VINTAGE

THE VISION OF ELENA SILVES

NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE

Contents

About the Book

In the Amazon city of Belén, in the heart of the Peruvian jungle, three old men sit on a bench. They sit in the square every day under the hot sun, remembering the women they loved and the world when it was a better place. One day a woman hurries past their bench whom all have reason to remember – Elena Silves, the girl with eyes as blue as the sky who once saw a vision and has been incarcerated by the Church authorities in a convent high in the Andes ever since. But the old men remember something else. They remember that Elena had been in love at the time with Gabriel, a student revolutionary who became the most wanted man in Belén.

About the Author

Nicholas Shakespeare is the author of *Snowleg*, which was longlisted for the Man Booker Prize 2004, *The High Flyer*, for which he was nominated as one of *Granta's* Best of Young British Novelists, and *The Dancer Upstairs*, selected by the American Libraries Association as the best novel of 1997 and adapted for the film of the same title directed by John Malkovich. He is also the author of an acclaimed biography of Bruce Chatwin.

ALSO BY NICHOLAS SHAKESPEARE

The Men Who Would Be King
Londoners
The High Flyer
The Dancer Upstairs
Snowleg

Bruce Chatwin

In memory of Bruce Chatwin

The Vision of Elena Silves

Nicholas Shakespeare

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

I'll be seeing you
In all the old familiar places
That this heart of mine embraces
All day through.
In the small café,
The park across the way,
The children's carousel,
The chestnut trees, the wishing well.
I'll be seeing you
In every lovely summer's day
In everything that's light and gay
I'll always think of you that way.
I'll find you in the morning sun
And when the night is new,
I'll be looking at the moon,
But I'll be seeing you.

(Irving Kahal and Sammy Fain 1938.
Recorded by Frank Sinatra 1961.)

Part One

1983

Chapter 1

IT IS EARLY morning in Belén. The jungle is quiet. The sky over the rooftops stretches clear and colourless, except for a red clawmark where the day has pounced.

The air is so fresh you want to inhale it in deep breaths. It smells of copa de oro.

Apart from the tented shape of Sebastián under his black hood and Vásquez washing his barrow by the cathedral steps, the square is empty.

An old man emerges from the corner of Calle Raimondi. He crosses the road to where Sebastián huddles beside a pile of newspapers. Aware of his approach, Sebastián holds up a yellow bucket and rattles it. The percussion of small change is the only sound in the street.

The old man throws in a coin and takes a newspaper from the pavement. He folds it under his arm and shuffles towards the bench under the statue in the middle of the square. In one hand he carries a large canvas bag; in the other a handkerchief. He is about to wipe the surface of the bench when he notices that instead of dew it is covered in blood-red beads. Putting down his bag he reaches out for one. He holds it to the light. He finds himself looking at a dead cattle-fly, half an inch long, the same colour as the sun.

“Colihuachos,” he says to himself, throwing it back among the other flies. They lie there as if a string has broken on a necklace. They cover the bench, the ground in front and the flower beds behind.

The old man brushes them off the seat with his handkerchief. He shakes the cloth, replaces it up his sleeve and sits down.

He is Don Leopoldo.

He wears no hat and his face is lined, as if he has walked into a spider's web and forgotten to wipe it away. His love of precise dates and proven facts has earned him a reputation for being a little pedantic. He knows more than is necessarily interesting about the yellow cathedral, its cartridge-shaped windows, its Swiss-made clock; about the origin of the tiles on the old Palace Hotel and about Admiral Grau, the man in whom Peru had once put all her hope, whose bronze whiskers bristle defiantly as if he is still on the deck of the *Huáscar*.

This morning, the flies on the Admiral's head and epaulettes have the appearance of laurel leaves.

Don Leopoldo looks beyond the statue to the metal house opposite, its roof stained with the sun. He can tell anyone who cares to listen – fewer and fewer nowadays – about this house, constructed by Eiffel for the Paris Exhibition of 1896, dismantled for its voyage to another continent altogether, and then transported two thousand miles upriver from Pará to be reassembled, bolt by bolt, for an absentee rubber lord.

