Prologue

River City Dreaming

Buenos Aires
34° 35′ S 58° 22′ W

Listen! Like a million small, slippery wet kisses on muddy shore and hard escarpment, on pebble beach and marshy reaches, the enormous river meets the land and sings to it, a song of love, water to earth. It is a polyphonic symphony with a chorus of aqueous voices – sucking seductions, rippling percussion, and millions of swamp frogs looking for a wet date. This is the river song. *Canción del Río*.

Her voice tonight is shored up by huge volumes joining the headwater as an eely legion of silver tributaries bring down Andean snow-melt and rainforest deluge. It is a jaguar sound, a deep subsonic snarl carried from the heart of the jungle – a satisfied sound of imponderable power, as if that cat has wrapped its muscles around a kill. A devil's smile of moonlight glint on ivory fangs.

Riparian tree branches reach like birds' feet to caress the black fur of water – fur that is the epitome of blackness, attended by the contented cat purr of wavelets lapping.

But there are other songs on the breeze as well, on a gentle breeze that carries a perfumed drift from jacarandas, and seduces legions of moths out of their beds.

If you listen carefully you can hear the faint sound of children crying, down in La Boca where the barrios are

filled with all human misery and from beyond there, even, from those places in the city where even rags and cardboard are scarce commodities and life is as tough as can be. Little wonder they cry constantly, an incessant wailing like professional keeners. Children without food, toys, parents even, who cry to try to forget the famine knot in the guts, not whinge about it. These are kids who subsist on scraps; whose lives are momentary, passing events.

The river's sub-song is the tympanic thrum of diesel engines, pistoning as huge freight ships heave into harbour after titanic journeys though the tempests of the South Atlantic, where even the seabirds – the black-browed albatrosses and the Manx shearwaters – are driven mad by the wind. Turbines groan in the enormous iron hulks – thrump, thrump, thrump – as the tugboats bring them into safe harbour.

Listen carefully, hush your very heart and you can hear a broken syntax of fractured conversation – partial sentences, snipped phrases – as you tune in to drifts of dream, snag them like wool on wire. In this city there are no secrets. They drift in the air, like spores or moth scales. Musical moth scales. A dust of dreams.

So assemble the fragments of a city's dreaming – hopes mingled with desire, fears expressed in galloping nightmares – as the river song lifts and veers, over dreary buildings and civic splendour, back out over the marshes and widening then over beaches and soft promontories, over ibis haunt and soft shore. Here are creeks and channels that give this place its shape, and offer both rhythm and character to its people. They are the *porteños*,

the people of this port, and there is an open door and ready welcome for anyone who disembarks here. Come on in.

This, then, is the city's sustenance, this river that flows inexorably on. It can be destructive too, and moody, but mainly it brings mineral nurture and fish aplenty. It gives skinny-dipping legions of children escape from the oppression of summer heat, as the great elegant mass of water gravitates to the sea. Elegant as tango. Forever tango.

> How much I want to cry
> In this grey afternoon
> In its peal
> The rain speaks of you.
> It's the remorse of knowing
> That it is my fault that I'll never,
> Love . . . never see you again.
> My closed eyes
> See you same as yesterday;
> Trembling, pleading
> For my love again . . .
> Today your voice comes back to me,
> In this grey afternoon.

And the old couple, Horacio and Flavia Trucco dance to this song in their apartment full of dust. Their legs, though pipe-cleaner thin, are as strong as those of a prima ballerina, and their heads held as high as Andalusian royalty. They are the King and Queen of this dance.

The ancient gramophone dissipates Gardel's voice through the room. This was the tender tenor who died too early, even though his voice, a reedy, silver trumpet, will

persist through vinyl, acetate, on MP3 and in living memory for as long as the Andes rise above the cordillera. They say it is impossible to understand the sadness of this city without understanding the emptiness and pain that underscore the tangos. And Gardel makes it all clear, exemplary. He makes that sadness explicit, unbearable.

Sometimes, in bright-light days, the mud on the riverbank can look like freshly-cut liver, gigantic butchery. The white egrets flash in the sun as if there is a secret semaphore in their feathers. Away in the north the greenery of Uruguay is a thick charcoal line under a sky which threatens a terrible rain, punctuated by flashes of nervy lightning.

But tonight the river is nothing more than a shimmer of light under the moon, with the occasional tiny 'blip' as indigent fish rise slowly to suck a fly. And a miniature symphony of tree frogs strikes up, making music – they are a lovelorn chorus for the dark, harmonizing a hoarse psalm to the night.

This is the River Plate and, like so many rivers, a city has arranged itself around its mouth. Buenos Aires – where the fresh air of its name is now filled with skeins of smog, trillions of diesel particulates that clog the light. But this is a fabulous city – from the frozen music of its regal buildings (some of them would surely dance a gavotte if brought to life) – to the brutalist tenements that mushroomed in the Seventies. The suburbs spread relentlessly, they go on and on as the city swells, as if they want to claim the horizon itself. And the people keep building, encroaching on the pampas with their concrete, an ant-like multitude as diligent as the ants of São Paulo.

But even this city has to sleep and it's always late in the day when somnolence settles, when the city's energies ebb, when the midnight bells have sounded their long echoes, late at night, when the river's song quietens to a gentle lapping against pilings, a shirr of water against the shore.

But the city doesn't stop working. It's just that night brings different work. The men in the bakery, who look like ghosts under their dustings of flour, suffer from ailments that would be comical, were it not for the fact they were so deadly. Yellow bread lung. Yeast fever, which can erase a worker from the staff list in just three days. Seventy-six hours from the first sprinkling of blood on the handkerchief to death's door, diagnosis to departure lounge. A thick line through a name in the staff ledger, an advert for a new bakery assistant the day after the funeral. Life moves on.

The gas station assistants read cheap novellas even as they ponder whether this will be the night someone comes to make a cash withdrawal at the end of a shotgun barrel. Robbery is epidemic. Assault is endemic. Battery the same.

Just a week ago an eminent literary critic, with a much respected weekly commentary section in *La Nación*, was killed in one of the petrol joints on Avenida 9 de Julio for criticizing the manner in which the robbers were going about their business. His last words before shuffling off this mortal coil were, 'Why are you parodying old B-movies when you could be inventing your own hard men argot, appropriating language to your own ends just as you appropriate the cash, gentlemen?' The bad guys, who must have favoured a different intellectual school, sided with the

counter-argument. Ba-bam! One bullet. All his education and learning and some thirty thousand books pondered and remembered blown out in a splattering waterfall from a neat hole in the head. Like a short story, it really was: each red drop a poem.

The robbers are abroad again tonight – working a nocturnal nine to five from dusk to dawn. They are at work as certainly as the motionless nun in her cell. She is hard at work, in her own way, too, whispering her prayers with intensity, knees drawn up close against her straw mattress. She has only the dimming light of one candle to see what there is left of the guttering physical world, even as she reaches up into a higher plane. She knows there is someone listening. She knows she has a conduit to her female God.

'Merciful Señora, bring us comfort and envelop us with your grace. Bless the city as she sleeps. Comfort those who need it the most and give me the strength – if such is your wish – to help them. I know their needs and wants and desire with all my heart to give them succour.'

And then she sings – not a sacred song but an old song about slavery and severed chains, her desiccated voice sustaining a thin melody which carries out over the rooftops to join in the river's arpeggio; its tiny waves in quietest counterpoint to the dissipating voice.

And she is just one of those singing tonight. It's a choir out there. A nightingale shopkeeper, fine-reeded as an oboe; an owl-poet with a deep timbre bassoon, a transsexual baritone and a desperate lunatic making dog noises, all lifting up their voices in supplication and

celebration, or because of insomnia, stomach grumbles, too much red wine or overpowering cheese, night terror or moon worship. Whatever. It makes for a lunar cacophony.

And there will be other prayers too. Hebrew chants. *Tehillim*. And kyries, too. The most beautiful words on earth. Kyrie eleison. Lord have mercy. Be merciful towards us. Be most impossibly merciful.

