

Roberto Bolaño and *The Savage Detectives*

By Natasha Wimmer

In Mexico City in 1976, a twenty-three year-old with wild hair and aviator glasses stood up in the Librería Gandhi, one of the bookstores that unwittingly supplied him with free books, and read a manifesto urging his fellow poets to give up everything for literature, to follow the example of Rimbaud and hit the road. The true poet, he said, should abandon the coffeehouse and take the part of “the sharpshooters, the lonesome cowboys . . . , the spat-upon supermarket shoppers in their massive individual collective disjunctives”—the cunning, the lonely, the unnoticed and despised.

This manifesto, titled “Leave It All Again,” was the founding document of a movement called infrarealism. The young man was Roberto Bolaño. For the next two decades he would live by his words, drifting from one menial day job to another and writing by night. But it was in the last years of his brief life, when he published his novel *The Savage Detectives*, that he achieved the radical break that his manifesto promised. In the words of the Spanish novelist Enrique Vila-Matas, *The Savage Detectives* “marked the beginning of the end of the high priests of the Boom and all their local color.” Since the 1970s, no single novel has had a greater effect on Latin American literature.¹

When *The Savage Detectives* appeared in 1998, Latin American novels could still be divided between those openly indebted to the famous writers of the 1960s—the epoch known as the Boom—and those determined to reject their influence. The Boom, which for many North Americans is synonymous with Gabriel García Márquez, was, in fact, a great explosion of talent. García Márquez is one of several major writers who, as a group, could be said to have invented Latin American literature in the decades after World War II: Mario Vargas Llosa, Julio Cortázar, Carlos Fuentes, Juan Rulfo, José Lezama Lima, and others.² Before them each country’s literature was almost entirely self-contained, and each tended to be strongly nationalistic. As the Chilean novelist José Donoso remembers, it was difficult to find a book published in Chile in a bookstore in Argentina.³ All the new

¹ Le Magazine Littéraire, date TK.

² Almost every country of Latin America was represented: Colombia (García Márquez), Peru (Vargas Llosa), Chile (Cortázar, Donoso), Mexico (Fuentes, Rulfo), Cuba (Lezama Lima), and so on.

³ José Donoso, *Historia personal del “boom”* (Alfaguara, 1972).

literature of larger interest seemed to be in translation.

The Boom changed this, as writers inspired by Kafka's bureaucratic satires and Faulkner's local sagas looked more deeply into their own national psyches. The fabulist strain of modern fiction gave them a way both to describe and to transcend their time and place: a continent where sudden technological advances coexisted with entrenched poverty, authoritarian government, and a tradition of magical thinking. Their work took various forms: Cortázar's witty, urban puzzle-stories; García Márquez's chronicles of the rural fantastic; Vargas Llosa's intricately structured tales of oppression and erotic adventure. All of them, however, dealt at some level with the overlap of an imported modernity and an older imaginary life.

Imitators of the Boom were (and are) legion, but Bolaño and others of his generation tended to see them as selling an exotic stereotype—dictators, whores, patriarchs, and ghosts—for export only. The situation in Latin America had changed. The dictators, for the most part, were gone. Capitalism, the World Bank, and the international drug trade replaced caudillos, death squads, and political persecution as the new faces of evil. The phantasms and terrors of the Boom generation had mutated into something more diffuse, unmoored from the local.

Some young writers of the 1990s, such as the Mexicans Jorge Volpi and Ignacio Padilla, set their novels in Europe or in imaginary European-seeming countries. Others, like the Chilean Alberto Fuguet, borrowed heavily from North American writers such as Bret Easton Ellis and focused on upper-middle-class Latin Americans lost in the shallows of North American pop culture. In general, these were programmatic rebellions, and it showed. They lacked the new life, the freedom of imagination, and needed to produce work that was urgent and active, rather than reactive.

Roberto Bolaño was born in Santiago, Chile, in 1953, and spent his childhood in a series of Chilean backwater towns: Los Ángeles, Valparaíso, Quilpué, Viña del Mar, Cauquenes. His father, León Bolaño, was a truck driver and amateur boxer; his mother, Victoria Ávalos, taught math and statistics.

