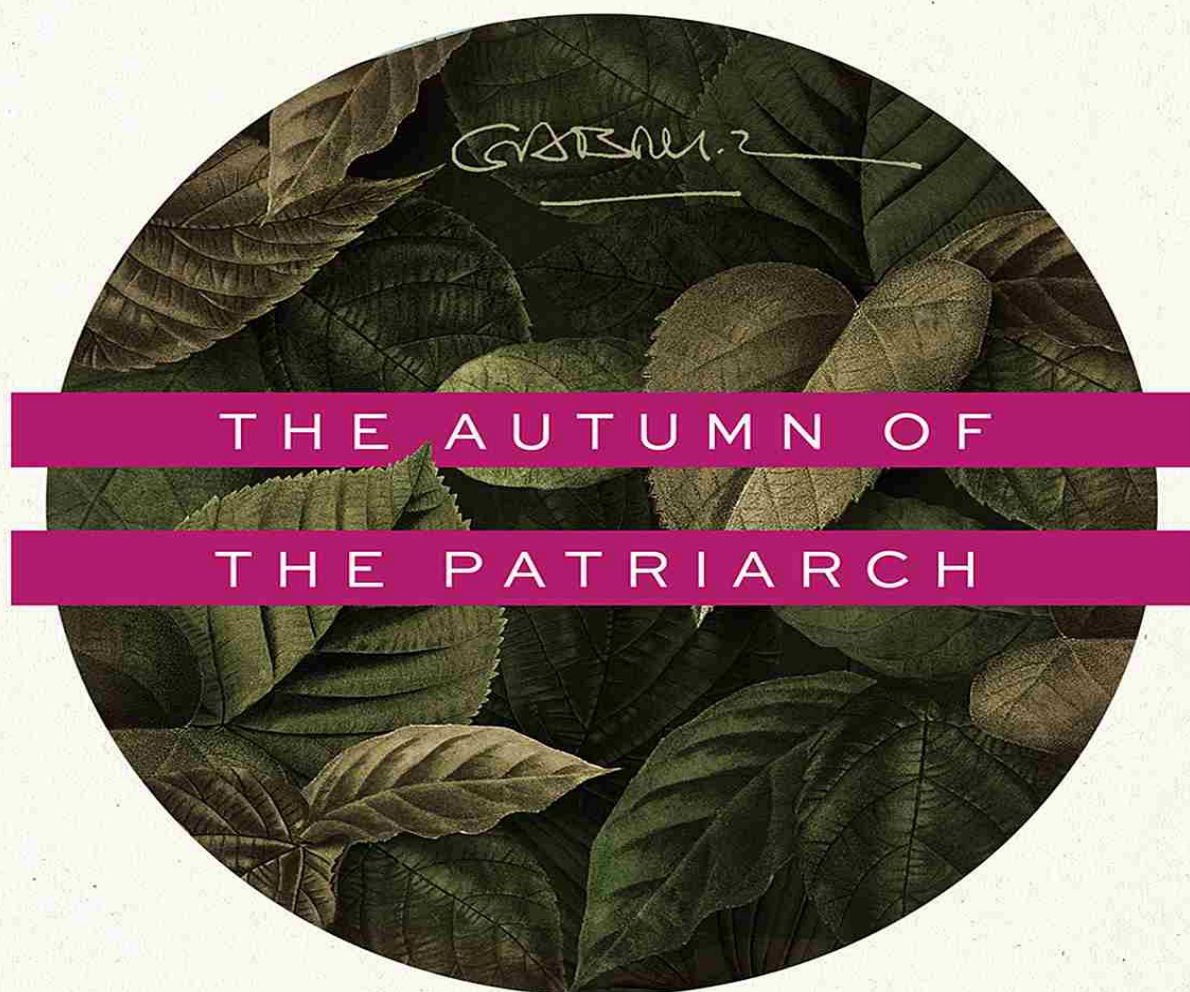


GABRIEL GARCÍA
MÁRQUEZ



translated by GREGORY RABASSA

Subscribe to our newsletter for title recommendations,
giveaways and discounts reserved only for subscribers.