So listen if you can, if you're not in any hurry, to this song of astonishing variety. Lullaby and blessing. *Lieder* and soundscape. Prayer of praise and penance. Above our many sleeping heads, the various and vital inhabitants of Buenos Aires.

One thing is constant. The river voice. Listen! Listen! It has power, complexity, pollutants, nature in abundance and watery productivity. And so too the lexicon for describing it – how the river looks and behaves in its many moods and seasons. Dark-skinned. Milky-coffee-coloured, or in the vase of this river, these rivers, the colour of *dulce de leche*, that ambrosial food that is both milk and caramel and better than any other food (but don't tell a dentist in this city because they all suffer from depression – the *dulce* is one of the biggest reasons). Argentina is a chart-topper when it comes to dental caries; so many mouths just pocked caves of dental rot, gingival recession fit to take your gums away.

The World Health Organization expresses its concern in heavy, authoritative reports, but sweet-toothedness persists. And the dentists slip further into black dog days. As it happens, one, a literate man with a fine sense of humour – will hang himself this very night – and do so,

ironically enough, using a cord made by twisting together a quarter of a mile of dental floss over a three-week period. It's robust enough to take his weight as he topples the chair from under him, to dangle there as his eyes become empty, as his bowels seep.

The warning signs had been there, flashed out with the certainty of egret wings – the tidying of each and every room, the almost daily visits to the bank, the dinner dates with close friends, not one of them sensing the turmoil within, ticked off a mental tally. In that he would have made a great poker player. Not one of them guessed that Hugo Martinez didn't see the world as a projection like Plato's cave, but rather saw its reality as a dungeon filled with huge broken teeth like gravestones, and he wanted out, more than anything.

This is the mental inventory of ways of describing the river the dead dentist Martinez kept in his head:
Lion-maned flow.
An azulejo flow – blue-grey, like horses.
A visual echo of the Argentine flag as it flies above the palaces.
A powder blue, a rare chalk hue.
A flat red plain, a soup of curdling silt.
Water the colour of chocolate.
Green water, laden with duckweeds.
Glistening gunmetal under a harsh sun.

In his notebook, Martinez the depressed dentist had captured the river in all its seasons. Not much good to him now.

Chapter 1

Los Libros

Fly over the city, feel how the heat rises from the earth, be amazed by the extravagant expanse of the water below, and the city's concertinaed map, which is spreading its concrete lanes and highrises like a virus. There are the new barrios, built under cover of night by men who ooze desperation like sweat. And that's where the children cry the loudest. La Boca. The river mouth. You've seen it.

Fly like the mythical kingfisher in the story *porteños* tell to their awed children. That halcyon bird, with a bill like a Scottish dirk, a stabbing dagger.

The bird dies after eating a fish that belongs to the King of the Fish – *Oh, He Who Must Be Worshipped!* He is the King of all things finned and gilled and He it is who created a space for them in both dark ocean and desert pool – for the pupfish of the Mojave Desert – yes, there is a fish that lives in the desert – and the coelacanth of ocean trench, for iridescences of herring to scythe through chill seas and herds of seahorses to drift aimlessly with the tide.

The kingfisher resurrects as readily as it will die again, a cycle repeated over and over again. Like the story itself, changed with the retelling. Myth is, after all, only very old gossip. Why don't you fly higher now, enjoy the sweeping air, as it catches in your primary feathers, giving you tilt

and control? Your feathers have a diesel sheen, like light on oily water.

And if you swoop through the air and the vapour of thin clouds, and follow the sodium lights of one of the wide *avenidas* that stretch out toward the south and then turn in a tight curve above the extraordinary façade of the oldest bookshop in the country and then bank left above the shop where the old lady makes the most sought-after *empanadas* and then lose height to drift in through the heavy mahogany door of Number 13, Calle Gibson, as if the wood has turned into gossamer, become competely without substance, you can proceed up the stairs and into the first room on the left where you'll see a young boy asleep. He is wearing a velveteen hat on his head – he wears it all the time – even when he is forced to have a bath. On those occasions his mother forcibly removes it even as he howls like a sea lion.

'Washing it, Jaime, that's all I'm doing,' says his mother, always eager to placate the boy. For he is her only, precious son.

Jaime is his only name. He doesn't have a surname because his mother, Esmeralda, who now works in a run-down coffee shop but used to work in much, much worse places, such as the room-by-the-hour flop shops, the hot pillow hotels, doesn't know who the father was and won't give her son any other name than that of her own father by way of forename. She wouldn't know the biological father if he was standing right in front of her. A tear in a condom changed her fate. Anyway, she is tall and handsome and like all mothers, a fabulous heroine.

It is three in the morning and the child has only just come in after a hard night's collecting and packing. He works in concert with other gatherers, gleaning cardboard and paper on the streets, slaving like a Trojan to break down the boxes and get them ready for the bundler who compacts them into big, brown cubes with his antique-looking press. The old guy who does the bundling has outsized arm muscles like Popeye. Jaime compacts the newspaper himself, using twine to shape and contain the piles. His brown arms work quickly, lassoing the papers and pulling them into place with a speed that confounds the eye. The others call him the Monkey and they are very fond of him – he is an effortlessly happy worker and sings with gusto as he takes his haul to the flatbed truck, its tyres flattened by the weight. He sings lullabies his grandmother taught him, and songs he's heard breaking through the static on the radio. They give him strength, distract him from the aches in his muscles, these songs evoking the cordilleras, rhythmic hymns to condors and high land, tales of love, both lost and won, though mainly lost.

His mother has left for work by the time he gets up but she has covered a full plate of leftover pastries from the café to protect them from flies. She always gets goods for nothing. Even though Jaime eats industrial amounts of them there is little danger of his growing fat, as he works so hard, burning off calories in the furnace of his effort.

In the café Esmeralda sells deep-fried *empanadas* to men who are exhausted after working night shifts in the factories and entirely spent after working illegally long hours behind the wheels of taxicabs. So tired are they that

some find it a strain to chew the pastries, even, with their rich mix of beef, currants and eggs, their flavour barely registering. The men's eyes are like dead fish as they eat, for they are licked by life, worked over by it and the testing strain of working two or three jobs to make ends meet. Ever since the peso was devalued living has been hard. But she knows the men will be in tomorrow and every day afterwards, looking increasingly exhausted and zombified.

Esmeralda works eighteen-hour days herself and she'll often double up as short-order cook as well as waitress: she is always ready with her smile, and popular because of it. Some of the men flirt with her, in that pathetic way that lonely men have, or in that sly way married men develop, now that their wives have put on weight or grown too familiar. Love between a man and woman is so fragile, like the papery wrap of a butterfly cocoon: that between a mother and child so invincible. The flirty men try out all their lines:

– Are you free tonight – or will it cost?

– Here's 20 centavos – phone your mother to say you won't be coming home tonight.

She has heard them all by now, every pick up line known to pathetic man, some sharp, some dumb, some chance.

– You're the one.

The words are traps for the unwary. Sometimes she goes next door to the bar called El Faro for a brandy with one of the men before turning for home. One of them is 'El Gato', 'the cat', and no one is exactly sure why he's been given this name, though it's probably explained by the way his body moves, a slinkiness in his manner. His

real name is Manuelito and Esmeralda loves the way his eyes engage the world around him, drawing it in, not content with just reflecting it. She enjoys his self-confident demeanour. She likes his voice, too, which carries the cragginess of his mountain childhood in the hard consonants that sound like rock being chipped with a mandrill. And the long 'o' he uses, like the sound of red-backed hawk wheeling and crying over the highlands.

He also has a stammer, which makes him seem weak, when in fact he is anything but. Manuelito was the only man who didn't presume that her acceptance of a drink was a passport to her bedroom. He was blessed with an old style chivalry and that was why she went to bed with him, that first time. That eventual first time. After he'd told her about the dream, over a third brandy, one evening when he realized that there was something beautiful accreting around them. His dream had recurred so many times he'd lost count.

