difficult to find the place of my earlier catharsis. Places are all mundane; their meaning is formed by experience and personal presence. Wrapped in my sleeping bag and looking at the desolate landscape through the freezing windscreen, I was content. I had found something that did not exist. It had not turned into an image and did not yield to words, but it had been as real as a dream or St. Elmo's fire. And it wasn't there any more, at all.

Waking up hungry and cold, I tried to position myself on the map. I guessed the bridge that wasn't yet a bridge must have crossed the river that drained the sacred waters of Lake Fagnano into a bay in the West. That was the most worthwhile end of a road that I could think of.

Years later, when studying a record of a 19th century Swedish exploration of Tierra del Fuego that reached some of the many still-blank patches on the map – those enclaves of indigenous life soon to be suffocated by the ever-expanding dominion of progress – I learned that the mountain of my purgatory, one half of which was as yet uncharted and reposing in the terrain of obscure, had been appropriately named Mt Hope.

VI

On the main road a police officer in a wind-beaten hut told me gasoline could be found fifty kilometres ahead, and pointed North, to plains of sun-dried colours.

At the Estancia Russfin there was a large sawmill, dozens of men at work, the first cars that I saw on the Chilean side, and a gasoline pump with a hand crank. The manager showed up, pumped my tank full to the brim, and showed me around the premises. He even made a cup of much-needed coffee for me. When I returned to the car I noticed that one of the rear tyres was completely flat. Either I had been lucky to make it there just before all the air had escaped, or I had been unlucky enough to get a puncture right there in the messy industrial yard. Either way, the manager got two men to fix it in the workshop, while I was shown more of the facilities and was also served some lunch.

I was heading for Porvenir on the western coast of Isla Grande, across the Strait from Punta Arenas, and I needed to move on. I found my car on all four tyres again, but cornered up against the gasoline pump by a large four-wheel drive filled with gauchos on their way to a wedding in the nearby village of Cameron. One of them had worked in Utah for a season, and spoke English. He had just descended from the hills, where he herded sheep in ten-day shifts, but was now dressed for the celebration – though without giving up the knife that he always kept with him. He led a life where there was no telling when a knife would be promptly needed, and the blade had become a part of him. The herdsmen were a bunch beyond wild, even without their horses. They radiated qualities that an image would have been incapable of reproducing.

Porvenir in the dark had nothing pretentious about it. It was a relic from the past, and that was what it looked like. Yellow streetlights shone here and there, with groups of idle locals under each of them like moths. Every second street was paved, some blocks were completely dark, and some lots devoid of buildings. Many of the houses were in an advanced state of deterioration. Others were characterised by the temporary solutions of repairs, modernisation, or salvage. Some of the villas boasted the old Dalmatian charm, and the elegance and size of a more daring and optimistic time. I took an immediate liking to the place and decided to stay for the night, but finding a room was harder than I expected. Hotel Central appeared to be a possibility but claimed to have no vacancies. Another one had dedicated the day to renovations, and wanted no guests to spoil their freshly painted stairs. It seemed to me as if the hotels, restaurants and bars in the town were closed in order to reduce their defeat, rather than be kept open to make a profit. A system of rotation dictated which amenity was on duty to deal with each day's scarce visitors. For the hotels, today was the turn of Hotel Rosas, where I got a room, but for a steak I needed to walk down the road to Hotel España, where the restaurant was open.

Ominous clouds, which I assumed hung permanently over the town and belonged to the look of it, emptied themselves during the night. The beating rain on the corrugated iron roof above my bed drummed me to sleep.

Porvenir was once used to send shiploads of bailed wool out to both oceans, when there was still commercial ship traffic in the Strait of Magellan. The ships calling at the docks brought diverse people ashore. Some stayed in the town, some made a living working on the estancias, while others pushed their luck to the limits searching for gold wherever there was running water.

Immigrants from Chiloe, Croatia and elsewhere founded Porvenir at the end of the nineteenth century, with firm hopes of a bright future. That future never happened, and the town now slumbers on, looking like the prospectors left it when they departed a century ago. Today the town would be better named Pasado, as the once-expected heyday was now a charming past.

As I drove into the hills outside of town I saw one of the last diggers hanging up his laundry of a checked shirt and patched trousers. He was a carefree character with a melancholy manner. He owned the bare minimum, and cared for nothing more, although he did have some dreams. There was a picture of a sailing boat on a blue ocean on his wall, next to a picture of a sports car and a scantily dressed lady from an out-dated calendar; and he dug for gold. I felt those cravings were all imposed on Pedro. He would not have known what to do with any of his dreams if they were fulfilled. Poverty suited him. And so did the fact that he was looking for something that he didn't even truly want to find. He made me coffee in his shanty, where he could reach all the objects without getting up from his bench. A car-battery-powered radio played a Spanish cover of *Wayfaring Stranger*, the soundtrack of his life. We listened with bowed heads. The accordion solo that fought with the wind whistling through the planking raised the hairs on my forearms, and a tear of compassion diluted the coffee in my hands. I was certain that beauteous fields would one day arise before him, but the fields of his earthly anticipations were rocky, dreary and backbreaking. We walked to the patch of land he knew as his workplace. After the rain there was water in the ditch, and his dreams were alive again. He shovelled a load of dirt into his pan and started working it down to dust.

