, none other than Virginia Woolf, the great subjective novelist of world renown.

Little by little the impenetrable crust began to crack open and I struck up a few good friendships. At the same time, I discovered the younger generation, steeped in colonialist culture, who talked only about books just out in England. I found out that the pianist, photographer, critic, and cinematographer Lionel Wendt was the central figure of a cultural life torn between the death rattles of the Empire and a human appraisal of the untapped values of Ceylon.

Lionel Wendt, who owned an extensive library and received all the latest books from England, got into the extravagant and generous habit of every week sending to my house, which was a good distance from the city, a cyclist loaded down with a sack of books. Thus, for some time, I read kilometers of English novels, among them the first edition of *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, published privately in Florence. Lawrence's works impressed me because of their poetic quality and a certain vital magnetism focused on the hidden relationships between human beings. However, it soon became clear to me that, for all his genius, he was frustrated by his passion for instructing the reader, like so many other great English writers. D. H. Lawrence sets up a course in sexual education that has almost nothing to do with what we learn spontaneously from love and life. He ended up boring me stiff, but this did not lessen my admiration for his tortured mystico-sexual search, all the more painful because it was so useless.

One of the things I remember from my Ceylon days is a great elephant hunt.

The elephants had grown much too numerous in one district, where they made constant raids, damaging houses and farmlands. For over a month, all along the banks of a wide river, the peasants had gradually rounded up the wild herds—with grass fires, bonfires, and tom-toms—and driven them back toward one spot in the

jungle. Night and day, the fires and the noise excited the huge beasts, drifting now like a slow river toward the northwestern part of the island.

On this particular day, the kraal was all set. A stockade penned off a part of the forest. I saw how the first elephant went in through a narrow passage and sensed itself trapped. It was too late. Hundreds more followed into this dead-end passage. Almost five hundred strong, the immense herd of elephants could neither advance nor retrace their steps.

The most powerful males charged the palisades, trying to knock them down, but innumerable spears surged up on the other side and halted them. Then they regrouped in the center of the enclosure, determined to protect the females and the young. Their organization and their protectiveness made them a touching sight. They let out an anguished call, a kind of neigh or trumpet blast, and in their despair uprooted the weakest trees.

Suddenly the tamers went in, mounted on two huge trained elephants. The domesticated pair acted like common policemen. They took their places on either side of the captive animal, punned him with their trunks, and helped reduce him to immobility. Next, with thick ropes, the hunters secured one of his hind legs to a strong tree. One by one, the creatures were rendered helpless in this same way.

The captive elephant turns down his food for a good many days. But the hunters know his weaknesses. They let the animals fast awhile and then bring them the sprouts and tender stalks of their favorite plants, those they would forage for on their long forest treks when they were still free to roam at will. At last, the elephant breaks down and eats. He has been tamed and begins to learn his heavy chores.

#### LIFE IN COLOMBO

In Colombo there seemed to be no visible symptoms of revolution. Its political climate was different from India's. Everything was engulfed by an oppressive calm. The country supplied England with the finest tea in the world.

The country was split into sectors, or compartments. The English, who occupied the tip of the pyramid and lived in large

residences with gardens, were followed by a middle class much like that in South American countries. They were and may still be called burghers and were descendants of the former Boers, the Dutch settlers of South Africa exiled to Ceylon during the colonial war of the last century.

Below them was the Buddhist and Moslem population of Ceylon, which numbered many millions. And still further down, making up the worst-paid working ranks, and also running into the millions, were the Indian immigrants, all from the southern part of that country; they spoke Tamil and professed the Hindu religion.

In the so-called "polite society," which paraded its finest clothes and jewels in Colombo's exclusive clubs, two famous snobs competed for leadership. One was a phony French nobleman, Count de Mauny, who had a group of devotees. The other was an elegant and devil-may-care Pole, my friend Winzer, who dominated the few fashionable salons there were. This man was extremely witty, quite cynical, and a source of knowledge about everything in the world. He had a strange profession—"preserver of the cultural and archaeological treasure"—and going along with him on one of his official expeditions was an eye-opening experience to me.