[Join here.](#)



THE AUTUMN OF THE PATRIARCH (EL OTOÑO DEL PATRIARCA) by Gabriel García Márquez; copyright © 1975 by Gabriel García Márquez and the heirs of Gabriel García Márquez. English translation copyright © 1976 by Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. Used by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

Translated by Gregory Rabassa
E-book published in 202 by Blackstone Publishing
Cover design by Linley Delucci
Dragon fly photo © abdul gapur dayak (Adobe Stock)]

All rights reserved. This book or any portion thereof may not be reproduced or used in any manner whatsoever without the express written permission of the publisher except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The characters and events in this book are fictitious.
Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental
and not intended by the author.

Trade e-book ISBN 979-8-200-95221-2
Library e-book ISBN 979-8-200-95220-5
Fiction / Hispanic & Latino

CIP data for this book is available from the Library of Congress

Blackstone Publishing
31 Mistletoe Rd.
Ashland, OR 97520

www.BlackstonePublishing.com

Over the weekend the vultures got into the presidential palace by pecking through the screens on the balcony windows and the flapping of their wings stirred up the stagnant time inside, and at dawn on Monday the city awoke out of its lethargy of centuries with the warm, soft breeze of a great man dead and rotting grandeur. Only then did we dare go in without attacking the crumbling walls of reinforced stone, as the more resolute had wished, and without using oxbows to knock the main door off its hinges, as others had proposed, because all that was needed was for someone to give a push and the great armored doors that had resisted the lombards of William Dampier during the building's heroic days gave way. It was like entering the atmosphere of another age, because the air was thinner in the rubble pits of the vast lair of power, and the silence was more ancient, and things were hard to see in the decrepit light. All across the first courtyard, where the paving stones had given way to the underground thrust of weeds, we saw the disorder of the post of the guard who had fled, the weapons abandoned in their racks, the big, long rough-planked tables with plates containing the leftovers of the Sunday lunch that had been interrupted by panic, in shadows we saw the annex where government house had been, colored fungi and pale irises among the unresolved briefs whose normal course had been slower than the pace of the driest of lives, in the center of the courtyard we saw the baptismal font where more than five generations had been christened with martial sacraments, in the rear we saw the ancient viceregal stable which had been transformed into a coach house, and among the camellias and butterflies we saw the berlin from stirring days, the wagon from the time of the plague, the coach from the year of the comet, the hearse from progress in order, the sleep-walking limousine of the first century of peace, all in good shape under the dusty

cobwebs and all painted with the colors of the flag. In the next courtyard, behind an iron grille, were the lunar-dust-covered rosebushes under which the lepers had slept during the great days of the house, and they had proliferated to such a degree in their abandonment that there was scarcely an odorless chink in that atmosphere of roses which mingled with the stench that came to us from the rear of the garden and the stink of the henhouse and the smell of dung and urine ferment of cows and soldiers from the colonial basilica that had been converted into a milking barn. Opening a way through the asphyxiating growth we saw the arches of the gallery with potted carnations and sprigs of astromelias and pansies where the concubines' quarters had been, and from the variety of domestic leftovers and the quantity of sewing machines we thought it possible that more than a thousand women had lived there with their crews of seven-month runts, we saw the battlefield disorder of the kitchens, clothes rotting in the sun by the wash basins, the open slit trench shared by concubines and soldiers, and in back we saw the Babylonian willows that had been carried alive from Asia Minor in great seagoing hothouses, with their own soil, their sap, and their drizzle, and behind the willows we saw government house, immense and sad, where the vultures were still entering through the chipped blinds. We did not have to knock down the door, as we had thought, for the main door seemed to open by itself with just the push of a voice, so we went up to the main floor along a bare stone stairway where the opera-house carpeting had been torn by the hoofs of the cows, and from the first vestibule on down to the private bedrooms we saw the ruined offices and protocol salons through which the brazen cows wandered, eating the velvet curtains and nibbling at the trim on the chairs, we saw heroic portraits of saints and soldiers thrown to the floor among broken furniture and fresh cow flops, we saw a dining room that had been eaten up by the cows, the music room profaned by the cows' breakage, the domino tables destroyed and the felt on the billiard tables cropped by the cows, abandoned in a corner we saw the wind machine, the one which counterfeited any phenomenon from the four points of the compass so that the people in the house could bear up under their nostalgia for the sea that had gone away, we saw birdcages hanging everywhere, still covered with

