

# In the Caves

Emilia Pardo Bazán

Translation, notes and introductory note by Valerie Hegstrom



© Valerie Hegstrom, por la introducción,  
las notas y la traducción, 2019

The Countess Emilia Pardo Bazán (1851-1921) stands out as one of the leading storytellers of the Realist movement in Spain. Her novels *Los pazos de Ulloa* (*The House of Ulloa*) (1886-87) and *La madre naturaleza* (*Mother Nature*) (1887), with their Naturalist elements, are classics of the period. Born to a wealthy family in the city of A Coruña in Galicia, the northwestern region of Spain, the author spent her childhood winters in Madrid, where she studied at a royal French school. The family made frequent trips to France and Pardo Bazán became familiar with French authors and literary currents. Prolific, Pardo Bazán published nineteen novels, twenty-one novellas, and more than 550 short stories in a wide range of styles. Additionally, she wrote notable essays on literary criticism, including “La cuestión palpitante” (“The Burning Question”) (1882), a series of articles on Realism and Naturalism. Although politically and religiously conservative, she nevertheless championed women’s causes and quickly adopted new technologies. She became the first Spanish woman to gain membership in the Ateneo literary club in Madrid and the first female chaired professor in Neo-Latin Literature at the Central University of Madrid (now the Universidad Complutense). Pardo Bazán situated many of her stories in Madrid or in other unspecified urban locations, but she filled other stories with references to the language, customs, and surroundings of her homeland in Galicia.

Along with her very brief story “Progreso” (1907), which also deals with a prehistoric couple striking out on their own, Pardo Bazán’s *En las cavernas* (*In the Caves*) (1912) is one of the earliest examples of prehistoric fic-

tion written in Spanish. Set in the Cantabrian mountain range in the north of Spain at the end of deep time, circa 15,000 BCE, the novella imagines what it meant to be a *homo sapiens*, or perhaps a protohuman,<sup>1</sup> in the pre-agricultural world when artists, who had discovered painting but not writing, left elaborate depictions of animals in caves like Altamira. *In the Caves* ponders the precarity of life at the prehistoric moment of the shift toward modern humanity, and questions what that passage implied in terms of survival, tradition, and creativity, as well as the origins of fashion, monogamy, property rights, jealousy, and murder.

In *The Fire in the Stone*, Nicholas Ruddick claims that prehistoric fiction is “born from the marriage of science and the speculative imagination” and suggests that, in the genre, plausibility supersedes fidelity to science (3). By the time Pardo Bazán published her novella, Queen Isabel II had inaugurated the National Archaeology Museum in Madrid in 1867, and pioneering amateur and professional archaeologists and paleoanthropologists had spent decades searching for and stumbling across artifacts and other evidences of our prehistoric ancestors. In *In the Caves*, the author combines contemporaneous knowledge about prehistory with her own speculations about what the evidence might mean, and while she includes some anachronisms, more often than not, she gets the sci-

---

<sup>1</sup> The characters in *In the Caves* are anthropologically human, but an early passage in the novella suggests they are a related species, hunted by *homo sapiens*: they searched for a land “where their fellow beings, the humans, were not stronger and more numerous and therefore would exterminate them.”



## In the Caves

ence right. The Old Men of her tale complain about the use of new-fangled weapons shaped and polished from stones, including spears, axes, and knives made from flint, but by the time in which the story is set, similar stone tools had existed for hundreds of thousands of years.<sup>2</sup> Pardo Bazán recognizes, though, that the invention of the shovel had not yet occurred, and her characters dig a pit with their hands and using rocks and bones. At the beginning of the novella, the nomadic group's survival depends on wandering in search of game and their ability to hunt and kill the animals they find, including rabbits, goats, goat-antelopes, boars, deer, horses, and bison. In one of the most suspenseful scenes, the hunters corner and kill a cave bear, a species that had suffered extinction nearly 10,000 years earlier. However, the mammoths that the tribe later hunts were still living in 15,000 BCE.

The rituals surrounding the hunt that Pardo Bazán imagines in the text grow out of the archaeological evidence of her time. The countess had visited Altamira Cave in November of 1894 to see the paintings, and the bison, horses, deer, and boars that her story's shaman, Ambila, paints before the hunt all appear in Altamira. Only Ambila's mammoth does not show up in that cave, but in 1908 explorers had discovered the outline of a mammoth painted in the Pindal Cave, 50 kilometers to the west of Altamira. Pardo Bazán's hunters don animal masks and participate in a symbolic, religious dance. Their masks represent the animals they hunt, and Pardo Bazán envisions movements that simulate the attack on and struggle with each animal. She may have noticed, during her visit to the cave, the anthropomorphic figure, an engraving of a masked man with his arms raised, on the ceiling of Altamira's Polychrome Chamber, next to a representation of a boar that appears to retreat. In the novella, Ambila directs the dance by raising his rod or

baton of command, a reference to the tools made from antlers, which the nineteenth-century French archaeologist Louis Laurent Gabriel de Mortillet believed represented power and authority and had named the *batôn de commandement*. The prehistoric hunt could lead to devastating consequences, and when Pardo Bazán's cave bear kills the young hunter Jari, women gather water in clay bowls, wash his body, mourn and recite incantations, and place his body in the fetal position. Boys place hatchets, utensils, and pieces of meat, which will accompany him in his tomb. In 1908, the skeleton of a young Neanderthal man, who appeared to have been positioned with equal care, had been unearthed at le Moustier in Dordogne, France. Pardo Bazán uses what she read about the archaeological knowledge of her time and what she witnessed personally as the springboard for her musings about the rituals she depicts.

The hunting methods and the rituals represented in *In the Caves* form part of the "old ways" or the traditions supported by several of Pardo Bazán's characters who oppose and distrust the creativity and inventions that betoken progress away from hunting and gathering toward a lifestyle and economy based in agriculture and herding animals. In the conflict between the hunter Ronero and the inventor Napal, the tale takes on mythic proportions, rewriting the Cain and Abel story. Napal devises a better way to hunt and kill mammoths, digging two pits, rather than one, to capture two animals as the herd runs by on its way to the lake. The plan involves keeping one of the animals to kill and eat later. In the most gruesome passage of the novella, the hunters follow Napal's instructions to bury one of the animals alive up to his neck and set his head on fire. If mammoth behavior resembled that of modern elephants, the plan would have failed because the herd of mammoths would have returned to find and guard the lost pachyderms, but the scientists of Pardo Bazán's day may not yet have made that observation. In any case, jealousy does not enter Ronero and Napal's relation-

---

<sup>2</sup> Pardo Bazán's characters do not employ the very useful atlatls or spear-throwers, which existed in Europe at least 30,000 years ago.



## In the Caves

ship as a result of Napal's innovations, but instead because the woman Damara originates the desire to be possessed by an individual man, rather than shared among the "horde." Pardo Bazán imagines Damara charming the young men with her inventions, clothing and jewelry, the vestiges of which the author could observe in the archaeological collections of her time. Napal's ingenuity, though—his planting, harvesting, grinding grain, baking, his plan to breed and milk goats, his domestication of the wolf pup Gúa, his visions of future houses, towns, and roads—leads to the shaman Ambila's envy and produces the conflict between science and religion in the story. That conflict lies at the heart of the progress and the tragedy depicted in *In the Caves*.

I have used the 1912 publication of *En las cavernas*, which appeared as number two in the first year of the *El Libro Popular* series in Madrid,<sup>3</sup> as the source text for my translation. I have attempted to approximate Pardo Bazán's word choice and tone as much as possible in my translation, but, for the sake of comprehensibility in English, I have altered some punctuation, syntax, and, in one case, divided a sentence into two. I left a few words not commonly used in English in their original Spanish and Galician and included explanatory footnotes. The *El Libro*

*Popular* edition included eight illustrations, depicting a few key moments of the story; Mariano Martín Rodríguez's 2018 edition of *En las cavernas* reproduces those illustrations.

### Bibliography:

- Biggane, Julia (2003). *In a Liminal Space. The Novellas of Emilia Pardo Bazán*. Durham: University of Durham, 2003 (on *En las cavernas*, 139-142).
- Martín Rodríguez, Mariano (2018). "Parábo- las de los orígenes de la civilización: *En las cavernas* (1912), de Emilia Pardo Bazán, y la ficción prehistórica en España hasta 1936, con un breve panorama de la paleo- ficción literaria española posterior," in Emilia Pardo Bazán, *En las cavernas*. Madrid: Ediciones 19, 103-149.
- Pratt, Dale J. (1999). "Sex, Science and the Origins of Culture in Emilia Pardo Bazán," Joanna Courteau (ed.), *Mujer, sexo y poder en la literatura femenina iberoamericana del s. XIX*. Valladolid: Universitas Castella- lae, 39-49 (on *En las cavernas*, 41-44).
- Ruddick, Nicholas (2009). *The Fire in the Stone: Prehistoric Fiction from Charles Darwin to Jean M. Auel*. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press.

<sup>3</sup> Emilia Pardo Bazán, "En las cavernas," *El Libro Popular*, I, 2 (1912).

Emilia Pardo Bazán

## In the Caves

### I

The horde, exhausted and drained, would have liked to find refuge in the cave by entering it with the mechanical haste of sheep when they seek shelter in the fold. They had been walking for the space of several suns in search of a benign land where ferocious animals were not abundant and game was not lacking and where their fellow beings, the humans, were not stronger and more numerous and therefore would exterminate them. Still astonished and bewildered by their first contact with Nature, they never found that Eden of their primitive fantasies. The steppe, which was afterwards called *Iberia*, stretched out seemingly without end, still swampy with dense vegetation of canes and rushes and wooded here and there. Some rabbits, sprinters, very difficult to catch, made furrows there. The hope of the miserable breed was that, at the wrong moment, a herd of elephants would appear in the marshes. Someone would die, but the rest would have an abundance of sustenance.

Two of them had lagged behind, in a confidential conversation. They were a man and a woman.

He, boyish and agile, did not seem as fatigued as she, and he leaned spiritedly on a sturdy pole. She, young and lean in form like a chamois,<sup>1</sup> had tied a long apron made of tree bark around her thin waist. In the light of the full and still reddish moon, which had begun to ascend through the sky like the burning face of a god, it could be seen perfectly that in addition to that rudiment of clothing, the woman wore strands of small shells and a completely coquettish hairstyle, big,

curly, forming a halo, in which the tips of wild boar tusks were stuck like needles. Her oval-shaped eyes fell on the boy and she asked sweetly:

“Are you very tired? Are you very hungry?”