Excavations had brought to light two magnificent cities the jungle had swallowed up: Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa. Pillars and corridors gleamed once again in the brilliant Singhalese sun. Naturally, everything that could be shipped, was carefully packed and went on its way to the British Museum in London.

My friend Winzer was pretty good at his work. He went to remote monasteries and, to the enormous satisfaction of the Buddhist monks, he loaded the official van with marvelous stone sculptures, thousands of years old, that would end up in England's museums. The look of contentment on the faces of the saffron-garbed monks was something to see, when Winzer would leave them some painted-up celluloid Buddhist images, made in Japan, as replacements for their own antiques. They would look them over with reverent eyes and set them up on the same altars from which the jasper and granite statues had smiled for centuries.

My friend Winzer was an excellent product of the Empire; that is, an elegant short-change artist.

Something came to throw a cloud over those days literally burned away by the sun. Without warning, my Burmese love, the tempestuous Josie Bliss, pitched camp in front of my house. She had come all the way from her far-off country. Believing that rice was not grown anywhere except in Rangoon, she arrived with a sack of it on her back, with our favorite Paul Robeson records, and a long, rolled-up mat. She spent all her time posted at the front door, looking out for anyone who came to visit me, and she would pounce on them and insult them. I can see her now, consumed by her overwhelming jealousy, threatening to burn down my house, and attacking a sweet Eurasian girl who had come to pay a call.

The colonial police considered her uncontrollable behavior a focus of disruption in the quiet street, and I was warned that she would be thrown out of the country if I didn't take her in. I felt wretched for days, racked between the tenderness her unhappy love stirred in me and the terror I had of her. I didn't dare let her set foot in my house. She was a love-smitten terrorist, capable of anything.

One day, at last, she made up her mind to go away. She begged me to go with her to the ship. When it was time to weigh anchor and I had to go ashore, she wrenched away from the passengers around her, and seized by a gust of grief and love, she covered my face with kisses and bathed me with her tears. She kissed my arms, my suit, in a kind of ritual, and suddenly slipped down to my shoes, before I could stop her. When she stood up again, the chalk polish of my white shoes was smeared like flour all over her face. I couldn't ask her to give up her trip, to leave the ship with me instead of going away forever. My better judgment prevented me from doing that, but my heart received a great scar which is still part of me. That unrestrained grief, those terrible tears rolling down her chalky face, are still fresh in my memory.

I had almost finished writing the first part of *Residencia en la tierra*. But my work was progressing very slowly. Distance and a deep silence separated me from my world, and I could not bring myself to enter wholeheartedly the alien world around me. Things that happened in my life, which was suspended in a

vacuum, were brought together in my book as if they were natural events: "Closer to life's blood than to the ink." I tried to purify my style, but relied more and more on a wild melancholy. I insisted on truth and effective rhetoric (because they are the ingredients for the bread of poetry) in a bitter style that worked systematically toward my own destruction. The style is not only the man. It is also everything around him, and if the very air he breathes does not enter into the poem, the poem is dead: dead because it has not had a chance to breathe.

I have never read with so much pleasure or so voluminously as I did in that suburb of Colombo where I lived all alone for so long. From time to time I would return to Rimbaud, Quevedo, or Proust. *Swann's Way* made me experience all over again the tortments, the loves and jealousies of my adolescence. And I realized that in the phrase from Vinteuil's sonata, a musical phrase Proust referred to as "aerial and fragrant," one savors not only the most exquisite description of sensuous sound but also a desperate measure of passion itself.

My problem, in those solitary surroundings, was to find this music so that I might listen to it. With the help of my friend the musician and musicologist, we pursued the matter until we learned that Proust's Vinteuil was probably a combination of Schubert and Wagner and Saint-Saëns and Fauré and d'Indy and César Franck. My shamefully skimpy musical curriculum had omitted almost all those composers. Their works were boxes that were missing, or sealed to me. My ear could never recognize any but the most obvious melodies and, even then, with difficulty.

Making further headway in the investigation, more literary than musical, I finally got hold of a three-record album of César Franck's Sonata for Piano and Violin. No doubt about it, Vinteuil's phrase was there. There was absolutely no room for doubt.