In later years, Bolaño rarely talked about his childhood. According to his mother, he taught himself to read when he was only three, and he wrote his first story when he

was seven, about some chickens who, to the consternation of the other barnyard animals, fall in love with a duck. One of his earliest literary memories was of listening to his mother read aloud from Neruda's *Twenty Love Poems and a Song of Despair*.

In 1968, the family moved to Mexico City. Here, for Bolaño, his youth began. He dropped out of school to devote himself to reading and writing and adolescent rebellion, vocations that went hand in hand. He stole books. He stalked writers he admired. He wrote masochistically, as he later put it, and took a sadistic pleasure in his reading. These were crucial developments in an adolescence darkened by dyslexia, chronic insomnia, and "problems of a sexual nature."⁴

It was poetry that excited Bolaño most. No matter how much attention he later received for his novels and stories, he never stopped writing poetry or thinking of fiction-writing as a lesser art.⁵ Turning against the lyrical effusions of Neruda, he mimicked the Chilean "anti-poet" Nicanor Parra born in 1914:

For half a century
poetry was
a solemn fool's paradise.
Until I came along
with my rollercoaster.

Climb on, if you want.
Though of course I can't be responsible if you get off
bleeding from the mouth and the nose.⁶

Along with Parra, Bolaño read the Latin American avant-garde poets of the twentieth century. César Vallejo, Vicente Huidobro, Martín Adán, Oquendo de Amat, Pablo de Rokha, Gilberto Owen, López Velarde, Oliverio Girondo—all were important to him. So were the French symbolists. In later life Bolaño would claim to have owned at least ten

⁴ "Literature + illness = illness," *El gaucho insufrible* (Anagrama, 2003).

⁵ "Roberto Bolaño: 'Si viviera en Chile, nadie me perdonaría esta novela,' interview with Melanie Josch, *Primera Línea* (December, 2000).

⁶ "Roberto Bolaño: 'Si viviera en Chile, nadie me perdonaría esta novela,' interview with Melanie Josch, *Primera Línea* (December, 2000).

different copies of Baudelaire's *Les fleurs du mal*. He had a definite predilection for writers concerned with form, for the Baudelairean outsider who observes a stricter, more classical rigor than any academician. This love of rigor led him to Alfonso Reyes, a Mexican critic and classical scholar; to Borges; to Julio Cortázar (the one member of the Boom to whom he acknowledged a debt); and to the Argentinian fabulist Adolfo Bioy Casares.

Bolaño also had a marked interest in erotic literature and the gothic. The first book he remembered stealing was a slim volume by Pierre Louÿs, though whether *Aphrodite* or *Les Chansons de Bilitis* he couldn't recall.

In 1973, when Bolaño was twenty, he decided to go home to Chile, taking the long land route down the Pacific coast. There he planned to take part in a people's theater project. As luck would have it, he arrived in Santiago just a few months before the Pinochet coup. On the night of the coup itself, he reported for duty to a ragtag Communist cell and was assigned to stand guard in an empty street. Nothing happened to him that night, but a few months later, when a bus he was riding was stopped at a checkpoint, his Mexican accent drew the attention of the police and he was arrested.

Bolaño spent eight days in prison before he was recognized by two of the guards, old schoolmates, who arranged for his release. Years later, he would mock the legend of his political imprisonment (a few German publications claimed he had spent six months in jail), but he took understandable pride in having done his part against the Pinochet coup.

In the English-speaking world, it can be hard to grasp how deeply writing and radical politics have always been intertwined in Latin America. For most of the twentieth century, to be a writer *was* to be a revolutionary—or a reactionary. Writers who are known in the English-speaking world simply as great novelists are more complicated figures at home: Neruda, politicized during the Spanish Civil War by the assassination of his friend Federico García Lorca, became an inveterate supporter of Stalin. Neruda's close friend, the Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz, was driven to write that Neruda and other Communists “began in good faith, but . . . saw themselves become entangled in

a mesh of lies, falsehoods, deceits and perjuries, until they lost their souls.”⁷ Vargas Llosa fell out with García Márquez in what they described as a personal quarrel, exacerbated by the latter’s unrepentant support of Castro.

