RANDOM HOUSE eBOOKS

Desolation Island

Adolfo García Ortega

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About the Book

As the twentieth century draws to a close, a ship heads for Punta Arenas on the Straits of Magellan at Chile's southern tip. On board is Oliver Griffin, a man on an unusual quest. His journey is inspired by a photograph of his grandparents embracing a strange automaton which now resides in the Punta Arenas museum. This fearsome metal warrior is a sixteenth-century robot, a relic of a proposed mechanical army, commissioned by Philip II of Spain to guard the strait against the English.

The automaton was discovered on Desolation Island by a grieving woman scouring the archipelago for the bodies of her shipwrecked husband and son. Griffin has long been fascinated by this place, where the Magellan Strait meets the Pacific, and spends his life drawing intricate maps of the island.

With a host of characters both real and imaginary, touches of Homer, Melville and Sebald, *Desolation Island* sets countless stories spinning around its central axis – the extraordinary automaton. Taking in sixteenth-century wizardry, court politics, the modern shipping industry, the cinematic version of *The Invisible Man* and personal letters and family photographs, this mesmerising, original novel is a testament to man's insatiable desire for knowledge.

Spanning four full centuries of adventure, *Desolation Island* is a classic seafaring tale, striking at the heart of that eternal mystery: our obsession with the sea, as terrible as it is irresistible.

About the Author

Adolfo García Ortega was born in 1958 and lives in Madrid and Barcelona. He is a translator, literary critic, journalist and former editorial director of the prestigious Spanish publishing house Seix Barral. His critically acclaimed novels have won many prizes. *Desolation Island* is his first book to be translated into English.

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Adolfo García Ortega

DESOLATION ISLAND

Translated from the Spanish by
Peter Bush

Harvill Secker
LONDON

Only the invisible moves us.

Théodore Jouffroy

It was a life stripped of the present moment.

Antonio Muñoz Molina

1

I HAPPENED TO be in Madeira on New Year's Day morning in the new millennium and it was there I met Oliver Griffin, a Spaniard in all but name, who accosted me on the sea-view terrace at the Carlton Hotel and used all his charms as a seductive storyteller to engage me in a series of relaxed though private exchanges. He invented and drew islands, because it was the activity he'd found most interesting in life to that point, or so he said when he started to talk garrulously about himself as if we were two old acquaintances, which we were not. I now realise no third party would ever have thought we were, I certainly didn't feel I was, but Griffin's warmth immediately captivated me as if he were unveiling the hidden designs behind his strategy for seduction. That activity of drawing islands, he stressed, modulating his words quickly in an almost monotonous lilt, could easily have turned into a full-time profession and given him the reputation of a fool. In the event, he had earned his living as a history lecturer, he added, only to abandon his academic career when an unexpected inheritance from San Francisco resolved his economic problems, just like Flaubert's Bouvard, he added.

He had drawn the island that was his obsession, for that's how he described it from the start, hundreds of times in recent years. It was a necessary exercise to ensure he

didn’t forget the place, he said, as though he’d invented an island that was his alone, however real it might be in some part of the world. He drew it to give it specificity while he awaited his opportunity to travel there, when it would assume a physical and geographical reality. Sketches of the forty-seven fjords, nine canals, fifty-six capes, eight gulfs and twenty-three beaches thus emerged repeatedly from Oliver Griffin’s fountain pen on whatever piece of paper was at hand, wherever he was, in hotels, bars, trains, airports, friends’ houses, hospital waiting rooms: it was simply an exercise to help him remember, a highly elaborate mnemonic device to chase off other thoughts. Many people solve crosswords, whereas I draw islands, I mean, simply that one island. I became so expert, he added, I could even draw it with my eyes closed: its rugged, elongated coasts, with a range of peaks and troughs like a graph charting Stock Exchange share prices or a dyspeptic seismograph, set obliquely, leaning westwards, like a Tower of Pisa in reverse. Griffin located purely from memory the names of the most important sites on the island – a total fantasy, he said, for, however much he remembered seeing it in one of the books he had consulted in the National Library in Madrid, he hadn’t retained their precise positions: Cape Desire, Cape Pillars, Port Mercy, Beaufort Bay, Cape Cut, Port Churruca, Mataura Cove, Barrister Bay … names nourishing a desire that impelled him towards a strange, profound encounter with himself from the day he was born, he said, one he had yet to decipher, like somebody who comes across a letter addressed to himself but written in a foreign language.