For me its attraction had been purely literary. In his sharp-sighted narrative about a dying society he loved and hated, Proust, the greatest exponent of poetic realism, lingered with passionate indulgence over many works of art, paintings and cathedrals, actresses and books. But although his insight illuminated whatever it touched, he often went back to the enchanted moment of this sonata and its renaissance phrase with an intensity that he probably did not give to any other descriptive passages. His

words led me to relive my own life, to recover the hidden sentiments I had almost lost within myself in my long absence. I wanted to see in that musical phrase Proust's magical narrative and I was swept away on music's wings.

The phrase loses itself in the depths of the shadows, falling in pitch, prolonging, enhancing its agony. It appears to build up in anguish like a Gothic structure, volutes repeated on and on, swayed by the rhythm that lifts a slender spire endlessly upward.

The element born of pain looks for a triumphal way out that, in its rise, will not deny its origin transmuted by sadness. It curls seemingly into a melancholy spiral, while the dark notes of the piano accompany time and again the death and renaissance of the sound. The heart-rending intimacy of the piano repeats, time and again, the serpentine birth, until love and pain come together in death and victory.

There could be no doubt for me that this was the phrase and this the sonata.

Savage darkness came down like a fist on my house lost among the coconut trees of Wellawatte, but each night the sonata lived with me, leading me on, welling around me, filling me with its everlasting sadness, its victorious melancholy.

Until now, the critics who have scrutinized my work have not detected this secret influence I am confessing here. For I wrote a large part of *Residencia en la tierra* there, in Wellawatte. Although my poetry is not "fragrant or aerial" but sadly earthbound, I think those qualities, so often clad in mourning, have something to do with my deep feelings for this music that lived within me.

Years later, back in Chile once more, I met the big three of Chilean music—youth, gathered together at a party. It was 1932, I believe, in Marta Brunet's home. Claudio Arrau was chatting in a corner with Domingo Santa Cruz and Armando Carvajal. I sauntered over, but they hardly spared me a glance. They went on talking imperturbably about music and composers. So I tried to show off a little, bringing up that sonata, the only one I knew. They looked at me with a distracted air and spoke down to me: "César Franck? Why César Franck? Verdi is what you should get to know." And they went on with their conversation, burying me under my own ignorance, from which I still haven't been able to escape.

## SINGAPORE

Solitude in Colombo was not only dull but indolent. I had a few friends on the street where I lived. Girls of various colorings visited my campaign cot, leaving no record but the lightning spasm of the flesh. My body was a lonely bonfire burning night and day on that tropical coast. One friend, Patsy, showed up frequently with some of her friends, dusky and golden, girls of Boer, English, Dravidian blood. They went to bed with me sportingly, asking for nothing in return.

One of them told me all about her visits to the "chummeries." That's what they called the bungalows where young Englishmen, clerks in shops or firms, lived together in groups to save on money and food. Without a trace of cynicism in her voice, as if it were the most natural thing in the world, the girl told me that she had once had sex with fourteen of them.

"And why did you do it?" I asked her.

"They were having a party one night and I was alone with them. They turned on a gramophone, I danced a few steps with each of them, and as we danced, we'd lose our way into one bedroom or another. That way, everyone was happy."

She was not a prostitute. No, she was just another product of colonialism, a candid and generous fruit off its tree. Her story impressed me, and from then on, I had a soft spot for her in my heart.

My solitary bungalow was far from any urban development. When I rented it, I tried to find out where the toilet was; I couldn't see it anywhere. Actually, it was nowhere near the shower, it was at the back of the house. I inspected it with curiosity. It was a wooden box with a hole in the middle, very much like the artifact I had known as a child in the Chilean countryside. But our toilets were set over a deep well or over running water. Here the receptacle was a simple metal pail under the round hole.

The pail was clean every morning, but I had no idea how its contents disappeared. One morning I rose earlier than usual, and I was amazed when I saw what had been happening.

