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DIARY OF LECUMBERRI

A poet behind bars

ÁLVARO MUTIS

Translated by Jesse H. Lytle

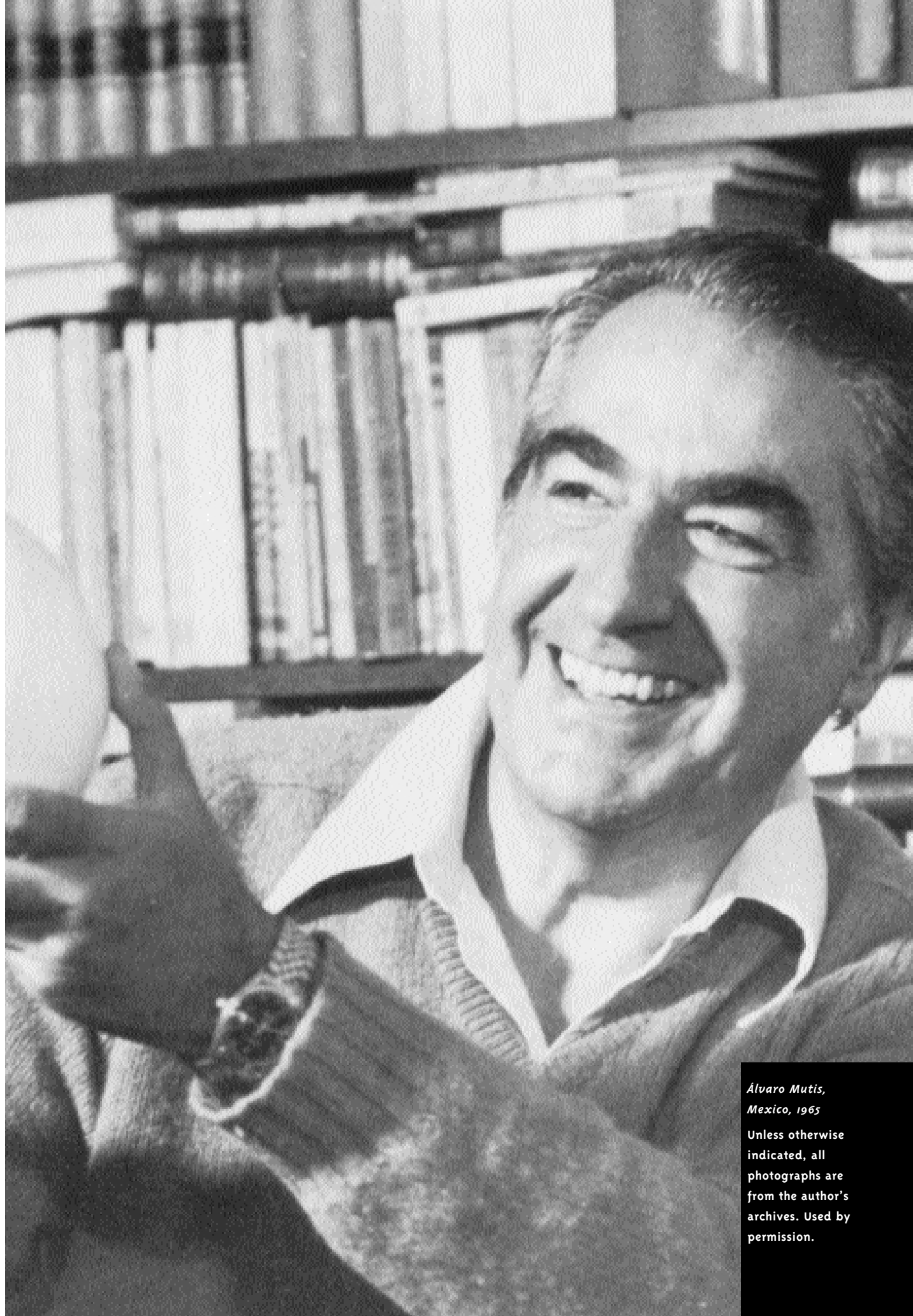
The poet Álvaro Mutis arrived in Mexico City from Bogotá in 1956, at the age of thirty-three. He had with him a couple of letters of introduction, one addressed to the filmmaker Luis Buñuel. Mutis was looking for a safe haven, since in Colombia he had been accused of fraud by the Standard Oil Company. But in spite of the support of friends like Octavio Paz, Alí Chumacero, Juan Rulfo, José Luis Martínez, Elena Poniatowska, and the painter Fernando Botero, his compatriot, Mutis's legal ordeal worsened; he faced extradition and a period of uncertainty. In 1958 he was incarcerated in Lecumberri, "El Penal," also known as "the Black Palace." He stayed there for fifteen months.

*Built at the turn of the century, the magisterial building of Lecumberri was inaugurated by Porfirio Díaz in 1910. Its doors closed in 1976. By then the place was the subject of myth, portrayed in films, fiction, and poetry as el reclusorio de la locura, a prison inhabited by dementia. In truth, by the time of its demise Lecumberri had become a more humane place. While there Mutis was able to stage a play, *El Cochambres*, and read widely. His true friends were Proust, Dickens, Cervantes, Conrad, Melville, and Stevenson. He was allowed to write poetry and to receive relatives and friends. During his incarceration he became friends with Poniatowska, to whom he wrote twelve long personal letters. (They were edited by Poniatowska and published in book form in 1998. A handful are translated into English here for the first time.)*

For Mutis, support from and communication with the outside world never stopped. In the end Paz drafted a petition to Mexico's president, Adolfo López Mateos, for help. Signed by a vast array of prominent intellectuals, it read:

Señor Presidente:

The Colombian writer Álvaro Mutis has been in jail for a year and six months. We ignore the reasons. We don't want to know them. Neither do we want to oppose the course of justice, or to request that exceptions be made in favor of the privileges of ancestry, money, or talent. But if we don't know the misdemeanors or guilt attributed to Mutis, we do know that he is a poet, a generous and cordial man, and a great creator. This encourages us to ask you, Señor Presidente, to see that his cause is approached with sympathy

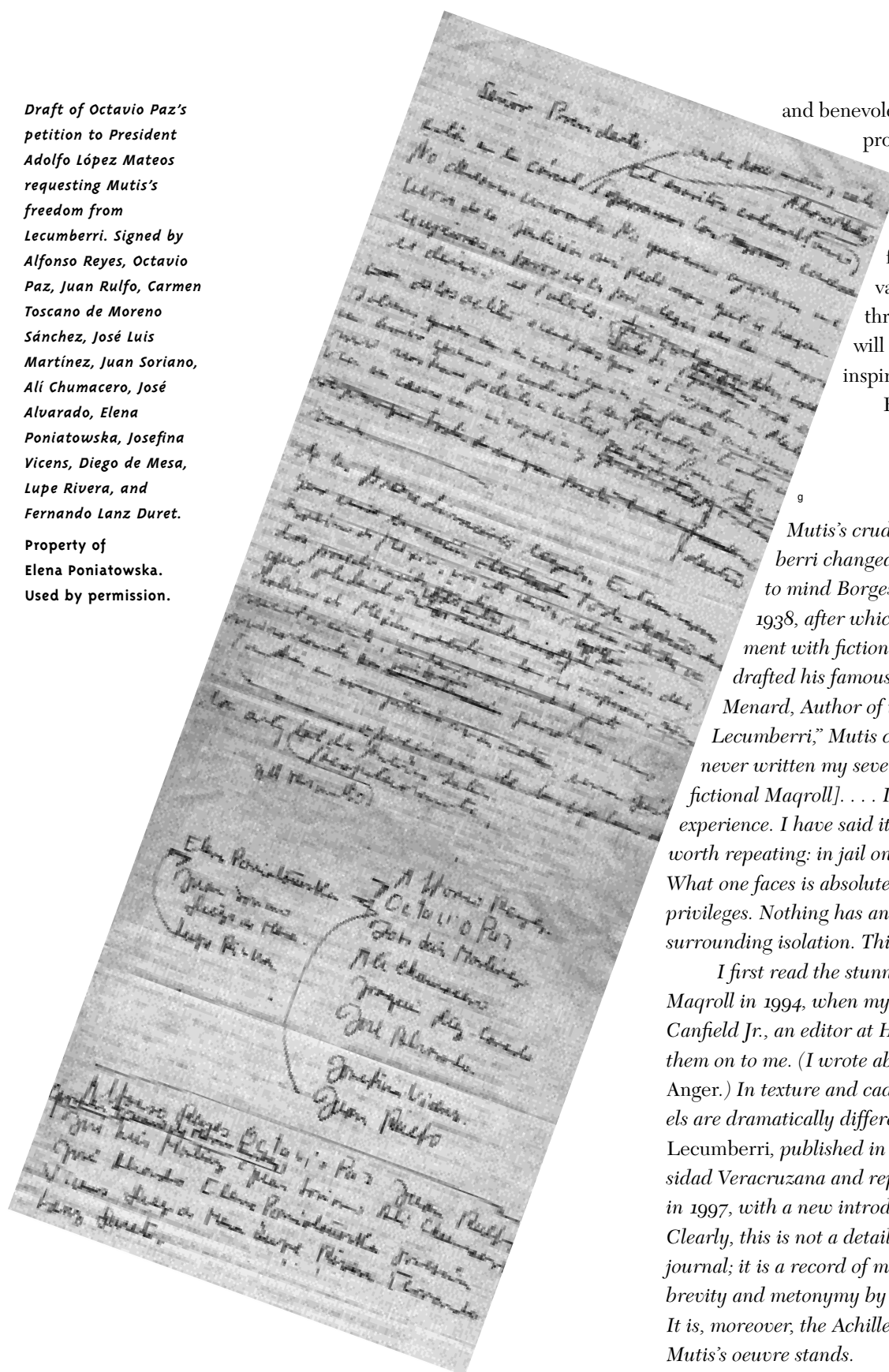


*Álvaro Mutis,
Mexico, 1965*

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indicated, all
photographs are
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Draft of Octavio Paz's petition to President Adolfo López Mateos requesting Mutis's freedom from Lecumberri. Signed by Alfonso Reyes, Octavio Paz, Juan Rulfo, Carmen Toscano de Moreno Sánchez, José Luis Martínez, Juan Soriano, Ali Chumacero, José Alvarado, Elena Poniatowska, Josefina Vicens, Diego de Mesa, Lupe Rivera, and Fernando Lanz Duret.

Property of Elena Poniatowska. Used by permission.



and benevolence within the legal procedures. We are sure that, should this be done . . . , not only the rule of law but a fair appreciation of the values of art in and through Latin America will become a source of inspiration.

Respectfully,

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Mutis's crude odyssey in Lecumberri changed him forever. It calls to mind Borges's near-death illness in 1938, after which he began to experiment with fiction for the first time and drafted his famous quasi essay "Pierre Menard, Author of the Quixote." "Without Lecumberri," Mutis claims, "I would have never written my seven novels [about the fictional Maqroll]. . . . It was a very enriching experience. I have said it many times, but it is worth repeating: in jail one is driven to the edge. What one faces is absolute truth. One loses all privileges. Nothing has any value except the surrounding isolation. This is all quite healthy."

I first read the stunning adventures of Maqroll in 1994, when my dear friend Cass Canfield Jr., an editor at HarperCollins, passed them on to me. (I wrote about them in *Art and Anger*.) In texture and cadence the Maqroll novels are dramatically different from the *Diary of Lecumberri*, published in 1959 by the Universidad Veracruzana and reprinted by Alfaguara in 1997, with a new introduction translated here. Clearly, this is not a detailed, day-to-day prison journal; it is a record of misery built through brevity and metonymy by an antisentimentalist. It is, moreover, the Achilles' heel on which Mutis's oeuvre stands.

Unless otherwise noted, all bracketed interpolations are Mutis's.

—Ilan Stavans

Introduction, 1997

The editors are asking me for a preface to the *Diary of Lecumberri*. I have thus gone back to look through these pages, and, as always happens in these cases, the labyrinths, tricks, suspicious occultations, and no less suspicious revelations of memory have left me living in a sort of no-man's-land, somewhere between surprised and afflicted. I will try to explain myself. The only certainty I have been able to arrive at is that what I recount here happened, I lived through it, and it forever scarred me. However, entire segments of that fifteen-month experience in the Cárcel preventiva de Lecumberri—I was detained by virtue of an existing treaty between Mexico and Colombia, one of whose articles demands that anyone subject to extradition be secured in a place that guarantees that he remain in the country—have been denied in an inexplicable oblivion. Others have taken on a dimension that clearly does not correspond to them. All this, forty years later, leaves me in the hands of the constant, tricky illusionist that is memory.

For these reasons, I had many doubts about going back to edit this diary, which made me feel somehow incomplete and not entirely sound. Nonetheless, I went off to work out an argument in my conscience in favor of its recirculation, an argument I will try to make clear for my improbable reader.

It turns out that on examination of these episodes of my penitentiary life, I soon realized that thanks to this experience, as profound as it was real and incontrovertible, I had managed to write seven novels I assembled, in Spanish, under the title *Empresas y tribulaciones de Maqroll el Gaviero* and, in English, in the volumes *Maqroll* and *The Adventures of Maqroll*, released by HarperCollins. Until then, I had only attempted to walk the roads of fiction with some stories collected in *La mansión de Araucaíma* and, later, in a compilation of all my prose titled *La muerte del estratega*. In the pre-

vious thirty years I had only written poetry. This step from one genre to another was possible thanks to my immersion in a world that combined pain, the most warm and certain human solidarity, and the awareness of a clumsy injustice hidden in codes and laws—put simply, the plain and brutal truth of the man fallen to the bottom of the pit, who no longer has anything to say, not like a mute protesting against something he is unable to explain to himself but like someone who has taken a brutal blow without knowing from whom or from where it was delivered. Talking with the inmates who share that situation with us is an education that will scar us forever and that will mark all contact we may have with our peers from this point forward. I never would have managed to write a single line about Maqroll el Gaviero, who has accompanied me here and there in my poetry, had I not lived those fifteen months in the place they call, with singular precision, “the Black Palace.”

The experience was so radical and penetrated to such secret corners of my being that today I recall it with something quite akin to gratitude and even tenderness.