The Club de Leones has since moved its premises to a floor above the Banco Industrial, but Don Leopoldo remembers when the members played their poker in Eiffel's folly, drinking bottles of Allsopp's Pale Ale in a hot metal room like an oven.

El Club de los Pájaros Muertos, they called it.

He gazes at Eiffel's house and the buckled pillar into which a car has crashed. It upsets him no one has repaired it. These days he finds it easy to be upset. That's what happens when you are a dead parrot with long memories. Don Leopoldo can remember a time when there was no cathedral and women walked beside the open drains holding geranium-scented handkerchiefs to their noses. He remembers the town in the days when you bought your clothes from Don Ramur – Scotch tweed, alpaca, boaters; when the ice cream you ate in the Booth supermarket came all the way from Liverpool; when the port you drank with Orestes Minero in the Café Nanay was Taylor's finest, shipped from Pinhão.

Now the river is silting up and no boats come from Europe. Now you bought your shirts off the pavement and they had crocodiles on

the pockets. Now in the café they hold aerobics classes.

The cobweb tightens on Don Leopoldo's face. They don't even keep photographs of the old town, to remind people it was a town of millionaires and palaces, not of soldiers who have appropriated the Palace Hotel and let it collapse about them. Instead of picking their noses, they should be restoring the chipped Evora azulejos. They should be repairing the fine ironwork and scrubbing the frescoed ceilings instead of straining their eyes upriver to Ecuador. Besides, who would invade Peru nowadays?

Live for today, forget about yesterday, then show your money with a fanfaronade and wait for the next boom.

As an historian, Don Leopoldo finds this recipe for life unworthy of Peruvians. But to be a Peruvian. What does that signify to the world outside? Nothing.

Don Leopoldo speaks harshly of his countrymen because he loves the land that gave them birth. As a young man he maintained the time had come for Peru to produce her popular historian. A man who could liberate the country from its cosy, obfuscating myths. A man such as Admiral Grau or Lord Cochrane who could ignite the masses like the blue touch paper on a firework. A man who could show them the path they should take by illuminating the path by which they had come.

As a young man he had wished for himself that role.

As an old man he regrets that he prepared himself for it by first writing a *History of the Colonization of Belén*.

At the end of each day since the day of that decision, he has returned to his room and added another manuscript sheet to the disorderly mound by his bed. Don Leopoldo's lucubrations pile up to several thousand pages. These are the pages which every morning, and in no particular order, he stuffs into the mouth of his green bag and carries to the bench.

Often he is influenced by what has been discussed on the bench. Sometimes his companions remind him of things he has quite forgotten. Sometimes they tell him of things he never knew. Always he tries to be on his guard with what they have said. But at night he is not entirely able to shake their voices from his head. Indeed, he

sometimes has the uncomfortable impression that what he writes is a mingling of their voices.

Don Leopoldo's *History of the Colonization of Belén* has taken a decade or two more than ideally he would have wished. He convinces himself it is lacking only a final chapter (on the territorial dispute with Ecuador, with a commentary on Gregory XVI's Bull of 2 June 1843 recognizing Peru's right over the diocese of Soreto). Plus an index, of course.

He has given up hope that when complete it will immortalize his name and cause the jungle round about to break out in psalms.

His magnum opus has taken so long because Don Leopoldo finds it easy to be diverted by parallel research. Not a day passes without him making copious notes from some historical journal. By now, even Don Leopoldo considers it unlikely he will survive to embark on the project that would have swept the reader back to the time of the Incas, to a Golden Age when there were no thieves or idle men or adulterous women, when a man who ravished a virgin was buried alive.

Clearer than the outline of Don Leopoldo's thesis is the melancholy which originally informed it (and which he attributes, erroneously, to Portuguese saudade). Although he has with some pride traced his ancestry to a learned quinologist from Ceuta, he feels the blemish of his European blood. It is sad beyond the power of Don Leopoldo's expression to contemplate the arrival of the bearded men from Spain.