He was riding a horse in the Andean foothills, the muscular land rising jagged and rocky-toothed around and above him, with eroded dragon shapes mutating into wind-sculpted pillars and mesas like the ones in Arizona. He was carrying a letter for a hermit who lived way up in a hut that had neither electricity nor water. It's best to say even this early in the account of the dream – lest it appear that it is something straight out of the Brothers Grimm – that the hermit was not a poor man. In fact, he was the son of a wealthy merchant banker from London, who was poised to inherit a fortune one of these days. The letters Manuelito carried in his extraordinarily detailed dream were sent

from the only private post office in Britain, other than the Queen's own postal service, the really private one, with trained falcons and tiny parchments on chains. So a tweedy lady in a gentlemen's club in Pall Mall had forwarded the letter. Details, details.

Manuelito was wearing a red felt hat and had a heavy mantle of alpaca wool draped around his shoulders. His palomino was the nervous sort of steed, taking hesitant steps across the scree. He remembered all the detail: it was the sort of dream a dreamer pays attention to, even in the murkily indistinct realm of the subconscious. The detail was graphic, like a car maintenance manual.

The horse was wary as it breasted through groves of thorn in the dry valley, even as Manuelito hacked and slashed his way through, aiming to win through to the other side of the riven gulch within the hour. A yellow-and-black snake slid in front of them and curled to defend itself, rearing and uttering a chilling hiss from a devilish head before being absorbed by leaf dapple. The air was thin and the horse breathed stertorously from fear and lack of oxygen, its lungs beating like bellows.

In the distance the mountains were translucent blue, a solid sea of rock. As he slowly gained on them Manuelito could see that they were actually blue, a geological feature rather than a trick of the light.

When he arrived at the hut the hermit wasn't there, but the door was ajar so Manuelito hesitated for an instant, then went inside. He placed the letter on the table and was about to leave, so he could be back home before nightfall, but instead he decided to rest for a few minutes on the one

chair. He was almost instantly asleep. He woke up to see a curious apparition – a hat and scarf floating in the middle of the room – and even though there is usually nothing frightening about hats and scarves, this particular hat and scarf did put the fear of God, or something, into him. Scared to the marrow, he started to recite a fractured mantra made of remembered bits of catechism, scripture readings, the Lord's Prayer and as if by way of reply the clothes disappeared, dematerialized as if they had never, ever been there.

Esmeralda had been listening intently to every word uttered by the man with magnetic eyes, and her attention had been riveted by the last part of the dream as she herself had had a disturbingly similar dream about a hat and scarf, floating in mid-air, threateningly! She almost failed to get the words out to explain. Even listening to his version had brought the night terrors flooding back. When he offered his hand by way of comfort she took it with alacrity before leaning her body against his.

Now, if Satan himself had appeared to them, or a gigantic serpent with silver eyes and hypodermic fangs, or some such horror, it would have made more sense somehow, but a hat and scarf! What was it about those items of clothing, and even more intriguingly, they themselves that they should have this dream in common?

In his room – he happened to live next door but one to the bar and they got there in less than two minutes – they shared a large class of aguardiente of some kind, the neat alcohol singeing their lips. Then, without any seeming cue, they drew close and their bodies began to furl and coil, and

clothes were shucked, tongue tasted tongue. She wriggled out of her black work dress and he took off his solid work boots and the two of them were laughing at the gay abandon of it and there was no embarrassment about it. As she sat on top of him, felt him grow in her most intimate embrace, she felt as if she'd always known him and that these moments were inevitable, preordained, that they could never be taken away. They both moved in time to an inner music. United in rhythm, harmonious in movement, they moved onwards as their bodies sweated towards an exultant release.

Then, in a movie moment, Manuelito lit a cigarette and started talking nonsense, a homely pillow talk that made her feel comfortable and safe. He even spoke about the weather, as her insides tingled and the aroma of tobacco lulled her to sleep, laughing quietly as she drifted. The weather!

Without words, he cradled her beneath his arm and pulled her in as if he wanted their bodies to meld as one. She nestled in a cave of warmth, where she wanted to be.

Jaime is too tired to concentrate in school – even though the geography lesson is one of his favourites and the American lady, who struggles to keep order, is both prim and funny. She comes from a city of which he'd never heard, even though Miss Lucy says it's the place from which the best hip hop in the known universe comes. He isn't keen on the music but many of his friends like it because it's what they watch on TV. She plays something by a band called 'The Coup' through her iPod deck almost

immediately after she's introduced herself, explaining how they'll be learning about a lot of things through music, even maths, which she avers is a sort of music. Playing the songs is a nice gesture. And he covets the player, as do all the other kids in class. If they own one they can be like the children on television. They take it in turns to plug in the little white earpieces and feel the heft of the box on the palms of their hands.

Jaime's friend Jorge isn't in school today as he's had an accident in the workshop where he cuts flowers ready for packing. Some days his hands bleed – as do those of his friends who work in a room which is dim from only having two light bulbs. The wire that binds the carnations is cruel to young hands.

Sleep threatens to envelop Jaime: the American teacher's descriptions of the world flow into a stream of meaningless patter, jumbled with the names of countries, and Jaime fights the encroaching sleep as if it is fire, trying to beat it back, but the waves are relentless. Even though she is talking about places he burns with desire to see – the dry deserts of Chile, the endangered virgin forests of Brazil, the impenetrable Gran Chaco of Paraguay – the facts and images merge and tumble. A train runs through a huge expanse of thorn where smugglers act as modern pirates. He sees skulls and crossbones on their Toyota Land Cruisers. Waterfalls fail to drown out the sound of startled parakeets. A scarlet macaw, hit by an arrow from an Amazonian rifle, explodes in a red supernova of feathers. The small boy's head leans ever forwards as the litany of names flows together: 'Santiagoatacamachubutpatagonia-

cordobacordilleratierradelfuegothelandoffireattheendofthe world . . .

'Jaime!'

The teacher's voice sounds as if it's muffled by cotton wool, all dreamy, faraway.

Insistent rain everywhere and everything looks dank. Horacio and Flavia are wearing their best clothes. He is dressed tidily in a suit normally only aired at funerals nowadays and she is garbed in a fur coat her grandmother bought from a fur trader in Northern California's Russian River at the turn of the century, wearing it all the way south as she rode on the early railroads and on tired nags. What started as a look of faded grandeur had become tatterdemalion by the time she reached home but she still wears it when she can, because this is her American coat and she has worn it on long treks and it has kept her warm in the mountains and at night. The scent of that gargantuan journey sticks to the pelt so that it is a sort of specimen case. The dust of dead insects, the dampness of a canvas tent, the tang of the long sea journey, the zip of juniper scent.

They walk regally to the end of the street, where they hail a cab. This will be Horacio's first time in a taxi, but today warrants the cost. As the car drives through the rain-slickened streets Horacio counts out his money nervously. The numbers on the meter turn at an alarming rate so that he hardly looks out the window. Today the doctor will give his wife the results of the tests. Her cancer is now established, a thing of appetite. She grows weaker

by the day. The pallor of her skin makes her shine in the dark.

Some nights, as they dance to the old tunes – Troello coaxing rich sounds from the bandoneón, or Pugliese caressing the keyboard as if he was outlining his first lover's hips – Horacio will chance upon his wife's ribs, held in a compacting cage of flesh. He can feel, with his fingertips, her heart beating, its pulse and fear, its rhythm and presence. It beats whirringly, like a hummingbird, as if it could fly away from here, out into the night.

Horacio knows she feels he suffocates her sometimes, for even love can asphyxiate. But all he wants is to be near her, to be next to her. He watches the city go past, registering no detail, his mind active with schemes to bring his wife some comfort.

The taxi driver comes from Armenia and has a voice treacly with nicotine. He drives like a madman among all the other mad people. This is an open-air asylum with everyone licensed to kill, as they rush home to meet the nurse with her trolley of medicines. Driving in Buenos Aires first requires a stiff drink, or Librium if you're heading out to the airport.

Señor and Señora Trocca sit like stone images, his counting done, her mind in a dark place. Over the city flash lightning flickers, with attendant thunder: percussive cracking to break the fug.