That is what I wanted to say in this second appearance of the diary. I would only like to add a few sentences that accompanied the first edi-

One does not forget these things. They are like bullets that sink into the body and travel beneath the skin and go to the grave with their bearer, where they keep watch over his remains.

tion in 1959 and that for me are still absolutely valid. “These pages summon, thanks to the interest and friendship of Elena Poniatowska, the partial testimony of an experience. The testimony is born for those who remained there; for those who lived through the most isolating misery with me; for those who revealed aspects, until then hidden to me, of that so-sullied human condition from which we move away so awkwardly every day.”

—A. M.

LETTERS TO ELENA PONIATOWSKA

Álvaro Mutis

Translated by Jesse H. Lytle

Thursday, 4 June 1959

Kind Helena:

I don't know if You can fully realize what it means to feed the epistolary energies of a prisoner. They are inexhaustible. You end your letter with "(Why don't you write me?)," like this, in parentheses, as if to open the floodgates of a great dam by touching a distant switch. Don't You see that as prisoners we have a generous quota of disposable time and with it a terrible urgency to verify the existence of the external world—of "the outside people"—which, as time passes, gains more enigmatic characteristics and fuzzier, more distant profiles? If during the time I was outside, two stupendous years, I was always one of your most faithful readers, can you imagine how enthusiastically I will now be one of your most tireless correspondents?

I regret about Octavio. I would have wanted to see him and tell him how much I liked his last book and how many things I saw and enjoyed in those poems, which seem to me among the few, almost the only, we can count on now in this Indo-America, so full of poets with a "social message" and socialists with "deep poetic sense" but so short on poets. There, in Paris, he will get together with a very close friend of mine, the Colombian writer Hernando Téllez, and through him he will come to know how much I admire him and for how long I have enthusiastically followed his work, ever since I read the first things of Octavio's to arrive in Bogotá with Téllez and we published some of them in magazines and newspaper literary supplements, short-lived but produced with the enthusiasm that is so quickly extinguished in our countries by politics and American "trusts."

Today You tell me You will go with Octavio to look for some book for me. You cannot imagine how in my mind I turn over the thousand possible combinations that occur to me, what You will choose and what You think I might like. Since by this time the gift—or gifts—will already have been chosen, I can tell You that I am terribly conservative in matters of letters. My great passions in prose barely extend to Proust and Conrad, bypassing Joyce, where I draw the line. In poetry everything in Apollinaire and Max Jacob gives me pause, and I find absolute satisfaction and communication only in the proven works of Mallarmé and Rimbaud among the French, extending to Machado and Neruda among those who write in Spanish, and ending in Hopkins among Anglophones. I will also tell You—I warned You at the beginning that you had opened a floodgate, something like the Dnieperspetroi of literature; I beg your pardon, but You have amiably sought it—that now I read only those few authors who help one live and who become something like a faithful double who follows us everywhere and has useful answers for every enigma that life poses for us. Then a line formed by Cervantes, Pascal, Chateaubriand, Stendhal, Gogol, Baudelaire, Dostoyevsky, Mallarmé, George

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A celle qui danse . . .

When things go bad in jail, when someone or something manages to break the closed procession of days and shuffles and tumbles them in a disorder coming from outside, when this happens, there are certain infallible symptoms, certain preliminary signs that announce the imminence of bad days. In the morning, at the first roll, a thick taste of rag dries the mouth and keeps us from saying hello to our cellmates. Everyone sits himself as well as he can, waiting for the sergeant to come and sign the report. Then comes the food. The cooks don't yell their usual "Anyone who takes bread!" to announce their arrival, or their "Anyone who wants *atole*," with which they break the mild spell left over from the dreams of those staggering around, never able to quite convince themselves that they are prisoners, that they are in jail. The meal arrives in silence and everyone approaches with his plate and his bowl to receive his allotted ration, and nobody protests, or asks for more, or says a word. They only watch the guard, *el mono*—"the monkey"—like a being from another planet. Those who go to the steam baths perceive more intimately and with greater certainty the new guest, impalpable, oppressive, impossible. They soap up in silence, and while they towel off they spend a while looking at the emptiness, not like when they remember "outside" but as if they were looking at a gray and miserable nothingness slowly swallowing them. And so passes the day amid signals, sordid landmarks that announce a sole presence: fear. Fear of jail, fear tasting of dusty *tezontle*, tasting like century-old brick, like aged dust, like a recently oiled bayonet, like a sick rat, like cell doors that moan their years of rust, like grease from bodies struggling on the frozen cement of the bunks and exuding misfortune and insomnia.

That's how it was then. I was among the first to find out what was happening, two days later, two days during which fear had roamed

like a blind beast in the great cage of the *penal*. One inmate had died in the infirmary and nobody knew from what. Poisoned, it seemed, but it was unclear how or with what. When I arrived in my block, my *compañeros* already knew something more, because in jail, stories run with the unparalleled speed with which nerves transmit their message when excited from fatigue. That he was a *tecatero* [heroin addict] and that he had injected himself with the drug hours before dying. That they were going to examine his viscera and that in another day they would know. By night the whole *penal* had found out, and it was then that we entered the second part of the plague, as I called it, to give it a name.

A great expectancy arose among us, and nobody could speak or think about anything else. At dawn the next day they went to my cell to wake me up: "Someone's very sick, Major; he's spitting up foam and saying he can't breathe." Something inside told me that it was foreseen, that I already knew he'd die, that this sickness had no remedy. I quickly dressed and went to the sick man's cell, whose groans could be heard from a ways off. It was Salvador Tinoco, *el Señas*, a quiet type who worked in the tailor shops and was visited by a clean, smiling old woman, whom he called his godmother. They had dubbed him *el Señas* for something related to the baseball team, to which he proudly belonged and dedicated all his free time with undying enthusiasm. I would never have imagined that *el Señas* had injected himself. I had not even learned to distinguish between the habitual melancholy of inmates and the profound hopelessness of those who use the drug, which only partially rescues them from it. *El Señas* stared at me fixedly, and I could no longer say anything intelligible. A tender moan accompanied this look, in which he conveyed all the blind faith he had put in me, his certainty that I would save him from a death that was already taking possession of his skinny body. We carried him to the infirmary, and immediately the doc-

Moore, Dickens, Conrad, Perse, Proust, Apollinaire, and Neruda would form what could be called the frontier of my "dominion," to use a pleasant word from Valéry Larbaud, whom I include on this list.

Fine, but this letter is now taking on the horrible semblance of a pedantic literary thesis. Forgive me, and keep in mind that it answers some generous inquiries you planted in me about the readings I would like to be supplied with and the magazines you have offered me. If it has taken me more time than necessary to answer them, understand this also as a fair desire to stop presenting to you a character of whom You have only very partial information. And by "partial" I don't mean good or bad aspects, but only the fragmentary aspect of its image. You might say that the often-discussed masculine vanity is rearing its head, and if You are not mistaken, You would have to add, some literary vanity as well. At any rate . . . "The Gaviero and I are like that, ma'am."

I'm moving right along with my theater group. The play is almost ready. We have limited means, as You might imagine, but, on the other hand, the goodwill of my inmate *compañeros* is really inexhaustible. Do You want to know what the play is about? It's the story of my friend *el Cochambres*, whom I ran into one day wandering through the interior blocks and whose Saint Bernard look almost makes me cry. He told me he was doing two and a half years for sleeping, after a long visit to the bar, on fifteen daisies in a public park. His crime has the delicious name "damage to state property," and his lawyer—from the public defender's office, naturally—forgot to request an appeal of the sentence, and here poor *Cochambres* purged his two and a half long years. He fixed shoes in the jail's shoe shop and is now in Iztapalapa, waiting for his freedom from one moment to the next. A *compañero* of mine, an occasional writer and public defender, wrote a comedy about the case and about life in Lecumberri. I was surprised by the soberness of his narrative, since this stupendous friend has a strong inclination for these lectures in verbal cinema that are so often produced in our tropical country and in some others. And here I am, staging the play and preparing each actor—none has ever been on a stage before—and going over his part one, two, ten, a hundred times until he learns it. The one playing *Cochambres* is a barber whom, from the day You see him, You'll never be able to forget. He's a mixture of Charlie Chaplin, Stan Laurel, and Cristo de Cranach. I dedicate ten hours a day to this play, and I put as much faith in it as if we were going to present it to the popes of Avignon. Moreover, it's time that I steal from the jail and from the Kafkaesque process following me, which nobody has yet explained to me or justified in a halfway comprehensible way.

I'm anxiously awaiting the issues of the *Revista de la universidad* You mentioned. I haven't received them yet, but I'm sure they will arrive shortly. I want to know what the friends we have in common are doing; your accounts of them were as playful as they were brief on that magical parachute visit You made—I hope You do it again as soon as You are in the mood and have the time for such a Franciscan task. I'm performing a search for a copy of my book *Los elementos de desastre*—a prophetic title, to be sure—which Losada edited for me in Buenos Aires and which I haven't been able to

get here, to send you as more proof of the “defeat of my most-loved matters,” a defeat that comes from a long time ago but that certain dark forces come from that make it stupendous for me to keep on living.

Now do You see what you risk by inviting a prisoner to write? Really, it pains me to have taken all this time and space, Helena, but to converse a little with you through this letter has done me a lot of good. And—tell me—have You not found that when You write a letter, You always get the impression that it isn’t what You were going to say but something else, more original, perhaps, more fun, or, at worst, more true? Talk to you soon, Helena, and many thanks. You write too. Hello to Toño and Kity.

A. Mutis

tor on duty admitted him. A futile struggle in which all resources at hand were exhausted culminated in *el Señas*’s harsh battle against the painful invasion of paralysis, which left certain parts of his body stuck in vague, grotesque gestures completely alien to the man who in outside life had been the tranquil and serious Salvador, who had told me one day, as the only commentary about his godmother’s visits, “She comes from Pachuca, Major. We have a little land there. She sees to everything while I’m stuck in here.” And now I thought, “Who will tell the godmother that *el Señas* is dying?”

Little by little he grew stiffer, and suddenly, as a scarlet shadow passed over his face, his hands, with which he had grasped his throat, loosened up. The doctor withdrew the needles through which the serum and the antidotes flowed and looked at us, his face awash with

come in, her hair painted blond, with the air of a Valkyrie conquered by misery and a loathing of barrio life. She wore a vague, lost look; a frozen, ugly smile was stuck to her face. She was the wife of Ramón the barber. We did not understand at first. But when we remembered the pharaonic face of Ramón, his big, watery eyes, and some of the fabulous digressions in which he got lost while cutting our hair, an oppressive certainty quickly came over me.

Ramón was next. With a ticket for the dentist I went to the infirmary in hopes that I was wrong. Ramón was a good friend, an admirable barber. I was right. I found him stretched out on the bed, softly moaning in the throes of intoxication, hands clutching the edges of the cot while his words kept losing their clarity. “Don’t let me die, *güera*. *Güerita*, let’s see if the doctor can do something. Ask him please.” The doctor fixedly observed the dying man: “Who gave you the drug, Ramón?” “It doesn’t matter, doctor. Save me; the others can go to hell. Save me and I’ll tell you everything. Let me die and I’ll shut up. Save me, you bastards, that’s what they pay you for!” and in vain he tried to jump on the doctor who was absorbing his words and watching impassively with the bitter certainty that on this desperate animal, here in agony, depended the lives of many others who at that moment might be buying the fake drug.

“Tell us who it was and we’ll save you,” said an assistant, with the imprudence of someone

unaware of the inflexible code of the prison.

Little by little we entered the plague’s voiceless pit, penetrating the tunnel of the dead.

fatigue: “There was no remedy anyway. As long as we don’t know what they’re selling as a drug, there’s nothing we can do.”

That’s what it was. They were selling *tecata balín* [fake heroin]. Someone had discovered an easy way to earn a few pesos by selling something as heroin. Who the hell knows what it was. It resembled the white powder known in the *penal* as *tecata*. I went back to the block. So this was what the fear had announced. How many would follow now? Who? It wouldn’t take long for us to find out.

The next morning we saw a hefty matron

Ramón was no longer able to speak; he barely had the air to form a single word. He kept staring at the assistant with an ironic look, accompanied by a scornful scowl, as if to say, “What do you know, imbecile? Now nothing can save me, I know. Can’t you see that I can’t even talk now?” All of a sudden his wife, who until then had maintained the frozen attitude of one who could not take any more blows from life, began to scream crazily and grabbed the doctor by the shirt, saying, “I know who sells it! I know, doctor! I’ll tell you! Only you! I don’t want to snitch in front of these assholes!” The doctor took her



*Mutis with his
parents, Brussels*

14 June 1959

Hélène:

I fear that this letter is going to come out a little *adagio lamentoso* because of my mood, the rain that soaks all the walls of this immense "Black Palace" and converts it into some kind of Reading Gaol *engloutie*, truly unbreathable, and the world you talk about in your letter, with the delicious tranquility of "outside people," signifies for me nothing less than the very structure of my life in Mexico, my most intimate matters, as Miguel Hernández would say, that Spanish poet who had "a potato face," as Neruda said, and died—ay!—in a jail. Let me explain myself: when you speak to me of Octavio Paz, Toño and Piti, and Soriano, and say a little about yourself as well, you bring me the constellation of people whom I met within a few days of arriving in Mexico and from whose friendship and intelligence I derived the dearest motives for remaining here, to struggle to reconstruct a life now badly injured and to continue to believe with furious faith in the notion that life is well worth living. Didn't you know, for example, that a week before the sinister pair of agents approached me with the air of people who had something

Drugs, hunger, and fear had given his body's tense skin a special transparency, a clear and simple tone that reminded me of those saints' bodies they keep preserved under the altar in some churches.

secret to sell and brought me here, I spent four of the most marvelous days of my life in Toño's house in Acapulco, with the unforgettable Valente, with Piti, with Toño, who walked like Tarzan's monkey, and with the circumspect and *toujours comme il faut* Jimmy Ross? Still, when I go to sleep and the guards in the sentry boxes yell horribly like widowed cowboys and make your hair stand on end, I imagine, to console myself, the piece of blue sea you can see from the dining room of the Souzas' house, through the huge rocks that shade it. This was my one true vacation in many years and a really unforgettable sort of Balbec, without Albertine. That's why I told you that your letter brought me so many things from which I'm now making, or trying to make, a net to protect myself from the chilling trapeze of my days in jail, which I don't always resist with the same balance and serenity. Today, for example—it's been an ugly day—I've fallen into a terrible "personal confession."

