

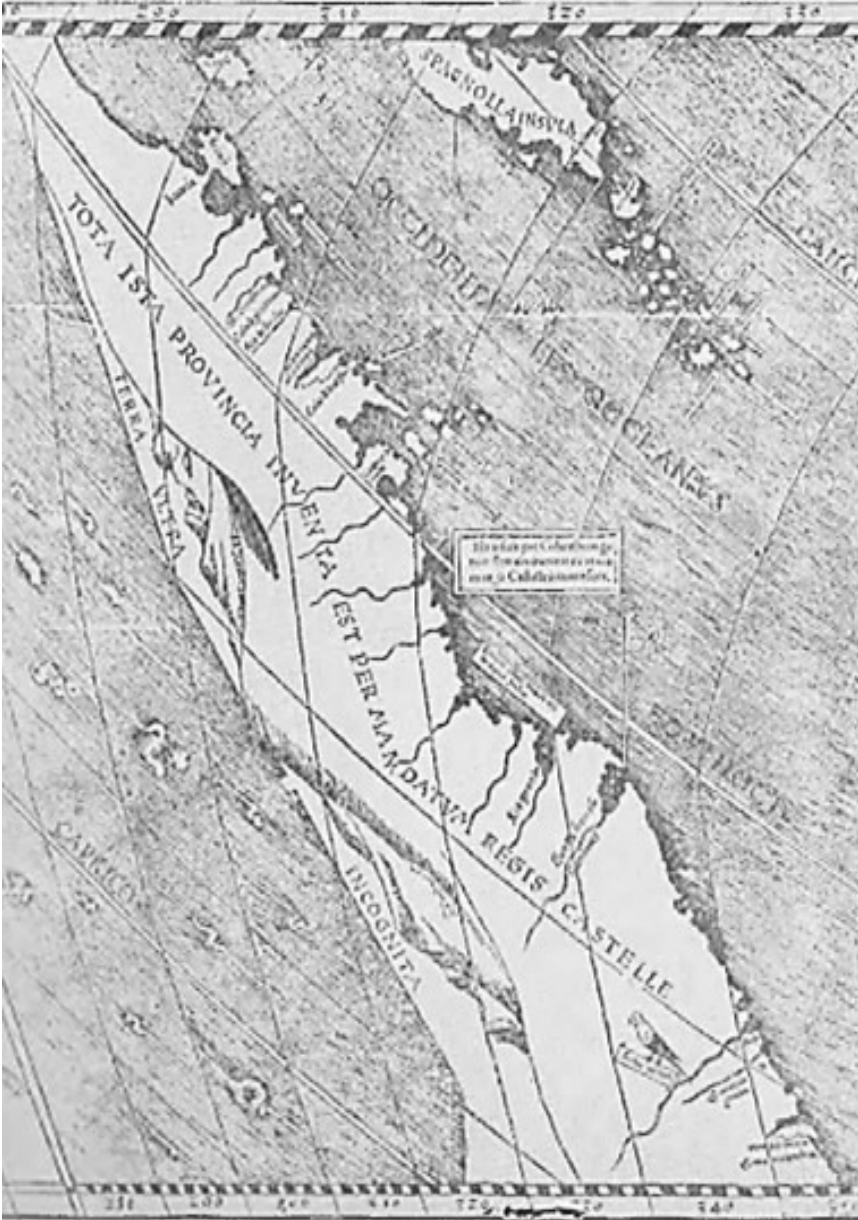
The Quest: ANTARCTICA

# **Who Calls in the Ice**

**History of the Antarctic Search**



**MIGUEL SERRANO**



Waldseemüller's map. — First print in which the design of the American continent was illustrated (year 1507).

*To those who undertook the adventure  
of being born in the South.*

*Neither by sea nor by land will you find  
the road that leads to the region of eternal ice...*

- PINDAR

## INTRODUCTION

The world of the future will be that of New Antarctica. The new Antarctica may be the old Atlantis. Before and after the sea.

Here is an unfinished book. The ancient and recent dead helped me. I have only been a vehicle of eternal Amor. Therefore this is also the book of eternal life. The book of the Southern ice. And of the White Sun.

The part of the book that should have followed, I prefer to live it instead. Walk, walk, until I find the Ice Oasis, Antarctica within, the last smile, the tender indifference, until I come together again with my Father, who died of yesteryear.

Pale traveler, here is the wind, here is all that is lost. The little gained. Here is the sea again ...

Santiago de Chile, 1955.

## THE SEA

Behold the sea. The possibility of all roads. Blood and lymph from the earth. Divine bow furrowed, wounded, ephemeral. Solar deities imagined themselves triumphant over the sea. It was a day, a single day; when the waves spread their hands and fingers, talons of foam as they sank mountains and temples. At the bottom of the waters, between the infinite weight and the dark light, old dreams still grow, the invincible pride of another Adam. They live there, where the thick liquid barely moves and cold beings do not know the air that flies over the back of the waves and that, after all, is perhaps the very breath of the sea, the breath and the steam released from his old body, from his heavy work.

And the waves come, the waves, and more waves. One after the other, they raise their white foams, of salts, towards the light; keeping the sun in its folds of water, enveloping it, refreshing it, projecting it in a myriad of reflections in solitude, in the vastness of its desert. So too it is in the life of the ocean of time. A wave may invoke a beautiful ship, or a lonely castaway, a wave thinking it will last forever, and tell his story to the algae and the rocks of an inexact beach. But the wave only lasts a minute and he does not know if he transfers his experience, nor the reflection of his sun, nor the memory of his history, to his immediate sister, to enrich the great memory of the sea. The noise and the song are the lament and the martyrdom of the waves, but also the life of animals, men and gods, must produce a deep sound on the beaches of infinity. Its wings will break and die on the rock in which some greater illusion contemplates it.

(I hold onto foam fingers and resist in the surf. My wave wants to curve its back, to make its shape immense, sink a continent, and transform the land in view, not to lose itself again in the unconscious amplitude of the sea. My self is the tiny reflection of the sun, kept and shining in the folds of instantaneous water. If my wave were able to break off and sit on a rock, ah then, could I contemplate the sea like that lonely one with dark eyes, participating in his enormous memory and memories! Or return, broadening the low sunlight; of the waters, illuminating the memories, the shipwrecks, the lost cities, the forgotten inheritances, and to be already the light of all the waves, the fixed sun through their deaths and returns. The light of the sea, the light green, blue and white, descending and then rising, from the depths).

The sea still exists for us to contemplate its depth. So far the adventure in him has been external. Wars, conquests, discoveries, privateers. The prows were lined up towards distant beaches, where islands and continents were discovered. On the back of the sea the gold, slaves and death were carried. But no one has looked inward, no one has searched for its true essence and reason. That is why they do not know that there is a river that descends to the bottom and enters the center of the world; that bends, turns on itself and immediately rises, rescuing its current towards the heights, from the depths of the sea. Some maddened whales wanted to sail it, perishing in the attempt. Only mermen and mermaids soar their gloomy course, and also a boat with an elderly Ferryman. For this river is the river of the dead, which spreads beyond the Dark Forest, under the surface of the sea. Traveling in the background of the cities of Atlantis, visiting its submerged palaces and the bones of another ancient Adam. It is there that great sins are punished, wicked dreams, fateful reminiscences and where pulpy coral trees sway on an aurichalcum horse. In the center of the sea, where the river still does not reach, two naked beings walk hand in hand. They are two suicides, they are two friends. Their loose hair floats in the liquid atmosphere. They look as if silhouettes and go as if flying, moving their legs and observing with their bodies, waiting for an advent. They are looking for someone, in the imprecise distance of the waters, in the dark solitude, someone who must come, someone who gave them a date in the bottom of the sea. Perhaps that someone sails already by the river of the dead. But they are far from this river and they don't even know it. They exist between life and death.

So many things.

South Sea, Pacific Ocean. Its waves are bigger than the mountains, bigger than the sphinxes of Lemuria, than the temples of Mu, than the frozen deserts of Godwana, than the ice shelves of Antarctica. In the middle of this ocean an island grows; in certain seasons rising like a rock towards the heavens and, in other times, submerging, being again covered by the sea. On its beaches, by the edge of its wet cliffs, there is a human figure that moves away, but turns its face towards the sea and contemplates it with its frightening basins. The Ocean is the dark, infinite soul that imprisons it, and it is the ephemeral form, a rebellious wave, the self, a new continent, another life, another anguish: an attempt to beat the sea. Yet how they long for the deep bosom, the fright, the horror, the night of

the Ocean! The storms of chaos of divine Memory! He can't take another step ... that's why the island will sink again.

Seen from here, the lonely sea holds old memories. The calm Moon, the stormy nights, the ships that sail it in all ages, and the beautiful months of the Sun. Its salt, its iodine, the foams of their distances and the colors of their intense twilights. In distant times, in its blue days, there were wings on the waves. It was the sailboats of classical times. Seen from the hills of the isles of gold, they looked like winged beings: wings of the waves; winged giants of the sea and sky. And then the music of everything that one day perished, of what has not yet come and what is already a promise in the blue of the sky, accompanying them in their sweet shimmer on the gentle waves. Still demigods reflected the friendly view in their clear pupils, seen from the palaces and temples in the hills of the ancient continents. Today the sea is the same; the sea has not changed. The smoke from the ships crosses its horizon with a white trail. And the afternoon sun descends red on the profile of the distant waves. On the beaches the wind bends the thorns and large thistles, spreading the petals of a white flower. Black birds stop on charred whale skeletons and there is a long and painful moan on the rocks beaten by the surf. A slow cold descends on the sea, while little by little the stars in the sky light up.

There is nothing new in this. And it would always be beautiful, if we didn't know that over the Ocean, between the sky and the water, stands the gigantic back of a shadowy being. He looks intensely and curses. His feet sink below the sea, to the center of the earth, and his face gazes over the desert of waters, even beyond the last mountains. He curses the stars, because He is a star. He entertains himself with the waves. And so he plays with us, because he is the Spirit of the Earth. Grabbing us by one hand, squeezing us and destroying us. Then washing his hand in the sea. However, his eyes are gloomy, because he knows that one day, somewhere, on this very Ocean, man will conquer it.

### THE CHAMBER OF OFFICERS

It was a few years ago, on my trip to Antarctica, aboard a Navy frigate. That one afternoon, the salt and the foam of the sea healed me. Then, holding on to the deck cables, I descended the narrow ladder to the wardroom. The room was of regular dimensions, with a long iron table and some comfortable chairs. Scattered, there were some men among whom I

could recognize my friend Poncet. Seeing me, he got up introducing me to the others.

They momentarily interrupted the chat and looked at me puzzled. I was a civilian. What was he doing on this expedition? Then they went back to their conversation and forgot about me. An Army Major explained his exploration plans for Antarctica. He was accompanied by a geographer and an astronomer. The sailors, in their pale uniforms, listened with concentration. From time to time one would get up and leave the chamber. Then he would return, with the light of the sea in his pupils, and he would settle into the same spot. In a corner, silent, half shrouded in gloom, stood a thick, dark man. When he spoke, I knew he was not a military man, nor was he a sailor; he was an Aviation commander. The subject ended up on him referring to certain plans that he also cherished. We were going to need the plane; without him we would lack time. The frigate bobbed a little and through one of the windows was seen a beam of red, oblique light, which struck the curtains of the entrance, at that moment they drew back to make way for a man in uniform. In it was the doctor on board. He was looking around; recognizing me, his face broke into a smile. He greeted me, telling me: "Good to see you. I went to your cabin and I did not find you there; but I found this." He handed me an old book. "I'm glad you are in this story and on this ship. I do not know where we are going, nor if we will return, but at least I know it will be possible to talk about old things, about the sea ..."

At that moment a long chime rang, like a high-pitched bell, and they all looked up at the clock, but the sailors remained silent and did not move, as if they were waiting for someone. And so it really was; because the curtain at the entrance moved and then appeared the figure of the second commander on board. He paused at the door for a moment and saluted. Then he removed the cap and, sitting at the head of the table, invited the others to do the same. It was time for lunch. The captain lowered his face to his chest. It was only for a second. At that moment the ray of light hit his face and I saw a sharp profile, a bitter grin, an indefinable sadness. It seemed that suddenly he was praying, or that he was suffering. He smiled and said something, then suddenly he struck the iron cover of the table with his fist, reprimanding the sailor that served us. The Army Major raised his head, quite surprised. The Aviation commander only shrugged.



I got up, going to the window. I rested my forehead there, in the thick glass, and looked outside. The water leaped, the foam rose. And far, out on the horizon, a gray shadow loomed, long and hard, cloaked in the gloom of twilight. It was the distant land, the beloved and unknown continent, as it once appeared to the eyes of ancient navigators.

#### THE STRANGE CONVERSATION OF CAPTAIN S.

The first stage of the navigation was completed in the port of Talcahuano, where we anchored for a whole day. In the moment in which we weighed anchor, the tanker arrived, it was the second ship of the expedition.

A fine mist fell on the pier and on the sea that morning. Inside the tanker, in his cabin, Captain S. called the orderly to help him put on his boots. After adjusting his uniform, he put on his cap. He closed the cabin door and started down the different decks of the ship, between piled iron, tubes and beams. Disassembled, in pieces, was the base that was going to be installed in Antarctica. Before descending into the boat that would take him ashore, Captain S. went astern to take a look at the dogs, who would be his company on the white continent. The animals, seeing him, jumped giving howls. Then the boat took him to the dock up and down on the gray waves. The captain wanted to avoid meeting with other soldiers or sailors so he made use of the enclosure car, but waited patiently for a bus that would take him to Concepción.

You could see quite a few people in the city that morning, mingling through its square in the fine rain. It was Sunday. Captain S. continued through the city next to the gardens and statues. With an agile step he marched through one of its streets and arrived at the door of a house.

For a moment he paused to look until he seemed to see what he was looking for. On a bronze plaque, attached to the wall, could be read: "Professor Oliver Klohn". The captain gave a satisfied smile and rang the bell. By a rare chance the professor was in his House. From the end of the corridor, in the gloom, his bulky silhouette emerged. When he saw a man in uniform, he seemed a little surprised, although his jovial face denoted pleasure. With a German accent - very pronounced r's - he greeted the military man, who briefly explained the reason for his visit: he was the head of the new base that was to be installed in Antarctica. He wanted to talk to the teacher, to ask him about some points of interest.

Professor Klohn laughed merrily. Taking his arm, he took him to his den. This was a room full of books, papers, dissected animals, microscopes, pictures, decorations, diplomas and two souvenirs from Antarctica: seal and whale bones, penguin hides and embalmed petrels. The captain sat down in a chair and the professor, behind his desk. And that's how the conversation started that here we go to reproduce:

“Professor, do you think that someone ever lived on that continent we call Antarctica?”

“This a curious question ... Scott found facing the Ross Sea, in the Queen Victoria Range, or by the Erebus or Terror mountain, fossil remains of tree leaves and bark corresponding to a tropical vegetation. A tropic in the ice. This would corroborate the hypothesis of the migration of the poles, the precession of the equinoxes and the theory supported by Wegener about the transformation of the continents. Continents move at a rate of three kilometers per million years ... Antarctica was a tropic millions and millions of years ago. According to Wegener, all of the continents were united in their origin, together, this being about fifty million years ago, in the Jurassic period, or Cretaceous and then, for various reasons, among others the centrifugal force of rotation of the earth, they were dividing, splitting, moving away and forming what is now the world, a plurality of disparate lands.”

“That sounds good to me, professor. Everything must be the same in the universe. From unity; one starts from plurality, from the indeterminate to individuation. To return one day to the indeterminate, to a new meeting. I have seen Wegener's schematics. And that single, central continent looks a lot like a fetus collected in the mother's womb. Later it detaches, stretches, rises and perhaps suffers in the plural and conscious life, in separation. And what happens with the continents, it too will happen with the races. In the origin there was some point from which the first man started, a single point; maybe that same central continent ...”

"Oh no, Captain! You are too imaginative ... to return to your first question: Were there inhabitants in Antarctica? ... I know that for this continent to have had a temperate climate ... How many millions of years! And man on earth will have at most one million years. If it does! An

anthropologist claims that man came to South America through Antarctica. Its stages were Australia, New Zealand, Ross Sea, Queen Victoria Land, Peninsula of Graham, the Sea of Drake and Tierra del Fuego. Surely the Sea of Drake was narrower and the submerged mountain range still conserved many peaks out of the water ...”

"Don't you believe in a native American man?"

“No. I believe, as you do, that at the beginning there was only one point; but not so far back in time. I do not believe in the plural appearance either and simultaneous of man in various places on the planet. India may have been the starting point. There a High-Culture would have been formed, later spreading to Asia and the islands of the Pacific. The passage to America would have been carried out through the Strait of Behring, from where it would have flowed to the extreme south, with slowness of centuries.”

“Regarding your statement, Professor, that man cannot have more than a million years on earth, is it not Ameghino who claims to have discovered in Argentina signs of man and one being a human skeleton in tertiary sediments?”

“That's right, Captain, but it is striking that Ameghino's "tertiary man" is not different in any way from the Patagonian Indians, from the current Tehuelches. Do you realize that this cannot be? But for your peace of mind, I will tell you that in Africa and America they also have found human fossils of appalling antiquity, Pliocene and Miocene. They are the *Australopithecus Africanus*, and their structure does not differ much from *Homo sapiens* and is far from resembling *Pithecanthropus Jabeanus*. There is also clear evidence from the more Paleolithic ancient America. . . . But I am a man of science and while everyone's data is not collected and classified, I am left with the traditional certainty.”

"Well, Professor, as for your argument about Ameghino, I must tell you that I am not convinced. Imagine that right now it ended civilization due to a cataclysm, or other causes, and only scattered human beings who, slowly, from a new barbarism, will head back to civilization. After centuries, forgetting the glorious past, remaining only in a hazy legend, some new science of man could find a skeleton somewhere in Africa or

Brazil; but lo and behold, that skeleton is not that of one of the two of us, for example, but is of a savage contemporary of ours, of a cannibal and, next to this skeleton is another of a chimpanzee. What do you think laughs at that man of science? Of course, civilized humanity does not. He was older than the age of his own history, a few millennia...

“However, however ... if he suddenly dug elsewhere, and in contrast your skeleton, Professor, and your skull ... What would you say? I would say that cannot be ...”

The professor smiled.

“I see, Captain. The catastrophic theory of cycles. For this path, you are going to confess to me that you believe in Atlantis. But Wegener, precisely, has dealt a death blow to this belief.”

“Why? Could not Atlantis be that unique and central continent? After partition and separation, intermediate pieces, or other continents appeared meanwhile, could sink catastrophically in the waters ...”

The professor kept smiling.

“You forget, Captain, that the main support of Wegener's theory is the almost exact match between African headlands and South American depressions between gulfs and peninsulas, between the two coasts of the continents.”

The captain was silent, looking with his blue eyes at a vague point from the wall, between the paintings and the stuffed insects, and a moment with his chin supported in his hands.

“It is true; but that is what makes me doubt the hypothesis of Wegener's. There is too much coincidence, too much evidence. When this happens, it is that the devil is reaching out there to hide something else that is the truth and that he doesn't want us to see, because with its light it would blind us ...”

The professor got up from his seat somewhat restless and began to walk around the room.

“Gee, Captain! Do you belong to a spiritualist sect? It seems to me that you are more interested in the occult than positive science.”

The captain responded promptly:

“No, professor, I don't belong to any of those societies. . . As for the rest, I don't see why shy away from the logic of reasoning when data is missing. For example, does science know what an *ice age* is? You don't know yet ... And couldn't we currently be living in an interglacial era? Ice ages have lasted for hundreds of thousands of years and some interglacial ages only thirty thousand years. Coming a new ice age, the human race may disappear. And maybe it has already disappeared before in the immense past...”

As in a monologue, the professor spoke loudly, while pacing:

“Yes. What does science know! It is true, it is true ... Cephalic indices are said to prove the superiority of the race and the evolution of modern man. But the cranial cubic capacity of *Homo Musterience* and The Neanderthal were superior to ours according to detailed measurements. Then? Where are we? And the *Cro-Magnon* man, has he reappeared on earth? Only in Greece! Once, there was beauty and an equal balance ...

The brain is a rare, very rare thing; a vertebra that blossomed, that opened like a flower and that instead of soft or penetrating perfume, it emanated ideas, thoughts, that is, perfume too, "flatus", cosmic "humus". . . And why are the other vertebrae not able to flourish, expand, and transform into brains? Then man would be round, yes, round, like a planet, like a star and would turn perhaps in the heaven of wisdom, with all its vertebrae thinking. Is this not, Captain, what interests you? Isn't this what is called occultism? That is, hidden thought, which is not said, which is not confessed to the common people; but that one meditates quietly, sometimes, at night, when no one and only God sees us. . . You are interested in America, the south of your country; Well, I, who am a European, can tell you one thing: this race of here, the remains that you will find in the canals, does not belong anymore to our cycle, it corresponds to another star, to "another earth", and it is the daughter of another Adam. Perhaps you, having fed your bones on this earth, have some of it; but I have nothing in common and I am a rebel from another sky ... This race of the channels is a remnant of the Paleolithic and still

persists along with their "conchales" and their "aeoliths", their stones of the dawn of humanity ... It should be believed that even its albumen is different ... Look, Captain, do you know anything about the Magdalenian man? Do you know anything about his art? This will give you a hint and serve as an example to gauge the difference... I have always been concerned with the caverns of the Magdalenian period. It is something so extraordinary, so... how to say it...? *unitive* and, at the same time, loyal, but distant... at the same time the object represented is penetrated and sees it inside, it is placed outside and he looks at it, contemplates it, with a fine, tender and delicate soul. Such delicacy has not yet existed in our time. The Altamira cave artist, who painted a bison on the dark and mysterious rock, saw maybe in an animal a lost god, an archangelic state hopelessly in the past for his soul, and his pain and emotion were such that he retired to the deepest and loneliest part of the cavern to remember it. Observe you, Captain, why, why did this Paleolithic ancestor never draw a human face? Why didn't he paint his face on the stone? Perhaps he was ashamed of himself, of the defenseless nakedness of Adam. He had lost the animal god and still couldn't find man. He was ashamed of himself. Surely he wore amine masks, he tried to imitate and understand what was lost. He made a "comedy" of his life. And in that intermediate state, he invoked Satan, as only escape, that is, he found in art his strength and his evasion in the "representation". When he dared to paint the man, he did only in a schematic and symbolic way, by means of abstract signs, that still endure. Imagine that man, that "monster of sensitivity", huddled in a humid and gloomy place in the cave, wearing a bull's head and painting, reproducing from memory, surely with closed eyes, the beloved and feared animal..."

The professor was yelling, and his words were pouring out with great ease:

"And what happened? Everything is over. The Magdalenian man stopped painting; that sacred art was interrupted overnight in mysterious and sudden ways, and there was no longer tradition to feed it and perpetuate. That race of strange men disappeared from Europe. Of where it came from, where did its evolution come from, its magnificent balance and its sense of drama? Here yes, captain, here I might have a hold on the myth of Atlantis. Maybe his disappearance coincides with a great sinking, with a catastrophe in the Atlantic. . . But there is something more important, which is where I want to go. All research later has emphasized only the magnificent and naturalistic painting of animals, ignoring the schematic

signs in which man was represented. Yet for me and for you mainly, it is the latter that is most important. He realizes? They never painted man as reality. That is, they painted it as a force, an energy, an archetype, something that acts, that occurs as a gesture, as a thought, as an idea, as a symbol, or a "representation", that is not real like an animal; but that can no longer perish, because it reproduces eternally, always that there is someone capable of "thinking" him, of interpreting him in his simple structure, a schematic, cosmic, sign. It is a drama and a comedy: the imitation and interpretation of a force. Man can perish, but the sign remains. And as long as there are caverns in the world that preserve these signs, even if man is erased from the surface of the planet by a great catastrophe, these vibrant signs will produce him again. This is what I think, Captain. And I think more, I think later the man strayed. And that it is here in America, in the South, where this "wisdom of the caves" could return..."

### THE LAST SUN

It was the dawn of a beautiful December day. When the frigate entered the Chacao Channel. I was sleeping, so I did not see the islands that are like precious stones, neither the turquoise color of the waters, nor the vegetation, nor the red roofs of the houses. Around the islands, boats and sailboats sailed and the birds began their flights of worship to the sun. A sweet languor invaded me and in order to stay longer in the berth I preferred to miss out on breakfast on board. I did not see the sun; but I felt it. At noon I went up on deck. In the distance you could see the silhouette of the great island of Chiloé. Soon I was going to cross the furthest limit of the waters that many years before had held me back, not being then able to surpass it, but now I would easily overcome. Today, like yesterday, I felt the influence of the mystery of the unknown, the imperious underwater current that dragged the ship "further south". There, on a hazy horizon, someone wielded an irresistible magnet; the steel plates of the frigate were easy prey for his insatiable strength. Beneath the smooth waters, furrowed by ancient tonines [dolphins], hidden hands and secret voices quickened our march, they made it more rigorous, and took us away from the sun. At the bottom and below, faithful sentries watched us and carried out precise orders. And I was the fundamental prey, since I had prepared myself through these years such as in ancient times the chosen victims were prepared for sacrifice. And when I crossed the boundary, a shudder of glee

ran through me, along with anxious thoughts of the unknown universe that was now opened before me.

Canal Moraleda received us bright and warm, enveloping us in its light. In the distance appeared the snow-capped peaks of the impenetrable Cordilleras, over a pure blue sky. Those regions are almost unknown and they are covered with virgin forests. Looking at the mountains, drawn with celestial transparencies, I thought of the City of Caesars and a fabulous perfume was released from the peaks and the abysses. By my side, on deck, the expedition cameraman never tired of operating his camera; sometimes he would stare, absorbed in the light.

"I've been through here," he said, "but this luminosity had never been so touching". I sat down to enjoy the sun near the bow, below the main cannon of the frigate, which pointed its mouth covering the horizon. My friend Poncet had approached. "Let's enjoy this sun," he said, "it's the last we'll see." He laid on his back to contemplate the clarity of the sky and the flight of lax seagulls. On the mast the radar plate rotated, also with softness, like an imprisoned bird. All that day we crossed through the light. Later, next to the turn compass, I met the architect of the expedition.

"You cannot understand", he told me, "what it means to build houses in those places. It's something like being God and starting to populate the world; Along with the houses, it seems to me that I am creating men." The architect was an experienced navigator and, in the gyrocompass, gave me my first sailing lessons.

At dusk, on the deck, in the midst of a soft twilight and of the calm shimmering over the waters, an arm reached out pointing to the distant land: "The Milimoyu!"

I shuddered. There, on the edge, covered in white and pink snow, clouded with trembling light, the top of a slender mountain and, at the top, two crab claws appeared, as if pretending to imprison the sky. From top to bottom, I thought, wisdom could be transferred from Kailás to Milimoyu ... But we are at an empty continent – the only soul is the soul of the earth - depopulated, without gods, without men, without animals. Our path is through a wasteland, shrouded in illusory light.



We anchor. The russet veils of the last twilight fall. In that amphitheater of mountains the threads of the night are woven. Everything is red. Only water retains its glass or mirror transparency. I'm alone, I lean over the rope on the railing and look. Then it seems I distinguish a strange movement of the water, which swells, beginning to rise and a body seems to be about to emerge on the surface; turns a bit and is moving, leaving a line behind in the water. Am I sure what I see? Is it not an illusion of this light and of this shadow? Now he is moving away. Then I scream: "Wait! I'm here!" But the shadow has fallen, the night is coming. I feel that I'm not alone on deck and there are eyes that watch me.

### THE SHADOWS

Clouds, the sun has died. From time to time, amid the thick smoke of the cycle, a brief moment reappears, and then lightning breaks its way, straight, violent, over the sea. The frigate moves silently, trying to catch up with it. But it is useless. The clouds are closing, gray birds fly and the rain is coming, its eternal reign begins. It's a fine rain, constant, almost imperceptible, which is part of the air and the contour; it bounces off the sea, on some island, on the already distant Chonos archipelago, on the land and the unexplored peaks of the continent that borders the canals to the east, on the profile of Magdalena Island, which is approaching on the horizon. A different vegetation begins to insinuate. The deep green of the ferns becomes scarcer, the color less varied and a smell of things rotten by humidity envelops everything. The trees become stunted and the forest is made of beech and Patagonian oaks, bent by the wind, bent by the water, pierced with moisture, with its bark softened and peeling, sinking its roots into a soil that is surely soft and swampy.

All these regions, with their precise names, are thoroughly described in marine charts and other books to reference. After these long years. I only have a vague memory of names and places and the fundamental impression of the dampness and shadow. The south of Chile, the south of the world, beyond Chiloé, it corresponds to the kingdom of the waters and the shadow. There is a sporadic sun that from time to time descends like the ray of Grace to the pit of Hell. The lungs are dilated and moisture is sucked in and a smell of soggy vegetation that comes from the land and the islands; at the same time as below, in the deep, in the underwater, it is a fathomed force, a kind of decline, that pushes us "further south", towards a point that must be the beginning and the end of wet and cold. The sun

has been lost; left behind. And just as quickly has its memory been lost in the mind of the one who descends through these silent threads of water.

I have started to tour the ship; I've been up and down the iron ladder, looking at the landscape, following the flight of dark birds, watching the wake of the ship and the opaque bottom of the waters. Once in a while the dolphins pass quickly, like a shadow in the background; or the corpse of a scrawny penguin is dragged along with a bundle of seaweed. Eddies and funnels consistently form in the water, and there the rain falls.

The sky creates cloud bombs, low ceilings and an icy haze rises and falls during the day. On the deck there is a sailor winding a bundle of twine, another is putting tar on the keel of a boat. They do not speak to each other, they do not even look, they are absorbed, turning their backs to the gray current of the south that carries them away.

Thus we arrive at the Gulf of Penas, and begin its crossing. Shortly before we had almost stopped waiting for the tanker, which was coming fast to catch up. We saw it pass to starboard, in the middle of the fog. A boat sailing at maximum speed, splitting the water with a sharp keel, which appears and disappears in the waves. It was beautiful. Then the wind was unleashed and the waters of the gulf ruffled and the rain lashed the ropes and sides of our ship. The Tempest had begun. I went up to the commander's tower, propped up on the railing, with the waterproof cap over my ears. Next to me stood a short, stocky sailor of a certain age. He looked at me and smiled.

"You better stay here. The air will keep you from getting dizzy. The gulf is very rough."

I smiled. He was a tough man, a boatswain perhaps. He was giving me good advice and obviously glad that the elements were unleashed.

The waves began to rise above the keel, crashing furiously against the ship's chest. The frigate, closed like a submarine, all made of steel, was a shell that tossed up and down over the raging back of the gulf. At one point everything around was chaos; the wind whistling, thunder in the sky, crawling like mountains to fall over the waters and sink into the depths; lightning flashes through the mist and a rare clarity in the air. Despite the gray of the rain; the waves in a dance of hills and sky were moving like a

swing. Clinging to the railing, next to the boatswain, I also felt beyond immediate fear, a great joy and a drive of challenge and combat. I looked at the ship and saw it impassively in the middle of the raging water, rising and falling, disappearing almost under the waves, to then reappear, dripping, burnished, foamy, sweating. In the tower where we were there were moments that we seemed to be perpendicular to the sea! Heading down, I thought we were sinking. The waves, breaking over the keel, entered our tower and they made us feel their cold salty taste. Then I looked up and saw the radar screen spinning imperturbable, with equal slowness and serenity; it knew nothing of this storm. Its specialty was recording sound shadows, vibrations of another kind. The boatswain extended his arm and pointed to the whirling horizon:

"Look, look there!" He yelled against the wind. "Whales!" "Where? What is?" I yelled back. There to the starboard, very close, on the top of a great wave, was projecting a double jet of steam of water, straight up, and then another one, up to three times. "The storm takes them away from the coast, they are sperm whales. Watch now it's back. There goes one!" They were the first whales seen in the middle of the storm. The boatswain felt his Ancestors as an old fisherman reborn, along with his soul of adventure and war. The elements unleashed united us in an understanding that was surely rooted in prehistory. The Chilean rediscovers his soul amid the tremors, the tempest or war, and then, he unites, loves himself and discovers faith in destiny. But a raging storm is needed in the Gulf of Sorrows, or a cataclysm, for separations and false gods to submerge and the soul of the warrior is ready to take back the reins of the landscape.