the sleeping cloths put on some night the week before, and through the numerous windows we saw the broad and sleeping animal that was the city, still innocent of the historic Monday that was beginning to come to life, and beyond the city, up to the horizon, we saw the dead craters of harsh moon ash on the endless plain where the sea had been. In that forbidden corner which only a few people of privilege had ever come to know, we smelled the vultures' carnage for the first time, we caught their age-old asthma, their premonitory instinct, and guiding ourselves by the putrefaction of their wing flaps in the reception room we found the wormy shells of the cows, their female animal hindquarters repeated many times in the full-length mirrors, and then we pushed open a side door that connected with an office hidden in the wall, and there we saw him, in his denim uniform without insignia, boots, the gold spur on his left heel, older than all old men and all old animals on land or sea, and he was stretched out on the floor, face down, his right arm bent under his head as a pillow, as he had slept night after night every night of his ever so long life of a solitary despot. Only when we turned him over to look at his face did we realize that it was impossible to recognize him, even though his face had not been pecked away by vultures, because none of us had ever seen him, and even though his profile was on both sides of all coins, on postage stamps, on condom labels, on trusses and scapulars, and even though his engraved picture with the flag across his chest and the dragon of the fatherland was displayed at all times in all places, we knew that they were copies of copies of portraits that had already been considered unfaithful during the time of the comet, when our own parents knew who he was because they had heard tell from theirs, as they had from theirs before them, and from childhood on we grew accustomed to believe that he was alive in the house of power because someone had seen him light the Chinese lanterns at some festival, someone had told about seeing his sad eyes, his pale lips, his pensive hand waving through the liturgical decorations of the presidential coach, because one Sunday many years ago they had brought him the blind man on the street who for five cents would recite the verses of the forgotten poet Ruben Dario and he had come away happy with the nice wad they had paid him for a recital that had been only

for him, even though he had not seen him, of course, not because he was blind, but because no mortal had ever seen him since the days of the black vomit and yet we knew that he was there, we knew it because the world went on, life went on, the mail was delivered, the municipal band played its retreat of silly waltzes on Saturday under the dusty palm trees and the dim street lights of the main square, and other old musicians took the places of the dead musicians in the band. In recent years when human sounds or the singing of birds were no longer heard inside and the armored doors were closed forever, we knew that there was someone in government house because at night lights that looked like a ship's beacons could be seen through the windows of the side that faced the sea, and those who dared go closer could hear a disaster of hoofs and animal sighs from behind the fortified walls, and one January afternoon we had seen a cow contemplating the sunset from the presidential balcony, just imagine, a cow on the balcony of the nation, what an awful thing, what a shitty country, and all sorts of conjectures were made about how it was possible for a cow to get onto a balcony since everybody knew that cows can't climb stairs, and even less carpeted ones, so in the end we never knew if we had really seen it or whether we had been spending an afternoon on the main square and as we strolled along had dreamed that we had seen a cow on the presidential balcony where nothing had been seen or would ever be seen again for many years until dawn last Friday when the first vultures began to arrive, rising up from where they had always dozed on the cornices of the charity hospital, they came from farther inland, they came in successive waves, out of the horizon of the sea of dust where the sea had been, for a whole day they flew in slow circles over the house of power until a king with bridal feathers and a crimson ruff gave a silent order and that breaking of glass began, that breeze of a great man dead, that in and out of vultures through the windows imaginable only in a house which lacked authority, so we dared go in too and in the deserted sanctuary we found the rubble of grandeur, the body that had been pecked at, the smooth maiden hands with the ring of power on the bone of the third finger, and his whole body was sprouting tiny lichens and parasitic animals from the depths of the sea, especially in the armpits and the groin, and he had the

