

Excerpt from The Translator's Introductory Remarks - Zabala and Bolaño in Caracas

Zabala was quite taken with Caracas, so it is no wonder that he also wrote Bolaño, the only other writer he knew, and invited him to come to Caracas and share in his discoveries. Bolaño wrote back that he would, and on Wednesday, November 22, 1989, at some point in the evening, they met in the once elegant lobby of Hotel El Conde, an iconic hotel in the historic section of downtown Caracas one block west of Plaza Bolívar. Zabala recorded his thoughts of Bolaño's visit in an entry in his diary dated November 26, 1989:

Bolaño left yesterday. I am only now just recovering. We spent sixty-some hours in a raging, drunken brawl with every preconceived notion about life we have ever held, all in a mad effort to see what would remain standing after we were finished. It was a dismantling of reality of the first order, and then a reassembling of that reality. It was a philosophical maelstrom, but it was also a poetic, anti-poetic, revolutionary, idealistic, paranoid, adolescent, obsessive, religious, atheistic, sexual, anti-sexual, bluesy, jazzy jam session. We crammed in every duality we could think of. And it began the moment Bolaño walked into the lobby of the hotel. I cannot think of a better venue from where to embark on a journey such as we took than Hotel El Conde. It is a modern hotel of iron and concrete, a fairly recent addition (1948) to a city that seems determined to replace the decaying, baroque elegance of the past with the ultra-modernity of the future, and yet the hotel itself is an odd portal that gives us a glimpse of the very past the city wishes to escape. When you first walk into the lobby you are instantly confronted with a few iconic pieces of artwork depicting the stylized faces of dead Venezuelan heroes, and you are almost overwhelmed by the musty odor like incense of the heavy blue drapes that admit into the lobby only surreptitious flashes of sunlight or starlight like vagabond ghosts that have wandered down from the mountains. It is a place where history is constantly whispering even though the architecture is barely forty years old. But a hell of a lot has happened within these walls in those forty years. Politicians and poet ambassadors and bullfighters and rising journalists have slept with society divas in the rooms above the lobby. Decadent drug lords have held court downstairs. International porn stars have tiptoed down the hallways late at night seeking out ritual comfort in one room or another. Murders have been committed here, carnival atrocities. New revolutions have been planned but then the plans have been shelved on the advice of foreign agents. The great writer Rómulo Gallegos himself lived in this hotel for a few months after he was elected President in February 1948 until he was thrown out of the country in November of that same year. It is said you could hear him typing away late at night, supposedly working on new sections of his great novel, Doña Bárbara. Was he ever finished with that book? Is he still hoping to add a chapter or two even in death? How amazing to think that he had only been in San Fernando de Apure for a single week doing research, and to read Doña Bárbara you would have thought he had been born there! The people who actually live in San Fernando say as much. Or perhaps Gallegos was working on something else when he called Hotel El Conde his home. Some say you can still hear him typing away madly. At any rate, this is where we had decided to meet. Hotel El Conde became our jumping off point, our crossroads between the past and the future. Of course the moment Bolaño walked into the lobby he breathed in the intoxicating, beguiling, surreal atmosphere of this hotel caught between two worlds. I was sitting in one of two red leather chairs near the hotel entrance, with a potted fern on one side. But he stopped as soon as he saw me and raised his hand as if to ask for silence. It was a bit dramatic. He just stood there for a while, his face submerged in the glare of a well-placed floor lamp, listening to some unseen music, and for a moment it was almost as if he had vanished. All I could see where he stood was the pulsating aura of the lamp light, as if he had been absorbed into the light itself, beamed up into oblivion by an alien spacecraft. Then he stepped out of the glare and sat down, smiling, a ludicrous smile, and asked me if I thought all that much about immortality, and I laughed and said what does it matter, madness is madness is madness, and sadness too, and he started laughing and said yes, yes, we are all children of Caliban, and I remember how astonished I was that he said that because I was thinking exactly the same thing, and then he asked me if I could feel the unappeased literary genius of Gallegos swirling about the lobby like smoke seeking escape, and I said I could, I said I had suggested Hotel El Conde for precisely that reason, and then we were both laughing hysterically. I think Bolaño and I were cut from the same cloth, though perhaps from opposite ends of the ragged bolt. We would agree and disagree in the same breath. I don't know how long we stayed at the hotel. We did not stay long. The hotel has a small, dingy bar, again a vision of faded, surreal elegance, where we downed a few beers, and then we hit the streets, which is to say we roamed all over the city that first night, searching out hidden bars and cafés tucked away in the crevices