Soaked and conscious, he was paying attention to the silence that falls under the storm. My inner ear was telling me that someone was laughing out loud inside the waters and that it was his laughter that drove the whales from those depths. The forest, the monsters, the cetaceans, the men and the storm, we were pushed over the gulf towards a shadow even worse. I knocked on the door of the commander's tower and someone opened it for me within. Along with the instruments and charts, the officers directed the difficult navigation. The commander turned and said to me: "Come on in ... from here it looks much better. In any case, it has been a good baptism for you. The Gulf feels responsible for maintaining its prestige in front of visitors."

I had not seen the commander of the frigate since before our departure. Now I was able to acknowledge him with pleasure. He was short and still young, with a clear and open face. Around his neck he wore a silk white scarf, his hair was cropped and he smiled, giving the orders in a low voice, with an unchanging serenity.

I approached the window that was shaking; through the steam, formed by the different temperatures that separated its tiny thickness, I could make out an explosion of light, rising over the waters of the storm. The officers' faces lit up with sulphurous clarity, and the ship rocked, tilting dangerously. We grabbed hold of it and became closer, supporting each other. The commander's face was impassive.

Beyond the horizon a rainbow appeared. One of its points descended towards the sea and calmed the waves, filling the black surface of the waters with green pearls; the other end was hidden behind the thick clouds, held, perhaps, by some hand that was afraid of sinking forever into the depths of the sea, because down there, they grabbed the other end of the rainbow and pulled it apart at the middle.

#### CHRISTMAS TOWARDS ANTARCTICA

At the end of the Gulf is the San Antonio Lighthouse. Hard to get to with the boats because the waves break with such force and the stormy weather. Men often have to wait for months to be relieved of their stay in that Lighthouse. The tanker lowered a longboat.

They were taking the dentist of the expedition aboard to attend to one of the Lighthouse guards. We continued perusing. Life on the frigate became routine. I spent the day lying in my bunk, without reading, almost without thinking, attentive only to an external and faint murmur, and to a kind of internal preserving that seemed to be growing. One afternoon, I walked down a corridor until I arrived at the door of a cabin, which seemed to me to be that of the Commodore of the flotilla. I thought I observed a shadow and noticed a faint smell of tobacco mixed with perfumes. A day later we anchored in a sort of bay. It was the 24th of December. That night would be Christmas. At three in the afternoon, a group of us descended into the whaling boat and ran ashore on an island. It was raining as always. It was the first time I had stepped on this wet and strange land. The officers and sailors looked like old sea lions in their black waterproof capes. The first

thing was a smell rising from the ground and coming from the immediate forest, it was a bland odor, produced by the humidity of the roots, leaves and ferns.

We looked for a path and started to climb the slope of the island on the steep side. The architect and the officers began to cut some branches and flowers similar to copihues. Up above, from the summit, I observed the landscape. Through the trees was the outline from the frigate, anchored in the bay. Next to me, the photographer was bent over some kind of patch of tiny herbs, from which they poked their trembling little heads, agitated by the wind and rain, making pearly drops, with some red and yellow flowers. He pointed them out to me and we spent a long time pondering them. Some insects walked on that blanket of flowers and herbs. That was about all of the light and life in this place. Then were also some languid flowers, strewn and sickly, growing in a shady ravine on the dark green of the branches and the leprous chestnut of the trees in the rain. They were the coicopihues - which do not belong to the copihues family - among the tangled and flat forest of oaks and Patagonian coihues. Upon returning on board, the architect came laden with the branches and flowers. They were for celebrating Christmas.

That night, the dining room was transformed. The architect, in the company of the officers, made the arrangements. At the center of the table was a large tree branch resembling a pine tree, and next to the cutlery and the liquors, many of the fair flowers and dark leaves.

Little by little the dining room began to fill up with the officers and the civilian expeditionaries. The second commander appeared, always opaque, tense. Then the first commander, fine, affable. We still did not sit. After a long time the curtain again opened and a gaunt figure with deep-set eyes emerged. He wore a brilliant uniform, and by its gold stripes, everyone knew it was the commodore. He saluted courteously and sat in the center, having at his sides the Army Major and the Aviation Commander. Next to me were the doctor and photographer. The Christmas meal began with a speech by Poncet that had recorded absent family members. After Poncet the aviator spoke. He did it radiantly and with emphasis. The sailors on duty crowded the door to hear him.

Outside, the Patagonian wind moaned and through some cracks in the ship, between the steel plates, penetrated up to us and blew over our very souls, crumbling and scattering the best words and intentions. Neither this ship, nor these men, not any faith of ours, could survive alongside this landscape. As time passed, everyone gave themselves to drink, to protect themselves from that wind and the fine and constant rain that seemed to always accompany us.

The commodore disappeared and, behind him, the commander. Then the doctor got up and started talking about childhood Christmases and yesteryear toys: “Ah, the toys! Where were they now? How do I find them again? A pram with wooden wheels, a horse with a severed head ... And those beings, those beings, who from heaven and from the dark night brought us those toys ...” The doctor writhed his hands.

I listened to the wind, I felt the moisture and, further down, much deeper, I heard a thought, saw a god that was not ours, with a great face, and elongated evil eyes, someone who was holding the islands, until the time came to settle them, on the hard bones of strange spoilers. There, in his submerged kingdom...

## PORT EDEN

An absurd name. As if two extremes could be brought together. The Eden and Hell. It was very early. The mist spread veils around the rain. Someone came to wake me to come up on deck. The anchor began to descend with its deep sound of chains. I saw that we were surrounded by little islands, which appeared like dark spots behind the gray dawn. A deadly light was appearing. Amid the voices of orders given to the sailors and their bustling feverishly on deck, I thought I heard guttural noises that they came from the sea. I approached and saw a swarm of shadows gliding over the water and some canoes stopped alongside the ship. They were hollowed out tree trunks carrying strange people on board. Ragged men and women, with shaggy children in their arms. Women raised their faces and spoke to the sailors in monosyllabic Spanish. The faces of the men, some old, were ashen. The sailors invited them to come up and bought some of their baskets braided with great skill. I remember the impression made on me by a woman half covered with dirty rags and holding a naked child with one arm while feeding him in the rain. Her stunted legs held her up on the deck of the frigate with the toes wide apart. They did not look like that

from a human being. She was numb to the falling rain, while the child sucked from her sagging breast. Those beings came from the water. Surely the mother's breast did not have milk, but water.

At noon, a man with a long beard and wearing an aviation uniform came aboard. He came in a boat manned by Alacalufes. It was the Governor of the island. He invited us to visit his home. A large and well-kept pier welcomed us. At the end was what looked like a big house. While the others went inside, I set out to visit the area. I walked along the beach making my way to a swampy region, where the green mud on the ground seemed to boil with humidity, popping bubbles of cloudy water. Eventually, I came to some dark mounds. Everywhere was mud and water. I was able to verify that the mounds were rucas [huts] made of overlapping seal skins. Conical in shape, they rose above the silt. Sometimes they had the same straw baskets hung at their entrance that had already been seen. A group of starving dogs began to bark. No man or woman was to be seen. Only a few children. I observed that one was defecating next to a log. I did not want to look inside the rucas, for a foul odor came from them. Then I discovered that the Alacalufe child was eating his own excrement. With disgust mixed with pity I walked away in the direction of the Governor's house.

As I entered the hall, it seemed I returned to the known world, to civilization, or to an ark in the midst of the flood. The aviator with the beard spoke:

“In this climate, living in the open, the worst thing that could happen to the indigenous people was that they became dressed. The clothes were soaked with the rain. And tuberculosis came. There are very few left. While they remained naked, they were strong.”

The commander interrupted:

“I think Thomas Bridge had discovered more than thirty thousand words in the Yagan language. It is incredible. This does not harmonize with the current state of the Fuegian and Patagonian races. Is it possible that they are degenerated from some once great and lost civilization?”

In the center of the swamps, the bodies of those insane races, with universes of water covering over their centuries, still refuse to perish. Who knows what satanic force sustains them? They sink into the mud and barely their black braids are still sticking out. Those rebellious braids, sisters of the fern and mylodon.

### WITH THE DOCTOR

The Spirit arose from the waters; but is no longer in the waters. It now floats far away on ice. Before Port Eden we had passed through the Angostura Inglesa [English Channels]. This is a kind of very narrow passage of the sea, between two islands. The forests rise on both sides, almost above the frigate and, through the thick vegetation, crystal clear waters fall. Magnolias, oaks, beech, and ferns tangle, intertwining their pasty ramadas.

That night, as the ship moved, towards the south, always "further south", I stirred in the bunk wrapped up in an anguished nightmare: I had to pass through a narrow hole in which I was caught. And, on the other side, at the end, a forest opened where there was sunlight. A group of strange men, dressed in clothes of violent colors, were sitting on the ground. They were eating. At last I managed to break free and go through the tunnel, reaching the group, but the men did not see me, because they were of another age. Then I leaned over to see them better. To my horror I discovered they were eating excrement. Half-awake I made an interesting reflection, typical of those states of subconscious: "This is all because I am not sleeping with the head turned north. The vibrations from the pole are very powerful and collide with those that tend to project from my head. So I can never cross the *narrows*. . ."

With an effort, I woke up. The cornet began to play the *Diana*. That morning there was a lot of activity on the ship. I began to observe what was happening. Lower down, an officer was standing, legs spread apart, keeping his balance, his hands were crossed behind his back and some binoculars were around his neck. Every now and then he yelled orders. Under the different decks, the sailors ran silently and the cannons of the frigate began to turn. Other men, lined up, passed heavy projectiles to each other. Machine guns and light cannons were also turning, searching the cloudy sky for invisible planes. The doctor came to my side. And after



observing their movement for a while, he explained to me: “They’re doing a shooting exercise”.

For half an hour we were observing the work of the crew of the warship, until I turned to the side of the landscape and indicated it to the doctor, and made the following observation:

"What a strange skyline, doctor, and how little it has to do with us. There is a deep imbalance between the landscape and the man. As if we lack the spiritual organs to grasp and understand it. Or, these organs are atrophied, lost in the depths of an inaccessible soul, who does not dare to appear in the light, in the expression. . . In the middle of these islands, of this shadowy vegetation and of those distant mountains, there are hidden gods who have become our enemies, and who were once friends of those dying races we have seen. What secret do they keep, what word do they mean, what was ever uttered? Their spirits float in these places. And we want to fight these gods. Uselessly ... For whose sake?

The doctor remained absorbed and said:

“You just witnessed something. A combat exercise. You will learn a lot on this ship. The soul of the new Chilean, who was born from the mixture with the Spanish, is pregnant with a desire for adventure and war. However, she cannot give it birth. Loves the adventure, the wide space of the sea, the conquest, and yet, it is obliged to vegetate in the ports, in slums, in convents, in tax offices. Give him adventures, give him tempest and war and he will be able to destroy them old gods and know what he wants from himself . . . At best, this is the sense of the old gods, this is their soul and that of the landscape, as you say . . .”

The conversation stopped. The doctor had to go down and I remained wandering the ship. In the evening, we continued the talk. He settled into one of the chairs and I stretched out on another. The doctor ordered a brandy, which he heated between his closed fingers. Once he raised the glass to his nose and inhaled its perfume. Then sipped it in small drinks, and we tried to resume the theme from earlier in the morning:

“The Alacalufes we have seen are in their last moment. They seem to belong to a race that has never emerged from a semi-consciousness. The

English missionary Thomas Bridge, in his dictionary, compiled some thirty thousand words of this Fuegian race, of which at present there are almost no representatives left. The language of the ancients was very rich in sounds and variations, in complete contrast with his customs and primitive habits today. The explanation given to justify the richness of its words seems childish to me. It is said that during the long rains and storms they had to remain in rucas, chatting and telling stories, which helped shape the language, so rich. There are certain words that correspond to situations or customs that did not exist in the life of the Yahgans during the time of their encounter with European man. When I ponder these races and these southern worlds, I can't get the idea of a submerged continent, and from a remote culture, out of my head. Ameghino tells us about Godwana and the sea that surrounded it, the "Andean sea", striking from the east on the legendary foothills of the Andes, until it disappeared to the Godwana continent. Today, the sea has changed and, above the submerged continent, it discharges its waves on the western side of the mountain range. It is true that this happened in an ancient time, but I think better of Atlantis; I am haunted by the memory of that Alacalufe child eating his excrements. Wouldn't there be something better from like a lost memory, like a distant habit stamped on the cells of these human blades fanned out of Atlantis?"

The doctor was silent, slowly sipping his brandy.

I continued:

"The weight of the Antarctic ice presses on the viscous magma and in a set of levers, lifts the earth from fire, to all the south of the world, and at the same time that the north of Chile is submerged. It would not be unusual for large chunks of Godwana to reappear with the ages."

And all this - said the doctor - for what?

"Well", I continued, "there is something else, about language. Did you know that in Peru it has been discovered that the Indians knew the written language and they did use parchment, just like the Egyptians? However, when the Spanish arrived they were only writing with threads. During a great epidemic, the god Huirá Cocha was consulted and this god told them that evil was a punishment sent to man because of the written word. The

writings were burned, and their signs were forgotten. When someone wanted to revive them, they burned him in turn.”

The doctor was looking at me, head-on now, quite perplexed and interested. He asked for another glass of brandy and exclaimed:

“What do you think? What do you say about this?”

“I say that it is extraordinary, that it is as if everything is repeated in this world. Consider the writer as a nefarious being, as malignant as the writing, which is common to the European Middle Ages, where even eloquence was considered a thing of the devil. And, further afield, Henoah also affirmed the Satanism of writing. As by an invisible and psychic bow the continents and lands of the world come together in definite certainties and fundamental beliefs, conceptions that are repeated in the individual soul. I must confess that I have serious thoughts about the possible Satanism of writing. At what point did the man begin to write? In the moment he ceased to live, when it ceased to be. So he looked for a substitute. The signs on sheets or papyri weren't even magical, like the schematic layout in the caves, or the signs in the air; they were simple alignment of figures, stories told; artifice, or, something demonic and that I still don't understand. . . The strange thing is that always mystics reject writing as dangerous, as belonging to a zone of the soul that is better not to touch, something similar to magic. . . However, the magician has never been a writer.”

Outside, the water was beginning to pound over the bow and slide down the sides of the ship. I was meditating now following my thoughts. Deep down, in some depth akin to that drama in the history of the human race, I was struggling in a tense struggle. I always felt that writing was contrary to action, life and magic; that being realized could not be poured out. That it was contrary to doing. Accumulating, as opposed to dispersing. And that all artistic realization is fulfilled at the cost of the effective possibilities of a personal fulfillment or divine. For this, perhaps, writing is contrary to God, because it prevents God from being born within you. It distracts, it does not contract; it separates, it does not unify. It makes you believe that you live and it is the opposite of magical action, which is gesture and direct, symbolic and liturgical action. Art is a substitute and a temptation.

“And the Bible?” The doctor stammered with difficulty. “Is it also satanic? Why is it then called Holy Scripture...?”

He was nodding off. Soon he fell asleep on the couch. And between dreams began to speak. I approached, because the words missed me that he pronounced. I paid attention and clearly perceived that the doctor was speaking a very strange language in a dream. What language would it be? Is it possible that while the body sleeps, the soul comes in contact with the surrounding world and grasps the language of the races that once lived? There, under the waters, there is a lost world, which emerges sometimes. And some beings, survivors of that past, also endure. The mysterious languages of that world, their sounds, emerge in the memory of our lives thanks to the banshee of this doctor who goes with me on board, through the rain and the channels of Patagonia.

### THE OLD SHIP

We arrived at Muñoz Gamero. There is a Navy pontoon, which serves to supply coal to those who make the regular traffic through the canals. Some men remain in it during the rainy winter and summer months. By telegraph we were informed that aboard the pontoon there was a sickness; they asked the doctor to visit them. Before noon the frigate docked next to the pontoon. To pass from one ship to the other meant that one had to jump over both railings. The doctor and the officers did it first; then some sailors and myself. This is how I found myself on the deck of an old dismantled ship. Everything was in ruins. Some broken anchors rested next to moldy irons and it would seem that great cobwebs were crossing over the ladders and masts where mushrooms and moss had settled. The boards creaked and the ropes gave the impression of being about to snap. I walked slowly to the bow and looked at that old man of a ship. Stranded in the roadstead, with the framework of the wooded hills of islands close by, it was like the dying races; but the ship had more dignity and greatness. The aura of an old story floated on its helmet. Ever when that ship was young; furrowing through the channels it searched for adventures and winds out to sea. Men sailed on it. It surely touched innumerable ports; beyond the rain and the storm discovering the sun. It stored grains and products, and with them it traveled the coastlines. From its decks, the crews glimpsed the boundaries, gazed at the stars, and swallowed the shipping lanes. They also took great care of it; in her belly they polished the machines and put them into operation. The sharks of the Caribbean and the Antarctic whales met it in

their wake and the winds and suns dried up its storm-wet decks. Now it was stranded alone in the last corner of the world to spend in shame its last days. It was no longer young. It was a ruin, full of splinters and of shadows. It had its ghosts. I sensed them as I walked it, up and down its rotting stairs. They were ancient, distant ghosts. The very ghosts of my childhood.

I descended a staircase to the center of the ship. I entered a large room, which must have once served as a dining room, or as a chamber. The cold Patagonian wind blew through its cracks. I continued down a corridor and opened a cabin door. A moldy lamp hung from a bunk; through the glassless window a plant, growing from a jar, stretched its branches and began to extend into the interior. Someone had to take care of her daily, so that she survived in that hostile climate. It was a plant from another place, grown here as a thought, or a memory. Downstairs, in the cellars, the coal was kept. I heard voices coming from another cabin and headed in that direction. From afar I made out a group of sailors next to a door. When I approached, they moved aside to let the doctor and the commander pass, who were leaving accompanied by a noncommissioned officer. The latter was in charge of the pontoon. He elaborated at length, telling me his concerns about the little plant that I had just seen. His men helped him take care of her. Now one of the crew had gotten sick and the doctor ordered his transfer to Punta Arenas to hospitalize him. The patient was the telegrapher. It was necessary to find someone else to replace him on the pontoon. No one wanted to stay and the commander found it hard to give the order. The choice was gambled. The frigate's telegraphers were two. I attended the draw scene. Nervously but smiling, the men rolled the dice over the table. One of them was young and dark-faced. He was the loser. Between jokes, the companions helped him fill his bags and gather his clothes. We went to drop him on deck.

As the frigate took off, moving away, the telegrapher remained standing on the pontoon, holding the rail with both hands. There was a man who would not see the end of the world, nor would he know the ice of Antarctica.

#### WITH THE AVIATOR

The cornet began to play. The sharp notes struck over the irons of the ship and, bouncing, came cruelly into my cabin, preventing me from sleeping

anymore. I slid down the bunk. My cabin mates had already risen. Sure, they did their jobs on board. They were Navy lieutenants.

With a bundle of papers under my arm I went out in the direction of the cabin of the commander of Aviation. Rodríguez shared his cabin with the Army Major and with the architect. They were both outside. The commander, on the other hand, was just beginning to button his coat. When he saw me he showed joy and he began to talk as if he had been waiting for my visit. He sat down and explained his projects to me on a map.

“The world ends here,” he told me. “This is Cape Horn. Beyond is the Drake Sea and then the ice. . . In the oil tanker I brought a small seaplane, a Sikorsky, a two-seater aircraft. I will try to fly, back from Antarctica, over the Drake Sea, to the continent. I must end the flight in Valparaíso. On a seaplane like the Catalina the flight does not offer difficulties; but, in a Sikorsky, no one has done it yet. I need your help to take some pictures of Tierra del Fuego. They will serve as reference points to guide me from the air. The photographs will be developed in Antarctica, aboard the tanker. On my trip I will have to dock at various points in these regions, where I can refuel.” The commander was full of enthusiasm. For a long time we were focused on his project. I listened to him with great attention. Then came my turn to propose something to him. When I thought the time had come to do so I also spread a map on the table.

“Look at this,” I said. It's a map of Antarctica. We will be around here and we will not go beyond the O'Higgins Peninsula. We will barely make it to sub Antarctica. But how immense is this continent! Fourteen million square kilometers, of which only they know about two million, mostly flown over only. The months of the year in which you can explore are very few and the fog almost always covers, like a protective veil. And the mystery. . . Do you know, commander, what the mystery is?... I pointed out a few dots on the map, probably five. “Here is the greatest mystery on this earth. There are oases in the middle of the ice. Oasis of warm waters, miles and miles of Water. When the ice falls into these inland lakes, they melt and, in their surroundings, a less cold climate zone is created, covered with low clouds, where vegetation and even life would be permanently possible. The origin of these oases is unknown. At the beginning they were attributed as volcanic; later, it was thought of as hot springs, but no

explanation is satisfactory. So far they have discovered five, most of them in the Queen Maud region. Almost all of them have been seen from the air. The short time available to explore in Antarctica, the distance and the hidden places where the oases are found make it almost impossible to locate them, or reach them easily. . . Here I stopped.

The Aviation commander was visibly interested. He was leaning over my map and observing. "Here's one," he said, "on the O'Higgins Peninsula."

I held my breath. "Yes, Commander. Here's one. And this is what I wanted to communicate to you. It is located at the end of the O'Higgins Peninsula. To reach it we would have to use a plane. . . Your plane."

The commander stared at me without saying a word. I took advantage to continue: "It could be much more important than your projected flight through the Drake. Think, think of the mystery ... Why are those waters warm? Heat between the ices! Behind huge barriers! Vegetation! Life! ... You know, Commander ... I think we might even find someone living there. Maybe there will be mysterious ruins ..." Commander Rodríguez took the map with both hands, sat down, and with his dark eyes continued to study it.

## LAST HOPE

The fine rain did not abate. It fell day and night, like an ash, like a subtle mist. The damp smell of the vegetation became persistent. Watersheds sometimes appeared amid the tangled foliage, falling from great heights, to the sea. The sky was closed and the frigate always glided further south, effortlessly, as if being pushed by a silent force. The point we were going to must be the center of the shadow, but one day the sun came out. It was not right over us, as it still continued to rain. It appeared far away on the horizon. The phenomenon was extraordinary. We saw an endless line of bright White Mountains. It was the Cordillera Darwin, continued by the Cordillera Sarmiento. Inside there were upright peaks, falling vertically; the waves hit their bases. In the distance, with the sun on its peaks, the mountains looked like translucent snow.

Up on the deck, I contemplated. I imagined the City of the Caesars, I thought it was not possible that he could be in any other place, but there. This strange myth, whispered by the land and its mountains. When

contemplating those mountains, the myth spontaneously appeared in my soul, as if instigated by the landscape. What to do now? Why continue? It would be better to stop and walk towards the horizon. Why continue this pilgrimage to Antarctica, when what was sought was right here? A great doubt oppressed me and, in a second, everything changed. The very sense of Antarctica and the continuity of my trip had lost its interest. I had to make a great effort, just as when I was asleep and about to wake up to cling to a dream, to continue it. I wanted to follow, continue. With a supreme effort I succeeded. I affirmed myself in the idea that the City of the Caesars was a temptation, a mirage, repeating to myself that the goal was to be found in the eternal ice. I held onto the illusion. Strange thing is the illusion. It recreates our life, fills us with mysterious force and transforms reality. It prevents us from seeing reality, it is true. He invents it. But what is the reality? Where is it? Wrapping our life in fantasy everything is more beautiful and there is a path that safely leads to other confines.

At that moment I needed the illusion not to lose heart. A solid subconscious barrier was raised to prevent the onslaught of skepticism and exhaustion. I had to move on. I couldn't let myself be seduced by the temptations of the road. Only in the white world would I find what I was looking for.

Someone approached me. It was my friend Poncet. Indicating to me with his finger stretched out to the distant mountains, he said to me: "There, on the summits, are the borders that separate us from Argentina. The clouds had once again covered the horizon and the vision of the mountains disappeared. The rain got wet again and the channels of the night approached.

"Dear Poncet, the doctor says that man was not made for navigation, that his medium is not water; says it is false that in a thousand ages man has risen from the waters. Therefore, there is no inheritance, nor biological memory. What emerged from the water was not the body physical, but a light, a spirit. That is why it must be that my body feels nausea, which is increasing as the fateful current drags us further south, always further south. . . In the same way, eternity does not flow spontaneously from man and it is false that it is his own environment in which he moves. Eternity is hard and it also produces nausea in most men; you have to learn to



navigate her. We are fleeting and the soul is not immortal. What emerged from eternity is not man, but the light of the spirit, and it is like the sea. The soul and consciousness are waves that in death are lost in the water of eternity. And the consciousness of this sea is equal to the unconsciousness and the thick shadow of nowhere. Mine is just one more poor experience, a weak cry that someone will pick up in the cloak of collective memory. And I will never return if it is not in the cell of a distant memory. When humanity is finished, the stones will remind us and when the stones are finished, only a handful of astral light. Tell me friend maybe you believe that eternity was donated to man as an attribute of his lineage? Oh no! Immortality is relative and can only be achieved in dogged and ruthless struggle. You will die, the commander will die, and all will die, because they are only the “dead who bury their dead. But I will live, because I have abandoned father, mother and children, I have taken my cross and continued. I follow the rough road to the south. . . In a fight with myself, between the ash and the rain that falls towards the end of the world, where no one lives and men are like worms amongst dark forests. . .”

(No, I will not be immortal. I lack strength, I lose myself entangling my wears in the ferns on the road, looking back, returning to retrace the steps. . . The taste of your Salt is already on my lips and I have dispersed the energies and the years. A vague constant force pushes me towards the ice, as the hour passes to open myself to the Angel, or the Devil, who is waiting to collect my remains and inflame them, covering them with skin and light of eternity. If I compiled the pact with my soul and threw this book into the sea, collecting myself silent and cold inside the heart, maybe I would recover my essence and find the oasis. But I don't know what force, what diabolical temptation of personal sacrifice they pushes me, what desire to project myself in this drama. And also, what hopes to convey a message for others to pick it up and look for the way, when I no longer exist...)

## PUNTA ARENAS

### *The City of the Great Memory*

Three days before the end of the year, our ship headed for the Strait of Magellan. Just at that time the clouds cleared, and a beautiful sun illuminated the shores.

I was still in my bunk when a sailor informed me that the commander of the frigate invited me to lunch in his cabin. I hastened to accept, since I

had no opportunity to converse with the commander since the storm in the Gulf of Penas. Only from time to time did I see him on the bridge, with his white silk scarf, attentive to navigation, or overseeing the construction of a wooden cabin that stood on the bridge, in which he would live during the stay on the ice. In this way he could live next to the gyrocompass and the tiller bar.

I entered the commander's cabin when he had not yet arrived. The table was served with two plate wares, one facing the other and, on the center, a bouquet of flowers from Patagonia. At an angle, on his desk, you could see a photograph of relatives, some spy glasses, an ashtray in the shape of a steering wheel and an old wooden crucifix. The commander came in and invited me to sit down. I was very happy for the proximity of Punta Arenas and the appearance of the sun. His assistant began serving lunch. Before opening a bottle of white wine and consulting me, he preferred to drink mineral water. He indicated that I would accompany him to drink from the latter. As long as we ate, the commander alluded to things on board, I took the opportunity to observe him with detail. He had a very young and smooth face; but in the blue eyes and on the clear forehead were the concerns that betrayed a thinker. When he put on his reading glasses, he looked like a young professor absorbed in his texts. He was small and his expressions denoted seriousness and good humor. After a random and inconsequential initial talk, He was wondering about my Antarctic views. The commander wanted me to inform him.

I had to answer him: "Sir, I know very little or nothing. I never studied in an orderly manner. Rather I just feel ... For example, from Antarctica I ignore everything. What good can this do you?"

Observing me, he replied: "By my profession I must study; but I also prefer to feel. For all of this trip I have been "feeling" a strange current underneath the surface, which facilitates the work of sliding us towards the south." I was mystified, but I did not interrupt. "My nautical training was in submarines. I think reaching a submarine to Antarctica would be something very interesting. If the big Cetaceans [whales] take advantage of these deep currents to navigate, why cannot a submarine do it too? On my return from this expedition I will present a project. Would you like to join me?"

“Without a doubt,” I replied. “Maybe we could cross over due to the ice and...” I interrupted myself.

The commander smiled significantly.

“We are enveloping ourselves in a special atmosphere,” he said. “I have sailed several times through these places, but I've never *felt* this till now. It must be a suggestion. The fact of going to a mysterious world makes you admire the shoreline in a different way. I always wanted to reach Antarctica, since my readings of the extraordinary journey of the Russian admiral Bellingshausen. If you don't get tired, I'll tell you something about him ... February 1820, after entering the icy continent, Bellingshausen explored the Antarctic edges. In the middle of the *pack-ice* he took a course further south and crossed the Antarctic Polar Circle. The *pack-ice* closed and the strong winds prevented him from continuing south. He withdrew to the northwest. After many twists and turns, he sailed for Sydney where he arrived in March of that year. On 11 November, he set sail again towards Antarctica and at the 103° W meridian, crossing the Polar Circle again. In January he discovered an island, to which gave the name of the reigning Tsar, Peter I. This is an immense island, in a j-shape.” The commander spoke in precise terms as if he knew in detail those regions, to which he was going to for the first time. Continuing: “The most extraordinary thing happened to Bellingshausen when he followed the north and then east, near South Shetlands. A thick fog enveloped his ships and he could not advance. Imagine the surprise to see through the thick veil of the Antarctic fog the masts of another ship from another nation. It looked like a ghost from the pole swinging in the severe mist. Upon clearing, a North American *sloop* could be seen. It was the *Hero*, commanded by Captain Palmer... the commandants met aboard the Russian ship. Bellingshausen looked like a man of legend, with a long beard and an imperial uniform. The North American informed him of the fantastic world around them. They had discovered to the east a vast frozen territory, with mountains visible in the distance. In honor of the American captain, the Russians named them Palmer's Land ... That's where we are heading today, to the land of Palmer, Graham Peninsula, or Land of O'Higgins, as we call it ourselves. Palmer took Bellingshausen to the bay of the island of Deception. On this island our compatriot Andressen lived for years and established his whaling factory ... Do you know that in Punta Arenas is Andressen's grave? It would be worth your visit”. The

commander planned to continue talking about Bellingshausen, Palmer and surely Andressen, when the ship's siren sounded on board.

He got up hastily. I followed him out on deck. "It is the Commodore," he explained, "who made the siren sound so that we would come out to anticipate Puerto Hambre and Fort Bulnes." As I watched over the gray strip of land and the distant barriers of the fort, the commander was lecturing, arm outstretched:

"It was in 1500, when the most daring and extraordinary Spanish conqueror, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, founded the free City of King Philip there. He left a hundred men under the command of a captain, but the English corsair Cavendish found only desolation and death. The houses were beaten by the wind and on the floors of the huts were frozen bodies. Cavendish christened this port with the name of Puerto Hambre [famine], because of hunger and cold ... The one who founded it was a man of bad luck and the strangest conqueror of his time. In everything he undertook, doom accompanied him. More than once he must have thought that this was due to the inclination that in his youth he showed for astrology, and even magic. The Tribunal of the Holy Office had him in its claws. Of a will as steely as his sword, Pedro Sarmiento Gamboa never wavered, but maybe the shadow of magic practiced, or remorse, pursued him with misery ... Other sailors know that to navigate you have to choose a single route and then follow it without hesitation. Doubts, different creeds, crisscrossing roads, magic on a Christian ship, or thought of legendary life aboard a ship of that century could carry fatality..."

