



VINTAGE

# BY NIGHT IN CHILE

ROBERTO BOLAÑO

# Contents

Cover

About the Book

About the Author

Also by Roberto Bolaño

Dedication

Title Page

Epigraph

Chapter 1

Copyright

## About the Book

During the course of a single night, Father Sebastian Urrutia Lacroix, a Chilean priest, who is a member of Opus Dei, a literary critic and a mediocre poet, relives some of the crucial events of his life. He believes he is dying and in his feverish delirium various characters, both real and imaginary, appear to him as icy monsters, as if in sequences from a horror film. Thus we are given glimpses of the great poet Pablo Neruda, the German writer Ernst Junger, General Pinochet, whom Father Lacroix instructs in Marxist doctrine, as well as various members of the Chilean intelligentsia whose lives, during a period of political turbulence, have touched upon his.

## About the Author

Roberto Bolaño was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1953. He moved with his family to Mexico City in 1968, but returned to Chile in 1973, a month before General Pinochet seized power, when he was arrested. After his release he went back to Mexico before travelling to Europe and finally settling in Catalonia. He wrote several novels including *Distant Star* and *By Night in Chile* as well as his two prize-winning works *The Savage Detectives* and *2666*. He died at the age of fifty in 2003.

Chris Andrews was born in Newcastle, Australia, in 1962. He teaches in the department of French, Italian and Spanish Studies at the University of Melbourne. His translation of *Distant Star* won the prestigious Valle-Inclán Prize.

Also by Roberto Bolaño

*Distant Star*  
*Last Evenings on Earth*

For Carolina López and Lautaro Bolaño

ROBERTO BOLAÑO

# By Night in Chile

TRANSLATED FROM THE SPANISH BY  
CHRIS ANDREWS

VINTAGE BOOKS  
London

“Take off your wig.”  
CHESTERTON



I AM DYING now, but I still have many things to say. I used to be at peace with myself. Quiet and at peace. But it all blew up unexpectedly. That wizened youth is to blame. I was at peace. I am no longer at peace. There are a couple of points that have to be cleared up. So, propped up on one elbow, I will lift my noble, trembling head, and rummage through my memories to turn up the deeds that shall vindicate me and belie the slanderous rumours the wizened youth spread in a single storm-lit night to sully my name. Or so he intended. One has to be responsible, as I have always said. One has a moral obligation to take responsibility for one's actions, and that includes one's words and silences, yes, one's silences, because silences rise to heaven too, and God hears them, and only God understands and judges them, so one must be very careful with one's silences. I am responsible in every way. My silences are immaculate. Let me make that clear. Clear to God above all. The rest I can forego. But not God. I don't know how I got on to this. Sometimes I find myself propped up on one elbow, rambling on and dreaming and trying to make peace with myself. But sometimes I even forget my own name. My name is Sebastián Urrutia Lacroix. I am Chilean. My ancestors on my father's side came from the Basque country, or Euskadi, as it is now called. On my mother's side I hail from the gentle land of France, from a village whose name means Man on the Earth or perhaps Standing Man, my French is failing me as the end draws near. But I still have strength enough to remember and rebut the wizened youth's affronts, flung in my face one day, when without the slightest provocation and quite out of the blue, he appeared at the door of my house and insulted me. Let me make that clear. My aim is not to stir

up conflict, it never has been, my aims are peace and responsibility for one's actions, for one's words and silences. I am a reasonable man. I have always been a reasonable man. At the age of thirteen I heard God's call and decided to enter a seminary. My father was opposed to the idea. He was not absolutely inflexible, but he was opposed to the idea. I can still remember his shadow slipping from room to room in our house, as if it were the shadow of a weasel or an eel. And I remember, I don't know how, but the fact is that I do remember my smile in the midst of the darkness, the smile of the child I was. And I remember a hunting scene on a tapestry. And a metal dish on which a meal was depicted with all the appropriate decorations. My smile and my trembling. And a year later, at the age of fourteen, I entered the seminary, and when I came out again, much later on, my mother kissed my hand and called me Father or I thought I heard her say Father, and when, in my astonishment, I protested, saying Don't call me Father, mother, I am your son, or maybe I didn't say Your son but The son, she began to cry or weep and then I thought, or maybe the thought has only occurred to me now, that life is a succession of misunderstandings, leading us on to the final truth, the only truth. And a little earlier or a little later, that is to say a few days before being ordained a priest or a couple of days after taking holy vows, I met Farewell, the famous Farewell, I don't remember exactly where, probably at his house, I did go to his house, although maybe I made the pilgrimage to the newspaper's editorial offices or perhaps I saw him for the first time at his club, one melancholy afternoon, like so many April afternoons in Santiago, although in my soul birds were singing and buds were bursting into flower, as the poet says, and there was Farewell, tall, a metre and eighty centimetres, although he seemed two metres tall to me, wearing a grey suit of fine English cloth, hand-made shoes, a silk tie, a white shirt as immaculate as my hopes, gold

cufflinks, a tie-pin bearing insignia I did not wish to interpret but whose meaning by no means escaped me, and Farewell invited me to sit down beside him, very close, or perhaps before that he took me into his library or the library of the club, and while we looked over the spines of the books he began to clear his throat, and while he was clearing his throat he may have been watching me out of the corner of his eye, although I can't be sure, since I kept my eyes fixed on the books, and then he said something I didn't understand or something my memory has not retained, and after that we sat down again, he in a Chesterfield, I on a chair, and we talked about the books whose spines we had been looking at and caressing, my young fingers fresh from the seminary, Farewell's thick fingers already rather crooked, not surprisingly given his age and his height, and we spoke about the books and the authors of the books, and Farewell's voice was like the voice of a large bird of prey soaring over rivers and mountains and valleys and ravines, never at a loss for the appropriate expression, the sentence that fitted his thought like a glove, and when with the naïveté of a fledgling, I said that I wanted to be a literary critic, that I wanted to follow in his footsteps, that for me nothing on earth could be more fulfilling than to read, and to present the results of my reading in good prose, when I said that, Farewell smiled and put his hand on my shoulder (a hand that felt as heavy as if it were encased in an iron gauntlet or heavier still) and he met my gaze and said it was not an easy path. In this barbaric country, the critic's path, he said, is not strewn with roses. In this country of estate owners, he said, literature is an oddity and nobody values knowing how to read. And since, in my timidity, I did not reply, he brought his face closer to mine and asked if something had upset or offended me. Perhaps you have an estate or your father does? No, I said. Well, I do, said Farewell, I have an estate near Chillán, with a little vineyard that produces quite