

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

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# To The Last City

Colin Thubron

# Contents

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Cover  
About the Book  
About the Author  
Also by Colin Thubron  
Dedication  
Title Page

Chapter One  
Chapter Two  
Chapter Three  
Chapter Four  
Chapter Five  
Chapter Six  
Chapter Seven  
Chapter Eight  
Chapter Nine  
Chapter Ten  
Chapter Eleven  
Chapter Twelve  
Chapter Thirteen  
Chapter Fourteen  
Chapter Fifteen  
Chapter Sixteen

Acknowledgements  
Copyright

# About the Book

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*To The Last City* is set deep in the Peruvian Andes, where five ill-prepared travellers – men and women with different values, temperaments and motives – find themselves trekking through one of the most exacting and beautiful regions on earth.

It is a journey which may temper or destroy them. They confront not only their relationships with one another, but also the enigmas of the country's past, the dangers of its present, and the limitations of their own minds and bodies. The 'lost city' of their destination is Vilcabamba, last refuge of the Incas against the Spaniards, subsumed by jungle for four hundred years.

In this brilliant exploration of the psychological challenges of travelling, set within the exotic jungles of South America, Colin Thubron for the first time joins his highly acclaimed talents as a travel writer with his gifts as a novelist.

## About the Author

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Colin Thubron is the author of several classic masterpieces of travel writing, including *Among the Russians*, *Behind the Wall*, *The Lost Heart of Asia* and *In Siberia*. His fiction titles include *A Cruel Madness* (winner of the 1985 Silver Pen Award), *Falling*, *Distance*, *Emperor* and *Turning Back to the Sun*.

Non-Fiction

*Mirror to Damascus*

*The Hills of Adonis*

*Jerusalem*

*Journey into Cyprus*

*Among the Russians*

*Behind the Wall*

*The Lost Heart of Asia*

*In Siberia*

Fiction

*The God in the Mountain*

*Emperor*

*A Cruel Madness*

*Falling*

*Turning Back the Sun*

*Distance*



Colin Thubron

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# TO THE LAST CITY

*V*  
VINTAGE



AS THEY DESCENDED towards the ravine, the mountains rose to meet them. They were entering solitude deeper than any they had imagined. They felt themselves dropping out of the light. The cloud forest thinned, and gusts of warm air blew up from below. Their horses' hooves sent stones whistling into the chasm. Above them, the palisade of snow-peaks – the destination they could not imagine – was slung across half the sky.

All afternoon, along a barely traceable path, they corkscrewed five thousand feet down the ravine. The sun shone gently on them – it was Peru's winter – and there was no wind. Beneath them, the Apurimac river, depleted by the dry summer, still surged over its boulders. Ahead of them, as they dropped deeper – some on foot, some on horseback – the peaks of Vilcabamba were at last obliterated by the valley wall, which was split by vertiginous spurs and clefts.

The Belgian's thighs ached under the short, descending steps of his horse, and the Englishman's feet, by the fourth hour of walking, had worked loose and inflamed in their boots. But for the moment he was too engrossed to care, while in front of him the delicate priest went with an expression of exalted reverie which the others found ridiculous, but imagined they understood. Here and there a tense glitter of streams ran in the defiles, and whenever they crossed one they entered a tangle of wild fuchsias and trees clotted with moss and bromeliads.

At last the noise of the river rose out of the silence, and the trees filled with the pipe and squeak of unseen birds. The horses minced over a cable footbridge. On the far bank the muleteers had set up camp on a few square yards of level ground, and their numbers – five men with nine pack animals, and a cook – belonged to another century. Quechua natives – showing the recessed brows and chins of their Inca ancestors – they had been born to this wilderness. With their loose gait and mountaineer's lungs they had glided soundlessly down the valleyside. In the dusk they had turned loose the mules and now squatted among the baggage and harness, smoking and speaking a soft, guttural tongue. After they had set up the dining tent, they never entered it. Instead the Europeans and the *mestizo* guide squeezed inside on aluminium chairs around an aluminium table, while the cook crouched in the entrance pumping Calor gas into a rusty ring.

At first they sat with the awkwardness of strangers thrown together. But the darkness outside, and a sense of their isolation, turned them slowly convivial, grateful for one another. A vague excitement brewed up. They toasted their journey in cheap Chilean wine.

The guide, perched between the priest and the quiet Englishwoman, attempted a speech of welcome; but he felt a tinge of unease. These people understood nothing of this land. Their baggage included chocolates and cosmetics and cellular phones. Didn't they realise that the stars appearing above them were different? Only Louis, the obese Belgian, seemed expansive enough for the guide to risk a question. The man was rubbing his thighs with little grunts of disgust, and murmuring: 'We should have brought a litter!'

'A litter? What is that?' Then the guide asked: 'Are you sorry to be here?'

'Sorry?' The Belgian laughed: a rich, self-mocking sound. 'I didn't have a choice! My wife wanted to ride. She likes mountains and jungle.' He reached across to her hand. She smiled vacantly. He said



'I'm a fool.'

But he did not look a fool. His eyes bulged heavy in a watchful face. Josiane might have been thirty years younger, it was hard to tell. She was pretty and delicate. The Englishman, staring across Louis, guessed it was his second or third marriage. Josiane, in this confusing candlelight, looked half as real as he did.

She said: '*Louis fait seulement ce qu'il a envie de faire.*'

She seemed to speak only French, and the guide's misgiving deepened. The common factor among these people, the travel agent said, was that they spoke English. Again he thought he should say something: something between a welcome and a caution. He hunted for the words. 'You know this journey is not usual. I think that is why you have chosen it.' But he did not know. 'Over two hundred kilometres in fifteen days would not be so much but ... but we are going through the heart of the eastern Andes. This is very hard country ... We may be going for eight or nine hours a day. There are no level places. The *arrieros* will set up camp where they can.' They were listening now, but it wouldn't make any difference, he knew. Foreigners travelled in this country ignorant of its dangers and sanctities. Perhaps that was what protected them. He went on: 'Tomorrow night we will come to the Inca ruins of Choquequirau. Few people have reached them before, and nobody knows why the city was built. It is without history.'

'There must be memories,' the Englishman broke in. 'Aren't there stories?' He had pale eyes in a mobile face, rather handsome. But the guide felt a surge of instinctive dislike. Some nervous impatience set the Englishman's jaw quivering. He burnt with enthusiasm or intolerance at whatever anybody else was saying. 'What do local people think?'

'There are no local people. This land is empty.' The guide went on harshly: 'For six days we cross the Cordillera Vilcabamba. We'll reach the snowline at a 15,000-foot pass before descending. In the end we go into rain forest at Espiritu Pampa. Then we come to Vilcabamba.'