They know the doctor well and have been visiting his clinic for half a century. He has an assured way of dealing with his patients, a confidence that can make some of them feel better straight away. He explains things in a way that

is painstakingly clear, and always offers a coffee or brandy. He has always, always read the notes before the patient comes in, so that they never have to wait in uneasy silence. His coat is white and his breath is often saturated with brandy, but today he is as sober as can be, as he knows Señora Trocca's path leads into the dark woods. He wishes he could go with her, be her guide past the stumps of fallen trees and the liana overhangs, to show her how to skirt the dark places. But that is not the way. The doctor imagines how her husband will take the news, how he will be smithereened by it.

'Would you care for a drink?' asks the doctor, gesturing towards both kettle and bottle.

'No thank you,' answer the couple, their voices in unison.

The doctor upholds his own standards and doesn't beat about the bush.

'I cannot explain things better than to tell you in terms of time. Señora Trocca, I'm so very sorry. You only have a fortnight left to you, I'm afraid. We can help you deal with the pain but the cancer is racing through your body and raging in vital organs. I have only one suggestion. Would you now consider going into the hospital, where at least we can keep you comfortable?'

In a voice that is disarmingly confident and full, the old lady refuses, insisting that she wants to be with her husband during all the time that remains to them and says, unequivocally, that it is her wish to die in her own bed. The doctor counters by saying that Horacio can be with her all the time in the hospital but there is a determined look in

the dark currant eyes of the dying woman which suggests that any argument he marshalls will be futile in the extreme. He knows this kind of determination: her generation had to be determined to survive.

The two old people bow as they leave – deep bows like Japanese worshippers in the temple of Kiyomizu-dera in Kyoto, even though this pair have never left their native city, or even met someone from Japan. It is an unusual gesture. The ancient lovers leave with heads held high, as usual.

Outside, the terror of what they've been told threatens to dismantle them. They stand outside a flower shop like pieces in a statuary. Dread turns their skin into marble.

'I'll be with you until the world ends. Until the sun falls from the sky, my love, my beautiful bride.'

He runs out of clichés. Nearly.

'You are the one.'

That night they go to L'Aventura for dinner – a down-at-heel restaurant that has seen better days. The grey wallpaper peels like grim festoons from the damp walls. The chairs are held together by electrical tape. The men who serve here are old – courteous zombies in crisp white shirts with time-crenellated collars and sober black ties. But they are also resourceful old men, crafty in the way they make sure the old couples who dine here feel they are in a special place on a blessed evening. How so? Even though there are only two elements to the set meal – meat and vegetables and the ubiquitous caramel flan – the old boys always ask, 'Have the señoras chosen?' – and by dint of this single question they manage to keep their customers'

geriatric fantasies intact. They make the menu seem much longer, help maintain the dignity of old people.

As she picks at her flan Flavia tells Horacio that she will love him after she is dead. The old man's body shudders with emotion and his eyes gush cataracts of tears.

'It's true,' says the old woman, who has volunteered to learn a special code, a specific list of numbers, that as been devised by mathematicians at the University of Buenos Aires. They have a scheme to test communication with the dead, and if she can successfully communicate the list to them after she has passed then the scientists will have bridged the awful chasm. The numbers have been generated by a computer and will be known only to a computer operator and to her. She cannot tell him what they are but she wants him to be alert, on the lookout for them.

She tells him more about the nature of the experiment and how the scientists have been working with colleagues in Canada and Arizona, studying the moment of death and its many consequences.

'And do people actually get in touch from the other side?' Horacio asks.

'Not yet, Horacio.'

He's been listening to her without understanding everything she says. His spoon sits on the plate for he has no appetite. He doesn't want a single thing, other than to keep his wife by his side.

Abélard and Eloise. Antony and Cleopatra. Adam and Eve. Horacio and Flavia.

One night, as Jaime worked on the streets in one of the eastern suburbs of the city, a tall woman came out of a Chilean restaurant called Tres Estrellas and paid him a great deal of attention. He was ripping the cardboard with gusto and applying as much pressure to it as he could, before handing it to one of the men with leather aprons. The bundles were then loaded on a cart.

The stranger looked at him for some minutes, without the usual embarrassment with which people in grand clothes normally caught sight of him, averting their eyes as quickly as they could. Most of them walk swiftly by. Then the woman walked up to the principal baler and asked how she could contact the boy the next day, to discuss business. That flummoxed the man. Who on earth uses the word 'business' with owlish workers who keep night hours and are dressed worse than derelicts, in fact are only one grade up from absolute dereliction? And what sort of business? But the woman had a kind, heart-shaped face, so Juan the baler gave her Jaime's uncle's address, suggesting that would be the best way. *He keeps a shop over in Buedo and owns a phone. Yes, definitely the best way to contact the boy.*

Jaime eavesdropped, even though he had barely an inkling of what was going on. Yet he was mature enough to know – for he lives in a world where kids have to accelerate through to the point where they do know such things – that something big was afoot. The woman smelled of geranium and lemon drops. Her hair shone like coal under the streetlights.

The woman's name is Phyllida Gellhorn and she is forty-eight and has a long history of working with Non Governmental Organisations in as many countries as you can shake a stick at. She's a Canadian who has lived longer in Argentina than she has in North America. By now she speaks the patois of the *porteño* to such an extent that she has lost the staccato pace of speech that went with living in cities such as Oakland and Minneapolis, where she was a probing reporter with the best of them.

Now she works as a publisher specialising in children's books and especially *Las Aventuras del Gato Verde*, which is the sort of runaway success story all publishers dream about. It's a simple tale about a cat which falls into a vat of green paint, so that it leaves its paw prints everywhere, all over town, all over the page, and because this is a kids' book, the paint never dries. There is green splash all around the mousehole where the cat, called simply Green Cat, *El Gato Verde*, spends an hour each and every day, just watching. There is paint all across the garden and down the alleyway where every day Green Cat visits its friend Tito. And, of course, there is plenty of evidence when something goes wrong, which it often does, because we're talking about Green Cat, an animal happily disposed to adventure.

Phyllida Gellhorn has just had an idea, or perhaps something bigger than a mere idea: she is awash with a gigantic brain wave, the sort of idea that comes as a deluge and changes everything in its wake. And the idea has arrived pretty much fully formed. Crashed in.

She has an image of a book in her head: a book that has cardboard covers and pages made of recycled paper, a bit like the fancy notebooks you see in some of the upscale stationery shops. But her book is different in that there are lots and lots of them and they are cheap as can be and they are run off by the tens of thousands. As she drives home she talks nineteen to the dozen to her husband but between his poor hearing and the number of cocktails he has poured down his neck, he is none too astute. Besides, his wife's word are galloping along in the most thoroughbred manner. He can't keep up.

When Jaime gets home that evening, he stops, as he always does, to leave a small pile of paper outside the door of the old couple that live downstairs. He hardly ever sees either of them but there is always music creeping out under the door – those old songs that can slice the heart in two. Jaime loves them and will often linger to learn a melody as it seeps through the crack. If he has enough time he'll squat on his haunches and listen carefully, committing the tunes to memory, so that he can sing them to himself as he works.

After they hear the boy's footsteps turning the corner of the stairs and then the sound of the upstairs fire door opening, Horacio steps outside gingerly and picks up the papers. He then carries them into the cramped dining room, where he has been busy cutting up thousands of little strips of paper, which he then glues on to the evolving frame of his creation. The frame itself is also made of paper, but with each successive generation of stuck-on paper it grows in strength. It is also a fractured, dislocated narrative: tales of this city, accounts of this nation.

