

prosaic figure of La Poderosa II, whose asthmatic wheezing aroused pity in our hosts. To a certain extent we had been knights of the road; we belonged to that long-standing "wandering aristocracy" and had calling cards with our impeccable and impressive titles. No longer. Now we were just two hitchhikers with backpacks, and with all the grime of the road stuck to our overalls, shadows of our former aristocratic selves.

The truck driver had left us at the upper edge of the city, at its entrance, and with weary steps we dragged our packs down the streets, followed by the amused or indifferent glances of onlookers. In the distance the harbor radiated with the tempting glimmer of its boats, while the sea, black and inviting, cried out to us — its gray smell dilating our nostrils. We bought bread — which seemed so expensive at the time though it became cheaper as we ventured further north — and kept walking downhill. Alberto wore his exhaustion obviously, and although I tried not to show it I was just as tired. So when we found a truck stop we assaulted the attendant with our tragic faces, relating in florid detail the hardships we had suffered on the long hard road from Santiago. He let us sleep on some wooden planks, in the company of some parasites whose name ends in *hominis*, but at least we had a roof over our heads.

We set about sleeping with determination. News of our arrival, however, reached the ears of a fellow-countryman installed in a cheap restaurant next to the trailer park, and he wanted to meet us. To meet in Chile signifies a certain hospitality and neither of us was in a position to turn down this manna from heaven. Our compatriot proved to be profoundly imbued with the spirit of the sisterland and consequently was fantastically drunk. It was a long time since I'd eaten fish, and the wine was so delicious, and our host so attentive... Anyway, we ate well and he invited us to his house the following day.

La Gioconda threw open its doors early and we brewed our *mate*, chatting with the owner who was very interested in our journey.

After that, we went to explore the city. Valparaíso is very picturesque, built to the edge of the beach and overlooking a large bay. As it grew it clambered up the hills that sweep down to their deaths in the sea. The madhouse museum beauty of its strange corrugated-iron architecture, arranged on a series of tiers linked by winding flights of stairs and funiculars, is heightened by the contrast of diversely colored houses blending with the leaden blue of the bay. As if patiently dissecting, we pry into dirty stairways and dark recesses, talking to the swarms of beggars; we plumb the city's depths, the miasmas draw us in. Our distended nostrils inhale the poverty with sadistic intensity.

We visited the ships down at the docks to see if any were going to Easter Island but the news was disheartening: it would be six months before any boat was going there. We collected some vague details about flights that left once a month.

Easter Island! The imagination stops in its ascending flight to turn somersaults at the very thought: "Over there, having a white 'boyfriend' is an honor"; "Work? Ha! the women do everything — you just eat, sleep and keep them content." This marvellous place where the weather is perfect, the women are perfect, the food perfect, the work perfect (in its beatific nonexistence). What does it matter if we stay there a year; who cares about studying, work, family, etc. In a shop window a giant crayfish winks at us, and from his bed of lettuce his whole body tells us, "I'm from Easter Island, where the weather is perfect, the women are perfect..."

In the doorway of La Gioconda we were waiting patiently for our compatriot to show up, who gave no sign of appearing, when the owner invited us in out of the sun and treated us to one of his magnificent lunches of fried fish and watery soup. We never heard from the Argentine again throughout our stay in Valparaíso, but we became great friends with the owner of the bar. He was a strange sort of guy, indolent and enormously generous to all the riff raff who turned up, though he made normal customers pay colossal