### PUNTA ARENAS

Punta Arenas, the city of the extreme south, was waiting for us decked out like on a holiday. We descended on the docks in magnificent weather. The sun no longer abandoned us. While we stayed in the city the sky was a transparent blue. Punta Arenas is a clean, windswept, level city. The image that remains of her is that of a sheet of paper beaten by the blizzard; with fury it's swirled, smashed against some wall and, immediately, taken in fast flight through the deserted streets, between the leaning trees. The sheet went up in the air, then descended to the causeways in search of a refuge.

I walked through the city, aimlessly, sniffing the air. The light was cold and the atmosphere thin. It seemed to me that if I went up I was going to

stay suspended in space, because there would not be enough gravity to bring me to the ground. I walked slowly, stretching my legs after the long days on the ship.

I contemplated the sea and meditated on the conquerors who once came here. I was wondering if they too would have experienced this feeling of pause, of yearning that surrounds the strait and is like an impalpable air from another world, a voice submerged in the wind that calls out our names, from beyond, from the other side. They are voices, they are strung words that come from the "farthest south" and they whisper in this city, that beyond here begins "another world", "another reality" and that we have to dare to go in search of it.

Surely the conquerors and corsairs also perceived this spell and they went with their galleons into the mystery. Who calls us by our names in Punta Arenas? A distant being wrapped in the white mist of the ice, that pulls our soul and that already has us in his domains. The only way to free ourselves is to go to him. Otherwise we will be lost and we will always return, without knowing why, to this city, to roam like an empty shell, like a ghost waiting for a revelation that we are not yet capable to penetrate. The conquerors contemplated the other side of the strait, perhaps they thought that the world ended here. The bonfires on the distant hills must have seemed to them like the fires of Hell. With certainty, they must have asked themselves: "What lies beyond?" Although it could cost my soul, I thought it might be well worth venturing out, and finding out. Walking, I came to a park with undersized trees and macrocarpus pines.

Nearby, the figure of a church stood out. I approached its entrance, which was opened. I was about to enter, when a priest of indefinite age beckoned me and invited me to stop by another door, leading me into a building with the appearances of convent. He led me down a hall to some large rooms where he told me:

“I am sure, my son, that you will be very interested in seeing this. It may even be the purpose of your trip ... You are in the Salesian Museum of this city. Look all you want, search. You'll see, you'll see ...” Then he walked away with a penetrating look, almost evil.

It was an indecisive moment, alone in the middle of showcases of animals, with embalmed birds. There were whale skeletons, indigenous weapons, arrows, braided baskets, spears, stones. I wearily looked at everything, almost distracted. I was thinking about the face of the priest and the impression of having seen him before. I stopped in front of some photographs. One of them powerfully piqued my interest. I got closer to see it better. I froze, while a chill ran through my entire body. How was it possible? There in a blurry photograph on the wall, was the face of that being that chased me in my dreams and night visions since my childhood. It was the same face, with identical attire: the man had his chest uncovered and on his shoulders, a puma skin. His face was hairless and he looked at me with elongated and evil eyes. Something powerful and arrogant was in that figure. In his gaze I sensed a great familiarity and a certain similarity with that of the old priest who brought me to this room.

With effort I got closer; then the face seemed to extend. It was that being that visited me in fundamental moments of my life and that always repeated: "You will arrive here, you will come ...". Now it was there, on the wall of this room in a hazy photograph. At the bottom I could read with surprise: "A Jon, selknam magician from Tierra del Fuego". There was no date, no indication from the time it was taken. Leaning on a column I began to contemplate that face for a long time. My vision of him had always been brief, but now I could analyze it at ease. As the night came and the darkness invaded the museum room, again it seemed to me that this mysterious face would smile and tell me: "You have come ..."

The circle was closing. The next day, the tanker arrived at the port and anchored at the dock, beside the frigate. He had to refuel it. This scene was almost tender, for it resembled a mother feeding her pup. Except that the mother, despite her larger volume, was harmless and the little boy showed his cannons and all the fineness of his line of combat. The surf rocked them softly.

When I got on board I saw that one of the oil hoses had been broken and that the black milk was jumping off the deck of the frigate like a thick river. Avoiding the shiny puddles I crossed over a wooden bridge, and went to the deck of the tanker. I went to visit my friend Captain S. I found him in his cabin. We talked for a long time and it was here that he told me about his interview with Professor Klohn, passing through the city of

Concepción. I heard him with great interest, but I told him nothing about my experience in the city of Punta Arenas.

## NEW YEAR

Another year ended. A dinner was served on board the frigate. The Commodore, the commanders, and a few officers attended. The rest had permission to spend the night in the city. Of the civilians there was only Poncet, the photographer and myself. It was a sad dinner, full of great silences. At twelve o'clock we got up and shook hands. The Commodore had champagne bottles opened. Then everyone scattered; some in the direction of the city and others to their cabins.

I wanted to see the night, wearing in a fur coat, I went to sit next to the bow cannon. The luminosity of the sky was strange. It seemed like a celestial curtain of invisible ice would project visions and clarities from the sky. The thin sky shook with sudden tempers. Blocks of light, flickering, cracking like a film of frost that it shreds. And on the horizon appeared a blue-orange stripe, which extended to its zenith. I was looking at it ecstatically, it was like listening to sounds of color that were transformed into notes, into a symphony, in chorus of calls from another world. And the luminosity of the sea widened the horizon, confused the dimensions, making time a single sphere: the past, with its navigators and its old galleons and the future, with the deep voice of Antarctica, wrapped in the icy, nocturnal wind of that light. It was a call, a sign. The voice of Antarctica. Surely everyone who in the past came here and stopped to contemplate the night sky heard it, because in the raging wind of the strait was also wrapped up a distant call. Seasoned sailors will have imagined that beyond the strait and the lands, there is another incognito world. Old ships were discovered going between the Antarctic ices. In the air, in the water, on the land, there is a powerful current, irresistible like a torrent rushing to the edge of the last abyss that falls towards the pole.

After the long journey through gray canals, and always with the rain, Punta Arenas is a stop in the descent to hell, but it is no longer hell. Rather it is like descending into a deep well. And from here it allows us to visit the other extreme, the distance of grace, the edge of things, but Punta Arenas is not the end of the world. Let us move on; we are going to fall into that "other reality" from which our everyday values don't seem to exist. My hunches, they stirred and I was adrift, in the center of waters that have

acquired dramatic speed and plummeted into the abyss. Everything was unstable, nothing to hold on, yet I was trying.

### THE GREAT MEMORY

I was shivering. I am not sure how, but wrapped up in my cloak, I fell asleep. Then I heard a sound coming from the water. I wanted to look, but seemed paralyzed. I waited as the sound approached. I could make out a figure that stopped near me, then took a few steps, approaching. It was suspended in the air and moved horizontally, without even touching the deck floor. When he was close I recognized an old visitor. He was the magician in the portrait in the Salesian Museum, now dressed in a black cassock. In one hand he carried a rosary and in the other, the strange bone of an animal. I now understood the sound that was being produced were the words he was whispering. He dashed the bone into the sea. He told me:

“I am repeating in my language: You have come ...!” He then launched the rosary to the sea. Another thing caught my attention at that moment. The eyes of that shadow cast their gaze above me, as if there was someone behind me, and his expression was not the same as before, he was more human and very similar to the priest who had entered the museum. “Could it be that the priest had disguised himself dressed in that garb, wishing to surprise me?” During the whole scene I now abandoned the question... I turned to look behind me.

I discovered another faded figure, standing almost atop the tower. At that moment it began to descend, approaching. I beheld a man in a helmet and armor. He was brandishing a Tizona [a sword used by Spanish Warriors, including El Cid]. Regardless of where he was, his sword struck everywhere. However, the characteristic noise of steel striking was not heard. I looked closely and suffered a strange sensation: nothing separated me from him; I was him; I was even feeling the pressure of his helmet on my head and the hilt of the sword between my fingers. I resisted a moment and, for the last time, I watched him from outside. He was lean with skin stuck to the bone, sunken cheeks and deep eyes, glowing with a passionate fever, like coals turned on. Afterwards, I no longer watched him as a spectator, but *felt that it was me*, that the words he spoke were said by myself and that his gestures were executed by my members. However, of some unexplainable mode, he also remained independent and outside. The



voice of his curious Spanish was uttered without any of my effort to articulate them, as if gliding from the inside out, independent of my will. I was talking about a king and taking possession of some land. With the sword he confirmed this action, while addressing some invisible spectators.

My first visitor, came even closer. Turning his eyes to me, he said:

“This is Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa. It seems to me that you have recognized him, and it could not be otherwise. Because you were him...”

“How?” I replied. “Is it reincarnation?”

“Words ... We are all of us. It depends on that which inherits your form. Search within yourself and you will find the world. Search a little more and you will find me. I am also you ... Have you not figured it out yet?”

He laughed unpleasantly. And he continued:

“Certainly you are more Sarmiento de Gamboa than anything else. You haven't changed much since then. But I'm going to tell you something that I also revealed to that poor man. Because you must know that he, likewise, saw me and it was by my will that he came here. I am the ancient, primal spirit of these places. My image is the shadow of the magic and wisdom that envelops this world, impenetrable by paths other than those I know. Gamboa also believed in magic, that is, he sought in the old thoughts that had already been lost to humanity. With his faith, he came this far, but he resisted. He was mostly interested in chasing English corsairs and in building ephemeral cities in this inhospitable place. The sign of the Cross, which is also that of the sword, oriented him to the external. You see how the Cross has been projecting humanity outward. And, in great doubt, he could not remember; in hesitation, or in fear, he drew doom upon himself. That is why you, Pedro Sarmiento de Gamboa, have had to return to these territories to sustain the test of memory. . . But first, you must contemplate your death. . .”

I felt an icy current. It came to me in waves from that shadow. Obeying his insinuation, I stood up and followed him. Soon we came to a sinister place. The waves were hitting a beach full of gravel and bones of large

fish. We came upon the awaiting. We were among huts with logs. The ruins of a church cast its shadows on the ground not far from the beach.

“Ready is the City of King Philip,” I exclaimed. “Here must be my men waiting for me.”

“Yes, here they are,” he replied. “They have waited for you a long time. You should never have abandoned them. You should have been among them ... Then I beheld a macabre sight. Inside the huts human remains lay, eaten by pumas. Bodies of men, women and some children. Half covered in rags, with pieces of faces that had turned gray. Bruised fingers, half-consumed arms, the remains of thighs in their clothing, with strips of torn human flesh. Inside the church, next to the rustic altar, I saw more corpses. On foot of the confessional a large puma was devouring the swollen body of a child. I retired to the plaza and arrived in front of the Tree of Justice. There hung three hanged men and the furious wind lifted them horizontally. Their bodies seemed diminished in size.

“They abhorred your name and the name of your king; that's why they're there... And you, where do you find yourself in the meanwhile?”

“Battered by the storm,” I replied, “which was pushing me toward the north and east. Do you think I forgot them? It was against my will. I thought only of helping them. But God's designs are inscrutable... Let's go. We walked through the steppe. It was night and we sat next to a bush. My companion reached out and took a small fruit.

“Have you tried it?” I wonder.

“Yes; I know its taste. It is the fruit of the return”.

“Calafate, they call it. Whoever eats it always returns to this region and that city. . . Rather, I would say that those who liked its taste, but did not reach the bottom of their memory, will always return here. He who was here and saw nothing, sooner or later will return in the ages, because on the eternal path it will only allow you to pass if you meet this requirement. I am the one who keeps the threshold. No one will cross to the ice without my authorization and without my stamping my sign on his forehead ... Rather, many pass, but they are “the dead”, those who come and go

everywhere, the “explorers”. Those go and it's as if they weren't. They get there, they look without seeing, and they hear without hearing. I don't even see them. They do not exist. They can happen because I don't worry about preventing them. But at some time I will have to, because one day they will change. . .”

“Tell me who you are? - I asked - . And why have I seen you for so long? You appeared already in my childhood. I think you were my playmate as a child.” The shadow laughed again.

“My race has nothing to do with yours. We are two different worlds. You and I can never get together. Only our gods could connect. Opposite to your humanity, I come from the south. You *go south*, you *must* go south. My race, on the contrary, proceeds from the ice, that's where it comes from and our wisdom is so very distant and mysterious. In a remote past we crossed that entire continent where you go today and, from there, we extracted the vitality. You think humanity is yesterday, I know that humanity is forever. But there are different humanities, as different from each other as the winds of the earth, like you and me. I have told you before how we can well be the same person, but at the same time we are different. Here is the mystery. As men we can never get close; the path of our shadows will never find a bridge; yet our gods they could meet again, become one. Just putting on the skin of God, you will be able to overcome time and contemplate that which is unchanging.”

From that moment, as I heard those words, I began to contemplate. And it was as if a long speech was drawn from me interwoven with visions.

“Avalon, Avalon,” they told me, “the city of apples! There were once beautiful golden apples! Remember? There, in that age of the world, on that central continent, grew a tree. Was it an apple tree, or was it a ceibo? It was Mother Ceiba. It grew from hell, from the center of the earth and crossed the hard surface with its foliage and reached up to the thirteen heavens. Men climbed up it to taste the golden apples. Around the trunk was the serpent of Quetzalcoatl and from Bochica; the beards of Bochica with beautiful quetzal feathers. The serpent lent its wings to men so they could climb. But what happened? Why did the paradise of Avalon become so far away, the ancient City of the Dead? The serpent was the light and

soon, he fell from the tree into the pit of hell. Who destroyed their wings and their feathers?"

"I'll tell you," the shadow told me. "Mankind has existed many times before. But time is circular and everything repeats itself. As well as there are days and there are nights, so there are cycles that open and close. What once was, will always be again. Many, many years ago, there was a central continent where great hope flourished with overtones of eternity. Everything you discover on your pilgrimage through the world, are only fragments of that childhood of time. Your own God already existed there. It was there that he first crucified him. The crucifixion you know is only a reflection of the previous ones. In that time the continents were reunited. But the time approached and everything had to disappear. A great enraged wave plunged a blow to the wonderful City of Avalon, where the golden fruits grew in the gardens of the sun. Everything disappeared with almost no memories and the ice of death covered the hill of paradise. The feathered serpent had also died, unable to stop the raging waters. In the Iron Age someone would have to descend into hell to rescue his light and his legacy. . . That is the story. And I don't know if it happened in heaven or on earth. I come from a different time. I am a foreigner in this universe. Before leaving I want to reveal the meaning of all this. It is very simple and yet well beyond the disturbing memories, myths and dramas of the gods. Everything repeats itself; what was once will be again. The world that was destroyed will be destroyed again. Everything is like a sowing. A great invisible hand strewn over the plains and when the same specific number has borne fruit; it does not matter which ones are lost. Another sowing is about to end. The time is near; you have to be deaf and blind not to perceive its signs. This is why you must hurry and continue towards the Oasis of the ice, the only refuge where you will be saved. You have to be ruthless and tenacious. You can restore nothing, and no one has the right to twist your will; fly above everything, life and death, because, if you falter, there are many others willing to take your place, taking eternity from you. Already the doors are about to close, and when this happens, those who remain outside will only be the useless seed, and sterile fruit, which the gale will scatter and the lightning will rip apart.

With my head barely raised between my shoulders, I wanted to move, but I could only mutter: "Help me up, for I'm almost frozen." I couldn't move anymore.

"Immortality is achieved among the ice," he replied, "and in freezing. I am no one, nor is there anything I can do now. Your great combat will be with the Angel of Shadows".

I still couldn't move. In anguish, I implored:

"I must retire to my cabin. Help me. It wouldn't be nice if they found me here frozen tomorrow. With difficulty, I saw my companion. For the last time I saw him by my side, but he had shrunk so much in size that he looked like a boy. His face was also very different; it had cleared up and his gaze was like a bitter yet helpless reproach. I understood what had happened; that being was about to vanish. It was just a larva that had fed on my life, an archaic ghost image. He never had more reality than I allowed him. And now, when he finally faced it, it came loose, unraveling. Vibrating currents ran through me. I woke up with a shudder. When I opened my eyes I saw the same sky with its celestial dawn and its astral reflection. I was sitting under the forward gun of the frigate. I looked at the time: only a few seconds had passed since I went into that dream. Through the cold and the white light of the night, I made my way to my cabin.

### THE LAND OF FIRE *The land of the Selk'nam*

On the other side of the Strait are the lands of the Onas. We returned to the east and took the Magdalena Canal, then the Cockburn Canal and the Whaling Channel; heading south. Here were those mountains and those gray slopes where once the bonfires caused the conquerors to give them the name 'Land of Fire'. The Onas signaled to each other using the most primitive means. By the fire they raised their temporary tents and narrated their legends. The Onas called themselves Selk'nam, which means man. More here, were the Yahgan; a race very different and darker than the Selk'nam.

On the Big Island of Tierra del Fuego, around Lake Fagnano, the gigantic coihues grow, the ñirres [Antarctic Beech] with white trunks and thin leaves even more, the maitenes with their green leaves, delicate as lace, the solemn cinnamon, deep in color; next to them, the bushes, the calafate, the inconsolable sarsaparilla, chilcos, ferns and creeper that envelops and

confuses everything, giving the forest the appearance of hair. The forest looks like a madman whipped by gales. Everything is wrapped in moisture from that great sponge of branches and mosses that seems to reach the sky.

The woodpecker makes its noise, which is like the compass of eternity. And in the night, where a dim light barely penetrates, are droplets that drain into the void, like sullen tears of the ancient night. Everything is damp, even when it appears under the cold sun. Transparent ghosts cross the thicket, spreading a reddish luminosity, like twilight, or blood.

These last lands, furrowed with precipices, high peaks and wooded plains, with boulders licked by the deadly white tongue of the ice, is an area alive like no other. That is, the spirit of a mysterious race, which once inhabited these lands, gave to them of itself the greatest thing that it is possible to give; a meaning, a soul, a legend that was embedded in the bottom of its intimate reality and gave consistency and life in the most hidden trails. Traveled a thousand times by those indefatigable hunters, who were the Selk'nam, the Big Island of Tierra del Fuego is impregnated with his spirit. Each hill recalls a legendary hero, each lake or snowdrift, an event of tradition or legend. And though it seems to have vanished with the disappearance of the last vestige of free life on the part of the Selk'nam, must return with great force in the future, if ever an authentic life is to flourish here, in the understanding of man with his landscape. So the ancient wisdom will return, along with the old memory of the first gods, which is still preserved within the mountains. And maybe the veil of memory is drawn; because those who lived here knew too much about the beginning and end of things. Its legends and myths, which at first glance seem to refer only to this Big Island and this south of the world, certainly close an allusion to the beginning and the origin of all things.

The Onas, or Selk'nam, came from the south; they were born in the ice. No one knows their origin, as no one knows the world. It is naïve to think the Selk'nam is over, because there are barely a dozen descendants left of their race, but the Selk'nam can never end, for the Selk'nam are the forests and the hills. The Selk'nam just sleeps and someday they will wake up. Selk'nam means man, and man is the hills and forests, the earth and the stars.

## THE ORIGIN

There, on the Great Night, “before the foundations of the earth”, in a sea without light, in the nameless, in the unknown, rested Temauquel. He was eternal, happy, beyond life, beyond death. He needed nothing, nothing moved him; he was infinite, eternally wise. It was Temauquel who created the world, and yet, it was not. Creation is a mirror, a shadow in which Temauquel tries to perceive his face. In vain attempt, great madness. Temauquel will always be beyond everything. The spaces, the times, the gods, the men, the animals, the plans, the abysses, are nothing other than Temauquel's dream.

### *The Son*

Temauquel has sent Quenós to take on the job of transforming substances. Quenós ... Who is Quenós? Is it the son of Temauquel? Should be; However, it is not. Because Quenós was born in the Old South for the father. Temauquel's dream is called Quenos.

### *The Hohuen*

It was Quenos who began to create the earth, from top to bottom. But before, and with white clay, he modeled the Hohuen, gigantic and trans-kindred like angels. Hardly created, the Hohuen began to fight among themselves. Tall, beautiful, they made bows and arrows. Instructed by Quenos, they fought on the old land. It was their memorable struggles that changed the look of the world. The earth wrinkled in its wake, rivers and streams parted, the crust became more and more until at last it was able to hold them. The arrows of the combatants crossed the sky and the clash of the opposing sides of Hohuen produced outbursts of light, thunder and lightning; when a Hohuen fell it was like lightning penetrating through the earth and fertilizing it. The Hohuen did not die; instantly they were transformed into something else. One of the most memorable stories of that time was the battle between the Old North and the Old South. They were both Hohuen and had a great power. The South of that time was very different from the South today. It was the Elder South. Also the North, was the Elder North. Since then North and South are enemies, because until today they have not made definite their contest. However, at the end of time North and South will merge. This is the fight of the elements unleashed by Quenos, a fight that will have no end. Because the war in this world will never end. Animals are thoughts, distractions from Quenos.

The plants too. The Hohuen, on the other hand, are reflections of the image of Quenós that created them in the likeness of the image that He had of Temauquel. The Hohuen are Quenos's dream. And man is the dream of the Hohuen. The day came when Quenos got tired of traveling the world. He wanted die, wanted to rest and could not, because he was immortal. He then traveled to the south and was buried in the ice. After a while, he woke up rejuvenated. This is how Quenos discovered rebirth and eternal youth. And Quenos taught it to the Hohuen. However, one day Quenos left forever.

### *Cuanyip*

Who is Cuanyip? He is the one who has destroyed the *memory*, bringing the Death. When Quenos departed, many were the Hohuen who remained. They still worked on the land. Among them was Cuanyip's father, named Hais. He lived a little further north and was fought by the Hohuen further south. They often attacked him, destroying his households. Hais had a son named Ansmenc and a daughter named Aquelvoin. Among his enemies was Náquenc, who was feared. Náquenc had a daughter, named Hosne. After the attacks, Hais fell in love with Náquenc's daughter. Náquenc knew of it and, one stormy night, amid the thunder and rain, he seized Aquelvoin, the daughter of Hais, and brought her to his tent. When Hais came, Náquenc had changed Hosne for Aquelvoin. And the father then he lay that night with his daughter. This is how Cuanyip was born, the fruit of night and incest. Cuanyip would feel forever alien and separated from the Hohuen. His origin is another; son of a fallen god and Aquelvoin. He only thus began to stand out for his fearlessness and intelligence, developing his cleverness, to make forgotten the history of his origin, son of a sin. It is he who has brought the sense of sin to the world, because he has not been able *to forget*. And in order to forget, Cuanyip discovered Death. He knew that as long as the Hohuen were immortal, he could never *forget*, it would always come back upon the world. For this Cuanyip killed his brother Ancmec. When Ancmec traveled to the ice, to sleep and rejuvenate, Cuanyip stole the spirit of his dream. And Ancmec could do nothing but to die. Since then, death came, like a torrent, on the immortal.

### *The man*

After Cuanyip discovered death, the man appeared next on the earth. The man was called Selk'nam and he tried to resemble the Hohuen.



*The Titans*

When Quenos came into the world, there was no sun. The first Hohuen marched on the soft earth, having for companions the fire and humidity. Great mists covered the sky. And the regions of that gray and central land saw the first Cyclopean monuments risen by the worshipers of Quenos, along with the din of Chaos. Someone told the Hohuen that the sun would come; but they didn't want to believe it. And when the sun came, the Hohuen did not want to recognize it so they sank into the mountains. They still remain there. Of huge statues, their heads stretching toward the sky.

(Have I not seen them? Two giants imprisoned by the gray mass of the mountain. One of them raised their imploring arms to the sky and the other bent, as if resisting the weight of centuries. These figures are framed by the gold of the peaks. And there they will remain; or until the ancient sun, which confined them, and has already left, reappears in the sky).

*They are*

Where did the Selk'nam come from? It was the Walkers of the Dawn of humanity. They came from the ice. There, in that White World, that hidden Paradise. One day they arrived on this Big Island —back when it wasn't as far from the White Continent— and they populated it. When the Selk'nam died, his body was deposited on some distant beach and his soul ascended to heaven, beyond the stars, to meet with Temauquel. Like a drop of water, the soul melted into the sea of Temauquel.

In this world, already extremely harsh, away from the ancient sun, the man died and suffered, because evil and disease, pain and death, they punished him. However, there is a halt in destiny, a milestone, something like a strange stone, which interrupts the doom of the blind path. They are the Jon, the Selk'nam mages. Because, unlike other mortals, Jon cannot die and his soul does not return to Temauquel, but reincarnates immediately in another Jon.

Here is the mystery of mysteries. With Jon there has been a high, an unexpected interruption in the whole process of life. Let's see what the Selk'nam has to say about this very strange event. They claim that Jon, although he belongs to his people, is a being that has nothing to do with

common men. He is of another race other than the human. His composition is different. He has no soul like that of other men. His skin is more subtle and blood does not run in his veins, but a white fluid; inside it radiates and is soft. Jon has nothing to do with men, he has nothing to do with Temauquel. It does not come from Him, nor does it return to Him. Jon has no soul. The one that Jon has is a *ghost*. As the Selk'nam walk up and down their mountains, Jon remains seated at the entrance of his tent. His eyes turn their gaze within, little by little, he appears inside a larger world, immense and luminous, with stars, oceans and abysses. His *ghost* begins to haunt him. That is where he walks; for the inner world, for the infinite.

And the Jons learned the secret of immortality. To obtain it they traveled to the ice, to "that White Island that is in the Sky". There they lay for a long time, waking up rejuvenated. During the dream they were fighting with the Angel of the Ice, with Cuanyip. Expiring hurt, they woke up immortal. Some of them returned to the lands of the Selk'nam. Others stayed in the mysterious and happy Oases, where they still reside, along with the Jons of all time, past and Present ...

Those who were born in the north, in the northern ice will find the path. Those who were born in the south will find it in the southern ice. The poles are the extremes. No flowers, plants, or even the roots. Only the seeds remain, the atoms remain, the mind of Creation; preserved by the ice, they are saved for the New Day of the primordial essences. And it is always the dramatic shadow of the Dawn Walkers that is indicating to men the difficult, and dangerous path of mortality.

### TOWARDS THE SNOWDRIFTS

We return to the rain and the gray mist; the water and vegetation. Little by little, leaden boulders begin to appear, washed out, almost like poured limes on the sea. On their backs you discover the trace of the prehistoric ice that has polished them, filing their edges. In the background, you can see the great mountains of snowy ridges, breaking through, climbing to inaccessible heights. On the railing cables, the physician stands leaning, with the collar of his coat pulled up to his ears, while he gazes at the water in silence. What is he thinking about?

I get closer. "Doctor, what are you observing?"

"It's strange," he says, "man wasn't made for water." These sheer rocks, they are similar to the savages that lived here. They were also naked and their bodies also waxed from the glaciers.

"Yes," I reply. "Those who believe that the Fuegians may be correct said they came from Antarctica in ancient times. They were shaped by the ice and this climate was not hostile to them. Herein lies the difference with the natives of the channels of Patagonia, who came from the north. His soul was unaware of the deep personality of the ice. Early on they must have degenerated, feeling themselves enemies of the children of the south, who they then in turn fought. I think that we ourselves are in a situation similar to those indigenous people from the north. We will also be combating the spirits of the south, who will not accept us until we have lived with the Antarctic ice. The school of the new generations should be that of ice ... It is the only way to live ..."

"Do you think so?" Asked the doctor. "So the next age would it be that of ice, as opposed to the current one, which is the Iron Age?"

He took out of his pocket an old book, with parchment covers, and began to read:

*"The last age of Cumea - The virgin maiden has already arrived – She brings the kingdom of Saturn and Rhea - The centuries turn to a golden age - Again heaven sends us long years - A new people will be begotten - You, chaste Moon, full of joy, favor, for reign and to your Apollo - To the Child who was born on this day - The iron will be cast out of the world - And a golden lineage, the most precious, - He will populate, and the other Pole."*

"Virgil", he said. "A boy was born then. Do you think another will come? Could it be a child from the ice?"

I didn't answer. But the doctor extended his arm, exclaiming "the snowdrifts!"

Yes, the snowdrifts! The first outposts, lookouts and sentries of Antarctica. They spread like white tongues on the water and their black moraines have been polluted with the dirt of the Iron Age. From the time when the ice

began to withdraw from the world and when the Child who was born would be sacrificed and crushed between the spikes of the great machines. The mechanism is as gloomy as the ferruginous moraines, which fall towards the end of the glaciers in the Beagle Channel. Slowly they pass: The Roncagli, the Romanche, the Italia. They are the primary signs, delegates from another world.

### GENDEGAIA

For hours I have been taking pictures for the aviator. He has pointed out the places that could serve as a reference in his projected flight from Antarctica to the mainland. The frigate has come a long way and that night we reached Gendegaia. This is a wide bay. At the bottom of it you can see the lights of some houses. On the other side of those hills is the Argentine city of Ushuaia. Here the two ships have met to continue together in the crossing of the Drake Sea.

The next day we continued sailing. With the photographer, Poncet and the doctor, I watched from the bridge. I am taking in the great island of Navarino. The photographer made a point:

"That's Wulaia. That's where Jemmy Button ordered the English prisoners to be killed."

The shadowy symbol emerged. Jemmy Button would perhaps fulfill the rite, pushed by the landscape and by his gods. He would pay the tribute of his race, their debt, to make possible the return of the world that existed beyond the sun, of the light that grows beyond darkness.

### PUERTO ORANGE

#### *Last reflection in Hell*

We are now at the last place, where the Beagle Channel forks. The current pulls vertiginously. There is nothing to hold onto in the adjacent territory. On the deck circulate the shadows of some crew. A strange tiredness invades them. Chiaroscuro play on their faces. Here, very soon, the world ends. Then starts the unknown, that which is beyond all physical relationships. Puerto Orange is our last stage before entering the bleak Drake Sea. Ships anchor here awaiting the right time to cross it.

The rain falls monotonously on the gray rock of the island. One afternoon we descend to land. On the small beach, covered with shells, the sailors roast cholgas over makeshift stone ovens. The smoke rises to the low sky. In nearby trees grows a small fruit that men are eating. The forest is dense with trees. Poncet, the doctor the architect, and I go to a peak, beyond the forest, where previous expeditions have left some signs. We march in line so that we can cut through the ferns and the branches. Our feet sink as in a soft sponge, which opens, only to close again. The water runs off our body and the feeling we have is to get above the treetops, because we must step on top of its branches; most of the dwarf trees are shorter than us and the best way to break through is by going almost over them. I see the doctor ahead. He has cut off a branch and with it he removes the obstacles. Pounding away, it looks like an animal sliding through the water and the foliage. The vegetation becomes less dense near the slope of the hill, and a mossy earth makes it difficult to climb. The doctor has stopped. He is wiping his face with a handkerchief. In that instant a long scream is heard coming from the beach. Our heads turn back and we look down over the forest. In vain we search in the gray afternoon. Again the call is heard, and now it seems to be closer. The doctor climbs up a rock and investigates with the binoculars.

"It's Fellenberg, the photographer," he says. "He is next to a tree, they are trying to help a fallen man. These sailors are like children. I know surely one of them has climbed up to pick those fruits and the branch broke. These trees are all rotten. Let's go. I hope his spine has not been broken against the stones!"

The architect marches ahead. I continue my own ascent of that mossy slope. I arrive at the top and I can see the other side of the island. Undulating plains spread out under the thin mist. Vapors rise from distant ponds, as if they were the breath of those last regions. A black bird takes flight. On the horizon the clouds of waters descend. They tend to cover almost everything. I sit on a stone. With my head in my hands I let the cold rain soak me. I can hardly resist the hopelessness. How long ago did we leave? I'm tired; we have arrived so low, so deep in this well, finding nothing to hold on to. Temple of the powerful current and the presence of the soul of dead beings, prisoners of the god of darkness, of the world of the past, who submerged in the waters. I am dragging my body to where I have brought it, where physical life is minimal, where helplessness reigns.