canvas truss on his herniated testicle, which was the only thing that had escaped the vultures in spite of its being the size of an ox kidney, but even then we did not dare believe in his death because it was the second time he had been found in that office, alone and dressed and dead seemingly of natural causes during his sleep, as had been announced a long time ago in the prophetic waters of soothsayers' basins. The first time they found him had been at the beginning of his autumn, the nation was still lively enough for him to feel menaced by death even in the solitude of his bedroom, and still he governed as if he knew he was predestined never to die, for at that time it did not look like a presidential palace but rather a marketplace where a person had to make his way through barefoot orderlies unloading vegetables and chicken cages from donkeys in the corridors, stepping over beggar women with famished godchildren who were sleeping in a huddle on the stairs awaiting the miracle of official charity, it was necessary to elude the flow of dirty water from the foul-mouthed concubines who were putting fresh flowers in the vases in the place of nocturnal flowers and swabbing the floor and singing songs of illusory loves to the rhythm of the dry branches that beat rugs on the balconies and all of it in the midst of the uproar of tenured civil servants who found hens laying eggs in desk drawers, and the traffic of whores and soldiers in the toilets, and a tumult of birds, and the fighting of street dogs in the midst of audiences because no one knew who was who or by whom in that palace with open doors in the grand disorder of which it was impossible to locate the government. The man of the house not only participated in that marketplace disaster but he had set it up himself and ruled over it, for as soon as the lights in his bedroom went on, before the cocks began to crow, the reveille of the presidential guard gave the notice of the new day to the nearby Conde barracks, and from there it was repeated for the San Jerónimo base, and from there to the harbor fort, and there it would be repeated in the six successive reveilles that would first awaken the city and then the whole country, while he meditated in the portable latrine trying to stifle with his hands the buzzing in his ears, which was beginning to show itself at that time, and watching the passage of the lights of ships along the fickle topaz sea which in those days of glory was still beneath his window. Every day,

ever since he had taken possession of the house, he had supervised the milking in the cow barns to measure with his own hand the quantity of milk that the three presidential wagons would carry to the barracks in the city, in the kitchen he would have a mug of black coffee and some cassava without knowing too well the direction in which the whimsical winds of the new day would blow him, always attent on the gabbling of the servants, who were the people in the house who spoke the same language as he, whose serious blandishments he respected most, and whose hearts he best deciphered, and a short time before nine o'clock he would take a slow bath in water with boiled leaves in the granite cistern built in the shadow of the almond trees of his private courtyard, and only after eleven o'clock would he manage to overcome the drowsiness of dawn and confront the hazards of reality. Previously, during the occupation by the marines, he would shut himself up in his office to decide the destiny of the nation with the commandant of the forces of the landing and sign all manner of laws and decrees with his thumbprint, for in those days he did not know how to read or write, but when they left him alone with his nation and his power again he did not poison his blood again with the sluggishness of written law, but governed orally and physically, present at every moment and everywhere with a flinty parsimony but also with a diligence inconceivable at his age, besieged by mobs of lepers, blind people and cripples who begged for the salt of health from his hands, and lettered politicians and dauntless adulators who proclaimed him the corrector of earthquakes, eclipses, leap years and other errors of God, dragging his great feet of an elephant walking in the snow all through the house as he resolved problems of state and household matters with the same simplicity with which he gave the order take that door away from here and put it over there for me, they took it away, put it back again for me, they put it back, the clock in the tower should not strike twelve at twelve o'clock but two times so that life would seem longer, the order was carried out, without an instant of hesitation, without a pause, except for the mortal hour of siesta time when he would take refuge in the shade of the concubines, he would choose one by assault, without undressing her or getting undressed himself, without closing the door, and all through the

house one could hear his heartless panting of an urgent spouse, the craving tinkle of his gold spur, his dog whimper, the surprise of the woman who wasted her time at love in trying to get rid of the squalid stares of the seven-month runts, her shouts of get out of here, go play in the courtyard, this isn't for children to see, and it was as if an angel had flown across the skies of the nation, voices were muffled, life came to a halt, everybody remained stone-still with a finger to his lips, not breathing, silence, the general is screwing, but those who knew him best had no faith even in the respite of that sacred moment, for it always seemed that he was in two places at once, they would see him playing dominoes at seven o'clock at night and at the same time he had been seen lighting cow chips to drive the mosquitoes out of the reception room, nor did anyone harbor any illusions until the lights in the last of the windows went out and they heard the noise of the three crossbars, the three locks, the three bolts on the door of the presidential bedroom, and they heard the thump of the body as it collapsed from fatigue onto the stone floor, and the breathing of a decrepit child that grew deeper as the tide rose, until the nocturnal harp of the wind silenced the cicadas and their fiddling and a broad big sea wave swept through the streets of the ancient city of viceroys and buccaneers and poured into government house through all the windows like a tremendous August Saturday that caused barnacles to grow on the mirrors and left the reception room at the mercy of the sharks and it rose higher than the highest levels of prehistoric oceans and overflowed the face of the land and space and time, and only he remained floating face down on the lunar water of his dreams of a solitary drowned man, in his denim private soldier's uniform, his boots, his gold spur, and his right arm folded under his head to serve as a pillow. That simultaneous presence everywhere during the flinty years that preceded his first death, that going up as he went down, that going into ecstasy in the sea while in agony in unsuccessful loves, were not a privilege of his nature, as his admirers proclaimed, or a mass hallucination, as his critics said, but his luck in counting on the complete service and doglike loyalty of Patricio Aragonés, his perfect double, who had been found without anyone's searching for him when they came to him with the news general sir a false presidential