After the Age of Gold, the Age of Manure.

What could be expected of a country whose fortunes were built on the violet grey sap of a tree and mountain upon mountain of birdshit?

"No wonder the only people who flourish are terrucos," he murmurs to himself. The only terruco he has time for is Lord Cochrane.

At night, looking into the kerosene lamp, Don Leopoldo can hear the sound of Lord Cochrane muffling his oars on the evening of 5 November 1820. In the flame he hears him creep towards the Spanish flagship *Esmeralda* whose spars are cracks in the darkness.

He hears him whisper to his men (the same number, he notes, as had taken Peru three centuries before). “One hour of courage and resolution,” he is saying, “is all that is required for you to triumph.” The promise stirs them. Don Leopoldo, dressed in white and pike in hand, lifts his tense face to the night where the 44-gun frigate rolls gently in the fog.

But the courageous, resolute men around him don’t need an hour. Cochrane and his patriots need only fifteen minutes to board and capture Spain’s impregnable flagship (guarded by 27 gunboats and 300 shore guns) and so finally slip cable on the royalists, those pigfarming illiterates who had destroyed a perfect civilization.

Had he wished it, as Don Leopoldo wishes it for him, Lord Cochrane could have been first Admiral of Peru. It is sad that no one else except Grau, sixty years after him, has seized such an opportunity for Peru to be faithful to herself.

The sadness has a cumulative effect on Don Leopoldo. More and more often as he puts on his jacket in the mornings, he wonders if he still has the strength to walk the two blocks to the square. One day the effort will be too much. Who will then wipe the dew from the bench, or the cattle-flies?

This is his favourite hour of the day, when the only voice on the bench is his own, when the square is empty and silent and he can imagine the town as it has been, before it is overcome-by the noise of cars and ant-headed motorbikes and buses which, because of the drowsing heat, have no glass in their windows. His eyes water as they move over the buildings – the Bishop’s palace, the cathedral, the Zumate pharmacy and Pía Zumate’s small hotel on the corner of Raimondi which shares a recessed entrance, always in deep shadow, with the Café Nanay.

His eyes are lingering on the hotel when they catch a movement at a window on the top floor. Don Leopoldo swears he sees a face looking out of the half-open louvres. Before lie can make it out, the face has vanished.

“So,” he says aloud. “The soft-shoe artist is back.”

The movement at the window has ruffled his day-dream. He unfolds his paper. He begins reading.

He has reached *El Oriente's* leader (on the economic consequences of the current called El Niño) when a second man arrives and sits down next to him. He wears a brown alpaca cardigan and a jipijapa panama that curls at the edges like a leaf. It is made of a straw so fine it can pass through a wedding ring.

This is Don Wenceslau.

He is a thin man with bony shoulders. The creases about his crotch imitate those about his eyes. They are eyes as red as the spirit he buys from Don Vásquez's barrow.

"How many tributaries has the Amazon, Don Leopoldo?"

"Eleven thousand and eighteen."

Don Wenceslau must know each one of them. If he can paddle off on a tangent, he will. He is a story-teller, a lover of red herrings, but they are best caught before lunch when he starts on Vásquez's masato. Until midday, his hangover makes him lucid and he can tell stories even Don Leopoldo listens to with interest. The square is his theatre. As he speaks, he points at things which transform themselves into his narrative. So the yellow copa de oro bushes behind them become the Nanay, the clock in the cathedral tower becomes the moon, the bronze Admiral becomes Christ descending into the Cocha and Vásquez's barrow the house of stone discovered in the jungle, where no stone exists and where chickens nest on an alabaster staircase.

Don Wenceslau sits down heavily. He greets Don Leopoldo. He has a stomachache, he says. He holds his head.

"Never eat cebiche at night, Don Leopoldo, that's my advice." It is not the first time Don Leopoldo has heard it.

"No sign of García?"

"Not yet."

"Probably had a night of it with his whores at the Teletroca." The copa de oro bushes rustle behind them. A man breaks cover.