of Venezuelan culture, riding the gleaming silver bullet trains of the Metro in search of the burn victim I had discovered back in October, but the further we traveled by train, the further my burn victim retreated into the majesty of my own myth-making. We lingered over midnight snacks and pre-dawn breakfasts and pestilent, sun-blazing, late afternoon lunches, or maybe we ate nothing at all, maybe we only drank, and it is impossible to calculate how much we drank, beer, tequila, wine, whiskey, rum, all sorts of mixed drinks, even Kahlúa and cream, which I absolutely detest, but I drank it anyway. I don't know what we were thinking. I guess we were thinking we were back in Mexico City in 1975. But what does that even mean? What does it mean to think back on a Mexico that existed fourteen years ago, a Mexico that no longer exists? Time lifts us with ancient cymbals, as the poet Gerbasi says, but not quite in the way he imagined it. The distant thunderstorms no longer agonize me. I am no longer stuffed with ashes. The hard geometries of my youth have swiftly bled away. So who cares what we were doing or why oh so many years ago? No one can tell your political sympathies by looking at your bones. The time of our youth was past. We had both moved on. And now we were drinking to the memory of that youth, or to something else. It did not matter. It was an endless night of drinking. The drinking is what mattered. That fact is indisputable. And we talked while we drank. We talked the way I had always imagined writers would talk. That fact is also indisputable. We spoke of the slippery nature of reality, the interconnectedness of things, the intertextuality of all history. We talked at length about Paul Kammerer, who said that history was the serial repetition of a singular event, an idea which he quite properly called seriality, but which Jung later stole and called synchronicity and now nobody knows about Paul Kammerer. We talked about the impossibility of defeating the Fascism of time, especially since we were armed only with the arrows of mortal ambition, which are easily turned aside. We wondered if in fact any writer could truly achieve immortality since the fate of all books, with no exceptions, is that sooner or later they are used for kindling. This is a practical reality. I remember that I talked about my Big Spanish book and Bolaño talked about his German book, which was almost finished, except for the polishing. It was a book which he said wasn't really about Germany, it was more about the intellectual games we all play trying to justify the violence of existence, or the nature of existence in a violent world, or something like that. Germany was just a front, Bolaño said, and he was laughing subversively as he spoke so I knew he was being ironic, but it was more than ironic, there was a smaller seriousness embedded in his irony, but that seriousness was also folded over into irony, with an even smaller seriousness embedded in that, and so on, like a series of opposing mirrors stretching with exquisite precision towards infinity. You never knew how far Bolaño would go when he was being ironic. I told him I would need to read the book to see what he was getting at. Then he talked about an idea he had for another book, a book that would be an encyclopedia of right-wing writers living in Latin America, and he was almost laughing as he talked about this book, but not quite, it was more like he was posing for the future. He said none of the writers would be real writers, they wouldn't actually exist in the world, he would make it all up, but he was convinced that people reading the book would think the writers were real. And then he did burst out laughing. Actually, it seemed pretty funny when he was talking about it, and Bolaño's laughter was certainly infectious, and it did break the monotony of sitting in a foul-smelling Metro station with the fluorescent lights flickering and buzzing at three in the morning, waiting for the train to Pérez Bonalde, though why we going to Pérez Bonalde I am not quite sure, but I seem to remember that we had heard a lot of gunfire at one point during the afternoon, I don't know where the hell we were, some café or bar or restaurant in Catia, just off Calle El Cristo, or maybe it was closer to Parque del Oeste, I don't really remember, but the gunfire sounded