Octavio's letter did me a lot of good. One of the things about jail is that you again learn to savor, as when we were children, any affection or interest someone shows you. What on the street would have been, perhaps, a cordial expression of sympathy, born in a moment of enthusiasm, here becomes something especially valuable, full of deep echoes and sentimental ramifications. Your selection of books could not be better. I hope their shipment is also, because I still haven't received from the university the magazines you mentioned, and all packages shipped to the jail suffer the same fate as the prisoners: you never hear from them again. The best thing to do is to drop them off here, at the main door, whenever you're nearby. The person you should ask for is Captain Rolo, and you can deliver whatever it is to him; he'll see that it reaches me immediately. On another note, I keep hoping you

out to the garden full of flowers. Before long he came back, leading her by the arm to the foot of the bed. "*El Señas*, as I was telling you, died yesterday, señora. It can't be him." "Well, it was him, doctor; no way it was anyone else." The doctor wore a look of impotence on his exhausted, colorless face. An official came in. He was wearing an impeccable beige gabardine uniform and walking with an air foreign to everything happening there, waking in us a silent rancor against him. Gratuitous perhaps, but very deep. "What was it?" he asked, looking at Ramón's purplish face. "Did you get anything out of him?" "Now he can't say anything, nor did he before," answered the doctor, shrugging his shoulders and reviewing the oxygen valves as if to avoid the intruder. Ramón the barber

began to shake; he shook as if he were being beaten in his dreams. His wife looked at him fixedly with rage, with hate, as if at something that

no longer worked, that had never worked. When he stopped shaking, he was dead. His wife said nothing. She stood up and left without talking to anyone.

Next came *el Ford*. He passed out while painting a wall in one of the kitchens. They carried him to the infirmary, and the doctors realized that he was suffering from poisoning. He had fractured his spinal column, he couldn't speak, and his big, bloodshot eyes stared at us in shock. Everyone was dying the same way. The fake drug affected their respiratory motor centers. Little by little they asphyxiated in terrible pain. They needed more and more air. They would put their hands to their throats and try to pull out something blocking the flow of air. The authorities would strap them to the bed, where they slowly succumbed, always incredulous that someone they had not betrayed had deceived them with the *tecata balín*, in which they had believed until they had felt the first symptoms.

After *el Ford* came *el Jarocho*; after *el Jarocho*, *el Tiñas*; after *el Tiñas*, *el Tintán*; after *el Tintán*, Pedro from the store; after Pedro

from the store, Luis Almanza *el Chivatón*; and so, little by little, we entered the plague's voiceless pit, penetrating the tunnel of the dead, who were accumulating until they forced us to live out this real and irremediable new chapter of our lives as inmates. Nobody wanted to say how he had gotten the drug, who had supplied him. No one resigned himself to having been chosen for this macabre business. When someone recognized the deception and asphyxiation began to steal the air from him and terror passed across his astonished face, a vengeful desire would make him shut up. "Let us all die!" said one. "In the end, what good are we, Colonel? If I told you who sold it to me, it wouldn't do you any good. Someone else will sell it tomorrow. Don't even look for him, chief." Others tried to negotiate with the authorities and the doctors searching around the bed for a clue to the plague's origin. "I'll tell you, doctor," they'd say, "but only if you send me to Juárez and give me a transfusion. I know that will save me. *El Tiliches* told me, I know it. I'll tell you there who sold me the *tecata balín* and where they keep it." The thing about the transfusion and Juárez was part of the legend forming around the uncontrollable and irremediable deaths. There was no possible salvation, and the doctors couldn't do anything about the substance that, once in the bloodstream, relentlessly dragged toward the grave the unfortunate who sought in it a different way to avoid the impossible reality of his life.

It was around the tenth death that Pancho unleashed his unforgettable scream in the movie theater. He had the habit of arriving when the lights were already out. He would sit at the foot

visit to the jail was not your last, and any day you decide to sacrifice a Sunday morning, just let us know, either Chucho or me, so we can put you on the list. By the way, Chucho tells me he wrote you last week, so I hope you have had news from him by now.

Our theatrical production is practically ready, and next Tuesday we have our "dress rehearsal." I've dedicated twelve hours a day to it, shaping and training each of the actors in it. It's an emotional labor and full of delicious surprises. There are all kinds of people in it! The strength of the "troupe" is made up of railworkers, people of enormous value in whom I've discovered many of those "national virtues" that are referred to so often in politicians' speeches and newspaper editorials, and are made so trite by them, that you end up thinking they are a myth. The others are a little of everything. There's a guy who falls asleep on me during scenes with a marijuana cigarette in his pocket, and another, more mature guy who paints the strangest female nudes, inevitably with the Parthenon in the background and a great profusion of flowers and butterflies. He has a life-size one above his bunk, and at night he falls asleep dreaming of a Brigitte Bardot who looks more like the daughter of Lola Beltrán and Gérard Philipe. There's another guy who writes verse, and another—well, I could go on forever, Helena; it would be better if I sent you a fair selection of my notes from the *Diary of Lecumberri* someday, and then you'll get to know them better.

So what do I do all day? . . . What you see here: I rehearse and work furiously in the theater, I read, I write a little at night, I dream—I dream a lot—and I hear the inmates' long histories, their moving lies, their petty confessions, their fabulous stories and memories; at length I remember people, places, things, moments, cities, conversations I thought I'd forgotten, and sometimes I become furious remembering why they didn't give me the electric train that I'd dreamed about for a year like nothing and no one I've dreamed about since and that, when we went to buy it, had disappeared from the shop windows in the horrible Galermas Anspach that became for me the symbol of my childhood years and my years in Brussels. What else do I do? Ah, sometimes I think about what it will be like when I'm free, and what used to make my heart pound furiously now only leaves me with a pent-up fear and a bitter taste in my mouth.

9

Clarification

(I want it to be clear that I warned you what you were exposing yourself to when you write a prisoner and plant in him questions such as "What do you do all day?" and "Tell me more about the prisoners.")

9

What can you tell me about (Fernando) Revuelta? Did you see how good I was, not to breathe a word of it? I must confess that I was interested in his friendly offer to do something for me in the newspaper, since up till now all that's come out is the "Dangerous Colombian Con Artist" and the "Auda-



Mutis in
Brussels, 1932

cious International Criminal” and other fantasies. I gave him a poem of mine, a new version of something I wrote a long time ago, and gave him an autobiographical note to “document” it. If you see him, ask him about it and tell him I’m still very interested in it. I’m sure that Foreign Relations and the judges who are now in charge of my case would think differently if they were shown the other side of the old “International Criminal.” As for me, I keep waiting for copies of the book that’s about to be published in Colombia with the Fernando Botero drawings, the one shown at Toño’s; some fragments of it would appeal to Paz the poet. I finished it here in jail.

As hard as I’ve tried not to fall into the common rut of all of Lecumberri’s guests, which consists of talking about “your case,” here I am, boring you with my Kafkaesque affair. I promise not to do it again.

I’m still going with the chronicle of my days. I try to write poetry, but it’s terribly hard work for me. Although it may not seem so, one lives here under tremendous pressures that do not allow the freedom of association, that com-

They soap up in silence, and while they towel off they look at the emptiness as if they were looking at a gray and miserable nothingness slowly swallowing them.

press the essential atmosphere, indispensable for poetry, until it becomes asphyxiating. Then one begins to ponder the anecdotes of the jail, the web of the days spent in it, and thus is born the *Diary of Lecumberri*, which I’ll most likely tear up or burn one day, for it’s only testimony or history, not creation, which is what we must always try to achieve.

I listen to a lot of music on a little radio I bought with the few dollars I had left after I arrived in Mexico. To supplement the description of my “dominion” that I began in my last letter, I’ll tell you that I’m a maniacal, voracious, indefatigable music lover. In here, a Vivaldi concert, a Bartók piece, or a good dose of Bach or Brahms acquires the qualities and virtues of a potent drug. Go ahead and laugh at morphine and the other harmless substitutes.

In your letter you promise me another, longer one. I hope it’s not a simple promise, and I count on it to learn a little more about the world “outside” and about you, efficient messenger and good friend.

Once again I arrive at the end of the letter with the impression that I’ve been a barbaric bore. When will we Colombians learn to write briefly and we prisoners learn not to cry on the shoulders of the visitors we’ve touched?

If you see Piti and Antonio, tell them how much I think of them. If Paz the poet has not gone, tell him how much I thank him for his letter and the friendship he put into it. A big hug to Soriano as well.

And that’s it for today, Hélène. Thanks for your patience, and don’t forget me in your prayers.

Álvaro

P.S. Forgive the unforgivable typing, but, as you can see, my handwriting is even worse.

of the screen and scream in a throaty voice, “I’m here!” A volley of insults would answer him, but he, without fail, would begin to comment, like a Greek chorus, on the events in the film, relating them to daily life in the *penal*. Just when the drama on the screen had us on the edge of our seats, he would scream nastily, “Ha! Now I’ve got you!” and break the spell, provoking the usual outcry from the audience.

When the *tecata balín* began to circulate and kill, when every face was scrutinized at length for signs of death, Pancho did not unleash his scream again. He came in, as before, with the lights already out, sat at the foot of the screen, as always, and stayed silent until the

end of the show. It was on the Wednesday following the national holiday, when three *compañeros* had died

on the same day, that the visiting terror reached its climax. The theater was full to the last seat. We all wanted to forget the endless power of death, that interminable trip through its dominion. Pancho came in through the dark and, all of a sudden, stopped in the middle of the center aisle, turned toward us, and yelled, “Long live the *chacales* [homicides], and the dead can go fuck their mothers!” A frozen silence followed him until we saw him sit down in his usual spot, put his head between his arms, and softly sob. Two of the dead had been his best friends. He had arrived at the *penal* with them, and with them he used to sell refreshments on game days at the athletic field.

From that day on it was known that there was a solid clue. Something in the air told us that the end of the reign of the *tecata balín* was near.

A little while later two inmates came in one afternoon, almost at dusk, and were brought to my block by a few guards who carefully surrounded them, prodding them with their billy clubs. Pale, stammering, disconcerted, each entered a cell on the ground floor. It didn’t take long for the officials to arrive with two doctors. They improvised an office in the bathroom, and

there each inmate was interrogated separately almost all night. Without violence, patiently and stubbornly, the colonel got the truth out of them, trapping them into contradictions that served to clarify the story. *Salto-Salto* and his *compañero*, *la Güera*, had been the ones with the idea. They had scraped a handful of white paint with a razor blade; they had wrapped the fine powder in tiny pieces of paper and had circulated the drug, mixed with real

heroin. For five black weeks a morbid game of Russian roulette had played out, striking blindly, leaving the victim to fate, which counts for so little with inmates and is so foreign to the concrete, unalterable world of the jail. Until then, fate had been one of the many elements from which freedom is made: the impossible, the fleeting freedom that never arrives.

I don't really know why I have related all this. Why I've written it. I doubt it will have any

*Mutis with his
parents, Brussels*



value later when I get out. Outside, the world will never learn of these things. Maybe someone should leave some testimonial of death's devastating visit to a place already very similar to the kingdom where neither time nor measure exists. I'm not really sure. Maybe it will be useful to have related it, but I wouldn't know in what sense, or for whom.

Today Elena and Alberto came and I told them all this. From the way they looked at me, I realize that it is impossible for them ever to know to what extent and in what way fear was strangling us, how the misery of our pointless lives surrounded us during those days. They will never know what dreadful power had played with our destiny. And if they, who are so beautifully prepared to understand it, can't get it, then what's the sense of others knowing?

I've thought about it at length, however,

and I've resolved to recount it now that a verse of Mallarmé's poem has filled me suddenly with vision, with an obvious and macabre vision. It says: *A throw of the dice will never abolish fate.*

9

Of all the human types born in literature—of the true and enduring ones, I mean—it is not easy to find examples in the real world. Of the one we call “an Aeschylean character,” “a Shakespearean hero,” or “a Dickensian type,” only rarely does chance offer us a mildly convincing version in life. But what I had firmly considered a near-impossible occurrence was an encounter with the “Balzacian character,” so commonly referred to, whom we always hope to find around the corner or behind the door yet who never appears before us. Because the dense material Balzac used to create his characters in *La Comédie humaine* was applied to subjects in successive coats, each one firmly bonded to the next. Created by accumulation, Balzac's characters present themselves to the reader with a dominating, exemplarizing purpose, precluding the halo of nuance that permits fusion in the characters created by other novelists; this halo may be found only partially and on rare occasions in the patterns offered by our fellow men in the daily routines of their lives.

What a shock, therefore, what joy for me as a collector, when I had before me for a few months, to observe at my leisure, an obvious, undeniable Balzacian character. A miser. He arrived at the block about seven at night and went around our cells with ceremonious affability, addressing each person in such a way as to give him the impression that he conceded him an exclusive and special grace, thanks to that person's secret and worthwhile virtues, which only he could perceive.

A tall and gangly figure, blond, whose ample, bony face was etched with numerous unpleasantly neat and sharp wrinkles, as if he were wearing a foreign skin that fit a little loosely: when he spoke, he underlined his always vague and incomplete sentences with episcopal,

*Mutis in the
Coello hacienda,
Tolima, Colombia*



emphatic gestures and lifted his eyes to the sky as if holding it witness to certain unspecified infamies of which he was a victim. He had a habit of rocking back and forth on his big feet, as the prefects who reign over religious schools often do, impressing a wavering and frightful authority on every observation that escaped his doughy, beadle's throat. His character was somewhat like a western cowboy who divided his idleness between sermonizing and homeopathy.

His name was Abel, a name that fit him admirably and clarified for me the nature of the universal sympathy that Cain awakens, along with the vague impression that the punishment imposed on him was excessive, bordering on sadistic.

Little by little, from newspapers and the information we learned thanks to the indiscretions of those in charge of the records, we came to know in detail the story of this Balzacian subject.