Perhaps he only imagined the group let out a faint, collective sigh. Vilcabamba. That, in the end, was what had lured them. These people were like children, in a way. He had been to Vilcabamba once before, and there was nothing there. Just stones sunk in the jungle. The Inca had laid them five hundred years ago as their last refuge against the Spaniards. What could they mean to the foreigners? Why did they come? It was not a good place, Espiritu Pampa. Its soil was bitter. The Spaniards had sacked it in the end, and the forest covered it over. People said the place was not in peace.

THE ENGLISHMAN lay in his sleeping-bag, listening to the quick, regular breathing of his wife. In the faint light he could see that she had placed her boots between them, with her anorak and a water bottle. He knew she was awake because her breathing was audible. In sleep she was silent. He could feel his resentment like a vapour in the tent, and listened instead to the violence of the river over its boulders and to the double note of a night-bird somewhere.

Suddenly she said: 'Robert? What do you think of these people?'

She had not turned round.

He said: 'I might like the Belgian. He's a cynic, but he's intelligent. As for the priest – what's his name? Francisco? – it's impossible to know, since he hardly speaks. I think we can trust the guide; and the muleteers too. These fellows may look frail, but they must be made of iron.'

A tiny gap had opened where Josiane was. Because he did not know what he thought of her.

'The Belgian woman,' he said eventually, 'I thought she was his daughter at first. What do you guess she is? An actress? A dancer?'

Camilla only said: 'It's odd to see a man like Louis besotted.'

~~Then she went quiet, and the too-quick breathing resumed. Again he felt her resentment, her recoil~~ from this whole journey. She was here in this wilderness, with these discordant people, because of him. She had never enjoyed people in the same way he did. She always wanted to appropriate their lives. Her friendships were narrow and steadfast. They bored him, accused him a little. They were too heavy, too exclusive.

It was he, in the end, who slept; but he awoke an hour later to a vision of leaf-shadows printed by moonlight on the tent roof. He gazed up at them in astonishment. They looked starkly delicate: the jungle distilled across the canvas. Outside, the river seemed to be roaring through a deeper loneliness. Camilla was asleep, and this, for the moment, was all there was in the world: the forest stencilled over the moonlit tent, and the noise of the great river pouring through darkness towards the Amazon. The air had cooled. He felt a disembodied elation. It was recognisable from adolescence, and he heard himself breathing out, as he might have twenty years ago: *So I have lived, I have lived!*

CAMILLA HEARD him unzip the mosquito net in the entrance and go out. She had sensed something about her sleep, as if Robert were too big for the tent, and now that he had left it the air was quiet again, and cold. She looked up to see the same leaf pattern over the ceiling, and it made her afraid. The light was too chill and wan. She tightened the sleeping-bag round her neck. And who were these people that she would never see again? The Belgian never focused her; she did not exist for him, not as a woman. Such things no longer mattered to her, she thought, or only a little. But she could never warm to him. And his wife, with her elf-locks and childish mannerisms, was already irritating. As for the priest in San Francisco, he looked at her with the nervous gaze of a deer, and never uttered. All this was fine for Robert, just as theatre was fine. Impermanence didn't trouble him. He pillaged people for their brains, their looks, their eccentricities, then moved on.

She had once loved his journey from obsession to obsession, and sometimes, nostalgically, still did. Seventeen years ago (could it be?) when they were first married, he had been impassioned by Ottoman architecture, then by minority religions in the Middle East, then by the survival of Aramaic, and had poured out articles which seemed touched by a cranky brilliance. While filing news items as a correspondent in Damascus, he had toured Syria with her in a frenzy of euphoria and frustration. She wondered about this energy now. For another fifteen years she had watched him shift from newspaper to newspaper, chafing at foreign editors' desks in London, always a bit too maverick to hold. People seemed to expect something important of him: a major editorship, a resounding book. Meanwhile his obsessions never died of their own accord; each was subsumed by the next one, then abandoned. Sometimes she felt that she too, at some unspecified time, had been left behind.

She closed her eyes against the tent ceiling. She did not care for mountains. She wasn't sure how to fit she was. Alone in the tent, she despised herself for being here. She had always fallen in with Robert's passions instead of following her own. But her own lay smothered somewhere under the luxuriant growth of his. Her love of research – which the birth of a delicate son had reduced to a part-time profession – was different from Robert's: not a reworking or transformation of knowledge, but a passive pleasure in it. She sometimes wondered who she would have become if she had not married so young. But probably the same, she guessed, almost the same. She imagined Robert standing outside the tent at night, dreaming of the Inca. Occasionally she sensed him on the verge of bitterness, as if he feared time was running away from him – and she felt a pin-prick of alarm.

OUTSIDE, UNDER that hallucinatory sky, Robert was astonished to see no moon at all. It was starlight

only that had turned their tent into a shadow play. He had never seen such a sky. It was ablaze from end to end. As he gazed down on the river, he found himself smiling, as if drugged. Fireflies flickered among the shrubs where madonna lilies grew, and there were glow-worms in the grass. Above him the unfamiliar constellations glowed fuller and more intense than those of the northern hemisphere, so that the Milky Way was less a trickle of sparks than a white dust glittering solid from one horizon to the other. No wonder the Inca worshipped it.

He reached through the tent flap and pulled out his telescope and compass. The tiny needle was clearly visible in the starlight. It swung towards the black mass above them where their track climbed precipitously north. Beyond, he imagined the last cones and spires of the Andes erupting in an icy-tipped wall, then foothills descending into forest and the Amazon delta. It was there, where the mountains eased into jungle, that the Inca had built the last city of their once-vast empire: Vilcabamba: he loved the sound of the name. For a few years, at least, it had haunted both Spaniards and natives with the dream of the Inca return.

He rooted the tripod of his telescope among rocks, and edged its barrel up. It was not powerful – little more than a toy – but in its lens the Southern Cross flashed like a warning, and the dust of the Milky Way separated like shattered glass.

When Robert detached his gaze from the eyepiece, he had the illusion that the sky was pressing close above him, close on the whole earth. He rubbed his eyes to cleanse them. He was puzzled that under this intricate web of light the Inca, who believed themselves Children of the Sun, had known so little about the skies. They had no true astronomical calendar as the Aztec and Maya had. To them the stars were sacred animals which interacted with the earth: Orion became a llama which crossed the sky to drink from the Pacific.

These absences in culture fascinated him: they suggested not paucity, but something later generations had not understood. The Inca were pervaded by such enigmas. Their empire was contemporary with the European Renaissance, yet they seemed cocooned in a remote antiquity. And into this world the Spaniards had arrived like a brutal modern fact. Shod in steel, the conquistadors rode chargers and fired muskets. The Indians were armoured in gold and feathers. They were dispelled like a mist. A mere 170 Spaniards put to flight armies of tens of thousands, and within ten years the Inca empire vanished. It was as if a delicate picture had been exposed to sunlight and blanched instantly away.