He had spontaneously sketched islands from early childhood. He was familiar with those irregular shapes his fingers drew extraordinarily slowly, as if he’d always known the direction they should follow: islands, not ridiculous circles *manqués* he surrounded fluidly with dashes and slender strips of horizons, suggesting the idea of a sea.

Unknown to Griffin and outside the realm of his experience because, like me, he came from an inland city, as I admitted to him, and that sea was as imaginary, threatening and enthralling as a secret. With the passage of time, he developed an interest in antique books of ingenuous, tinted islands, which he searched out, paid the high prices demanded, and admired, studied and collected as if fate were inexorably leading him to them.

Those Books of Islands fascinated him, he said, because they were totally unreal in their descriptions and colours, and still were today, I fully agree, added Griffin, who, like myself, believed those descriptions to be as fictitious as any novel. Books of Islands, he said, like maps, were texts I read in my adolescence with greater enthusiasm and empathy than literature, because I felt they raised a curtain in my imagination like scenes in a film, revealing realms of fantasy, which they undoubtedly were, while my finger ran over sites, promontories, coastlines, and a residue stuck with me, a sensation lodged in my head immersing me in happy, escapist suspension of disbelief. I suspect those Books of Islands related to actual islands, though that soon became irrelevant, they could be fake, invented islands for all I cared, Oliver Griffin said casually. Besides, islands, or so I've read, he continued, sometimes stay or at least become invisible. It is their destiny, whether or not this is mythical, to be lost in remote corners of the world, either because they are wrongly located or fell into oblivion when the scant maritime traffic they saw evaporated. Now they only exist in the feverish minds of lunatic sailors, islands appearing on no maps, islands nobody survived to recount their longitudes and latitudes, inaccessible islands, shrouded in ethereal mists or preserved by strange tempests at the epicentre of which they live on and flourish on the margins of time. Even islands outside the possibilities of history, like the one described in Cervantes's *Persiles and Sigismunda*, the island inhabited by King

Kong, or even Robinson Crusoe's: islands that are invisible, in a word.

Invisibility, he continued, that was so important in relation to my own life and name, also shaped my island: first it was fiction, then reality, and then fiction again. Like my name, he stressed. And Oliver got up from his chair on the sunny terrace of the Carlton Hotel where we were admiring the blue sea, and, like a man plucked from a previous century, though he couldn't be more than fifty-five or sixty, introduced himself ceremoniously à la Melville, as he pointed out, parodying the 'Call me Ishmael' in *Moby Dick* with a 'Call me Griffin', followed by an affable smile and handshake as he awkwardly bowed his head. He added that he was as invisible as the islands he drew or at least tended that way, not because he was antisocial – he clearly *was* an affable fellow – but because he felt an affinity with the way everything in his life turned into literature, a family trait that was apparently hereditary. Or rather, he said, short-circuiting my confusion, I am metaphorically invisible, since my name is the same as Griffin, the Invisible Man, if you recall, the protagonist of H. G. Wells's novel of that name. Via an inevitable association of ideas, as I told my interlocutor, I remembered that Georges Perec, my favourite writer, had wanted to use the name in a film called *Vous souvenez-vous de Griffin*? I see, Oliver commented, after admitting he was familiar with Perec, though not with that particular fact. My full name, by the way, is Oliver Ernesto Griffin Aguiar, my father, Sean, was an Irish engineer from San Francisco and my mother, Matilde Aguiar, was a famous radio broadcaster from Madrid and both are still alive, if divorced: each live in the city of their birth and wish me Happy Christmas, in the morning and at night, respectively.

