Cuban writer Javier Pedro Zabala and Chilean writer Roberto Bolaño first crossed paths in Mexico City in the mid-seventies. Their very first meeting, recounted at some length in Zabala's diary, occurred in April of 1975. The meeting did not take place in Librería Gandhi or any other bookstore. It did not take place in that mysterious Mexican hangout called Café La Habana, although that venue would have been appropriate on many levels, certainly because it was the haunt of writers and artists for generations, but also because it is supposedly the spot where Fidel Castro and Che Guevara drew up their plans for overthrowing the Batista regime and taking control of Cuba. No, the first meeting between Zabala and Bolaño was not imbued with such a heavy-handed sense of history and timing. Instead, the two writers, both young men who had not yet made a dent in the literary world, met by accident in a greasy spoon of a café called El Abrevadero on Calle de Tacuba, a few blocks east of the Palace of Fine Arts. It is now a McDonald's, but back then it was the kind of place where you could get a beer at any hour of the day or night. Bolaño was capping a thirty-six hour stint of walking and writing by eating a large, overcooked breakfast before he went to bed. He was sitting alone, with his back to the window. '*He was a brightly shining shadow sitting in a pool of dark sunlight*,' Zabala later wrote. Zabala was with a young woman, Blanca Barutti, a recent graduate of the Facultad de Medicina UNAM, who would later become Zabala's wife. She was originally from Santiago, Cuba, from the wealthy Vista Alegre neighborhood, but her family had left when Castro came to power. She was extraordinarily beautiful and was often mistaken for a movie star. She also had a reputation for a razor sharp wit. Both qualities caught Bolaño's attention.

In his diary, which Zabala kept with religious diligence, he recorded that he and Bolaño soon struck up an uneasy conversation, precipitated by the presence of Blanca.

> *'We spent half an hour sparring politely, an imaginary war between two young lions pacing back and forth in the same cage. Blanca was the prize. And then we forgot all about Blanca and talked about everything but writing. Bolaño said Mexican politics was disheartening. Echeverría had only made things worse. Then he said Echeverría was why he had left Mexico in '72 and spent some time with leftist guerillas in El Salvador. He said he had been a spy, a counter-revolutionary. He said he then went back to Chile to give his heart and soul to Allende's struggle to build a socialist state, but then Pinochet seized control. Pinochet is worse than Echeverría, he said. Didn't you know that Echeverría supported Allende? I asked him. How can you be against Echeverría and Pinochet both? But he seemed not to hear me. Of course I was only half serious. I mean who was I to comment on the labyrinthine complexities of Latin American politics? But I thought Bolaño was full of shit, to be frank. He sounded like a wannabe Trotskyist who knew nothing about the deprivations and personal sacrifice that go along with revolution. Besides, he was too skinny for even the most resolute revolutionary. He seemed more like a refugee. Then he said when he had gone back to Chile the police picked him up because of his odd-sounding accent and tossed him in jail. Everyone around him was smeared with blood.*

Everyone was suffering from contagious amnesia. He said he spent nine days in a rat infested swamp of a prison cell, waiting to be tortured like the other prisoners, before a guard he knew from high school recognized him, so they released him. It was at that point I knew he was a writer more than anything else, and I said so, and he laughed. He told me about a new poetry movement he had founded that would pick up the torch lit by Rimbaud. We ordered some beers. Then he said the oddest thing. He said he hoped one day to win the Casa de las Américas Award for a book of poetry. I think he said this to see if I was paying attention. Or maybe to irritate me. Or maybe he was back to flirting with Blanca and wanted to impress her. I looked at him over my glass of beer. What was the use of a literary award to a poet like Rimbaud, who abandoned poetry for a mercantile career in Africa? I asked him. He put his finger to his mouth to shush me, as if we were both collaborators on the verge of discovery, and then he started laughing and disappeared into his own beer, the morning light refracting through the dirty glass containing his amber colored ambrosia, producing a soft golden halo effect above his head.'

Zabala later told his daughter, Cecilia, that he and Bolaño got along well enough. They met now and then over the course of the summer of 1975 and talked about poetry and what it meant to be a writer and whether or not you could call yourself a writer if you didn't write a single word. They talked about their disappointment with establishment writers like Octavio Paz and Juan Rulfo (though Zabala confesses at one point in his diary that their reasons were childish and more a reflection of their own as yet untested literary ambitions than anything else). They were both moved by the surrealistic impulses of Alfonso Reyes. They didn't bother to discuss Carlos Fuentes, except Zabala said he had enjoyed *La muerte de Artemio Cruz* immensely. They agreed about Norberto Fuentes. They disagreed about Gabriel García Marquez. On the whole they liked Mario Vargas Llosa's books. They could not praise enough the efforts of Miguel Ángel Asturias and Rómulo Gallegos and, of course, Borges. They tossed around the names of all sorts of eccentric poets. They joked about Carlos Pellicer, who looked like a butcher or a tenor in a barbershop quartet, according to Bolaño. They agreed it was easy to masturbate after reading the erotic poetry of Pierre Louÿs and next to impossible to masturbate after reading the sublime poetry of Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz. Zabala dismissed Luis Cernuda outright. He thought Cernuda would have been nothing at all if he hadn't flung open the doors of his homosexuality for the whole outraged world to see. Bolaño disagreed. Bolaño asked if Zabala had read the Chilean poet Carlos de Rokha and Zabala said he hadn't heard of him and Bolaño said he wasn't surprised because even the Chileans he grew up with hadn't heard of de Rokha. Zabala asked Bolaño if he had read the Mexican poet Sageuo Ruedas but Bolaño had not. Then Zabala asked if Bolaño had heard of the Peruvian poet Eduardo de Jesús Montoyo, a friend of José Carlos Mariátegui, but Bolaño said that except for Adán and Vallejo and Emilio Westphalen, and Pimental, of course, the founder of *Movimiento Hora Zero* (the Zero Hour Movement), who had discovered a way to capture the beauty of a ballad in his poetry, and then there was Carmen Ollé, who was heavily influenced by the Greek

Francophone poets (too heavily, Bolaño smirked), but aside from that the only thing he really knew about Peru was they made pretty good Pisco Sours there, but not as good as in Chile. They both respected the lyrical beauty of Emilio Ballagas. They talked intense trash about all sorts of sycophants and university snobs, the vultures waiting in the wings. '*Our opinions contained a great deal of adolescent posturing even though we were both in our twenties*,' Zabala later wrote, '*but we had a hell of a time getting drunk*.'

Roberto Bolaño, Javier Zabala, and Bruno Montané, Mexico City, 1975.

By 1976 Bolaño was fully immersed in the world of his infrarealist poetry movement. Zabala was not interested in becoming an infrarealist. He later confessed to his daughter that he thought the whole idea was just a thin disguise for surrealism, which had been around since the twenties. He didn't understand how you could create a movement that already existed. Eventually, the two men parted company. Bolaño published his first book of poetry, *Reinventar el amor*, and after that he fled to France, and then Africa, before settling in Spain. Zabala and Blanca left for Cuba. Bolaño was twenty-three. Zabala was twenty-six. They communicated sporadically with each other over the next thirteen years, always by letter, never by telephone. They did not see each other again until 1989.