coach was driving around to Indian villages doing a prosperous business of impostoring, they had seen the taciturn eyes in the morguelike shadows, they had seen the pale lips, the hand of a sensitive bride with a velvet glove that went along throwing handfuls of salt to sick people kneeling in the street, and behind the coach followed two bogus cavalry officers collecting hard cash for the favor of health, just imagine general sir, what a sacrilege, and he gave no order against the impostor, but asked instead that they bring him secretly to the presidential palace with his head stuck in a burlap bag so that people would not get them mixed up, and then he suffered the humiliation of seeing himself in such a state of equality, God damn it, this man is me, he said, because it really was as if he were, except for the authority of the voice, which the other one never managed to imitate, and for the clearness of the lines on the hand where the life line went along without obstacles all around the base of the thumb, and if he did not have him shot immediately it was not because he was interested in keeping him as his official impostor, that occurred to him later, but because the illusion that the cipher of his own fate should be written on the hand of an impostor bothered him. When he became convinced of the vanity of that dream Patricio Aragonés had already impassively survived six assassination attempts, had acquired the habit of dragging his feet which had been flattened out with a mallet, his ears buzzed, and his hernia ached at dawn in the winter, and he had learned to take off and put on the golden spur as if the straps were tangled up simply to gain time at audiences muttering God damn it these buckles Flemish blacksmiths make aren't even good for this, and from the jokester and gabbler that he had been when he was a glass-blower in his father's carquaise he became thoughtful and somber and paid no attention to what people were saying to him but scrutinized the shadows of their eyes to guess what they were not saying to him, and he never answered a question without first asking in turn what do you think and from the slothful wastrel he had been in his business as a vendor of miracles, he became diligent to the point of torture and an implacable walker, he became tight-fisted and rapacious, he resigned himself to sleeping on the floor, his clothes on, face down and with no pillow, and he renounced his precocious presumption of an

identity of his own and all hereditary vocation for the golden flightiness of simply blowing and making bottles, and he confronted the most terrible risks of power laying cornerstones where the second stone was never to be laid, cutting ribbons in enemy territory and bearing up under so many soft-boiled dreams and so many repressed sighs of impossible illusions as he crowned and did not so much as touch all those ephemeral and unattainable beauty queens, for he had become resigned forever to live a destiny that was not his, even though he did not do it out of greed or conviction but because he had exchanged his life for his in the lifetime job of official impostor with a nominal salary of fifty pesos a month and the advantage of living like a king without the calamity of being one, what more could you ask? That mix-up of identities reached its high point one night when the wind was long and he found Patricio Aragonés sighing out toward the sea amidst the fragrant vapor of the jasmines and he asked him with legitimate alarm if they had put wolfbane in the food because he was drifting off as if pierced by evil air, and Patricio Aragonés answered him no general, it's worse than that, on Saturday he had crowned a carnival queen and had danced the first waltz with her and now he couldn't find any exit out of that memory, because she was the most beautiful woman on earth, the kind you never get for yourself general, if you could only see her, but he answered with a sigh of relief and what the hell, this is the kind of trouble a man gets into when he gets all tied up with women, he proposed abducting her as he had done with so many good-looking women who had become his concubines, I'll have her held down by force on the bed with four troopers at her arms and legs while you take care of her with your soup ladle, God damn it, you can take her while she's bulldogged, he told him, even the tightest of them roll around with rage at first and then they beg you don't leave me like this general like a sad rose apple whose seed has fallen off, but Patricio Aragonés didn't want as much as that he wanted more, he wanted them to love him, because this girl is one of those who know where the tune comes from general, you'll see when you get a look at her, so as a formula for relief he pointed out the nocturnal pathways to the rooms of his concubines to him and authorized him to make use of them as if it were he himself, by assault and quickly and with