To Robert, who had expended all his adult life on words, the knowledge that the Inca had never practised writing, had known no alphabet, intensified their mystery. Their memorial lay in half-interpreted ruins, and in their Quechua descendants who still walked these mountains in mournful amnesia. Robert had studied them in libraries until they became a nagging obsession. In Lima he had scrutinised their artefacts in museums, but only felt their distance increase. Their vestments woven with golden scales like those of some fantastical fish, their masks and flutes and ceremonial ornaments, the regalia which splashed gold down half their bodies – all seemed charged with some impenetrable symbolism.

Could it be true that they had never known writing? If so, theirs would be almost unique among great empires. Robert could not resist the idea that Western eyes, including his own, had been blind to something extraordinary, and that the gap left by script had been filled by some other, lost idiom – but a language free from the concepts an alphabet embodied: a language encoded in music, perhaps, or the hieroglyphs of fabrics, even in the patterns of stars or the intricate layout of Inca cities. The need to inscribe meanings, finding no outlet in words, had expressed itself – he was quite sure – somewhere else.

He heard a baritone voice behind him. 'A different sky, isn't it? Can't locate a thing.' Louis was standing a yard away. 'The first telescope, you know – Galileo's, I think it was – showed the stars *square* and *rectangular*. Pretty upsetting, in its way.' He looked outlandishly comfortable in the chair that night, his double chin nestled in the neck of silk pyjamas. 'Square stars didn't conform to expectations of course, so people redeveloped the telescope. They didn't want anything angular flying about up there.'

Robert thought he could like Louis. He said: 'I dare say the Inca saw them square. They never did invent the wheel.' He noticed the white curve of Louis's stomach overlapping his pyjamas, and wondered vaguely about Josiane. How could she bear him on her? He pointed to the telescope. 'Do you want to take a look?'

The Belgian shrugged. 'I can see enough from here. Too much, in fact. Hurts the eyes.'

'It's astonishing.'

'Yes, well, this mountain stratosphere. There's less carbon dioxide, of course; leaves the planet pure.' He glanced up. 'But God, what a mess up there! Wreckage floating about in its own slipstream. And people talk about the order of the heavens. Gravitational pull – just a lottery! It makes you sick to look at it.' He roared his rich laughter. Then suddenly: 'You're a journalist, aren't you?'

'I was,' Robert said. 'I quit my paper to travel here.'

'Quit?' Louis looked suspicious.

'I turned freelance. Quite a risk, in its way. But how long do you wait?'

'Wait for what?' Louis was scratching his stomach.

Robert hesitated. It was a little humiliating to explain: how you harboured an ambition like a caged animal. For years the animal barely stirred. He had even thought it dead. Then it started pacing again: the desire to do the thing before it became too late and the animal died, smelling of rancour. But one morning he had decided to release it: the passion to write something different. To give voice to however the Inca had left behind the memory of themselves, as he travelled this once-sacred land. To write it before journalism coated all the words. Before he became afraid to put to the test his instinct that the Inca might have found some unsuspected language.

But it sounded too naive to talk about now. Because probably only he believed that this cipher might survive – in stone or pottery decoration or the configuration of ruins – or that the potential for sensing it existed in him, that it wasn't just a feeling. Not a capacity at all – he could imagine Louis scoffing – just the floating conviction of one: a booby trap. So when he said to Louis 'I mean to write about this journey,' he felt frailty beating up inside him like a warning.

Louis said: 'To write what?'

'A book, a slim book.'

'Well then, do it, Monsieur, do it! Get it out of your system.' But the Belgian shook his head slightly. He had straw-coloured curls which looked faintly dissolute. 'When I was a young architect I longed to design a country villa, but nobody gave me the commission. Ours was a very urban practice in Hainaut. So I bought a plot and built the villa myself. An imitation Frank Lloyd Wright. Sold it for a pittance!' He laughed, a little cruelly. 'But I see now the villa was a fake. Whenever I drive past it, I take my glasses off. Hah-hah-hah!'

Robert felt too piqued to join the laughter at this warning. He said: 'Well, I'm not as young as you were then.' He folded up the telescope. 'All the same, look at this country! If anything can clean your eyes, it's this!'

He realised he sounded foolish, but it was too late.

Louis had burst into laughter again. It was a rolling, guttural sound, now not unkind. 'Ah. The

cleansed eye! Self-obliteration. You are very ambitious.'

~~'Yes.'~~ And Robert remembered other charges. You are self-centred: yes. Arrogant: probably. Overbearing: yes (she says so). All these things. Yes.

'But why Vilcabamba, Monsieur? Why not London, if you want a challenge. It would be harder to write about home.'

Robert said: 'Because Vilcabamba was the Incas' last memory of themselves. It was their last effort to perpetuate themselves.'

He thought: there, if anywhere, they must have longed to shore up their past, the history which they could not hold in writing, as their empire faded away. The desire to commemorate must have been unbearable. To travel here, he thought, would be a kind of pilgrimage. For once he would set out with no journalistic motive, hunt no specific story, impose no opinion. He didn't know how it would end. He just trusted it. And he trusted himself. It was a great arrogance. He had never felt so elated. He looked at the precarious line of their camp above the river – a light still glimmered in the priest's tent – and at their mules and horses huddled beyond. He did not want to talk about himself any more. 'Are you, Louis? You desert your architectural practice for this folly.'

'Ah no, my practice deserted me. I was made redundant – at fifty-six! People fell out of love with my buildings. They decided they were post-modern and that, in provincial Belgium, is the end. They thought me inept when I was only playful.' His feet made a tiny, mocking dance on the coarse grass. 'You can always tell my buildings – they're all over Hainaut and Brabant – because stylistically they subvert themselves a little, as things should.'

Robert thought: perhaps it is the solitude of this place, or the gulf of age and nation between us which makes confidences easier.

Louis was saying: 'All that was three years ago – then I was an out-of-work divorcé. But the world is very considerate, Monsieur. It keeps on turning.' He touched Robert's arm, as if in consolation. 'Now I have a private consultancy and an angel-wife!'

As he turned back towards his tent, the Englishman smelt on him, oddly like incense, the faint fragrance worn by Josiane.