Into the back of the house, walking like a dusky statue, came the most beautiful woman I had yet seen in Ceylon, a Tamil of the pariah caste. She was wearing a red-and-gold sari of the

cheapest kind of cloth. She had heavy bangles on her bare ankles. Two tiny red dots glittered on either side of her nose. They must have been ordinary glass, but on her they were rubies.

She walked solemnly toward the latrine, without so much as a side glance at me, not bothering to acknowledge my existence, and vanished with the disgusting receptacle on her head, moving away with the steps of a goddess.

She was so lovely that, regardless of her humble job, I couldn't get her off my mind. Like a shy jungle animal she belonged to another kind of existence, a different world. I called to her, but it was no use. After that, I sometimes put a gift in her path, a piece of silk or some fruit. She would go past without hearing or looking. That ignoble routine had been transformed by her dark beauty into the dutiful ceremony of an indifferent queen.

One morning, I decided to go all the way. I got a strong grip on her wrist and stared into her eyes. There was no language I could talk with her. Unsmiling, she let herself be led away and was soon naked in my bed. Her waist, so very slim, her full hips, the brimming cups of her breasts made her like one of the thousand-year-old sculptures from the south of India. It was the coming together of a man and a statue. She kept her eyes wide open all the while, completely unresponsive. She was right to despise me. The experience was never repeated.

I hardly believed it when I read the cable. The Minister of Foreign Relations was notifying me of my new appointment. I would end my term as consul in Colombo and go on to carry out the same function in Singapore and Batavia. This raised me from the first circle of poverty into the second. In Colombo I had the right to retain (if it was taken in) the sum of \$166.66. Now, as consul in two colonies at once, I could retain (if it was taken in) twice \$166.66; namely, the sum of \$333.32 (if it was taken in). This meant that, for the present anyway, I would stop sleeping on a field cot. My material aspirations were not too high.

But what was I going to do with Kiria, my mongoose? Give her to the impudent neighborhood kids, who no longer believed in her power against serpents? I wouldn't dream of it. They would neglect her; they would not let her eat at the table, as she was used to with me. Set her loose in the forest to revert to her primitive state? Never. She had doubtless lost her defensive in-

stincts and the birds of prey would devour her in an unguarded moment. But how could I take her with me? Such a singular passenger would never be allowed on board ship.

So I decided to have Bhrampy, my Singhalese "boy," make the trip with me. It was a millionaire's luxury, and it was also madness; we were going to countries—Malaya, Indonesia—whose languages Bhrampy couldn't speak a word of. The mongoose, on the other hand, could travel incognito in a basket on deck. Bhrampy knew her as well as I did. Customs was a problem, but crafty Bhrampy would be sure to get around it.

And that's how, with sadness, joy, and the mongoose, we left the island of Ceylon, headed for another, unknown world.

It must be difficult to understand why Chile had consulates scattered all over the world. It surely would seem odd that a small republic tucked down in a corner near the South Pole should post and maintain official representatives on archipelagos, coasts, and reefs on the other side of the globe.

In truth—as I see it—these consulates are evidence of the flights of fancy and self-importance we South Americans generally indulge in. But also, as I have already mentioned, from these far-flung places Chile got jute, and paraffin to manufacture candles, and, above all, tea, enormous quantities of tea. In Chile we drink tea four times a day. And we can't grow it. Once we had a widespread strike among the nitrate workers because of a shortage of this exotic product. I recall that one day, after a few whistles, some English exporters asked me what we did in Chile with such exorbitant quantities of tea.

"We drink it," I told them.

(If they expected to pump out of me some secret industrial exploitation of tea in Chile, I was sorry to disappoint them.)

The consulate in Singapore had already been in existence for ten years. I went ashore, then, with the confidence instilled in me by my twenty-three years, with Bhrampy and my mongoose in tow. We went straight to the Raffles Hotel. There I sent out my laundry, of which I had quite a bit, and then I sat down on the verandah. I stretched out lazily in an easy chair and ordered one, two, perhaps three *gin-pabits*.

It was all very much like something in Somerset Maugham,

lunch, when I saw Kruzi come in. She flung herself into my arms, choked by sobs.

"They're throwing me out of here. I have to leave tomorrow."  
 "But who is throwing you out, why are they throwing you out?"