“Not so much that it takes my strength. I am hungry for you, Damara. For you, yes, I am hungry and thirsty. Don’t you know this?”

She smiled and she affectionately repeated what had been said so many times:

“I do not want anyone to take me in his arms, because if they respect me now, knowing that I belong to no one, when I belong to someone I will belong to everyone, and I prefer dying over that. Do you not understand it, Napal? I see my sisters submit without repugnance to as many males as there are on the earth, even to old Olavi, who has lived more than a thousand moons, and we carry him on a stretcher during our treks; but you know well that I am not like them: I want one man only, so that when I bear a son, he will carry the same name as the one who sired him.”

Napal drew closer, insistent, imploring. He always hoped that Damara would feel the same fire that was consuming him, and he followed her, as a Hunter follows a beast.

“Well said, Damara, and that is not the only way in which you and I think differently than the rest of the tribe. Look, we could always resort to making good use of the first favorable occasion, and split off from our brothers to run away together... but that is not possible, because I must not do it, since I have marvels to reveal to the tribe that will redeem them from misery and from this bitter life of walking and walking continually.”

“And besides that, how would we fare alone, Napal? If even when united with the tribe, we cannot live, we do not find refuge nor sustenance, how long would our life last, having no more defense than our affection?”

Napal was quiet for a moment, with the

---

<sup>1</sup> A chamois is a species of goat-antelope (*Rupicapra rupicapra*) native to the mountains of Europe, including the Cantabrian mountain range in northern Spain.



## In the Caves

heavy breathing of desire and the fever of love, and then, he suggested in a low voice:

“There would be no difficulty with that. I would be enough for you. Have you not heard, Damara, old Olavi say, when he tells us things from other times, that in the beginning there was one woman and one man on the whole earth? And then they did not know how to light fire, nor how to pursue animals to eat their flesh and to keep warm with their pelts. You and I would be like those two ancient parents, except already knowledgeable about great secrets... Come, Damara, let us stray some more from the tribe; the moon now grows white and it sheds light on us generously. I have something to show you that I have found.”

Damara vacillated and looked anxiously toward the confused grouping of rabble, which swarmed in the distance.

“I fear,” she murmured, “the shrewdness of Ambila, the astute shaman. I am afraid he will come out to spy on us, like other times with our brother Ronero. He will kill us if he becomes convinced that I will not consent to his embrace. His eyes burn me when they rest on me. If I were like the other sisters who have not chosen, Ronero would be patient, but having chosen you, no more! I know that he will not suffer it. He is strong; he is hard as jasper; he likes to see blood run and entrails pulse. He will kill us.”

“Bah! He is tired now from the long journey and from carrying the stretcher on his broad shoulders, and he still has to search the cave with the other youths. Do not fear, Damara. This is an oath between the moon, you, and me. Come and I will tell you my hopes, because, being young, I know more than the Old Men and I, with my wisdom, will free myself from the yoke of the Old Men and will be the one who guides the tribe in the future.

Damara, half-resisting, began to walk, and they climbed the hill, seeking the protection and mystery of the dense and fragrant thicket. The moon was now a clear beacon and it made it possible to see Damara’s face, lightly tanned by the elements, expressive with

slight features, her mouth pallid, her teeth like hailstones, her cheeks like dates from palms, smooth and fine, and her eyes dark black with a promising gaze. Napal smiled with joy to see himself in such a remote place with this virgin, as he supported her in the difficult pathways, as he pushed aside the thorny bushes so they would not scratch her.

On top of the hill, a plateau sown with scattered stones invited them to sit down. Napal did so, drawing Damara’s body toward him so close that the boy could hear the girl’s heart beating, like a wild dove that quivers in one’s hands.

“Tell me, why not right now?” he stammered. “And tomorrow I will reveal my ideas to the tribe, which will change our life, and they will not be able to keep me from taking you to the dwelling that I will build in a hidden marsh that we passed on the left when we came down from the mountain. Our dwelling will not be in any cave: I want to see the light and free you from the beasts. On strong poles protruding from the water itself, I will interweave branches, I will coat them with mud that the sun will dry and I will also cover the top of the lodging, which no woman in the world has had besides you, for all of the men we have encountered and with whom we have fought found shelter in caves. And to ensure your food, so that hunger will not weaken your breast like the sphere of the rising moon, your honey breast, Damara, I know a trick; I have discovered a marvelous thing. No one in our tribe (they are little more than animals and every day they do the same things they did yesterday) has noticed that certain grasses produce a very small fruit, a seed that can be eaten...”

“Look!” With a rapid movement, Napal unfastened a kind of crude net made of dried grass that he wore across his shoulder and he drew out of it two or three pieces of cane.

“With this,” he exclaimed, picking up one of them, “you know that I capture the air and modulate it in a delightful way. Many times you ask me to make my cane pierced by a rock sing... No one knows I have this ability, nor do I want them to, because I would have



## In the Caves

to make music for them all the time. Bah! Music, for you alone... They will soon have enough to thank me for. I will be the spirit for them, the one who creates life and lights it with a torch."

He pulled out the stopper made of grass, which sealed another hollow cane, and in the palm of his hand, he caught the stream of grain that sounded like sand as it fell.

"Do you see, my Damara? This is the mystery that will make them suppose that I have dealings with the spirits, with the awful powers that slice the firmament with lightning and make the thunder roar in the mountains."

"Napal, and what if they kill you, like they killed the one who taught them how to get flames from tree trunks?"

The boy smiled confidently.

"With these grains," he insisted, "one can live without wandering eternally in search of prey. I, by force of observation, have found out how these grains reproduce (because everything reproduces, and if man is born from man, grain is born from its seed, which falls on the earth) and I have noticed that if the earth is dry and hard, grain does not sprout, and in loosened soil, it grows quickly. At the edge of the marsh where we will live, there is very fertile soil, thick like the fat of bear cubs, and wet. We will sow, we will gather..."

"But you cannot eat this," she objected, for she had just ground the seed between her small, white teeth, and she spat it out.

"You will like it, Damara, when I grind it for you with rocks, and adding clean water and making a dough, I cook it for you among other burning red-hot rocks... Could you swallow the raw meat of a bear cub or a mammoth?"

"Grandpa Olavi remembers a time when it was done that way and says that the Hunters were stronger then and the praise of the women sweeter..."

"Let the decrepit Old Men long for the past, because it was the time of their youth! Let raw, bloody food do good to whomever eats it! Happy is the sizzle of meat in the flame and delicious the fat that the fire has scorched. Olavi and the disheveled grand-

mother Seseña lead us, but it would be better if they would lie down to die, because that is not all they say. They also say something that..."

The girl shuddered at the vague hint. She understood perfectly what he meant. Recalling other ancestral rites, the grandparents held the idea that, when prey from another species was found, the men of bygone years, vigorous and resistant, hunted man... the most delicious vermin, delicate and tender flesh, in which each piece has a distinct flavor... And it was not just for gluttony that the rite, the sacred magical rite, was practiced: at the dawn of religious feeling, of the trembling of a nascent faith, the shamans requested it, demanded it, refusing to protect the tribe if the intense odor of human blood did not ascend to the clouds from the stone altar.

"Napal, do not allow them to tear me to pieces even if Olavi orders it!" stammered Damara, terrified, drawing closer to her beloved. "I do not want them to profane my body nor to devour it! No, I do not want to dwell anymore with our fathers and brothers, since you and I are different from them and we have knowledge that they do not possess. Look, I know how to array my hair and I know how to gather and arrange flowers and shells to make myself necklaces and adornments. I know that after bathing in the rivers our skin becomes clean and soft, like new leaves after spring rain, and I know that a woman is better off covering her waist, and not naked like female animals, who go that way because their feathers or fleece serve them as a covering. I have made myself skirts out of bark and tall grasses. I will weave nets to cover my back and protect the shape of my body. Isn't it true, Napal, that a woman should not walk around completely naked? Well, grandma Seseña, who uses no other veil than her own graying and tangled hair falling around her shoulders, insists that it is bad and shameful to cover yourself and that respected and traditional customs require that we go about as did our ancestors, those who now sleep with their knees next to their faces in the sacred tombs. And the flesh of grand-



## In the Caves

ma Seseña turns blue in the winter, but sometimes she does not even want to cast a bear pelt upon her back. And she has grown hideous, with her flaccid shapes that hang way down, but she insists that it is not decent for a woman with her adornments and clothing to inflame the whims of a man.

Smiling, Napal inclined his head, jokingly insinuating that grandma Seseña might be right and that clothing might incite passion. He was disgusted by the dusty and dirty nakedness of the females of his tribe and—after seeing Damara covered by her long apron and her dried leaves, half interwoven, half attractively unfurled down her back to her waist—he could not fathom the possibility of approaching the other females, even when (because they were communal property) no one guarded them. Damara's chokers, made of small pink shells, were part of her beauty, and her hair, as it evenly surrounded her slight face, lent her mystery, as black plumage lends it to the cawing crow.

"Oh Damara," he murmured caressingly, "you are the only one! The night protects; give me your hand, come. Now they do not think about us; they only long to sleep, and taking stock of the cave keeps them busy. Damara! It is time for love!"

"No, not today; Napal... When fate decides... when they venerate you as a genius..."

Napal played with her necklaces and, desirous, he moved the grass fringe aside.

"Do not reject me... There is nothing but you and I, Damara..."

A listlessness paralyzed her. Her laugh was confused, interrupted by the desire in her breast.

"At least do not let them find out, Napal! Ronero would drag me by one arm; he would knock me down; he would beat me. No, you alone."

"You alone, Damara," he sighed, clutching her desperately, devouring her face, lying down to better surround her slender form and make her descend toward him, as one conquered.

Still resisting, Damara murmured, point-

ing toward the sky, toward the big, refulgent plate of the moon:

"Oh Napal! *She* sees us! *She* must be very chaste, very white, Napal! It looks like a colorless face is watching us, cursing us, and I am trembling, as always when I see her rise."

The young man, enraptured, laughed. What reproof could come from that candid face, indifferent to what it illuminated? Delighted, quivering, he pulled Damara toward the thickness of the bushes, looking for a suitable place. And because the girl still wanted to break free, afraid of the unknown, he held her more tightly:

"Now she cannot see us..." he declared, sinking with Damara into the shadow.