The island that had obsessed Griffin for years, the one he called his own, was Desolation Island. The whole story he recounted in Madeira on those warm January days that

ushered in the new century stemmed, in turn, from the only remaining trace of the life of another real or fictitious man, who was definitely invisible, since only his name, John Talbot, remained, or perhaps, as Griffin remarked, only his death remained, that took place many years ago, because it was all we know about him, or at least all that Herman Melville decided to mention in Chapter VII of *Moby Dick*. The lips of Ishmael his narrator spelt out the inscription on one of the marble, black-edged gravestones embedded in the wall, on both sides of the pulpit in the New Bedford chapel, the Seamen's Bethel, that still exists today in Bethel Street, Nantucket:

SACRED
To the memory
OF JOHN TALBOT
Who at the age of eighteen was lost overboard,
Near the Isle of Desolation, off Patagonia
November 1st 1836.
THIS TABLET
Is erected to his Memory
BY HIS SISTER.

'In this same New Bedford there stands a Whaleman's chapel, and few are the moody fishermen, shortly bound for the Indian Ocean or Pacific, who fail to make a Sunday visit to the spot', Griffin quoted Melville in a trance, confessing, as if he were indeed in a trance, that he'd entered that chapel some time ago after reading that page in his favourite and much reread novel, because the words, Desolation Island, gave meaning to all his previous life and would do so to all his subsequent life, as he was about to tell me. I searched for Desolation Island, Griffin said, on maps, in Books of Islands, in whole libraries, but which of the three Desolation Islands in the world was Talbot's? I started to invent one: although Melville says it is in

Patagonia, it could just as well be the island of Tristan da Cunha, also known as Desolation, facing the coast of Patagonia. Mine, the one I later located at the western end of the Straits of Magellan, perhaps appeared suddenly, by mistake, when I hadn't intended. But that island – who'd have thought it? – said Griffin was already linked to my life in the strangest of ways, and the fact it caught my attention when I was reading *Moby Dick* was simply a natural epiphany in the unfurling of my existence that was bound to happen sooner or later.

Chance or fate determined that that island I'd read about, an invisible isle to me, the invisible man, was my grandfather's and was held to be so by my family for years. It was the Desolation Island where an extraordinary, fantastic, inert monster had appeared five hundred years ago, at least according to the press headlines of the time, which came into my grandfather's possession and that I still have, said Griffin, duly dubbing the find a monster. In fact, the body or object that emerged from oblivion was a metal object, an artificially wrought human figure, found on Cape Cut, on Desolation Island, in 1919, and that Graciela Pavic, its discoverer and the curator of the Salesian Museum in Punta Arenas, restored and cleaned for years until it assumed the presentable state in which it appears in the photo my grandfather Arnaldo had taken with my grandmother Irene, when they visited the museum on their honeymoon in the Straits area. That journey took my grandparents as far as Valparaíso, which was also the destination of the ship which took me to those parts years after, said Griffin, flourishing his hand after a long pause that anyone else might have deemed a contemptuous silence.

He then handed me the photo of his maternal grandparents, all spruced up and smiling, standing in front of the camera embracing, like a friend, both sides of a metal automaton whose unnerving smile and face gave it

the features of a disfigured warrior. I scrutinised those seemingly strange people. This photo has accompanied me through life, Oliver said, breaking his silence, as if waiting for the moment to reveal its inner secrets and tell its story. And seemed, Griffin continued, to have been there for ever, inciting one to travel, as Baudelaire writes, and its moment had come when I read that epitaph in Melville's novel. This photo had been my family's gateway to something extraordinary, and had been shut away at some point, had been severed, locked in an inexplicable, orphan state, hibernating between bundles of photos of cousins, brothers, sisters, relatives, weddings, travels and monuments, and now it entered my life by chance, I forget how. Perhaps it fell on the floor when I opened a wardrobe drawer, but the fact is it *did* fall into my hands, and I grasped it as if I'd been expecting it all along, because I found it soothing, a photo subtly evoking mystery and desire that led me constantly to imagine a mythical place that had been non-existent and fictitious until recently, I could almost say, until I decided to retrace my grandparents' footsteps. It was a place that attracted me but I'd yet to receive the appropriate summons, a final excuse to give meaning to the words written on the back of the photo, which in my youth sent me into a wildly exotic, symphonic mood, as in the lines of the poet of the sea, Brauquier: 'For those of us who have seen nothing, the map of the world is full of names of cities that float on our lips like exotic scents.' Griffin then showed me the other side of the photo and I read what his grandfather or maybe his grandmother had written: 'Punta Arenas, 1923. Salesian Regional Museum. Figure from Desolation Island, lost for five hundred years. It is frightening.' When that photo came into my possession, said Griffin, I already loved islands and drew them when I played at inventing places. Until the photo also became invisible. Invisibility became a feature overshadowing my childhood and whole life: to be called

the Invisible Man is a heavy burden and legacy and I'd no idea what I'd let myself in for.