She sobbed out her unhappy story. She was about to get into the Rolls-Royce when the immigration officers stopped her and subjected her to a brutal interrogation. She had to confess everything. The Dutch authorities considered it a grave offense for her to live as the concubine of a Chinese. They finally let her go, on her promise not to visit her gallant and to get back on the ship she had arrived in, which was returning to the West the next day.

What hurt her most was to disappoint the man who had been waiting for her, a sentiment the imposing Rolls-Royce may have had some bearing on. Still, Kruzi was sentimental at heart. There was much more to her tears than her frustrated interests: she felt humiliated and deeply offended.

"Do you know his address? Do you have his telephone number?" I asked.

"Yes," she said. "But I'm afraid they'll arrest me. They threatened to throw me in jail."

"You have nothing to lose. Go see the man whose dreams must have been full of you, though he did not even know you. You owe him at least a few words. Why worry about the Dutch police at this point? Get even with them. Go see your Chinese. Take care, give them the slip, and you'll feel better. I'm sure you'll leave this country feeling happier then."

Late that night she returned. She had seen her mail-order suitor, and she told me all about their meeting. The Oriental was a literate man who affected French manners and spoke French quite well. He was married, observed the mores and practices of honorable Chinese matrimony, and led a very boring life.

The yellow-skinned suitor had prepared for his white, Western sweetheart a bungalow with a garden, mosquito screens, Louis XVI furniture, and a huge bed, which they tried out that night. The house's owner sadly showed her the little refinements he had been preparing for her, the silver knives and forks (he himself used only chopsticks), the bar stocked with European drinks, the refrigerator filled with fruit.

Then he stopped before a huge locked chest. He took a key

until I decided to look in the telephone book for my consulate's headquarters. It wasn't listed, dammit! I immediately put an urgent call through to the British government offices. They replied, after checking, that there was no Chilean consulate there. I made inquiries about the consul, Señor Mansilla. They knew nothing of him.

I was crushed. I barely had enough money to pay for one day at the hotel and for my laundry. Then it struck me that the phantom consulate must have its headquarters in Batavia, and I decided to get back on the ship I had come on, since Batavia was where it was going and it was still in port. I ordered my laundry removed from the tub where it was soaking, Bhrampy rolled it up into a wet bundle, and we set out for the docks at breakneck speed.

They were drawing up the ship's ladder. I puffed up the steps. My ex-traveling companions and the ship's officers stared at me incredulously. I moved back into the cabin I had left that morning, and lying on my back on the bunk, I closed my eyes as the ship pulled away from that unlucky port.

I had met a Jewish girl on the ship. Her name was Kruzi. A blonde, on the plump side, she had orange-colored eyes and was bubbling over with good spirits. She told me she had a good job in Batavia. I stayed close to her during the cruise's farewell party. She kept dragging me out to dance, between drinks, and I followed her clumsily in the slow contortions that were popular at the time. We spent that last night making love in my cabin, in a friendly way, knowing that chance had brought us together for this brief time only. I told her about my misadventures. She comforted me gently and her lighthearted tenderness touched me.

Kruzi, in turn, confided the real nature of the job waiting for her in Batavia. There was an organization, more or less international, which placed European girls in the beds of respectable Asians. She had been given a choice between a maharaja, a prince of Siam, and a wealthy Chinese merchant. She picked the last, a young but mild-mannered man.

When we landed, the following day, I got a look at the Chinese magnate's Rolls-Royce as well as its owner's profile through the automobile's flowered curtains. Kruzi vanished among the crowd and luggage.

I settled into the Nederlanden Hotel and was getting ready for

after the mongoose, which was more and more restive in her new home.

There really was a Chilean consulate here. At least it was listed in the telephone book. I set out for its offices on the following day, rested and more appropriately dressed. The consular coat-of-arms of Chile hung on the façade of a huge building occupied by a steamship line. One of its numerous personnel took me to the office of the manager, a florid, corpulent Dutchman who looked more like a longshoreman than like the manager of a shipping firm.

"I am the new Chilean consul," I introduced myself. "First, let me thank you for your help, and then I'd be obliged if you would brief me on the running of the consulate. I propose to take over my post right away."