## II

Meanwhile the tribe, instead of settling down in the cave to sleep the leaden sleep of those exhausted by fatigue, still waited while Ronero and ten or twelve other brutes, before anything else, carefully took stock of the depths of their eventual refuge.

Striking a piece of flint against another and setting fire to some dry grass, they had been able to light their crude, resin torches, and with their light they moved forward, detecting from the cave's very entrance something indefinable, an odor, fierce and musky at the same time, that betrayed the presence of the wild beast.

In the first circular chamber with a low roof, they noticed nothing suspicious. Ronero, nevertheless, had armed himself with a heavy club, the end of which had been hardened in the fire, and with a sharp quartz knife. His companions simply held enormous rough stones aptly shaped to turn into fearsome, blunt weapons. The Old Men preferred and endorsed this natural armament, claiming that ever since arms in diverse shapes were formed and almost polished, bravery—ferocity—had diminished. Despite their objections, they noticed that Ronero, the hairy one, the bold one, used the new arms. They shook their heads and repeated:



## In the Caves

“When we were young, what did we do? The natural stone, which is never lacking, was our defense. We brought down our enemy by throwing stones, we gouged his head, collapsed his ribs, and, his belly torn open, we watched his steaming bowels flow out of him. These new arms, these axes, these spears, open wounds that can barely be seen. To use them, it is not necessary to be strong like Ronero. Napal himself, he who never fights, could now accomplish feats. The day will come when the cowards will overcome. A heavy rock can only be thrown by a sinewy arm!”

This very thing was murmured among those of the tribe, waiting at the mouth of the cave. The women, exhausted, had dropped to the ground; some suckled, their hunger dulled by the fatigue of road. Grandma Seseña, with her gaze of mistrust and gloomy anxiety, inspected the groups. She was not as faint as the other women. In consideration of her age and the authority that she maintained in the tribe (for she came from the time in which the matriarchy, which was now falling into disuse, had ruled), they had they carried her—lightening their burden with stretchers made of branches—and also granted her the treasured bits of loin from the young rabbits they stunned with pellets. She noticed, and not without growing alarmed, the absence of Damara, her granddaughter, who scandalized her with her conduct. In addition to that young girl dressing and adorning herself in a reproachable fashion, now, having arrived at the age at which it is the rule to suffer the yoke, to increase the tribe by breeding, a capricious resistance, like that of a young goat who wants to jump wherever she wishes, kept her free, virginal, and cheerful. The grandmother sensed the scandalous fact: Damara was setting a bad example by choosing, by becoming enraptured with one alone, against the customary law of the tribe.

“What times are coming!” grumbled the centenarian, foreseeing catastrophes. “The daughter of my daughter, my own granddaughter! But Seseña, who knows the will of the spirits, is still alive. They have not yet buried her with her knees against her belly!”

All around the old woman, everyone noted the delay of Ronero and his brothers, confined in the depths of the cavern. Many approached the mouth, looked, as if their eyes could pass through the darkness, and returned, insisting that they heard strange noises, suffocated laments, the sound of fighting. But really nothing could be heard because the cave was vast and it seemed to sink into the bowels of the earth. After the first almost-circular chamber, a narrow passage with a rapid slope obligated one to walk without lifting his head; a man who was not very tall could barely stand up. From that narrowness, one exited into a much wider gallery, with an elevated vault, and a kind of precipice led to an immense chamber. From the ceiling hung rigid, sharp stalactites and in the corners stalagmites stood on end, imitating the forms of hooded larvae and strange, motionless vegetation.

Ronero pressed on, but his brothers, no less brave in the light of the sun, began to feel their legs weaken. They were familiar with caves, only they were not so deep, so impressive in appearance. Without a doubt, the spirit gods were there, that was their hidden temple, and it was sacrilege to disturb their repose.

“Do not keep going, Ronero... Let’s leave... This place is terrible...”

Scornful, the brute continued forward, brandishing his heavy club. “Do you not notice,” he said, “the particular smell of the bear? He lies in ambush, as always, in the final corner of the cavern. Soon you will hear his panting... The mothers of the tribe will rejoice when they roast his flesh.”

An icy sweat running down their temples, trembling, the men continued to light the way with their torches.

“Hurry!” urged Ronero, “before we are left in the dark!”

A new gallery, also full of stalactites, twisted to the right. The end of it was a kind of enormous niche, which although it was the capricious work of nature, looked like it was opened by human hands. The floor, slippery from humidity, slanted, aided the rapid





## In the Caves

march of the Hunters. At its back, the niche revealed a hole, a den... and from it appeared, enormous, swaying, growling in a terrifying way, the great prehistoric bear, the kind that belonged to the caves. It was a recluse, an old one, ferociously enraged at the impudent men who were invading its den. It advanced like a boulder detached from a mountain peak, but the men, standing now before the clear and defined danger, had recovered their courage and one of them, Jari the Swift, without waiting for anything, forged ahead, raising his arm to hurl his bulky rock. The beast took it right on its snout, and the blow was so terrible that it staggered, roaring hideously. Recovering, it rushed and fell with all its weight on the man. Its huge limbs closed around the trunk of the human; the cracking of ribs was heard, and the claws, scoring the back, made five tracks of blood run. Ronero, taking advantage of the moment, bashed the skull of the beast with his mallet, and as the animal retreated, momentarily stunned, releasing its prey, in one leap in turn, Ronero got between the formidable claws, and before the bear could close them; the Hunter jabbed the quartz knife into the region of the heart. In its agony, the beast wanted to squeeze and suffocate its enemy, but it did not have time. Ronero leaned with furious strength on the misshapen and sharp knife and thrust it deeper, swiftly making the wound fatal. Bear and Hunter collapsed together, and at the same time, Ronero cruelly twisted his weapon in the wound. Pulling it out afterwards, and half standing up on the ground covered with the hot and red fluid, he plunged it again into the bowels of the bear, ripping it with a firm grip up and down, paying no attention to the convulsions and the final hoarse gasp that announced the death of the monster.

Two of them carried the wounded—or rather the dying—Jari, and Ronero and the other brothers dragged, panting, the huge body of the bear through the slopes and turns of the cave. The torches had burned out, except for one, which allowed them to see the way. Before reaching the circular chamber,

this last went out as well, and so feeling their way, they exited the narrow passageway.

When they reached the edge of the swamp, dragging the beast and carrying the dead man, the tribe raised a clamor. The women pulled out their hair, scratched their faces, and Seseña, unfolding her tall stature, lifting herself, terrifying in her naked skin like esparto grass and tinder weeds, began to intone a sort of funereal hymn to the bravery of Jari, to his skill in the hunt, to all of his service rendered to the tribe. Afterwards, the women brought water from the swamp in rough clay bowls, and Seseña washed his wounds, pronouncing in a low voice phrases that were incantations. Grandfather Olavi, who—exhausted from fatigue—had stretched to sleep, awoke to the echo of the lamentations. Now many voices were calling him by name. Ambila, the shaman of the tribe, shouted even more loudly:

“Olavi, father, come! Your son Jari has left for the valley where there is always fresh water and the thick meat of goats and chamois.” In reply, the old man rose. A river of silver seemed to fall from his face. It was his beard, so white and so long that it was able to cover, modestly, his wrinkled belly, his mummified contours. He lifted his hands, and with an enfeebled trembling of his head, he bemoaned,

“Jari! Oh, Jari! Who was the cause of your death, beloved son?”

By now they had dragged out the corpulent bear and the flint knives were beginning to do their work. They would skin it and quarter it afterwards. The women, except for one, interrupted their laments and began to help with the task. They would eat! Jari’s mother, meanwhile, continued rolling in the dirt, tearing her hair, digging her skin with her nails. Maternity was the only clear kinship that existed in the promiscuity of the tribe. And the mothers demonstrated a violent love toward their young, never complaining about having to carry them on their shoulders nor about taking food from their own mouth to give it to them. The men, once they reached the age of strength, attended



## In the Caves

their mothers, from out of whose wombs they had come. The sorrowful mother sobbed,

“Jari! Jari! Who will be my support on our journeys? Who will give me a piece of meat, the good fatty part? Jari, my son, all that was good to me, the swiftest of the tribe!”

Her voice rose isolated, interrupted by spasms of grief. In the clarity of the moonlight, the tribe labored around the prey. They had moved the dead man near a mound in the terrain, placing him already in the embryonic position that he had had in the maternal womb, during his gestation, because thus he would be buried, and it was necessary to bend his knees before stiffness overcame him. The axes and flint knives were busy; the animal, skinned, was being divided into pieces with a speed born of habit. The sight and smell of fresh meat roused the hungry, and many supporters of the old ways demanded their piece and drew apart to devour it without any other preparation. However, the young women gathered branches of firewood in the closest thickets and built the bonfire to roast the ribs and thighs of the bear, the best portions. And the men, seduced by gluttony, let out jubilant shouts when they saw the rancid grease of the old recluse drip over the flame.

Grandfather Olavi drew near with silent steps, with his flowing beard, which the nighttime air oscillated gently. A child-like craving could be read in his eyes, ambushed behind his overpopulated eyebrows. His gnarled hands reached out, as if supplicating.

“Would you eat what has been roasted, Grandpa Olavi?” asked Belenda, a twenty-year-old girl, friend and rival of Damara, offering a piece of meat to the old man.

“Just once...” he stammered, struggling between maintaining his traditional opinions in opposition to seasoned food and his appetite and gluttony awakened earlier by the comforting smell of that roast.

Laughing, the girl cut a more abundant portion with the quartz hatchet and turned it over to the old man, who initially assumed he should manifest a certain repugnance. Once he ingested the first mouthful, he was pre-

paring to devour the second with delight, when Seseña, angry, terrible, approached the group and pulled the roast dripping with fat from Olavi's hands.

“Not us!” she shouted irascibly. “Not us! We, like our fathers, they who, without even waiting for the beast to be quartered, pulled off the red shreds still pulsating, before the spirit of the beast could leave, which when devoured infuses us with its valor...”

Intimidated and consternated, Olavi retreated, unable to use his toothless gums on the raw meat, which, having tried the other, caused him nausea. Seseña moved away as well, tacitly reproaching the profanation of the bonfire. The tribe divided: some were grouped around the fire, passing around the half-charred pieces of meat amidst grunts of satisfaction. Others, under the moonlight, filled themselves with raw fare, tough shreds and scraps, because the bear was very old and his fur had begun to turn gray.

Ronero was not eating. A profound worry was bothering him. He approached Belenda familiarly.