Typically, Bolaño dismissed them both: “Gabriel García Márquez: a man thrilled to have known so many presidents and archbishops; Mario Vargas Llosa: same thing, but more polished.”⁸ By the time Bolaño and his friends were in their teens, the Cuban revolution had ended in repression and misery; the Mexican PRI, a revolutionary body turned ruling party, had been permanently discredited by the 1968 Tlatelolco massacre of students in Mexico City; and guerrilla movements in Guatemala, Nicaragua, Colombia, and Peru had failed, leading to vicious leftist infighting. Still, writers continued to be drawn—as it were, ineluctably—to the idea of revolution. Traveling in El Salvador, Bolaño got to know some of the poet-revolutionaries of the ERP (a Marxist-Leninist group advocating armed insurrection), who later assassinated their own comrade, the poet Roque Dalton, in his sleep.⁹ Bolaño’s account of a literary junket to Managua in *The Savage Detectives* paints a bitterly funny picture of the aftermath of revolution in another Central American country. As he put it in an interview, “We fought for parties that, if they had won, would have sent us immediately to forced labor camps; we fought and put all our generosity into an ideal that had been dead for more than fifty years.”¹⁰

This extreme sense—not just of disillusionment, but of belatedness—is key to Bolaño’s activities as an infrarealist. Together with his best friend, Mario Santiago, the Chilean poet Bruno Montane, and their few dozen followers, Bolaño disrupted the readings of poets whom they held in contempt, shouting out their own poems. The poets they chose to torment usually had one thing in common: they accepted money from Mexico’s PRI government, which made a policy of supporting (some might say paying off) Mexico’s top writers and thinkers. But there was another side to this provocation. For Bolaño and the others, rejecting a career in poetry was in fact a way of taking poetry as seriously as life itself—and vice versa. If the author *lived* what he wrote in this spirit,

⁷ “Considering Solzhenitsyn,” *On Poets and Others* (trans. by Michael Schmidt), Seaver Books, 1986.

⁸ “Extranjero me siento en todas partes,” interview with Alfonso Carvajal, *El Tiempo* (Colombia), Jan. 3, 2003.

⁹ “Entrevista a Roberto Bolaño,” interview in *Lateral*, no. 40 (April 1998).

¹⁰ Discurso de Caracas,” *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

Bolaño liked to say, the reader would naturally feel the urgency and live it too: “If the poet is caught up in things, the reader will have to be caught up.”

The effects of this belief can be felt in all of Bolaño’s work, but especially in *The Savage Detectives*, which lovingly resuscitates the characters, the love affairs, the squabbles, the pettiest details of bohemian Mexico City, around 1976. Bolaño even catalogs the names of the streets where the very graffiti spoke to him. He remembered once coming across something an enemy of the infrarealists had scrawled on a wall: “Go back to Santiago, Bolaño, and take Santiago with you.” (The first Santiago, of course, refers to the capital of Chile and the second to Mario Santiago.) In a letter to Mario, dated not long before Mario was struck and killed by a truck in 1998, Bolaño writes from his home in Spain:

I’ve got the windows open, it’s raining outside, a summer storm, lightning, thunder, the kind of weather that puts you in a state of excitement, or melancholy. How is Mexico? How are the streets of Mexico, the ghost of me, our invisible friends? Is Al Este del Paradiso still open or has it lapsed into the sleep of the just? One of these nights, when my money situation improves, I may show up at your place. And if not, it doesn’t matter. The stretch we traveled together is already history in some sense, and it endures. I mean: I suspect, sense, that it’s still alive, in the dark but alive and still defiant—who would’ve thought. Well, not to get carried away. I’m writing a novel in which you’re called Ulises Lima. The title of the novel is *The Savage Detectives*. With love. R. ¹¹

Like Belano and Lima in *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño and Mario Santiago left Mexico City for Europe in 1977, and the movement lost its leaders.¹² Santiago headed for Israel, and spent time in Paris, too. Bolaño ended up in Barcelona.

¹¹ El pasado infrarrealista de Bolaño,” Matías Sánchez, Proyecto Patrimonio (October 2005).