"Not whores, Wenceslau, princesses," he says. He sits down next to Don Wenceslau, crosses his legs and stretches an arm along the back of the bench. In his face there are the remnants of a good-

looking man. The finest feature is a moustache. Its greyness matches the colour of the felt trilby cocked rakishly over his nose. From his breast pocket tumbles a bright red handkerchief.

He is Don García, the singer and a devoted Donizettian. Listening to Donizetti he is almost persuaded to be a Christian. He believes the Italian rescued music from the dissipation into which it sank after that barbarian Rossini – that Marat of melody who would set a laundry list to music – broke the unities. Sometimes, to fill a rare silence, he treats his two companions to an aria from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Don García is ever in search of similes to describe life as he sees it – afresh each day – in this square. His temperament gives rise to flights of operatic fancy, such as his belief – though Don Leopoldo assures him repeatedly it is out of the question – that Caruso once sang at the Alhambra in the role of Lord Henry Ashton.

Don García's eyes cannot help prancing over the road to the site of this theatre where on the night of 24 October 1927 the receptionist fell asleep with her cigarette between the pages of Ouspensky's *Tertium Organum* (and where ten years later the celluloid overheated during a showing of *The Rubber Man's Daughter*). On each occasion the place was burnt to a cinder.

Don García does not see the grassed-over stage occupied by three chickens and a derelict bus. He sees the dado mosaic floor, the spangled velvet curtains, the massive backdrops, the castles rising from landscaped gardens. He does not mind that this backdrop was used whatever the work: opera, film, or pantomime. He never minded either when a French company performed *Così fan tutte* and Don Alfonso's beard fell off; nor when in the love scene the chaise longue slid into the orchestra pit and broke the legs of a Swedish cellist (nor when the shoes of the prompter appeared under the curtain). He never minded because he is a man for whom disbelief suspends as easily as that curtain. Which is why he imagines every now and then, when the wind from the river is right, he can hear the opening notes from "Una furtiva làgrima".

Don García is also a picaflor. He likes women. He more than likes them. He adores them. He remembers, before the Alhambra burnt

down a second time, when money was in pound sterling and you could get a girl for the price of the handkerchief in his pocket. He spent a lot on handkerchiefs. All men were children of Adam, he used to say then. It was the silk that made the difference.

Now the girls never look at him. But it doesn't prevent him, if a pretty one walks by, from arranging his face to look mysterious, haughty, someone of infinite possibility, when he knows in his heart that all the girl sees is a piece of flotsam on a bench. Or three old men on a bench.

They sit here in the same position every day, the singer, the drinker, the local historian. Three narrators watching over the same scene. No one can hope to cross the square without their knowledge. From the glimpses of those who pass by they concoct whole lives.

"What's this?" says Don Wenceslau, noticing for the first time the dead flies at his feet. He picks one up at the second attempt. He caresses the ruddy wings.

"They're colihuachos," says Don Leopoldo.

Don Wenceslau frowns. "And what is a colihuacho?"

Don Leopoldo tells him.

Don Wenceslau looks closer at the bloodsucking cattle-fly. He imagines its journey from the southern lakes, over the desert and the Andes to the cathedral square in the jungle.

"El Niño?"

Don Leopoldo nods. He passes *El Oriente* to him, his finger on the headlines. "And it's getting worse. The worst in memory, they say." He taps the paper again. "If you can believe it, and I'm not sure I can. Floods on the coast, crocodiles in the sea, plants never before seen springing up in the desert. Worse and worse. Like the terrorists." He pauses. "You hear they've blacked out Piura?"

"Vásquez told me."

"Calling themselves the Shining Path – then leaving everyone in darkness."

"Chimbote, Puno, Tacna," recites Don Wenceslau. "Soon it'll be every department in Peru."

"Not Soreto."

“No, not Soreto. Not yet, anyway.”

“You wait,” says Don García, from the other end. “I saw Lieutenant Velarde last night. He spoke as if terrucos are behind every carob tree. He said the police and the military have reached the end of their patience. He said they only need one small excuse – and boom.”