"I am the only consul here!" he said angrily.

"How's that?"

"Start off by paying me what you people owe me!" he shouted. The man may have known something about shipping, but he had no idea what good manners were, in any language. Phrase after phrase tumbled out, while he chewed furiously on an awful cheroot that was polluting the air.

The wild man hardly let me get a word in edgewise. His indignation and his cheroot threw him into deafening coughing fits, or else into gargles that turned into gobs of spit. I was finally able to get in a word in self-defense: "Sir, I don't owe you a thing, and I don't have to pay you a thing. It is my understanding that you are consul *ad honorem*, honorary consul, that is. And if this seems open to question, I hardly see how it can be settled with all this shouting, which I don't intend to put up with."

Later I learned that the nasty Dutchman had every argument on his side. The fellow had been the victim of a swindle that, of course, could not be blamed either on the government of Chile or on me. Mansilla was the crook at the source of the Dutchman's rage. I discovered that Mansilla, the so-and-so, had never assumed his duties as consul in Batavia; he had been living in Paris for some time. He had made a deal with the Dutchman to have him perform the consular duties and send him, Mansilla, the papers and fees he took in every month. Mansilla pledged to pay him a monthly stipend, which he never paid. Thence the indigna-

from his pants pocket and opened the trunk, revealing the strangest of treasures to Kruzi's eyes: hundreds of ladies' undergarments, soft, silken panties, the scantiest of briefs—intimate women's dainties, hundreds, thousands of them stuffed into that piece of furniture sanctified by the pungent aroma of sandalwood. Every kind of silk, every color, was there. From violet to yellow, from every shade of pink to the mystic greens, from strident reds to shimmering blacks, from electric sky-blues to nuptial white. The entire rainbow of male concupiscence put together by a fetishist who obviously had collected the items for his own sensual pleasure.

"I was stunned," Kruzi said, beginning to sob again. "I grabbed a handful at random and here they are."

I, too, was touched by this mystery of human behavior. Our Chinese, a serious businessman, importer and exporter, amassed ladies' panties as if he were collecting butterflies. Who would have dreamed it?

"Let me have one of them," I said to my friend.

She picked out a white and green garment and stroked it softly before handing it to me.

"Write something on it for me, Kruzi, please."

She smoothed it out with care and wrote my name and hers on its silky surface, which she also sprinkled with a few tears.

She left the next day without my seeing her, and I have never seen her again. Those sheest of panties, with her words of dedication and her tears, traveled around in my suitcases among my clothes and my books for a good many years. I never knew when or how some cheeky lady visitor walked out of my house with them on.

#### BATAVIA

In those days, when motels had not yet come into the world, the Nederlanden was a rarity. It had a large central building, for dining-room service and offices, and then individual bungalows for the guests, separated by tiny gardens and robust trees. In the high tops of these trees lived an infinitude of birds, flying squirrels that fitted from branch to branch, and insects that chirred just as if in the jungle. Bhrampy outdid himself at his job of looking

repeated my motion as one man, with pens they had drawn out of their pockets, exclaiming vigorously, "Ink, ink," and nearly dying with laughter. They thought it was a new ritual they were learning. I rushed desperately into the bungalow across the way, followed by the string of servants in white.

From the solitary table I took an inkwell that by sheer luck was there, and waving it in front of their astonished eyes, I screamed at them: "This! This!"

They all smiled and sang out together: "*Tinta! Tinta!*"

And that was how I learned that, in Malay, ink is called by the same name, *tinta*, as in Spanish.

In time I regained the right to take up my duties as consul. My disputed patrimony consisted of a moth-eaten rubber stamp, an ink pad, and a few folders with records of profits and losses. The profits had ended up in the pockets of the wily consul operating from Paris. His swindled Dutch surrogate handed me the insignificant sheaf of papers with the cold smile of a frustrated mastodon, and never stopped chewing on his cheroot.