Football headlines bisect news of murders laid over political commentary and entertainment gossip. Strips of *La Nacíon* over ribbons of the same length and width cut from the *Buenos Aires Herald*. Gradually its shape begins to form and he strengthens the front, side and back. He keeps on building, using every delivery of newspapers to build up the shape of the thing, so that lines from *La Prensa* and *Clarín, La Razón* and *La Capital* cross and blur and there are now thousands of narratives crisscrossing in crazy abandon, something like the higgledy-piggledy story of the city itself, built partly from Chinese whispers and partly from remembered history. Palimpsest on palimpsest. There are headlines and bylines, paragraphs of print and columns of argument: how the first penguins of spring landed on the coast of Chubut with almost clockwork precision, marking the season as surely as swallows in Europe (page 12 of *El Cronista*); the madcap railings and anti George Bush ravings of Chavez 'the pinko oil baron', which attracted the attention of *Ámbito Financiero*; a killing in San Telmo and in the Claramente and in a few other places in a monthly crime round-up; an oil strike in Patagonia; a rare wine harvest delights makers from Cordoba to Mendoza . . . cellar carefully and your grandchildren will be able to toast your wisdom. Every story, no matter how well written, and no matter how thorough the research, is turned into precise squares and meticulous rectangles as Horacio's sharp scissors and shaky hands advance their work. More bits of paper. *Bistec*, 24 pesos only, another murder, a new opinion poll, half a story

here, half a story there. Eight more inches of news, some adverts on top, as his creation finally takes shape . . .

The first time Jaime and Manuelito meet is far from being a success. Esmeralda has asked the boy to behave, even though she knows he is at heart a really well-behaved kid. But he is also independent, and this quality has created the need in him to do fatherly things in the absence of a father. Despite his bantam size there is a touch of the alpha male about him, and friction between him and other men is inevitable, especially a man who has started to claim too much of his mother's time which Jamie finds rare enough to begin with. In another time, in another place, they would already be fighting with knives, the blades startling, the blood inevitable.

For this introduction his mother has chosen a pizzeria where Jaime always goes on his birthday (he likes the food there so much he has been known to go through their garbage cans looking for crusts and uneaten food at other times of the year). She thinks this might make him view the evening as a treat of some kind. In fact he sees it as his world being invaded, everything being overturned. In his fanciful young mind he sees it as akin to a wild tribe rushing into his village and razing all the straw huts to the ground, raping the women and, well, even the animals aren't safe from this lot. Manuelito makes him angry beyond words, and as the man stammers he wishes he could twist and yank that stupid tongue out of his mouth. What does his mother see in this cretin, this yammering moron?

'You . . . you . . . enjoy school – according to your mother.'

Manuelito's stammer intensifies with the pressure of the situation. Jaime glowers at his mother.

'You had no right to talk to this . . . stranger about what I do or do not do in school . . .'

He spits out the words in a spray of spittle. They have pretty much the same effect on Manuelito, who forces a brave and fixed smile. He is willing to persist in his efforts with the lad, not only because he adores Jaime's mother but because the boy works like a Trojan, placing a brown envelope of cash on the table every Friday night, not that a street boy earns anything like he should for the hours and the daunting effort. He doesn't keep so much as a centavo for himself: his mother doles out pocket money by way of teaching him prudence.

Over their very late breakfast the old couple are discussing euthanasia and how the local soccer team, Boca Juniors did in the local derby against the River Plate. Not very well. The two disparate subjects meld seamlessly. The old man, pouring orange juice, says he knows someone who could get them half a syringeful of liquid that would work very swiftly and without pain (he has one eye on the other half of the liquid for himself, for later) even though he doesn't admit that the friend is, in fact, their doctor, who had waylaid him on the way to the tienda. The partisan voice on the radio blames the scoreline on the referee who clearly had mislaid both seeing dog and white stick.

It takes them a full half-hour to get dressed in their

dancing clothes. She breathes heavily now, and every movement is a grave effort. Her husband places the needle on one of their favourite records, one of Carlos Cesar Lenzi's songs – 'A Media Luz' – which crackles through the air in the appropriate half-light. And as the words swirl elegantly around the room, the two begin to move in stately progress, their torsos stiff, their heads near motionless, although their legs move almost gymnastically. From the waist up the tango is seemingly effortless, disdainful of movement, but the legs, well, the legs have it. Half the body still and half in constant and complicated motion. She hardly looks at him: he hardly looks at her, and he would find it very hard to look at her, so tenderly does he love his dying wife who has been all to him for so many years. Lenzi steers them around . . .

> Corrientes 348,
> Second floor, elevator
> There are neither doormen nor neighbours.
> Inside, cocktail and love.
> Loft furnished in maple:
> Piano, rug and night lamp,
> A telephone that answers,
> A phonograph that cries
> Old tangos of my flower
> And a porcelain cat
> That can't mew the love.

And the two hold on to each other, hold on for very life. They feel each other's presence, utterly as one in their movements, and for a fleeting moment their eyes meet and

it is as if it's the first time – him carrying a box of shoes across Estados Unidos and her carrying a small tissue of flowers to give to her violin teacher after passing the exam, and as she dances with happiness along the pavement she fails to see the road mender's hole into which she stumbles, and in that memory of the first time he can see through all the years that intervene to the bright moment when her eyes – startled and clear – looked into his as he offered her a gallant hand, lifting her and helping her back on her feet.

Wearied now, Horacio's feet snag on the carpet, his wife too brave to show that she cannot dance much longer. She gives him this gift, this last dance. She sees a dapper, younger version of her husband lift some yellow roses and place them back in their cone of paper, a casual but treasured memory. He sees how yellow her skin is, how jaundice-pallid, like the daylight seeping from the sky outside. His wife's liver under siege. His wife's kidneys are under attack. A last dance, perhaps. And she dances with impossible precision all the way through the next stanza, her memory for the sway of notes intact, even if her body is failing.

> And everything at half-light
> That love is a sorcerer . . .
> At half-light the kisses . . .
> At half-light the two of us . . .
> And all at half-light . . .
> Interior twilight . . .
> What soft velvet
> The half-light of love . . .

In a room filled with ornate and heavy colonial architecture, with views over the Plaza Mayor and the cathedral, Phyllida is making her case. The table seats twenty monied men, and she is here to appeal to business sense and harry their consciences.

'Gentlemen. I want to talk to you about an opportunity to give Argentina pride in itself and to give yourselves pride in your actions.'

This inclusivity right at the outset was textbook stuff, as was the rivalry she was about to engage . . .

'We will be seen as so unlike our uncivilized neighbour – where the police hunt down children of the streets and shoot them dead, where venal talk of money drowns out all poetry. There are places where kids are chased right through the *favelas* and gunned down like dogs in front of their mothers. We, the literate, Argentine people want even the poorest children to be cultured, to have a chance of beauty in their lives. And this is why I'm proposing The Great Library of Argentina, which will see all our classics, modern and old – in fact the whole glorious canon of our literature made available to all, on paper picked up from the streets and then recycled and bound between cardboard covers, using cardboard some of our poorest street urchins have gathered as they slave away while many of us sleep.'

'But doesn't this insult our great writers such as Cortázar and Borges, who deserve to be bound in leather, with their names in gold lettering on the spines? Their work shouldn't be found in a cardboard sandwich,' challenges a man with a face as florid as a fuschia flower.

'Not so, sir. Quite the reverse. Every contemporary author worth his or her salt has signed a petition backing this idea to the hilt. And were Cortázar alive today I'm pretty sure he'd have added his signature, in blood if need be. This is a way of getting a whole nation to read books, to regain their birthright.'

And then the masterstroke . . .

'And as I've been suggesting, while our neighbours sully the very idea of innocence and curtail childhood in any meaningful way for hundreds of thousands, I'm sure you'll agree we're a people who love and respect our children, yes we love them and respect the space they need to grow and blossom as individuals, asking only the familiar trinity of them in return – that they love us back, that they keep to the basic rules and work in school – not much to ask when all is said and done. And this will inject equality into the lives of children from Catamarca to Ushuaia, from Formosa to Mendoza, as they all get to read what is rightly theirs – their written heritage. And we shall teach them all to read and by damn, and when we've finished every work of note from Argentina – Centenera to Cortazar, Prado to Puig – then we'll start filling the bookshelves with other great works of the world – Shakespeare, Calvino, Brodsky, Muldoon, Ted Hughes, Elias Canetti, Caradog Prichard and Patrick White.'

She mentions White on purpose, knowing that his name would be unfamiliar to them and this would be unsettling, prey on their minds a little, make them feel ignorant, however temporarily. She loves his *Tree of Man* more than any other book she'd read and had it read it at least eight

times. A pure story, Old Testament stuff, about establishing a home in a hard place. She thinks he should be taught here, in this country, where its parable would be taken as documentary.