*THE NOTEPADS are the seed-bed from which the book will come. They contain details, pictures, thoughts. I write them sitting on these rocks in the starlight.*

*Today: the first day of freedom.*

*I cannot take on Inca perceptions. But can try to shed my own. And the first thing is to describe this land. If I concentrate, the commonplace will disperse. A matter of attention, and of openness. Large objects shape their own words. Then the book will come.*

*Afternoon: razor spurs, treeless. Grey-blue shale. Terrific, steely valley-sides. The complexity of this ravine: shifting light. Not a soul in sight, except two small girls by the Apurimac, who run away. From here the river flows almost 4,000 miles before it reaches the Atlantic. Even in August it's a torrent.*

*Camilla walks steadily. I'd feared she might tire. Always thinks I'm leaving her behind. We descend the ravine with a bamboo pole in either hand, like skiers over the dust.*

*Mystery: how the Spaniards conquered. Steel armour, Toledo swords, guts, war-horses, arquebuses: not enough against such disparity in numbers. Did the Inca think them gods?*

SHE WAS woken by the gravelly voice of the Belgian and thought he must be talking in his tent with Josiane. Then she saw the sleeping-bag crumpled beside her, and peered out.

Robert was settling among the rocks with his notebook under the stars. For several minutes she watched his bowed head and the flickering of his hand over the page. She knew he was starting his book, but these notepads were a mystery to her – he forbade her to read them. Before the intense private passion of this writing, she felt herself recoil into practicality. She became the wife who worried over next year's school fees. She wondered too how she would feature in his narrative. But only as an airbrushed companion, she imagined, or a name lost in the acknowledgements.

She turned back to sleep, without bitterness. She did not think of herself as especially lovable. When her son was younger it might have been easier to imagine herself so. But now he was boarding school – aged fifteen, his voice cracked – she instead felt intermittently bereft. She wanted him as a child, still.

When she curled up she was pleased to find no stiffness in her body. She flexed her back, pinched her calves: nothing. She did not want to let Robert down.

But often now, beneath the conventions of solicitude, she felt separate. Perhaps, to sense herself a woman, she needed somebody's dependency. For years after her son's weaning, she would wake up feeling a child at her breast.

THE TURMOIL in the Spaniard's mind was not anxiety but a feverish euphoria, heightened by the cruelty of this land, and by the strangeness of what he was doing. He was exhausted, but could not sleep. He looked as if he could bear nothing. Under the sheen of boyishly parted hair his eyes were black and flinching, and his features attenuated into a nervous fragility.

Gingerly he stood a candle on the groundsheet in the tent, and hung his crucifix above. Then he opened his breviary and read aloud the *Anima Christi*, to still his heart. Twice he lifted his eyes and asked forgiveness of the enamelled body hanging there on its cross, discoloured by the successive fingertips of his grandmother, his aunt, his mother. He grew calmer.

After a minute he felt in his rucksack and pulled out a disc of polished quartz. Cautiously he wiped its surface and saw again his reflection swimming in the candlelight. He had found it in the disc since boyhood: the troubled face. But now, inexplicably, it shocked him – his survival here; and he realised that he had half expected to find in the polished circle nothing at all.

Outside, the Belgian's laughter rolled out above the noise of the river. Francisco shuddered. These people carried their worldliness about with them like armour. Cities dripped from them. Nothing they said – no look, no gesture – escaped contamination. Louis in particular: those yellowing jowls and bulging, glandular eyes and easy talk about everything unnecessary! And just when you expected him to be serious, that dreadful laughter would detonate out of his chest as if to disinfect himself of truth.

Josiane, too. Could you be like that and yet alive? She would have been all right in porcelain. In fact he had seen her in shop windows in Trujillo – pale and sightless. Assistants changed her dress and wigs once a month. The thought of her touch frightened him.

Then there was the English couple. The journalist made you afraid to speak. If you did, he either dismissed or devoured you, demanding explanations. Those pale, hot eyes! Once that evening Francisco had ventured a word about the early Spanish missionaries, and Robert had machine-gunned him: Which ones? When? Where? What exactly ...? His intensity was preferable to the Belgian cynicism – he even looked sympathetic, with his long, responsive face and lips – but still it was unbearable. You longed to pass unnoticed. Yet a human being, Francisco was sure, was a God-made thing.

Only the Englishwoman, whose husband ignored her, seemed different. There was a stillness, a gravity about her. She had a comfortable, womanly body. She spoke graspable things. You could sense

her by her eyes. Behind Josiane's – they were violet, long-lashed – you could not be sure who existed, they were only pretty. But against Camilla's brown skin her eyes shone grey and slanting. He decided she was beautiful.

After a while he unwrapped a book in a scuffed leather binding, *El Calvario del Inca: Crónicas contemporáneas*, and fondled it open. On its flyleaf was inscribed in faded ink the name of his mother and beneath, in the same hand but wavering, weakened: '*Para Francisco, para que comprenda y se ilumine.*' He chose a page – like a talisman – at random.

*I moved across a good portion of this land and saw terrible destruction in it. I could not help feeling great sadness. The sight of such desolation would move you to great pity. We cannot conceal the paradox that the barbarian Inca kept such excellent order that the entire country was calm and all were nourished, whereas today we see only infinite deserted villages on all the roads of the kingdom.*

Francisco closed the book gently. He knew many such passages by heart.



ALL NEXT MORNING, circled by empty mountains, they wound for thousands of feet up the wall of the Apurimac valley, until their track tilted over a watershed to move above cloud-filled ravines. The going was hard from the start. It wrenched at unaccustomed muscles and chafed tender skin. But even after four hours' climbing they were laughing a little, and found the energy to sing beneath some *chilka* trees where they examined their feet for blisters. They looked back in wonder across the valley they had descended yesterday, tracing the hairline of their path where it wavered down a seeming precipice. A muted pride touched them. It looked possible only to goats.

Louis alone seemed disgruntled, as if his sturdy, rock-climbing horse were secretly tormenting him. Sometimes he clutched his back. While the English couple and the priest climbed sweating at the heels of the guide, he gave up steering his horse and let it turn the track's corners undriven. Camille wondered what he and his wife had expected. Josiane rode in expensive-looking jeans and a lac alpaca cardigan bought in Lima, while Louis wore a cream-coloured denim suit and fedora sunhat. Occasionally Josiane stopped to check her complexion in a little mirror. They had already taken a two-week cruise on the Amazon, and still they looked as if they were riding in some public cavalcade.

Often Louis ached to dismount, but knew that if he did he would lag far behind. So he watched Josiane, who floated in front of him with no visible effort at all, and found a purpose for this trek in her foolishness in her delight at the landscape or at the antics of her horse. Sometimes she pointed her camera at some rearrangement of mountaintops, framed by trees or dusted in clouds. She had developed a faint, habitual smile. It was her holiday, after all: he would never have contemplated it. She expressed no surprise at the land's ruggedness, made no complaint. She simply watched it pass around her with the innocence that had touched him when they first met. Then he could only mock or fall in love. Now he laughed at himself instead of her.