Over time my grandfather found out more about Graciela Pavic, Griffin continued, keen not to leave any stone unturned in his story and indifferent to the din of daily life in Funchal where we plunged as we talked. Although they never returned to Punta Arenas, he said, they did occasionally write to her, and must have developed something of a friendship in the time they spent in the Straits while their boat, the *Santander*, turned round. She told them about how she walked down to the port every day and headed to a vantage point in the city in order to survey the whole of Catherine's Bay, where her husband and two sons had died in a fishing boat. It happened on a summer's day in 1918. Arturo Bagnoli set sail with his two sons, aged seven and nine, to lever mussels off accessible rocks on the north coast, as they often did, very close to land and quite safe, but on that miserable day currents in the rough sea dragged the boat out to the centre of the bay and a storm broke, immediately capsizing their fragile vessel. Remains of the boat were swept southwards, onto a cape at one end of Useless Bay, but the bodies never appeared. Grief at losing all she had on that tempestuous morning sank Graciela into a deep depression and for years she undertook a long, random pilgrimage to islands, coves, bays, harbours, caves, searching that rugged coast for the bodies of her husband and children. The only thing she found in the end was the automaton that she refurbished with such passion, Griffin said, as if it were a beloved soul she'd saved from sentence of death, decomposition and worms. Gentle, melancholic Graciela Pavic, he went on, poured out her despair in long letters to my grandparents when she realised that she would never find them, however vigorously she explored and renewed her faith each morning when she looked at photos of her husband and children: they had died, and she with them, because every

remaining day of her life would be a day lived in retrospect, in the most desperate rush imaginable to recreate every single moment they had shared.

Oliver constantly thought about Graciela Pavic, or reinvented her, because it was obvious he'd never met her, and simply transformed her into his symbol of desolation, since, as he said, desolation was etymologically an absence of consolation, from the Latin *solacium*, or absence of pleasure, if we followed ancient Occitan *solatz* sung by the earliest troubadours. The void is desolation, he pensively added, a desert where aggressive devastation, like an aggressive disease, attacks everything, starves life and withers the tiniest buds of hope, and that's what Graciela must have felt in her soul as she went from cove to cove, island to island, cranny to cranny, searching for her dead children, with only the reflected solitude of that landscape in her mind where suddenly, a miserly glint vanquished the waves, a dull spark from a tin corpse that was built to strike fear into cormorants, seagulls, ingenuous Indians and myopic sailors from its cliff-top eyrie.

2

I USED TO meet Griffin in a café on the Avenida Zarco, named after the founder of the city, opposite the palatial home of the regional government. If there was no rain to deter us, we walked up the steep slope to the Fortaleza do Pico, but the breathless Griffin never stopped talking and telling stories that weren't always his own. Madeira fascinated him, and he knew things about the island that nobody, or almost nobody, knew. When we passed one of the low stone houses abutting the Church of Santa Clara, Griffin told me it was where the great mariner, not to say pirate, Carteret was held and threatened by his men, on the expedition of another pirate, another mariner, by the name of Wallis, when he'd come to Madeira to repair his boat, the *Swallow*. Inexplicably, perhaps because he'd run out of gold, Carteret decided to stop the repairs and set sail with the boat as it was. Nine men mutinied and took him at swordpoint to that stone house, from where they kept watch on the bay, but Carteret persuaded them to put down their weapons, surrounded as they were by loyal crew, and pledging, so they say, to show mercy towards the rebels. That proved to be a lie and they hung the nine men from the yardarm after they'd dislocated every bone in their bodies. The story of Carteret and Wallis made a deep impression on Arthur Conan Doyle, according to Griffin, when he was in Madeira

in the winter of 1881, although he'd certainly heard about it before coming to the island. However, Conan Doyle was really astonished by the uncanny sight of a lunar rainbow in the bay, something I also saw one night, said Griffin, when I observed the city from one end of the seafront, its houses lit up on the mountainside where Funchal is built.