It seemed to me that Pedro had reached a state of freedom rarely arrived at by the white man. He was a bird of the heavens, content with what he had at hand. Digging for gold was a distraction, something to pass the time.

Back in the cabin he carefully folded a piece of old paper and, with the help of a horseshoe-shaped magnet, separated the black iron-ore

sand from the few tiny yellow flakes at the bottom of the pan. He poured the gold dust onto the paper, sealed the stamp-sized parcel with a piece of blue tape, and handed the proceeds of the day to me. I gave him the planed piece of Nothofagus Antarctica that I had received from Russfin the day before, as Pedro lacked a good chopping board. I also handed him the bottle of Legui liquor that I had bought in Argentina, in case such a golden occasion occurred. The liquid boasted the same tempting colour as gold, but certainly tasted better than the tiny nuggets in my parcel, and the chopping board had practical qualities far above those of the yellow dust that he had filtered out of the soil. The exchange seemed mutually beneficial. He led a real life and valued useful things, while I was happy with the useless yet shiny symbol of success.

For the rest of the day I drove around northern Tierra del Fuego in large circles, but in the evening I felt the call of Porvenir in my blood. The town, with its postcolonial dignity, had started to emerge in my mind as a symbol of much of what I hoped to find on my journey. Porvenir was bustling and tranquil, grandiose and sordid, promising and disillusioning, all at the same time, depending solely on what angle it was viewed from. There was nothing in Porvenir for a visitor to look at except a mirror, and that is what I returned there to see.

At dusk I moved into an upstairs room with a wonderfully high ceiling at Hosteria Yendegaia. The fresh paint from yesterday had by then dried on the stairs of the old Croatian villa, and it was their turn to offer rooms. The wooden floor creaked as it must have done under many a pair of boots before mine, and when I walked by the window, the old, wavy pane distorted the view of the street below and the Strait beyond, as if they were ruffled by a sudden gust of silent wind. There was no one on the street and the harbour was deserted, too. The Indians had been driven to annihilation, and the current locals were nowhere to be seen. I could see no sails in the Strait of Magellan, just like there had been none for me to behold around the Horn, either. The world no longer ran on wind power. The square-rigger sailors had been true nomads, who had journeyed around the globe without property, savings, permanent possessions or homes. Like Fuegian natives they lacked respect for authority, and often also for religion, and they had been curiously devoid of any ambition to amend their condition. They had formed a tribe of their own on long ocean voyages, which had paid them no more than they needed for brief, but intense sprees at their ports of call. They did wear clothes, but, on the other hand, they lived without families. Now the one breed of white men that came closest to the Yahgans in their freedom and insouciance, sailing ship mariners, was just as extinct as the Indians.

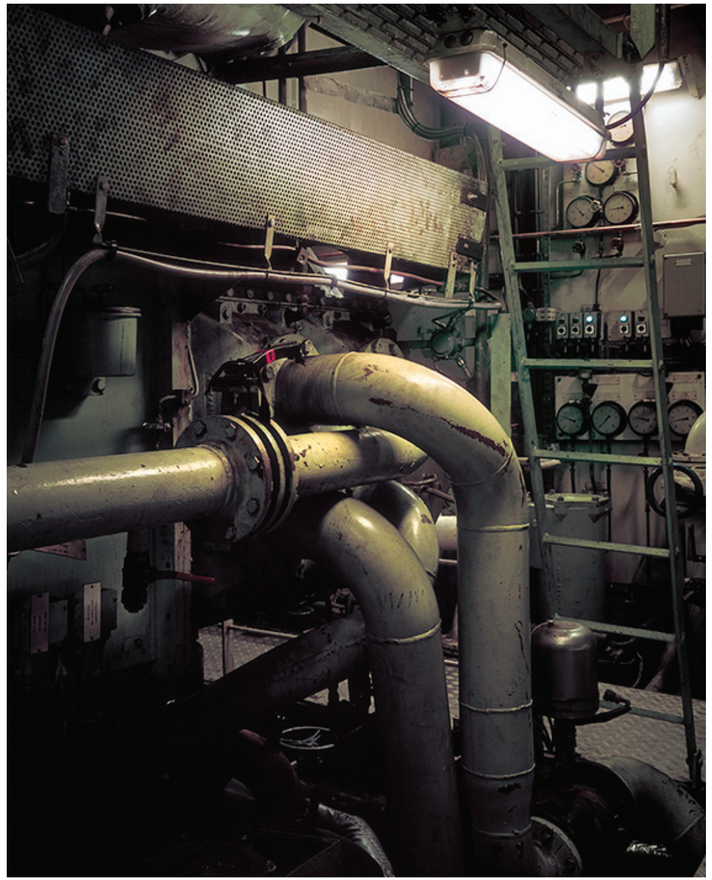
The encroaching darkness gradually turned the window into a mirror, and I saw my own reflection grow clearer and merge with the ephemeral realm behind the glass. I descended to the unlit restaurant of my hostel, only to learn that it was the turn of Hotel Rosas to man a kitchen. After dinner I took the dark, dusty road to Bar Valerie, where there was a twelve-metre walk across an empty wooden floor from the door to the bar. The place was another spacious relic from times when people there still believed in the future.