pretty close wherever we were, and there was a lot of it, and Bolaño was convinced there was another riot going on and people were dying right and left, but then the gunfire stopped and the owner of the café came over and smiled with great enthusiasm, a gleaming, hopeful smile like a burning sun that most certainly masked the invincible melancholy of a defeated people, and he said they were working on some of the transformers down at the electricity company, which was only a few blocks away, that was why we had heard all those popping sounds, it sounded like that sometimes, so there was no need to worry, and then he brought us another round of beers, perhaps to disguise the fact that his explanation seemed unconvincing, because the very air of Caracas is saturated with an unthinking and unrepentant violence, because in the streets of Caracas the hope of Baudelaire is erased by the certain knowledge that everything is fatal, even chance, but who were we to contradict the owner's great enthusiasm and his hopeful generosity and so expose the truth behind the mask, so we went back to our drinking, so I think that's why we were going to Pérez Bonalde, because there was a hospital a few blocks from the station and if there were any survivors from the massacre that afternoon, that's where they would have been, except there was no fucking hospital, how we got this idea into our heads

I can't imagine, and there probably hadn't been a massacre either, but what the fuck, in retrospect the whole damn thing was fucking hilarious, the whole sequence was rather like something out of an absurdist play by Fernando Arrabal, Bolaño talking about his idea for a new book at three in the morning, the two of us bathed in the erratic glow of festering, fluorescent lights in a deserted Metro station in lonely, mythic Caracas without even rats scratching about, somewhere beyond the known boundaries of reality, I suspect, and then Bolaño out of the blue remembering about the imagined gunfire from before, no warning, just bam! and then he became obsessed with the need to talk to a survivor of the imaginary riot that had taken place only in our collective brain that afternoon, this need surging through his arteries like a bolt of lightning, the fluorescent lights flickering with a more visible intensity as his obsession grew, and then bam! just like that the lights went out, also without warning, the two of us now waiting in a hazy, humid darkness backlit by the faint red glow of half-a-dozen emergency lights floating in the blackness of the Metro tunnel like the eyes of Cerberus guarding the black Gates of Hell, the two of us waiting for the train to Pérez Bonalde so we could go to a hospital that did not exist, so our plan was pretty much fucked from the start, but like I said, we didn't know. I'm pretty sure that was the reason, but we were both fairly drunk by then. I'm not even sure if we made it to Pérez Bonalde. I guess we must have made it because how else would I know the hospital didn't exist, but I don't remember. But while we were waiting in the darkness for the goddamn train I told Bolaño I wanted to see his right-wing writers' encyclopedia when he was done, and he said he'd send me a copy. After that we didn't talk any more about literature. We were too tired to talk about something so heady and yet so insubstantial, so unreal as literature. To tell you the truth, I think we were just plain exhausted. And then all of a sudden it was Friday night and we had arrived at the last stop on our whirlwind journey through this terrifying yet seductive landscape of dark nights and even darker treachery. We were sitting in a seedy dive on Calle Los Apamates, a stone's throw from yet another Metro station, a café where humanity's darkest intentions were made visible. It was the kind of place that served horrible dinners until nine or ten, and anything you wanted to drink until five in the morning. The patrons were mostly prostitutes sitting on the laps of drunken, overweight, mid-level businessmen, the prostitutes playfully tugging at ties and rubbing with surreptitious skill the bulges that had started to grow and spoon-feeding the hungry businessmen until their plates were empty and then the girls whispering words that promised a night of unending joy coupled with eternal absolution (¿Pendiente de una vuelta?) and the businessmen whispering back words that echoed with the hope of unrestrained passion (¡Chévere!) and then two by two the newly formed couples would begin heading for the door and the crystallized obscurity of the dark Venezuelan night, only to be replaced by more playful prostitutes and more eager businessmen. There were also a few out-of-place University students who had abandoned their studies days earlier and were now teetering on the brink, hoping for table scraps, perhaps, their eyes glazed over with the luminous, impenetrable anxiety of drug