“Where is Damara? Do you know?”

“No. Who knows? Eat from our roast, Ronero. Recover your strength, since you have killed a bear.”

The brute insisted.

“Damara arrived here with us. Did you not see where she headed?”

“I tell you I don't know. Why do you care about Damara? Am I not as young and as healthy as she?”

Ronero shrugged his shoulders. Belenda was attractive and she imitated well the style set by Damara; like her, she wore aprons made of flexible bark and spread fringes of grasses interwoven with wild flowers across her breast and bracelets around her knee. But Belenda had suffered the male yoke several times and Damara resisted accepting it. And Ronero only thought about Damara, about her intact body, about her skin always purified by ablutions, about her large eyes, whose gaze was a lighted torch. At night, Ronero mumbled the name of the virgin. Pensive, he looked around the groups that gorged



## In the Caves

themselves, unconcerned with anything that was not the pleasure of eating after long days of scarcity in which they had survived by chewing on leaves and wild berries.

Instinctively, in looking for Damara, he was looking for someone else, someone other than her. Napal was not there either! Ronero furrowed his brow. A now long-held suspicion awoke in his spirit, like a lethargic snake stretches out in the heat of a flame. For the virgin to refuse the male yoke was audacity, was to contravene the ancestral tradition, but avoiding the rest of the tribe while she reserved herself for one could now qualify as a crime. And, above all, deep down, Ronero understood that the veneration of the tribal customs and laws did not matter to him, but something else did: a ferocious feeling that was gnawing at his soul, a suffering that no one there knew, precisely because no woman belonged to anyone in particular. Ronero did not know how to name this new, intolerable torture. He clenched his teeth, and tracking as if he were searching for the scent of Damara in the air, he was going to move a good distance away when he saw afar off a graceful figure slowly approaching, and he recognized in it Damara herself. He remained unable to move, waiting for what he was not sure, perhaps a great joy, perhaps a great disillusionment...

The dawn was almost already whitening the mountain peaks when the tribe, glutted, drunken by the meat, took refuge to sleep in the now liberated cave. Gathered, they began falling to the ground, and they could be heard snoring, breathing heavily. Damara refused to enter. She remained beside the dead man, Jari, around whom some boys left hatchets, utensils, and pieces of meat, which would accompany him in the tomb made of stones that they would leave raised for him, well covered to protect his remains from the carnivores.

### III

The tribe resolved to remain in that cave, making it their halting-place until they had

recovered enough strength for another journey. Not knowing where to go weighed heavily in that resolution. An immense desolation seized them with the idea of continuing to wander, as they had journeyed for such a long time, surrounded by mysterious dangers, freezing from the cold and burning from the heat; unsure about whether sustenance would or would not appear, about the famine that decimated them. And at night, speaking about what could happen through the mediation of spirits, the shaman, astute Ambila, announced a marvel to them, the sweetest rest, in which their children would continue to inhabit the place which their parents had always inhabited, the possession of a space, fertile in game, which would belong to the tribe and about which no one would dare to dispute with them.

And this daydream, this aspiration—natural in the wanderers of this earth—began to take shape, in spite of the opposition of the Old Ones, the faction of Grandparents Seseña and Olavi, who recommended the ever-wandering life left up to fortune, to the chance of dangerous hunts, in which courage is tempered and the pride of triumph makes food appetizing. Even if it were demonstrated that living in tranquility were possible, that would be, in the judgment of the grandparents, a humiliating existence. Life in a stopping-place could be acceptable, a temporary stopping-place. But a sedentary life would mean decline. Did our ancestors not wander? Are their bones not scattered across such great distances?

The other faction, the young one, was influenced by Napal. A legend began to form around the boy. It was said he was a shaman, as much as or more than Ambila. Did he not accomplish incredible things? One afternoon, a little after the arrival at the stopping-place, he was seen descending from the mountain, where he had spent long hours, followed by two or three goats with tawny fur fastened with twisted fibers of esparto grass. The tribe believed the fibers would be used to strangle and devour them, but Napal extended his hand and declared that the she-goats and the



## In the Caves

buck would not die. One of the she-goats was pregnant; the other, followed by her bleating kid, had her udders filled with milk. The goats were tied to sharpened stakes that were fastened in the ground, and the fullest one was milked by Napal. As soon as the bowls were filled, the anxious men wanted to drink, but Napal pointed to the nursing mothers, from whose breasts their babies drank with irritated, greedy cries.

“You drink, our sisters...”

At night, that first attempt at a flock was gathered into the cave, to guard it from the voracious savage beasts. On another day, Napal, on returning from the mountain, brought an animal tied up that defended itself desperately. It was a wolf cub. Napal, petting it, treated it to the remains of rabbits, giving them to it to chew on. Soon the wolf cub was domesticated and he guarded the goats, howling furiously if he sniffed another wolf approaching.

Nevertheless, their misery continued. The trapping of birds and little rabbits that already swarmed in incredible abundance in Iberia; the fish from the lake and the closest river, caught with a kind of spiked wooden stick; the herbs, chewed up voraciously, did nothing but tease the constant ravenous hunger, which was never satisfied. The goats' milk was a delicacy, a gift to the nursing mothers and the sick. And Grandfather Olavi and Grandmother Seseña, who had at first harshly censured the capture carried out by Napal, now came, flaunting their authority, showing off his beard and their coarse gray hair, asserting the privilege of their extreme old age to claim a bowlful of that nectar, which they drank greedily with their toothless mouths, winking their eyes at the *glug, glug* that it made as it slid down their throats.

The menacing problem of subsistence continued. The boys and the women did not stop asking the Hunters anxiously:

“When will you kill a tender bull or a heifer? Will rhinoceroses or elephants never bathe in the lake?”

They directed their questions principally

to Ronero, known for his courage, for the fury with which he attacked the large mammals, delivering plunder for many days. And without a doubt Ronero also desired to face one of those formidable enemies, since he went out at unusual hours, accompanied by the most resolute youths, those who had helped him kill the bear of the cavern. They walked far, traveling leagues away from the stopping-place, returning with lesser prey, but checking desperately to see if larger game, which would be easy to notice, did not appear anywhere on the steppe and the hills. Napal, for his part, disappeared for entire days. And Damara—the first shepherd—took care of the she-goats and, tying them with esparto filaments, she went in search of the soft and succulent grass that springtime was causing to sprout, irrigated by the waters of the thaw.

Soon Damara noticed that it was not necessary to tie the little goats, for they followed her docilely, nor the wolf cub, who not only followed her, but, having lost his wildness, licked her hands. Then the shepherdess went in search of a hidden meadow where she was to meet Napal. While the goat grazed and the wolf cub, his evolution toward a sheepdog begun, guarded them, the lovers, intimately entangled, conversed, their words flowing like a river of honey. In everything they said, they found a deeply significant meaning, an infinite interest, but Damara, with her woman's cautious instinct, warned of dangers, urged precautions.

“Do not trust anyone, Napal,” she repeated. “Look, they are false, for they lie. Ronero may be the least deceitful. It would be better if you and I fled, like I told you the first day. Do you not remember? This will end up being discovered and then they will make me suffer the common law, and I will prefer that they stone me to sharing with other men, with that hairy Ronero, who covets me, that which is yours alone through the law of love.”

“Do not worry, Damara, my shepherdess,” the inventor responded with his show of affable confidence. “I told you: the tribe's debts to me will be so great that they will not be able to deny me anything. They have already begun to



## In the Caves

accept me as a shaman. Soon they will see me as a god or a spirit, and there will be nothing they can refuse me. Instead of bringing them a dead beast for them to tear apart and eat in four days and that costs the lives of two or three men, I give them a means to stay securely in one place, without the least risk, in happiness. When your little flock grows and there are enough young so that they can reproduce, the tribe will eat of their meat and their milk, and their fiber will warm them when the snow freezes the top of the mountains. And in a few days, when I gather the grain that I have sown in the valley that they do not know and I teach the tribe to grind it and cook it among burning rocks... the ordeal of going without food will end, because what I do, those in the tribe who have arms and youth and strength can do in greater proportions. And the children will not die because their mothers have dried up, squalid from suckling without nourishing themselves. You see now, Damara, I will be the master of the tribe, for they will respect me more than the Old Ones themselves or than the shaman Ambila, who is inclined toward my ideas. I will ask of them a very simple recompense: that you live with me wherever I am ... and it will not be in the gloomy cave with its floor carpeted with the debris from the hunt, the bones torn open to extract the marrow, not there. I also know how to make a dwelling. I will teach them how to do it. Each one will dwell with his beloved, with his children that are born from her and from him, so that they will be something his, blood of his blood. When I return from the field that I will work, you will wait for me by the side of the burning stones, where you will have cooked my sustenance and yours; you will offer me the gift of milk. Who knows if to celebrate the approaching birth of a child, we will roast a fat goat on a stick over the flame! And our bed, made of scented grasses and thick skins will be soft by then, awaiting us... and this our happiness will be the happiness of all. Everyone will have a flock, grain, a house, a woman who loves him alone, children from his loins... What do you say, Damara? It seems you are lost in thought..."

"Oh, Napal! I cannot trust them; I know

those of the tribe, the bloodstained Hunters, the stubborn Old Ones. I doubt they will understand the good you will do for them."

"But look how they eagerly drink the sweet milk..."

"Yes, but I fear that the more powerful you are, the more envy it will arouse. Ambila the Shaman envies everyone else's power. And I have the misfortune that Ronero covets me. And the girls who yearn to be courted by Ronero hate me. Belenda spies on me and I am sure that she has been following me. Hey!" she suddenly shouted, alarmed. "Do you not see how Guá has startled?" (That is what they called the guard wolf, because of his semi-canine yelp.) "Someone is coming. Go away, Napal. I promise you that someone is coming."

"It is probably some rodent."

"No, they are looking for us. Run."

Napal disappeared, hidden behind the hedge, as nimble as the chamois that, fooling the Hunters, could bound about the rough places on the mountains. The restlessness of faithful Guá increased, and finally yelping furiously, he rushed at the person who was approaching. Damara had not been wrong: it was Belenda with two girls of her same age who, imitating the style set by Damara, wore wide skirts made of esparto and yellowish grass and ostentatiously shook the strings of punctured shells, which made up their necklaces.

"Hello, Damara!" Belenda mocked. "Was Napal not here with you?"

"No," responded Damara with a slight shiver. "I have not seen him."

"Then you were alone?"

"Can you not see? With my goats and with Guá."