There was only one customer in the place. He held a glass of beer, and sat under the only picture decorating the walls: a paper copy of a painting depicting a native woman as she might have looked to the first white visitors on Tahiti, the paradise that Darwin, only sixty years later, would call fallen. The way we still want to remember her is the way that was pushed into nonexistence by that same urge for discovery, representation and dominance that now keeps her manufactured memory alive. She only existed before our appearance, and never for us. We effaced her, and stole her image in order to preserve it as an exotic idea in our imaginations, and as an obscure object of desire.

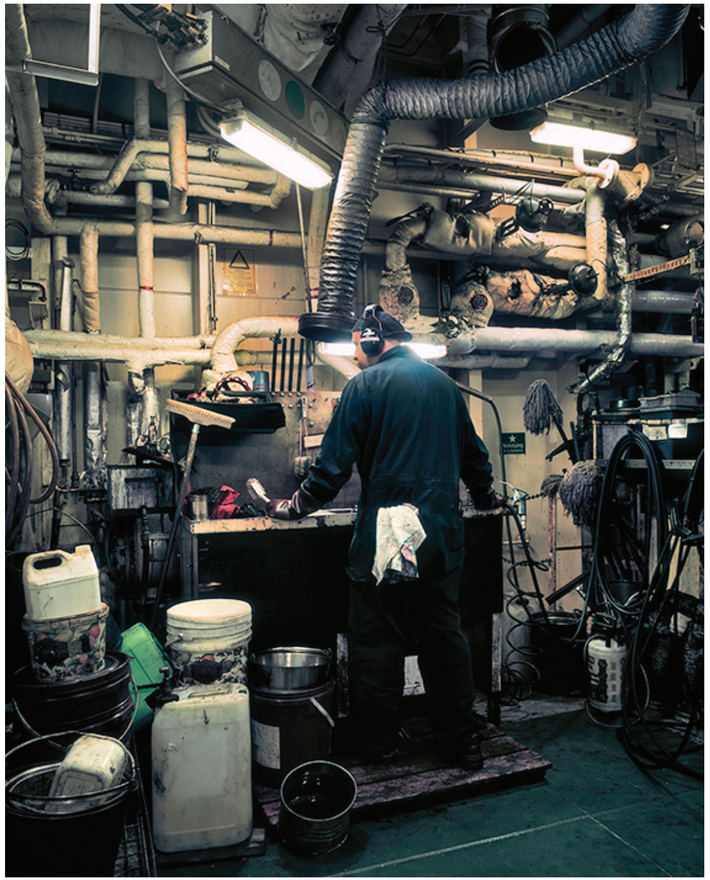
The last of the two hundred and thirty eight sheets of film that I had carried along with me on this journey, I exposed feeling an unpleasant sensation of hypocrisy in my heart. Modern man tends to radiate appreciation towards the world as it was before his interference with it, but he is blind to the consequences of his own actions. A recorder, such as a camera, is not only a tool of transformation, but also of destruction. The man with the beer and the woman in the painting both radiated a longing for times gone by, and for liberation from intruders with their devices of depiction. I looked at the couple projected upside-down on the ground glass of my viewfinder. The woman had been killed centuries ago while the man was still wasting away, and I started to see similarities between my pictures and those of Julio Popper, which are preserved in a neatly decorated album at the Museo del Fin del Mundo. The gold digger of El Páramo, a devoted divider of unpartitioned land and self-appointed emperor of Rio Grande, was also an ardent pioneer of photography. In a set of pictures now emblematic of the methods used by expanding civilisation, he stands with his uniformed men combing the landscape through the sights of their rifles for any natives known to loathe the imported law and barbed wire – the ultimate insult to the free. His shots with his camera were as accurate as those he fired with his gun, and he was ready to overcome any difficulty to find all the ingredients he needed to carefully composure pictures loaded with the symbolism of his time. The guardians of western doctrine stood proud, brave and righteous, while the inglorious Indians, trespassers on their own land, laid in the foreground, naked and dead.

I lowered my gaze and sat down, letting myself blend into the dignified panelled walls of oblivion, bagged the camera, stopped recording, and immediately became a freer man.

A Forced Pose of Repentance



The Wake of Ice



A Reverent Thought