addiction, certain to end up the victims of some unspeakable crime. Bolaño and I were sitting at a small, triangular table next to a narrow aquarium that had been shoved into the back corner. Our tiny table was partially illuminated by the dim light from the hallway that led to the bathroom. The aquarium was supposedly filled with all sorts of tropical fish, though it was hard to see, perhaps it was only a few half-starved piranhas, and every now and then someone on their way back from the bathroom would toss a few coins into the aquarium and stop and stare for a while at the murky darkness of the water and the faint, greenish glow of a tiny light bulb lodged inside a porcelain deep sea diver. Everyone who tossed a few coins into the aquarium seemed hypnotized by the tiny deep sea diver. Then they would shudder and shake their heads and the spell would be broken. They would mutter a small prayer for good luck, or maybe they were cursing someone under their breath, hoping to cast the evil eye on an enemy, and then head back to their tables. I think we were the last ones to order dinner. We were eating pabellón, a meal that consists of carne mechada, black beans, sweet fried plantains, and queso blanco. We were also drinking a spicy, dry, dark rum, Pampero Anniversario, glass after glass after glass. We ate in absolute silence because we were very hungry, but once we finished eating, we began talking with the same fervor we possessed at the beginning of our journey. We talked about the ever-expanding galaxy, and we wondered at mankind's insufferable egotism to suppose that our star alone of all the stars in the sky possessed planets that supported sentient life. We lamented the lost beauty and obscured significance of those unheralded beings from distant planets whom we would never know. We wondered if they were flesh and blood creatures like we were, or if perhaps they were instead made of gas or water or frozen light and simply floated like nebulas or clouds from one place to another. We cursed our inability to soar through the heavens, except by using our puny, febrile imaginations, towards the unfathomable purity of those unreachable stars. We talked about the technology of

spaceships. We talked about time travel. Who will be left far behind? I asked Bolaño. We all will, he replied. Then we talked about Simón Bolívar and Venezuela's struggle for independence. We talked about Bolívar's relationship with the famous German explorer Alexander von Humboldt. Why is it the Europeans, especially the Germans, but also a few Venezuelan myth-makers, insist on perpetuating the story that Humboldt gave Bolívar the idea of a free Venezuela when they met in Paris in November 1804? Wasn't Bolívar a bit too young and inexperienced to absorb such weighty advice at that point? Isn't it more likely that their first meeting was a bit more frivolous in nature, that perhaps all Bolívar wanted to know was the name of a good restaurant? Isn't it more likely that the political intent of El Libertador was stamped upon his psyche after his return to Venezuela, where he was ultimately confronted with the inescapable tragedy of life as a bonded servant to Spain? Wouldn't this realization have been enough to spur his political ambition? And what of Bolívar's strange, almost legendary meeting with José de San Martín, the great Argentine General, the Protector of Peruvian Freedom, who had liberated not only Peru but also Chile and what is now Argentina? What actually happened at that fateful conference in Guayaquil? Who was the puppet master? Why did San Martín accept the defeat of his political hopes to install a new monarchy in Peru (or was this hope also a fabrication of later historians) in favor of Simón Bolívar's dream of a series of republics? Was the banquet and ball given in honor of San Martín a political demonstration of Bolívar's complete victory? Is this why San Martín soon abdicated, leaving South America for good in 1829 for the shores of idyllic France and a life of quiet retreat? Can the riddle of Guayaquil only be pierced by two historians whose very existence is limited to the pages of a short story of the same name written by Borges? Is all reality suspect? Does the successive, ordered use of language by its very nature tend to exaggerate the importance of what we are saying? And what of Bolívar's own claim that he was in Milan in 1805 and attended the coronation of Napoleon? We were both fascinated by the swirling eddies of myth and deception that surrounded Bolívar. We wondered if his lover, Manuela Sáenz, a patriot and hero of the revolution in her own right, minded all that much that her beloved was taken from his initial resting place in the Cathedral of Santa Marta and put on permanent display, so to speak, in the National Pantheon in 1842, becoming thus a symbol of the impervious commitment to the competing ideals of liberty and equality, while she herself