And it is a mistake; sound souls only make pilgrimage to these places after the destruction of the body.

THE PURGATORY  
*Crossing the Drake Sea*

Far is Cape Horn, where strange shadows lie. An indigenous bonfire raises its smoke to the sky. The frigate sails heavily. To the west, in the distance, we see the tanker move. It rises and falls, an instant submerged by the waves, then her masts and keel reappear, as gray as the ocean.

That invisible, immaterial current, that during all the navigation we thought we sensed in the channels, here it has become diffuse, lost taking in the breadth of the sea. He no longer pulls towards the pole and it is difficult to continue between these heavy waves. The ocean sways silent, leaden, confusion in the gray haze. A close immutability, a feeling of navigating within four walls or a big round glass, falls on the crew. The waters of two oceans come together, get confused in this strait and, surely, far below, fight and they swirl. That hybrid existence, that deep enmity, laughs strap into the turbulent and distressing atmosphere of the Drake. The hell current cannot break through the depths where other forces collide. But maybe lower, much lower, there is a passage where someone walks easily in pursuit of their ice regions.

They have given us the first Antarctic ration, consisting of greasy meats and chocolate bars. They have also distributed appropriate clothes to us: gloves and “parkas” filled with feathers, or lined in bear skin. The Commodore has reappeared. I saw him in the cockpit of the wheelhouse, reclining in a chair, wearing a hat of fur hooded up to the eyebrows and with a black and grown beard. He was looking through the glass and holding a book in his hands. One afternoon I crossed a corridor that I never knew how to get to. Holding onto the irons, I walked to its end. On the threshold of a door a curtain had been drawn. Inside was the commodore. He has also saw me and with a wave of his hand, he motioned for me to come closer. The Commodore was alone in his cabin, going through books and photographs. He offered me a seat and began to talk. It was the first time we were going to have a long talk. All those books were full of photographs, of termites, of seals, and of curious birds. Among them is the Commodore himself. They are photographs of Antarctica, taken on other expeditions.

Now, as we cross this difficult and gloomy sea, the Commodore contemplates that other unimaginable world from here. Maybe I will find strength...

“You can't understand what Antarctica is,” he tells me. “With this sea, all connection has already been lost. Long ago in the past, that was not so. Here is an old map of Ortelius, where Tierra del Fuego and Antarctica are still united. For those of us who navigate this sea, its crossing is like a purgatory, the memory of Antarctica is that of heaven. There was a time when heaven was everything and purgatory did not yet exist. It is difficult for the world to understand how those of us who remain here yearn for heaven. I must not forget it, although everything conspires to make it happen ... That is why I contemplate these memories...”

I looked at him curiously. Sitting there, under the window, where the pale afternoon light was coming in. From a drawer he took a little book with seafaring songs and browsed through it. Then he intoned in a low voice, and said:

*Ready to hunt down the sails  
the fathoms to gird,  
Take advantage of the southern breeze,  
that makes the sail fast.*

And then:

*... A thousand joys await you  
That you will not be able to forget ...*

It happened that night. I did not sleep. In the bunks below, I felt the same of my cabin mates. Neither did they rest. An anguish for the day hung in the air. The waves were slow mountains, like monsters of liquid metal, which took an infinitely long time to rise and fall. They were not agitated, but neither were they quiet.

I could do nothing except to continue lying for long, empty hours. I wasn't thinking, I was dull; my sensations were heavy and tortuous. I had waited in vain that morning for the sharp sound of the cornet, which by bouncing off steel and iron, would have shaken us. But even it was silent. There was no place for the merry bugle. The Drake's designs were fulfilled. This sea did not allow opposing forces in its domains. He is sullen and gloomy, as perhaps was the spirit of the privateer who gave it his name.

With nothing to hold onto, without a point to lean on, I was beyond laughing nauseous at myself. The rocking of the sea was deep. With this, I got up and went up next to the command bridge. The fog joined the waters again. The nausea increased. Standing by the railing, I threw up. The entire sea looked like dark vomit. On the horizon appeared the shadow of a whale that threw its double chop. It rolled up to the sky. It seemed to me that the monster was also throwing up its vomit to the heights.

During those two interminable days, in which the ship advanced, I was not sleeping; heavy drowsiness made my eyelids dry. During the night, ideas spun in circles. I seemed to know why. We were in purgatory. Under the sea grew the Dark Forest and the old mountain ranges of the Andes submerged. Out of this, nothing, absolutely nothing. There were no image to be seen and in the depths of the sea, no Being was pushing us, easily lining our way. The Angel of Darkness passes this stage and, in other worlds, it may change its essence and color. You can't hear your dull laughter, nor do you feel your hands slip on the bow. It is the purged river of souls, which does not go anywhere, nor never ends. It does not give any exit and imprisons with the violence of its unfathomable abysses. Within the circle of purgatory the punished soul must find for itself the path of liberation. No one can help. Forces do not exist and yet you have to look for them somewhere else. There is no will to continue, nor to make a determination. But the soul has to exert a supreme effort that impresses, in order to find the exit, reaching the distant ice. Will the Commodore of this ship be able to make the effort? I again hear him sing, dreaming of heaven: *A thousand joys await you, that you will not forget ... My soul feels vibrant and temporarily triumphant...* This is how the Commodore prepares.

The waves of the Drake churn and hit the sides of the frigate. He had said:

“You don't remember Dante anymore? Have you forgotten about him? It is in purgatory where the Paradise Hill is ... and Colón, didn't you think you found her again going up the waters of the Orinoco? What happened? Did the moon, falling from the sky, submerge in the waters of the Hill of Paradise? And this sea, this purgatory, this separation? Paradise and purgatory were one; the lands were united, this water did not exist. Man lost the White Hill forever.”



Maybe, maybe ... because paradise could only part, only get out. The continents also divide, they move. The White Island is not in heaven. It is a little further, it moved away, it escaped from men, keeping in the continent of ice, in the warm oases, on which, sometimes, the Southern Cross shines, or the mysterious dawn. And the Angel of Death guards him, with his sword of fire and cold flames. It is He who gives heat to the oases and who shields the secret. Shadows pass through the diaphanous air and immortals contemplate their own eternity.

The Commodore, who is a man who collects old things, old maps, also has in his cabin a letter from the world of that Alexandrine monk, Cosmas Indicopleustes. In it the earth is surrounded by water, but, in turn, the water is surrounded by another land. And this last one is an ancient land, far away, where paradise is found. The current land, is linked to paradise by a river. We move about this gray earth, after the flood. Could she be the inside of a sphere, stopped by the waters of another legendary and external land, which was the one where the happy Fathers dwelt, in a remote past? That "other land" from the ancients, which Plato already dreamed of. The Conception of the Indicopleustes map is similar to that of the primitive inhabitants of America, who placed a tree in the center of the world, growing until reaching the thirteen heavens. It was a Ceibo, it was a Mother Cieba, and by it men climbed to conquer the sky. The Tree from Paradise where the Cuanyip serpent coils. Or, the River that leads to heaven and first descends into the depths of Hell. Climb up and, as you exit the pole, transform yourself into the great streams of the Milky Way. Going up it we will reach Atlantis, or to Avalon, the City of the Dead, where the Hill of Paradise is encircled by golden apples ...

“You remember Dante and his rivers, the Cocyto, the Letheo, the Styx and the Flegetonte?”

“Yes, but I don't see them here, I don't see them ...”

“Everyone has found something on this journey. Punta Arenas, the "City of Memory", has given them. The architect Julian has found a poem written by Sir Ernest Shackleton in the album of a woman of his time. Shackleton has been the most extraordinary explorer of Antarctica. A painful love prompted him to flee from his land. Today he finds himself buried on South Georgia Island, covered by Snow. His wife, Lady

Shackleton, wanted him to rest there, under the cold, in the proximity of that world that he loved. Antarctica is a continent marked by a different sign. Men have explored without material ambitions. Drake the Corsair was what he was; there was no incentive to keep him going through the ice. It has been the poets, the adventurers, and the heroes who stepped into its mystery. Shackleton was the greatest of all. He wanted to cross from the Weddell Sea through the center of the Antarctic continent, piercing the pole, to the Ross Sea. A distance of 2,880 kilometers. The icebergs and the *pack-ice* of the polar winter prevented him, and it kept his ship, the *Endurance*. He then sailed on a drifting iceberg, with all his people. And in the company of a few, crossed this very sea in a boat. He was looking for help for his abandoned crew on Elephant Island. As they rowed over the Drake, Shackleton had said: 'There is someone among the ice. We will be back. If it weren't for the icebergs that destroyed our ship, who knows the mysteries that we would have revealed. There is a mystery there, Captain, a great mystery that is kept. Someday I will find out'. And then he would recite a verse from Job: 'Which belly did the ice come out? And the frost of the sky, who generated it? The waters are hardened like stone and the beam of the abyss freezes.' One afternoon the castaways thought they saw a mountain on the horizon. But it was a gigantic wave moving forward. That wave that travels the world age to age and that only very few human eyes have seen in our time. The same wave that engulfed Atlantis. It is ignored how they could survive in a small boat. Perhaps the verse about Job saved them. If Shackleton had made it across the center of Antarctica, as was his wish, he may have discovered the mystery. But the white sentries prevented him; because his time had not yet come. He must first shed his dense clothing, his rough covering and material. Today you may know him. On this night, on the prow of the frigate, the architect Julian recites Shackleton's poem, which he found in Punta Arenas. And his voice says:

*"We are those madmen who found no rest - in the gray land they left behind - our minds tortured by the far South - and the incessant fury of its strange winds - The world, where ideals languish - is erased from our defiant eyes - and so on, over dark secluded seas - slowly we advance towards our destination".*

Julian is standing on the prow of the frigate and his eyes contemplate the shadows of purgatory."

## THE ANTARTIDA

That afternoon the first signs were glimpsed. They were winged messengers. It was always the birds who announced another new world or a new time. They came to the ship and flew over it, accompanying it for hours. Their chests and wings were stained with white, as if the snow had marked them, or showed the shield of nobility of the ice. They were the "Wilson's petrels". Then the whitest doves appeared, almost transparent, across the sky of gray. The wind moaned and they were like chunks of ice with wings, ripped off icebergs. In the distance, still invisible, float the icebergs. They did not send these messengers, to greet us and show us the way. Perhaps they were sentries and lookouts, returning with the news of our arrival.

Until the wee hours the white "cape pigeons", the "pigeons of the storms" flew. There was no night. The cloudy sky gave off a white luminosity. And it seemed that once again, there was a current down below. Covered with the hoods of the "parkas", we remained firmly tied to the ropes of the ship, resisting the wind. Something trembled on the horizon; dizzying lights crossed it. Outside the fog, a presence was guessed. A cold that was not only from the external ice pierced me. It was the chill of anticipation. What would there be? Would space suddenly open and we would see the figure of the white giant?

The ship was advancing on a sea that had become calm. The waters seemed firmer and we moved smooth, as if it were asleep. A mysterious melody was believed to be heard; it came from under the surface of the approaching line of horizon. In this light it was trembling, as if struggling to open up, or perhaps hiding behind wispy clouds. There, in the extreme, between the sky and the sea, appeared an intense, misty strip, like a happy, celestial island, spread out between ether and music. Maybe it was the "White Island" of Selk'nam. I had just looked at my watch. Three o'clock in the morning. Then I raised my view, and something like a blinding blow, coming from somewhere internal, it made me shudder. It was as if my eyes had been hurt and the soul was wounded. An explosion of white light had arisen and that light was then transformed into notes of a huge symphony. I must have covered my eyes and leaned heavily on the rails. When I could see anew, I was already a different being, suffering that unseeable blow that the light of the new world gave me in the center of my being. Meanwhile, outside, everything appeared changed. The fog

disappeared as if by a miracle and, in front of us, was Antarctica, with its indescribable presence. Mountains of ice, wispy clouds, meadows of snow, unfathomable ravines; an unknown world, living in a distant cycle, in a subtle and violent light.

The frigate advanced between scattered icebergs, facing the snowy peaks of Smith Island. Beyond, you could see Snow Island. And the sky was a cold, transparent blue. The birds always crossed it. The ineffable existence of that contour seemed to be wrapped in the music that arose from its abysses and from the invisible and radiant beings that live in their pale peaks.

Like the birds, my ideas also left. I could no longer think like before. The blow of light from Antarctica burns the soul and blinds. The baptism of its light transforms the being that will cross it. The world of the dead and of the shadows has been surpassed. And if the pilgrim shall one day return, he will end up as undone as an iceberg from the cold, inhospitable climates. It will be like a dead man suffering in living shadows. Or as I now live among the dead, remembering the nuptial homeland. Following the wake of the ship, the penguins began to come. It was our first contact with them. We watched them swim at high speed underwater and emerge, suddenly, in a jump that ended in a plunge.

Around us was the rosary of the Shetland Islands of the South. It was here that Smith, or perhaps Bransfield, found a ship stranded in the ice of the bay. It had been there for centuries. What happened to the crew? How did it get to these latitudes? It's a mystery. Perhaps the Spaniards knew of the existence of the Antarctica from distant times and that its navigators reached its coasts. The interests forced the empires of those days to maintain secrets of their discoveries; exposure will always be used by enemies. In the Royal Decree of 1555, issued by Princess Juana, on behalf of Emperor Carlos V, her father, she puts under the jurisdiction of Don Jerónimo de Alderete, Governor of Chile, "the lands that extend to the pole."

Around noon we began to enter the English Channel. In front of us we had the vision of the immense ice walls of Greenwich Island, still distant. The barriers shone in the sun. We gathered in the command tower and watched, trying to discover clues to the base. As the evening descended, we were

still trying to discover clues of the base. We could imagine the state of mind of those who waited for the relief, since the people on board were impatient to arrive. The Commodore stood on high with an outstretched arm. The sun fell cold in the radiant atmosphere and the ship glided, slowing her march in a calm sea. Far away, small icebergs were visible. The penguins continued to greet us with their water jumps; two or three birds hovered above the black radar gull. We were dropping a few degrees to starboard to get into the bay. A tiny dot stood out on the ice. It was the cross at the base; then, little by little, the roofs of the uniform houses emerged from the dawn. What follows is the account of our encounter with the people of the base. I was lucky to get off in the first boat. Everything happened in the way predicted and only very slowly, the events began to blur in my mind, as if entering in a reality other than dreams.

We were moving away from the frigate and entered the channel, next to the great barrier. Meters of vertical ice rising over our heads. From time to time, with a noise of thunder, with a deep and hoarse roar, pieces would come off that rushed into the sea, lifting the water in wide waves, which gave the boat a rhythmic rocking. Behold the iceberg factory, the ice barrier, which extends towards the interior and that covers the earth, preventing us from knowing the real formation of this world. Antarctica may be a group of islands linked by ice, or a single continental mass, an immense shield of fourteen million square kilometers.

The sailors quickened the rhythm. The commanders went close to the bow. The dock at the base was beginning to stand out. And on it, we saw the members of the crew. They wore their naval uniform and the commanding officer appeared in the foreground. I heard Commander Urrejola speak. He addressed the Commodore:

“That spring must be new ... It seems to me that there is one less man in the group waiting for us.”

The Commodore confirmed Urrejola's observations. The boat came in at the small, rustic dock. The officers jumped to land. Then Poncet, the photographer, the Army Major, the doctor and others. I descended slowly. I looked at the faces of those men, trying to guess what they would never say. I saw the thin faces, red eyelids. The head of the base, Lieutenant Pilniak, operated like an automaton and when he spoke his chin trembled.

With firmness, he stretched his hand and then brought it to the brim of his cap. Someone hugged him. Then we all entered the base and toured it. The practitioner, a 48-year-old sergeant, was unable to come out to meet us, because he had injured his leg. The doctor examined the wound. We also went to see the sheep they had kept throughout that year. They were born in the Antarctic base. The base consisted of two sections. We walked through them, observing everything carefully, imagining how we would be there during the winter solitude. Pilniak and his men watched us silently. Some of them began to distribute chocolate bars, left over from the annual supply. They pretended to be attempting an extreme means of establishing interaction.

As they left, to take the boat back, the Commodore asked: "Pilniak, has this pier been built long ago?"

"No sir. Recently. We worked half naked and with the water to our waists. I have an aching back."

"All right. We are waiting for you to dine on board tonight, with all your people."

As we parted, Lieutenant Pilniak asked me if I wanted to stay with them for a cup of tea. I was surprised by the invitation, for I thought that these men would like to remain alone to open their family's mail and military packages. However, I also thought that by staying I was going to have some invaluable experiences. And that was stronger than any scruple. I consulted the Commodore and he nodded, adding that in the late afternoon he would send a boat for me. I came back to the house. I sat in a corner, in the main room, while the men retired to read their letters. There were magazines and texts on hydrography. Secretly observing those faces, they looked bloodless, as if years had passed without receiving the sun. Their hands were slowly breaking the cords of the packages; then, without haste, they were removing the objects and opening the letters that we brought.

In no time they completely forgot about my existence. They went through the room and neighboring compartments as they did for weeks and months, recovering the rhythm of their activities. The radio operator locked himself in his booth. The meteor expert returned to his notebooks. Only Lieutenant Pilniak still sat on his bunk, with a letter in his hand and

his eyes lost in a small window in front of him. I began to feel too far away, as if I was in an empty space, surrounded by clouds, dead trees, stuffed birds. It is here that metal acquired a consistency, a special hardness. The only hard existence, like metal, was that of these beings. And I did not exist except in a curious thought, who observed everything without losing details. The lieutenant made an effort and swayed toward me. I also got up from my seat. We went together to the table where the tea was served. It was hot and I took off my "parka".

“Lieutenant,” I said, “have you seen anything during the winter?”

“What? ... What thing?”

“Something . . . A boat . . . Searchers. . .”

“During the winter,” he began, “the sea freezes over, how can ships pass? This bay is a single iceberg. Of course we walked it, we marched in the great starless night, until we got to the edge of things ... and there is the Bransfield, which does not freeze...”

“Well, what about there ... have you seen anything?”

The men looked at each other silently. Then they watched me.

“What thing?” He said.

“A ship ... a ... anything.”

“Nothing is seen here. This is the same as anywhere in the world. In what are you thinking? Don't get your hopes up ... at night there were only some stars, so far away, so...” He stopped for a moment. Then he continued: “Ah, that black sea!” And that light down there ... I've seen many seals...”

But one of the men intervened: “One day I climbed to the top of that hill. And then I saw something...”

“Silence!” The lieutenant interrupted. And his gaze had taken on a sudden glow. The lieutenant had not tasted his tea. I did not dare to continue speaking.

“Seals and more seals,” Pilniak muttered again, after that painful pause. “It is the only thing that matters. They save us. If it weren't for the seals, we could not exist in this world. His meat is what feeds us. If it weren't for the meat of the seals we might all be dead. In them is the vitamins that we need; acclimatizes us, strengthens us ... and I do not mean only of the body ... It is the meat of the seals, their blood and also of the penguins, which defends us in this universe.” A melancholic sensuality was revealed in his words. “You can't fight the cold with alcohol. It is a mistake to believe that whiskey helps here. It only burns calories. I have implemented the dry law. During all this year no use has been made of a single drop of alcohol. I can say that I have healed my liver in the Antártida”. He stopped abruptly from a strange thought:

“Antártida? Did I say Antártida? ... Who knows what this place is really called?”

To save us from a new and terrible silence, I said anything: “Has this house served well, Lieutenant?”

“More or less. Metal houses are useless, as is anything made of steel. What is strong there is not strong here. The wood, just the old wood. It works the best. We have had winds of up to one hundred and sixty kilómeters per hour. It seemed like everything was going to fly away. When we would go out to cut the ice that we needed to make water, we had to tie ourselves. The men would go out supported by a rope from the inside. Outside you could see absolutely nothing. The fog is tremendous, it is black or it is gray; thick, you can cut it with a knife. It comes and goes suddenly. One day, the sergeant had to go twenty meters out and spent six hours trying to find it. We had to go find him. We discovered him sheltered in a hole. He was sure he was several miles away. Instead, he was facing the front door of this base.

My tea and the others' were finished. I requested permission to tour the base again. He gladly agreed, getting rid of my presence and unusual conversation. I walked through the wooden house again. I saw the wineries where preserves, cans of meat, boxes of vitamins were stored and also oil for the generator. Hot water accumulated in a pond on the ceiling of the main room, connected with a stove that passed the heat. From there it was transported down tubes to the shower and kitchen. In a narrow gallery they



lined up skis and poles. A little further there was a carpenter room and, at the end of the corridor, a door. I walked over to it and went outside. Outside, everything was different. A triumphant light trembled over the islands and the biting cold forced me to cover myself with the "parka". Around the base the ground was free of snow and ice, covered with smaller rocks down to the sea. In a makeshift corral were the sheep and her young children. They also knew about the night and the winds inclement cough. Their fur was yellow and they were eating withered forage.

At a slow pace I continued to the beach. I crossed some small lagoons where birds were seen, which invariably took to flight when laying eyes upon them. They had long gray necks and were as big as crows. By the sea there were skeletons of seals, probably killed by Pilniak and his people; penguin bones and a large whale vertebrae. I amused myself by observing them. Some looked like steering wheels and the surfaces were charred, scraped by ice. I felt them and they were cold. "What immense monsters - I said to myself - and what a curious sensation to be able to touch their bones ... To touch the bones! Will there be someone who touches my bones centuries after I have died?" And with an inexplicable laugh I replied: "Yes, a whale." Then I contemplated the ice caps to my back and I was certain that there must have been dead whales imprisoned by glaciers millennia ago. The best gift ever for this Lieutenant Pilniak would be to give him a taste of the legendary meat of those cetaceans, of those dragons of the white abyss, preserved intact and fresh in that hideous refrigerator.

I sat on a rock. At my feet, among the boulders, was a soft moss fish. I was watching him for a while. Then I raised my sight and gave myself to the contemplation of the wide panorama of the bay.

The air was still and thin. When inhaling it, you could smell the cold, and the odorless smell of ice, the sleeplessness of heaven and emptiness. Through the nose, into the lungs, something sharp penetrated and the small Vibrant particles of light made me feel ethereal and intoxicated. In this highly lucid state, I perceived the slender mountain, that girl, in front of me, across the sea. It was much like one of our volcanoes from the southern regions. Yet how distant and how different from them. Could it even be said that this was still the South, or that it really had anything to do with the Earth? The vision was more like someone else's world.

Above, the sky was crisscrossed with tremors of light, and despite it being late in the afternoon, it remained as blue as noon. The sea, soft, small waves moved on the pebble beach. Far away, advanced some very white icebergs. They sailed in peace towards the entrance of the bay. Happy birds beat their wings over them. They flew in circles ever wider, rising to radiant heights. Behind me, glacier barriers precipitated their huge blocks and the noise of the landslides seemed to hurt the clarity of the air, perhaps producing that continuous flickering of light. The glare of the ice often made me close my eyes, striving to keep them looking without dark glasses, to perceive the contour in its maximum reality.

However, I was feeling so light and everything seemed so extraordinary to a degree that I had to lower my eyes to interrupt that vision of Zion. Then, nearby, on the snow-spattered beach, were birds with gray feathers, and red rings on their necks. I seemed to have seen them before, somewhere. I held my head in my hands and my hair felt cold: "Where had I seen them?"

I raised my face again. There, on the horizon line, I saw clouds were beginning to rise. And between that sky and the sea, it was limited by a red band, like blood or fire. It was as if a veil was suddenly detached from my memory; full of amazement, I recognized that sky and those birds, who now walked on the beach. I had seen them identical in my old dream, during my "Three Nights of Ice". In front of me I had the same painting: near my feet the gray birds with red necks, and even the stones, sprinkled with snow, were touched by the waves. For a long time I sat still on that rock, while the light night was approaching, recreating the eternal day.

That night I remained motionless in my cabin. I listened to the rumor of a conversation. It seemed like groups of people were walking on deck. The pounding of some paddles in the water was approaching. Footsteps stopped at the cabin entrance. Someone ran through the door curtain. And the shadow of an officer stood out, lit up by the light that penetrated through the window. It was one of the tenants that also occupied this cabin. He came looking for me; the members from the base crew had arrived at the frigate. I got up and went out. Climbing up the ladder, I suddenly found the second commander, who was coming down at the same time. I gave way. He stopped and grabbed me by the arm:

“Are you just coming? He has lost something very important, not to be repeated. I have seen the arrival on board of that handful of men who stayed here a year. As the boat docked we all spontaneously sung the national anthem. Pilniak trembled ... I couldn't contain myself...”

The second wasn't holding back now. His hand was squeezing my arm, and had turned his face to hide his emotion. A curious character was this sailor, in certain moments of excessive violence and, in others, excessive sentimentality. The dinner on board was not particularly relevant. The personality of the commodore gave an air of sadness, apathy, to all these manifestations. It was evident that he only felt at home in the shelter of his cabin. For the rest, neither the commander nor the second were very receiving. The crew of this frigate, who more or less, lived its history inward, withdrawn, hermetic. Pilniak and his men felt awkward. After their long sojourn they did not manage to understand this situation of foreground actors. They resembled those beings sleeping in a dark room, when unexpectedly the light is turned on; rub their eyes, they don't know what's happening, or where they are, unable to adjust their gestures to reality.

Sailors from the frigate entered the chamber at every turn, to ask for their autographs, which they would stamp on bits of seal bones, or on white stones, in memory of this day. The Army Major, Salvatierra, drew on the top of a whale vertebra the landscape of the bay, with the base in the background. When he finished the drawing he was asked to sign it. When it came to liquor; they wanted to hear how none of them had tasted the cognac, so Pilniak explained his theory of abstinence. Then, at his request, Corporal Gutiérrez began a discussion about the seal hunt.

“We waited for a clear day,” he said, “and we all left armed with knives and clubs. I carried a large club; to make it more effective I put several kilos of lead on the tip. At the end of the ice, there are herds of seals. The little ones play like children. Mothers sleep carefree. We chose the one that was more to itself. And then a club hits him on the head. The seal is stunned. Then the knife is plunged into his neck and he bleeds. If perhaps the first blow does not work, another is given. Once the seal is dead, the hide and fat are removed. In this task everyone used the knives. The loins and liver are then cut off. The leather is staked and the grease is used to fuel the fires.”

After Gutiérrez, it was the cook's turn. "Seal meat is prepared in the same way as beef; but only for steaks. I also cooked seal in the oven, adding some pickled onions that we had, Seal meat is quite tasty. What differentiates it from the other meats is that it is black. The penguin also edible; but you have to prepare it in a different way. I would leave the meat in vinegar water for a while to clean it well. The penguin can be groomed in many ways. It can be roasted and in the saucepan. It tastes like duck. But it is oilier. At first it is difficult to get used to because you watch the penguin with pleasure... but then..."

Lieutenant Pilniak interrupted: "You can't eat other meat anymore, because it would taste bland ... No! How are we going to adjust once we leave?"

The ships were anchored side by side, linked by a plank bridge. In the oil tanker the crew was also expected to celebrate. The party there would be different. I accompanied the men to the gunwale, but did not cross the little bridge. In the night-day, the great barriers rumbled over the sea and their deep sound was like the voice of God in the beginning of time.

In the morning, the bay appeared covered with icebergs. With interest I observed the work of the boat loading the material in the trolley and transporting to the base. They had to avoid the ice. In the prow, a standing sailor with a hook was pushing away the icebergs, deflecting the boat with an instinct. Sometimes the oars would slip on ice with a hard, dry noise. The men were covered with the "parkas", as an icy wind whipped across the bay. Repairs were beginning in the base houses. Captain S. got off in one of the boats, accompanied by his pack. He led the dogs to a steep islet, located on the side of the channel that separated the great barrier from the base. He would leave them there to acclimatize. The dogs were thick-haired, resembling wolves. They were not snow bugs like the ones used by the English and Americans at both poles, but Creole dogs, acquired in Punta Arenas.

I thought I might employ them in the year. One of these dogs was especially striking. It was a yellow mess with long curly hair. He looked majestic, though gentle. His hair fell over his head, sympathetically covering the eyes. This dog was given to Captain S. in Punta Arenas. I made a good friend of him. I don't know why, but I found a semi-spiritual

bond remotely between him and me. That morning on the lonely rocky island I went to see him. I ran my hand lovingly over his head and saw his eyes wet from the cold. The dog opened his mouth and his red tongue was swaying to the beat of the breath. His fine paws sank into snow. Around him were the other companions; but easy it was guessed that he had no deep communication with them. They barked, they howled, and he was silent. Even if he had done the same, it would be different. There were other "reasons" in this animal. Another destination. I wanted to hug him, but I just waved at him and left. The dog raised its burly head, shook back its curls and smiled.

### IN THE GLACIER

That night the wind came over the ship and shook its plates of steel. In the midst of the gale there was a chorus of distant barking. The next day the sky was clear and beautiful again. We went out to the island in several boats, where the dogs barked furiously. They had bloody jaws and bristled hair. Their lurid figures strummed against the lonely rock and the white background of ice. At the base they explained to us that in the night the dogs had thrown themselves into the Sea; swimming across the strait they had reached the houses and some sheep were kept.

The members of the expedition divided into groups; some took to the base and others went hiking; they slid on the skis that they would ride for that part of the island. I walked back towards the pebble beach, reaching now the edge of the glacier. I saw that the beach continued in a narrow stretch, leaving a space where a man could walk to the other end of the island. With curiosity I was looking at that coastal strip, whose end was interrupted at times by rocks, or large chunks of ice. A desire took hold of me, so that I wasn't exact sure of the moment in which I had begun to walk it.

Sea pebbles sprinkled with snow and covered with ice made up the stretch. After about two hundred meters, I realized that this strip was much longer than had first appeared at a glance. This error of perception is very prevalent in Antarctica, where the dry air and transparency allows one to see for great distances. I began to very clearly hear the noise my shoes made on the stones when scraping in snow and ice. Like this I advanced another hundred meters and I was quite far from the beginning of this narrow passage. Then I stopped and looked. On one side was the

sea of ever gentle waves. The beach was low to a small extent, then it fell vertically, to a great depth. The water looked transparent and, without touching it, it was understood that it was deadly ice. Crouched by the sea, I was between it and the huge white wall of the glacier. Spreading the legs and stretching the arms, I could touch the sea water on one side and on the other, the barrier of ice. I looked at that gigantic wall of ice for a moment and then shuddered. It ran through me to the extreme. The wall cracked in all its long extensions. It was from there, and not elsewhere, where the great icebergs produced landslides. If the wall fell, I would have no escape and the expeditionaries would not find me. I imagined that by throwing myself into the water and swimming a stretch out to sea might protect me from the collapse; although I could hardly survive the freeze. While staring, mesmerized, I was attracted to the image of the ice above my head. A huge chunk hung over, reverberating in the sun. At the top it ended in streaks. The light was decomposing into deep green, yellow and black hues. The alarm and thrill of the beauty mingled. I don't know if that wall was moving; but I knew that something intimate was getting closer and closer. Then I heard a small noise, like sighs and clicks, and then as if souls began to fall like flying and white feathers, that when crossing through the light, they were fantastically kaleidoscopic, and taking strange forms. They fell on me, caressing me, and covered the small beach by the millions. I stopped being afraid. The vision was so incredible that it would have been good to die in that instant. All covered in those little souls of ice, soaked by the cold of that beyond human light, I cried with emotion. And amid the tears I heard a soft hidden music made of sighs, clicks of the barrier and from the flight of those crystals, water vapor solidified in the cold and dry air. Why didn't I die in that instant? From above, the glacier saluted. Their spirits, their fabulous beings, revealed their music, their minimal life. Perhaps the collapse will occur at the end of the cycle of this slight symphony; only then does the glacier's thunder close it with its tuning fork. How many more times would I seek to hear this miraculous music, which was like an angelic melody! I wanted to get up and couldn't do it, because I was blind. The light of the sky is blinding. With both hands over my eyes, I stayed a long time waiting to recover, until, little by little, I detached myself from the glare.