Sometimes he closed his eyes against the jarring hooves under him. The passion for landscape passed him by. The English kept exclaiming at this vista or that, while the Spaniard gazed ahead as if God were round the next corner. But to Louis the idea of scenic beauty was a bizarre confidence trick. These chilly peaks and shaley valleys! Nobody had admired such things before some fashion decided nature was sublime. And now troops of tourists wandered about exclaiming 'How beautiful!' It was an inherited delusion. Mountains were not beautiful, he thought. A Bach cantata might be beautiful, the Fontainebleau staircase was beautiful, Josiane was beautiful. But land was just geology.

He let his reins fall idle over the saddle's pommel. For miles ahead the track moved across a sheer cliff-face. Step two paces to the left, and you were gone. But they were all used to this now – the men went in Indian file – and the horses walked with a surer tread than humans did.

He heard the Englishman, tramping in front of Josiane, trying to flirt with her. Their voices were thin above the ravine.

'You ride well.'

'We had horses in the Midi, my family.'

'I thought you were Belgian.'

'Louis is Belgian. I am French. From the Midi.'



French, Robert thought; that made her more graspable. Her horse's head kept nudging his back. Whenever he turned she flashed a blithe, full-lipped smile; yet it was as impersonal as semaphore. She baffled him. The unlikeliness of her being here – her child's fragility – suggested some hidden resource. She seemed at once vain and unworldly. Her hands holding the reins fascinated him. They were not a girl's hands at all, but lean and veined. He imagined electricity shivering into her horse's mouth. Their bones were as thin as harp strings.

It was odd to be talking like this, stranded in clouds. But he said: 'So your family lives in France.'

'My mother, yes. My sister has a business in Toulouse. She makes animals.' Her laughter trickled out across the abyss.

'Animals?'

But the guide was pointing now, his stick tracing some feature near the horizon, and they tried to follow his gaze. Far ahead the clouds had congealed to lumps, and seemed to be pouring mountains out of the sky. Wave upon wave, the ridges hung there in jagged solitude, banked up like a tide growing fainter, fading away. On one of them the guide was pointing out the Inca ruins of Choquequirau, but nobody else could see them.

For two more hours they curled round the mountain flanks, sometimes dropping into gullies lush with orchids and acacia. Then Robert saw in the distance what appeared to be the seamless rampart of a great fortress above the valley.

'There it is!' He turned to Josiane. 'You see it?'

She reined in her horse. 'Oh yes!' She smiled at it, as she had smiled at everything else – mountains, flowers, him. '*Quelle folie!* Why should they build it there? Up in clouds!'

But Robert didn't know. Nobody knew. The place had gone unrecorded, even by the Spaniards.

An hour later the jungle broke apart and they found themselves walking over grass beneath the curve of huge terraces. Dusk was falling. The distant rampart – an optical illusion – had separated into these stone esplanades hacked out from a forest whose trees they couldn't name. They camped exhausted on the lowest tier, where the muleteers had staked out their tents, and felt a childish sense of achievement: they had reached their first Inca city. Concealed under canvas, they massaged their legs and sucked vitamin pills, anointed reddened skin, bolted a few private rations.

Meanwhile the ruins lay above them, waiting for tomorrow, and the night came down in silence. Robert was jubilant. This was their first staging-post, and it was spectacular. Even from here he imagined it lying open like a book: an Inca city untouched by the intervening centuries, spread innocent on its mountain, its purpose unknown.

After supper, lying in their tent, his elation reached out to Camilla. He was not sure if the form doubled up in her sleeping-bag – she said it was cold now – was reconciled to this journey or accusing him for it. He said: 'You're not frightened, are you?'

She stirred slightly: 'No, not really. I'm just not used to this.' Then suddenly: 'Do you realise that it's jungle outside and we haven't heard a thing? It's utterly silent.'

But no, she thought, she wasn't afraid. Not of anything specific. Only she told herself: we are alone now. And now that she thought this, lying in the cold tent, she realised that what frightened her was emptiness. The idea of nothing. Didn't people have to be strong for a place like this? Or be able to protect one another? In other places the night was full of tiny, reassuring sounds. But here the stillness was the silence that underlay everything, always. In London she never noticed stars: the sky was orange. Now they chilled her. Could you disappear into this country and come out unscathed?

He said: 'Of course it's silent. It isn't rain forest.' But he heard the intolerance in his voice, and he leaned over and held her shoulders. 'There's nothing dangerous left here. It's almost uninhabited. The

Shining Path guerrillas were mopped up years ago.'

~~She curled her arms slowly over her breast, her fingertips touching his. It's not that, she thought, it's nothing like that.~~

NONE OF them had seen anything like it. The Apurimac had reappeared from the east and was coiled six thousand feet vertically below them. Nineteenth-century travellers had imagined this place to be the lost Vilcabamba, but now, in the absence of record, the theories had all worn thin. Perhaps it had been the remote estate of a forgotten princeling, or a sanctuary where the last Inca ruler was raised by priestesses, the Virgins of the Sun; or perhaps a shrine for the mummies of the Inca royal dead.

They climbed the five terraces into a square edged by ruins. Their feet rustled over a plain of grass. Robert identified building-types from his reading, as if he were leafing through his memory. For the first time, the dead stirred into life. Here, preserved up to their eaves, were the long meeting halls; above them a paved water-channel and the façades of immense storehouses; beside them the spouts and basins of a dry fountain. Under the beautifully jointed walls his enthusiasm became infectious. He overflowed with talking, and the others listened to him. 'Look, look!' They peered over to where the great terraces dropped into jungle. The Inca had shored up the soil against the mountain as if it were gold. 'The most successful agricultural empire on earth!' he heard himself saying. 'They gave us the potato, and pioneered dried vegetables. And you see up there?'

High above them, the granary chambers, with their multiple windows for ventilation, might have been the sleeping quarters of an army. All over the empire they had been built against famine. 'The Inca had a genius for organisation!' Their empire struck him as an administrative prodigy: a confederacy of peoples benignly enrolled under the supreme Inca. They paved ten thousand miles of roads between Ecuador and Chile. They built suspension bridges of aloe ropes moored on stone piers and a relay of messengers could carry news over a thousand miles in a week.

His voice echoed in the gabled halls. The tenons which had secured their giant thatches were still in place. Here were all the architectural elements he had expected: the inward-leaning doorways with their monolithic lintels, the stone rings to hold doors now vanished, the trapezoidal windows and niches which broke up the monotony of the magnificent walls.

Suddenly Josiane asked: '*Est-ce qu'ils n'avaient pas froid, là-haut?*'

'Cold?' Robert laughed. 'Well, yes, they probably were. But this stone ... No civilisation in the world cut stone like the Inca! And they built without iron, without the wheel.' He was thinking of the great buildings he had examined in photographs. Many showed glossy, coursed masonry; others were composed of polygonal boulders, some weighing hundreds of tons, shaped and dovetailed without mortar and bevelled inward at the edges in a near-seamless jigsaw. Even here some of the doorways were of handsome ashlar. You couldn't slip a pin between the stones. The niches which gaped through doorways onto the square had perhaps held ancestral mummies. Louis ran his hands over them, muttering in surprise, while the *mestizo* guide walked away through the empty halls rolling a cigarette.