his clothes on, and Patricio Aragonés in good faith sank into that morass of loves even believing that he could put a gag on his urges through them, but such was his anxiety that sometimes he forgot the conditions of the loan, he would unbutton his fly absent-mindedly, linger over details, carelessly stumble across the hidden jewels of the basest of women, draw out their deepest sighs, and even make them laugh with surprise in the shadows, you old devil general, they would tell him, you're growing greedy on us in your old age, and from then on neither of them or any of the women either ever knew whose child was whose or by whom, because Patricio Aragonés's children were seven-monthers just like his. So it came to pass that Patricio Aragonés became the man most essential to the seat of power, the most beloved and also perhaps the most feared, and he had more time available to take care of the armed forces, not because the armed forces were what sustained his power, as we all thought, quite the contrary, because they were his most feared natural enemy, so he made some officers believe that they were being watched by others, he shuffled their assignments to prevent their plotting, every army post received a ration of eight blank cartridges for every ten live rounds and he sent them gunpowder mixed with beach sand while he kept the good ammunition within reach in an arsenal in the presidential palace the keys to which hung on a ring with other keys that had no duplicates and opened other doors that no one else could open, protected by the tranquil shadow of my lifelong comrade General Rodrigo de Aguilar, an artilleryman and academy graduate who was also his minister of defense and at the same time commander of the presidential guard, director of the state security services, and one of the very few mortals authorized to beat him in a game of dominoes, because he had lost his right arm trying to defuse a dynamite charge minutes before the presidential berlin was to pass by the site of the assassination attempt. He felt so safe under the protection of General Rodrigo de Aguilar and with the presence of Patricio Aragonés that he began to relax his concern with self-preservation and was becoming more and more visible, he dared take a ride through the city with only one aide in a covered wagon bearing insignia looking through the peepholes at the arrogant gilt stone cathedral which he had declared by decree the most

beautiful in the world, he peeped at the ancient stone mansions with entranceways from times when all was drowsy and the sunflowers turned seaward, the cobbled streets with the smell of snuff in the viceregal quarter, the pale young ladies making bobbin lace with ineluctable decency among the pots of carnations and the bunches of pansies in the light of balconies, the checkerboard convent of the Biscayan sisters with the same harpsichord exercise at three in the afternoon with which they had celebrated the first passage of the comet, he went through the Babelic labyrinth of the commercial district, its lethal music, the labara of lottery tickets, the pushcarts with cane juice, the strings of iguana eggs, the Turks and their sunlight-faded bargains, the fearsome tapestry of the woman who had been changed into a scorpion for having disobeyed her parents, the alley of misery of women without men who would emerge naked at dusk to buy blue corbinas and red snappers and exchange mother-directed curses with the women selling vegetables while their clothes were drying on the carved wooden balconies, he smelled the rotten shellfish wind, the everyday light of the pelicans around the corner, the disorder of colors of the Negro shacks on the promontories of the bay, and suddenly there it was, the waterfront, alas, the waterfront, the dock and its spongy planks, the old battleship of the marines longer and gloomier than truth, the black dockworker woman who was too late in getting out of the way of the fearsome little wagon and felt touched by death with the sight of the sunset old man who was contemplating the waterfront with the saddest look in the world, it's him, she exclaimed with surprise, hurray for the stud, she shouted, hurray, shouted the men, the women, the children who came running out of the Chinese bars and lunchrooms, hurray, shouted the ones who held the horses' legs and blocked the coach's way so they could shake the hand of the power that was, a maneuver so swift and unforeseen that he barely had time to push aside the armed hand of his aide scolding him in a tense voice, don't be a damned fool, lieutenant, let them love me, so overwhelmed by that outpouring of love and by similar ones during the days that followed that it was hard for General Rodrigo de Aguilar to make him get out of his head the idea of riding about in an open carriage so that the patriots of the nation could see me full length, what the hell, because