¹² The movement, however, lives on (see www.infrarrealismo.com). Matías Sánchez, cited above, records some of the infrarealists’ mixed feelings about Bolaño’s success, identifying each with his or her fictional counterpart from *The Savage Detectives*. José Peguero: “I’m never going to be a novelist, he said . . . But the surprise is that he did become a novelist. He was already a storyteller. I’ve always said I preferred Roberto’s poetry to his prose.” Guadalupe Ochoa (“Xóchitl García in *The Savage Detectives*”): “Mario Santiago, Bruno, Piel Divina [Luscious Skin], and José, as it turned out, were more true to their pledge of marginality, of breaking with literary circles, of turning their lives into a *poème maudit*. Only Roberto opted for recognition.” Juan Esteban Harrington (“Juan García Madero in *The Savage Detectives*”): “To sum it up: Roberto painted a picture of a bleeding heart; Mario held it in his hand.”

Two years after General Franco's death, Barcelona was still filled with a sense of liberation, not just political but sexual and artistic, too. Bolaño had an apartment in the center of the old city, and Latin American and Spanish friends would drop in, day or night. He worked as a dishwasher, waiter, longshoreman, garbageman, seasonal laborer, and receptionist; he claimed his favorite job was as night watchman at a campground outside the city. He was desperately poor, often sick; for a time he was addicted to heroin.¹³ Over the years he lost most of his teeth, leaving them behind "like Hansel and Gretel's breadcrumbs" in the countries he visited on his shoestring travels.¹⁴

When Bolaño reached his early thirties, he retreated. His rejection of the literary establishment had become a kind of rage. "The scorn I felt for so-called official literature was enormous, though only a little greater than that I felt for marginal literature."¹⁵ He left Barcelona for the small city of Girona and, soon after that, moved to the even smaller seaside town of Blanes, some forty miles north of Barcelona, where he supported himself with a little jewelry business. At noon he would go snorkeling near a breakwater where it was still possible to see octopuses. At night, after settling his accounts in a fat notebook, he would sprawl on the floor to write (he didn't have a desk).

In 1982, he married the Catalanian Carolina López. Now Bolaño was definitively settled. Blanes was in some ways an odd home for him, a commuter town with a touristy stretch of beach and apartment towers, a bland town (though it is one of the oldest settlements on the Costa Brava). Maybe that was part of what he liked about it. It was a neutral place, full of visitors. He himself was no longer a visitor, but he wasn't a local, either. In later years, he would write fondly about Blanes, even delivering the town's yearly address in 1999, in which he salutes his first friends in Blanes, "almost all drug addicts . . . Today most of them are dead."

Bolaño's son, Lautaro, was born in 1990 (later there would be a daughter, Alexandra), and it was then that he decided to embark on a (marginally) more lucrative career: instead of writing poetry, he would write fiction. In the early 1990s, he devoted himself to writing stories for regional literary competitions in Spain, which awarded generous

¹³ "Playa," *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

¹⁴ "Literature + illness = illness," *El gaucho insufrible* (Anagrama, 2003).

¹⁵ "Anarquía total: veintidós años después," introduction to *Amberes* (Anagrama, 2002).

prizes. In 1993, he won several of these, and after that, he supported himself entirely by writing.

It was in 1996 that Bolaño's first major works were published: *La literatura nazi en América*, a fake encyclopedia of make-believe writers, and *Distant Star*, about a fascist poet and skywriter.¹⁶ In these books, Bolaño finds his major subjects as a satirist: the allure that political extremism holds for writers and the allure of literature itself, which functions in Bolaño's work as a kind of last utopia. His gallery of fascist writers stands in for any number of poets and novelists who cozied up to power and made their peace with the system—with the literary establishment, and with the platitudes of the left as well as of the right.

These two novellas gained Bolaño a following and Spain's most prestigious publisher, Jorge Herralde (whose publishing house, Anagrama, brought out *Distant Star* and all of Bolaño's subsequent work). But with the publication of *The Savage Detectives* in 1998, Bolaño became a cult figure. He received the Premio Herralde and the most important literary prize in the Spanish-speaking world, the Premio Rómulo Gallegos; from critics he received the kind of acclaim that marks a shift in the landscape, acclaim for a novel that readers have unwittingly been waiting for.

The story of two poets on an obscure quest, it is the most transparently personal of Bolaño's works. Arturo Belano, the protagonist, is—of course—Bolaño, and Ulises Lima, Belano's sidekick, is Mario Santiago. Their passion for poetry is Bolaño's passion for poetry, and their years of wandering are Bolaño's years of wandering.