Protected by a false rank of colonel, obtained at God knows what price or how many sweet words and pompous, rhetorical gestures, he determined to carve out for himself a fortune that added up to 50 million pesos, according to the courts, by means of the secular and infallible system of loan-sharking. He loaned money at a very inflated interest rate and demanded as security—always in the form of a promissory note, annulable on repayment of the principal plus interest—lots and buildings located, by rare coincidence, in areas about to receive the benefit of valuable urban improvements. Because of the relentless wheeling and dealing that in some people becomes a sense, like sight or smell, the owners saw themselves parted from their properties when their friend, generous until then, found himself obligated to “recover some pesos to address a sudden business crisis.” It was then that the crushing pincers of IOUs and eviction notices closed on the naive debtor and left him out on the street, from where, still in shock, he could see the erect silhouette of the *Coronel* walking through the new property and then stopping to admire it, bring-



ing his body to that terrifying and vengeful rocking.

The more details we found out and the more he recognized our growing knowledge about his past, the more emphatic our man became about his innocence and “the infamies invented by my enemies, whom I willingly helped in their day.” On his uniform he usually wore an insignia from the Rotary Club, which we always supposed he had slyly pilfered and added to his outfit to further enhance his self-proclaimed “humanitarian spirit of service.”

*Mutis and his father,
Santiago Mutis
Dávila, Bois de la
Cambre*

Thursday, 18 June 1959

Admirable Hélène:

Along with your letter, I received the first notice from the Mail announcing your shipments. Don't worry about it anymore, they're coming. Tomorrow the guard will go and get them from the Mail. Thank you, Hélène.

Now, regarding your stupendous offer of a interview. Of course I'm interested. I had no idea at all about the kind of collaborations Revuelta did in the newspaper, but of course I'm not interested in anything that's outside the purely literary sphere or from the Sunday supplement of *México en la cultura*. That's how I had understood it, but I didn't have time to talk much with Revuelta, and many things were left hanging. But about your interview: I must explain two things, one general, having to do with its practical necessity and purpose, and one essentially personal.

With regard to the first, I'll tell you that my interest that something take my name out of the "terrible crimes" log is due entirely to the fact that the Colombian embassy has been interested in craftily keeping my position in Colombia as a writer quiet and thus has managed to deceive Foreign Relations and the other authorities that have taken up my case. Since what they've done with me is an outrage whose enormity you will realize one day, I'm not willing to tolerate it anymore. About my case—it has delicious picaresque nuances and precious human experiences, but it has never moved, as far as I'm concerned, beyond a purely idealistic and at times lyrical context—I want to tell you that while no judge is soliciting me in Colombia, while my lawyers there

His attitude toward us, and in general toward all the inmates, was that of someone who, locked up because of a clumsy conspiracy, has to stoop amiably to share the penitentiary life, letting everyone see that it is entirely foreign to him, while he works out the misunderstanding. He marked his distance with a gesture of his simian hand, like a high prelate beginning the benediction before a needy mob of faithfuls, a very apostolic air laden with friendly rejection, while he placed a seraphic smile of condescension on his face to indicate that his transient gentleness conformed more with conventional, exterior necessities than with any personal sentiment.

He occupied a first-floor cell that he kept locked and never invited anybody into. And while the other residents of our block—known in Lecumberri as the home of *los cacarizos* [influentials]—prepared our meals or received them from the outside, Don Abel would approach with dignity, holding his bowl in one hand and his regimental dish in the other, as if

Tijuana is the abscess of fixation that allows North Americans to relieve the Lutheran tension in their consciences and taste the heinous sins they have only guessed at from the furious sermons of their pastors.

confirm more emphatically every day that I've been accused of nothing, the embassy here insists on asking for extradition, for reasons that are, I suspect, half personal and half political. And to this end, they've gotten their hands on an old investigation that targeted me during the dictatorship of Rojas Pinilla and framed me for the most fantastic crimes. This matter had been definitively laid to rest there, and the trial adjourned upon the discovery of the nonentities of which I was accused. But the embassy here took advantage of the Mexican chancellor's good faith, and here I am, purging hypothetical offenses, my life truncated just as I was beginning to remake it after more than three years of struggle in Mexico, the details of which will make stupendous stories for your grandchildren one day. My friends in Colombia have initiated a strong newspaper campaign, and the affair has become entirely political, which does not interest me, either, since I've always been so detached from this kind of thing and so distant from that dubious, stupid profession, politics.

Now the personal explanation: you're quick to tell me you don't want me to talk to you about my case or to tell you why I'm here—it's like when a war hospital wants a soldier whose legs have been cut off to believe that it's a completely normal thing, and yet, if not for that, they would lose interest in him as a sick person. My case, Hélène, is only another chapter of my book

only observing a routine, to get the *penal* food that arrived at our door. But once served, the blond *Coronel* would lock himself back in his cell, and there he would devour his penitentiary ration without anyone witnessing his valiant feat.

One morning, as he left his cell to answer the roll, three large brown rats, whose woolly bellies almost touched the floor, came running out behind him. They froze, stared at us, somewhere between shocked and furious, and returned to the cell. Across his face Don Abel began composing a beatific smile that started out like the one illuminating *Poverello's* face when he spoke to his brothers the birds but that, once confronted with characters like us and with such irritable rodents, managed only to become a disturbing grimace, complicitous with infernal powers, and died in a smirk, ugly, puerile, and gratuitous.

One afternoon, on his return from a court proceeding following his trial, his ample, bony Judas face wore a yellow, sickly color, and his gestures, ordinarily so full and eloquent, were somehow out of sync and rigid, which awoke an unspoken animosity in us, a dark rage against him.

The next day we found out that Don Abel was sick and could not make the roll. When the sergeant arrived to count us, he knocked on his door, and an empty, emphatic cough answered him, resonating inside the cell like a lying and hysterical apology. That same day the newspapers brought word that the judge had fixed his bail at three thousand pesos. Such a benevolent judicial decision would have filled the rest of us with joy. However, it plunged the *Coronel* into the most anguished dilemma. Christmas and New Year's were approaching; his grandchildren—who had adopted many of their grandfather's traits, with the awkward and deceptive freshness of youth—visited him on Thursdays and Sundays and besieged him with questions about when he would get out, whether he would be home to exchange gifts under the tree, and whether he would be there for the parties. The old man's mouth would contort like a reptile trying to escape the cruel hands of tormenting schoolchildren.

We began to bet on whether Don Abel would spend Christmas with us or would force himself to part with the three thousand pesos. When Christmas Eve arrived, the bets rose to a hundred pesos, and Don Abel kept answering the sergeant's knock with a cough, each day more cavernous and less convincing. Those who bet that Don Abel would spend Christmas with his family lost. And the same went for New Year's and All King's Day.

Finally, an official found a way to get Don Abel out of jail. One morning at roll call we saw two stretcher bearers from the infirmary arrive with an assistant from the medical service. They knocked on the weak, ailing man's door, and when he answered with his clownish cough, the sergeant replied with a dry "Come out!" which must have frozen him in the darkness of his cell.

Reseña de los hospitales de ultramar—the one they're publishing now in Colombia—and I'm so proud of it, deep down, that I could not help telling you about it. I would have liked very much for you to ask me, for example, "How is it that you came to Lecumberri? What were you accused of?" But since I know that you haven't done so because of a natural fear of hurting me, and also because of natural reservations about springing such a little question on someone whom, when all is said and done, you've only seen three times in your life, it's my duty to tell you that you would not have wounded me at all—just the opposite: you would have given me the opportunity to tell you something like "There once was a young Colombian who etc., etc." Some other time, right?

And another thing: I don't want the interview to cause any problems for you; if you have even the slightest trouble, please forget it completely, because in the end it's no more important than you could make it, and I would so much rather you not do it than that it become a bother, one of those onerous burdens that we undertake with enthusiasm but that becomes a detestable, heavy cross for us to bear. Tell me, then, in all truth, what you think about this and let me know when you want to do it, and I'll put you on the list so you can come and see me, and we'll talk "at our leisure," as in the letters you send me. On Sundays there's visitation from nine in the morning, and we'll have a lot of time to talk. Revuelta has some photos that that countryman of his took here; I have a copy of the material I gave him, and then we could just see. But I repeat, I'm much more interested in your taking a little time for this poet gone astray in epistolary regions and for a stupendous friendship than in the journalistic strategies and tactics in which I'm involving you. Understood?

How boring all these explanations and complications have become, but they were necessary. First, I couldn't be satisfied with that bit about "my case wouldn't interest you, nor would Chucho's," and second, I didn't want two totally different things to mix: what a piece about my affairs and work in your newspaper could do for me and what your letters and support can offer me, for these, along with my many other close friends, make me cling to this earth more furiously every day, despite everything that attempts to take me away from it.

Why did I erase "people" and put "troupe"? Ah, perceptive lady: because—and chalk this up to the biographical details I keep giving you in these interminable letters, which I endorse to you with so much freshness—we Colombians are a people of pedantic grammarians and rhetoricians, and while in other countries people get together in cafés to talk about politics, there they do it to discuss grammar and the "gerund," the "gallicized qué," and other trifling things. Two lines further down, when I went back to employ the word "people," I preferred instead to use the polished gallicism, which gave the adjective a certain irony. Fairly unjustified irony, because today I had my first "dress rehearsal," and I must confess that it's been an emotional experience to see my *compañeros*, my adorable prisoners, all become actors, grown in the secular, fleeting prestige of the footlights, portraying pieces of their own lives. I confess that I got very emotional, and I hope that very soon

we'll be able to invite you to see us. I'm sure it will be an unforgettable experience for you. These things, along with others having to do with that warm human solidarity found in jails, hospitals, and other places of pain, are well worth the many dark hours we live here. There is a tremendous, definitive truth in all this, and much that one hears on the outside sounds hollow and silly by comparison.

Some pages of my *Diary of Lecumberri* have been appearing in Colombia; I'll send you clippings when I get them. In them I explain to you further—I have already been telling you—what prisoners do and what I do all day.

You tell me that my two letters moved you. That's good! That shows that you are really with me and have seen in them all the sincerity and cordial enthusiasm that I put into interpersonal relations and that have always seemed to me among the most genuine reasons never to renounce life but always to live with my enthusiasm intact. I confess I fear that these long epistles may interfere with the normal course of your days and that they bring you fresh concerns. But since I understand them as a dialogue—in that I am painfully Rilkean (on the list of my "dominions" I forgot him, because in such catalogs whoever is most worthy is always the one forgotten)—or perhaps since I conceive of interpersonal relations as a complicated and necessary alchemy, the creator of the very purpose of life, I'm really not afraid to appear impertinent by taking up your time and occupying it with my things.

Well, Hélène, that's all for today, although clearly there remain in the inkwell—in the keyboard, more like—the things that are irremediably beyond letters. A thousand thanks once more for the books and magazines. And a thousand thanks also for your stupendous offer to help out with my affair, which, if it lacks the publicity of the Lacaze case, nonetheless presents more colorful angles and nothing petty or sordid, so a lady can look into it without blushing.

Stay well, Hélène, and say hello to "our people."

Until next time.

Álvaro

Shortly after, he appeared in the doorway, and we must have all worn the same shocked expression at the horrible transformation his body had suffered. His skin was stuck to his face like Carnival paper turned gray by the rain; moisture-swollen eyes betrayed only a glimpse of reddish, oozing matter; and of his enthusiastic Lutheran gestures there remained barely the tremor of a frightened animal. He had forgotten to put in his dentures, and his mouth was sunken in the middle of his face like the drain of a tenement patio.

He stood before the stretcher, not knowing what to say. "Lie down there—take him away," ordered the sergeant, with a military curtness that allowed no room for argument or apology. The *Coronel* laid himself down slowly on the stretcher, which the medics had put on the ground, and, attempting to smile at us, as if to lessen the significance of the scene, he let a white bead of saliva escape from his uncontrollable lips.

That same day he called his lawyer and ordered him to pay the bail. The medic in charge of the room where they took him told us that when he signed his ticket to freedom, he was so mad that he broke the pen twice. They say he left enraged, accusing the judge of abuse and thievery and the jail authorities of inhumanity and cruelty to an old veteran of the revolutionary armies.

When we entered his cell, driven by the curiosity caused by so much confinement, I thought about Abbot Faria in the old silent-film versions of *The Count of Monte Cristo*. In a great many little paper bags, like the ones they use in stores to sell sugar and rice by the kilo, he had kept chunks of bread now pharaonically rigid, pieces of meat that reeked horrendously, and other foods whose identity had changed a number of times with mold and age. Rats scurried among the paper bags, disturbed like dogs who lose their master on a crowded street.

The janitors washed the cell but, as hard as they tried, could not eliminate the stench that stuck to the walls and arose from the humidity permeating them. They were forced to leave the room vacant and used it to store the brooms, rags, and buckets they cleaned the block with.

9

This morning I was told that *Palitos* had died. He had been stabbed in his block at daybreak. Since they knew that he came to see me and talk with me, and since he had told his *compañeros* that I was his *generalazo* and was "real cooperative"—by this he alluded to the ease with which he had convinced me of the extent

of his complicated dealings in milk, coffee, and cigarettes—some of them came to bring me the news.

I went to see him in the afternoon in the narrow room used in the infirmary as an amphitheater. Atop a slab of granite lay *Palitos*. His naked body was stretched out on the smooth surface in an attitude of vague discomfort, of

preserved under the altar in some churches, in glass boxes with dusty golden frames.

There was *Palitos*, even younger than he had seemed in life, almost a boy, free now from the deranged anguish of his days, from the uniform that had been a little big on him and had made him seem even unhappier; in his cadaver's nakedness showed a certain secret testimony of



unsustainable rigidity, as if shrinking from contact with the cold stone. Below, at his feet, was the bundle with his clothes, the inmate's blue uniform, already faded from use, his cap, his workboots, and, on the wrinkled page of a sports magazine, his personal effects: a hypodermic syringe, patched with canvas and wax, a small switchblade, a signed portrait of Aceves Mejía [a popular singer], a blunt pencil, and a crumpled pack of cigarettes, almost empty.