he didn't even suspect that the assault at the waterfront may have been spontaneous but that the ones that followed had been organized by his own security services in order to please him but without any risks, so honeyed by the breezes of love on the eve of his autumn that he dared go out of the city after many years, he started up the old train painted with the colors of the flag again and went creeping and crawling about the cornices of his vast mournful realm, opening a path through orchid sprigs and Amazonian balsam apples, rousing up monkeys, birds of paradise, jaguars sleeping on the tracks, even the glacial and deserted villages of his native barren uplands where they waited for him at the station with mournful-music bands, tolling death bells, displaying signs of welcome for the nameless patriot who sits at the right hand of the Holy Trinity, they recruited rustics from the back reaches who came down to meet the hidden power in the funereal shadows of the presidential coach, and those who managed to get close enough only saw the quivering lips, the palm of a hand with no origins which waved from the limbo of glory, while a member of the escort tried to get him away from the window, be careful, general, the nation needs you, but he would reply sleepily don't worry, colonel, these people love me, as it was on the train in the barren lands so it was the same on the wooden paddle-wheeler that went along leaving a wake of player-piano waltzes in the midst of the sweet fragrance of gardenias and rotting salamanders of the equatorial tributaries, eluding prehistoric dragons in their leather gun cases, providential isles where sirens lay down to give birth, sunsets which were the disasters of immense disappeared cities, even the burning and desolate shanty towns where the inhabitants appeared on the riverbank to see the wooden boat painted with the national colors and they could just make out an anonymous hand with a velvet glove which waved from a window of the presidential stateroom, but he saw the groups on shore who were waving malanga leaves for lack of flags, he saw those who jumped into the water with a live tapir, a gigantic yam that was as big as an elephant's foot, a cage of partridges for the presidential stew-pot, and he sighed with emotion in the ecclesiastical penumbra of the stateroom, see how they come, captain, see how they love me. In December, when the Caribbean world turned to glass, he would take the closed carriage on a

climb along the cornices of crags until he came to the house perched on top of the reefs and he would spend the afternoon playing dominoes with the former dictators of other nations of the continent, the dethroned fathers of other countries to whom he had granted asylum over the course of many years and who were now growing old in the shadow of his mercy dreaming in chairs on the terrace about the chimerical vessel of their second chance, talking to themselves, dying dead in the rest home he had built for them on the balcony of the sea after having received all of them as if each were the only one, for they all appeared at dawn in the dress uniform they had put on inside out over their pajamas, with a chest of money they had pilfered from the public treasury and a suitcase with a box of decorations, newspaper clippings pasted into old ledgers, and a photograph album they would show him at the first audience, as if they were credentials, saying look general, that's me when I was a lieutenant, this was the day I was inaugurated, this was the sixteenth anniversary of my taking power, here, look general, but he would give them asylum without paying any more attention to them or inspecting credentials because the only document of identity for an overthrown president should be his death certificate, he would say, and with the same disdain he would listen to the illusory little speech of I accept for this short time your noble hospitality while the justice of the people brings the usurper to account, the eternal formula of puerile solemnity which a while later he would hear from the usurper, and then from the usurper's usurper as if the God-damned fools didn't know that in this business of men if you fall, you fall, and he put all of them up for a few months in the presidential palace, made them play dominoes until he had fleeced them down to their last cent, and then he took me by the arm over to the window looking out onto the sea, he helped me grieve over this meat-beating life that only goes in one direction, he consoled me with the illusion that I go over there, look, over there to that big house that looked like an ocean liner aground on the top of the reefs where I have some lodgings with good light and good food, and plenty of time to forget along with other companions of misfortune, and with a terrace overlooking the sea where he liked to sit on December afternoons not so much for the pleasure of playing dominoes with that

bunch of boobs but to enjoy the base good fortune of not being one of them, to look at himself in the instructive mirror of their misery while he wallowed in the great slough of felicity, dreaming alone, tiptoeing like an evil thought in pursuit of the tame mulatto girls who swept government house in the dimness of dawn, he sniffed out their public dormitory and drugstore hair-grease trail, he would lie in wait for the chance to catch one alone and make rooster love to her behind office doors while they would burst with laughter in the shadows, what a devil you are general, such a great man and still so horny, but he would be sad after making love and would start singing to console himself where no one could hear him, bright January moon, he would sing, see how sad I am standing on the gallows by your window, he would sing, so sure of his people's love on those Octobers with no evil omens that he would put up a hammock in the courtyard of the suburban mansion where his mother Bendición Alvarado lived and sleep his siesta in the shade of the tamarind trees, without an escort, dreaming about the errant fish who swam in the colored waters of the bedrooms, a nation is the best thing that was ever invented, mother, he would sigh, but he never waited for the answer from the only person in the world who dared scold him for the rancid onion smell of his armpits, but he returned to the presidential palace through the main door in exaltation with that miraculous season of the Caribbean in January, that reconciliation with the world at the end of old age, those mellow soft afternoons after he had made peace with the papal nuncio and the latter would visit him without an appointment to attempt to convert him to the faith of Christ while they had chocolate and cookies, and bursting with laughter he would allege that if God is the man you say he is tell him to rid me of this beetle that's buzzing in my ear, he would tell him, he would unbutton the nine buttons of his fly and show him his huge tool, tell him to deflate this creature, he would tell him, but the nuncio went along with his shepherd's work with patient stoicism, tried to convince him that everything that is truth, no matter who says it, comes from the Holy Spirit, and he would see him to the door when the first lights went on, dying with laughter as had rarely been seen, don't waste your gunpowder on buzzards, father, he told him, why should you want to convert me since everything