Bolaño once described *The Savage Detectives* as his own answer to *Huckleberry Finn*. Like its precursor, *The Savage Detectives* is about friendship—not just between Belano and Lima, but between them and the chorus of fellow-writers who help narrate the book. It is also, like *Huckleberry Finn*, a story of lost innocence. Beginning in Mexico City, the novel travels to Paris, Israel, Vienna, and Barcelona, and, most of all, through twenty years of irreversible experience and generalized disappointment. As Bolaño said in his acceptance speech for the Premio Rómulo Gallegos, “All of Latin America is sown with the bones of its forgotten youths.” In *The Savage Detectives*, he brings those youths back to life.

¹⁶ “Anarquía total: veintidós años después,” introduction to *Amberes* (Anagrama, 2002).

Detective is a word of great significance for Bolaño—or, more accurately, significances. First there is the genre cliché, the hard-boiled private eye, cool and resourceful. Then there is the metaphysical seeker hidden within this worldly hero. But more than anything, it seems Bolaño idolizes the detective as someone who has seen more terrible sights than anyone else and never turns away, never flinches. He is a witness, a watcher, someone who gets to the marrow, the literal bloody core. In a poem from the collection *Tres*, he writes: “I dreamed I was an old, sick detective, and I had been looking for lost people for a long time. Sometimes I happened to look at myself in the mirror and I recognized Roberto Bolaño.”

By the time he published *The Savage Detectives*, Bolaño was sick, and had been for some time. In 1992, he had been diagnosed with a fatal liver disease, which meant that nearly all his fiction was written under the threat of death. He had always lived simply, but now his existence became even more austere: chamomile tea, endless cigarettes, incessant writing.

Bolaño took seriously the idea of literary immortality—never more than when he turned it into a joke. Failed writers are frequent characters in his stories and novels; so are lost writers, whose legacy must be preserved. In “Photographs,” the only published story in which Arturo Belano reappears, he comes upon a kind of illustrated encyclopedia of forgotten French poets from the 1960s and ’70s. As he looks at their pictures and reads their biographies, remote and irrelevant now, he sees a line of birds on the horizon, “an electrocardiogram that flutters or spreads its wings in expectation of their death, of my death, thinks Belano, and then he shuts his eyes for a long moment, as if he’s thinking or crying with his eyes closed.”

From the mid-1990s on, Bolaño was determined at all costs to turn out a book a year, while laboring away at *2666*, the massive novel he firmly believed would be his magnum opus. He had clear ideas about the different merits of the long work and the short work. “The novel is an imperfect art. It may be the most imperfect of all literary arts. And the more pages you write, the more possibility there is of revealing imperfections . . . It isn’t the same to build a house as it is to build a skyscraper. Often a

house is cozier, but to build a skyscraper you have to be very good.”¹⁷

The most perfect of Bolaño’s own small books, in his opinion, was *By Night in Chile*, which was published by Anagrama in 2000. He was extremely proud of its intricate construction. He also thought it was funny (“At least while I was writing it I laughed like crazy”). Short or long, all of Bolaño’s books are part of a larger *romanfleuve*, or succession of linked works. The novella *Amuleto*, published two years after *The Savage Detectives*, is essentially an expanded version of a long section of the latter novel; many of the characters from the novels are also mirrored in the short stories (an excellent selection of which are available in English in a collection titled *Last Evenings on Earth*).¹⁸ Bolaño’s books are full of repeat performances, correspondences, and resonances, representing not overlapping worlds but a single world progressing through different incarnations. As in a dream, characters change shape or name or setting but are somehow still the same. Real-life characters drift through stories and novels, as when the critic whom Belano challenges to a duel in *The Savage Detectives* eventually becomes, in real life, under a slightly different name, the executor of 2666. Life is not simply the raw material of fiction in Bolaño’s work; instead, life and fiction seem to cross-pollinate.

Bolaño also wrote criticism and reveled, following the success of *The Savage Detectives*, in the excoriation of writers he didn’t like and the anointment of writers he did. He loved making lists: worst three writers in the Spanish language, best five, and so on. He repeatedly disparaged Isabel Allende.¹⁹ He called Paulo Coelho “a kind of cross between Barbusse and Anatole France in the form of a Brazilian soap-opera witch doctor.”²⁰ He saw the 1980s as a particularly miserable decade for Latin American literature, full of

¹⁷ “Roberto Bolaño: ‘Si viviera en Chile, nadie me perdonaría esta novela,’ interview with Melanie Josch, *Primera Línea* (December 2000).