died in 1856 of diphtheria and was dumped with unceremonious disdain, and no small measure of fear due to the possibility of contagion, into a mass grave. We wondered who actually created these fantastic stories that we now take for history. We wondered if we ourselves could create such stories. Who will be left far behind? Bolaño said. We all will, I said. We were filled with sudden troubling premonitions. Or perhaps we were having simultaneous attacks of gastroenteritis. Then we were talking about Venezuela under Pérez and how it was a ticking time bomb. The day that shook the country had only exposed the problem for the whole world to see. There was no brutal rupture with the past, no collapsing sky, no need to invent a new metanarrative to superimpose upon the universe. It was the same story that had plagued Venezuela since the days of the Spanish Empire, the same story that plagued all of Latin America. Everyone with eyes to see could see that the gap between the rich and the poor remained, and so did the frustration that fragments the lives of those living at the bottom. The streets of Caracas were still home to thousands and thousands of 'buhoneros' (vendors) who continued to scratch and claw with desperate enthusiasm just to stay alive, selling everything and anything from Rolex watches to rock-and-roll t-shirts to handbags to empanadas to raw oysters to pistols to drugs. The upper crust still hid out in their fortified castles, protected by barbed wire and surveillance cameras and German mercenary bodyguards armed to the teeth with fully serrated army knives and semi-automatic machine guns. And all over the city, in the slums of Caucaguita and San Agustín and Monte Piedad and Sierra Maestra, dozens of hastily built, ramshackle apartment buildings and burnt-red ranchos were still washed away in the muddy torrential rivers that followed on the heels of severe thunderstorms, in spite of the tangled black net of cables and wires that seemed to hold the barrios in place when it wasn't raining. The tears that were shed only months earlier for those who had died in the name of freedom had already evaporated like desert raindrops. But Pérez cannot wash his hands of that blood, nor the blood that is to come, I said. He cannot forever blame the leftist guerrillas and criminals and drug lords and counter-revolutionaries from Cuba and other politically undesirable elements for the plague that has already arrived on his doorstep. And it is not just a Venezuelan issue. It is a global issue. We must focus on helping everyone meet their basic needs, I said. It is time to put Marcel Duchamp's urinal back on the wall. And Bolaño naturally agreed. Then we talked about the explosive violence of the Caracazo itself and the burning buses and the looting that had spread like an Egyptian pestilence, like a fucking plague of locusts, and the government declaring marital law, and just like that Bolaño wanted to know all about the burn victim I had

met in October, in fact it was more like an interrogation, like he was pumping me for information, what was his name? said Bolaño (Ernesto Peralta, I said) and where did he live before the riots? (in the neighborhood called El Marques just off Avenida Boyaca in the shadow of Cerro El Avila, the lungs of Caracas because of all the greenery) and where did he now live? (I did not know, I had not seen him since that first time) and how extensive were his injuries? (the entire left side of his face and neck and shoulder were burned very badly, I could not see the skin beneath his shirt, but the skin that was exposed was still very black, almost a charcoal color, and it was leathery, I mean it seemed like his skin was actually a piece of leather that had been left to rot in the elements, and it was also cracked in many places, and it was clear that his arms and his legs from the knees down had also been burned, but not as badly, but the overall impression was of someone with a rare, festering, malignant form of cancer or someone suffering from leprosy, he didn't look human at all from a certain angle, in fact in the dim light of the Metro station where I met him he looked more like a creature from outer space) and did he possess any unusual smell? (an unusual smell?) yes, like formaldehyde or rubbing alcohol or ammonium chloride? (I do not know, I do not remember any unusual smell) and did he seem to have an aversion to direct sunlight? (that is difficult to determine, one could argue that was the case, since I stumbled upon him at the deepest level of the Metro station, but I only met him the one time, so it is impossible to perceive a pattern) and did he seem to have come to terms with his deformity? (you mean psychologically?) yes, or emotionally, or did it seem like he possessed a violent, sinister streak just below the surface? (yes, now that you mention it, he most definitely possessed an aura of maladjustment, the