From time to time I signed consular invoices and put the dilapidated official stamp on them. That's how I obtained the dollars that, converted into guilders, made it possible for me to eke out a living: food and lodging for me, Bhrampy's wages, and the upkeep of my mongoose Kiria, who was growing noticeably and consumed three or four eggs a day. Besides, I had to buy myself a white dinner jacket and tails, which I undertook to pay for by the month. Sometimes I would sit, almost always alone, in a crowded open-air café alongside a wide canal, to have a beer or a *gin pabiti*. That is, I resumed my desperately uneventful life.

The rice table of the hotel restaurant was fit for a king. A procession of ten or fifteen serving boys would come into the dining room, fling past with their respective platters held high. Each platter was divided into sections, and each section held a mysterious, magnificent delicacy. Each item of this endless variety of food was mounted on a rice base. I have always been a hearty eater, and I had been undereating for such a long time; I would choose something from the platter offered by each of the fifteen or eighteen serving boys, until my plate became a small mountain where exotic fish, indescribable eggs, astonishing vegetables, in-

tion of this naïve Dutchman, who came down on my head like a collapsing roof.

I felt miserable the next day. Malignant fever, flu, loneliness, and hemorrhaging. I was burning hot and perspiring profusely. My nose began to bleed as it had in my childhood in Temuco's cold climate.

Mustering all my strength, I headed for the government offices. They were located in Buitenzorg, in the magnificent Botanical Gardens. The bureaucrats raised their blue eyes from their white papers with difficulty. They took out their pens, which were also dripping with perspiration, and wrote down my name with a few drops of sweat.

I came out feeling worse than when I had gone in. I walked down the avenues and finally sat down under an enormous tree. Here everything was healthy and cool, life breathed calm and powerful. Before me, the giant trees lifted their trunks straight, smooth, and silvery, a hundred meters into the air. I read the enameled nameplates identifying them. They were varieties of eucalyptus I was not familiar with. A chill perfume drifted down to my nostrils from the immense height. That emperor of trees had taken pity on me, and a gust of its scent restored my strength.

Or perhaps it was the green solemnity of the Botanical Gardens, the infinite variety of leaves, the crisscrossing vines, the orchids flashing like sea stars in the foliage, the undersea depth of that forest-like enclosure, the shrieks of the macaws, the squeals of the monkeys—all of it restored my confidence in the future and returned my zest for living, which had been flickering like the stub of a candle.

I got back to the hotel in better spirits and sat down on the verandah of my bungalow, with writing paper and my mongoose on my table; I had decided to send a cable to the Chilean government. I needed ink. So I called a boy from the hotel and asked him in English for some ink, hoping he'd bring me an inkwell. He didn't show the slightest glimmer of understanding. He just called another boy, also dressed in white and barefoot, to help interpret my baffling request. It was no use. Whenever I said "Ink" and moved my pen, dipping it into an imaginary inkwell, the seven or eight boys who had by now congregated to advise the first



owned a car, but I did have a garage that was always empty. I had more than enough space in this tiny house. I took on a Javanese cook, an old peasant woman, charming and egalitarian. A "boy," also Javanese, served table and looked after my clothes. There I finished *Residencia en la tierra*.

My solitude became even deeper. I decided to get married. I had met a creole—to be exact, a Dutch girl with a few drops of Malay blood—and I became very fond of her. She was a tall, gentle girl and knew nothing of the world of arts and letters. (About this marriage of mine, my friend and biographer Margarita Aguirre was to write several years later: "Neruda returned to Chile in 1932. Two years earlier, in Batavia, he had married María Antonieta Hagenaar, a young Dutch woman who lived in Java. She is quite proud of being a consul's wife and has a most exotic opinion of America. She doesn't know any Spanish, but she's learning it. However, there is no doubt that it is not just the language that she has had trouble learning. In spite of all this, she's very much attached to Neruda, and they are always together. Maruca, that's what Pablo calls her, is tall, stately, hieratic.")

My life was very simple. I was soon meeting other amiable people. Linked by our common language, the Cuban consul and his wife became my friends as a matter of course. Capablanca's countryman talked nonstop, like a self-winding machine. Officially he was representing Machado, the Cuban tyrant. Yet he would tell me how items belonging to political prisoners—watches, rings, sometimes even gold teeth—would turn up in the bellies of sharks caught in Havana's bay.