I stood staring at him for a long time while a reddish ray of sunlight, diffused through the Texcoco dust floating in the afternoon, crawled over his body's tense skin, which drugs, hunger, and fear had given a special transparency, a certain cleanliness, a clear and simple tone that reminded me of those saints' bodies they keep

his being, which in life he had been unable to transmit and which perhaps he had sought to express through the heroin he had irremediably lost himself in. His mouth remained partway open, like that of an asthmatic painfully seeking air; looking at him up close, you could see a fold in his upper lip that partly exposed his teeth. A mixture of smile and cry, like a spasm of pleasure. On his left side there was a wound with hideous lips, through which a thread of black blood still trickled with the consistency of asphalt.

Within a few days of my arrival he had appeared in my cell out of nowhere, with a disturbed look and a slight tremor throughout his body, like one preceding a fever.

He explained to me that he was willing to

Mutis and his brother Leopoldo, lagoon of Tota, Colombia

Thursday, 24 June 1959

My dear Hélène:

I received the books and then the magazines. Today I can say a few words about how much they have helped me pass some fairly black days. Valéry Larbaud's *La Pléiade* was a miraculous guess, since it unites in one volume all of his work that I love most and possess, dispersed throughout many volumes, who knows where. I keep leafing through it with true delight. The Chateaubriand has had the same effect on me as the tea-soaked madeleines had on Marcel Proust. I've returned to my days at l'Ecole Pascal, in a Georgian corner of Passy, where we lost *la crème de la crème* of the South Ameri-

The *Coronel* underlined his vague and incomplete sentences with episcopal gestures and lifted his eyes to the sky as if holding it witness to unspecified infamies of which he was a victim.

can elite. I went back to see my literature professor; the park with the big trees; a Chilean girl, my roommate's sister, who sent me some very disturbing letters; some really boring soccer games in Roland Garros Stadium; and some endless, even more boring afternoons in the Louvre or in the Richelieu room of the Comédie-Française. The Chateaubriand that interests me the most today is *Mémoires d'outre-tombe*, but this one has done me much more good and has brought me many more memories than any other book you could have thought to send me. I will devour the magazines. I read your interview of Alvarado—very good!—and another they did of you, with a magnificent portrait of you wearing your very Guermantes pearl necklace.

I would have many things to tell you, but I can barely drag out these lines because I'm recovering from a sense of total hopelessness, usually called *carcelazo* here, a terrible emotional state. It's as though the jail, with all its walls, bars, inmates, and miseries, had fallen right on top of you. It's like when you sink underwater and desperately try to get to the surface to breathe; all your senses, all your strength is concentrated on the illusory thing that becomes more impossible and alien every day: getting out!

I'm still working with my theater. I've set up the play now, and I'm ready to present it. I need to work out lights and scenery. We're taking care of that ourselves. The group is now thirty-five people, and sometimes it's as much trouble as thirty-five thousand.

It's 11:30 at night now, and you can hear the city purring outside. You don't know what incredible prestige that city has gained with its lights, its cars, its people, its noise that arrives here, muffled by the despised, horrible, porphyritic *tezontle*.

Some friends and *compañeros* from Colombia have begun to move on my case, and for July they have prepared a debate in the Senate, before which the minister of foreign relations is supposed to appear and explain the stupid outrage they committed against me. I receive letters full of spirit and friendship from writers, painters, and poets that should fill me with enthusiasm and give me new energy to withstand jail, but that all sounds very distant, very foreign, as if it had nothing to do with me. It's one of the worst effects of

wash my clothes, clean my shoes, go to the store for coffee, and went on offering me a list of services with the anxious haste of someone delivering a password or communicating an urgent message. He didn't wait for me to ask him for anything, and when he saw me hesitate, he disappeared just as he had entered, leaving the echo of his hurried words behind.

"Be careful with that one, *compañero*. His name's *Palitos*, and he's always scheming about some fucking thing," someone told me. I didn't bother

to ask for any details, and I had already forgotten all about him when he suddenly reappeared in the middle of my siesta.

"Chief, you need some curtains for your window. I've got a guy who sells to me real cheap—what if you buy some, eh?"

"How much?" I asked him.

"Seven pesos, my good man. Should I get 'em for you?"

I gave him a ten-peso note and he ran out. He didn't come back for a couple of days. I told a *compañero* of mine who understood the way things worked in the daily life of the *penal*. "But who would give him ten pesos and buy that story about the curtains? Don't you know that *Palitos* needs to scrape together about sixteen pesos every day for his drugs and will use any scheme his clever thieving mind can imagine?" Shocked by the urgency of his habit, I remembered the watery, vague look of his big eyes, the tremor running through his body, and the hurried pace of his speech, like someone racing against time, which relentlessly closes in on the weak creature screaming for that second source of life, without which he cannot exist.

Some weeks later *Palitos* came back to visit me. He had found an unexploited mine of ingenuousness and didn't even bother to explain what had happened to the ten pesos. He must have just had a fix, which allowed him to act with relative tranquillity and also gave him a communicative disposition, like somebody who

wants to keep talking until the dream comes. It was then that he recounted his life for me and we became friends.

He didn't remember his mother, nor did he have the faintest idea what she had been like or who she had been. His earliest memory was of the nights he had spent under a billiards table in a Chinese café. He had slept there wrapped in newspapers picked up off the street and at theater exits. According to him, he had been six then. At eight he had watched over a newsstand in Avenida Reforma while the owner went out for lunch. That's when he had smoked marijuana for the first time: "It took away my hunger and made me feel happy, like a real winner." At eleven he was already smoking six joints a day. Around that time he joined a band of pickpockets operating around Calles Madero and 5 de Mayo. To "work," he needed to be high, and, aided by the joints he was smoking, he served his bosses with a skill and speed that soon made him famous. One day he fell for a trap. They

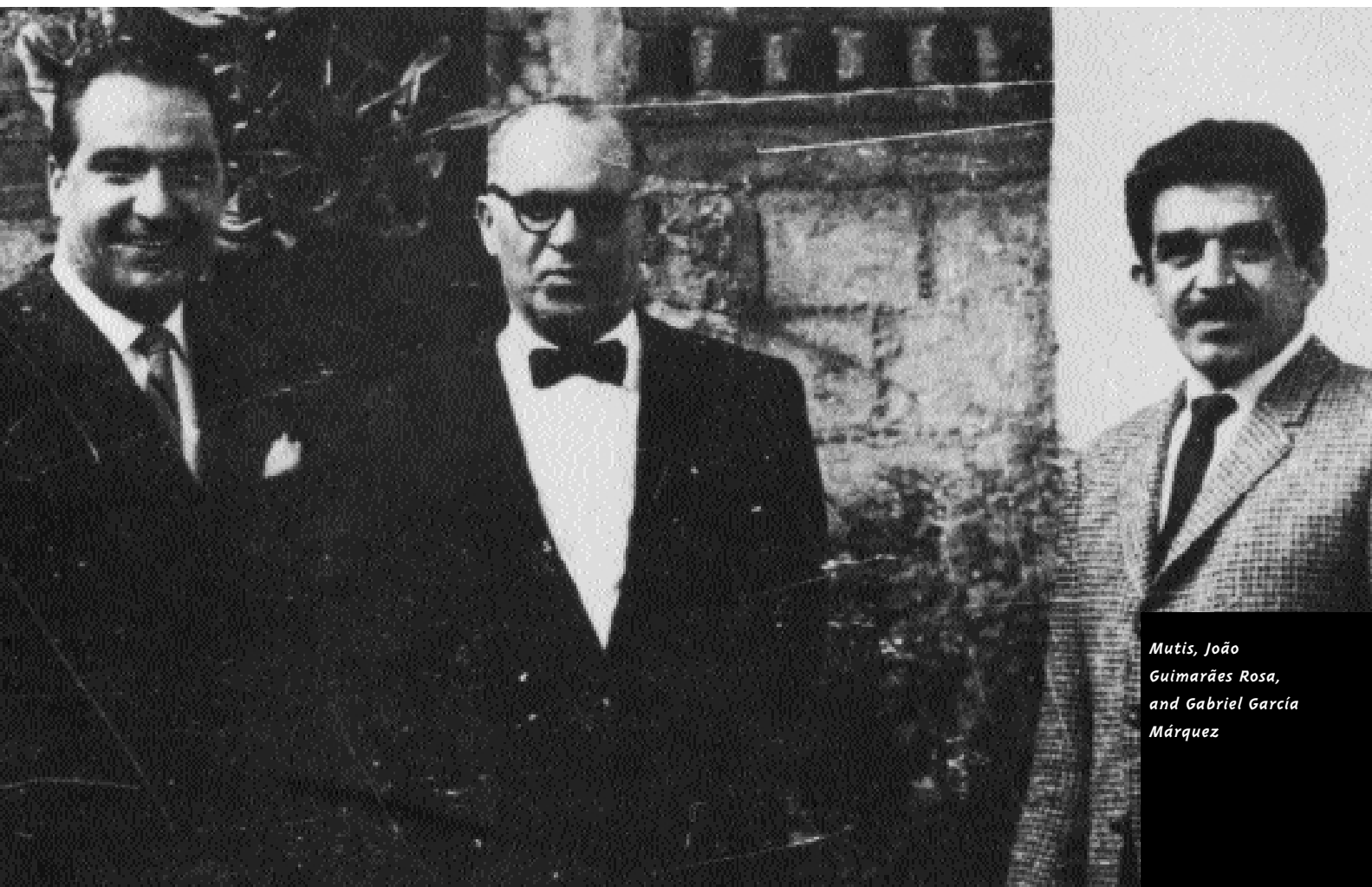
jail: by isolating you from the world, it keeps transforming the sentimental and vital distances that used to place you among other people, and you lose the bonds that used to make possible what is so extraordinary and full of surprises, a relationship with another human being.

Well, Hélène, I'll stop here; suddenly I feel as if I were talking to myself out loud. It's my fault, naturally, but the sensation is terrifying. Pardon this letter, so black when it should be full of enthusiasm and appreciation for the trouble you've gone to so cordially in sending me such stupendous gifts. May you be happy, and when you have a free moment, write me a few lines. Talk to you soon,

Álvaro

brought him to the police station, and a doctor examined him there. "Acute narcotic intoxication" was the diagnosis, and they took him to a juvenile reformatory. He escaped within a few months and, hidden in a boxcar, ended up gazing out on Tijuana.

Tijuana is the frontier: the paradise of drug traffickers and gamblers, a vast brothel operating day and night to the deafening sound



Mutis, João Guimarães Rosa, and Gabriel García Márquez

11 July 1959

My dear Hélène:

How nice that you've written me, and with the same cordial interest as usual. Your silence was worrying me, and I had begun to fear that, for some hidden reason, you had renounced the Florence Nightingalesque labor of sustaining my morale and my literature.

I'm truly sorry that you've had the flu, and I hope you've happily recovered. When I get the flu, it becomes an illness of the spirit bordering on agony, so I understand your silence perfectly.

I'm delighted about the interview, mostly, I assure you, for the pleasure of seeing you and breathing a little of the air of freedom that you'll bring on your clothing and in your words and your gestures, not to mention Beltrán's cordial smile. You're down on Chucho's visitor list for Sunday, 19 July. I couldn't put you on mine, because it's fixed.

I've prepared some material that may, perhaps, interest you, including a poem I wrote last week that is "quite lovely," as the ladies of Bogotá say about the teas their friends give. (Oh, I could tell you extraordinary things about the ladies of Bogotá. They are unique in the world. Imagine Marie Chantal going to church every day and belonging to the daughters of Mary.)

Next week I put on the play. First we'll put on two productions for our *compañeros* and later open it to the public. Your invitation will arrive shortly, and Beltrán's and Revuelta's as well. We've done the sets ourselves, down to the electrical wiring. The truth is, I'm really happy with the results, and it's done me a lot of good to be able to focus all my effort on this: it's the best antidote for *carcelazos*. I've also had warm correspondence with my *compañeros* from Colombia, and this makes me feel like a living person again, not a mummy given to anguished, useless soliloquy. Jomí comes on Sunday; I'll talk with him about film for a long time and we'll keep agreeing how good Baudelaire, Flaubert, Conrad, and other "eccentrics" are. I haven't learned a thing about my affair, but it worries me less, when I return to the surface, thanks to that stupendous hand that people like you and other friends extend to me. It's then that judges and other nobodies seem like strange people who have nothing to do with me, with "my affairs"; nor will they ever be able to understand, for example, why the sea speaks seven languages: one in the morning, resembling Latin; another at midday, which is classical Greek; another at siesta, which is Arabic; another in the afternoon, which is lower Saxon; another with the last ray of sunlight, which is Proust's French when he's speaking with Balbec; another at eight at night, which is the Spanish of San Juan de la Cruz; and another at midnight, which is what all the world's lovers speak. Poor guys—there's no hope for them.

In one sitting I read *Barnabooth de Larbaud* for the umpteenth time; what extraordinary pleasure to know that pages and pages of the same Larbaud await me in that ruddy, promising edition of *La Pléiade*. There are times I wouldn't want to be free, so I could read all day as I pleased.

of *sinfonolas* under the light of a million neon signs. Tijuana is the abscess of fixation that makes possible all the orderly work in the rich Californian region and allows millions of North Americans to relieve the Lutheran tension in their consciences and taste the heinous sins whose marvels they have only guessed at from the furious sermons of their pastors. *Palitos*, by a predictable twist of fate, had fallen into the very middle of it, where he could be consumed most efficiently and with the greatest speed.

There he met a woman—*mi jefa*—who used him as bait to lure the tourists interested in *something special* [In English in the original. — Trans.] and at the same time as an occasional lover, when the two would fall for entire weeks into the arduous excitement of heroin, from which one can only pull out as from a deep dive. She was the one who made him try opium. Here you saw the frightened look of *Palitos* remembering the nightmares that the first pipes produced in him. As he told it, it seemed that the opium's power to excite his senses surpassed his scant knowledge of visions and sensoral memories; instead of providing him with pleasure, it filled his dreams with horrific monsters that tormented him with the primal terror of the unknown and dragged his senses toward regions so far beyond comparison with his petty experiences that, rather than expand the territory of illusion, they atrociously distorted it. He did not persist for long before dropping the opium and with it his "boss," from whom he took a few things that ended up at the pawnshop.