The beach widened and some rocks emerged. Then it was interrupted with the ice from the landslides. I had to climb over some icebergs. At last I reached the end of the glacier and found myself at a stretch covered

with volcanic rocks, sharply emerging, with beautiful contours, resembling fortresses or cyclopean constructions, and the snow covered vast plains. By the rocks, where the waves beat, one would imagine a hidden world of sea creatures, sea elephants and exotic birds. My sight hurt and I didn't want to go on. Close to me I heard a squawk. On a black rock, a bird flapped trying to chase me away. I got closer to see it better. He cared for a nest in which some frightful chicks screamed in terror. Then the bird rose and began to start circling over my head. Suddenly it came upon me from above with its neck extended and widened eyes. I threw myself to the ground and the bird stopped abruptly in the air. I could see how ugly it was; with a long brownish beak and bare neck, it squawked in fright and dared to bring his attack full on my head. It was the seagull *skua*, queen and mistress of these places. I came back through the barrier. In the complete solitude of that morning, without fear, I understood that I had made my first contacts. Without me knowing that nothing could happen before that world takes me to the end, to its center.

#### PARTY ON BOARD

With a few intervals, shadows of hooded men crossed the plank that joined the two ships. In the night, from a cold of steel, the expeditioners with their "parkas" looked like friars who carried custody, or penitents on their way to a lonely retreat. However, they were heading to the tanker's chamber, where they strummed the guitars for a while. I followed them.

The tanker's chamber was spacious. That night it could hardly be seen through the smoke of the cigars and the pipes. I stood in a corner and waited for my sight to get used to that atmosphere. Almost all of them were there. At the head of a long table was the commander of the frigate, with his young, serious and affable face. Beside him was the commander of the tanker, a sailor with a shaved chin and very black mustache. I also discovered the mayor of the Army and the Commander of Aviation. At the other end I saw Captain S. chatting with an officer in shirtsleeves. Also nearby, with an absent gaze, Lieutenant Pilniak watched the scene. A captain, with a pointed beard, acted as conductor of the orchestra and of the choirs. The guitars were struck by the astronomer, a man who had a thick forehead, and by an impassive young man. Some melancholy songs made their way through from the smoke. Then, a small and wrinkled character, with a bronze skin and very blue eyes staggered drunkardly up to the guitars. He was a German biologist, surnamed

Heinrich. He ordered them to pass him a guitar. And with the permission of the captain he began to sing, accompanied by thunderous strums. The lyrics of the song were in German and, although no one understood him, it seemed that it must have been funny.

Next to me, the second of the tanker told me:

"This biologist is preserved in alcohol, just like his lizards. You would think he came here to investigate marine species. No sir! He comes to drink and nothing more. It was the same last year. And this year the dose is repeated. There will be those who think he travels for the love of Antarctica, when he really travels to flee from his wife! She does not let him drink. Here he can do it at ease..." The captain had interrupted. Standing on a chair, he led a choir in honor of the biologist Heinrich. I listened smiling. It was a well-known canton of German breweries, now with lyrics in Spanish. A lieutenant in uniform got up and played solo, with a falsetto voice and comic pronunciation:

*How is it alike, gentlemen, the port of Valparaiso ... ?*

Then, amid laughter, everyone accompanied the chorus. Pilniak was always distant, without drinking. The commanders of the ships were retreating and a movement of bodies carried out through smoke. I took advantage of that moment to come to the place where Lieutenant Pilniak was. Seeing me next to him he was able to suppress a movement of unease. I greeted him saying:

"This morning I walked through your domains to the other end." And thinking that the atmosphere of cordiality of this chamber helped me, that it might break the hermeticism of that man, I added, insisting: "You said it's there, at Bransfield, where the sea doesn't freeze in the winter. An observer might have seen passing ships...."

Pilniak did not allow me to continue, because he abruptly walked away and left me with the words on my lips. My friend, Captain S., came to get me out of the embarrassing situation. Accompanied by the naval in his shirt sleeves, he approached, introducing him to me; "Lieutenant Rosales; will replace Pilniak this year as the Head of Base. He is your friend. But now you must wait another year before you may ask." Lieutenant Rosales



did not pay attention to these cabalistic phrases. With a glass of wine in hand, he looked at me smiling strangely.

At last he spoke to me: "Do you not remember? You don't remember anything?" Something, something seemed to remind me. Where? When? Where had I seen this face? "I am Braulio Rosales. I was your classmate and bench partner in the Lyceum."

I did not remember. It was much too long ago through the clouds of those remote years, and now, I barely heard what Rosales was talking about, with his fixed face, enigmatically smiling, a glass of wine in hand.

"How you loved to run off on the roofs of the buildings! I did too, sometimes. And we used to look at the stars. I have never seen more starry skies; there were millions ... I had love for an adventure..."

Late that night I left the tanker chamber and walked to the bow. The light was like day. In the West there was a beating of wings of light. Soft blue cloaks blended with green seas and purple gardens. "Colors are the passions and desires of light." But this time it was not like that, it was more of an impossible existence, like a game of souls. A flock of night birds flew to the far end of the horizon, trying to reach that region of impassive light. Through the black irons of the ship, I approached the railing and I steadied myself to contemplate the barrier. It gave off a still light while dropping its great icebergs, which broke the silence of the night with its thunder. Above its edge, where the immense plains of ice were beaten by the wind, someone seemed to walk; a presence of love, a being so white, from a very fine tunic with crystalline eyes and a sweet silver beard. Who would it be? Where was he going? In what mysterious oasis would he raise his cross? I suddenly sensed that someone was moving near me. And I discovered that another man was looking at the night on the deck. Sitting on a roll of cord, perhaps he had been watching me without my noticing him; the shadow of a fireplace had hid him. The wind, which was now blowing from the east, he had rotated the mouth of the chimney, leaving him uncovered. He got up and came to stand on the railing. He was a thick sailor, round-faced, with a beard with thinning reddish hair.

"I'm the engine captain of this ship," he said. "Not often do I come up on deck. I live in the belly of the ship, next to the noisy boilers and steam

smoke. I hardly ever see the day, not even the sea. I am like Jonah eaten by the whale. If the ship sailed under the water, instead of on the surface, I would not know it. Alone I hear the voices of command coming through the long tubes. In the combat I know not what transpires because my machines continue to work. The different landscapes of the world are indifferent to me. I live in the guts, in the intestines. And I love metal and lime behind my machines. Its rhythmic noise, great pressure, are music to me. The beings that exist in the deck light, whose voice perceived by the distance of the acoustic tubes, belong to another race, they are weak and transparent angels, who depend on me. Anyway, one day I will make important revelations to you, if you will be so kind to visit me down there ..."

With curiosity and sympathy, I paid attention to this man. He continued:

"Today I went up for the first time to look at the ice. At first I had not felt the cold, because I kept the heat of my boilers, but, now, it is that I am trembling. And it is not only because of the cold of this white world. I'm excited. I did not think this could be. Look at those dawn plains and that iceberg that now falls into the sea. Listen to its noise ... it is like the voice of God at the beginning of time, before I descended down there to work for the pale angels who don't know how to do it like me, and that they would be nothing without me ... I have written a poem ... If you allow me, I will read it ..."

*Solitude dressed in white  
Fury of battles in distant places  
Nights as clear as mounds in fields of mole  
Impression of a God in the minds without faith ...*

The engineer stopped and, looking for the last time and said:

"I have to go. My time is up. My story is the same as yours and everyone's. I'm sure right here in this world there is also an engine captain who lives in the womb of the ice. Someday he will come out to speak to you in this same way and he certainly will not read a poem. Then you should go visit him, like me, for curiosity, and because it's hot down there and it's too cold here ... I hope ..."

## THE *SKUAS* GUESS THE DESTINATION

The following day Pilniak officially handed over the base to Lieutenant Rosales. For this reason, the latter offered a lunch, to which he invited the Commodore, high ranking officers, and some civilians. The dogs moved around the men. He had brought them from the rocky island to keep them at the base until the time of the new set sail.

After lunch, the officers got up for a walking inspection. They wanted to see that nothing was missing. Commander of Aviation, Rodríguez, entered the ski room and discovered a shotgun. He took it in his hands and was looking it over; he laughed, shoved some cartridges into the barrel, and went out alongside the dock. The sky was clear and the biting wind was always blowing from the east. Birds were flying over the radio antenna and particles of snow were torn from the ice barrier, falling on the damp boulders below. Next to the base door, the yellow dog was lying down. When he saw Commander Rodríguez leave, he got up restless. Raising his head and walking with its long thin legs it headed in the direction of the glacier, without ever lowering its head, as if it was seeing someone up there. Then the birds that flew came circling over the dog. Commander Rodríguez raised the shotgun, rested the butt on his shoulder, close to his black beard, and aimed at the top of the glacier, precisely where the dog looked. There was a dry explosion, spreading across the confines of that transparent air. And along with it a heartbreaking howl of the dog, while he ran along the edge of the beach, heading for the barrier of eternal ice. The *skuas*, who a moment ago had begun to descend in a flock over the animal continued to squawk, while they got closer and closer to its head. At the sound of the shot, everyone left the house. Captain S. saw his dog lose himself in the snow and asked Rodríguez what had happened. But Rodríguez knew nothing. He had shot high, and the dog had fled as if the bullet had hit him. Someone said maybe the boom could break the eardrums of the animal. Or the surprise shot drove him mad with terror: “If the birds flew over the dog, it was because they perceived the emanations of camphor, which is shed from frightened animals. The voracious birds know that they can make it their prey”.

Everyone thought the dog would come back. Commander Rodríguez regretted having yielded to an inexplicable urge, to that desire to shoot a shot in Antarctica. The Commodore looked at the snow on the glacier for a long time, where the dog had focused its eyes. He gazed at the last *skuas*

that flew, getting lost, and then silently boarded the boat. Despite knowing that the dog would not return, he often turned his face in the direction of the great barrier, as his boat approached the frigate.

“Dear friend, here I am thinking of you. I knew it. I say it from the moment I did not fall crushed by the ice of the glacier. If it wasn't me, it would be you. It had to be someone. Necessary. It was written. But no; its not that. There was a place, *a destination*. And you the more courageous, the more *prepared to fulfill*. Today I understand it well. Since that moment, everything was decided. You had gained the lead and there would no longer be room for me. In vain would I strive, trying to follow you, knocking on the doors of ice, which do not open. The one who sees everything, that analyzes, weighs the soul and the value of the heart, had preferred you. And I would be nothing more than a tragic annoyance and full of doubts ... expelled, yes, from their domains...!”

“Tonight my soul remembers you and envies you. I know that I won't be able to forget you, that I will carry you in memory. When on the gray island my hand reached out to caress your curly head, you were as wise as those dark birds who guessed fate. My hand ascended to your head as in homage to a king who is taller. The last moments of your form were fulfilled, of your hermetic symbol. Where did you come from? Did you see childhood? Why did those white gods choose you, when you have no "intelligence" or "reason"? Why did they reject me? Perhaps for having them? There, in the hidden oasis, you will rest ... They needed a dog, and they took you. You will be an emblem and symbol, as when the lion was your brother's hand in paradise.”

“At this moment, next to this seraphic light, I think of our souls, that thing that we both are, what represents us and that sought shape, until breaking it - yours. And I know that maybe you remembered me - my hand - when you looked up the glacier, someone called you, and you accepted, saying: “My Father, why have you abandoned me?” And then: “Take this chalice away from me...” You thought about it with your eyes. And when the shot rang out, and you howled, it was shouts of pain and triumph. The birds were the birds of the limits, the signs of the earth, which will release your form, squawking with joy ... Oh, dog friend, you are so better than men! Because you are purer, more god than humans. Now you leave me. And

when the time comes on the snow, howl again so that I know, and look for your ghost, who will guide me to the Oases.”

“Meanwhile, in the light of tonight ... Do you hear the Commodore who saw it? Do you hear? I listen to him. He says: "Where are the roads of my ship? How do I make it sail through my soul?" Ah he does not know his own soul! But instead he knows mine. Because he knows, friend, that tomorrow I will go looking for you, before those terrible birds destroy your body, your unsorted hair...”

## THE SEARCH

I headed out early the next day. I have never been a great skier. In front of me stretched out the white plain. From the beginning, the sun was beating down on the snow. Refracting violently, decomposing in that sort of vibrant and luminous dust that hurts the sight. Then a consistent, milky mist descended. The sun did not pass through it, but the vibration of the light that bounced off the frozen ground did. I walked west in search of the opposite end of the island. The snow was hard at times, and the skis were getting stuck. From time to time, little cracks presented themselves. I was straining to see through the eyeglasses, touring everything they made it possible for me to see through the fog. Several times I diverted from the path, thinking I saw a lump, which was then a rock. I reached the edge of the snow, where descending would lead to the beach, the same that I reached in previous days. Again I could see the rocks next to the surf, the silhouette of marine animals and the birds flying. I was considering taking off my skis, and going down to that place, when the fog began to fade and the sun briefly reappeared. I was then able to take in the landscape and found myself on a tongue of land surrounded by the sea. In the distance appeared the hill of the island, with its summit without snow and its sullen appearance. I thought that if I reached there I would get a broader view of the area. Looking through the binoculars I could discover it, perhaps, in some uneven terrain. I turned north and started up the smooth snowy slope. Now the cold sun was hitting the ice. The dryness of the air was taking hold.

For an hour I walked until I reached the base of the Mount. I was tired and perspired despite the cold and snow. The slope was steep and made it difficult with skis. I was soon fed up with this painful effort and I decided to take them off. I sat down, opened the key, loosen the shoe straps and

nailed the skis in a visible place. I had not advanced a large stretch on the snow, when one of my legs broke through the icy crust on the ground and sank into a crevice, so that I hardly had time to back down, resisting the weight of my body on the other leg to escape from falling into the opening. I was able to continue climbing carefully, identifying the snow with the cane. I arrived at the rocky terrain. Here, among the rocks, stunted and dry mosses grew, burned by the cold, swayed in the icy air, as if they were sick hairs of those monstrous granite skulls. The devastated rocks were littered with snow and frozen manure. Higher up, the summit of the mountain was visible to me. It was a narrow and impregnable cone, for the rock was chipped and decomposed. The smallest stumble would despair into the abyss. I stopped and looked at the wide panorama, spanning the distance. On the other side of the horseshoe of water, of celluous whiteness, the beautiful pyramidal mountain rose. Anchored in the Bay, the two vessels and the houses of the base were highlighted as small black spots, interrupting the snow blanket. The Antarctic Sea stretched golden, covered with distant icebergs that sailed south. I was scrutinizing meticulously, pausing at crevices, noting visible boulders and shadows. Soon I understood how difficult my job would be. On that invariable plain, on that smooth shroud, the total mystery of a disappearance had been fulfilled. Not even the birds flew over the hollows. In the barrier the voice of the glacier continued to resonate. Alone high up on this steep rock cone, within the crevices, or in the marine area, next to the wolves and seals, I might find the dog. From the nearby summit the thick fog began to descend and, in a few moments, soft gloom covered the space. The frozen desert was veiling his designs.

#### THE COMMODORE IN HIS CABIN

It is night. Outside the swift pole light crosses. Streaks shake on the pale sky. There is a man leaning over a table. Through the little window the moving light penetrates. The Commodore looks at a sea chart and draws figures on it. In his hands he holds the compass and the square. Every now and then something murmurs; words that are not perceived. A long time has passed. About an hour. The man stands up and looks through the window. He begins to sing:

*When the Angel passes  
only some will arrive ...*

And then:

*Ready to hunt the sails  
these fathoms to girdle.  
He makes good use of the southern breeze...*

He sits down again and presses his temples: “Ortelius was right ... and so was Cosmes ... Ah, that Indicopleustes, that crazy genius! ... If I manage to steer the ship to the east, always in that direction, maybe I can find the River and the Tree, they which make contact with “the other land”. That other land the dog reached ... I will take everyone, yes, everyone who goes with me on this ship. Especially that one. . . What is his name?”

He gets up and walks.

“I know these ices and I can decipher their voice, as if living within them for centuries. Perhaps it has been so. But they do not speak of man, they say nothing; it seems they only want the dead ... Ah, it is not yet known that “the aspiration of all grain says wheat and that every shape says man”... But here ... The bright wind, the gusts of light, the bursts of light. Those swift and transparent ghosts like arrows, that cross this sky and that damage my sight. Only I see and know them. Here time has stopped and everything is the same for millions of years, when the great fight was fought and the Archangel fought against me ... What do I say? ... Against him ... Everything is identical. The fight is repeated. The same history. There, on the great barriers, on the vast snow plains, the drama continues. Therefore that light sees. They are squads of spirits. And it is not yet known who will win ... I still have one option. I'll be back in combat soon ... In this ship carried my people; some good warriors; the doctor, for example, totally on my side. But there is another who could well throw it all away; to lose. He has come ... Perhaps it was impossible to avoid him. Yet oh Gods, how ironic, if this time he took my side...!”

Take the compass and the square and put them both against the beam of the night light penetrating through the porthole: By you, signs of the great measure and of the law, I hope that we fulfill the destiny and that in this territory the form is undone! I need you to navigate. And to win. You are the signs of courage. The cold light hit the square, bouncing off the

compass, where it described two circles in the shape of eight, the sign of infinity.

And the Commodore sang:

*Ready to hunt the sails  
these fathoms to girdle. . .  
Take advantage of the breeze from the South,  
that makes you quick to navigate. . .*

Outside, the birds flew with a slight shudder, away toward the area of the horizon where the heart of the light was beating.

#### IN POSSESSION OF MY DESTINY

The O'Higgins Peninsula, or Land of Graham, is like an umbilical cord that hangs from the great belly of the Antarctic continent. It would not be possible to know if it is really united to the central mass, which is shaped like a gigantic plate or shield. The ice is wide and eternal, so that it can hardly be appreciated if the Peninsula of O'Higgins is really a peninsula or if it is a group of united islands by the ice. An indication of its peninsular condition could be the cordillera that follows her full length, then continuing in the same direction to the vicinity of the pole.

In the west the waves of the Bransfield Strait, the Gerlache and the Bellingshausen Sea. To the east, the Weddell Sea and the peninsula is whipped by gales. Its exact amplitude is unknown, having been explored only at its ends. The English base of Hope is at its northern tip. There are other bases, North American and English, in Bahía Margarita, its southern tip. To the west the Polar Circle falls into the Bismarck Strait, still within the O'Higgins Peninsula, and to the east, in the Weddell Sea. The great Antarctic shield mass is just beginning further south. It can thus be seen that this sector is still sub Antarctic, still distant from the haunted mystery of the polar auroras.

At the dawn of this day I felt a vague happiness, without knowing that I started their cause. Little by little I seemed to discover the reason. The ship shook and nodded, swaying in that familiar way. Below, the waves lashed against my window. There was no doubt, we were again moving. And now



in the exciting adventure, going through places unknown, in search of an unexplored place of which only I thought I had an indication.

Without telling anyone, the Commodore had chosen that night to set sail. In Bahía Soberanía the tanker was anchored. The frigate incorporated Captain S., the entire crew of the new base, and the lieutenant Pilniak, who was coming to complete his hydrographic studies, during the polar night. The latter was on the command bridge that morning, on the gyro, peering through the glass with his vague and flushed gaze. The solar rays penetrated fractionally, illuminating his face with a waxy pallor. He did not seem like a being of our race, as if the Antarctic night had bled him and his veins circulated streams of vapors and mists. It resembled a sick angel, with their wings stuffed, about to come off their back.

The cabin door was open and the navigating officer could be seen. I saw him busy with the sextant, calculating the course. His fur collar was pulled up above his ears because the wind whipped.

The Strait of Bransfield rocked its waves. Great icebergs came from the south. They took strange shapes and had to be diverted several times to stop the course so as not to collide with them. They passed very close, so it was possible to admire their hermetic pigment, and its enchanted life of legend. Several hours we were sailing in this way. Always with course to the southeast, toward the rocky peaks of two small islands, stained with snow. In the middle of the islands a long cloud spread.

The navigating officer explained:

"The Land of O'Higgins is in sight. It's that cloud. I think that there is error in the writings regarding the situation that occurs on this peninsula." "There would be nothing strange about it," said Poncet. "These places are unknown. Only Charcot sailed within sight of those shores in 1906. One more hour and we began to glide between islands. We were entering into an intriguing cove. In front of us the wall appeared, the vertical ice wall of the barrier of the Land of O'Higgins.

Poncet spoke to me: "We are the first! No one has ever seen this".

Thousands of small icebergs, tiny chunks of ice, floated around us. They were green, pink, yellow, of all colors. They traveled, they turned, and they circled in the water, reflecting the sun in each of those facets, in its multiple vertices. They came to the ship and struck its hull, producing a melodic click. In the transparent water they came to project the great shadows of the islands, of the barrier and the ship; and even ours, affirmed on the railing, looking at the sea.

The frigate had slowed almost completely. In the bow, the second commander directed the work of the probe. Without jacket, dressed only in his officer's outfit and his hands without gloves. He announced the depth that we were reaching. His voice was advanced by an acoustic tube. On the bridge, Commander Urrejola received the information, transmitting it to a lieutenant, who in turn sent it to helmsman.

The wheelhouse was under the command castle. Through the floor, we could hear the wheel. It resembled the string of a watch that is wound and stretched. With astonishing slowness, the frigate advanced directly towards the wall of ice. The rocky bottom could be seen in the blue transparency of the water. The cove narrowed more and more. I heard the commander say:

"These alleys always have a way out. It all consists of persevering, in not turning. It occurs to me that near the barrier we are going to find a gutter. In that case, we will see something extraordinary. Patagonia has gotten me used to these surprises."

The frigate was now very close to the front wall. Even so we continued to advance slowly, when the second warned from the bow a dangerous pass. The commander ordered full gear back and the frigate stopped, to begin to retreat.

Once again we were outside the silent inlet and still small multicolored icebergs circulated around us. From the south came other older ones, driven by an invisible current. About one of them a seal was stretching; lying on her side, she supported herself on her fin as well as on her elbow. As we passed her neighborhood she raised her head and looked languidly. She opened her round eyes. Then she dropped her white lids and covered herself with her stalactite lashes.

We were trying to move south for about an hour; but the *pack-ice* began to emerge and large icebergs, more and more frequent, blocked our way. We gave up, changing course in the direction of Hope, that is, towards the extreme north of the peninsula. As one sailed north, the Land of O'Higgins went running east, in such a way that along with exploring those latitudes it fulfilled the main requirement of the expedition. Further east no one could reach, unless they crossed the Strait of Hope, going to the Weddell Sea. Our instructions were to go as far east as possible.

After a continuous navigation we got to where the English base of Hope is located, in the vicinity of the cape of the same name. The commander ordered to change the heading south, sailing slowly again, more and more close to the coasts and barriers of the peninsula. The time kept was always clear, though a threatening wind blew over the plateaus pushing scattered clouds toward the invisible horizon.

Some of the crew had gone to lunch, others preferred to stay on deck, attentive to exploration alternatives. I was still in a command tower and observed with the twins the variations of the coast. Small fjords often appeared; the commanders were not interested in exploring them, bypassing them. There was a time when the vision of the coast was completely interrupted by a flat iceberg like a table. As this iceberg moved away, a very different spectacle arose before us. We were close to the peninsula. In our sight was a gray rock, standing out as an extension from the ice barrier. Immediately above it stood a not very large hill, although covered with snow.

The commander leaned over the gunwale and peered. To his side was the architect Julian. A little further away was the commodore. Julian stretched out his arm and indicated the rock: "There it could be." But I doubted it. Then the Commodore spoke in a low voice to the commander, and the commander ordered something to the officer on his left. The ship headed for the gray rock. And again, the voice of the second singing the depth. The anchor chain began to scrape the steel of the hull and the frigate anchored a short distance from the Land of O'Higgins. We were among the first to tread and sink to our knees in that snow. Never was a human here. At least for the millions of years that this place has been covered in snow and ice. The sailors and soldiers also descended, with their compasses and theolodites. On snowshoes and skis they walked through

the snow and began to measure the terrain. The rock was bare and the rock was sullen.

The wind was blowing strongly, sweeping from one end to the other. Some black birds squawked in fear. Fellenberg leaned over with his camera. He was photographing and spent a long time studying the veins of the stones. Some sailors watched him full of curiosity, thinking that he could discover gold. The atavistic soul of the miner awakens in plain sight of the bare and arid rock. The wind forced us to return soon. The waves were ruffling, even though the sky was still blue and clear. On the way back to the frigate we came across an iceberg on which a seal was also coming. Could it be the same one from the morning? Coming in a dinghy rowing at full oar, in the bow, standing and with an emotionless expression, was Lieutenant Pilniak. He was holding a knife. He took off his coat and shirt, leaving his waste bare. In the boat the house's pet dog was barking furiously. The seal seemed not to care about all this and looked sleepy at these strange beings. How could it even imagine what was about to happen?

Pilniak hopped on the iceberg, which swayed dangerously. He closed in quickly to the seal, stabbing it in the neck. He wanted to slide the blade of the knife down to cut it round; but he slipped, falling flat on his face. The seal, surprised, let out a bellow of terror. He could not understand what was happening. At the same time, a stream of thick black blood leaped over the ice, rushing into the water and staining the torso of Pilniak as he struggled to get up. Like a madman he was on his feet again, unleashing new stabs at the seal's neck. Naked and covered in blood, he performed the inexplicable rite of this savage murder. His blood and that of the seal were merged into one. He was no longer a waxy angel, now he looked like a terrible and bloody god. The whole sea was stained with blood, and all the ice; we enjoyed it with horror. Pilniak thus showed newcomers to this world what he knew, the only thing he had learned in a year: kill seals.

But was it just this? At night, he meditated. And it seemed to me that he could not be so simply judged. A curious fate brought Pilniak to this universe. The Antarctic shroud slowly oppressed, destroying everything that was physical, that was the product of another land and from another space. Along with the wind that wrinkled the plateaus, the voices of the spirits could be heard, of the genuine forms of these distances. They pressed on Pilniak's soul, embalmed it, bewitched it; but the body could

not find the sun, the physical cells did not receive their nourishment. For such a simple and dense man, the drama was fulfilled more beyond his consciousness. And what could have been a wonderful death, capable of transporting to a *new life* ("it is necessary that I die so *he* may live"), in Pilniak it became fright, frenzied resistance before nowhere. No, he would not voluntarily allow himself to be overcome by the "hug of the Virgin of the Ice". And he instinctively sought a way out, finding it in that pact, in that bloody rite. In the cold of Antarctica he bathed in the blood of the beings that inhabit it. He murdered, prolonging thus the existence of the pale vampire of himself. Blood is the liquid sun. If the sun did not appear in the sky, then Pilniak would look for it in hell. (Someone was laughing downstairs). Poor Pilniak, you're already marked! Because you can never forget this thick and red blood, which runs in torrents on the ice. In what other place in the world will you find it mixed with this color so white?

### THE NAME OF THE HILLS

It was a cloudy dawn. The sky was overcast and low. Nonetheless, there was good visibility. With two sailors I descended to land and began to climb the hill that stood behind the rock. The snow was very soft and we sank down to the waist. I was leading, opening the track. I felt the snow wetting me; I felt its consistency light and porous. I often squeezed it between my hands. I saw how it came together compact and then disappeared. Millions of years falling here and fading into the atmosphere, rising to the mist, to descend another time like invisible bird feathers. It is salt without flavor, shroud of this world that looked back and was embalmed. She knows the secret, but she has no memory. What is saved around her, she does in spite of herself. Some whales, some eternal dead, must be kept under her sheet.

Halfway through, we stopped to evaluate. We could see the bay covered with icebergs and the frigate in the middle of that white gray atmosphere. Shortly before the summit, the snow became scarce and the bare stone appeared. The sailors amused themselves looking at the rocks in search of the usual vein. One of them was short and stocky. He was the cook on board. He was always treated with respectful sympathy. For my part, he pretended to be a good comrade of mine. The other sailor was tall and black-bearded. I had very seldom seen him on the frigate. Maybe he worked with the machines. We were looking for an easy climb to reach the top. We were circling around the summit. I was always in front,

followed by the cook, who gave way and observed the ground with meticulousness, while he collected colored strata stones. It was close to the top when a curious thing happened. The tall sailor, who marched in last, quickened his pace and, almost running, he overtook us to reach the top first. Once there he smiled as if satisfied, looking at us for a moment and opening his arms to take a deep breath, as if he wanted to gaze at the cloudy horizon of Antarctica.

Back on the frigate that afternoon, the Commodore sent for me. He was on the bridge and beside him he had the commander and the two sailors with whom I had climbed the hill in the morning. In the Commodore's face wandered the shadow of a smile, but the two men looked confused.

The Commodore began: "You must know that the hills also receive names. Here I am the one who baptizes them. I am John the Baptist of these regions. And I give the name of the first to reach its top ..." I couldn't help laughing. Now he understood everything. The Commodore interrogated the chef: "Who reached that summit first?" The cook looked with reproachful eyes at his companion, who kept his eyes downcast. "He said." "Do you confirm it?" Asked the Commodore. "Of course," I replied. Then the Commodore, addressing the tall sailor, who had not yet dared to look up, exclaimed: "That hill will be called by your name. Your name is Morales. So that the hill will be called that. I baptize you in the name of ..." His face had suddenly turned grim. But the sailor Morales dared to speak, interrupting the chief: "Sir, these gentlemen did not know who got to the top first. . . Why don't you name the hill after you?" Now I felt that I was embarrassed and protested energetically, affirming that the first to reach the top was the sailor Morales and that the name of the hill should be his and no other. But something strange had happened in the meantime in the Commodore's mind. Unexpectedly, He decided that the hill would not be baptized, having to continue white and nameless for all eternity. Now I saw both sailors smiling, satisfied and grateful.

In this way I received a lesson that I will not forget. For these seamen, the fact that a piece of the world bears their names is the maximum realization that they can claim of hidden dreams. However, with the characteristic delicacy of the people, they prefer to modestly resign themselves rather than have to endure the idea of having acted without decency and generosity [What does that say for those that were named?]. I looked at

the sailor and saw his smiling eyes now. It is beautiful that a hill bears our name. But what is our name? This white world has yet to reveal it.

### THE BIRDS OF PARADISE

We set sail again, because the lonely rock did not meet the required conditions. Only if we never find a more suitable place, would we return to build the base there. Meanwhile the expedition had made an important discovery. The long suspicion that the Land of O'Higgins is misplaced in navigation charts, could be checked by our sailors. In relation to the geographical charts, the peninsula is run fifteen miles northeast. The navigating officer would locate the exact point in the error.

That morning we were sailing south again, a little more off from the shore. A curious phenomenon occurs in Antarctica: the landscape is never the same, even when you pass the same place several times. A concentration of icebergs, or a collapse of the ice barrier, gives new configuration. The landscape is like a moving stage. The cove that we saw yesterday, does not exist today. The mountains that rose in the clear sky are covered by thick fog.

With surprise we observed an unknown panorama. More or less in the same latitude of days ago. We discovered a strange world, populated with fantastic figures. The frigate was scuttling through enormous spans of icebergs that took on fanciful shapes, sailing in the direction opposite to ours, or remaining static, like sailboats from fairy tales. We deviated towards the coast. The icebergs did not diminish, but on the contrary they increased, giving the impression of an army determined to block our way to an invisible world. The Commodore ordered to anchor. Behind the icebergs the peaks of islands seemed to rise. But nothing could be taken for granted in this morning prone to all mirages. The commander's motor launch was lowered. The Commodore, the doctor, the photographer and some officers got on to it. I also accompanied them. We were going to try to breach the icy trench, through the compact ranks of those armies of icebergs. The noise of the launch's engine interrupted the stillness of the environment and the boat moved away with the bow directed towards the covert peninsula.