“Velarde has got to catch them first,” says Don Wenceslau whose distaste for men in uniform is well documented on this bench. “And Velarde never caught anything except a fever.”

“They’ll catch them,” says Don García. “They always catch them.”

“I don’t know,” mutters Don Leopoldo. “There’s something about these terrorists . . .” Something which made him frightened for his country.

“They caught the terruco that came from Belén,” observes Don García. “They caught Gabriel Rondón Lung.”

“Gabriel Rondón Lung.” Don Leopoldo tries each word slowly. “The Chino.”

Don García nods. “The one in prison in Lima. Remember him? The one who screwed up Velarde’s promotion.”

“I don’t remember the terrorist,” says Don Leopoldo.

Don Wenceslau obliges him. His head is clearing. “He was a tall man. But you know what they say. Tall men steal light bulbs.”

“I’m well aware of his height, Wenceslau. What I meant is that I never thought he would turn out as he did.”

“So good looking,” agrees Don García. “Every girl in Belén – their mothers too – he could have had any of them . . .”

“But he didn’t, did he?” says Don Wenceslau.

“No, he did not,” Don García sighs, overwhelmed suddenly by a sense of waste. “No. He kept his Chinese eyes for Elena Colina Silves.”

The name is a spell that sends the three men into silence. They think of that handsome young couple, kissing on the bench opposite, leaning over the Malecón’s balustrade to watch the ships sail by, elevated by memory into the envy of Belén.

“I forget what happened to him when she was taken away,” says Don Wenceslau. “Didn’t he vanish too? Do you have any idea?”

Don García leans forward. His eyes are shining.

"If I had been him," he says, unable at that moment to find a suitable model in Donizetti and thinking instead of Verdi's troubadour, "I would have gone knocking on the doors of every convent and religious institution in Peru until I found her. And that, I imagine, is what he did."

"That's more than 1700 doors," calculates Don Leopoldo. He has never concealed his opinion that the only thing capable of being set to Don García's music is nonsense. "He didn't come back for, let me see, another fifteen years. That's 150 doors a year. Possible, I suppose," he adds in a manner suggesting he thought it wasn't.

Don Wenceslau, who would like to think that melody and speech sometimes belonged together, says: "Isn't it more probable he spent those years with Ezequiel? I read that some of those terrucos spent at least fifteen years training for their revolution."

Don Leopoldo snorts. If only his *History* had taken that time. The time it has taken has given the local historian a contempt for the quotidian. In Don Leopoldo's eyes, men were either books or newspapers. The man next to him was a newspaper. "You oughtn't to believe everything in *El Oriente*," he says.

Don Wenceslau snaps open the first page again. "'El Niño – the worst in living memory'," he reads. "'Record rainfall in Lima. Arequipa and Silar two months now without rain.' You can't imagine it, can you, sitting here?" he says, smelling the inky blooms of the copa de oro and casting his eyes to the untroubled sky. "You can't imagine, at the end of February, that somewhere they've still got El Niño."

Don Leopoldo thinks of the stream known as the Child because it comes at Christmas. He thinks of the hot-headed current crawling every seven years along the coast. He thinks of it elbowing Humboldt's cold drift with all its pescado and pejerrey into the Pacific, beyond the reach of fishermen and guano birds.

"Not even the Christ child caused so much damage," he says.

Don Wenceslau turns to Don Leopoldo. "If you ask me, that's why the terrucos have spared Belén. Our climate. They'd just go off to the Teletroca with García here and that would be that."

Don Leopoldo points to the ground. “So, explain the colihuachos.”

Don Wenceslau looks at the dead flies which have tumbled from the sky’s belly.

“Ah, the colihuachos. Yes, well.” His eyes return to the page. They alight on a paragraph from a correspondent on the coast. “It says here that in their nets men have discovered feathered fish.”

“Journalism,” says Don Leopoldo.