She is asked to leave the room while the men deliberated her suggestions. They have pot bellies bursting with power. They do not take long to achieve a consensus and soon she was back in the room with them. The director of the Banco Nacional, the one with a pot belly in which you could hide barrels, has a broad smile on his face as he explains that they are of a mind to give every peso asked for, and, furthermore, everyone in the room, in their capacities as employers, will release key staff on secondment, so she will be able to make more money, keep accounts, have marketing know-how, and by dint of these be able to set her sights even higher.

'You are a persuasive lady with considerable reserves of energy,' said the country's most important banker – who would later offer her a place on his board.

'We are maturing as a twenty-first century country,' says a former vice-president, who is keen to hang on the coat-tails of this idea as a means to launch himself a new career. This woman has also sparked a desire in him to write a memoir, something to make it onto a list of the future.

'And if ever the National Bank offers you major league money to go and work for them then the Party would like to say publicly that we would more than match it. We know a national heroine in the making, most certainly,' says another politician.

'And because we're the Banco Nacional, if ever you

make an offer we'll match it, even if we have to have a new print run of banknotes and use up all the purple ink,' retorts the head of the bank. 15 all.

They laugh at that outrageous conceit. This gives Phyllida, who was trembling inside, time to compose herself. She thanks them with all her heart, announcing that she is going to start work that afternoon by trying to contact the little boy who triggered the idea in her mind, imagining that he might be the public face of the project. She has his uncle's number in her little black book, which is about to swell with useful contacts. Phyllida thanks them all for their wisdom, and further for wisdom they will impart to generations as yet unborn.

When she reached the street below she phoned the uncle and asked for the address. Despite a whipping wind that felt as if was flailing in from Patagonia, she decided to walk across the city, which would also help quieten the tremors of excitement that shuddered through her. She deliberately went past the shanty town at the back of the station, where the inhabitants had dug in when the city announced they were going to bulldoze the place, arguing that if they were given a reasonable sum from the future developers of the site they could themselves move up one step in life. She could hear a chorus of kids' voices behind the wall that separated the sprawling camp from the railway tracks.

The shop, when she reached it, was dark, not because it was closed but because the entire stock of second-hand toys was lit by the light of just one candle and even the flame of that seemed to gutter emphysemically. A stuffed

baboon, missing one eye, hung from its own mangy arm over the till, which itself looked like a museum piece. The antique till was set theatrically as an island on an aluminium foil pond where flocks of plastic ducks swam. As her eyes adjusted to the gloom she could discern an enormous pile of jigsaws and noted that each box was marked with three sets of numbers. There was the price, then the number of pieces and then the number of pieces the box should contain, so a purchaser could work out precisely how many pieces were missing. She thought someone would have to be very poor indeed to buy a jigsaw without all the pieces, then realized that someone had had to count the pieces – to do the maths. One box contained 1898 pieces out of two thousand. It would look like a wool sock after the moths had finished dining, a puzzle suitable for those with attention deficit disorder. *Start again, why don't you? Oh, don't worry, start again with a different piece.*

'May I help you, señora?' asked a man in a brown shop coat. He had a shock of white hair, which hung luxuriously over his shoulders.

'I'm looking for a young man called Jaime.' Phyllida replied. 'Do you know where I might find him?'

'Oh! You must be the lady who phoned earlier. Now he hasn't done anything wrong – I can vouch for that. He's as honest as the day is long.'

The man burbled his words rather but he was undeniably protective of the boy. Jaime's uncle admired the fact he worked like a robot. His nephew was the sort who could

climb up out of the ditch, as his grandmother used to say: he could make something of himself. He really would.

'No. He's not in trouble – I hope quite the opposite. I have a scheme to publish hundreds of thousands of affordable books – most of them affordable because they'll be free, and I'd like him to permit us to take photographs of him to use when we publicize our new library.'

'Why him?' asked the old man, who had no clue what she was talking about.

'Because he's a hard worker . . . and I saw him one night trying to read one of the papers he'd collected. I could see the frustration in his face. And one way to tackle illiteracy is to give people worthwhile things to read, coupled, of course, with the skills to read them.'

'He finds it hard to concentrate in school,' replied the uncle. 'And by the time his mother comes home she's too tired to help him – and she herself finds reading a difficulty . . . But let me say one thing if I may? If you single him out for attention then he'll become a target for other kids. He'll be fighting day and night.

'We'll take care of that. And by the way, would you like to come to work for me yourself? We'll need someone with experience of the retail sector.'

The two old men were drinking coffee and staring meditatively out of the window at the rush of people wearing raincoats and carrying umbrellas, and at the way the wind sent streams of jacaranda petals like confetti down the *avenida*.

'She's weakening by the minute,' said Horacio, his cheeks wet with tears.

'Is it time for me to help you out?' asked the doctor, employing his most professional tone of voice. He had helped a good many people leave this earth ahead of the allotted time, and had done so with a clear conscience. Who would choose to live a life of pain and share that pain with all their family? Not Hippocrates himself, he'd bet.

'I will need your help,' said Horacio. 'But not in the way you suggest. She wants to leave, but doesn't want that coward's drift into the arms of Morpheus, using drugs. But she is ready to leave. Do you have ten minutes to come over to the flat – she's fast asleep at the moment? I have something to show you.'

An old, heavy key turned in an outsized lock and the two men walked ceremoniously up the time-worn marble stairs, past the rows of locked doors and into the flat. It was dark and there was only the sound of Flavia's troubled, bronchitic breaths, the sound of caged budgerigars. With his finger to his lip, Horacio led the doctor to the dining room, where the doctor beheld a boat made entirely out of paper. Using his usual forensic logic, he thought that Horacio had chosen his material deliberately. Suitable for sinking. He noted the shape of the supine figure in the room next door, was intrigued by the care lavished on making the boat's paper sides. He could imagine her sandwiched in the keel. Death by slow drowning – chosen in preference over sleeping tablets or a pillow pressed over a mouth, mercifully applied. He could see it.

'She wants to go on the river for her last journey,' said Horacio, buoyed up momentarily by the seaworthiness of his craft, or perhaps its riverworthiness.

'Where will she go?' The doctor imagined the paper drawing water in minutes, the suck and pull of her sinking.

'It'll be some sort of holiday – to new places – to see a little more of the world than she has previously seen. Flavia has never left Buenos Aires, and as she joked the other day, it's never too late.'

In the Athenaeum Club fourteen men of irrefutable influence, in dark suits and silk ties that vary in colour but not in sobriety, sit around a teak table that was made four hundred years ago. They look at Gellhorn as if she has just arrived from Mars. But she is aflame with conviction, and having already convinced one roomful of such men, she feels able to browbeat these cynics. Tonight will be a new pitch, and she will not be using notes. These are the publishers, the booksellers, the distributors, the advertising agency guys – not to mention a sprinkling of venture capitalists not known for their philanthropy.

'Gentlemen, thank you for your time. Let me start by reminding you about some of the virtues of our society. We live in a city that has a thousand bookshops – some of them are represented here this evening – and in every community in the land there are shops that try to keep the latest titles in stock. But since the peso was devalued books are expensive commodities – out of the reach of the ordinary man and woman on the street. And not just them. Only a week ago I met a professor at the University of La Plata

who teaches comparative literature and she told me she can't compare literatures as much as she would like because the library's budget has been cut, and she certainly can't afford to buy the latest books by Soyinka, Bolaño, Pamuk and so on on her salary.

'We are a nation that has offered a dazzling range of authorial voices to the world, a chorus of voices that proclaims "We are here and our lives are worth recording." But our children can't read these works because the municipal libraries are empty: you can see shelves which have nothing on them other than labels. Go down to any one of them – libraries in Salta, Junín, San Rafael and Puerto Madryn – and you'll find something that resembles a closing down sale. On average there are forty people waiting for each title – yes, each and every title. In my own library there are over two hundred people waiting to read Borges' poetry alone. So this is the answer we've come up with.'