"Your goats! Do not call them that. They belong to everyone, Damara, and the other girls can graze them as well as you."

"Go ahead and graze them," the girl conceded. "You all already know that the milk they give is for the nursing mothers and for the weak Old Ones. I do not drink it."

"All of that will be discussed. Grandfather Olavi and Seseña the Ancient Mother, do not



## In the Caves

approve of you declaring yourself independent on the pretext of the goats. A young woman should remain under the vigilance of the mothers and the grandmothers of the tribe, and you wander on rough paths with too much freedom.”

“The same way you wander,” replied Damara, turning it into a joke.

“We are the bearers of a message for Napal and that is why we seek him. You, without a doubt, know his whereabouts. It has been five days since he has been near the cave, and as the help of all the men is necessary for the great enterprise that the valiant Ronero is going to undertake, tomorrow from the moment the sun rises ...”

“I do not know where Napal can be found,” declared Damara with the ring of truth, for in that moment she truly did not know, “but if I see him, I will tell him. Tell me of the enterprise that Ronero is going to undertake.”

“From the place where the sun rises, a herd of elephants is descending, which will surely head to the lake and the swamps that surround it to bathe and frolic. The great ditch into which at least some of them will fall must be prepared in the haste that this case requires. Ronero,” Belenda added with childish vanity, “has promised to give me the point of the tusks to adorn my hair. Abundance will reign in the tribe.”

“For a few days,” objected Damara, as if talking to herself. “Meat rots, and even drying it in the sun to cure it, there are always more mouths than meat.”

“Do you not value the feat that Ronero is going to carry out? Well, you should know that, as a prize for it, he will be able to freely choose from among the girls of the tribe who have not yet suffered the manly yoke, the one he prefers, to impose it on her. Thus the Old Ones have resolved it, and Ambila, who knows the will of the spirits, has declared that they cannot be favorable to us if we do not respect the ancient customs and the rites imposed by the power that speaks with the voice of thunder and looks upon us in the gleam of the lightning bolt.”

Damara, underneath the smooth tan of

her silky skin, felt herself go pale. A shiver ran through her veins.

“When did the Old Ones gather in council?” she asked, hiding the shock of her fear.

“This morning. Ambila did not perform the magic invocation, because he will do it at night. And the men of the tribe have begun to work already, but they need more people. The ditch must be very deep, very deep, so that those who fall cannot climb out of it... The women are also going to have to help. Everyone, everyone must help with the task.”

And in the cheerful voice of the girl could be perceived her pleasure in taking part in the same work that Ronero was carrying out, in being able to be close to him, to help him, to carry water to him, to dry his sweat.

“Now you know about it,” she added imperiously, directing herself to the shepherdess. “Return to the tribe, and if you see Napal...”

“But, why should I see him?”

“Who knows?” and an aggressive malice shone in the expression on Belenda’s face. If you see him, tell him to stop being idle and to hurry to help his brothers!”

And, as quickly as they had come, the girls turned back, joking and whispering to one another, as they ran, damaging the ground carpeted by the tiny petals of early flowers with the soles of their bare feet.

“Did you see? She no longer wears shells around her neck. She is wearing the buds of the white hawthorn interwoven with grass.”

“And in her hair, two or three purple and yellow flowers. Irises.”

“Where can those flowers be found, Belenda?” one of the pretty girls asked.

“I believe it must be on the river bank.”

“We will dress up that way.”

“Damara is always contriving something. How vain!”

“And around her wrist, a bracelet, did you see it? She has strung the small empty eggs of a bird!”

“And on her apron, she has artfully attached, probably with tree sap, the most beautiful plumes, also from birds! Did you not notice? She never stops improvising to appear more beautiful...”



## In the Caves

Belenda, furrowing her brow, pondered.

“Do you believe that Napal was not nearby?”

The others laughed cheerfully. Then they pretended to be scandalized.

“Damara must not be allowed to do what is not permitted to any woman: to choose, to reserve herself for the one she prefers...”

When the girls moved away, Napal came out of the thicket.

“Do you see? Did you hear? Do you see the danger that threatens us?”

“Danger? What danger? I am going to help them open the ditch. That is fair, my dear one... When the others work, I want to work too. And you, go down as well, gather the flock, and if it is necessary do not deny your cooperation: carry water to them, help to move the dirt.”

“Napal! Napal! My heart is fearful. Let us take advantage of the moment, let us flee. Believe me: you have communication with the spirits that I do not have; you accomplish marvels; you know; you see, Napal... and yet, there is something in which I am wiser, because I know the evil of the men of the tribe, our brothers. No matter how much good you do for them, they will not stop hating you. The Old Men curse you, because you bring new customs and they cannot stand them. They insist that everything continue to be done as it was done yesterday. To change would kill them. Ambila the Shaman would betray you, because he has never accomplished anything useful for the tribe, and when you reveal so many good things, his incantations and conjurings will be laughable. And Ronero, who leads the Hunters, hates you... because he wants me. Napal, let us leave them. What does it matter to us if they suffer hunger? We should, first of all, save ourselves, you and I... and the child who is going to come!”

Moved, Napal held her against his breast, calming her with his caresses.

“I promise you that if they do not pay attention to me, if they do not accept my teachings, we will flee and we will conceive a caste of men and women who will live peacefully

and prosperously in the place they choose for the burial of their fathers... but it would be cruel to abandon to hunger the mothers and those Old Ones who fight us, without their knowing why. It would be an evil deed, Damara. Do you not understand this? Let us help them now in their hunt. Ronero is stronger than I, but do not fear: I am more astute. Let us go down to the cave; the sun is setting.

### IV

When they arrived at the mouth of the cave—each feigning to arrive from a different direction—they heard the confused noise of the crowd and they saw that some young men were coming down the hillside, shaking lit torches. This was because they wanted to see the work completed by the shaman Ambila, the spell cast on the walls and ceiling of the cave, to attract the prey. This recourse and the ceremonies that accompanied it were only performed on the eve of great undertakings, in critical hours when sustenance was lacking. Since dawn, Ambila had devoted himself to the artistic spell.

Mixing the red ochre and the pale clay over the bone of an elephant’s tooth, and helping himself with his agile and skilled fingers, the shaman had drawn the first lines of an indecipherable meaning, conjurations without a doubt, then elegant figures of animals, bison, horses, deer, and boars, and even an elephant, which was the hoped-for prey. He enhanced the signs, which had the form of combs or of boats, with white chalk and with cinnabar. Ambila gathered everything that seemed useful to him to paint with, storing it all in mollusk valves, souvenirs of the brief time spent on the bank of a very blue sea, a delightful place from which other tribes expelled them. And now, as he drew the animals with exquisite fidelity, they were accompanied by less perfect figures, meant to be human, which looked like dolls with their hands raised to pray, in the first transport of belief, which was now appearing, wrapped up in magical evocations.



## In the Caves

The whole tribe had considered with a sense of respectful terror the pictographs of Ambila. The shaman's prestige had grown with the paintings, which the rest did not know how to execute.

And now, lined up at the door of the cave, grasping the torches, they waited for the soothsayer to appear. The Hunters, with Ronero at the front, each flaunted his animal mask: one of a boar, another of a bull or a bison. Ronero wore the mask of a bear, his last victim. And the women readied themselves to accompany the religious dance with prolonged howling.

Ambila appeared through the door of the cave. His body, entirely naked, was painted red with the same ochre of his paintings; on his head, he displayed the magical cap of braided straw, adorned by small, hanging snail and conch shells, and in his right hand, he brandished the staff made of deer antler, on which he had engraved animal figures, also with the object of attracting them by reproducing their outlines on that emblem of his shamanic power. When they saw the sorcerer, the Hunters shouted with harsh voices, repeating the shriek that they exhaled when they attacked, which could be transcribed in this way:

*"Aw-oo! Aw-oo!"*

Then they began their symbolic dance. Ambila directed it with his rod of command.<sup>2</sup> It was a kind of representation of the struggle with the beasts. They attacked the beasts, mimed the blow of the club, that of the knife, the act of the beast throwing itself on the man, and the furious body-on-body struggle.

Each masked Hunter attacked in the way of the animal he represented.

As he passed by Damara, Ronero exagger-

ated his violent gestures. He made the motion of grabbing as the bear grabs, with a quick, strong grasp, and he let out a characteristic howl. Other Hunters bellowed like bulls or imitated the charge of the boar.

To increase the fervor of the sacred dance, Ambila pulled from a corner a clay pot that contained sap gathered from trees and he burned it on a rock. The strong smell of the resins went to their heads, not yet familiar with alcohol.

Their own movements, the hope of the hunt approaching, abundant and succulent intoxicated them, with no need for anything more. As soon as the dance had ceased, still sweating, pulling off their beast masks, they ran to the ditch followed by the whole tribe.

The ditch was still shallow and they spread out to deepen it. They dug with bones, with stones, with flint knives, with their hands, in their ignorance of the tools that can dig up the earth and the metals with which they are built. They hurled the dirt haphazardly and it hindered them later when they tried to climb out of the pit. Then, the voice of Napal rose up:

"Bring stretchers, the stretcher on which we carry the Old Ones... Throw the dirt on them and then carry them where it will not bother you."

The advice was good and it was adopted right away. Ronero, nevertheless, furrowed his brow and turned about quickly.

"Ah! it is you, Napal!" he pronounced with a dark expression. "We believed that you had broken away from the tribe. You are never seen among us."

"I come if I am needed," responded calmly Napal, "and listen, Ronero, for my advice is for the good of all. Dig a deeper hole to one side of this pit. In this way, you will catch two elephants instead of one. One will fall in the hole and will remain captive; you will throw him grass and shoots, and you will have him trapped, to kill him when it pleases you. The other, the one in the pit, you will have to kill him immediately."

Ambila intervened sententiously. So many preparations should not be taken. The spirits

---

<sup>2</sup> In this passage, Pardo Bazán refers to the tool made of antler that the French archaeologist Louis Laurent Gabriel de Mortillet named the *batón de commandement*. Mortillet believed these tools functioned as symbols of power or status. Archaeologists now doubt this interpretation and other theories about their use include arrow or spear straighteners, spear throwers, fertility symbols, clothing fasteners, calendars used by midwives, tools to smooth and shape leather cords, and spinning wheel handles.





## In the Caves

could be offended by excessive precaution. Nevertheless, the women, those who suffered when food was lacking for the children, approved loudly and even the old woman Seseña, in a lightning bolt of discretion, explicitly joined in. Meat rotted so quickly in that season of the thaw!