Chapter 2

THE SIMPLEST WAY to reach Lima's Establecimiento Penal San Francisco is to take one of the crowded collectivo buses from the Inca market. A thirty-five-minute journey along a featureless highway brings you to the northern outskirts of the city. A narrow dirt road, sandwiched between several stalls of avocado pears and sometimes hard to find, leads to San Francisco's entrance.

It is a low prison made from brown brick that merges into the sandhills. During El Niño, the only way for the water to drain was down these hills. The water washed everything in its path – Gloria milk tins, husks of maize, empty bottles of battery fluid – until the detritus of the surrounding shanty-towns slopped against the prison walls and became home to the dogs and buzzards that rooted there day and night, infuriating the guards so much that the towers rang out with the shooting matches they held whenever the Governor took the puddled road into town to be straddled by his mistress.

That Tuesday morning a man joined the friends, relations and lawyers walking up the hill. He was small and square, with brilliantined hair that fell over his ears in dark coils. He walked a pace or two behind the group, looking at his feet and hopping across the rivulets.

One of the avocado women watched him leave the stall where he sheltered from the rain. She called over to a friend. She pointed at the man's receding back, bowed into a dirty leather jacket.

"Palanca," she called. Substitute.

The avocado women knew that in an hour's time when the group came down again, it would not include that man. But in a few minutes they would be passed by another, on his own, who wouldn't be looking at his feet but at the sky, who would start with fright at unexpected sounds.

Sometimes, when the avocado women saw such a man, they liked to shout.

At the main entrance to San Francisco, the man in the leather jacket separated from the others and made his way to a metal door at the side of the prison. He knocked, waited, then knocked again.

The door opened.

Someone emerged, walking in rapid steps down the hill.

He entered.

He walked through a number of green doors, each guarded by a uniformed man on a stool who rose in silence and drew back the bolt. He counted six of these men. Bolt, open, clang. Bolt, open, clang. Bolt, open, clang. Bolt, open, clang. Bolt, open, clang. The last guard wasn't sitting, but scrubbing the concrete floor with a brush. The brush had few bristles and made a scraping sound on the concrete. The concrete was dark with shit, mud and water from the feet of those passing through the sixth door. The man knew once he went through that door, he was on his own.

The only time a guard went through that door was to shoot.

Clang.

The door led into a large open compound. Despite the rain, it was crowded with prisoners. Camarada Edith had described to him the kind of prisoner – pick-pockets from the bull-ring, narco-traffickers from the Huallaga who continued to deal in cocaine paste, murderers, lunatics, innocents.

One or two wore plastic bags over their heads and shoulders. Most did not. They sat with their backs to the brown wall, drenched and glistening, like the animals rooting through the rubbish on the other side. They wore few clothes. The only life came from their eyes, pickled by cocaine or potato-skin alcohol, which licked over him as he stood by the door. He could smell the brutality. It was even stronger than the smells emanating from the soaking pyramids of excrement. These mounds rose from the mud wherever he looked.

He clenched his hands into his jacket pockets. He began walking.

"Two dormitories lead immediately off the recreation ground. You want the one on the right."

As he picked his way through the pools of water to the building, fewer people stood in his path. Those that stared before moving aside were neater dressed and cleaner. Their faces weren't dazed by pasta básica. They were forbidding in a different way.

Walking by, he felt their eyes. They were more uncomfortable than the eyes wanting to violate him by the compound's entrance. Feeling them, he forgot the smells from the drains and the flies rising and falling in a dense bush on the crapheaps and the naked man who lay across the top of one, giggling a hymn.

Suddenly his only thought was to enter the building where there was no one to look at him like that, just a long, empty, high-ceilinged corridor down which he walked towards the men who sat guarding the final door of all, the door into the dormitory.

There were three of these men. They sat on chairs behind a table, reading. The man knew they exerted more power than anyone else in the prison, except those through that door who, like them and like the men staring at him in the compound outside, awaited trial on charges under Decree 046 of "the law against terrorism".

He reached the table.

"I'm the palanca," he said.

Inside the dormitory, about forty young men in their early twenties were arranged on benches, listening to a tall, thin man who stood reading from a book. The light came from a skylight above him. Apart from his voice, the only sound was rain falling on glass.