She reaches for fourteen cardboard bound copies of Sabato's first novel, *El Túnel*, and hands them around.

'Each volume will have a recycled binding, and every page will be made of paper that is a hundred per cent recycled. If we manufacture these every child and young person will be able to read, will be able to start their own libraries. And it won't be costly, as every major newspaper publisher in Argentina has said we can print them at their presses when they're lying idle, a couple of hours a day.'

The gathering is incendiary at first – even though what they've heard is slightly better than the vexing version which had been circulating via Chinese whispers and jungle

drums before the meeting. They see their own sales dwindling to nothing in a moment. But Phyllida says that this can only create a fresh new appetite among adults and they should remember that all of these young readers will all too soon grow to be adult book buyers, and then she clinches it by saying that monies will be made available to buy the copyrights for the cardboard books and mentions a substantial sum already earmarked by the Banco Nacional.

Some of the arguments Phyllida hears marshalled against her plan are snobbish ones. One book buyer for a major chain suggests that she is degrading the works by wrapping them in discards, but she counters his claims with the withering cliché that he is judging a book by its cover. One man argues that in a country with so many cattle on such huge stretches of pampas they could afford leather-bound copies but she says that this is also about giving street boys a pride in what they do, and, eventually, a way out of their poverty traps. Better than boxing, rock music or drug dealing as passports. And then Victor Sanchez, the owner of the longest chain of bookshops in the country starts clapping, joined quickly by a caucus of his friends. Phyllida knows she has the book trade on her side. Or in the palm of her beautiful hand.

During the course of the next few weeks – and it does only take weeks – the plan blossoms, then fructifies. There are days when big news presses, usually silent for some six hours in the huge industrial estates, work full pelt, sending the first copies to be bound further down the line. Some of the country's leading artists have volunteered to paint original covers for the books; some create bright Rorschach

blots and belts of colour, while others create work of more conventional conception.

The most famous and lauded conceptual artist in the land, Oscar Martinelli, though well into his nineties, produces ten covers a day, each and every one of them among his finest works. As a series they gather everything he has ever learned or intuited about life, culminating in a haunting study of a skull, made of glass or crystal and seemingly illuminated from within, with all the fissures of bone turning into gossamer threads. Little canyons of sentience and knowing. Unbeknown to him he has just created the iconic summary of the project, which will become the symbol of the whole endeavour. Nine hundred artists will work on twenty thousand copies of the first print run of Borges' poems, customizing the covers. They reflect their own regions – from the astonishing flatnesses of the pampas to the terrifying and empty vastnesses of Patagonia. A man from Salta, who works in acrylics, depicts the colourful front doors which are so typical of the place, echoing images of the Georgian doors of Dublin, and a man of Welsh descent tells the story of his people coming to Patagonia, with a cover showing a ship, another showing a sheep fence and another a detail from a teacup which tells the whole story – like reading the story of a Grecian urn as you turn it in your hand.

In the series launch, in the Libreria Oriental, the largest bookshop in all of South America, with a million and a half titles on its shelves, the people mingle amid the buzz of a honeycomb covered with worker bees. There are the politicians in their Armani suits, and the press with their

weasel snouts, and the glitterati of the Zona Norte where the rich houses reach all the way from Olivos to San Isidro. A huge brass orchestra plays – two hundred members in all – and there is feasting and an auction for the first volume. This appeals to the brazen appetite of the nouveau riche who crave ownership of anything exclusive, and show off their wealth whenever they can: their wives' handbags always come from Prada or Hermes, their life values come from glossy magazines.

For the first book of its kind the auctioneers extract a king's ransom from El Capitan, the owner of the yacht club and marina at Puerto Olivas, who is then happy to present it to the National Library as a gift. His style.

On the wall outside the opulence and extreme comfort of the Libreria a small boy smiles down from a huge poster. He has a copy of a book in his huge hand. Jaime is about to grow into a symbol of the city and, before too long, a symbol of the country itself. Like the starving child of Biafra, or the pathetic child who haunts the adverts for *Les Misérables* in any city worth its salt, it is a young face laden with meaning. But unlike those poster kids for poverty and shame, Jaime's face carries a burden of dignity. Yes, Jaime, who will one day win an enormous literary prize in the States after spending a decade being feted by the world's best universities. The face of a better future for his country . . .

Because there will be cardboard books for every child in Argentina, and cheap writing paper aplenty for every school. One day this boy on the poster will stand before the United Nations, in a specially convened meeting of UNESCO, and he will raise the spectre of illiteracy in order

to explain how they banished it from their land, along with the Sony reader and other devices designed to rob one of the simple experience of turning pages and learning.

In May 2023, Jaime addresses a packed chamber and he doesn't have a script, just a narrative of pride:

'Because someone reads with his right hand – depending on which hand one normally uses of course – we know when the end is approaching in, say a Sherlock Holmes story by Conan Doyle, by the number of pages left to turn. Our minds are forced to speed up, to try to solve the crime before the detective. There is a communion between reader and writer, a physical link between them as the hand holds the page, and that link is stronger now the world over, as reading not only threatens to become the new rock and roll but is the new rock and roll. Knowledge is power, as they say and the old ways of disseminating knowledge are often the best ways. So thank you all for supporting the Year of the Book. We will banish illiteracy. We will create people who can think their way out of the world's ills. The answers are all there in some book or other: we just need plenty of detectives to ferret them out. But the future for now, belongs to science fiction, to William Gibson and Phillip K. Dick. But soon it will belong to the unborn millions, waiting to overcrowd the teeming tenements of Buenos Aires and Mumbai, to inhabit the skyscrapers of Singapore and Sydney. To plant their homegrown shacks on every map, to build them in a night, to stake their claims. And they shall have books, I tell you, no matter how poor they are. Because with books you have richnesses beyond comparison.'

The two men are carrying the old lady, who has shrunk to pretty much nothing during the past few months. She weighs no more than fifty loaves, if that. As they turn the corner of the stairs the boy who delivers the piles of papers appears, as if he knows that every effort and sinew in his wiry arms and taut muscles will be called for. Soon, he is working his shoulder under the keel of the boat, taking most of the weight.

A song from the misty recesses of memory echoes in Horacio's skull under his floppy fedora – that song about a grey afternoon and the absence of love. He looks at his wife, whose breathing is shallow now – like a child holding its breath – as she leaves for her final journey. He imagines the accompaniment, coming in unbidden and gently . . .

> How much do I want to cry
> In this grey afternoon?
> The tinkling rain
> Seems to speak about you.
> Forgiveness,
> That it is my fault,
> That I will not see you again
> Never ever, never see you again:
> With my eyes shut
> I see as if it were yesterday
> Shaking, pleading for my love,
> Today your voice comes back to me
> This grey afternoon . . .

The city is preternaturally quiet – grey layers of silence settling to form the bedrock of darkness – with only the

very occasional taxi ferrying a drunk to some down-at-heel bordello. The men walk on, coping with the awkward shape of their cargo. Jaime isn't sure what's in the boat, but he can imagine. When they put it down he glimpses a white dress and a lady seemingly asleep.

The men do not speak a word. Horacio listens to the silence, which reflects his inner emptiness. The doctor listens to the reassurance of his own beating heart. Their lungs collectively rasp in the cold night air. They work their way down one street and then another, until they reach the park that runs down to the river. In the distance is the permanent flame near Edificio Kennedy, which commemorates the bloody battles of the Malvinas, but Horacio doesn't see its flickering light, or the lines of the railway tracks beyond or the shape of his friend as he walks behind him. His mind is a swirl of ribbon-like memories that snake and furl into and over each other as he pieces together his married life. The shards of it, now a variegated lapidary of memory.