In spite of the rudimentary nature of their tools, the pit quickly grew deep, and at one end, separated by a wall of dirt, a vast hole was opened, the future prison of an elephant. And everything was covered skillfully, with that skill characteristic of the savage, with branches, reeds, and bushes.

The herd, when crossing that point to drink from the river, would trip on the snare laid for them and fall in.

To finish was urgent, because Ronero's subtle sense of smell already perceived in the distance the vague scents, the trace of tar and musk that an elephant leaves behind wherever it goes. It was even more penetrating in the species to which the herd belongs, the oldest species that has lived on the planet, the mammoth called *Meridionalis*, of gigantic proportions. Ronero was sure. Very soon the herd would appear.

The tribe retired to the cave and only the Hunters remained on watch. Ronero, ever ironic, ordered Napal to keep them company.

"Although your weak arm will not throw a rock at the elephants, your knowledge can be useful to us. Who knows what advice you will give us?" he murmured jokingly.

"My advice, Hunter, hear it well: when the animal falls into the pit, do not throw large stones at it. It will take you a long time to kill it. Its skin is thick, its defenses terrifying, and when you think you have him stunned and you go down into the pit, one of you will pay with your life. The tusks will tear your bowels open. In his trunk, your ribs will crack! Do something else. As soon as he falls, begin throwing in dirt and pebbles. Bury him that way, and when you have his feet imprisoned and only his head uncovered, you will defeat him easily."

Despite how primitive the Hunters were, the strategy pleased them. They lay in wait,

attentive to distant sounds, their ears close to the ground. The stars had already grown pale and the firmament was bathed in milky clarity when Ronero, startled, stood up.

"Do you not hear? They are coming!"

In effect, a sound like the clamor of a torrent could be heard. The earth shook. The Hunters only had time to run and hide in the thick, tall reeds. The clear, distinct, terrifying trumpeting of the herd sounded, and, as it was now dawning, their enormous bulk could be seen, for they were as granite blocks cut from a cliff, rolling down a slope. And suddenly, a crash, terrifying blows.

It was the animals, when they fell into the traps. The rest of the herd did not stop for it. Blinded by dust and by heat, they saw only the pleasure of entering the waters of the lake, beyond the marshes. Thirst, like a madness, drove them forward. They continued their galloping, frolicking as soon as the water met their trunks and they could gather it, playing and flinging it into the air.

Meanwhile, the Hunters began to confine their first captive, who trumpeted mournfully at every cascade of dirt and gravel that slid along his enormous flanks. Feeling trapped, he tried to defend himself with his legs, with his trunk, but the dirt blinded him, falling in his eyes and on his great limbs, clumsy and solid like tree trunks, they grew fixed, caught and tangled in the dirt that rose up. The clods of soil now reached his belly, as far as the flabby and drooping skin that hung from him; and the animal, unable to move, wild with rage, heat, and fatigue, flung out his trunk, seeking prey in the air. The Hunters burst out laughing; one amused himself by throwing sharp stones at the trunk, drawing mournful bellows from the animal. One of the rocks broke an enormous curved tusk, his terrifying defense.

Now the dirt was rising to the middle of his belly; little by little it climbed to his wide back and covered it. The enemy was buried.

"Now," Ronero suggested, "we will crush his head."

"No," Napal, as usual, intervened. "It is not necessary. If you crush him, you might



## In the Caves

not kill him, at least not soon enough. Gather dry branches around him and roast his head alive.”

They did it that way, which promised a cruel spectacle, but Napal knew that, using that system, the death of the pachyderm would come sooner. The smoke would asphyxiate him. There was a moment, nevertheless, in which he shouted furiously and his trunk, like a serpent, writhed in a senseless coiling. But, lacking breath, his small eyes closed now forever, his mouth open in anguish, his groans grew quiet, and the flame, alive and capricious, licked and roasted that enormous head, whose skin burst open, cracking. The smell of roasted hide woke the greed of the men, exhausted from work, sleeplessness, and excitement. With their flint knives, they attacked the huge head of the monster and they gluttonously devoured even the tongue, half burnt to a crisp, and the trunk burnt between the charred tusks. The tribe—women, children, old men—now approached, mad with jubilation. Once again, life was assured; there was surfeit, a buried elephant that they could take apart in pieces, another imprisoned in the pit to keep alive, and the din of the clamor of happiness and rejoicing rose up deafeningly.

“Praise to Ronero! The Hunters, our brothers, are the spirits, are the strong wild boars!”

They called them wild boars, because of all the prey, that was the one they found the most exquisite.

“Let the law be fulfilled!” Belenda shouted. “Let a beauty, free until today from the masculine yoke, be surrendered to Ronero!”

Damara shuddered with anxiety and Napal turned to the Old Ones, who also clamored, lifting their gnarled hands, and he implored them.

“It is necessary that you hear me, fathers and grandfathers of our tribe!” he exclaimed in a loud and resonant voice, “but, before all else, tear the prey to pieces and prepare it for the victory feast. Fill yourselves, run, be happy... I claim only a moment of your attention.”

“We hear you now, Napal the Inventor. Speak...!” said one of the Hunters, the young Mordala, a rough and loyal fellow, Ronero’s competitor and somewhat badly disposed against him since the day that he unfairly took a dead goat from him. “Know this, Old Ones: today’s achievement, more than on us, depended on Napal.”

Mocking laughter from young Belenda’s group and sullen exclamations from Seseña and from Ronero met Mordala’s declaration in unison.

“Napal killing elephants!” the girl laughed disdainfully.

“Napal himself,” Mordala angrily sustained. “It was his suggestion to make the shaft to catch two elephants at one time. His to move the dirt with stretchers, which saved us so much time. His to bury the other elephant. His to roast the head...”

“How do you respond to this, Ronero?” Grandfather Olavi interrogated with a gravelly voice.

“I respond,” Ronero, after a pause, arrogantly answered, “that it is true. I do not deserve any recompense, Old Ones, in this hunt. Napal’s thoughts have done more than my arm. It would be less than worthy to say anything else. I am not Napal’s friend: I desire to prove my strength with him. But I will not lie.”

Napal threw his rival a glance of sympathetic gratitude.

“No, Ronero, I do not accept the honors for this achievement. Your strength has done it all. The hunt depended on you Hunters. Do not hate me. I profess you no ill will.”

Ambila intervened, changing the direction of the dispute. The hunt depended on the spirits, on the magical incantations that had called them forth. It was the spirits that directed the hand of man. They had propelled the elephants toward the lake. And if the tribe forgot the spirits, it would be punished.

In their turn, the Grandparents made their ruling. The spirits would be offered part of the prey, which would be burned in their honor; but, in the first place, what the spirits demanded was respect for their practices, for



## In the Caves

the sacred customs, which were now being lost. And Seseña, all skin and parchment, all disheveled and wild gray hair, began to speak, severely condemning the new styles, the abuses that were corrupting the ancient virtue. Looking at Damara, she thundered against clothing, against artificially arraying one's hair, against lascivious adornments that drive a man mad and make him abhor another man of his own tribe, whom he should love as a brother. And when she referred to the pretension of a girl who wanted a boy to herself, and to also be for him alone, the centenarian had harsh words.

"If there is in our tribe such a she-wolf, let the Hunters capture her," she exclaimed, fury flashing from her bloodshot eyes. Her dry right hand was extended toward Damara, but the members of the tribe no longer heard her. They were exhuming and quartering the elephant.

### V

The binging in those bodies whose stomachs were almost always empty or badly fed was a kind of inebriation. Stretched out among the remains and the coals, they digested, without busying themselves at the moment with anything else.

Approaching Damara surreptitiously, Napal whispered in her ear:

"You were right. Tomorrow at dawn, take your goats to graze. I will meet you and we will flee."

She trembled with joy. She knew it was her only salvation. They were going to turn her over to Ronero the Hairy One. Without a doubt, Grandmother wanted to punish her for her adornments, for her repugnance of ritual promiscuity. And she felt all around her the clash of wills, like hyenas in the shadows preparing themselves to jump on her. It was imperative to escape without delay. It would be better to do so immediately. The coolness of the afternoon began to awaken the gorged and, with their siesta over, they stretched in the shadow of the reedbeds. Soon the tribe

was on its feet; some entered the lake to bathe, to prepare themselves for dinner, which would not be less copious. When there was meat, the tribe ate even three times, swelling their bellies until they bulged like wineskins and gazing at them with happiness. The hope of dinner awoke in them an effusion for life, a carnal rejoicing. Some couples disappeared behind the bushes. Belenda approached the hunter Ronero, but the latter, brusquely rejected her with a grimace. He had barely eaten. The image of Damara did not separate itself from his spirit for a moment. She was another more desired, more difficult prey, and cracking the joints of his arms, Ronero promised himself that when he finally put them around the neck of the girl, he would either take possession of her or strangle her.

Meanwhile, the shaman Ambila, cautiously approached Napal and he led him toward the reedbeds.

"The Old Ones of the tribe have promised to listen to you, Napal, but it would be good for me to know something first. What do you have to say to the fathers and the mothers? You already know that they are the ones who possess wisdom, the ones who lead, but the spirits inspire me and I influence the decisions of the Old Ones who believe they follow their whims when they actually follow my impulse."

"Ambila," responded Napal, "your power and that of the Old Ones is great, but you know that the spirits do not always inspire equal things. And you also know that, in extreme cases, a man does not wait to consult you nor to hear the results of your spells, and he has to manage on his own. The spirits are very high up, in the great mountain of fire, and we are down here on earth without protection, weaker than the beasts if our skill does not help and save us. You, Ambila, will not contradict me. No one hears us. Woe on us if we only did what the spirits tell us to do from your mouth!"

"Your words are audacious, Napal. I will not repeat them to the Old Ones, because they could be disastrous for you."



## In the Caves

“My words do nothing to offend the spirits. They surely watch over us, and one of the ways that they must protect us is to teach us how to defend ourselves. They have suggested to us that we sharpen flint, that we light the fire, that we seek shelter in the caves, and they, Ambila, distribute the capacity either to paint, as you do, or to invent. The spirits have directed me toward the discovery of secrets that the other members of the tribe do not know. I want to share those secrets with them, because, Ambila, I love my tribe. I love them all, the Old Ones, the children... and I love one woman and I do not want her to belong to anyone but me!”