The palanca moved towards the man in the light. "We know that a revolution is always religious," he heard him say. "The word religion has a new value and it no longer serves only to designate a ritual or a Church."

The palanca found an empty bench. He sat down and looked at the man reading, taking in the first sentence or two. He saw his clean-shaven face, his blond curly hair and the scar on his cheek which darkened when he concentrated. This was Comrade Chino of Belén, one of the first heroes of the revolution, he reminded himself. This was the man who for three years had sent out prisoners to run some of Ezequiel's most effective missions. This was the man who

had bribed the guards so he, the palanca, could sit here for a week while someone blew up the electricity pylons in Jauja. Or whipped dogs through Ayacucho with grenades round their necks. Or exploded a donkey in the market at Huanta. Or worse.

Early on he'd offered his services, but while they hadn't laughed, they'd made it clear he was too old a mongrel to teach the tricks they now liked you to learn from the age of six or seven. "To become a Senderista doesn't take months," they said. "It takes many years." But they'd kept his name all the same, which was why one evening a month ago as he was unzipping himself from the overalls he'd bought when he first came to the station as a young boy, he found himself looking at a woman who introduced herself as Camarada Edith. She wanted information, she said. Information that would assist the revolution. And she wanted something else.

"We want you to take someone's place," she said. "Just for a week. We want you to be a palanca."

He thought of the man whose place he was taking, at that moment walking past the avocado women, the man who for a week was carrying his name, his double. Thinking of him, he felt uneasy about someone out there with his name. Dead pylons. Dog bombs. Donkey bombs. He could live with those. But recently he had read of other bombs. Human bombs. Mother bombs. Child bombs. Nor was it just the child bombs. It was the throat-cutting, the head-cutting, the ball-cutting. What if they caught the man who was him slitting a PIP throat, red-handed with the bastard's blood? What then? Then it wouldn't be just a week in San Francisco prison.

Under the skylight, the reader looked up from his book. His oriental eyes fell on those sitting there. "When a tree gives bad fruit, it must be cut down," he said. "We cannot build without first destroying. We cannot have a new birth without blood." He closed the book. "Long live the world revolution."

"Long live the world revolution!" shouted the men on the benches. "Death to the President of the Republic! Long live Presidente Ezequiel!"

When they dispersed, the palanca rose and walked into the light. He kept his eyes on the floor. He saw the man's bare feet. They were

watermarked to their ankles in slime from the compound.

"Comrade Chino?" He sensed the man's eyes on him. "I'm the palanca."

"The one from Electro-Peru?"

"Yes."

"From Silar?"

"That's right."

He felt the man before him nod. "Sit down," he said.

They sat on a bench. "The emergency pylons – you've brought details?"

The palanca slapped his leather jacket. "The plans are here." He produced an envelope and handed it over. Without a word, the man placed it between the pages of the book in his lap. Then he said, "What's going on? For two months, all we've heard is rain."

So the palanca told him. He told him about the drought in Silar and Arequipa, where the cattle savannahs had gone without water for nine weeks. He told him about Piura, where the air was usually dry as a cracker. (It had rained night and day for two months, flooding the cotton crops and rotting the cherrywood bed in the house where Admiral Grau had first seen the light of day in June 1834.) He told him about Chimbote, where smell had always meant money and where the harbour's florists stank of pulverized meal from the fish factories. (It was now common to see doorways spilling over with people who had fainted in the odourless air.)

He told him of things he had heard in the electricity station and read about in newspapers. How, germinated by El Niño's strange interaction of water and air, plants were growing along the river banks no botanist had ever seen. How scallops floated on the waves as if boiled in the water. How a burst river had carried a crocodile out to sea where it bobbed for an afternoon among a school of distempered seals.

"In their nets," he said, "men have discovered feathered fish."

And the more he talked without being interrupted, the more confident the palanca became until he found himself able to look into the face of his listener.

"What do they say about us?" said the man eventually.