The German consul, Hertz, was a great admirer of the modern plastic arts, Franz Marc's blue horses, Wilhelm Lehmbruck's elongated figures. He was a sensitive person, romantic in temperament, a Jew with a centuries-old cultural heritage.

I once asked him: "And this Hitler whose name appears from time to time in the newspapers, this anti-Semite, anti-Communist leader, don't you think he can assume power?"

"Impossible," he told me.

"Why impossible, when history is full of the most absurd incidents?"

"But you don't know Germany," he stated flatly. "That's the one place where it is absolutely impossible for a mad agitator like him to run even a village."

credible chickens, the choicest, rarest meats covered the summit of my lunch like a flag. The Chinese say that food must excel in three things: taste, aroma, and color. The nice table at my hotel had those three virtues and one more: abundance.

At about this time I lost my mongoose. Kiria had the dangerous habit of tagging after me wherever I went, with quick, imperceptible steps. Following me meant plunging into streets traveled by cars, trucks, rickshaws, and Dutch, Chinese, and Malay pedestrians. A turbulent life for a trusting mongoose who knew only two persons in the whole world.

The inevitable happened. On my return to the hotel one day, I saw the tragedy written all over Bhrampy's face. I didn't ask him anything. But when I sat down on the verandah, she did not come to jump on my knees or brush her furry tail against my head.

I placed an ad in the papers: "Lost: mongoose, answers to the name of Kiria." There was no reply. None of the neighbors had seen her. Maybe she was already dead. She had disappeared forever.

Bhrampy, her guardian, felt so disgraced that he stayed out of sight. My clothes, my shoes, were taken care of by a phantom. Sometimes I thought I heard Kiria squeal, calling me from a tree during the night. I would, turn on the light, open the windows and doors, peer into the coconut trees. It wasn't she. The world Kiria knew had betrayed her; her trustfulness had shattered in the city's dangerous jungle. I was grief-stricken for a long time.

Overcome with shame, Bhrampy decided to go back to his native country. I was not happy about it, but the mongoose had really been the only thing we had in common. One afternoon he came in to show me the new suit he had bought so that he could return well dressed to his home town in Ceylon. He showed up suddenly, dressed in white and buttoned all the way up to his neck. The most surprising thing was the huge chef's cap he had settled on his jet-black head. I burst out laughing, in spite of myself. Bhrampy was not insulted. On the contrary, he smiled at me sweetly, with a smile of understanding for my ignorance.

My new home in Batavia was on a street called Proboinggo. It had a living room, a bedroom, a kitchen, a bathroom. I never

My poor friend, poor Consul Hertz! That mad agitator barely missed running the world. And the ingenuous Hertz, with all his culture and his noble romanticism, must have ended up in some monstrous, anonymous gas chamber.

## 5



## Spain in My Heart

### WHAT FEDERICO WAS LIKE

A LONG sea voyage of two months brought me back to Chile in 1932. There I published *El bondero entusiasta*, which had been mislaid among my papers, and *Residencia en la tierra*, which I had written in the Orient. In 1933 I was appointed consul of Chile in Buenos Aires, and there I arrived in the month of August.

Federico García Lorca arrived in that city almost at the same time, to direct his tragedy *Blood Wedding*, performed by Lola Membrives's troupe. We hadn't known each other, but we met in Buenos Aires and were often feted together by writers and friends. Of course, we had our share of incidents. Federico had his detractors. So did I, and I still have them. These detractors are driven by a desire to snuff out the lights, to keep us from being seen. That's what happened this time. Because there was a lot of interest in attending the banquet the P.E.N. club was holding for Federico and me at the Plaza Hotel, someone kept the phones busy all day long spreading the word that the dinner in our honor had been called off. They were so persistent that they even called the hotel manager, the telephone operators, and the chef to make sure no reservations were accepted and no dinner was prepared. But the maneuver fell through and in the end Federico García Lorca and I got together with a hundred Argentine writers.

We came up with a big surprise. We had prepared a talk *al almón*. You probably don't know what that means, and neither