“We know that. You love Damara. But do not expect, Napal, to obtain her for yourself alone. You propose to uproot with your hands a custom that is now so ancient that we do not remember any other, and the ancient customs acquire divine essence. You will not uproot it, as you could not uproot a very large, sturdy tree with an extensive crown.”

“You may be right. In the end, this matter of my love is my responsibility. I planned to ask the tribe to grant me Damara as a reward for what you will now know, but I will not even plead for that. Without any personal interest, hear what I offer you...”

Ambila, for several moments, had been listening, deeply pensive. In his mind, he was weighing a devious scheme.

“I am offering the tribe,” Napal insisted, “the means to never suffer from hunger. I am giving them an excellent food, without the need to go out hunting. There will be enough to eat every time the sun shines. Look.”

From his bag made of woven grasses, he pulled something flat and toasted; he broke it and offered a piece to the shaman.

“Eat it without fear. Tell me if you like it.” Ambila sank his teeth into the cake, at first cautiously, then greedily.

“What is this?”

“A grain, which grows from a seed, which I grind, knead, and bake between two rocks... but it could also be baked between three walls made of stone and clay that resists the fire.”

“And where do you find this grain?” Ambila interrogated with great interest.

“In the little valley, to the East, I have sown, I have gathered, and you all can do the same, but in greater quantity, and keep what you gather in the cave to distribute a portion every day. And hear another secret that I will reveal to them: you would live better than in caves, if you built your homes of branches and clay, supported on tree trunks upon the waters of the lake. The beasts could not attack you there. In this way, each of you would have his dwelling, and his preferred woman and the children of his loins would live with him. Do you not understand, oh shaman, the difference? Do you not recognize that you would be happier? And when you were, you would bless the name of Napal, who has changed your life, who has redeemed you from the incessant walking and walking, pushed on by misery. You will settle in a favorable place, where you will find pure waters and fertile land; you will sow this grain, which will give you sustenance, and you will remember me.”

“In other words,” the shaman asked, growing more and more worried, more and more serious, “you desire, Napal, that the tribe count you among the inspired ones and, when they speak of you, that they lift their hands as they pray to the spirits?”

“No, I do not seek that; doing good to you all is enough for me. I have always desired that because I have seen that our condition is unhappy and I have tried to improve it. After me, other men will search out other secrets and little by little our hardships will be remedied. Here you have what I was planning to tell the Old Ones. If you handle making it known to them, it will be the same, Ambila. Perhaps it would be even better; they will believe you. They have faith in your magic.”

The shaman remained silent, his brow furrowed and his face pensive. Napal felt a pang of distrust and he looked at him intently.

“Do you not appreciate my revelation? Can you possibly be rejecting it in the name of those customs that you invoke for everything?”



## In the Caves

Do what you want, Ambila. I do not force anyone to receive a free gift.”

“No; on the contrary, Napal... You can be sure about me; what I doubt is that the Old Ones will accept such variations and novelties. At any rate, leave it to me, and do not reveal a word to anyone until I am able to convince them. Now it would be good for us together to visit the place where you have sown the grain, so that I can better understand what I should announce. I need to see you make the delicious cake. That way I will be able to praise your discovery and depict it as easy and practical, so that they will know that, thanks to you, the danger of hunger has been averted... Let us meet, then, at the hour when our absence will be least noticed. They are going to prepare the supper, and when they are involved in the preparations, wait for me behind the cave, at the start of the path, and we will take advantage of what is left of the day.”

Napal agreed, and the shaman, dissembling, left him. Slipping around the edge of the lake, he came to a stop before the pit where the live elephant, captive in his hole, trumpeted mournfully, vibrating his trunk to plead for help. It seemed that he was sucking in the air, seeking in it the trace of the herd that had abandoned him in his strange prison.

“You are strong, big and fearsome,” Ambila thought, “but astuteness has beaten you... Men know how to make the powerful fall into a trap and how to rob the pups from a wild animal... Men know how to fight with cautious prudence...”

While the shaman was thinking about this, a footstep was heard and a striking and robust shadow was cast over the ground of dry mud.

“Is that you, Hunter?”

Ronero looked at Ambila sullenly.

“It is I... What?”

“I was looking for you to tell you something that matters to you.”

“Very little matters to me, Ambila. Life itself hardly matters to me.”

“Because you are always thinking about a woman.”

“You are right. The virgin with her shell necklaces has stolen from me sleep, the pleasure of meat, and the longing for the ardent hunt.”

“You are wrong about one thing, Ronero,” the shaman answered.

“About what?”

“You will soon know... Come with me, let’s move away a little.”

“Listen, Ambila,” the Hunter murmured, fixing his feverish gaze on the sorcerer after they had withdrawn a good distance, “you who knows about incantations and knows the way to favor the spirits, will you not tell me what I must do so that Damara will be mine? Even if the Old Ones deliver her to me and the custom is fulfilled, I would rather smother her than caress her, if I see that I horrify her... And I am sure of one thing: Damara abhors me.”

Ambila gathered his thoughts for an instant before responding.

“Ronero, I told you before that you were wrong about something... You called the one with the strings of shells a virgin. But some time ago, she has completed the rite with Napal the Inventor.”

The Hunter groaned, as if he were receiving an internal and mortal wound.

“Is what you are telling me certain?”

“Certain. I know it from Belenda and the other girls of the tribe. I attest to it on the bodies of our fathers that have been scattered in diverse regions, covered by rocks so they would not be devoured.”

The brute looked at Ambila with wild eyes.

“And if that is true, how do those of you who have the duty to watch over the ancient customs tolerate it? Does it not go against our laws that a male should choose a woman, the woman a man? Napal and Damara should be stoned and their bodies left unburied.”

Ambila smiled with ironic tranquility.

“Yes, that is the old law, but like others, it has fallen into disuse. Only the Old Ones uphold and remember it. The young would oppose that act of justice. Everything changes,



## In the Caves

and who knows the variations that our way of thinking and living will suffer? ... You yourself, Ronero—do not deny it—are infected by this new spirit, and instead of looking upon all of the women of the tribe like sisters and wives, you think only about the one with the necklaces! You also defy tradition, and from these amorous urges, great misfortunes will come. Because of woman, man will hate his fellow being and will hate himself.”

“According to that, is there no remedy for my illness then?”

“There can be, but you yourself must apply it. The spirits love spilt blood. In another time, human blood was offered. The victim was fastened on a grooved rock, and the red and steaming liquid ran down the fissure to soak the ground. And the hunt was abundant, and the nursing women were never exhausted by hunger. That custom has also been lost. Don’t you see it? I’m telling you that it is necessary to vary things constantly! Now barely once or twice a year a bull or a boar is offered to the spirits... Today, a great hunting day, all that you have awarded them are the scraps and offal of the elephant. That which you refused to devour... And the spirits, on the mountain of fire, suffer thirst. The only thing that can quench it is blood! To favor them you are enough. Do you have a well-sharpened hatchet or the knife with which you killed the bear?”

The Hunter bellowed.

“Blood! I also have my jaws dry since I have not slept. I cannot even taste the flavor of a portion of bear. Look at how my limbs have grown thin, how unhealthy heat comes out of my mouth. Blood! I have desired it and did not spill it to not contravene the law of fraternity in the tribe, where we are all brothers.”

“He has already broken fraternity. He wants Damara to belong to himself exclusively.”

“It shall not be!”

When he said it, the Hunter lifted his hands to swear or curse.

“If your resolution is firm,” Ambila advised, “find your way tonight, one hour after

the moon comes out, to the hillside of the goats. I will be there with them.”

A surprise cut off the words of the shaman. The light of the sun completely covered the bearded, hardened, and contorted face of the brute, and something liquid and gleaming ran down it, like a drop of dew that shines the foliage of the reeds at dawn.

“Are you crying?” Ambila interrogated, astonished.

“Kill me, Ambila,” he supplicated. “Throw me into the pit of the captive elephant. Is there no spell against me? Cast it. That girl has pulled my heart from my breast and she has fed it to a wolf cub, to the one that guards her.”

“Bah!” and the shaman jovially slapped the cheeks of the boy, “we will cure you soon... Go out to the hillside at the appointed hour...”

## VI

Before nightfall, Napal had taken the shaman to visit his fields, where the ears of grain, although still green, nonetheless displayed their husks full and their heads somewhat bent over. In that loamy, intact soil, growth and maturity were accelerated, and could yield four harvests annually.

Returning then to the plateau where Damara was waiting, surrounded by her little flock, Napal pulled out the flour, already ground, and in the presence of Ambila mixed the cake; meanwhile the shepherdess lit the flame, stoked the bonfire, and, encircling the flat stones with embers so they would become red-hot, she improvised a misshapen oven where the bread would be baked. Ambila watched it all with avid eyes, learning the process, helping, immediately recognizing the singularity of this novelty and the incalculable worth of its fruits. The inventor had not lied: from that day onward the subsistence of man was assured.

In her turn, Damara explained to him the usefulness of the little goats. They would give birth; there would be abundant meat, milk,



## In the Caves

and skins for warmth. Ambila was dazzled. He who revealed such mysteries would be greater than the spirits, would abolish their rites, would be worshipped.

Meanwhile, the feast began. After milking, Damara presented him with a brimming bowl, into which Napal dipped pieces of the warm cake, which he offered him. Savoring such new delicacies, the shaman praised them:

“It is as if a river of sweetness were running through my veins... It is so pleasing that my tongue comes to my lips to taste it again...”

“Did I not tell you so? The tribe will no longer suffer; the children will not be wretched; the old will return to the days of their childhood, because this delicious milk will give them a food that does not need to be chewed. Oh, how I have pondered these things! Night after night my imagination has flown, and the future has advanced before my eyes with more clarity than the series of your paintings advances on the walls and the ceilings of the caves... I have seen many dwellings, wide, radiant, in rows, where men who actively come and go reside. I have seen infinite fields all covered with ripened grain the color of the sun. I have seen bright green meadows with thousands of flocks in them. And I have also seen Hunters, pursuing beasts, just for the pleasure of slaughtering them, not to eat their disgusting meat. I have seen wide rivers and immense seas and I was walking on them; I do not know how, maybe by foot on some boards. And I have seen women who drew water from the river, and only wore their neck and arms uncovered. The rest was covered, chastely, by a kind of white cloud. How beautiful they were! How charming in their forms!”

Ambila listened, not without sometimes paying attention to distant rumbling, as if he feared or hoped for what was to come.