After a while Robert and Camilla were left alone there, with the priest hovering at their side. He had hung on Robert's words with a nervy concentration. Now he said in his soft, correct English: 'But the palaces must have looked ... humble.'

'In what way?'

'Thatched. Like cottages.'

'The thatches were immense! And the walls look plain now, but some were stuccoed and painted, others were hung with tapestries of vicuña wool – and whole temples were sheathed in gold. Humble'

no.’ The priest’s gaze was fixed on the ground. Robert went on: ‘It was a rich civilisation, powerful. The conquest by your people – Spaniards, I mean – was astonishing.’

Francisco said very quietly: ‘They were hard men. From Estremadura,’ then added even quieter ‘That’s where I come from.’

‘From Estremadura?’ Robert stared at him. ‘Hah! Why didn’t you say so before? That’s extraordinary.’

The priest was blushing like a boy. ‘I was born near Trujillo ... the conquistador city. My father named me Francisco, after the conquistador leader Pizarro.’ But now he wanted to escape their gaze. Robert’s eyes blazing with inquiry, Camilla’s soft, wondering.

She was thinking what an unlikely descendant of the conquistadors he was: a slip of a youth with his aquiline features and olive skin.

‘Is that region still hard?’ Robert demanded. ‘Still poor?’

‘It’s all right for cattle and pigs.’

How could they understand? Francisco wondered. The land was not like this one, but a plateau spotted with gum-cistus and outcrops of grey rock, the cursing-stones of his father. Its pastures were matted in brown grass for half the year, and quartered by drystone walls which crumbled as quickly as you built them.

To him those fields were haunted by his father: a man on horseback, grasping a whip. In the boy’s mind he rode round an infinite estate. His iron-grey hair was swept back from heavy brows. Always Francisco’s memories converged on a single image: his father staring down from his saddle, his eyes shadowed under his cloth cap, but unswerving, angry. Because what he looked down on was disappointment: the watery maze of dreams and fears that was his younger son. ‘*How have you wasted your time today?*’

Camilla was asking: ‘Your people were farmers, then?’

‘Yes ... yes.’

The cattle-shed had been bigger than their house at first: a grey-stoned barn for wintering and silage. The herd were pure white – you could stroke them – with small heads and blunt horns. But when he was ten they sold the place – his father called it ‘a wilderness’ – and bought the *Finca San Amalia de Abaja*. Wrought-iron gates hung on its pillars, and a smart fence ran barbed wire all around their land. Great buttresses supported the house walls, and he had his own room looking out over eucalyptus trees. That day he followed his father out to see the new cattle. They had curved horns and burnished red coats, and drank from a stone-lined waterhole. They were ‘stronger stock’, his father said.

Francisco said: ‘I think I liked the white ones better.’

‘The *white* ones!’ His father’s face had frozen into that terrible, livid glare. ‘D’you think they’re toys, then? By God, what’s in your blood?’ He had spurred his horse forward in contempt.

Camilla was asking: ‘Were you an only child?’ She seemed to pity him.

‘I have an elder brother.’ But now that Francisco had been separate from his family so long, even Miguel shone in an odd half-light. It was Miguel, swaggering, to whom his father taught stockbreeding. And it was from Miguel, aged eight, that Francisco first heard the family boast of conquistador blood. ‘Let’s play Spaniards and Incas!’ – and they wrestled in the stubbled fields, until he felt his twisted arm screaming against his shoulderblade. Miguel always won, yet never tired of the monotony. ‘Who’s Pizarro?’ he would yell, and twist again until Francisco bleated, ‘You are.’ ‘And who’s the yellow Inca, Atahualpa?’ His arm screaming again. ‘I am ... I am the yellow Inca, Atahualpa!’

Atahualpa. It was only a name then. But in school he learnt how the Inca emperor was captured by the conquistador leader Pizarro, and traded his freedom for a promise of gold heaped eight feet high up the wall of his cell. The Inca kept his word, but the Spaniard did not. Atahualpa was baptised, then executed.

‘But what about Trujillo?’ Robert was asking. ‘Those old conquistador homes?’

‘Trujillo is beautiful, if you like that sort of place.’ Even to him his voice sounded fastidious, almost bitter. ‘It is built of rock and granite. Everything rises from rock. There are conquistador houses and palaces there, yes. They came back rich.’

He had once loved the town, or felt in awe of it. He had thrilled to its fortified mansions and churches stacked up the hill against the abandoned castle, and he loved San Martin church where the storks still nested, its tower heavy with bells which sounded every quarter hour in a tinny crash like something hitting hollow armour. Especially he remembered how one evening his mother had led him up to where the Virgin Mary gazed over the town from her chapel window in the ruined castle. As they entered, his mother had pressed a hundred-peseta coin into his hand and guided it through a slot. ‘She’s your favourite,’ she said. ‘Our Lady of Victory.’ She was smiling at him. He had inherited her fragile looks; but in her they were beautiful. Suddenly the chapel lit up and for a few minutes the Virgin Mary shone out over all Trujillo, even beyond. He thought: she is shining because of me! I have done this!

But next morning his father took him to the town square. He had a purpose, Francisco knew: his father always did. The boy became aware of the busts of conquistadors leaning from the walls of stone, their mouths open as if shouting or angry, flanked by twinned eagles and bears. They fascinated and repelled him. Then his father led him to the foot of the monstrous thing itself. On its plinth he read: ‘Francisco Pizarro, conquistador’, and gazed up.

Lifted thirty feet on his pedestal, and twice life-size, the conqueror rode in full armour. The boy observed him with a pang of fear, even of recognition. Far above, beyond the prehistoric head of the horse, the cruel eyes were shadowed by a raised visor. The sun streaming under it hacked the face into a jigsaw of jagged beard, hooked nose, grim mouth. A double plume streamed obscenely from his helmet.

Francisco’s gaze dropped to the ground. Beside him his father put his arm around his shoulders, and that the boy shuddered at the unaccustomed warmth of it. His father was dedicating him, he knew. The boy began to shake. The hand on his shoulder was flecked with black hairs, its nails blunted by work yet almost tender. When Francisco stared up at the statue again, its eyes were vacant slits under lids coated in verdigris. Were they glaring? Or closed? He could not tell. Only the horse’s eyes bulged insanely through its head-armour.

A light wind had sprung up and was rippling the grass in the empty square of Choquequirao. Robert was saying: ‘But most conquistadors didn’t return. They grew rich and settled here.’ From a frieze on the wall the emptied niches shed down their memory of the Inca dead.