On returning to Mexico City, he rekindled his friendship with the pickpockets, but he now had the prestige of his trip; having lived in Tijuana carried a certain weight with his old familiars. He no longer worked in exchange for drugs. He charged real money and bought all the fixes he needed. Without heroin he couldn't work. With it he acquired a coordination of movement and a velocity of imagination that made him practically invulnerable.

Until the day when he planned the incredible hit, the masterstroke. He bought some dark

blue cloth pants, an impeccable white shirt, and some respectable black shoes. He went off to some Turkish baths and came out converted into a handsome countryman, into a devoted son who works from a young age to help his parents and to pay for his sisters' schooling. The ascetic expression on his face served him wonderfully in this role. He got a suitcase like the ones traveling salesmen use to hold and display their merchandise, and with that in hand he walked into the poshest jeweler's shop in Madero. He waited a few moments for the people in it to become accustomed to his presence, then suddenly, with absolute serenity and self-assurance, he began to empty one of the display cases at the counter. Diamond bracelets, platinum watches, emerald rings, sapphire jewelry all came to rest in *Palitos's* suitcase. Nobody suspected anything; everyone believed he was redoing the display case, and the employees thought he must be some new guy that management was testing. After he had filled his case, *Palitos* carefully closed it and headed for the door with a firm, calm gait. At that moment the manager came in and, with the rare intuition that the owners of such businesses have when something's amiss, threw himself on *Palitos*, grabbed the case, and turned him over to the shop detective. On inventorying the loot, they figured it to be worth about 3 million pesos. "I already had a scam set up to sell it all for 5 million pesos. . . . Drugs for two months, chief. They screwed me real bad!"

When he arrived at Lecumberri and had gone through the medical examination, he was assigned to F block, where they put the drug addicts. There he awaited the result of his case for three years, during which he so perfectly assimilated himself to life in the block that, even if they had let him go free, he would have come up with a way to "get a new trial" and stay there.

His feverish routine began at six in the morning. He sold his breakfast bread and half of his *atole* and so began to scrape together the sum necessary to provide himself with the drug. All the sly ruses, all the cunning schemes, all the deceit was directed in a gigantic effort to get

It's midnight and I'm fading from fatigue, which will free you from another of these interminable epistles that don't respect how busy you are and belie my proverbial and deeply hidden timidity.

Talk to you soon, then, Hélène, and may you be very happy and take good care of yourself. Hello to Beltrán and to Revuelta, if you see them.

Until Sunday, if you can.

Álvaro



20 July 1959

Hélène:

They've already called curfew, and it's as if every slab of stone and every point of every bar had begun to return all the curses we hurled at them during the day. An airplane passes a few meters over us—the airport must be very close (they brought me at night, so I don't have the faintest idea where it is)—and it reminds me of the insatiable flight I embarked on a few years ago, during my opulent life as poet-servant to the big international "trusts." I was head of Foreign Relations of an international airline, and I spent weeks in New Orleans, lost among the Bourbon Street bars, listening to the world's best jazz, dressed like a tramp, and not entirely convinced that I was having a good time; or I was getting away to London—the world's best and most marvelous city, the only one in which the imagination still reigns, free to serve urban poetry—where I stayed in a respectable guest house and had stupendous friends who took me to the British Museum and by night did the *trottinoire* on the Strand; or—well, I'm not going to recount all my travels. It's just that the sound of these machines reminds me of a lot of things that now seem as if they had been lived by someone else, by someone distinctly else, neither better nor worse than, hardly different from, the Álvaro of today. Nothing new like the little poem you took with you.

Last night the people from the television were here. One hour of Fco. Vela about jail: interview with the general, presentation of the mural (*merde!*), the inevitable mariachis, *boleras* like Los Panchos, and a very large dose of pity for the poor little prisoners. Disinfected, antiseptic pity, like what the Rotarians or the Shriners or the *damas católicas* give. And us impassively withstanding the barrage, with the jail at our backs, seeing how these "free people" looked at us with a mixture of fear and curiosity and later seeing how they left through the little gate you leave through when you're freed (do you know what that gate is called? "The Door of Distinction." It seemed to me, when I found out, horribly byzantine), chatting spiritedly: "I brought my car. I'll take you." . . . "I'm going to eat now. Yeah, at Sanborn's. See you there." . . . "You called her? Is she still there? Doesn't hurt to go. . . ." The outside life, you see, stupidly bursts into our midst, we who keep an injured soul in living flesh, and we try to defend it at all costs from these scrapes and injuries.

I did the presentation and explanation (!) of the mural. That is to say, I returned to the occupation at which I earned my first few pesos, as a speaker. I was eighteen then, and I thought the world was waiting for me with open arms and everyone knew what a sensational guy I was. How quickly I found out not only that they had no inkling of that but also that I had started not to believe it myself, without even realizing it. All of a sudden, Vela said my name—"Inmate Álvaro Mutis has explained to us, etc., etc."—and I felt that ugly slap of the first few hours of prison, with the fingerprints, the mug shots, and other silly little things. I recovered quickly, but something must have kept buzzing inside. . . . we'll see. Because all the theories you keep weaving here to convince yourself that you've "overcome" jail, that it's "just one more experience," and other things like that, which enable you to swallow

that sum. Thus he was never without "his *mota* and his *tecata*," the names for marijuana and heroin in Lecumberri.

Recently he had formed a productive friendship with an effeminate *cacarizo*—an inmate who enjoys special prerogatives in exchange for working in the *penal's* offices—who paid him handsomely for his favors. In a quarrel caused by the *cacarizo's* protector's jealousy, he was stabbed straight in the heart that morning, right there in line, while they were calling roll in the block. He bled to death in front of the guards, who looked on in shock as the blood pumped from his chest with an intensity that decreased faintly as his life escaped from him in shadows that crossed his face, like a Christian martyr's.

Now, lying here, he reminded me of a Greek Legionnaire. The dignity of his pallid cadaver, turned the color of old marble, and the sensual grimace of his mouth captured the ancient "human condition" with severe beauty.

They had tied a tag to his ankle, like the ones they put on bags and pocketbooks for airline travelers. On it was typed "Antonio Cardenas, alias *Palitos*. Age 22 years," and below that, in red, underlined letters, "Released due to death."

9

Around six yesterday the first drops fell. We were on the athletic field, and they started dotting the dry dust. I kept going around the field. It was the only exercise that gave me any kind of peace. The harsh denim uniform grew damp, and a fresh sensation clung to my skin. The rain was falling torrentially now. It washed the ground and leaped off the fresh mud. It washed the *tezontle* walls, cascaded over the plaque commemorating Madero's death, washed the guards' bright raincoats, the quad's metallic red tower, the patios, the kitchens. Insistent, united in happy streams, it began to carry away all the misery of our days, all the cruelty, hunger, delirium, the guards' muted, petty anger. Everything was washed away by the rain, until the only

thing left between us and the transient air flowing through Lecumberri's complex construction was the transparent water falling from the highest part of the sky, from the corner where freedom awaited us like an enraged wolf mother searching for her pups.

"Let's go, bastards! . . . Beat it! . . . Beat it!" The guards' shouts woke us, as the afternoon darkened, from the unhealthy delirium that water had plunged us into; it kept falling, stubborn, generous, messy. Nobody can circulate through the blocks when rain falls at night. No one with seniority, not the assistants, not even the most *cacarizo* can walk outside.

"Beat it, fuckers! Can't you hear?" The chief watchman on the exterior fences patrols even the farthest corners of the blocks with his lantern.

Rain gives people bad ideas. Rain does not belong to the closed dominion of days in the *penal*. The inmates must be locked up before it goes to their heads like a wild liquor and they begin to do foolish things. The sentinels, at every blackout before the lightning, shout their numbers: "Six, alert! Seven, alert! Eight, alert!" and so on with the twenty-one numbers that surround our lives and watch each step, each look. As the bolts flash in long, enthusiastic series, the sentinels start their chorus again; the thunder resounds in the metallic cell walls, in the corroded zinc roofs, in the hard iron or cement bunks. We are all locked in. Only the guards, keepers and masters of our world, patrol the ring, enter the blocks, and, as part of the routine, bang on the doors with the butts of their rifles.

"Pancho!" "Laguna!" they answer in the cell next to mine. "If you smoke *mota*, I'll fuck up your mother!" "No, Sergeant, not today, Sergeant." "I know you, fuckin' son of a bitch! You smoke it down to the seed." "Don't worry, Sergeant." Pancho told me, while we were coming in from the field, "Now is the time, brother. I'm gonna *cotorrear el puntacho* with my bros.

the interminable noodle that is the hours of prison—they are "words . . . words . . . words," like the other one said. The truth is otherwise, and it's very ugly. The truth is that jail is jail, that to be in it damages you and makes you fearful, and nobody will ever give you back, in the form of life and something resembling happiness, all the time that has passed here uselessly and that is time out of "my life" and that is unrescuable and all the other generalities that become ugly, irrefutable truths here. And it's not that I have *carcelazo*—no. I am totally serene, tranquil, even, in a way, smiling deep down. Now I can hear one of those boring, interminable German musicians I like so much, precisely because of how Wagnerian and emphatically romantic they are. On XLA—what would become of me without my radio and without that radio station!—they're playing Bruckner's Third Symphony. It's like summering in Bad Neuheim and choking on pumpernickel, apple strudel, and Rhine wine. Oh, my German classes in Colonia—what a beautiful waste of time!

Tomorrow I present *El Cochambres* for the prisoners and Friday for the outside public. I've organized a magic show for the inmates' children next Sunday. We have two magnificent magicians who do the most horrifying tricks. One dresses as a Chinese, the other as an Arab, and they'll compete against each other. I'll be the host, and Leoncio, the clown, will spice up the show. I've already told you about Leoncio, right? The one who spent his whole life in those traveling circuses—"La Strada!!"—and who woke up one morning when he was eleven with an enormous lion at his feet, looking at him tenderly and resting his head, hurt from years of bars, on the bed;

How many times have I heard next to me an interminable evocation of circumstances and places, of fragments of lives lost in an illusory past?

his toes remained shrunken from the shock. And HE'S CALLED LEONCIO. I've already told you, of course, but it's well worth it for you to remember it, because Leoncio is a great guy and nobody here takes him seriously except me, because, deep down, I'm also like a little lion. The show will be at twelve and will not interrupt our interview, so I hope you stay for the show.

Today *La Guaraní* arrived, wearing a long fuchsia dressing gown, a fake bust, and hair done like B. B. With the uniform and after a bath, she still looks as unfalteringly feminine as before. His name is Armando, and they sent him to a special block, secret, hidden, terrible. In the beginning it was a lot of laughs; then a bothersome feeling started spreading through the hallways, and it's no longer discussed. What a fabulous world for someone who has narrative talent! It's something nobody could imagine. A sort of Gidean paradise in a Tepito version. I'll tell you it now, if you don't mind, because almost nobody knows about the existence of that world and its special, picturesque customs, struggles, and miseries. (Look at what, in my eagerness not to be literary or to write you "how I've been doing," I've come to tell you disguised as an anecdote and local color. But you won't deny that it's a primacy.)

This little old guy Bruckner keeps insisting on his violins and his trumpets and oboes in back, with a stubbornness so deliciously German and Lutheran

that it somehow takes me out of jail and distracts me from my chronicle-for-a-friend-who-wants-to-know-how-life-is-in-jail.

Today is the national holiday in Colombia—"Long live July 20, and may the *godos* die!" all the Colombians will shout tonight, drunk on brandy and national colors—and the only countryman of mine here came to give me a hug. A poor guy who killed his wife in a fit of jealousy while they were going through Mexico, and he still doesn't realize what happened. His tears were falling when I gave him the shout I just told you at the top of my lungs. I can picture His Highness Mr. Ambassador, my colleague from the Jockey Club, toasting the health of the fatherland and trembling inside to think that someone might relight the "Mutis" topic. What a guy! Look at him make me a prisoner—me, who is such a good guy and so harmless! What guts that guy must have! Tonight all the Colombians living in Mexico will agree how beautiful our country is, how good Colombian food is, and what a great guy Alberto Lleras is, but tomorrow *enguayabados*—that's what we call people with a hangover there—will go back to their old ways, and you'll see them turn more Mexican than pulque and hear them say *manito* in every sentence for no reason at all. That's how they are, girl, that's how my countrymen are, EVERLASTING is the adjective for them, the more so because it appears in the first stanza of our national anthem, "O everlasting glory . . ." Look at how, as an adjective, it must suit those who use it! You'll meet some and you'll say I'm right.

Bruckner's still going. He died at sixty-five without having had a girlfriend, almost without ever having a woman speak to him, and his whole life long he was an organist in a little lost village in Tirol. Now I understand why he went through his life so timid. But what good it does me, and how well it fits into this absurd, disorganized summary I send you to satisfy your journalistic curiosity, so you'll know a little the "character" who is neither the poet they painted to the official from Foreign Relations, Alfonso de Rosenzweig—do you know how he signs it? Alfonso de Rosenzweig y Díaz! Isn't that grand?—nor the white dove my mother thinks.

Among the books I'd like to borrow from you is one published by the Fondo from a guy who, if he's bad, I don't remember it; he's called MILLS, and it deals with the "white collar" of the United States; in Spanish it's called something like *la Clase poderosa* or something. Do you have it? If you do, loan it to me; if not, forget it. Now anthropology has come back to me; it's consoling to see how one is the product of many things distant from what one loves most, and how one must free oneself from that at all costs. But I take it in very small doses, because all in all it bores me, and I return to my "old stuff" as usual, which I won't go back and enumerate, so you won't tell me my letters are literary and I'm much better heard than read—which, to be frank, is a great eulogy, and I don't say that to console you or to console me—and that is quite certain, anyway.

Another very big favor: could you bring me, as a gift, two or three posters of touristic propaganda from Italy or France that have castles, landscapes, or pretty cathedrals? It occurs to me now because I can't stand these 523 screws

They're gonna go at it all night, and the watchman's got a lot of work."