“Do not worry,” Napal advised, for he interpreted Ambila’s hesitation in his own way. “They do not remember us... They will have dined and lain down to sleep... As long as they have abundant meat, nothing will trou-

ble them. In fact, I believe it more prudent to wait to reveal anything to them until hunger begins to hound them. Today they would not listen. Not even your absence will seem strange to them. Just wait, you are going to hear something that will please you. You have tried the simple milk mixed with the warm, appetizing cake. And, having satisfied that instinct of necessity that moves us to fight for the conservation of our lives, we wish for something more; is this not true? A pleasure, which sometimes would cause us to forget that very anxiety about survival, would do us good... some other ideas that would distract us...”

He pulled out of his grass bag a short piece of perforated cane, and under the light of the moon, Napal began to sweetly modulate the sonatas of the primitive, rustic shepherd’s flute. Seated on a rock, her elbows on her knees, her face resting on her palms, Damara listened, her whole soul filled with tenderness. It was a sound as new as the flavor of the bread, for nothing had been heard in the tribe except the savage *aw-oos*, with which they stirred themselves up for the hunt, or the sinister formulas of the sorcerer’s spells to call forth the dark spirits, the elemental powers. Unexpectedly, on the top of a nearby tree, an awakened little bird began to sing a duet, warbling delicately. The chirping flowed from the throat of the bird, spilling like a string of small shells that, broken, rolls down a woman’s breast, and the moon itself, white and smooth, seemed to enjoy illuminating the marvelous concert. As if without realizing, Damara, trying out her young voice, harmonized a canticle, a mysterious ancient melody, phrases interrupted by flattery or conversation, something that was a lullaby, a complaint, and a call. The divine song of the bird alternated with the improvisation of the woman and with the delicate whining of the flute, and Ambila, for an instant, felt that something that could carry the name of remorse was rising up in his heart. His ear, although saturated with the spell of the music, perceived among the undergrowth something like the crawling of vermin and the con-



## In the Caves

tained and panting fatigue of hoarse breathing...

It could have been an illusion perhaps, because nothing more was heard, and amid the friendly silence of the night, the sonata of the bird, the woman's trembling and soothing rhymed moans, and the echoes of the flute, similar to the whisper of the wind in the tall and lance-shaped reeds that border the lake, continued to rise...

When the revelry ended, Napal approached the shaman.

"Ambila, this has been a farewell. I leave you a splendid inheritance: the bread, the flock, the idea of new dwellings, and even the music. Take this flute and, when your body is full, awaken your superior spirits with a harmony imitating that with which those little birds regale us..."

Ambila quizzed, "What do you mean about inheriting the flute, the bread, the inventions?"

"Have you not understood? Damara and I are breaking away from the tribe tonight. Wherever chance, the master of human existence, leads us, she will be for me and I will have no other woman, no other affection. Little ones will be born and they will be named after us, Napal and Damara. The earth offers us its fruits and I will bequeath these marvels and others, perhaps greater, aimed at making life pleasant, to my children. I will not see you again; my path is distant. Good-bye, Ambila, and let those of the tribe speak of me as the one who has saved them."

The shaman listened, believing he was dreaming. An anxiety about having prepared what was going to happen oppressed him. It appeared that no one needed to die. The blood, pleasing to the spirits, did not need to run. When he fled, Napal was leaving him heir to his power. He would surely never return, and the glory would be for him, Ambila, to appear like a numen sent by the supernatural powers. And now, what could be done? The die was cast; there could be no retreat. He shrugged his shoulders.

Ambila did not commit evil if it was not to his advantage, but the ambition to be great among his people consumed him. The power

of the Old Ones constituted a hindrance to him. They were too attached to the primitive law and whenever something unknown came up as a proposal, they screeched, infuriated, without even making the effort to find out what the change was all about. In the depths of his soul, the shaman, pretending to bear them great consideration and listening to them with expressions of respect, despised the Old Ones and the centenarian grandmothers, made senile by age and infirmities and weaknesses. More than once, Ambila had thought about the necessity of changing the ways of the tribe, fixing it on the bank of a flowing river or a freshwater lake. Napal's discovery opened vast horizons. It was the end of the power of the decrepit ones, who did nothing and hindered everything. If such a happy outcome, which would make him omnipotent, had to cost life of Napal... of Napal alone? As sudden as lightning, Ambila realized... Damara also knew the secrets and she too had to die. Otherwise, she would talk, she would cause an uproar, the truth would be known, the name of the inventor, and it would not be he, Ambila, whom they would venerate as a genius, but rather the boy... A deep wrinkle scored his forehead, while Napal and Damara cheerfully repeated,

"Farewell, shaman, farewell..."

And the couple, entwined, began to walk in the direction of a trail that scaled the mountainous banks toward a grotto known only by Napal and in which they planned to spend the night prior to embarking on their unknown road before the sun rose. They walked lightly, with an elastic step, Damara happy, for from the first day she had longed for escape, for liberty. Her joy began in that instant. The world was opening up for their innocent and ardent love. She was realizing an unconscious dream: the purification of brutal instinct through the election of the soul. And they disappeared, behind the curtain of vegetation, toward the tree where the songbird still continued chirping.

A dark mass came out of the thicket and the voice, raspy, agitated, of the Hunter stammered:





## In the Caves

“I am going after them...”

Suddenly, a more horrible idea crossed Ambila’s mind. Ronero had also heard. He also had the key to the future!

“Listen, Hunter,” he murmured. “My counsels are better even than those of the Old Ones... Follow them at a distance, observe where they stop and, if they fall asleep, attack them then, when they cannot defend themselves...”

“Traacherously? No!” shouted Ronero. “I will kill him face to face.”

And hoisting his formidable club made of hardened wood, he began to walk furtively. Ambila followed him on the steep pathway. The lovers had a head start, because, anxious to arrive at their refuge, they had taken the shortcut that they knew. They were already in the grotto, in which Napal’s care had provided a bed softened by fragrant, dry grass, a bowl full of water, and wild, but flavorful berries, placed on fresh leaves, tart strawberries and *madroño* berries,<sup>3</sup> the color of burning garnet. Damara, filled with joy, laughed at the frugal refreshment, petting her faithful wolf cub, who had followed her, abandoning the flock. With her Napal, everything was beautiful to the girl, everything dressed in lights and colors.

“How I love you, Napal!”

“My Damara! Mine from today and always!”

The embrace was tight, prolonged, endless... A shadow, at the door of the cave, veiled the light of the moon. A savage “*aw-ooo!*,” challenging and hateful, resounded, inflected with diabolical energy. Damara exhaled a shriek of fear... Ronero was there, leaning on his club, waiting.

“What do you want, Hunter?” Napal asked, protecting Damara with his body.

“Your blood.”

“Why? I have not offended you in any way. Yesterday I helped you undertake the hunt.”

“You have taken Damara from me; you have stolen her, like the vultures take the doves. I have come to take her back.”

“You are deceived. She was never yours. She wants to come with me. She resists suffering the yoke. Ask her about it. She is mine.”

“She must suffer what her sisters suffer. And above all, I want her. Give me her or your blood!”

“Ronero,” Damara begged, trembling, “forgive us. I will entreat you as I would the spirits, but let me be free. You cannot command what is inside of me.”

“When I have pulled Napal’s heart from his chest, then tell me to whom you belong. But for now, I am waiting for you, boy. Pick up a rock or take my flint knife. Arm yourself, if you prefer, with my club... My limbs are enough for me.”

And rapidly, dropping the club, throwing his knife on the ground, he moved toward the platform that surrounded the grotto and that overlooked, on one side, the steep pathway and, on the other, a deep ravine. Clinching his fists, flexing his biceps, he waited. In spite of Damara’s pleas, Napal advanced as well. When they came face to face, they grabbed each other. Ronero made Napal’s body crack, but an able punch by Napal between the eyes of his enemy blinded him, and the boy was now going to make the most of his advantage by doing it again, when from behind, a hand grabbed his ankle and made him fall flat. Without giving him time to get up, blind and all, the Hunter, groping, held Napal down with his knees and sought, with open hands, the neck of his enemy. The hands of Ronero were two hairy pincers, endowed with unyielding strength, and under his cruel pressure, the inventor would soon stop breathing. But the Hunter felt that he was being grabbed from behind with nervous violence: it was Damara, who was coming to the defense of her lover. Then the shaman intervened again. Grabbing Damara by the waist, he dragged her to the edge of the plat-

---

<sup>3</sup> The *madroño* (*Arbutus unedo*), known as the strawberry tree in English, is native to western Europe and the Mediterranean area. The fruit of the *madroño* is used in jams, yogurt, and brandy. The symbol of Madrid is the bear and the *madroño*; the mention of the plant calls to mind the bear, just before Ronero, the bear-killer, appears.



## In the Caves

form, holding her halfway dangling at the brink of the cliff, while with desperate efforts she struggled to approach the two men again. Then Guá, the domesticated wolf, hurled himself at Ambila to bite him, and the shaman, with the club that he picked up from the ground, laid the dog out inert, breaking his backbone.

The momentary aid of the shepherdess had been enough so that Napal, agile and quick, could free himself from the hands that held him and deal another well-aimed blow to Ronero in the stomach. The Hunter gasped and, since the cloud of pain that covered his eyes had not yet dissipated, he once again searched by groping for his enemy. The latter had now armed himself with the flint knife that lay on the ground and waited firm-footed, with desperate resolution. He saw Damara and the shaman together, she struggling to help him, he preventing it; Napal finally understood Ambila's cunning schemes, and, in any case, he wanted to save himself and his beloved. Grasping the sharp piece of flint, he calculated the blow. As soon as Ronero jumped on him, he quickly stabbed him. The weapon penetrated under a shoul-

der, close to his neck, and when the Hunter suffered the sharp pain, he became more enraged; his fists launched into flight and found Napal's temples, dazing him, and then they clutched him. Both enemies—linked by the embrace of hatred—struggled to hurl each other from the bank to the bottom of the ravine, where they fell without extricating themselves, Napal with his forehead cracked open, Ronero with his lung perforated, both ricocheting downward off the rocks. The shaman, seeing them roll, shoved Damara, and the beloved descended after her lover into the abyss.

.....

And it was the first time that a crime of passion was committed in the tribe. Many others followed, because once the shaman Ambila had taught the cultivation of wheat and the making of bread and the art of building dwellings (for all of which he was venerated like a deity), the tribe stopped wandering and gave origin to agricultural and pastoral peoples, who abolished the ancient rite, the enemy of Love.