¹⁸ The stories in *Last Evenings on Earth* are culled from *Llamadas telefónicas* (1997) and *Putas asesinas* (2001). There are also two posthumous collections, *El gaucho insufrible* (2003) and *El secreto del mal* (2007).

¹⁹ In an interview with Mónica Maristain for *Playboy*, Maristain asked: “Don’t you think that if you’d gotten drunk with Isabel Allende and Ángeles Mastretta you’d have a different opinion of their books?” Bolaño replied: “I don’t think so. First, because those ladies would never drink with someone like me. Second, because I don’t drink anymore. Third, because even at my drunkenest moments I never lost a certain basic clarity, a sense of style and rhythm, a horror of plagiarism, mediocrity, and silence.”

²⁰ “Sobre la literatura, el Premio Nacional de Literatura y los raros consuelos del oficio,” *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

“bad imitators of magic realism, like Laura Esquivel, or terrible quote unquote youth writers, like Alberto Fuguet, or writers who write on historical subjects in the most criminal way.”²¹ In some of his most exhilarating essays, his criticism verges on theater of the absurd: “Listen: I don’t have anything against autobiographies, so long as the people writing them have penises that are at least a foot long when erect.”²²

Even—or especially—when Bolaño is most outrageous, his passion for literature is contagious, and younger writers responded. The Spanish writer Javier Cercas made him a major character in his novel *Soldiers of Salamis* (portraying him as a “softlyspoken, curly-haired, scruffy, unshaven Chilean” who offers Cercas sage writerly advice), and Jorge Volpi gives him a cameo in *El fin de la locura*. Bolaño himself doled out cameos freely, of course, and it was a point of honor to be included in one of his novels.

Throughout his career, Bolaño had a contentious relationship with the Chilean literary establishment, which wasn’t quite sure whether to consider him one of them or not. After the coup, he didn’t return to Chile until 1998, and he wasn’t welcomed warmly in all quarters. He felt a permanent mistrust of Chile and Chileans. He tells the story of another Chilean immigrant, who swore that when he got back to Chile he’d kiss the ground. “He’d forgotten the terror, the injustice, the senselessness.”²³ Any discussion of exile made Bolaño impatient (“I don’t believe in exile, especially not when the word *exile* is set beside the word *literature*”), but he was certainly conscious of being a foreigner everywhere he went, beginning with Chile.²⁴ His homeland, he liked to say, was the Spanish language.

This lack of geographical roots was something else that divided him from the writers of the previous generation. Even though many of them also lived in exile (Vargas Llosa in Paris, Madrid, and London; García Márquez in Mexico City), and even though they wrote for an international readership, their fiction was grounded in specifically regional life. They were reinventing their national literatures; Bolaño was forging a new

²¹ “Roberto Bolaño: ‘Si viviera en Chile, nadie me perdonaría esta novela,’ interview with Melanie Josch, *Primera Línea* (December 2000).

²² “Derivas de la pesada,” *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

²³ “Fragmentos de un regreso al país natal,” *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

²⁴ “Literatura y exilio,” *Entre paréntesis* (Anagrama, 2004).

international, post-nationalist literature, the world as seen from the perspective of a global drifter—Latin American, to be sure, but also someone who watched late-night TV movies and read Philip K. Dick; a world where *September 11* meant the day of Pinochet’s coup in Chile, and also the day of the attack on the World Trade Center in New York City. “I lived through the Chilean September 11, suffered through it, and—since I was twenty years old—enjoyed it, too. New York’s September 11 caught me in Milan with my wife and two children, and when I saw the explosion the first thing that came to mind were the images we had in the eighties of World War III.”²⁵

A creeping sense of conspiracy permeates *2666*, the novel that occupied Bolaño for the last years of his life and was published in 2004, after his death. The book, a 1,200-page tome divided into five parts, is a hugely ambitious undertaking. In it, the dread that flickers in Bolaño’s earlier fiction is concentrated, the essence of evil made visible. If *The Savage Detectives* is a journey outward, then *2666* collapses in on itself. The center of the book—its black hole—is the city of Santa Teresa, a thinly disguised version of Ciudad Juárez, in the north of Mexico. In Santa Teresa, girls and women are being raped and murdered at an astounding rate, and in the novel’s long middle section, Bolaño chronicles these killings one by one, zooming in mercilessly time and time again.