tremulous tremors that lull us to sleep, as if he were just waiting for the right moment to slit someone's throat) good, very good, said Bolaño, and there were many more precise, journalistic, though slightly bizarre questions after that, nitty-gritty questions, an attempt to get at the hidden psychology of what it means to live out one's days as a burn victim, and I did my best to answer every question he put to me, it was actually kind of fun, like we were two detectives comparing notes, that is the impression I had, as if Bolaño had come face to face with numerous burn victims since he had left Mexico City and was cataloguing how each had responded to their deformity in the hopes of answering certain fundamental questions about the nature of identity and whether or not you could indeed remain yourself if the face you had been born with no longer existed. Yes, it was an interesting conversation. And then just like that it was over, but not because we had exhausted its possibilities. Bolaño was just about to ask me what might have been the most profound question he had asked all evening (that was certainly the look in his eyes sparkling with mischief), when we were savagely interrupted by two immaculately dressed local gangsters engaged in a furious discussion about a recent epidemic of UFO sightings in the skies above Caracas. I say gangsters because each gentleman possessed a small pocket gun, a Beistegui Brothers Libia 6.35 mm originally manufactured in Spain but purchased only God knew where. With a flair for theatric gestures, they had placed their guns on their table while they were arguing. These were not the kind of guns police detectives would have carried. Yes, they were deadly enough, but a Libia is more for show, a collector's item, more for the prestige of owning such a gun, more to announce to the world that the man who possesses it is a man of some stature, more the kind of gun a gangster on the rise would possess. What was more intriguing than their tiny showcase pistols, however, was that their argument seemed less like an actual argument than it did an occasion for arguing. It was soon apparent that both men believed in the existence of UFOs, and that their comments about the sightings and the possibility of being visited by aliens or even abducted were aimed at disarming the paranoid vigilance of their opponent, thus creating an opportunity to get off a quick potshot. We were in fact witnessing a rarely seen ritual dance between two second-tier egomaniacs vying for power (and a chance to gain market share in gangsterland) in the dim, bluish, cavernous light of this seedy dive on Calle Los Apamates south of Solano. Both men seemed to be frothing at the mouth. What about the story of Emelino Gonzales, the truck driver? said the one. Ah, my friend, why do you need to go back to 1954? said the other. We are talking about alien encounters, are we not? What better example than Gonzales, who was forced to exit his truck because a nine-foot wide spherical craft was hovering six feet off the ground, blocking the road to Petare? said the one. Ah, yes, but some say Gonzales was a deranged drug addict. Who else would claim he was attacked by hairy dwarves? said the other. But you do not dispute the fact that his assailants emerged from the craft and sent him flying backwards some fifteen feet with a concentrated beam of light? said the one. No, no. But Gonzales did say his astral assailants were covered with hair and they were wearing loincloths. I dispute that. And he also said some of these hairy dwarves were off gathering rocks when he surprised them. I dispute that as well. What aliens wear loincloths? And why did they need rocks from the road to Petare? said the other. What of the story of Lorenzo Paz and Alberto Rosales? said the one. You

mean Rosales the shoe salesman and amateur photographer and not Rosales the philosopher? said the other. Yes, certainly, the one who along with Paz took the pictures of a luminous oval craft zooming back and forth in the skies over Carora, with great orange flames shooting out from its underbelly, incinerating the landscape. Who could deny the truth of the pictures? said the one. Yes, that is certainly a truthful account. But it is also an old, old story. And it does not take place in Caracas, said the other. Very well then, let us return to the recent sightings. What do you say about the craft Mrs. Regina Rivero said she saw from the plaza just outside the Chacaito subway station? said the one. Yes, yes, this report has been on the news on every channel. A whitish blue light of great size and luminosity, much brighter than any other heavenly body in the sky. The light appearing stationary for five or ten minutes, and then accelerating at great speed and vanishing in the hazy, urban glow of the city and the darkness beyond. But a whitish blue light is hardly a spacecraft, said the other. What then