I already knew what they meant by *cotorrear el puntacho*: an interminable round of marijuana stretched out all night among the deliriums and the mortal leaps of an imagination that has sought to escape for centuries, to free itself from streets, churches, schools, laws, machines, suits, weapons, money; a return to a certain dense, old path where words serve to name things, deeds, deeply buried feelings that the inmates themselves do not know and cannot identify, during their vigil, with anything familiar to them.

After the guards had gone, it kept raining relentlessly, all night long. The lightning moved away toward Texcoco, and the sentinels resumed their customary alert every quarter hour. The water ran through the gutters, flowed over the roofs, foamed and leaped on the patios. Lying on my back on my bunk, unable to sleep, I had the impression that the *penal* had begun to sail over infinite, bounteous waters falling from the sky and that we were all traveling toward freedom, leaving behind judges, ministers, protectors, clerks, guardians, and all the other beasts tenaciously clinging to our flesh, giving blind nods of fury to destroy us. All night a fresh breeze passed through the bars of my window.

At times I could hear Pancho, my neighbor, or one of his *compañeros* traveling the hidden ways of his being, guided by the sure hand of grass.

It was that night that old Rigoberto was killed. He ran the errands in our block and bought whatever we asked him to at the shop. The first time I had seen him, he was in our bathroom, picking up the glass from a lightbulb that had exploded from the steam. I asked him what his name was and why he was there. "My name is Rigoberto Vadillo, here to serve God and you, sir. I am the new janitor. Tell me anything you need and I'll bring it later." Nothing occurred to me at that moment, and I stayed awhile to talk with him. He had a small face and

wrinkled, dark skin like a nutshell buried in wet leaves in the woods. His black eyes, deep, wet, nervous, looked me over from head to toe with a certain mixture of fear and malice. A few white hairs sprouted here and there on his chin and lip. When he rolled up the sleeves of his jacket to wring out the wet floorcloths with which he had gotten up the last of the glass, I saw the veins in his forearm, riddled, tumescent, and throbbing from drug use. It was *tecata* that sustained that sleepless call from another world in his eyes. "I'd never deny it, chief. Sure I'm a *tecatero*. But I have honor, and I don't do anyone any harm or mess with anyone. It's not the

I have in my cell or the profusion of little things I have on my wall, which now really annoy me, except for the paintings by Santiago, who is a terrific guy and a great friend of mine. (Santiago is the author of the battle between the bad guys and the good guys and the kids in the park, remember?)

Well, no more boring stuff, Hélène; it's past twelve, and my Teutonic cellmate won't stop his *andante un poco mosso*. The guards have started shouting, "Six alert! Seven alert!" on up to twenty-three, and I have to take advantage of the pause between each of these choruses—half an hour—to fall asleep, because otherwise morning will be upon me before I know it.

Until Sunday. A big hug for Alberto *il sorridente*. May you live many years and write my biography so they give you the Nobel Prize. All my friendship as usual.

Álvaro



Luis Buñuel and Mutis

first time I've been sent away, and I want to avoid trouble."

That night I learned something else about Rigoberto from some guys who had known him for years. They counted twenty-seven times that he had been sent to the penitentiary, all for homicide or "bearing an illegal weapon." He was sixty-five and had been born in Jalapa, Veracruz. On two occasions he had been in the Islas Mariás, and the second time he had managed to flee, locked in the hold of a ship for fifteen days, without food, without water, and unable to move.

There is no sensation closer to freedom than that of entering the steam room and staying there with your eyes full of October's lilac, transparent sky and the high, swaying branches of the trees in the distance, beyond the double wall surrounding the citadel of Lecumberri.

He had disembarked in Mazatlán at night, dragging himself along like a snake. Numb and half crazy, he had hidden on the outskirts of the city until the next day, when he had been steadier on his feet. From his prolonged confinement in the cargo hold he had developed a defect in his spinal column, and he walked leaning to one side, as if inebriated. He had gone back to Mexico City and had taken up his old job. Rigoberto was a contract killer. According to those who knew him and had required his services in jail, he had notched more than a hundred murders. Rigoberto killed ably, and it was tough for the police to track him down, because he had no relatives, no *compañeros*, no friends who knew anything about his life. An unerring intuition always took him where someone needed his help. He carried out the contract and disappeared. The times he had been taken prisoner were always because of a *chivatazo* [denunciation], but the rat always paid for his betrayal with his life, even if it was years later.

I had many opportunities to speak with him, and when I arranged for him to fix up my cell and wash my clothes in exchange for a few

pesos each week, we spent long hours talking. That is to say, Rigoberto talked, while I discreetly tried to keep the impulse of his confidences alive. "In the end you're an outsider, chief, and when you're gone from here, you'll forget everything and won't be able to screw me." In this the astute Rigoberto was mistaken. It will be hard for me to forget him or many of the other things besides him that have been the pith and sap of my life during my fifteen months in this prison world. No, I will never forget Rigoberto, or the night they killed him, or the reason for his death. One does not forget these

things. They are not a matter of memory; they are like bullets that sink into the body and travel beneath the skin and go to the grave with their bearer, and even

there they keep watch over his remains.

In the *penal* Rigoberto also killed by contract. One night we calculated that of his sixty-five years, he had spent forty-two in the penitentiary. He knew like no one else all the hidden ways around that world and had won a secret, deep prestige among the other inmates, above all the *conejos* [repeat offenders], who knew his story well. He confessed to me that he had "taken care of" no fewer than thirty of his victims in Lecumberri. It was remarkable to listen to his broken, monotonous old story and hear him recount calmly, even with a certain grandfatherly smoothness, some of his hits. He had the peculiar tenderness of an old Indian, and when I saw him taking care of the children who came on Thursdays and Sundays to visit after they had converted the block into a garden for games, it was hard for me to imagine him as the relentless killer of so many people.

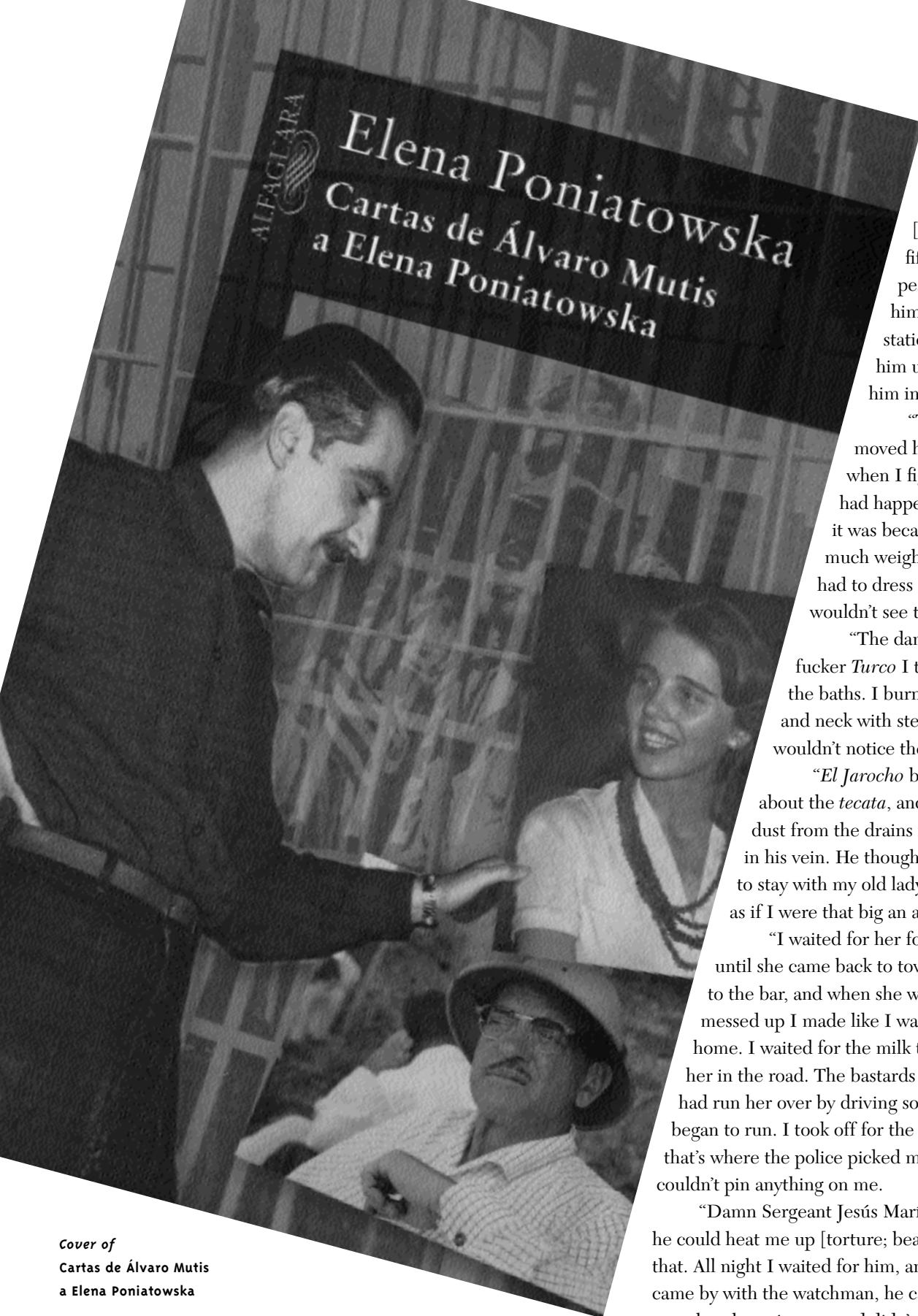
One afternoon, while I was reading and lying on my bunk, where I had taken refuge in search of a little coolness in the July heat, which didn't even ease up at night, Rigoberto came into my cell and began to dust off my books and

magazines. He took them out one by one, cleaned them conscientiously, and carefully returned them to their place. Some words that escaped his lips drew me out of the reading in which I had been absorbed. He was talking to himself. His dilated pupils gave him an ancient, fearful look, and an impalpable foam burst from his mouth now and then and dried instantly on his lips. He had stopped shooting up, and the heat must have forced him out of his cell, which faced the sun all afternoon. The scrupulousness with which he cleaned each book, each object, made him seem even more hallucinatory and delirious. He looked at without seeing me, but some fragmented image of the recumbent being observing him must have awakened in the corner of his mind a muffled urgency to confess to his very self what he kept from me in the most secret part of his soul. Then he began a long rosary of names and murders that I will never be able to recall with the same horror that left me nailed to the bunk many hours after the old man had furtively and silently gone, leaving all the objects in my cell shining. He began with some sluggish, senseless words; then, all of a sudden, he broke into the main current of his feverish litany:

“Pancho the baker I stuck in the oven, and if it wasn’t for his sister arriving and calling for him, they would have found only his ashes.



Cover of
Diario de Lecumberri,
by *Álvaro Mutis*



Cover of
*Cartas de Álvaro Mutis
a Elena Poniatowska*

"Luis's father gave me two blues [bills worth fifty Mexican pesos] to blow him away at the station exit. I tied him up and tossed him in the well.

"The girl hardly moved her legs, and when I figured out what had happened to her, it was because she had so much weight on me. I had to dress her so they wouldn't see the holes.

"The damned mother-fucker *Turco* I took care of in the baths. I burned his face and neck with steam so they wouldn't notice the marks.

"*El Jarocho* bought the story about the *tecata*, and a little pure dust from the drains is what he put in his vein. He thought he was going to stay with my old lady his whole life, as if I were that big an asshole.

"I waited for her for three years, until she came back to town. I took her to the bar, and when she was good and messed up I made like I was bringing her home. I waited for the milk truck and put her in the road. The bastards thought they had run her over by driving so fast, and began to run. I took off for the ranch, and that's where the police picked me up, but they couldn't pin anything on me.

"Damn Sergeant Jesús María, who thought he could heat me up [torture; beat up] just like that. All night I waited for him, and after he came by with the watchman, he came back to see what the noise was and didn't even scream, because I slashed his throat.

"I didn't steal Pascual the barber's tools,

but the motherfucker turned me in to the *comandancia*, and they had me in the punishment cell there, the one above the boiler where they boil the animals. When I left, I killed him on Circular Dos, where he was cutting *el Turrón's* hair.

"The two kids thought I was really going to take them to Escuinapa to see their mama. The older one began to run when he saw me crushing his brother's *choya* [head], but I caught him and he got the same. I buried them in the riverbank, and nobody ever said anything.

"With that money I went back and got married in Ensenada and opened the cantina. The men who paid me to take care of the priest, they went to drink there, and when I had to beat it, they fixed things with the police. The father's scapular is in my daughter Cleta's hands; she's blind and prays a lot. I told her it made miracles.

"The two fags from the laundry brought me the gringo still alive. They had already messed him up, and he was losing a lot of blood. He turned up hanging in the gym, and we had to give the guard fifty pesos not to say that he'd seen us come in with him.

"I killed *el Chapulín* myself because he was a motherfucker. It wasn't Rafael like they said, but Rafael didn't want to lend me five pesos to give my old lady, so it was best that way.

"It was my *compadre* who told me they closed the shop at nine. And he finished off the *ruca* [old woman] by throwing her in the gully out back. I was *miramón* [to look out] at the door, and later they pinned it on me because my *compadre* ratted on me like a pansy.

"If they all got together and came and asked me if I'd do it all over again, well, they know me and have no reason to think I'd say no. If not, they can go talk to someone who'll do the job without blowing it like everyone does, and the first drunk they put down they come out with 'I'm so tough' and what I did, and the fucker and the fucker and just like that they fall for good."

His words trailed off, and when I turned to look at him he had gone from the room. Many times I tried to coax more details about "his *muertos*" out of him, but Rigoberto, more because of a faulty memory and stultification caused by drugs than because of malice or distrust, couldn't pull together anything that made any sense.

The day before yesterday they called me to the quad, and the captain interrogated me about Rigoberto. I told him what was permissible according to the prisoner's honor code, and from what he told me I knew the old man was in a heap of trouble. They had found more drugs on him than what he usually injected himself

The dignity of his pallid cadaver, turned the color of old marble, and the sensual grimace of his mouth captured the ancient "human condition" with severe beauty.

with. They took him to the punishment cell and Sergeant *Carp's Eye* heated him up.