As we approached the icebergs, we saw that they were not so close to each other. Wide roads opened between them. The main obstacle, the illusion,

was being overcome. We soon found ourselves at the center of the first outposts. A superb spectacle, impossible to describe accurately, was presented to us. We were surrounded by mountains of ice that moved silently, or swayed gently to the beat of a faint breeze, or a mysterious rhythm. The ghosts were approaching in the same direction, adopting the most extraordinary silhouettes. Castles with white battlements, with their drawbridges and with the faces of warriors imprinted on their crystalline walls, stopped by our side. Fantasy sailboats they sailed leaving behind a silvery trail. In the direction of the bow of the launch an iceberg appeared divided by the half and joined in its upper part by colossal arcades of pink ice. We passed under this portal and the side walls gave off multi-colored sparks, which seemed to vibrate. We stopped to contemplate it. The vision was unique. The light from the sky, intense and cold, penetrated the white walls and, from within, was transmuted into those vibrations of color.

Someone there received it in all its original purity, later contaminating it with emotion and passion for color; like green, blue, purple, and gold blood, she surged from the ice walls, falling onto the water and spreading hues across its surface. Around the arch and beyond the porous skin of the first iceberg floors, the light was decaying; on this second surface thousands of little golden and shiny dots were boiling; they circulated, they moved continuously, producing the changes of color; at times they were green, then light blue or pink. It was impossible to follow all her transformations and adventures with my eyes; the intense glow was blinding. But, if one had the strength and the power to do so, one would overcome this plane of color, being able to reach the immediate interior of the ice, where the light again rests, becomes silent and becomes white. It is the central abode of light and cold. Everything is still there, without vibration, but there is an accumulated point, a center of rest, static, which is consciousness, super consciousness, and in which that melody of color is virtually found, the one that expands around the contour of the ice walls. Someone dwells in all this. Thousands of faces and shapes are created and recreated, and from that awareness of light, the music that accompanies the swaying of the icebergs is born. Something that is beyond the ear perceives this melody that trembles in the air, under the multicolored arcade and that enraptured us, imperceptibly moistening us.

Our launch continued forward. We stopped at times, or as in this case, we turned around an iceberg to ponder it to our liking. Despite the colossal



dimensions that are visible, the part of the iceberg that is submerged in the water is twice as much as that which is shown. The foundations of these buildings navigate submerged, hidden from view by a green and yellow stain that, like thick oil, comes off the floating walls. These icebergs, as they are carried by the polar currents to the north, decrease in size and die one day in adverse climates. Its death is announced by a turn of the bell, in which the lower part rises violently and the upper part plunges into the sea. It is a well-known story: life is changed into death and death into life. What was below rises and what was above descends. The day turns into night and the night turns into day. The ascent from the base of the dying iceberg is as if your soul is soaring to heaven.

The noise of the motor of the launch brought us momentarily to reality; but the men scarcely looked at each other, and the little boat advanced unperturbed. A huge tubular iceberg appeared in front. It was like an island. As we got closer, we thought it would definitely block our way. But, suddenly, some white birds, similar to doves, rose like pieces from its surface. They spanned for a while and then squawked away to cross the center of the iceberg and get lost to sight. We were surprised. Where had those birds disappeared? Across the iceberg it was impossible, unless we actually found ourselves in a place of enchantment. Those birds had to have flown down some invisible passageway from here.

We steered the boat toward the point in the ice pack where we last saw them and we came across a narrow corridor between two icebergs. Towering walls stretched out on both sides, and to the other end the birds were still moving away. The iceberg split in two. As we slowly crossed the corridor of water we saw the blue light of a transparent sky. The cold shadow of the ice and the waves that hit its sides with a thud, made us wish to leave this dangerous path soon.

The sailor in the bow gave an exclamation. Then we were all able to witness an amazing show. On the other side, the still sea was clear of icebergs, covered only by small pieces of ice. On a partly snowy lace, the birds flew in circles, squawking and dropping an impalpable dust from their wings. We were almost on top of the continent and within a bay cut to the west by two islets. It was a tiny expanse of the Land of O'Higgins. The sky was clear, but a blanket of clouds descended over the peninsula that day so that its exact configuration remained veiled. As the launch

approached, the sailor in the bow began to sing and Julian accompanied him. Again, as before, the birds had shown us the way to paradise.

Hundreds of penguins lived on the tip. The inhabitants of paradise were they. When descending and passing through their nests of stones, we perhaps resembled those first conquerors who arrived to the pleasant islands of the South Seas and walked alongside the naked and rapt natives, who welcomed them with flowers and dances. The penguins were in the breeding season. They remained lying in their small space of polychrome stones, warming their eggs. Our feet stumbled in that immense rock, destroying sometimes, and as always, the primitive rooms of beings. Then the penguins would escape leaving the egg or the young. Some sailors tried to catch the chilled chicks. If it was the female that brooded, for no reason did she leave the nest, facing the intruder, despite her fear. The male, on the other hand, fled in dismay, not daring to return to protect the shelter. The poor birds, without discrimination, trembled like children in our path. The trembling of their feathers produced a uniform movement in the great colony that inhabited the rocky of the lace.

The expedition members had dispersed around the place to analyze it. The spit of land was united to the mass of the peninsula down a rocky corridor. From here you could see a cove in which the icebergs were grouped and where the sea, in eddies, beat against the side of the barrier of very high walls. Above it, a mountain seemed to rise, but the veil of clouds did not allow us to see. Below was a beach of fine earth and sand mixed with chunks of snow and ice. In it rested a seal with spotted skin. We heard the sound of the onboard cornet. In the middle of the penguin colony, the bugler had ushered in reconciliation. Squatting down, he was playing a few bars. The birds came around him and listened enraptured. They twisted their picturesque little heads, some with chinstraps, and others with red beaks, and they seemed to appreciate those sounds, in which perhaps they discovered God, or the rhythm of a glimpsed universe, dreamed in the dawn of the Antarctic night. The Papuan penguins and the Adélie penguins, with their eggs under the belly, or with their young, listened to this improvised concert, letting themselves be transported by the simple sounds. The waves were beating gently on the natural rocky pier at the top. When the launch left, to return through the icebergs, the choice was already made. Julian could build his house.

In the evening, after lunch, I went up on deck and waited. The frigate had changed anchorage. Passing between two small islands, it had entered the bay, and was now anchored facing the lace. The floats of icebergs were to the north, overwhelmed, and even the great iceberg was slowly moving away. A gentle breeze was swaying. Crouched in my "parka" I stopped, like other times, next to the bow gun. The sky was clear and clean. But a great red and gold patch of twilight clouds was spreading on the horizon. On the peninsula the veil still rested that prevented us from seeing above the cutting line of the barrier. I kept waiting. Then, the light began to tremble and a distant glow crossed the sky. The veil throbbed at its end and ripped to the south. Through that tearing, the swift light leaked, like a sudden breath, and all the long blanket of wispy clouds parted, breaking into crepes and threads that the wind moved gently toward the horizon. That much desired thing was happening. An immense mountain range of transparent peaks, extended over the back of the Land of O'Higgins, to continue in tremendous undulations, united and separated by snowdrifts and abysses. The peaks were of immaterial dawn and they ascended until they came across the last remnants of the torn veil and the triumphant night light. Purple ribbons sometimes descended the slopes and the waves of light beat against the peaks.

Here are the mountains of my dream. As white and transparent as they could be, shivering in the cold divine light. Within its snows would live the heroes I'm looking for. Their peaks resembled the faces of titans, with the celestial eternity tempering. Feeling that I was living in a precise moment, I began to walk across the deck. Upon reaching the bow, I met the Aviation Commander, who was also watching the event. With his black beard and bare head, he turned when he felt me coming. "Look," I said. "Between those mountains the Oasis awaits us. We have to go". He remained silent and turned towards the horizon of the sea to point out a new spectacle to me.

The red clouds had mixed with the crepes torn from the veil that covered the mountains and the night wind was bringing them together, pushing all that unlikely mass towards the zenith. And it was like coagulated blood, deep and dark red, melting with gold and green to create impossible shapes and colors. At the far end of the horizon, where the sea meets the sky, caravans of icebergs traveled and gave me that ecstasy of light. They were blue, old gold. And somewhere, somewhere in that distance, a pulsed

glow, as if it were the isochronous hammering of the pulse of light. Twilight stretched across the sky and stretched beyond the world, enveloped in an air that came from another universe. Without being aware of myself I began to walk back and forth on the deck, with my face raised to the sky, and found myself wanting to sing. I marched, marched like a child, until late at night. Maybe until the next day. Or until beyond the day. I dreamed again of the transparent snow crystal hill. He was inside and he told me: "We are waiting for you. Hurry up. Lest you no longer find me. The wind of doom blows. The trees in here are falling. The rooms are empty. The ceilings are collapsing. Our enemies are closing in. We must leave. We will wander eternally through the worlds. We are prisoners of the Myth. We need you. Come with us. Hurry up. Your dog has arrived. He told us that you would come ..." The wind, which scattered the crystal snow, hit the transparent mountain. Below was a blue lake.

#### CONSTRUCTION OF THE BASE AND EXPEDITION TO THE WEDDELL

The next day the work of unloading materials for the construction of the base began. From very early much was built on board. The whaling boats left with wood, bags of cement, barrels and long irons. Ashore, Julián directed operations. Next to the natural dock a crane and a sheave had been installed. They transported the heaviest materials to the construction site. The men worked with joy and loaded the sacks amid jokes and laughter.

I went down to the beach with the officers and saw the Commodore and the commander working with the drill. The Commodore performed this symbolic act. With an indifferent face, thinking of somewhere far away. I also spent a while devoted to work. I wanted to do something for my part and accompanied the lieutenants to load sacks. Soon I had to take off my "Parka", because a pleasant heat circulated through my body. And so I worked with them until exhaustion overcame me.

On the dock, Captain S. contemplated that morning the first efforts made for the construction of what would be his refuge for a year. His attitude was curious, for he did not take a single step to intervene or to help. Rather he seemed disinterested. After a moment he boarded and did not descend ashore again.

For several days they worked with an intense rhythm, until the unloading task was finished. The frigate had to return to Sovereignty, to replenish material on the tanker. These trips would be repeated often, until construction was completed. I will not narrate them in detail. It is enough to say that we sailed through Bransfield with variable weather, more good than bad. I must also explain that it was not possible to work on land every day, as we were frequently hit by wind storms. The first of them we met had burst out on a glorious sunny day. The waves in the bay reached great heights and the boats could not descend. As refugees in the frigate, we watched the icebergs and the snows of the mountains flash. The wind roared, making the ship's chains and plates vibrate. From the sidelines it gave off snow dust and the plateau was beaten by a *blizzard*.

During the navigation to Soberanía, the water of the Strait of Bransfield had a brownish color; great tube-like icebergs furrowed it. Other icebergs followed in the wake of our ship, or caught us sliding in the opposite direction and forced us to change course. We also established a more intimate contact with the whales. It was the time when these appeared in the Antarctic seas. The areas most visited by them are Ross, Kerguelen and Bouvet. From the Weddell Sea region, at the other end of the O'Higgins Peninsula, they crossed to Bransfield. They were blue whales, baleen whales, and *finbacks*. The solitary sperm whales are occasionally seen here, who, as pilgrims, or adventurers, make these enormous journeys from its warm seas. Plankton, the food of whales, is abundant in the aforementioned areas and is mainly made up of a crustacean called *krill*, in Norwegian. *Finbacks* also eat zooplankton copepods. It could be said that the Antarctic seas constitute an immense plankton soup for cetaceans.

As we have already said, to enter the bay of the new base we had to pass between two rocky islets, stained with snow. One day we found a sleeping whale there. It drifted, stretched out in the sea like an odalisque. The frigate sounded the siren several times to wake it up. But that monster, about thirty meters long, was not moving. His ear, covered by multiple layers of fat, perceived only the dull stirring of his internal torrent, of his heavy circulation, of his deep and hot world among the ice.

Are the whales the way we see them? What is their reality? Is there a reality? A grain of sand penetrates the oyster, injures it, irritates it. The oyster secretes a juice and that juice transforms the grain of sand into a

pearl. The pearl is a wound, a pain, a disease. Perhaps reality is also like the grain of sand that reaches us, and the vision of the world, like the pearl, a subjective transformation, something that is no longer the original, but a product made by pain, emanating from ourselves. Reality itself escapes us, both outwards and inwards. We live in an intermediate plane. It is never given to us to know what we really are. We can only transmute pain, coming to feel it as pleasure. That is, everything is creation. Ultimately we depend on potency, courage, and will for creation. It does not matter what exists or what is believed to exist. Neither one nor the other is apprehensible. And perhaps the latter is more accessible to us than the former.

The whale has a point on its tail where it can be mortally wounded. In order for him to perceive the pain, or to know that he has been injured, the stimulus will have to travel many meters of thick meat, difficult distances, hidden fats and nerves. When the whale feels pain, perhaps it happens as it happens to us when we contemplate a star whose light has had to pass through millions of years to leave us. The star may have already disappeared. Similarly, the whale's tail may be dead; but the whale does not know it yet, because the pain that comes to him is that of millions of light-years away. The sun has set; in the refraction of light I still see it in the sky. Reality is beyond reality; originates in the mind, in a vibratory center, in something that cannot be reached without creating, transforming, inventing, losing oneself or becoming divine.

Does the whale know this? At least I think the ice knows it. It does not seem to me that it is a matter exclusive to man, but common to creation. Making differences between animate and inanimate nature is our simplicity. In the cosmos everything is alive and sensible. The difference is one of grades and categories. The distinction is real only in the values of reason that it classifies in a whimsical and personal way. But the game is one, and damnation and deception are universal.

I am going to try to explain here how the ice also plays a similar game and deceives, with an irony very similar to that of man. But first, I will say that when we returned one day to the base under construction, we saw on the white blanket of snow, which extends to the east, above the peninsula, two black points, similar to men, who observed our arrival. The dots moved, sliding south, to disappear. It could have been a mirage, a vision produced

by the powerful east wind that beats the snowy plains incessantly; but in everyone's mind an unknown was throbbing.

The bay had lately been clear of ice, which was carried away by the polar currents and the wind from those places. It was easy now to anchor a short distance from the base, for more unloading of materials.

One morning Fellenberg and I went ashore. After going for a while, I was surprised the photographer cut on some icebergs in the cove behind the base. He was photographing some edges of the ice. And this is what I want to talk about.

At first, Fellenberg did not notice me. He was so deep in thought. But soon the crunch of snow made him turn around. He had lost eyes, like someone who returns from other distances. He must have taken a while to get used to it. Then he beckoned me over. He showed me exactly the points of the ice blocks that he was observing with a magnifying lens and then reproduced it in the camera of his machine. They were small pieces, angles, irregular edges. The light fell on these points and it was decomposed or refracted as in the different sections of a diamond. All the colors of the rainbow played, combining in amazing mobility; similar to a fugue of sounds, they climbed and rose, repeating the motif or after passing it in different tones, up to the end of the chromatic scale. Later, they returned to the origin, in a movement of passion, or of sublime irony. And everything was wrapped in a radiant tremor, of magic and spell.

"The interesting thing," said Fellenberg, "is that this occurs at a small point on the iceberg." In a thousandth of its space. The rest remains opaque and nothing should be known of the glorious event that, after all, does not alter the reality of its dense and cold existence. It is an illusion."

"Who knows" I said. "Watch! It has already changed. What is left now? Nothing. Is there any trace of the event? Not a particle saves the impression. It depends on where the light falls. And the entire iceberg, in any of its parts, may repeat the phenomenon. All the cold indifferent mass has the same possibility of going into ecstasy, reaching the supreme life. It is a matter of where the light hits. It is an illusion!"

“And who directs the light?” I asked. “Chance? Are we so sure that there are no traces? Our eye is limited. If our heart turned to ice for an instant and our spirit blended, we could perceive something else; who knows if a wound, an ecstasy, or an incurable pleasure. The ice goes mad at a certain point and its madness takes the supreme form of indifference and irony. The light falls . . . and nobody knows where or about whom.”

But Fellenberg was no longer paying attention. He was again running his camera. She was the heart of him. His machine saw more than he did, for he had given her a part of his soul. The best proof of this is that tomorrow he would reproduce an extraordinary flower of light. What he hadn't seen was caught by the lens. A flower of madness, love and death. In the small piece, on the sharp edge, its petals of rapid colors opened and were terrible green and red. The snapshot had managed to fix the moment when the red was decomposing into blue. And that transition, that doubt, was already spirit; almost non-existent, it marked the line of madness, illusion and joy. Joy of liberation, joy of comedy. Because there, at that point, the image had managed to show that everything was a farce and that the flower of ice and light did not exist, being an imitation, a simulated form, a game with light; with the complicity and acceptance of the light. . . Perhaps the ice and the light loved each other and initiated the multiple positions of that game. Death awaited them in the extreme. But in the meantime, they were creating, transforming.

"Look, Fellenberg, that luminous flower proves to us that ice happens as it happens to us. It also creates, it also pretends to be something different, a flower. . . Are you kidding yourself? I think not, if the moment of its flower really lives. . . At least he's as *delusional* as we are."

"The difference," said Fellenberg, "is that ice is still ice. That is to say, he plays coldly, he remains serene in the face of his own drama". "Who knows", I repeated.

Later - I cannot be sure if it was the same day - we were observing a drop of water in one of the innumerable pools formed by the thaw. In that drop, thousands of micro-organisms lived and stirred, taking unlikely forms. In Antarctica, life is rudimentary in appearance, and it is for the biologist. But it takes on a heroic tone, of an ignored epic. Life seeks inner, subjective situations, so to speak. During the great night is rest, and only



the moan of the wind and the sharp blow of the crystal blades is heard in the cold darkness. The great depths of the Ocean are black, like a blind pupil. There the little sponges sway, gently cradled as if by a late breeze. Those peaceful beings, who embed their kisses in the humid night, are spun by the eternal rolling of the waters and by the currents of the pole. Its galleries, its soft passageways, like honeycombs, house thousands of tiny beings, vermiform, threadlike, aneroid, that adhere to its corridors, or go through them to the rhythm of the ingestion of sea water. They love, they die, they fight, they live on the life of the soft sponges, they eat their rotten lobes. Like parasites, they steal their food and even breathe in the swaying liquid that fills their caves. Outside, all is peace. Rhythmic, imperceptible oscillations make one believe in an idyllic existence; the lines are curved, at times, to resemble tiny dreamy tree canopies.

The passage of beings from salt water to fresh water lagoons is facilitated by the similarity of temperature. When summer arrives and the icy crust of the sea breaks, on the beaches the pebbles are stripped, mosses and lichens appear, on the shells of polar limpets. And there the algae and fungi are born in the tangle of the moss tapestry. Amoebas move, protozoa and crustaceans roam in the rock pools. A tiny louse lives on the skin of the crabeater seal. And all these manifestations of life are exciting, as they struggle to remain with a tenacity and a heroism typical of the fury of creation. They try to assert themselves even here, in the most inhospitable place, where only the potential roots persist.

Fellenberg discovered a rare flea in the snow, moving and jumping; extracted from there it seemed to die and dry up. Observed under a microscope, it was like an ant with multiple limbs. Someone had the idea of putting it in a drop of water, at sea temperature, and that flea began to stir and came back to life again. The dark snows are stained by millions of these minimal beings. Life acquires an intensity proportional to its short time. Winter freezes the seas, covers the continent. A slight change in temperature will make life impossible for millions of beings. One wonders if this will to exist is so fervent and if nature really disperses its creatures here by thousands. Is it not rather that everything repeats itself and that life does not end but rests and recreates itself? That is to say, just like that flea, once winter has arrived, the beings in the pools fall into a total sleep and no longer revive until the next thaw. They too have discovered

immortality, rejuvenation. Energy is limited and so it is conserved. It's terrifying to think about it.

There is also a relationship with color. Black birds tend to disappear from these seas and it is very difficult for them to reach the extreme latitudes of Antarctica. On the other hand, birds with white plumage withstand the cold much better. Their feathers do not absorb the rays of external light and prevent the internal heat from escaping, creating their own thermal zones. White is the color of cold. It is not known which of the two has preceded the other. Antarctica may be Antarctica because it is white. Or vice versa. He who wants to conserve internal heat must avoid the heat of the outside world. The ice will be burning inside, in a central and unknown point. And the whales may have a hidden place where the color also reaches the intensity of white. At least there, in its layer of fat. Fat is cold, it is antipyretic, it is insensitive, it does not allow vibrations to enter or leave. Isolates. The heat of whale blood does not easily pass through the dead boundaries of their blubber. For the same reason, the seal, lying on the snow, overcome by the thousand-year-old fatigue that catches it as soon as it emerges from the water, does not shrink the iceberg that serves as its bed, because its epidermis is as cold as the world that is its blanket. The heat is stored in an interior space, reduced like a chest, and throbbing like entrails.

Intelligence and will are also at work in Antarctica; It seems that they did it from the outside and very slowly. It is an external, disturbing intelligence that is not in a hurry, that is also frozen and that observes like an eye without eyelids from the peaks of the veiled sky. She needs ages to change things. Petrels make their nests underground, sometimes taking advantage of the galleries of the ice. With the torrents, with the waters and the snow, when they are flooded the babies die drowned. Sixty percent of the young perish in this way. However, every year the petrels repeat the mistake. A secular instinct, prior to their life in the ice, leads them to build inadequate housing. The petrel has not yet developed the new reflex, or the new "concept". The idea, like light, does not yet reach beyond its feathers and bounces in thin air. It falls like the sun, from the sky, but he does it slowly, without passion.

Nothing else has happened to the penguins. Since we have arrived at this place, they have accompanied us. Their nests are thinned or destroyed by

the continuous movement of men. Many hatchlings have been unintentionally killed. But they do not leave and their colony still persists in the rocky area. Most of these birds are from the “papua” and “collar” families. The latter bear this name because they wear a black chinstrap around the neck. The “gentoo” penguin is the one that builds the most exquisite pebble nests, and the “adelia” is the most careless in these tasks. The superb and grandiose “emperor” penguin is not found in these sub-Antarctic latitudes. They gaze at the auroras of the Ross Sea, or weather the gales of Queen Maud's lands.

For a long time we have been given to observe the love games of penguins and their theft of eggs, chicks and pebbles from neighboring nests. But I think they should have left by now, as their young are adults and an imminent danger looms over them. The men still respect them, obeying the commander's orders to leave them alone. But the time will come when they don't. After so many lonely centuries, the penguins are not convinced of the existence of man. It will be necessary to transform them into victims so that the reality of the human presence penetrates into their blood, becomes an idea or a reflection, capable of mobilizing their wills. Thus fate, through death and destruction, fulfills the mandate imposed by a veiled intelligence.

The terrible god of man will also reach these creatures, just as he once reached the altars and temples of the sun, today reduced to dust and ruin.

The form will be destroyed. However, everything is like that ice flower. Simulation, nonexistence. A hard and fine force, like a steel blade, going underground, creates multiple appearances, which only serve to cover it up, to disguise it, or perhaps to distract it. Here, in the ice, the form transmigrates. Resurface, resurrect. He exercises for the afterlife.

The flea that one day we carried on board, died and did not die, because in the water it would revive. Was he alive? Was he dead? I think neither one nor the other. First he simulated life and then he simulated death. He invented both. He recreated them. To do so much, you need *will*, and, above all, a sense of humor. The flower of ice gives us the key and shows us the way. Maybe one day I'll ask Fellenberg to give me a picture of that flower.

## THE GREAT PLATEAU

The rock on which the base is built forms a wide border, joined to the continent by that thin tongue of stones, lashed by the waves and the tide that rises from the silent cove. There is no noise of landslides and the icebergs come to take shelter, lazy and mute. Through this rocky passageway you reach a sloping plain that is always covered with deep snow. Climbing it, a small abandoned hill is discovered. At the top of the plain, much further back, to the south, a slender hill could be seen, which lets its shadow fall over the base.

Skiing is practiced on the plain. The soldiers, the doctor, and Poncet descended swiftly, like moving points on the white savannah. Towards the east a plateau of ice and snow stands out, furrowed by shadows and undulations. Towards the south, the peaks of the mountain range sometimes appear. I had gone up to scan the horizon. I found Commander Rodríguez there, who was looking to the east. Every now and then he would turn his head away. In the monotonous, vast distance, a radiance throbs, like forever. The great plateau collects this signal and projects it from its shield of ice and frost. That white light covers the entire horizon line. It seems that in those distances a different region, or perhaps the sea, extends. Commander Rodríguez shook his head, he seemed to have an idea. When I turned my gaze from him, he discovered me and was startled.

Another day I surprised Major Salvatierra on that peak. He was sitting on the ice with a compass and a map on his knees. I was also staring to the east. The glow from the horizon was milky and lightning streaked across it. All the distance trembled. Then it would return to the incisive, nostalgic stillness. Then they saw me. A knowing smile spread across his face.

## THE ENCHANTED GROTTA

The little boat entered smoothly, moving with weak strokes of the oar through the still icebergs. On board were Fellenberg, the doctor, Major Rodríguez, Julián, Poncet and two sailors. They walked the inlet of still waters. Two seals were swimming diving under the icebergs; from time to time his nose and two round eyes poked out. The boat approached the barrier, revealing the entrance to an open cavern in the ice wall. The water formed a break there, so that to get closer you had to wait for the favorable movement of the tide. The boat was dragged to the mouth of the grotto. It

could be seen that it was deep and that the water was introduced into it by a corridor, through which the boat could advance. The decision was quick. A few energetic strokes of the oar propelled the boat and the movement of the surf did the rest. The men met in the inside a cavern of ice, drilled into the bowels of the glacier. At first the eyes were reluctant to see, not because of the darkness, but because of the light that penetrated level with the water, hitting the vault and the ice walls. Some small icebergs arrived driven by the current and they were going to hit the walls of the grotto. Hundreds of stalactites hung from the ceiling that looked like the beards of a prehistoric wolf or a strange monster in whose belly the navigators were found. The light refracted from those ice tears producing new tones and greater mobility. As elsewhere, here too the disorder and the play of light were repeated, but due to the hermetic space and the fear of a possible detachment, the influence and suggestion in the spirit were far superior. The reality was altered and the deep cold dulled the mind, slowing its perceptions. As the boat progressed, it seemed to be crossing different color scales. First of all, green; then yellow; then scarlet and blue. The tips of the stalactites hung so low that the men had to bend to avoid brushing against them. They spoke slowly for fear that the sound of the voice would cause a collapse.

"This cave must be of fabulous age," Julian said. "Maybe not," replied the doctor in a very quiet voice. What takes a long time to form elsewhere, on ice can be achieved in days or weeks. It also perishes just as quickly. To corroborate the doctor's expressions, the light traced all kinds of silhouettes and swift shapes on the walls. Faces, flowers, animals, shadows, that only lasted a moment and then disappeared giving rise to new creations. Against the unfading bottom of the ice, what was happening in that cavern was like a symbol or a reduced image of the universe. Man thinks from his temporal vision and believes that things persist, that they last beyond the instant. The universe is a factory of symbols in transit, a play of light on a background of ice.

"Maybe we will find cave drawings of some remote inhabitant, of a distant ancestor of the ice age". Julian continued. "What more cave drawings than those colors and these luminous transpositions on the walls!" Queued the doctor. "The remote inhabitant is the light. She is our ancestor". Certainly. That cavern seemed to be the Distant Ancestor's mansion. It was the magical enclosure of light. But from the cosmic light, uncreated. The men

covered their eyes with their hands and the boat continued to advance on its own inland, propelled by the faint current. We were passing through fields of wonder; places where light was born, sown, in which flowers and spikes grew, and it was given to them to assist in its flowering and harvest. In the wide solar glades, purple and emerald lived. We were absorbed in this instantaneous event. Light is the creative will of form. It is the seed before the symbol. Light is the Wandering Traveler, the Ancient of Days. "Here the memory of everything that once was is preserved," said the doctor. The atmosphere of the cavern grew more rarefied.

Again someone spoke: "In the caverns of the ice age you must go to the bottom, because that is where the sacred point is located, the sanctuary before the flood, the fingerprints of the hands without fingers, the footprints of monster feet, are recorded in the darkness of the end; also the hermetic sign." Suddenly the light went out. It became total darkness. The sailors wanted to stop the boat, rowing in reverse, leveraging the oars in the water; but it was not possible and the keel hit bottom and ran aground. The noise of the water, crashing against a front wall, was clearly heard now. No one dared to strike a match. Little by little, from the entrance of the grotto, a weak beam advanced through the water, reaching the men again. Perhaps an iceberg interrupted the passage of light. They were at the bottom of the grotto. The boat held its keel on pebbles of ice and green water hit the wall through which stalagmites rose. The clarity was projected differently, extra-human, it bounced off the ice mirror and it was not possible to look. The men struggled and it seems that they managed to perceive a circle that surrounded the stalagmites; like a faint translucent space, framed by the blue veins of ice, through which flowed the immaterial blood of light. Staring further, it looked like a magical sphere. From deep within, or from far away, shadows loomed. Commander Rodriguez got as close as he could. So everyone thought they saw a sign on the circumference. His features were precise; but maybe it would be erased. It was something like a map reproduced on the ice wall; an instantaneous vision, held in the glacier, or a memory caught in the cold. The vision of something remote, enormously distant, was reproduced in that sphere; a vast plain, first, furrowed by cracks; then shadows and rugged mountain tops. Summits and abysses. A trickle of water was gliding down to a place where titans of ice interrupted the path. But the thread pointed the way; it plunged under the frozen towers and reappeared in the center of a valley. There was a great lake of calm waters, which gave

off vapors. Trees grew around it and houses were built. Meadows of strange vegetation could be seen. An animal, perhaps a dog, was approaching a mountain. And inside, the image of a giant resting was drawn.

All this was reflected in the final wall of the grotto. No one could be sure that this was really the case, not even if everyone interpreted the event in the same way; but Rodríguez murmured: "That's the dog! There he is! Who can get there? It would have to be only a trickle of water. . . Or be dead. . ."

The truth is that no one believed they discovered in that vision the area where the base was being built. The route seemed to correspond to a central continent, infinitely far away. "The cave has been given to us," someone said. "We have discovered your sanctuary." The men trembled. In the distance, came the ray of light. With difficulty we reached the exit of the cavern.

#### FLIGHT TO BAHIA ESPERANZA

Commander Urrejola wanted to reach the English camp at Bahía Esperanza by any means. As has been explained, it is located precisely in the extreme north of the peninsula, in the strait that communicates with the Weddell Sea. In the exploration trip, the frigate got to the "block" of the Antarctic pass, being blocked by the *pack-ice*. The commander feared that the same thing would happen again. That is why he resorted to the seaplane.

Rodríguez had transferred to the oil tanker on one of the periodic trips to Soberanía, taking advantage of an exchange system that he, like the Commodore, had implemented, so that the tanker's crew could also get to know the new base. No one could explain why the Commodore did not solve the problem more directly; making the tanker come here. He preferred to keep it at anchor until the end of the expedition. Rodríguez transferred to the oil tanker and did not return.

Commander Urrejola kept his idea of making his return to Hope. His confessed intention was to study a way for the frigate. He contacted the tanker by telegraph and requested the arrival of the seaplane. Commander

Rodríguez agreed and we all thought we would see him again, with his curly beard and feverish eyes. It was not so.

The hum of the seaplane was heard before it could be seen. Then a black dot moved on the blue and white background. It circled over the bay and swooped down on the ship, almost over the chimney. The pilot's head bowed and his hand waved. You could see the numbers painted on the wings. The seaplane dropped anchor and some small icebergs hit the keel of the floaters, as if they wanted to make sure of the real existence of that rare bird. A young Aviation lieutenant, named Velásquez, disembarked on the boat. He explained that Commander Rodríguez was sending him in his place.

After lunch, Urrejola boarded the seaplane. He was wearing his feather parka and the white silk scarf around his neck, and as he climbed in he took off his cap to put on the aviator's leather helmet. Velasquez helped him adjust a life jacket and parachute. With all this in addition to the seat straps, Urrejola was almost immobilized, barely managing to hold the camera, the naval chart and his binoculars. The pilot was in the forward cabin, being able to communicate with the captain by means of a telephone.