of the small, circular black object seen in the skies above La Pastora, an object that was most definitely an alien spacecraft according to the witnesses, and there were thousands of reputable witnesses who said the ship crisscrossed the heavens, looking for unsuspecting victims to snatch away, slicing up the sky in odd, bewildering geometric patterns before it zoomed away at the speed of light and was lost in the clouds surrounding Cerro El Avila? What of that, my friend? But instead of responding with another criticism, the other gangster picked up his Libia in a motion so quick and easy it was difficult to believe the gun had not always been a part of his hand, and without even a backward glance at his friend, he fired in quick succession at three hanging lamps hanging directly over the darkly stained bar. There was an explosion of glass particles and shards of darkness as the lights were extinguished one by one, and then a roar of jubilant laughter followed by a competing roar, and then the voice of the first gangster saying watch this! as the light from several more hanging lamps (these were hanging above various tables) was extinguished, and then there was more roaring, robust, jubilant laughter, and then for some strange, unfathomable, possibly psychotic reason, the men turned their Libias on the poor forgotten aquarium nestled in the back corner and emptied their weapons in unison, an amazing feat of synchronous skill which suggested, among other things, that these two gangsters were connected telepathically, twins of body, mind and soul. The aquarium glass shattered with the impact of the bullets, and then there was a rush of murky, aquarium water, and soon after that you could hear the fish flopping about on the tiled floor. The gangsters started congratulating themselves on their marksmanship. Their laughter swelled with their joy. Then one of them (it was difficult to see who was who) tossed a large bill to the table. For the damage, he said. And then they were gone. Just like that. We barely had any time to reflect on what had happened. We were like fugitives, too tired from running to think, rubbing our sore feet, lost in the second desert of our delusions. We just sat there numbly, absorbed by the darkness. And it was very dark indeed. The interior of this seedy dive on Calle Los Apamates had been plunged into what I can only describe as a primeval darkness. A couple of hanging lanterns had survived, and there was still the dim glow from the hallway that led to the bathroom. And remarkably, the tiny porcelain deep sea diver was still intact, still standing on the pebbly though unwatery bottom of his domain like an exposed skeleton, and he was still glowing faintly with a soft, surreal greenish light. But that was it for illumination. It was almost like the world had been suddenly transformed into a grainy film noir gangster movie from the forties, except there was no femme fatale. So we sat there for a while. I don't remember how long. I do remember it was dark enough that I had trouble making out even the face of Bolaño, who couldn't have been more than two feet away. Then I heard Bolaño's voice swimming towards me through that ocean of darkness. Who will be left far behind? Bolaño asked. We all will, I replied. And then we were laughing hysterically, arm in arm with death, that impertinent lover who whispers only bitter stories. That's what it seemed like. That's the last thing I remember.

One would be hard pressed to find a more compelling portrait of two writers on a two-day bender. But the passage is so neatly developed, so charged with purpose-driven, kinetic energy, that it seems more like a fictionalized account of what should have happened (an ideal version of reality) than what actually did happen (plain old boring reality). Both the obvious details and those hidden beneath the luminescent surface of the prose dovetail in ways that seem crafted, as opposed to accidental. The hotel where Zabala says he and Bolaño met is a case in point. Hotel El Conde is located on the very corner where the house of the Count of San Javier lived with his wife and extended family during the 18th century. That the name Javier lay at the historic foundation of the hotel where he and Bolaño began their epic journey must surely have appealed to Zabala's sense of irrefutable destiny. Likewise, the looming presence of Rómulo Gallegos as a one-time resident of the hotel carries a similar prophetic weight when one considers that Bolaño was

virtually unknown as a writer until he won the Rómulo Gallegos Prize for his novel, *The Savage Detectives*, in 1999. The irony of this fact may indeed be a coincidence, given that the second meeting between Zabala and Bolaño supposedly took place ten years earlier, but this small but significant detail could just as easily have been inserted into Zabala's narrative after 1999 and we would be none the wiser.