When he came back to the block, he went straight to my cell. From his toothless mouth ran a trickle of blood, and he walked with some difficulty. Every movement prompted a soft moan from deep in his chest. "Chief," he said to me, "see if you can do something for me, because they're gonna screw me. The sergeant hit me in the balls with a pipe, and I had to spill the beans. The guy who gave me the *tecata* to sell, they've already put him in the cage, and the others swear they'll make it really bad for me. I want them to take me to Circular Uno. They can't come in there. See if you can talk to the major and he can do me that favor."

I spoke with the major, and now I don't remember exactly what he told me. But it's a fact that yesterday, when I returned from the athletic field and it started to rain, I saw Rigoberto fearfully lock himself in his cell. I had already forgotten about the whole thing. In jail everyone bears such a weight of anguish and hopelessness that the pain of others rolls off like water off a duck's back.

Then the rain came in the night and washed from my memory all the suffering and

all the fear that stuck to the walls of the *penal* and plunged us into it miserably. When they called roll the following morning, a fresh mist kept falling lazily. They made us assemble in the corridor on the second floor, because the patio was flooded and the water had entered the lower cells and had risen thirty centimeters. We had just reconciled ourselves to that deep morning dream that follows a sleepless night when the horns and drums sounded. We stood half asleep, and only when the sergeant arrived did we see a small bundle floating next to the bathroom door. At first I thought it was a uniform they had tried to plug some crack with. The sergeant, in his high rubber boots, kicked the pile of rags, and we saw that it was old Rigoberto. His small face, even more wrinkled by death, had something of the look of a root or rusted metal. His hands still clutched his stomach, out of which came a crimson trickle, delicately suspended in the muddy water in which the cadaver floated.

They went to the infirmary and came back with a stretcher. They disrobed Rigoberto, delivered his uniform to the major so he could update his roll, and took away the body. When it passed in front of me, I saw the yellow skin and pudgy crisscross of old, capricious scars. Over his heart he had a tattoo of a naked woman, with a cat's face in place of her sex. Almost nothing remained of Rigoberto. Death had taken whatever semblance of manhood he had and had left only that insipid pulp, the product of so many years of prison, heroin, vain struggling against sergeants and motherfuckers.

Nobody pitied him. I never heard his name mentioned again. I alone will have to remember him every time a flash of lightning wakes me in the middle of the night or the rain falls on my consciousness as a free man.

9

In the hot mist of the steam baths, among the beaten, naked bodies covered with the cheap perfume of the soaps and shaving cream, among the anonymous shouts and laughs muffled by the sound of water falling, running across the floor,

rushing through the pipes, one recovers freedom—an illusory freedom, to be sure, but one that renews and strengthens our ability to resist the burden of prison. Naked, without uniforms, without letters or numbers, we go back to having our names and talking about our lives “outside,” about the pleasant business of our days as free men, which we never allude to anywhere else in the prison, so it's not absorbed in and contaminated by the ugly, miserable grease that stains everything and is present in everything. The purifying stream of water and the steam roaring as it escapes through the valves ward off the humiliating presence of punishment.

Under the shower they go back to singing the songs to which they loved and journeyed, to which they reveled and suffered, those who once were free. The names of certain women, cities, streets are heard only on the steam benches, where the mist erases walls and bars and sticks to the dark cement, making it impalpable and invisible. How many times have I heard next to me an interminable evocation of circumstances and places, of fragments of lives lost in an illusory past, completely separated from our present life? We never see the faces, nor can we distinguish the bodies that, with intense and delirious devotion, evoke a life foreign to the definitive misery of Lecumberri.

“Dora lives in Santa Anita, *compañero*. In California. Where everything is gardens and huge estates with pools and tennis courts. She was a chambermaid in the house of some millionaire guy who sells yachts. I was his chauffeur, *compañero*. I drove a silver Rolls that turned everyone's head. We had a girl who was also called Dora. I lived there for five years. The boss gave me Saturdays and Sundays off and loaned me an old pickup he used to carry tools, plants, and fertilizers for the garden. Dora and I would go to the beach, and we'd bring food for two days. We'd sleep under the pickup, and when we made love we'd jump in the water and bathe in the middle of the night, when the sea looks like boiling milk and you can see all sorts of lights and fish shining underwater. We'd go back to

sleep, a wave crashing louder than the others would wake us up, we'd make love again, and back into the water. During the day the same, *compañero*. Dora was from Pennsylvania, and her parents were Germans. When she took her clothes off, she was really white, so white that if the sun hit her you almost had to close your eyes. She has golden hair that covers her whole body like a ripe apricot. We also went to San Francisco a few times. The boss sold yachts to Hawaiian planters who waited for him in their hotels to close the deal. He traveled with his wife and their daughter, who was paralyzed and couldn't walk, and they brought Dora. I drove the car and had a white uniform. Dora said I looked like a naval officer. The boss went off with the Hawaiians and their families for a cruise on the yacht he was selling. Dora and I walked around town. We went to the hotels in the high hills, and we made love all afternoon with the windows open, because they faced the bay and nobody could see us. I learned English, *compañero*, and when I get out I want to go back there to see if I can find Dora and the girl. If I get out, eh, because they put me in for twenty years, but my lawyer appealed it last week. I had to come back here because one day I crashed the Rolls and the police asked for my papers. I had crossed illegally and the boss was in Glasgow, where he bought the yachts. They took me to headquarters and the next day sent me to the border. I worked here to get some dough and go back. I was a tour guide, and they gave me good tips. I took a couple of gringos to Xochimilco, and the sons of bitches got really plastered and began to argue, and one of the gringos hit an old woman with a videocamera and killed her. When I bent over to see what had happened to the old woman, who was bleeding everywhere, the gringo came at me from above and the barge flipped over. Since the gringo was so drunk, he drowned. Like an idiot, I had insisted on taking the barge myself, and I paid the owner to let me. That way I could earn a couple extra dollars. They came down hard on me, and I've had to switch lawyers three times

because they always end up robbing me. The girl's named Dora; she's blond. At first her mother wrote me, but when they put me away it hurt to tell her, so she doesn't know anything."

I couldn't see his face. He sat awhile in silence and then went off to the showers. In the steam room you can't even see your own hands clearly, and dreams float and whirl crazily in the whitish, burning steam.

"I went to Chalpa with my man Antonio, who's a cab driver, and his two kids. His wife knew he was with me and she didn't care. We all went to Chalpa on the pilgrimage of Santo Cristo. We go dressed as women and nobody picks us out. After mass we go to a gully among the trees, and there we do our stuff. But not before mass. One time I went alone, also dressed like a woman, and the priest made me call on the sacristan, and he began to tell me that I was very bad to dress like that and wasn't I ashamed before God, who was on the altar, and when had I let myself go like that and shouldn't I change my life. I suspected what he was up to, and when he put his hand on me, I told him to give me the offering he had taken up at mass, and he went to a cabinet and took out a basket full of coins and bills. He took out two fistfuls and gave them to me. His hands were trembling, and the coins scattered across the floor. I let him do what he wanted, and when he finished I told him if he didn't give me everything he had left, I'd go to the town officials and tell them everything. He got furious, but in the end he had to give me everything. The coins didn't all fit in my bag, so I had to keep some in the money holder I had on me. He wanted to start in again, but I was already tired and wanted to get out anyway. I returned a year later with Antonio. We took the car and drank the whole way. A lot of buses were headed for the sanctuary, full of people. We stopped on the shoulder of the highway and he started to kiss me, and a bus stopped and they wanted to mess us up, but they didn't realize I was a fag; otherwise they would have killed us. We went to mass, and they were there too, with their husbands *la Zarca*, *la*



*Palacio de
Lecumberri, 1950s*

Jarocho, la Güera Soledad, the one who works at El Delfín and who is now the major in J block, who went dressed like a *tehuana*. We marched along in the procession, and when we knelt before Christ the priest kept staring at me; he recognized me and turned pale. I played dumb and covered myself with my veil. When we left,

we went to eat some greasy food at the stands in the plaza. Then we went to the forest and did it there. I was scared, because people who go there during the pilgrimage and do stuff turn to stone and their legs become trunks and overnight they become trees. I was trembling, but Antonio was acting crazy and nobody could

have stopped him. At night we went back to town and ate fritters in the atrium. It made me laugh, because this really proper man stood up and offered me his seat. "Ladies first," he said. I was half drunk. Antonio was jealous and wouldn't speak. He thought I was flirting with the old rascal. I gave him a kiss in front of everyone and he was happy with me again. We went back that night and listened to the radio in the car and sang the whole way home. Oh, that Antonio! A lousy gringo took him from me with nothing but dollars. He was loaded, and everyone followed him around like flies. Sometimes I feel like telling Antonio to visit me some Sunday, but I'm really skinny, and anyway, they disgraced me with this cut on my face."

Long black hair that fell over greasy cheeks covered a good part of his face. Big green eyes dripping mascara and cheap makeup on his skin, which the water flowed over, was all that could be recognized of the effeminate baker who didn't talk to anyone. Despite his forty years of hard living, he still catches some customers on visitation days. He left trailing a strong smell of cheap brilliantine. In the bathroom he uses black nylon women's shorts.

His great stature, as an ex-football player who had played polo for the past fifteen years, blocked the light coming in through a thick skylight protected by iron bars. A mild smell of laundry wafted through the room. He began to shave slowly, whistling parts of long-forgotten musical comedies. He finished shaving, spread a fine English towel over the bench, and began his eternal lament as a worn-down playboy.

"If it weren't for the mess they stirred up on account of that bastard, whom various people wanted to get rid of anyway, I'd be on the Riviera now, not in this damned jail. I have an apartment in Nice with a garage and a white Mercedes-Benz, almost new. I have a really rich, fun friend and I go with her over to Italy and we stay there until winter. Next Sunday two gringas are coming to see me. I hope I can get in good with the major, even if it takes a liter of *John*

Haig, and I'll lock myself in my cell and throw myself a big party. Dough used to settle anything; now they're getting really tight and things are changing, but there'll always be a *mono* [policeman] who'll take a chance for a hundred. Now, it'd better not occur to Mama to come, because then everything gets screwed up and I have to leave the gringas in another cell alone, because if my mama finds out, she'll take the lawyers away again and leave me buried in here for my whole damned life. I have a kid who's as tall as I am now and goes to a military academy in Texas. He doesn't know I'm here, and maybe my wife tells him to get even with me for everything I've done. But this is just macho stuff, and it would be better for him to find out that his papa knows how to handle whatever comes his way. But my wife's family and my mother are really naive and don't get any of this."

This great competitive animal, now fifty years old, kept living like a child in his happy thirties, when he sowed terror in Guadalajara and enjoyed great prestige at the eight universities in the United States that had expelled him for scandals he organized with other Latinos. He was generous and a good guy and helped a lot of people get out, paying the one or the three hundred pesos' bail they never would have been able to scrape up themselves. He could withstand the *carcelazos* courageously, but sometimes he was little indiscreet.

This is the so-called *Bath of the Pachuco*, which can be used only with the permission of the *comandancia*. It is next to the boilers and is made up of a dressing room, a shower room, and a steam room. Only the commissioners and the *cacarizos* use it, and it's rarely full. Often guards also go there, especially the sergeants. Once inside, they lose their guard qualities, and their lives, so hatefully segregated from ours, are mixed in with the rest of the *penal* and emanate that substance of nostalgia and nightmare that nourishes our freedom.

When we return from the athletic field in the afternoon, we are the last to use the bath. There is no sensation closer to freedom than

that of entering the steam room and staying there with your eyes full of October's lilac, transparent sky and the high, swaying branches of the few trees off in the distance, beyond the double wall surrounding the citadel of Lecumberri. Nobody speaks then, and we all traverse the best moments of our past until the cornet bites our insides, calling mealtime at six o'clock, and we awake to the reality of the prison, which bears no resemblance to the other doubtful realities man seeks throughout the world. Because it exists and is built on the ground, like a great beast that eternally agonizes amid the stench of its own rotting flesh.

There are also general baths where the din of the *conejos* or the tragic silence of the *chacales* condenses penitentiary life into its most insupportable intensity. In the steam room, situated on a long passageway, old erotic rites are performed, punishment and crime, revenge and *transas* [shady deals], with habitual familiarity. There the *chivatones* die, asphyxiated, without anyone's having seen anything when the investigation rolls around. There the loud residents of J block keep appointments with their clients and favorers. There they pass off the watch taken from the naive driver or the fountain pen stolen from the public defender. In the dense steam that smells of sour sweat and disinfectant, a court of miracles passes through, with no more cloth than their very flesh torn by knives or teeth or soaked in and oozing heroin. When the Pachuco baths are closed because of some breakdown in the boilers or a lack of fuel, we go to the general ones, but never alone, always in a group, whether it's some guys from a volleyball game or from the same block.

There's also the small boiler bathroom. I don't know it, or who gives permission to use it. It's a tiny room, with showers and steam room together. "Don't go there, Major," a *compañero* told me one day, offering no explanation. Then I found out that it had the reputation of being the choice of the *supecacarizos*, who bring their

friends there, with the complicity of the officials. I never found out if the rumor was true, but one Saturday I went to bathe there because it was the only place that had steam, and as I crossed the threshold a guard yelled, in a startled, irate voice, "Hey, where ya going, asshole! You may be a major, but nobody comes in here now! Out, damn it!" and tried to hit me with his billy club. I retreated without a word, remembering what I had been told about the place.

Finally, we have our bathroom in the block. Only three blocks have steam bathrooms: L, I, and K. The one in I is next to the stairs facing the third floor of the block. After the morning roll everyone goes there, or almost everyone; some, reluctant to use the bathroom, maintain a proverbial modesty, which gives rise to jokes, stories—always the same. There is steam for only one hour, and we take advantage of it, with the cordiality common to prisoners in the same block, to prolong our communal life and to laugh at each other, and we always make the same jokes. Because it is ours, the bathroom in the block is no longer part of the *penal*, and we always feel a little at home in it and forget the anguish of the night, the long insomnia, the horrible doubts, and it evokes in us the perennial ghost of freedom that poisons us every hour. f



*Mutis on an
Esso steamer*