Winding around this dark center is the quintessential Bolaño quest, the search for a lost writer. But this time, it is the writer himself who takes center stage, his seekers eclipsed or ridiculed (they are four European academics who scamper farcically about until they wind up in Santa Teresa). Benno von Archimboldi is a curious character, a Kasper Hauser-like feral child who stumbles through World War II and comes out the other side a writer, as reclusive as Pynchon but deeply European, a receptacle of the violence of the twentieth century and a lightning rod of the apocalypse embodied in the date 2666. In dozens of cryptic ways the charnel house of Santa Teresa is linked to the corruption and decadence of twentieth century European history and culture. The abyss, a constant metaphorical presence in his work, now takes on new meaning. It has become simply a burial pit, the literal receptacle for the bodies of an endless procession of

²⁵ “Bolaño baja el telón de la narrativa chilena,” Rolando Gabrielli, *Letralia* (August 2003).

victims.

Speculation abounded after Bolaño's death as to whether he had put off scheduling a liver transplant in order to finish *2666*. Whatever the case, he raced to finish the book, and in the harrowing lecture "Literature + illness = illness," he spoke about living with the knowledge of being gravely ill.²⁶ He almost never talked to friends about his health, and rarely wrote about it. "Writing about illness, especially if one is gravely ill, can be torture. Writing about illness if one is not only gravely ill, but also a hypochondriac, is an act of masochism or desperation."²⁷

In the course of the lecture, physical illness becomes associated with the malaise of modern man, and Bolaño quotes the stanza from Baudelaire's long poem "The Voyage," from which he took the epigraph to *2666*:

How sour the knowledge travellers bring away!
The world's monotonous and small; we see
ourselves today, tomorrow, yesterday,
an oasis of horror in a desert of ennui!

A similar mistrust of travel—and, by extension, of life as a quest—is expressed in a line from the infrarealist manifesto: "And the person will have to walk a thousand kilometers, but the road will swallow him up at last." The journey is literally all-consuming. And yet, as Bolaño goes on to say in "Literature + illness = illness," "While we search for the antidote or the medicine to cure us, the *new*, that which can only be found in the unknown, we must continue to turn to sex, books, and travel, even knowing they will lead us into the abyss, which, as it happens, is the only place we can find the cure."

This, in any case, was Bolaño at his most serious. He put it another way in the last interview before his death, when he was asked what gave him hope. "I have hope in children. In children and warriors. In children who fuck like children and warriors who

²⁶ "Literature + illness = illness," *Los gauchos insufribles* (Anagrama 2003).

²⁷ "Literature + illness = illness," *ibid.*

fight like brave men.”²⁸ In July 2003, just after discussing the plans for publication of *2666* with his editor, Jorge Herralde, he was admitted to the hospital with massive hemorrhaging. A few weeks later, he died.

Bolaño, who had always been fastidious in his work habits, left the definitive versions of each of *2666*'s five sections clearly labeled. Herralde commented on the care Bolaño took and the deliberation that went into even his most exuberant writing. “The manuscripts were impeccable, very precisely crafted. I would make suggestions: sometimes he would accept them, other times not. He was very stubborn (or very sure of his work).”²⁹ Bolaño's short novels are tightly controlled models of precision. His two big books were intended to be something else: works encompassing rough edges, loose ends, lapses, faults. Here, at last, life bleeds fully into art and vice versa, allowing even for the final rupture of death, that great inconsistency in the fabric of existence. Given that immortality can come only after death, Bolaño rehearsed its coming exhaustively. In a sense, *The Savage Detectives* is the story of two ghosts, men lingering into the afterlife. Their persistence in the myths and memories of their friends mirrors Bolaño's own persistence in the minds of his readers.

²⁸ “Literature + illness = illness,” *ibid.*

²⁹ Jorge Herralde, *Para Roberto Bolaño* (Alfadir, 2005).