Of course two questions emerge from this line of thinking. First, when was this particular passage actually composed? And why would Zabala engage in yet another deception, particularly since it seems unlikely that he ever intended for his diary to be published? To answer these questions, it is perhaps instructive to examine the texture of the passage as a whole. Zabala gives us dozens of clues that as a writer he is interested in blurring the lines between history and myth, between fact and fiction. He declares at the very beginning of this passage that he and Bolaño were engaged in 'a dismantling of reality of the first order, and then a reassembling of that reality.' Then Zabala comments on Gallegos' great novel, *Doña Bárbara*, which is a mythic exploration of the life of a cattle rustler and petty tyrant from Venezuela (who also happens to be a witch), whose sense of reality, which is shaped by the violent nature of existence on the plains of Venezuela, deteriorates over the course of the novel as a consequence of both her struggle to find peace and love for herself and her struggle against the legitimate government of Venezuela. For Zabala, Hotel El Conde and Gallegos' novel are each an ideal 'jumping off point,' a trampoline, if you will, for the journey Zabala and Bolaño are about to make into unknown territory, and thus they also serve as appropriate symbols of the 'crossroads between the past and the future.' Reality is thus ever malleable. Bolaño listens to 'unseen music' and vanishes in the glare of the lamp light. They talk about the nature of reality and the meaning of existence. Bolaño describes a book he hopes to write that will be an encyclopedia of fake writers but everyone who reads it will think they are real. They go to 'some café or bar or restaurant in Catia, just off Calle El Cristo, or maybe it was closer to Parque del Oeste.' Zabala doesn't really remember. They imagine they hear gunfire outside this café and assume a riot is taking place, or at least Bolaño makes this assumption. The owner of the café wears a 'mask' to hide his melancholy disposition. Nothing in this account is precisely located either in memory or, seemingly, in actual fact. Zabala and Bolaño wait for the train to Pérez Bonalde in a Metro station 'somewhere beyond the known boundaries of reality' so they can 'go to a hospital that [does] not exist.' Zabala compares their experiences to something that might exist in the world of an absurdist play by the Spanish writer Fernando Arrabal. They curse the limitations of their imaginations, limitations which make it impossible to comprehend the 'unfathomable purity of [the] unreachable stars.' They talk about the myth and deception that surrounds the life of Simón Bolívar. They wonder if the riddle of Guayaquil can 'only be pierced by two historians whose very existence is limited to the pages of a short story of the same name written by Borges,' a writer who was himself a master of blurring the lines between myth and history. They talk about 'the hidden psychology of what it means to live out one's days as a burn victim' in an attempt to answer 'certain fundamental questions about the nature of identity and whether or not you [can] indeed remain yourself if the face you [have] been born with no longer [exists].' They witness a lively debate between two local gangsters about the truth of various UFO sightings in and around Caracas, but the sophisticated intellectual tenor of this debate seems well beyond what we would normally expect from gangsters, especially with its half-buried reference to Alberto Rosales, a Venezuelan philosopher and an expert in both Kant and Heidegger who was particularly interested in Heidegger's distinction between the notion of Being (*Sein*) and being (*Seiende*). Finally, everywhere Zabala and Bolaño go during their epic two-day journey, light does not truly illuminate. More often than not the two writers are surrounded by a hazy, murky, mythic, at times primordial darkness, as if the 'world had [indeed] been transformed into a grainy film noir gangster movie from the forties.' In short, Zabala seems to be saying that what we understand as reality is not reality, what we think of as our identity is perhaps something else. Everything is up for grabs. Of course many writers have tackled such themes. Understanding the nature of reality and identity have become the cornerstone themes of the post-modern era. What distinguishes Zabala from most other post-modern writers, however, is that he seems to embrace the joy of not knowing (as opposed to wallowing in the swamp of confusion and despair) because he is seeking spiritual enlightenment rather than intellectual certainty, which he viewed as something of a red herring. Zabala makes the search for identity and the search to understand reality the same search, but in the end he abandons both because, as he writes in his diary in an entry dated April 14, 2001: 'to search to the exclusion of all else for something that changes before our very eyes is a waste of breath and prevents us from experiencing the incalculable joy and ephemeral beauty of life.'