Tentatively Francisco asked: ‘Do you think that what we did can be pardoned?’

Robert baulked. He did not think in those terms. He kicked irritably at the earth.

Instead Camilla asked gently: ‘How did you become a priest?’

‘I’m not really a priest,’ he said. ‘I’m just a seminarian, a deacon.’ He looked back into her eyes and imagined that he found something firm there, deep and firm. For a moment he trusted her. ‘I’ve always wanted to be a priest.’

How to explain that from childhood God had cried out in the swell of the church organ beneath so many voices, cried out in the mysterious agony of the crucified, in the wafer that was His body? Even

his father had knelt at the altar before the little balding celebrant – it was strange to see. Even his brother. So Francisco knew that there was nothing meaningful to be except God's servant. And inside-chapel, above where Christ hung naked in his exquisite passion, Our Lady of Victory, Patroness of Trujillo, floated on silvered clouds. She had austere cheekbones and golden robes. And her grey eyes slanted down on him with a frightening promise.

'A deacon.' Camilla seemed to ponder this. 'How long is your training then?'

'Six years. I've already done five.'

It was in the seminary, a year ago, that he began to have nightmares – he could not tell the Englishwoman about those – until one morning, in the interval between Sacramental Theology and Penitence, he had suffered a breakdown. You could not explain it even to the Rector of the seminary, even to yourself, even to God. You could only go away for a time, and purge yourself – that was what they said – and promise to return. Sometimes God sent you on a journey.

He was afraid she might ask him something more. He would not lie to her. And her husband was pacing about like a chained animal, thinking things. Yet he wondered if already she might not understand. Almost in panic he reached behind him into his rucksack to find the quartzite disc. It came cool and precious to his fingers, and when he handed it to her it felt like a love-gift. It was his reward to watch her eyes dilate in wonder, and her hands fondle it. 'What is it?'

'It's an Inca mirror.'

She turned it over in her hands. 'Look, Robert, look.'

He came and stood between them. 'I've never seen such a thing.' His smile shed a glow of interest over Francisco, which made the deacon wince. 'Where did you find it?'

'It belongs with my father's family. He says our ancestors were conquistadors. He inherited a sword-hilt and a dagger as well, otherwise I would not think it true. My father kept no interest in the mirror. He let me take it.' He passed his sleeve over its surface. 'I think it a beautiful thing.'

Robert took it from Camilla's hands, and they gazed by turn into its opaque surface. For a moment, as they lifted it to their faces, they wondered independently what they might see there. Both had a fancy that the darkly brilliant disc gave access to a different world, perhaps the past. Robert wondered: had the Inca too imagined that his reflected image loomed out of elsewhere? The face imitating his might be a mocking stranger.

But more likely in such mirrors, Robert thought, the Inca became self-conscious for the first time and began to conceive himself as a separate being with an inner life. So mirrors bestowed identity. No wonder only nobles were permitted them. Fancifully he raised it on his palm, in the gesture of Inca offering. 'Who looked in this before, I wonder? The Virgins of the Sun? Atahualpa?'

Francisco received it back from him. The idea of Atahualpa's face there had never occurred to him. Had Pizarro's reflection then followed it? He felt faintly sick. He wiped its surface again, and folded it back in its cloth. Atahualpa. Some of the early chroniclers – from the books his mother lent him, or from the library in Plasencia – he remembered as clearly as his breviary or the Bible.

*'And Atahualpa was led out for execution to the sound of trumpets in the town square of Cajamarca, and he commended his sons to the governor don Francisco Pizarro. But the friar attending him advised him to forget his wives and children and to die like a Christian. But he continued to persist in commending his sons, with great weeping, indicating their size with his hands, showing by the signs he made and by his words that they were small, and that he was leaving them. . . and he said that yes, he wanted to be a Christian; and he was baptised. With these last words, and with the Spaniards who surrounded him saying a credo for his soul, he was quickly strangled.'*

CAMILLA TRAMPED among the ruins alone. At first she thought that their bare walls and angular shapes were monotonous: no carving or domestic detail touched them with intimacy. In fact it was hard to believe that they had ever been other than ruins, or that a people had once cherished them. But gradually she noticed how they enshrined the world outside: how the landscape stood like paintings in their doorways, how a window framed a mountain – Robert said the Inca worshipped mountains – and consecrated the wanderings of the Apurimac. Compared with Robert, she knew nothing of the Inca, but she sensed this reverence, and imagined it a discovery of her own.

She climbed a path up a hill above the ruins. Once its summit had been crowned by a shrine or an observatory, but now she found grass and stray stones. She felt a strange release. The only sound was the wind in her ears. All around her swam a crowd of grey-blue mountains, and the river was slipping through black ravines a mile below. Here was only the savage and unmediated nature which had frightened her before. There was no birdsong. The river made a twist of silver through barren gorges as if it were descending out of the first creation. Now that nobody could see her, she raised her arms and closed her eyes.

‘THE QUIPU,’ Robert read, ‘*was a circlet dangling knotted strings of various lengths and colours. In this means, in a system now lost, the Inca sent their messages. Spaniards recorded them reading on their quipus like a book. But in fact the device confined itself to simple data and numbers. It recorded no feeling and no complex thought: only the arithmetic of facts.*’

‘And that’s what language should be!’ Louis proclaimed. ‘Anything more points a civilisation to misery. Hah-hah! Forgive me.’ He squeezed Robert’s arm. ‘I forgot your profession. But tell me, have you written yet, have you written?’

Robert laughed. But he was still not used to Louis. Beneath the man’s playfulness simmered something which made him wary. Now Louis sat exhausted in the shadow of a wall, his fedora tilted to one side, sipped from his hipflask and said: ‘Myself, I have no energy even to breathe here, let alone write.’ He inhaled noisily. ‘What altitude are we at, do you suppose?’ He flung out an arm at the valley below them. ‘Look at that! Wouldn’t that move an ape to words? You should write here, Monsieur, if you can’t write here ...’

But Robert sensed that Louis despised landscape. He said: ‘I’m just making notes.’ And suddenly he wanted to be alone and – yes – to possess this place in words. The ruins were full of secluded spots. And there was time.

But Louis went on: ‘If you ask me, the genius of the Inca lay not in what they created but in what they *refused* to create. The wheel! Think what trouble the wheel has caused! And writing. They had no writing, did they? What a tragedy the alphabet has been!’

Robert took the flask he offered, and found himself drinking a rich Cognac. It trickled lava through his veins. Perhaps it was the altitude, he thought, but either the drink or the healing air made it easier for him to suppress his irritation and to adopt Louis’s flippant tone. ‘Yes, who would invent writing? As a journalist, I know. It’s nothing but slippage.’ He drank again – a ghostly toast to the mountains – and handed the flask back. ‘Here’s to *quipus*!’