The plane began to move north. He turned and ran across the smooth surface of the sea. She flared cleanly, climbing over the lace. She did not immediately head south but circled several times, so that the commander could see the men working on the construction of the base, gesturing. In the same way the sailors of the ship greeted him. They looked like stains on a slim steel strip. He reflected that this thing was his refuge in these hostile places, in these solitudes. The commander felt a slight shudder; it was the first time he had left his ship.

He did not have time to ponder further, because below Antarctica loomed, and the seaplane was heading north, towards the end of the peninsula. They first flew over the continent, some sixty or seventy meters high. You could see that smooth sheet, wrinkled in places, covered with lines, like the palm of a hand. Deep crevices cut across the plateau, and it was possible to see them down to the depths of their shadowy depths. The ice rippled in the same direction as the wind. The plane descended almost to meet its bird shadow on the plateau. Urrejola looked back. The mountains



were not visible on any side; it could be that in the north they leaned towards the Weddell. The plane began to turn and soon the sea rose again. They flew over the shoreline, scouring chunks of the barrier and shadowy cliffs. To the left appeared the horizon of water with slight twilight and distant islands. Urrejola recognized the eastern roadstead where they remained standing by during the frigate's incursion. He discovered low depths in the eastern part, which stood out sharply from the air. A large amount of ice accumulated and the commander saw some small islands that he could not recognize, due to the imperfect geographical representation of the coast of the quarter they were flying over. It could well be Gordon Island or Hope Island.

A few more moments and the flight's course altered significantly towards the south; they began to follow the contour of the west coast of the Antarctic Canal. Towards the bow appeared the islands D'Urville and Joinville. Countless images came to Urrejola's mind. There, in Joinville, Larsen was shipwrecked. Nordenskjold's dramatic adventure played itself out in his imagination. And Hope Bay was beginning to be seen as described in the book that narrates the expedition from 1901 to 1903. Between the two islands arose the channel known as Paso Activo, south of the Antarctic Canal, in the entrance to the Weddell Sea. It is possible to see Rosamel Island, almost completely devoid of ice, much smaller than the others, and the closed *pack-ice* extended over the entire width of the channel, continuing in the open sea, even when it was seen from the air. They were observing some clear steps. It was a fact that the frigate could not reach this far. However, Hope Bay remained ice-free. Its outline was familiar to the commander in Duse's drawings of the Nordenskjold expedition, with its plains on the south side, the snowdrift in the background, its imposing crevasses, and the superb figure of Mount Bransfield, guardian of that end of the mountain. Urrejola calculated the distance that separated this point from his base at about a hundred kilometers.

"The military might well try an overland expedition to unite the Chilean base with the English one," he thought. He picked up the phone, consulting Velasquez about the possibility of anchoring. The pilot's voice sounded strange. He said he was going to fly over all of the perimeter of the bay until the camp was in sight. Soon the camp appeared and some men waved their arms at the passage of the seaplane.

The landing was perfect. As he freed himself from the many straps and moved his stiff legs, the captain saw a boat similar to a fishing boat approaching with three men on board. The crew of the boat came to invite them to come to the base. Urrelola and Velásquez spoke English. The newcomers were very friendly. Once on the boat they explained that the bay was deep and that they could not know if the entire channel was frozen, because, from the camp, there was no possibility of making the observation. They had arrived at this place two years before, sailing in a specially conditioned ship. Since then they have not seen other human faces. They had to stay one more year in this place. All this was explained logically and with a monotonous intonation, without inflections or emotion.

The pier was made up of a natural rocky area; from there to the base there was a short stretch. A shoal of rocks crossed from north to south. The chorus of howling a pack of beautiful Labrador dogs greeted them. On the door of the base could be read: "Eagle House", "Post Office" and "No Beer." The base had tiny windows and the snow was reaching well "to above the middle of the wooden walls.

One of the English explained: "Really the lighting is bad and it depresses us. But you must bear in mind that the climate here is the worst in all of Antarctica. When you have a five or six force wind on Greenwich Island, here the barometer indicates a storm."

The interior was equally sad. It consisted of a central dining room surrounded by outbuildings, a laboratory, radio room, kitchen, equipment room, room for storing tools, and a storeroom for leashes and sleds. The library was large, composed of scientific works. The laboratory had a darkroom for the development of the photographs. The regional fauna and flora were collected in test tubes and files. Two skulls of elephant seals stood out.

The English were five in number; four civilians and a military radio operator. The one who ran them was called J.M. Roberts, a physician from Twyford. He replaced the real chief, who had set out on an important overland expedition to Bahia Margarita, at the other end of the O'Higgins Peninsula. The leader was Elliot, an explorer of the Himalayas. The

English doctor smoked his pipe and watched the foreigners indifferently. But he was impressed by the serious face of that Chilean sailor, young and courteous, a human being who suddenly arrived from the ice. Yet two years in this world had practically burned his soul; almost without food, feeding on the meat of the seals and drinking his blood, still warm, to drive the ice from the heart.

Urrejola looked at the ceiling. There were no electric lamps; only paraffin lanterns. They got up to leave. As they passed they saw the instruments for measuring coordinates and a complete series of meteorological devices. Dr. Roberts explained that a three-year stay in Antarctica offered them the possibility of conducting systematic studies. Outside the day was still open although the wind was beginning to blow. Velasquez took a few steps forward in the snow and felt that a bulge was coming on top of him and the weight of a hairy body threw him on his back. He saw a dog overhead and felt its wet tongue and warm breath on him. Tied to a chain about a hundred meters long were the Labrador dogs. They stayed apart so that they couldn't reach each other. They lived in the snow all year round, digging holes to protect themselves from storms. They were beautiful, with soft oily fur and howled like wolves in the clear sky. Remnants of their food were visible on the snow, raw seal meat, gnawed bones. Using these dogs is a difficult art and science to learn.

Nearby rose a headland of snow. Commander Urrejola climbed it to observe the distance with his binoculars. He was looking in the direction of Joinville Island and thinking again of Nordenskjold. The expedition had been terrible. Divided into three groups, one of them spent a winter in the open. The men had to smear their bodies with the seals' fat and devour their raw meat. They looked wild and were hardly recognized when they finally reached Snow Hill. Urrejola was also thinking of Pilniak. He saw him again with knife in hand, sliding on the iceberg, on top of his victim. He then tried to imagine the southeastern plateau, on the other side of the mountain range, stretching without end, by the sea. Some Englishmen were now marching through the winds, the cold, and the implant cable shroud of ice. He wanted to question the doctor, but he saw him so far away, with his empty, almost white eyes and his bloodless skin, so beside himself that he preferred to keep quiet, trying to perceive that clarity that pulsed as always in the veiled edge of the plateau. These men have forgotten words, Urrejola thought. Their expressions are dead, frozen.

They can explain nothing to me outside of what I guessed on their faces ... Yet how much would he give to march with those who were going over the great plateau, toward the southern light!

### MOON NIGHT

He had been dozing off for some time. An agonizing sense of subconscious lucidity kept me on the bunk. Suddenly someone spoke to me. I thought it would be less difficult to wake up; but it was like being out of my body and it was hard for me to return. I finally opened my eyes and saw a leaden face. I didn't recognize him at the time. The man wore a woolen cap and was covered with a black fur coat. "The commander sends for you. He says come see the moon. He waits for you on the bridge". The sailor and his features were beginning to look familiar to me.

On the bunk opposite the ship's accountant was sleeping. There was no one in the two bunks below; the occupants were a second lieutenant of engines and the navigating officer. The latter spent his days and nights on the bridge, next to the radar and the gyrocompass. I put on my slippers and robe and started toward the tower. In the booth, under the bridge, I found the helmsman. He turned the tiller handle slightly. I said good evening to him, and he answered with a melodious intonation, without turning around. An unreal clarity descended from the bridge. Everything there was wrapped in the ghostly light of the moon. At the foot of one of his instruments stood the navigator, his head uncovered and his gaze lost. Beyond that, a strange character was wandering about, a lieutenant, or who knows, dry, tall, with blond hair and a beardless face. He gazed through the cockpit glass, resting his hands on a spyglass that hung around his neck. He wore a very fine leather jacket and his hands were covered with feather gloves. He held a clay pipe to his lips and an imperceptible smile lit up his face.

Then Commander Urrejola entered, closing the door behind him. He came dressed in his dress uniform and with his white cap. He shook my hand: "Good evening. . . Behold the moon. . ." The atmosphere was warm, an electric stove tempered the room. The officers of the night watch kept it on. The unreal light surrounded us, making us experience a unique sensation. I wanted to look at the sky and opened the door. I carried the warmth of the cabin with me, so I was able to stay outside for a long time.

Successive layers of lunar fogs were falling from the sky. They descended on the bay covered with icebergs of all shapes and sizes. Some birds flew slowly, as if they had to struggle their way through the immaterial membrane of moonlight. As far as the eye could see, everything was permeated with that fantasy. The mountains were of pure legend, a region from another world. Convulsive, enveloped in effluvia, they seemed visited by the souls of the dead. The veil was torn and new layers of ash settled on the snow. Also in the distant Oasis the moon would shine and its soft mystery, its enchantment, would be contemplated by eternal visitors. I looked at it, I saw it: huge, close, as no one has ever observed it so close. It was the moon of Antarctica, the moon of the South Pole. It fell through the sky towards the sea, towards the end of the horizon, slipping in that subtle atmosphere. Pale, a little less than the ice, the moon touched us, extended its gnarled arms, crumbled into silvery ash dust, like a mummy without time and without memory. Then a bird flew across her face, and slipping into the shadow, it seemed to lose itself within her sphere. I ran my hand through my hair, as my head was white from that magnetized ash. Since ancient times, men have feared the moon, because its light produces madness. She is dead in heaven.

I went back inside. Now the cold had gotten into my bones. The commander was no longer there. Behind his curtain he talked, he talked about the moon and things far away. And that lieutenant was still standing, motionless, smoking his clay pipe. He was smiling with his eyes fixed on the snows of an anxious country.

The steering wheel moved with the sound of a clock ticking in the night. The navigating officer was leaning on the gyro and his face was white. It was an old man's face, aged by the moon.

It happened like this. I was in the bunk. My eyelids become heavy as granite and I think I fell asleep. Suddenly skeletal arms crossed the ceiling, through the ironwork. They were the arms of the moon. And the cabin lit up with an anguished beam, of the deceased. The arms caught my chest and began to pull, as if to pull me out. I resisted with all my might and over and over I got up, falling back onto the bunk. At last that magnetic current overcame me. And then I saw myself *outside*, surrounded by a powerful clarity, floating in the air. Although it was only for an instant, it seemed to me to be a ship stranded among the ice, next to the reefs of an island; but it was a ship from another time. No one was in it. Soon I began

to climb, slowly at first, then faster and faster. Now the light had disappeared and the space was black. I realized that I was approaching an area. What I feared so much was soon to happen; the moon had caught me between its tentacles and its current dragged me towards its world. Afraid, I watched her get closer and closer until her dark circle hid the vision of everyone else. There it was, huge as the earth, covered in shadows and craters. And I was falling at great speed. I wanted to stop. It was impossible. I resisted with my last strength, but the shadows faded into sharp light and two octopus-like tentacles enveloped me. In vain do I warn you against these viscous forces. The pressure was such that my chest seemed to explode. I would surely be swallowed up by that maelstrom, sucked into that sulfur blue world. In that instant, when all seemed lost, two figures busted in. They were white and with ice hair. They spoke words of a strange language, and the pressure lifted. The current that dragged me broke in its center. I cannot remember if those beings wore pointed caps made of sealskins on their heads. When I opened my eyes, I was completely stretched out on my bunk and the pale rays of the moon came in through the little window. A strand of light played on the blankets.

#### WITH THE GREATEST

I sat in the chamber reading a book on explorations in the Antarctic lands by Queen Maud. The curtain was drawn back, and a soldier with a lean silhouette approached to speak to me: "I come from my elder Salvatierra." He urges you to talk to him. He waits for you in his cabin. I got up and followed him down the hall. What would the elder one want me for? I remembered his somewhat festive expression. Of medium height, he had rather the appearance of a bourgeois and was not immediately imposing by his appearance. But there was a vague smile on his face and his small eyes sometimes sparkled strangely.

Major Salvatierra was reading at a small table. He got up when he saw me. He was clad in his military cloak and his head was uncovered. He offered me a seat by the window and stood for a while, looking at me without saying a word, with both legs spread and balancing on the tips of his shoes. To avoid the insistence of that look and that smile, I began to observe the cabin. There were three bunks. Two were occupied by the Aviation Commander and the architect. None of them were currently on the frigate; Julian slept at the base under construction and the aviator was in Sovereignty.

At last the elder spoke: "I have sent to look for you because I have something very important to tell you." And he smiled again. I could hardly guess where the elder wanted to go; but I don't know why my heart skipped a beat. Salvatierra sat down near the table. "Do you remember that we met up there, at the apex that overlooks the great plateau? I was trying to draw a map of that territory ... I have seen something fabulous, extraordinary. . . You will have seen it too. Is it true?"

"What thing?" I asked. "I have seen a light that comes from the horizon, from the east ... Have you not observed it?" And the major's eyes glowed like embers. His entire face had transformed, taking on an unusual expression. "Come on!" He exclaimed.

We went to the table where there was a letter drawn in Chinese ink. "This is the plateau. Here are the mountains. And here . . . Do you know what is here? The sea! Understand? The sea!" He was yelling. "I have known it by that light, by that clarity. It can't be very far. In this place the peninsula has to be very narrow. Two hundred, one hundred, thirty kilometers, at the most. . . Because that light comes from the sea, it is the clarity of the Ocean. If it were far away, it wouldn't project it with such intensity. . . The Weddell! Do you realize it? No one has ever crossed here. They are unexplored territories. No one has seen the shores of the Weddell coming from the shores of the Bransfield. Virgin snows, lonely regions for millions of years! And we will climb the mountains and reach the sea...! What things will we see!"

I had closed my eyes, as a sensation of vertigo took me. Was it true what was happening? And I began to make the most absurd objections to the elder, absurd because that adventure was the one I had planned to do with the aviator. And in this instant, when it was made possible through another channel, I was beginning to object to it. The elder showed me a high-precision compass, with a gold frame.

"It's our best guarantee," he told me. "With this compass we cannot get lost". And then standing: "I have sent for you because I thought of inviting you to my expedition. You will be the only civilian. Are you willing to join us?"

“I don't want anything else. I was going to ask you right now. My reflections are the product of enthusiasm, since I already feel to be part of the company”. He smiled. “I knew it”, he said. “I have asked the Commodore for permission for you. He says that you must deliver a letter to him declaring that he has no responsibility in determining you. That you do it of your own free will. We will leave in a few days. We are going to set up our camp on the ice plateau. Training and acclimatization are essential. We will take three high mountain tents and we will build a hut in the snow. You must prepare a suitable gear to take to the field at your opportunity. That is it for today, and I thank you.”

“I'm the one who is grateful, Major. You do not know . . .” He interrupted me, laughing his haunting laugh. And his eyes pierced me, fixed on the threshold. I braced myself at the door, for the ship was moving. I left the cabin.

### I PREPARE MYSELF

One of those afternoons I retired to my cabin and wrote several letters. The first was for the Commodore and I wrote it in the terms suggested by the Major. The others I still have, as they were returned to me by the frigate's accountant officer. I open them now, after so many years, and read them. I have saved them. They are dated that year, and the ink is blurry.

Someone entered the cabin. It was the onboard recorder. This sailor had a strange personality. He was not interested in Antarctica. Never once had he come ashore on the expedition. He never made references in his conversation to the continent we were on. That is why I was surprised to see him now, showing various knowledge: “I have been told that you will be part of the expedition. I think you would not. That expedition is crazy. There are no adequate means to carry it out. There are no suitable dogs, no experienced people. The equipment is insufficient and the time cannot be worse. If you happen to be surprised by a storm with force twelve, none of you will return. All of Antarctica is crisscrossed with large cracks in this near-melt season. September and October are the good months. As a cabin mate I consider it my duty to warn you. Think about it, do not get carried away by your fantasies. But, if in spite of everything, I do not convince you, I beg you to make your will, and give it to me to keep it.”



He said the latter in that ironic tone with which he used to speak. I believed, therefore, that he should not care. But he insisted: "I am the accountant of this ship and I must worry about these things. You give it to me and I keep it sealed. Write down everything you own and the name of the person to whom you leave it." The accountant was swinging on the bunk and was satisfied. At last he had something to do in Antarctica.

That night, while the light was projected in the cabin, I remained motionless in my bunk, with my eyes open and watching. I crossed my hands on my chest and invoked the Angel imprisoned in the Ice: "I will go down to your domain. I am going to open the doors of the Oasis, which you guard".

My eyelids became heavy and a lethargy took over my body. Gentle currents, pleasant at first, ran through me from head to toe. And I think I fell asleep. But in front of me a black spiral tube appeared, spinning dizzily. I could not take my eyes off this funnel, at the far end of which I saw a point of light, like the exit of a tunnel. As my sight grew accustomed to that ethereal *maelstrom*, an invincible force gripped my chest, pulling me out and down. I was terrified. Although I was aware of the event, I had no control over it. For a moment I seemed to see myself far away, in a deep black space. A superhuman laugh spread its echoes in that abyss. I fought, I resisted. I managed to overcome the current that dragged me, but I couldn't wake up. I was *unfolded*. Inside my body and outside at the same time. Vibrations ran through me. It was like an internal plunger, speeding up uncontrollably. And that force was unable, in spite of everything, to project me out of the body, since my daytime consciousness had entered the process and, keeping me half awake, tangled the delicate cables and all the subtle connections of the hidden event. The cause of this disaster could well be found in that terror that had dominated me. I had already experienced such a thing at other times, but today was of such magnitude that my brain seemed to explode. Luminous flowers swirled in space. The frozen flame approached my heart. One more second and it would all be over. Then there appeared a small metallic pot, full of water. Eagerly, desperately, I plunged both of my hands into it and spilled the liquid on my body. The vibrations suddenly stopped. I was able to open my eyes. And I found myself on the bunk, reclined in the same position as before. Who put that metal pot in front of me? The water serpent was submerging the tortured continent again. And only fire will give us immortality. The

accountant had woken up in his bunk and was staring at me with round eyes.

## THE CAMP

From early on, one of the whaling boats was transporting the gear. This consisted of three small tents, a sled, a radio transmitter, theodolites, skis, sleeping bags. Each explorer's wardrobe included two "parkas", one made of bearskin and the other made of feathers. The underwear was silk and wool. As is known, silk has insulating properties, conserving heat very well. Apart from the scarves and handkerchiefs, we were given a hat, also made of silk, to wear under the fur-lined helmets.

I waited for the afternoon to come down. I left on board my blankets and the supply of dry food, calculated for a period of about twenty days. Pen knew to come back for these things. In addition to the equipment I just mentioned, I had one of my own, that of my old mountain excursions: a thin "parka", thick fabric pants, gabardine leggings, made especially for this trip, and a pants-cover, waterproof. The shoes were thick, some sizes larger than the foot, to be worn with several pairs of socks. I was later able to see that shoes so wide are extremely uncomfortable and that, after all, it is the same to wear one pair of socks as three. My old spiked shoes were the best, and I even wore rubber-soled slip-on shoes with great success. The ski shoes had been loaned to me and they were tight.

When I reached the plain where the camp had been set up, the military finished their installation. In the small field a contagious enthusiasm reigned. The upper part of the plain was chosen, next to a small and rocky hill, which would serve as protection against the wind. The tents were low, of the "Aconcagua" type. Its "winds" were tense and embedded in the snow. The day was covered in fog. Walking up to the rocks, I discovered the shelter built by Major Salvatierra. This was a home in the snow, like an Eskimo igloo. Its walls were built of stones covered with snow; sticks were spread over them and a sturdy cloth was spread over them. The booth could go unnoticed; it resembled a natural occurrence on the plain.

Sitting next to the doorway was the elder, with a pencil and a map in his hands. When he saw me he beckoned to me. He seemed pleased with his shelter and invited me in. He must have gotten in on almost all fours. Inside were two bunk beds. That of the major and that of Captain Homero

Riquelme, the radio officer. Geography and Mathematics books appeared near some paraffin lanterns. The floor had been paved in the same way as the walls; over it, another waterproof cloth was spread. Reflections and leaks of vaporous light, yellowish in color, entered through some gaps, plunging the cave into an hallucinated and sickly atmosphere.

“I feel at ease here:, he said. “At last I am on the ground” - and this word was used in a professional sense. “We military men don't feel good on the water. She is for sailors, who are strange people. I do not understand that of staying in a nutshell on an unsafe item. At last on land!” And he chuckled.

Then the elder lined up the people at one end of the camp. He spoke to them: “Gentlemen, at this moment the life of the campaign begins. Everyone knows what our goal is by staying here. To achieve this, we will subject ourselves to an iron discipline. We will do daily ski training, under the command of Brigadier Morales. People should be collected early in their tents and those designated for preparatory scans should be in good cleft condition. A symbolic bullhorn will be heard at six in the morning. It will be heard even though no one can get out of the tents due to bad weather. Everyone will cook in turn. The kitchen is that hole. In turn, the water supply for the day will also be collected. The two civilians are subject to the military discipline of the camp. They will be our recruits! Nobody can go back anymore!”

The other civilian in the camp was a young radio operator from a station in Punta Arenas. With a wizened face he watched the spectacle. Immediately the major distributed the tents. The radio operator would occupy the first, with a lieutenant named Narváz. The sergeant and the corporal were in the second. The third corresponded to Brigadier Morales and myself. The lieutenant was a strong and cheerful lad. The sergeant and the corporal had that sullen and rude appearance which usually hides a simple and kind soul. I will deal with Brigadier Morales later. The radio operator stared with languid, watery eyes.

At the top of the rock, the transmitting device had been installed. That is where I found Captain Riquelme that night, trying to communicate with the frigate and with the oil tanker to set up a program of periodic broadcasts. He was a kind man, of fine treatment. He had blond hair in his

beard and faded blue eyes. He always smiled. That night it was not possible to establish a connection, the device limited itself to expelling all kinds of curious noises, similar to primordial babbling, in pieces of chaos. The hubbub was like a sound story from the years before the discovery of mechanics. As an imitation of those noises that must have preceded the invention of radio in the brains of its creators. The very long antenna was swaying in the wind of the Antarctic night. From the top of the rock you could see the silent cove, half hidden in the mist. The milky light of the plateau descended on the plain, giving this night the appearance of a singular day, regardless of time.

I went to the tent and, with considerable difficulty, entered it. Lying in his sleeping bag was the brigadier. At that time he was trying to light a small paraffin lamp to warm the room. He did not give any importance to my arrival. I started to undress. This was a feat that the brigadier saw from the corner of his eye. The small space of the tent would not have allowed two men to undress at the same time. I thought about getting into the sleeping bag with my heels and a wool vest. But the brigadier stopped me: "Do not do that. Strip completely. Clothes will prevent you from moving. The purpose of the sleeping bag is to maintain body temperature, forming a warm atmosphere that protects you. But the heat has to be produced by you, not the clothes. The jacket does not let the cold in, nor does the heat come out. The lighter, the more suitable. It is the object of the feathers with which it is filled". Like birds, I thought, and also like the blubber of whales. What strange bird or calf is this brigadier? "For now stay with silk clothes; but the feet must be bare, without socks". He directed the operation meticulously. He was a rude, reddish man - the exact word is "rucio". He was not so young. It was noted that he wanted to show me his knowledge, but he did it with that cordial tone, as though not very sure of the comrade who has fallen to him. Before turning off the light, he pulled on his silk cap, tying it tightly under his chin. He told me, "Do the same. The head remains outside and must remain warm." I often "think" so much during sleep that my head never gets cold. What gets cold is my feet. But I obeyed him.

He turned off the lamp. And the tent was completely dark. We were side by side. The space was so small that we could barely move. Outside the wind was beginning to blow, and the canvas of the tent was flapping. On the floor there was nothing but a thin waterproof covering. Underneath

was the hard ice and its constant, tenacious cold, passed through the fabric and the jacket, reaching my back, my lungs and even my bones. I felt it sharply, almost burning, without strength or power to fight it. It slowly took me over, like an irresistible pain. The lungs were still lukewarm animals, but before long they would be hit by the cutting edge. I moved. I tried to get on my side. The wind blew through the tent.

The brigadier was not sleeping either. He began to speak. There is nothing better than words to protect man. They give us what objects can no longer give us. The words warmed us. He said, "In Switzerland, I have also slept in the snow in the mountains. They are different mountains, other types of rocks, they seem more domesticated. They are not wild like ours. They have been covered with pine trees and man controls them. Even the snow seems less cold. There is a whole sophisticated and complex technique to climb. Here things are quite otherwise. . ."

It was a different man who spoke to me. With a sweet intonation he remembered his trip to Switzerland. He mixed up some French words. It seems that the shadow had transformed him. "There I studied the *parallel* technique. It is difficult to master, especially for those who have been educated in the "wedge" system" [skiing]. With the silk cap, my head was feeling intense heat. I had to take it off. He continued. "Our mountains are the most well-known. They have no equals in the world. Right now I miss them. In this huge savannah, what encourages me, what drives me is the hope that those mountains, which we sometimes see, resemble those of ours. I think they are smaller. It is to them where we must go. My major is interested in the Weddell Sea; but I'm interested in those mountains".

"Me too! Morales, you and I are looking for the same thing". I exclaimed. Then the brigadier re-lit his lamp, for it seemed to him that the entrance to the tent had opened and the wind was blowing in. He checked the lock and then searched for something among his clothes. He seemed to have found it:

"Look," he told me, "this is Switzerland... But there is something else I want to show you... This." And he pointed to the photograph of a woman in the snow, wearing ski pants. "She is my wife. Together we have climbed the mountains. We both have the same love for mountains. She would have liked to take part in this exploration."

Afterwards, the brigadier was pumping his small lamp, with which he intended to warm the room a little. And so it happened that night, between the light and the shadows, both talking away about things that we would forget tomorrow and trying to fight the ice bite with memories. Until faintly, amid the noise of the wind and the indecisive light of dawn, we heard the horn, as if it were the anguished cry of a frozen throat.

### THE DAY

The day was here. We washed ourselves by drawing water from a hole dug in the snow. A boat left with the radio operator. He woke up with a high fever and a lung complication was feared. They transported him on a stretcher back to the barrier. It seemed to me that the man was happy to leave. Major Salvatierra stood at the entrance to his igloo, with a compass and a map. That good bourgeois had become a fanatical and willful man. Ironically, almost scornfully, he looked at the radio operator. He told me: "Now there will be a space in the lieutenant's tent. You better move there. In this way the brigadier will have more comfort. He is our guide."

That morning we climbed to the edge of the plain. And the brigadier began his ski lessons. The major and I were the students, because the lieutenant skied very well and the sergeant and the corporal could glide quickly down the slope. The notions that the brigadier gave us were the rudimentary ones: turning, walking on soft snow, trimming the skis on the ice, ascending an inclined plane, descending in *semi-skid* and braking in a "wedge". The brigadier considered that the "wedge" system was the most suitable for this terrain. We were surprised to see the elder repeat the same practice one and a hundred times, falling and getting up, covered in snow. That man was no longer young; but he showed the enthusiasm and stubbornness of a boy. Beaten, bruised, he insisted that the brigadier continue to instruct him, despite his exhaustion. The brigadier was perspiring and so were we, without the intense cold being an impediment. The elder practiced until after noon. Only then did we return to the camp.

Lunch was cooked in a rustic way. Between two large stones hung the kettle. The meat and vegetables were canned. The food base was made up of chocolate and dry foods. In the afternoon there was a short rest, before continuing with the training sessions. The wind blew strong, without causing the fog to clear. Only when night fell did the explosion of white

light come over the horizon. But it was momentary, as always, because immediately that unreal gloom returned.

We took refuge in the tents. And that night was even worse than the previous one, because Lieutenant Narváez did not have a lamp to warm us. We were in the dark from the beginning and not even the constant joy of this officer could make us forget the terrible cold. I think I overcame the bite of the ice, which kept me on the brink of "clairvoyance". And I say this because, after the first stage of despair and pain in the body, I was entering a state of lucid indifference, as if floating in a light world and perhaps even burning, in which the body was alien, like a stone...I could, if he wanted, abandon it forever, without any emotion or anguish. But the inflexible will of the elder would bring me back to consciousness: his bugle call tore the gray dawn of a new day.

#### LOST AT SEA

That afternoon the boats with materials continued to go ashore. They did it despite the fog that made visibility only a meter away. I went down by a rope and entered one of them. The boat carried wood. His crew was complete. Before leaving, the skipper of the boat, a sea corporal, offered his men a drink of water. Sailors call this drink the "girl". We left in the direction of the pier. Wrapped in the "parkas", the men went under a sky too cloudy to be serene. I watched the sailors row in silence, they were focused. At times it seemed to me that the boat was sailing through the air, amidst the vapors of an imprecise world. Those sailors rowed in eternity and their movements were pointless. The bow of that boat would never touch a port. We had been sailing for a long time. If my calculations were not wrong, we should already be landing on the tip. I watched the sailors and the corporal. They showed no concern; they laughed, joking. I also tried to laugh, participating in the talk of the boatmen. In this way another half hour passed. And the men's faces did not change. The sea corporal kept the tiller in his hands and, from time to time, spoke almost ritual words, unintelligible to me.

With an involuntary movement I looked at my little pocket compass. In it I saw what I feared. We were marching in the opposite direction, rowing north instead of south. I went to the end: "Do you know that we are lost? We have been going in the opposite direction for a long time". But the corporal laughed, affirming that that could not be, because we had started

in the right direction. The other sailors confirmed. Then I showed them my compass and they argued to me that in these latitudes the compasses were of little use, since they frequently “went crazy”, due to the proximity of the pole. The cape was extended in a very curious way with the possibility that it was not the North Pole that attracted the needle, but the South Pole that repelled it. I admired the calm of these men, especially when I realized that they were not sure of what they were saying. I tried as a last resort to convince them: “Let's at least stay the course; in this way it will be easy for us to return, turning round to the south”. I breathed relief when I saw that they accepted this proposal. I think this is what saved us, because suddenly the waves began to rise, giving the impression that we were no longer in the bay. Through the dense fog we glimpsed at times the shadows of some islets that later disappeared. And later, some great icebergs passed so close that the emanation of the ice reached us with its sharp breath. The wind blew. And the noise of landslides not too distant was heard between the waves and the fog.

No one no longer doubted that we were lost at sea. The corporal exclaimed smiling: “It seems your compass was right. I've been thinking the same for a long time, but what would it have gained us by saying it? We can't go back to the ship. The captain will be furious; to believe otherwise is not to know him. We better try to find the lace. . .” In this difficult situation the temper of these men remained firm. We were lost in Antarctica. The storm could strike at any moment. The climate and the sea were unknown to us. However, the sailors did not show concern.

Nor was I afraid of the situation we were in. I only wanted, vehemently, to reach the plain of the camp, where the elder was waiting for me. What happened to us in this boat for me was a serious obstacle. With a special sense of humor, the sailors told me: “Why even bother going back? If we die here, it makes a good story of the trip.” I understood. But I kept quiet. Because it was his *reason* and not mine. And from that moment on, a silent struggle began between them and me. It was the fight of his myth against mine; of the myth of the sea against the myth of the mountains. I knew that only the elder was offering me the possibility of a compromise between his Weddell Sea and my transparent peaks.