A confluence of kisses on cherry lips seemingly all summer long – that first splendid summer when he was aflame with young desire and she insisted on guarding her virtue, playing safe and wriggling like an eel when necessary – which was pretty near every time they got this far in their foreplay. He remembers the look on her father's face when they met for the first time – a look of scrutiny and, well, envy, even though he didn't challenge her father's eyes as they flashed with the imagined loss of his only daughter. He recalls the first dance in the Armenian social hall as he demonstrated his ineptitude by sprouting

an extra leg: wincing slightly as he remembers her embarrassment at finding herself on her back on the floor as she tripped over his awkward clodhoppers, then blaming her own clumsiness to let him off the hook. These are his memories as the three men walk though the park and the path turns silver in the revealing first light and birds start to twitter exploringly and some of the denizens of the cardboard shanties start to stir. Horacio remembers her laughter, great falling cascades of laughter, the best sound in all the world, and the taste of the skin on her shoulder, which was sweeter than that of the delicious length of her back which had overtones of caramel and notes of honeysuckle, he would swear to God it did, and one day he said he'd now kissed her everywhere, but she said *not quite everywhere* before offering him her deepest secret, and in the dark he found her salty and warm, a cave of brine, a volcano, a heat so fierce it threatened to set his hair on fire.

These are Horacio's memories of his wife, gathered as a tangerine line of light on the horizon thickened, as the sun sets another Argentine day ablaze. He remembers that too, filtered from all the other memories for whatever reason some things stick and others turn to mist.

The men are on the riverbank now – next to the crazy golf course. The doctor suggests they should now conduct some small ritual, for it is almost time.

'A ritual?'

'Yes, even we humanists should mark the occasion. It's the end of a long journey, Horacio . . .'

It is the first time he's used the man's first name, that

he's dispensed with the doctor-patient courtesies. It sounds clumsy to the two of them. The boy wanders off to look at one of the constructions on the golf course – a windmill and a dyke, invoking the Netherlands.

River light corruscates. The surf of traffic grows louder on the overpasses. Colour leeches into the sepia. Day begins its struggles and satisfactions. This is Flavia's day and the one her husband dreads.

'It's a special day . . .'

Before the doctor can finish his sentence Horacio starts to sing – one of the very old songs, one of the primitive songs that can tear the heart's cage apart, and the young lad starts to sing as well, in notes struck from pure gold and then the doctor adds a baritone as velvety as Guinness as they raise the boat and settle it unfussily on the water. For a few moments the boat does nothing but then Horacio prompts it to move by prodding it with a stick and his wife leaves them now, taking with her the news of her long year's battle with illness. She begins to move with the current and the ship looks like a swan, the white of her nightgown like a soft duvet of feathers and then the song changes as the old man's tears flow and he starts to bay like a terrier that's stepped on a nail.

The current takes her away more steadily now and Horacio utters guttural sounds, cronks like a raven or a crow and the doctor takes the young man's hand as they watch the small craft pick up some speed, say two knots and rising, and even though it is made of paper it doesn't sink but rather it looks surprisingly steady and solid,

breasting the wavelets as if it is a rubber inflatable. It starts to move to mid-channel where trees are carried down from way upriver where uprooted stumps from the leftover forests are a danger to shipping – any ship, that is, and most certainly one made up of old copies of *La Nacíon* and *Ambito Financiero*. After a half hour which feels like an Ice Age, Horacio has settled a little and his sobs are rhythmic now. They stand there on a crumbling breakwater as three eyewitnesses watch the señora moving out of hailing reach, out to open water, to open sea, eventually. Horacio's gaze is unwaveringly steady. May a fair wind follow you, dear. My great love. Farewell.

Later that day Horacio feels with his fingertips the shape of his wife in the lumpy mattress, ferreting for the last physical memory of her. Horacio drinks deeply from the glass of aguardiente next to the bed. He won't get up again until he himself is summoned by death. Until it is time to see her again. The doctor knocks on the door, for maybe the third time that day, and then goes away again. The old man, stubborn and inebriate, hugs the coverlet.

But in the morning, in a fog of sorrow cloaking a lagoon of worry, he feels as if a psychotic blacksmith has been reshaping his skull with a bull hammer, flattening his occipitus. He remembers his wife's words about attempting to speak to him from the world beyond, and leaves his bed to look for the letter confirming the appointment she'd had. The Head of Department was called Professor Sophocles, no less. Horacio rang him from the phone in the street and asked if his wife had made contact yet.

'Nothing's come through, so far, Señor Trucco, but we'll let you know just as soon as we hear anything. I can guarantee that . . .'

He makes it sound as if they were regularly linked up with the afterworld. Had their conduits in place.

And from that moment on Horacio was alert to her presence, taking a pencil and paper with him everywhere and waiting for an invisible hand to guide his own and spell out the code. He even bought a child's abacus, thinking that might make things simpler. But 4557759990003428190 never came through, for all the intensity of his vigil.

The next morning it had been arranged that Manuelito should take Jaime out for breakfast – one more attempt, and perhaps the last, to build a bridge them, between two continents seemingly drifting apart. The cook in the Mexican restaurant had an enormous girth that matched his reputation and you would have backed him over all comers in a tortilla-eating competition. He had a great reputation for making *huevos rancheros,* the best in the known universe. Jaime had stared through the windows of the place more than once, amazed at the number of people who were willing to queue for food there, a serpentine line that sometimes stretched right round the block. But these were no ordinary recipes. They were handed down as family heirlooms from the cook's grandmother, Claudia Benitez, who had placed them in an envelope under seal in a bank deposit box, to wait there until the chef was old enough to appreciate them. He did just that, treasuring the

sepia pieces of paper, aware of how small words, a hint of Turkish mint, a zip of lime, could become an ambrosial taste.

'I hear you've got yourself a splendid new job, or should I call it a role in life? I've seen the posters and you look quite wonderful.'

Perhaps it was something to do with the quality of the eggs – which came from rare varieties – Houdans and Norfolk Greys – or maybe the calibre of the chorizo or the butter from Junín but Jaime started to tell him everything, about Señora Gellhorn who had seen him on the street one night and how she had just arranged for him to be the model for a series of new book covers following on from the success of the posters for which he had originally modelled – and how strange was that word on the boy's lips – and how she had also given his uncle a full-time job so he had sold the shop. As Jaime told Manuelito about all this the boy reached into his bag and, his face welling up with pride, he showed Manuelito the very first prototype book, which the señora had used to persuade the President himself to back her plan. There he was, on the cover, beaming. He handed the book to his friend, only realizing as he passed it above the salt and pepper pots that he saw him as a friend. Fazed, Manuelito started to read. He is properly embarrassed.

'No, not from the beginning,' said Jaime. 'Pick a bit from the middle. I haven't got there yet.'

'"And a shadow of death fell across the young girl's face. You can expect to lose a father or mother and even, sometimes, the two, but losing a brother is a rupture in the

very order of things, like Lady Macbeth tearing out a baby from her womb before its time."'

'It isn't exactly a happy story,' said Jaime, his mouth full of eggs.

'Not at all – but there are only seven kinds of story and one of them has to be the sad sort.'

'Seven?' asked Jaime. 'What are the others?'

And as Manuelito started to list them and explain them – the various orders of narrative he'd learned by heart at evening classes – and talked in detail about how books had dealt with dark times in history and how poetry had failed to deal with the chicos who went to the Malvinas but left the Falklands and men who went as heroes came back as losers who would never be mentioned in a song, Jaime looked at him as if for the first time. On the jukebox in the restaurant, a tune he knew was playing, one he'd heard seeping under the old couple's door. He would miss the sound of their soft shuffle behind the closed door. A soft piano lilt, a cracked voice joining the one in the recording.

Llega el viento del recuerdo aquel
Al rincon de mi abandono
Y entre el polvo muerto del ayer
Tambien volver tu querer
Yo no ne si viviras feliz
O si el mundo ha vencido
Si viviendo sin querer vivir
Buscas la paz de morir

A memory like a breeze comes to meet me
In a corner of abandonment

And in yesterday's great dust
Your love has returned
I don't know if you'll live happily
Or if the world will defeat you
If you will live without wanting life
If you want peace by leaving the earth.

Out at sea the small boat rose and fell with the wave curls as they became bigger now that the the hurricane season had opened with some peremptory gusts. The undertow was the sound of a double bass, sonorous and deeply fluid, the whiteness of the notes lifting up like a saint's hands explaining a miracle. And high above, a single albatross, on a long sojourn from New Zealand, was leading the way.