I'm doing is just what you people want, what the hell. That floating calmness shattered its hull suddenly at a cockpit on a faraway plain when a bloodthirsty cock tore the head off his adversary and ate it, pecking at it before an audience that was maddened by blood and a drunken brass band that celebrated the horror with festive music, and he was the only one who spotted the evil omen, and he sensed that it was so clear and so imminent that he secretly ordered his escort to arrest one of the musicians, that one, the one playing the tuba, and, indeed, they found a sawed-off shotgun on him and under torture he confessed that he had planned to shoot him during the confusion as the people left, it was quite obvious, of course, he explained, because I was looking at everybody and everybody was looking back at me, but the only one who didn't dare look at me one single time was that son of a bitch with the tuba, poor devil, and still he knew that that wasn't the ultimate reason for his anxiety, because he kept on feeling it at night in government house even after his security service had shown that there was no reason for worry general sir, everything was in order, but he had clung to Patricio Aragonés as if he were himself after he had received the omen at the cockpit, he gave him his own food to eat, he gave him his own honey to drink with the same spoon so that he would at least die with the consolation that they had both died together in case the things had been poisoned, and they went like fugitives through forgotten rooms, walking on the rugs so that no one would hear their great furtive Siamese elephant steps, navigating together in the intermittent light from the beacon as it came in through the windows and flooded the rooms of the house every thirty seconds with green amidst the vapor from cow flops and the mournful greetings of nocturnal ships on the sleeping seas, they would spend whole afternoons watching it rain, counting swallows on languid September afternoons like two aged lovers, so far removed from the world that he himself did not realize that his fierce struggle to exist twice was feeding the contrary suspicion that he was existing less and less, that he was lying in a lethargy, that the guard had been doubled and no one was allowed in or out of the presidential quarters, that someone had still managed to get through that strict filter and had seen the birds silent in their cages, the cows drinking at the baptismal font, the lepers and cripples

sleeping in the rose beds, and everybody at midday seemed to be waiting for dawn to come since he had died as had been announced in the prophetic basins of natural causes during his sleep but the high command was delaying the notice while they tried to settle in bloody secret meetings their postponed quarrels. Although he did not know of those rumors he was aware that something was about to occur in his life, he would interrupt the slow domino games to ask General Rodrigo de Aguilar how the mess was going, friend, everything under control sir, the nation was calm, he watched for signs of premonition in the funeral pyres of cow chips that burned on the courtyard corridors and in the wells with their ancient waters but he could find no answer for his anxiety, he visited his mother Bendición Alvarado in the suburban mansion when the heat died down, they would sit and take in the cool afternoon breezes under the tamarinds, she in her maternal rocking chair, decrepit but with her soul intact, tossing handfuls of grain to the hens and the peacocks who pecked about the courtyard, and he in the large wicker chair, fanning himself with his hat, following with his look of old hunger the big mulatto women who brought him colored fruit juices to quench his hot thirst, general, thinking oh Bendición Alvarado, my mother, if you only knew that I can't stand the world any more, that I'd like to go away I don't know where, mother, far away from so much injustice, but not even his mother was shown the inside of his sighs but he would return to the presidential palace with the first lights of evening, go in through the service entrance hearing the clicking of sentries' heels as he went along the corridors and they saluted him all's well general sir, everything in order, but he knew that it wasn't true, that they were dissembling from habit, that they lied to him out of fear, that nothing was true in that crisis of uncertainty which was rendering his glory bitter and had been taking away his old desire to command ever since that fateful night at the cockpit, until very late he would stay stretched out face down on the floor without sleeping, through the open window facing the sea he could hear the distant drums and sad bagpipes that were celebrating some wedding among the poor with the same uproar with which they would have celebrated his death, he could hear the farewell of a vagabond steamer that was weighing anchor at two o'clock in