“Let's go back to the ship”, I insisted. “Anything else will be considered by the captain as recklessness. You, Corporal, are responsible for the



decisions made here!” One of the sailors said: “On that island, after the fog, we could spend the night”. “No!” I yelled. “That’s stupid. Let’s find the frigate. Remember, Corporal, don’t forget the captain. By this time the lack of this boat will have been noticed and they will be looking for us.” The corporal’s fear for the captain helped me defeat him. I never thought that the petulant captain could one day become my ally. However, this time he definitely favored me. These men feared him and the sense of discipline prevailed over the feeling of destiny. The corporal preferred to face the anger of his superior rather than be accused of breach of duty.

One more hour we rowed until the very fine ears of the sailors made out vibrations that were imperceptible to me. It was the noise of the frigate’s engines. The corporal steered the boat in that direction. The scene of the appearance of the ship was ghostly. She emerged from the mist like a mass that was closing in on us. Yet she was immobile and anchored. The fleeing clouds gave the impression that she was moving; its cannons and her chimneys took on colossal proportions, towering above us. It seems that the pounding of the oars was also heard on the ship, because a sailor on duty shouted and then others crowded onto the ladder on board. The captain approached, looking down: “Where were you?” “We got lost”, said the corporal, reluctantly. “So I see. What kind of sailor! Let’s see, give this man a boat compass, so he can reach land!” I saw the corporal turn red and look at me sideways. The captain handed him a large compass, similar to a lamp, and ordered him to set sail immediately, since the other boats were already returning from the tip.

We arrived at the dock at dusk, when the clarity began its nocturnal signals on the plain. I said goodbye to the sailors and, carrying my bags and blankets, I ascended the snow slope to the camp. A heavy silence awaited me. The tents were closed and only Captain Riquelme received me next to the hill. He told me that the major had ordered me to be picked up at once, since the people rested to start at dawn to explore the plateau. I could not take part in it because of my delay. The captain tried to convey the major’s orders to me kindly, so as not to disappoint me. He did not know that worse things could happen to me on that journey.

I think I even slept that night. Although it could well have been because under the sleeping bag I gathered several blankets to defend myself from the ice.

## THE FAILURE OF AN EXPLORATION

The major left accompanied by the brigadier, the sergeant and the corporal. The rest of us stayed in the camp. The group of explorers climbed the slope to continue east, along the great plateau. It was a very rough exploration.

From the start, the fog almost totally intercepted visibility. Cracks appeared in the plain. The brigadier sank into one and they had to help him by pulling the ropes. They marched in single file, avoiding dangerous features on the ground. Towards noon the wind appeared. The *blizzard* engulfed them. They thought to stop, but as the storm was getting worse, they continued in the same direction. The elder wanted to test the precision of his compass and the mettle of his men.

In the afternoon, hunger, thirst and cold were accentuated. The sergeant took a handful of snow and put it in his mouth. His eyes were sunken. A short distance from them, the mist began to swirl in whirlwinds. Then the corporal fell flat on his face, and began to moan. The elder approached him and hit him with his cane. "Stand up!" He shouted. "What is the meaning of this? Are you not a man?" The corporal overcame himself and continued marching into the evening. They returned to camp late, sad and starving. The brigadier looked puzzled, though upright. Only the elder was smiling, as always, his face covered by a shaggy, dirty beard.

The days passed over the camp. The fog continually closed the space. Often the east wind blew the plains, preventing all activity from us. We couldn't cook, having to stay inside the tents, motionless, and without even having a book to read. It snowed at all hours and the ropes barely resisted the gale. It seemed that the fabric of the tent was splitting. The wind blew in, beating furiously. Our entertainment consisted in following the trickles of water that slid down the slope of the cloth. If we were to touch with our finger, the water would seep out. But as it snowed, a crust of ice formed over the tent, protecting us, isolating us. During these days of forced confinement we ate dried fruits and a certain concentrate enriched with vitamins. I had personally stopped practicing the brigadier's recommendations. I would go into the sleeping bag dressed and put on as much coat as I could, going to bed with the "parka" and hood on. It was no longer about doing experiments, but about saving myself from freezing. I don't think even the brigadier in his lone tent would be complying with his regulations. When the cold and the wind picked up, the lieutenant and

I tried to make heat by bringing our bags closer. Less than human beings, reduced to the pure instinct of self-preservation, we were driven by a strong desire to survive.

Our appearance must have been equally primitive. Sometimes, when we managed to get out of the tent, we washed ourselves with a yellow water, like urine, in the holes of the thaw. Its touch hurt the face. Hair and beard tangled. I deduced my appearance from the others. The elder had lost several kilos in weight and his eyes were surrounded by moving shadows.

Finally the wind died down and we went back to skiing. This was one of the worst times of our stay in Antarctica. Luckily there was no windstorm on a larger scale. If that had happened, who can say if any of us would have survived. The expedition and the camp were set up in the most inappropriate conditions.

We had very few essentials. Nor was this the right season to risk exploring Antarctica, further ignoring the configuration of the area. However, I endured with joy and serenity all these sufferings. Only one thing crossed the line and it infuriated me: having to cook. We spent a whole day lighting a fire that the wind put out, thus fulfilling a job for which I was not prepared and from which atavistic knowledge no longer remains in me.

One day the Commodore came to visit us. We saw him arrive at the camp covered with his fur hat. He sat by the fire and drank a cup of tea with us. He stared at the group, distracted, tired, as if he had done this many times. Then he dropped a few words: "Have you seen that light?" It was already late and from the distance of the plateau the white signals arrived. The Commodore left, without turning his face. But we all had a feeling of renewed vigor.

The elder took me to the top of the slope. He spoke to me: "That clarity comes from the sea. It's the Weddell. It shines more at night than during the day. In the daytime, the fog prevents us from seeing it. We already have the experience of a day trip. The sea preserves the invisible light of day, which may be clear in those confines, and projects it at night to show us the way. We will do the next expedition at night. We will march in the direction of Hope, until we reach the English base. It will be the last

preparatory expedition before the final one. I prefer the night. I don't want to know more about the day!”

So I walked away and climbed the small rocky hill to one side of the camp. From there, and in clear weather, you can overlook the bay. I sat on a stone stained with snow and manure. Close, between two rocks, a *skua* gull was found. It stretched its ascetic neck and shook out its ugly gray feathers. Solitary, it was like an anchorite in these regions, aware of its power, self-centered, ugly and proud, amid hostile elements. It stretched its neck further and seemed to penetrate the mist in the direction of the invisible bay. It spread its wings and soared through the mist, toward the sea. I said to myself: “There is the king of Antarctica. He is harsh and cruel; but he is self-sufficient, he is complete. He is just like ice or cold, he is beyond all thought. No definition reaches it. The ruler of Antarctica is not the lymphatic seal, nor the sweetheart penguin. He is the cruel and stark *skua*”. Tonight, while we were in the tent, we heard noises. The steps of someone who walked stealthily would have been better. These noises had been heard at night for some time. Maybe it was the crunch the snow makes as it hardens.

#### THROUGH THE PLATEAU, TOWARDS HOPE

The expedition to Hope took place at night. The brigadier was in front, followed by the major, me and the sergeant. I cannot explain why the lieutenant was left without participating in this expedition. We headed northeast. We marched in single file, linked by ropes and dragging our skis on the soft snow.

I don't remember much about this expedition with clarity, despite being the first in which I participated. I have a fuzzy feeling of having walked for hours and hours, always to the north, with a slight incline to the east. We then turned into the Bransfield Sound and the peninsula barriers. The march was monotonous, almost uninterrupted. My shoes were tight and the bearskin “parka” made me perspire. The impression of sweat in a climate of intense cold, in the middle of the ice, is extremely unpleasant. From the start, the fog imprisoned us and we hardly saw the one in front of the other. At first the mind was clear, attentive to the occurrences on the ground; but then, the incredible monotony, the white color of the snow, the heavy mist that enveloped us like a sack, that barely let us pass, to close again, the diffuse light, existing somewhere beyond that fog, which made

inextinguishable signs, they were introducing us into a mental climate that was also dense, and very soon we could not distinguish the world in which we found ourselves.

The brigadier advanced silently. From time to time his voice would be heard, as if he came from on high. Every half hour the elder indicated the course. Behind me I felt the sergeant breathe. Sometimes the rope squeezed my waist. It was because the major, the sergeant, or myself, had lost the rhythm of the march. It is to be understood that when walking in this way, mired in the mist and in that ghostly world, the impressions were soon confused, becoming equally vague. If to all this is added that unique sensation of cold and heat mixed, of ice and perspiration, the fatigue that is not felt, but that is entering the bones, then it is necessary to accept that the mind cannot fix the details and that the memory of this expedition is that of a walk that could well have been made in a single point, without advancing or returning, turning all the time around the camp. One more hour of walking in that nocturnal Antarctica and perhaps we would all have begun to see visions. But the brigadier got tired of the fog and the major must have admitted that we were still far from Hope, even though at certain moments we thought we were close enough to the English camp to discover the lights of the facilities.

We return, taking the direction to our base. And while we were doing it, the elder explained to us: "This expedition will be very useful when we begin the conquest of the Weddell. We will rest all week and, at the beginning of the next, we will embark on our great adventure. Nothing will remain to be known. Nothing can resist us."

Until late in the morning I remained lying in the tent. All over the camp, the snow had solidified, so that there was a crust of hard, slippery ice on the surface. In the afternoon I reached the rocky outpost. The slope was snowy. I put one foot in it and slipped, falling flat on my face on sharp ice rubble. A deep wound on my right eyebrow covered my face with blood. With the handkerchief I staunched it. I kept climbing to the top of the hill. I sat for a moment by the ice crushed rock. Dipping my finger in the blood from the wound, I traced some marks on the snow of Antarctica. I then enclosed them in a circle. Red on white, the signs will remain penetrating to the heart of the ice. They must still vibrate on those desolate glades.

I went back to camp. The brigadier healed my wound. The days began to pass slowly, agonizing. We did not see the elder. He was in his cave, plotting routes and studying maps, with the compass on his knees. Every now and then there was an eccentric laugh from him. The sergeant and the corporal made some attempts to drag the loaded sled up to the plateau, but they failed. The brigadier himself must have recognized that it was a job superior to his strength; the sled could not go on the expedition. It was a serious setback. When we left the sled we also gave up the radio transmitter. Lieutenant Riquelme would remain with his instrument. He showed no regret for it. I thought I saw a good omen that the device was discarded. The mechanical sterilization of life was left behind. Perhaps fate could act.

One night I returned to the level of the plain and looked at the edge. Far away the veiled and tragic light throbbed, projecting its signals onto the pale mirror of the plateau. I looked for the mountains, but the fog covered them. I thought of my oases and that the white midnight sun would shine there. Someone was waiting for me and the time was near. In a low voice I repeated: "I have finally arrived."

This is how these last days passed. I picked myself up in the tent. As the wind blew, I went back to dreaming with my eyes open. And then someone came, stepping on the crunching snow. I struggled to see and discovered the image of the Master. How long that I did not see him. There he was now, standing by the hill. He had an air of concern and his eyes were looking at me with affection. He beckoned me to come closer and I obeyed him with great effort. It was difficult for me to get up, leave my sleeping bag and all those things that kept me warm, among them, the body. I got closer. The Master extended a hand towards the ice. "This burns", he said. "What loneliness and so much shade ...! Have you looked into this crevice?"

And he showed me the mouth of an abyss, while he leaned down to contemplate it. I also looked and saw a deep, endless well that reached to the center of the earth. "There he is. He is", he explained. "There he resides. Deep down the ice glows; because ice and fire are the same thing. The frozen fire, from whose bite no one can heal, because it destroys the dense form, and eternalizes. Whoever lives there is the guardian of fire and he lives among the ice. Do you remember Dante? He must have crossed

through Him, until he reached this very place where you are. But high in the sky then the Southern Cross shone. We will not be able to see it now until this mist that veils it disappears. To achieve this you must fight with Him, down there, or up here. Your test is coming. Will you dare to descend into this abyss in my presence?... How many things would be avoided...!” I involuntarily pulled back and I think my body started to shake. The Master exclaimed: “I am sorry. You will not be able to avoid the ordeal that awaits you in your real life. If you lack the strength to descend within yourself, then you will have to destroy yourself externally, learning to die once more. You still have human time in your heart... But do not forget, the test that is coming is hard and if you fail, you will harm many; because the lives of men are mysteriously united and the adventure of one reaches all. There are invisible threads that intertwine humanity. Your triumph or your failure will have repercussions until the end of the South...” He turned his face and looked at the white snow on which were streaks of red. “These signs...! Whenever they vibrate, I must come... What do you have on your forehead?” He approached. In his eyes I caught a quick reflection. And he ran his hand over my wound. I felt relieved. “May your luck be light...” And I saw him leave, without turning his face, separating the fog with his blue atmosphere.

### TOWARDS THE WEDDELL

Lieutenant Narváez would carry a hundred sticks covered in tar, to mark the route of return, driving them into the snow at intervals of a kilometer. Since the afternoon the camp was active. Provisions and tools were prepared. The skis were lined with a sealskin strip to facilitate climbing the icy slope. Those who remained gathered in front of the tents. They hailed us by raising their arms. The elder had just come out of his snow shed and was saying goodbye to his men. He tied himself behind the brigadier, signaling us to do the same in the corresponding order. He put me after him. Lieutenant Narváez was behind me.

The first part of the journey was made through the plain. The fog enveloped us as always, although this time it was a little less dense than on previous nights. He could see the brigadier turning his head and marching the rhythm of the march. The ropes left two meters of distance between each man. It took us half an hour to ascend to the plain. The elder changed course to the south, to skirt the side of that high hill that on clear days casts its shadow over the base under construction. We started to climb

new slopes. Because of the fog, we could not distinguish the mountain slope, presenting us with the first problem of orientation. We had doubts as to whether we were circling the cone of the mountain. The elder stopped to consult his compass. And the lieutenant took advantage of the stop to drive the first stake. When we started again, the stake was like a black dot or a friendly line on the paleness of the plain. The snow was soft and it was necessary to stomp on the skis. I felt that my shoes were tighter than on previous occasions. We had ascended quite a bit and the compass was now showing us heading east. Always going up, we kept that direction. Apparently we would not change it again. In front of us appeared a plateau of successive undulations, which continued like waves of a hardened sea. Thus we walked for a long time, with the same impression of previous days. Without clearly distinguishing if we were going through the land or through an imaginary world. The hooded man in front was a gray shadow amid nightmare fumes. The pace of the walk unnerved the mind and will.

The elder raised an arm and the caravan stopped again. The lieutenant shook the snow off his skis and came forward to stand beside me. I could see him well. He had snow on his beard. He asked me to take one of the tar stakes that he carried behind his back, inside a kind of quiver. "You have to take off your glove", he said. I did, and the cold seized my fingers. The tar was sticky and the hand went black. The lieutenant drove this new stick into the snow, just as he had been doing. Every kilometer. The wind beat my gloves, attached by a rope around the neck of the "parka." Then the elder began to distribute lemon and anise candies. I found it extravagant and I resisted accepting them, pretending that they did me no good. But the elder got angry, saying: "You have to eat them! I order you! You are under my command! These candies are absolutely necessary". The brief immobility froze us, and we had to continually wave our arms and legs. The plateau continued its slope and the temperature rose inexplicably. Suddenly an unusual phenomenon happened in Antarctica. It started to rain. The water fell thin and we were soaked. My "parka" was oozing, getting wetter than the others. He tried to breathe in the humidity of the rain, so particular in this dry and odorless air; but it was also a special rain, between steam and ice, without humidity and almost without water, like dust, or like fine and penetrating needles.

We reached a summit, and the wind blew stronger and stronger. The rain stopped and we had to advance on an incline, fighting the wind. The



temperature dropped again and the cold became unbearable, which did not prevent us from perspiring at the same time. I think we could have frozen to death without the body stopping its perspiring. A noise like glass and faint clicking was produced on top of the clothes. The rainwater was freezing on the raincoats. The unreal climate of the fog, now together with the powerful wind and the cold, produced again that lucidity close to clairvoyance, which made us look at the events with indifferent serenity, as if we were also ice beings, separated from all suffering. We stopped again.

Fatigue became effective inside, in an almost intellectual way, by deduction or reasoning: we thought that we should be tired, that it could not be otherwise. The cold prevented us from feeling physically tired, also taking away the possibility of stopping to regain strength. We stopped for a very short time. I went to take off my gloves to open my backpack and noticed that it was completely covered in frost. The rainwater had frozen on the strings, on top of the gloves and the hoods of the parkas. We shook each other. The ice fell in small pieces. The lashings were so compact and hard that there was no way to untie them. Instinctively I put my hand to my face and it felt cold, like stone. The beard was a chunk of ice. Only then did I discover the appearance of Major Salvatierra and that of the others. They looked like ice elders, covered in stalactites from head to shoulder. I tapped my beard with my knuckles and it snapped in half, falling with the sound of glass.

Then the elder spoke to us, his voice coming from his frosty lips: "Can you hear the wind? Do you smell? It is the smell of the sea! It's the sea! This wind comes from far away, but maybe not so much. Because here, in Antarctica, everything reaches distances, the view, the wind... and so do we... Today we will reach the sea!" I was experiencing a sharp pain in my heels and would have liked to take off my shoes for a moment. The major was again controlling the course.

The plateau was always the same. Now we were on the ice and the sealskin of our skis scraped the surface. The brigadier marched very slowly, hesitantly, groping with both sticks. In this way we continued for a few hours. Until the brigadier suddenly stopped, plunging his staff into the ice.

“A crack”, he said. We stopped. The elder consulted: “Is it deep?” “Quite a lot”, the brigadier replied, as he plunged the baton down to the hilt. “Can we cross it?” continued the major. The tone of his voice was decisive. The brigadier turned his face away. I guessed from his gaze what was going on inside him. “We can,” he answered. “Well,” said the major, “that's what we're here for!” And he fastened the rope around his waist. I heard the lieutenant start to whistle very quietly as we parted ways until the ropes got taut.

The first to cross was the brigadier. He did it carefully. Stepping as if he wanted to rise, like mountain mules, nailing a stick in front and another behind. The rift was covered in a layer of thin ice that crackled and snapped as if it were breaking apart. The elder's turn was the next. He passed quickly, inconsequential, as if he were stepping on solid ground. I followed him. I affirmed one foot and then the other. He was already over the crack. The thin cloak creaked, broke apart. I plunged a cane forward and pushed myself. I was on the other side. As the lieutenant crossed, the major explained: “It is very difficult for a crevice to be as wide as the length of a ski. I am convinced that there is no danger in this!”

From that moment we found ourselves in the middle of a field of cracks and only at the end of this desperate expedition did we come to be rid of them. The cracks surrounded us and the brigadier ordered us to change the formation. Instead of going one after the other, we lined up horizontally. We were estranged, although with loose strings between us. I still don't understand the reason for it, but each one of us was alone. For the first time in Antarctica I experienced loneliness. A loneliness that was not produced by the external, but came from within. It was a distant, primordial loneliness, congenital to existence and made conscious due to the almost metaphysical fatigue that dominated us. I sensed, I realized the fatigue of being, in the cells, in the entrails; the bones ached, with a cold that penetrated to the marrow. The heel tortured me like it was being cut. All around me were shadows moving without noise. Gray fog. Then impenetrable darkness. I did not dare to move, but slowly, hesitating in that nightmare darkness. As we walked for hours between cracks, without knowing where, without seeing by our side, an invincible sense of horror took over our spirits. And an irresistible desire to throw oneself in the snow and finally rest. I got over it with an almost alien wisdom. I ordered myself to move on. A great faintness took possession of the body, a white fatigue

rose from the feet, of those who refused to advance. It was the "embrace of the Virgin of the Ice", of which Amundsen speaks; the temptation to rest on the ice and taste that mystical embrace. I stopped for a moment. Doubt struck me suddenly. What was I doing here? What was that world and what did it have to do with me? In a flash, the absurdity of the adventure was revealed to me and I saw myself as a child engaged in a meaningless game. Perhaps I was close to annihilating myself, to end a life in exchange for a dream, a suggestion maintained with deceptive skill, transforming me into a victim of my own creations. Doubt tortured me: "Could I have another way? Perhaps there, there...?" Jubilant water, profound eyes, big as the universe ... Quickly, the heart beat again and the blood found its old channels. However, somewhere in my being, a pure consciousness was amazed at this sudden change.

The doubt would no longer leave me until the end. The horror, the fog, the nightmare atmosphere, the cracks, the insufferable rhythm of that continuous march, the cold and the proximity of death had transformed me. I no longer owned myself. Deep down, I was in awe of this change. It happens that in extreme climates, near the pole, curious phenomena and alterations of mental states occur.

A tug on the rope forced me forward. The immense field of cracks continued to surround us. I recognized some black sticks that the lieutenant had nailed down. Maybe I was retracing my steps. I heard a voice ordering us to stop. And in front of us a huge crack opened, as surely I will not see another. It stretched out in a zigzag until it was out of sight on the plain. I approached and observed that it was black and deep, like the crack of my dream. I felt the same terror looking at it, not daring to get too close. Then we all got together and began following the course of this crack. With the brigadier at the helm we went round and round. I'll never know what we did to get through it. Somehow we found ourselves on the other side. At least we thought so.

We formed the line again. Then the brigadier hesitated. I saw him going slow. I could hear him breathe with interruptions, turning his face to consult the elder. Behind, the lieutenant still marched vigorously. He no longer asked me to remove the stakes from his quiver, but rather he tried to help me. We reached the edge of a slope, or perhaps a precipice, for the brigadier stopped abruptly and waited. Then the elder started screaming

and laughing. He jumped on the skis and howled against the wind. “Here is the sea, here is the sea..! Do you smell, do you feel this wind coming out? It is the sea! It is my Weddell Sea ...!” And he hit the snow with his sticks.

I listened to the wind, softly I heard it. And in the middle of it, very far away, I seemed to perceive a penetrating and high-pitched howl, calling me, waiting for me. . .

*(THE DOG HOWLS)*

“Could it be you, who reminds me of the oases, that pure and great dream of the beginning of time? Where are you? You have been faithful, because you have come at the moment when I need you the most, to show me the way to my friends, the heroes, the immortals. They send you. And you howl, howl in the wind, in the snow. . . Tell them I'm coming, tell them I'm hesitant, I'm not sure I'll find them, I'm still in doubt. . . I doubt your howl. . . for it may well be the wind that blows on the desolate plateaus. My dog, show me your yourself, appear here with your image of blond curls, destroyed by the ferocious skuas! Are you the voice of God, or the howl of Destiny? I think that if I obey you I will be wrong. I tremble. I am weak, I do not know what happens to me. A voice that is not yours tells me that the moment has not yet come, that this may not be the way. It tells me that I must abandon this last dream, that it is not by sea, nor by land where I will find peace, nor the legendary heroes, whom you serve today ... Dreams, water...! Howl against the wind! ... I have abandoned you ...!”

The lieutenant was holding my arm, pushing me forward. He was watching me curiously. “What happened? Is something wrong with you?” “Nothing. Don't you feel how it howls? Can't you hear the dog?” Surprise was reflected on his face. And he let go of my arm. “You too!” He exclaimed. “You are going crazy? It is nothing but the wind.”

We were descending into the abyss. We did it by edging the skis on the ice. Nothing could be seen below. Everything was black, shrouded in mist. The slope was almost vertical and only with the edge of the skis did we keep adhering to it. It would be enough for one to slip to drag the other three. The major kept telling us that we had reached the end of the expedition and that the Weddell Sea was at the bottom of this precipice. Then the brigadier stopped. I saw in his eyes the expression of a terrified

animal. Then facing the elder, it was understood that he was not willing to continue advancing. A deathly pallor covered his face.

“I don't see anything”, he said. “I don't know where we are going. I think if we take one more step it will really be, as you say, the end of the expedition... I'm good with here! I will stay here!”

The elder also stopped. He hesitated for an instant. In the voice of the brigadier he discovered the germ of rebellion. Then he did something very strange. He turned to me and looked deep into my eyes, as if inquiring, wondering. So that I knew that if I supported him, if I said a single word to follow him, he would give the order. With me at his side, he would advance, to fulfill destiny. In a flash I sensed the mystery of this adventure: the elder was nothing more than the vehicle of my dream. He seemed to understand it too. But if I doubted, there would be nothing more to do ... I remained silent, like a statue of salt and suffering. The elder stood up to how tall he was, put his hands on his waist and shouted against the wind, towards the cold spaces and the bottom of the abyss: “Weddell Sea, you have beaten me! But I'll come back! We will see each other again!”

Thus the expedition was concluded.

We never knew where we had been or how we made the return. We returned much more easily and faster than we did it on the way there. The tarred stakes were very useful, pointing the way. Despite this, the brigadier got lost and could not find the exact path. But the elder consulted his compass and guided us. The big crack was nowhere to be seen this time and I don't think it was necessary to dodge it. At the top of the steep slopes, we removed the sealskin from the skis and began to glide rapidly. Because the four of us were tied up and the major and I were not good skiers, we often rolled through the snow, dragging the brigadier and the lieutenant in the fall. My feet ached more and more and I was barely supporting myself on the skis. In order to avoid falls altogether, a change was made. Undo the formation, to continue in a group of two. The major would go with the brigadier and me with the lieutenant. The elder tied the rope across his chest, while his end was held firmly by the brigadier, who would march behind holding him every time the speed increased too much. Narváez did the same with me. In this way, when the slope dragged me and the wind

cut with great force, the lieutenant braked in "wedges" and the rope gave a sharp tug. I was unable to keep my balance and fell against the snow.

This singular race across the cloudy plains of Antarctica lasted for several hours. From time to time we would make out ahead, like a moving point on the ice sheet, the major and the brigadier. They descended, often progressing for long stretches.

Suddenly, the fog lifted. It was in a minute, maybe just seconds. Incredibly it dissolved into the air and for the first time in many days, in such painful hours, the deep and subtle sky of the pole appeared diaphanous. Around us the world was made and our eyes were given to contemplate the landscape. We were at great heights, on slopes of ice and snow. Gentle rolling hills slid back and down, convulsing peaks that we were unable to reach. The Southern Cross had not yet appeared in the sky, veiled by the blazes of the eastern light. Ecstatic at this miracle, grateful, we forgot the cold and misery of our bodies. We looked at the panorama that surrounded us, emerging from nowhere and from the shadows. And there, far down and far away, on the long blue strip of the sea, between small and wandering icebergs, we saw a little light that was blinking. It was the frigate, anchored in the bay. With great emotion we contemplated it. That was our home, our refuge in this vastness, on this continent of invincible ice and mystery defended by impenetrable barriers.

The last stage of the comeback was done individually. I was the last to arrive at the camp. I barely advanced, staggering and with my feet smashed. It was already dawn. Next to the bonfire, tea and brandy awaited us. I drank it in small sips. The others were there, lying on the snow. Captain Riquelme looked on them with sweetness. The elder was still smiling. He did not feel defeated. He had done his duty. "I'll be back ..." he repeated.

I walked away towards the rocky outpost and climbed the little hill. I was looking for the *skua's* nest among the rocks. I found it there. It was, as always, alone. He craned his neck at my proximity. Then he ruffled his ruffled feathers and stood up. He was looking out to the seaside. He took flight. He was moving away towards the western islands. A point appeared on the horizon. It was another bird from Antarctica. The *skua* joined his partner and together they flew away, circling over the happy islands.

“My God,” I thought, “even the invincible loner, the hermit, the king, seeks his opposite, his defense in the solitude. The fog prevented me from seeing it earlier. Is it necessary to cover over certain facts, so that a destiny can be fulfilled, to maintain the faith and the blindness necessary to all fulfillment? What is the truth? The fog or the light?”

I realized that a subtle irony, a wisdom pierced with humor, was driving these last hours and was unfolding before me in perceptible symbols, but now unusable.

Dressed, I laid down inside the tent and fell asleep. The scenes of the expedition passed through my soul again and I saw the plateau, the unfathomable cracks. Behind the major and the brigadier, and in front of the lieutenant. Someone else was with us, someone who had the wings of a bird and howled like a dog. It was a dog with wings; a snake-shaped dog, howling inside myself, at the base of my spine. No, it was the brigadier who was howling; he howled like a pitiful animal, towards the west, where his wife came from, approaching with some ski pants in hand. Then the major thrust one of his batons down the brigadier's throat and he couldn't howl anymore. We all agree to kill the elder. We buried him in the snow. And on his grave we crossed his poles and his skis. The dog with *skua* wings remained watching. The Commodore also came and explained:

“This man must be prevented from immortalizing himself, because covered in this way by ice he will be able to resurrect eternally. To prevent it I will stay here and make him discover death again. I am a specialist in these ways, because I am ...” I don't remember the rest of what he said. But the Commodore sat on the major's ice grave and stood there to prevent him from being resurrected.

At times I would wake up to go back to sleep. Somewhere the face of the Master appeared. He was staring at me curiously. Then there was a great emptiness in my heart. I had lost, I was not capable. The ice rejected me. He who resides in the white darkness, in the cold fire, did not accept the combat, because he did not find me alone enough. He saw that the hopes and illusions still lingered in my heart. Love also spread its wings there flying towards the barren remoteness. Sweet water, distant memory, warm fingers of human blood and consoling tenderness! I forget and dream! Wheel of reincarnations! I was not worthy of the ice or the last despair. I

knew it already at the start, with my heart filled with messages and boreal poems, they were subjecting me to one last illusion. . . I began to howl, to howl for a long time, between tears, between ice and frost. My soul ached, my feet ached. Lieutenant Narvaez shook me hard to wake me up. He brought his head close to mine. Disquiet was reflected in his eyes.

#### AGAIN THE BRANSFIELD

I spent that day and the next lying in the tent. The cold paralyzed me; at times I tried to get up; but the pain in my joints and feet prevented me. He had taken my shoes off; the socks were a single bloody mass, stuck to the raw flesh of the heels and ankles.

At noon a boat from the frigate came and docked near the barrier. Its occupants went up to the camp to report that they would take me aboard. They had an order from the Commodore to this effect. Only in the afternoon was I able to get up and go on the air. A thin mist let through the clear sky at times. I descended to the rocks and waited for the boat. I jumped with great difficulty over the hangover. One of the sailors helped me.

On board, the captain transmitted to me the order of the head of the expedition: I should remain in the frigate to be taken to Sovereignty. I protested, saying that the expedition was not over yet and that I could not abandon it right now. But the captain insisted on transferring me to my cabin, stating that I looked fine.

In my cabin, I looked at myself in the mirror. The poor light showed me an unrecognizable image. No wonder the sailors looked at me curiously. The image of a sick man was reflected in the mirror. His cheekbones were taut under dirty, transparent skin, his eyes sunk behind shadows, with signs of visible pain. A shaggy beard framed that face where fear had left its mark and where the anguish and great disorientation of the present were drawn.

Then the Commodore came and sat at the foot of my bunk. He stared at the pale light for a long time. On his face there was a weariness of centuries, of ages. He remained silent. Nothing could affect him anymore. He had so many times seen men in similar trances. Although it could be that a surge of faith sometimes arose in his soul. And perhaps this was the



moment; because in his eyes the light played and tears seemed to make their way. But not! It was only the light that created his fantasies. Ghosts of tears, ghosts of hopes.

“I know everything”, he said. “I have always known. I will always know. I'm so tired . . .” Then he got up. Dressed in black, the light hit his chest. Then went singing down the hall. That old song of the sea and of men. . .

The Bransfield again. The bow rises and falls. Clouds are icebergs sailing in thin blue. Down in the sea, they accompany us, speaking their language of slightest clicks, with their persistent cold and difficult games. The whales teach us the life of the wide seas and their stream jets unite the horizons. The killer whales and white doves arrive as the ambassadors of recent times. The pole moves its latitudes. And the sea is already our friend, sure of having us, as it has its waves.

I let my dreams get lost and my heart and soul melt into the ice. On the waters of the Bransfield, I want to recover my personality as a man and open the locks to the memory.

But then I discover that my soul is burned by the ice and that it is very difficult for the rise of another passion other than that of the cold, and that of losing myself amongst its icebergs and its oases. To rise again from its unfathomable and remote depths.