Louis murmured ‘*Salut!*’, lifted the flask, then pulled his hat over his eyes, and fell asleep.

ROBERT MOUNTED a stairway which ended, mysteriously, in nothing. He was conscious of the pain in his blistered feet. A cove gave a view of the river valley and of the city’s skeleton below him – everything he wished to see. To evoke this, he knew, carried a peculiar importance. To the Inca, the country before him was not stone and jungle but a living map whose contours traced an intricate web

of sanctities. From the Inca epicentre at Cuzco, the Temple of the Sun, a fan of invisible power-lines had radiated out along chains of hallowed mountain summits, rivers, and massive, isolated rocks, the farthest limits of the empire. So the whole land might have been read like a holy text.

He cleared a space and sat with his back against an *alyssos* tree. Once he looked up and saw a hummingbird quivering beside the branches above him. He took it as an omen. The wind had dropped and in this perfect, suspenseful silence he opened his notebook and started to write.

He wrote in short, jagged sentences as the images came to him, seized by an unexpected urgency as if time were running faster at this height. He had no planned narrative. But he knew that he must record this site now, before tomorrow's trek sapped his will and it slipped away. He was conscious, too, of writing with an angry defiance, against age, against Louis, against his own fears. And he wrote for a long while – not impressionistic notes, but finished paragraphs (he imagined) wrested out of the elusive valleys beneath, the Inca stones, and the silent river. The scene struck him as so grand and so complex that it demanded both a wide descriptive sweep and a rather sophisticated exactitude. He knew, too, this moment's importance: that it was a litmus test for his future. In fact if he stopped to think, he might panic that the rest of his working life was being presaged here, in this unknown room under the *alyssos* tree. He had not written so freely, almost violently, since adolescence. He felt all his learnt constrictions dropping away. For the first time in years he was writing for no readership but himself.

For a long time he continued in a kind of frightened euphoria. The dipping sun began to dazzle him through the branches. At last he eased back exhausted, uncertain of what he had done. The silence was complete. He closed his eyes. He felt his notebook throbbing under his hand, but he did not read it.

After a while voices sounded on the terraced stairway behind him. They belonged to Louis and Josiane. He wondered how they talked when they were alone, wondered how she looked at him. Then he heard her voice – light, teasing – say: '*Tu es simplement envieux, Lou-Lou. Toi, qui ait du talent mais qui manques de volonté*' – and Louis's laughter went on rumbling until her words became inaudible.

Robert waited for the silence again, then picked up his notebook to read what he had written.

At first he could not believe it. He thought his early sentences must be preliminary mistakes. So he read on more quickly, waiting for the sentences to take fire, the sentences he remembered. But he found only lifeless words. They never left the page. They coated it with a language so lustreless that it was near to cliché. Only a few bubbles of pretension marked where something original had tried to surface.

He felt a bitter bewilderment. He wondered if he were exhausted, numb. It was like reading an undeciphered script.

He read again, slowly, tried a few corrections, gave up. Worse, this writing brought an ache of recognition, almost of despair. It was strenuous, serviceable, his own. But it could not make the world new. It could not evoke this land of torrent and precipice. Everything he'd ever written, ever said or thought – everything written by everybody else – overhung it in a stale cloud. He thought: I'm locked into these phrases, these rhythms. I can't escape them.

But he knew he would try again. And again. Already he had settled back to outstare this landscape. There must, after all, be descriptive solutions to all these things: how ridges cut into river valleys, how clouds alter mountains. There must even be perfect definitions. He tried very coolly to write them now. He tried to analyse the cloud patterns on the slopes opposite, how they redefined the ridges as they moved.

But they remained ungraspable. He watched them slip between his words. He thought: the lexicon

is too thin. The words for this landscape do not exist. He could not watch these mountains without spasm of awe, but when he looked at what he had written he turned hot with frustration. It was as if fog arose between the thing and its expression, blurring its precision, dimming its life.

He glimpsed the figure of Camilla on the spur opposite. She looked tiny above the ravine. He could not tell what she was doing. In the ruins, the light was beginning to fade. He put away his notebook and the tension left his body. He saw the first stars appear. This, he thought, was the stillness he had forgotten. He had promised himself to pay attention. Let things themselves speak. Only listen. Idly, a little fancifully, he looked down at the darkening Apurimac, on its complicated weave between cliffs, and waited for natural sentences to form. He thought: it must be painless really, simple. It has nothing to do with originality. It is more like translation. Listen.

But he listened in paralysis. He was very tired now, and nothing came to him at all. Even when he thought about the Inca ruins, only the obvious occurred to him: the reiteration of architectural motifs, the deifying of nature. Perhaps he had worked too long only with facts, because this unknown place suggested nothing beyond them. His imagination had gone dead. As he scratched out the description in his notepad, he noticed his own hands, spotted with mosquito bites: how lumpily their veins stood up, how his finger-joints straightened into leathery pouches. They looked too old to begin again.

He salvaged nothing from what he had done. Only, in anger, he scrawled beneath: ‘*So I’m no damn good.*’

THAT NIGHT he heard Camilla singing in her sleep. It was a stifled, squeaky sound, but he could make out its rhythm, and a few words. The song was one which had become a signature tune between them, establishing itself by sentimental fluke. It marked their chance reunion on a London Underground train. In the tent’s dark he could discern the worried knot between her eyes while her lips were moving.

He had noticed the woman at once. She was very young. She wore a sleeveless summer dress. In the crowded train, with one arm raised to grasp the bar above, her shoulder lifted into view the start of one discreet breast. At first the nagging idea that she was familiar to him smacked merely of wish-fulfilment.

The tilt of her grey eyes against the brown skin – an illusion of their lids, he later decided – should have reminded him. Her eyes made a soft blaze. They were what you remembered after the rest of her face had blurred. But they hadn’t yet looked at him. Later, he thought, it was these eyes – intense and a little grave – which intimately bound him to her. In the din and rush of his journalist friends, she was the still centre, whose habitual, teasing, ‘Do you think that’s really true?’ was to root him for years in some sort of integrity.

The girl was preoccupied, oblivious. Only on a crowded Underground, he thought, could you stand a foot from the armpit of a beautiful stranger. But the idea that she was not quite a stranger persisted. In the end it was one of her hands – it had a distinctive mole between thumb and forefinger – that triggered his memory. He had last seen her six years ago, when her face and body still hovered in girlhood. Then her parents had moved away from his neighbourhood in Kent, and he had forgotten her.

Even now, because he was not sure, he stood a little behind her and softly sang the absurd song from their childhood:

*Somebody stoked up the sun  
Somebody lit up the moon ...*



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