Griffin and I stopped at the top of the castle, the famous Pico, and looked down at the city from its battlements, at the beach as far as Barreirinha, the marina, with its yachts and sloops, and the big boats moored by the long, crowded Pontinha quay. On one of those excursions that generally led to a fishermen's café on the Rua da India or one of the tourist restaurants on the Cais Novo, Griffin started to tell me about his voyage, unleashing a torrent of stories and characters that spilled into each other, and time always seemed to pass incredibly quickly when I was with that extraordinary inventor of places and life-stories for all and sundry.

One morning when we'd drunk two iced coffees at Os Ingleses, a bar near the cathedral, and couldn't decide which of the usual watering-holes to visit next, Griffin said, I was here in Funchal some five years ago and stayed at the Calcamar Hotel on the Rua dos Murças, while I waited for Afonso Branco, the captain of the merchant ship *Minerva Janela*. I had contracted to sail with Branco, through correspondence with his shipping company, boarding in Lisbon, but I arrived late and the *Minerva Janela* left without me. I was told to fly to the boat's next port of call, given that I'd paid in advance for my passage, and to wait there. I did just that, said Griffin, but arrived four days before the boat reached Madeira, time enough for me to fall in love with the island and this city, Funchal, a beautiful, resonant name, that, as I read in a book by Casimiro Ortega the botanist, is the name of a variety of fennel, *Foeniculum vulgare*, that grew on the banks of the island in 1707, when it was discovered by another botanist,

Hans Sloan. I roamed the granite breakwaters that skirt almost the whole of one side of the city that overlooks the sea, while the other side is practically vertical, with streets that slope like ramps. I have spent many hours on that promenade, sitting at the end of the quay with the red and white beacon, watching all manner of vessel set sail, merchant ships, container ships, Russian cruisers, Japanese whalers, the island's rubbish collectors. As a result, Griffin went on, I can agree with Paul Morand that ports aren't at all poetic, or at least that such poetry is the invention of armchair poets: a port in itself is filthy-dirty, and its only beauty is brought by the voyager wanting to experience departures and arrivals, dreams, when all's said and done, because a port's only reality is its boats, and I now believe the true port is the one conceived from the open sea and not from land. He fell silent for a moment. I remember, he then said, another boat I almost embarked on, also sailing to Valparaíso, to the same destination as the *Minerva Janela*. It was the *Soliman*, a black, rusty sand transporter, but I was put off because they anticipated it would be a much longer trip than the *Minerva Janela*. Besides, the Philippine captain inspired no confidence whatsoever, and though this might seem incredible, he looked like a one-eyed, toothless character from a novel by Salgari. When the *Minerva Janela* finally arrived, I was in the port, as usual. Its huge hold was carrying tree trunks from Africa, timber from Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and, wherever you looked, columns of containers like massive tower blocks, secured by thick ropes and chains. Oliver Griffin suddenly broke off and said goodbye, confident we would meet again the following day. I was so shocked by the abrupt way he'd interrupted his flow that I hardly had time to respond and lingered there awhile, semi-paralysed, with most of the day looming before me, a day that now looked irremediably empty without that fellow's enthralling conversation.

I met him in the same spot, Os Ingleses, the following day when he launched forth without even the briefest exchange of pleasantries. No doubt, said Griffin, before starting a now familiar routine, I learned most about Funchal from John Byron, the poet's grandfather. As I read in his book, Byron spotted Madeira on 14 July 1764 and immediately he set foot on its soil he was won over by the springtime warmth of its climate and the crisp winds that blew across the island at certain times of day. In his list of the island's virtues, continued Griffin, he most praised its marmalade and cider jams and the scent of sugar-sweet violets that hit him the second he left behind the stench of the port. I have often remarked how the most experienced sailors act like sleepwalkers on dry land, entranced as they are by the wildness of nature, and Byron was no exception as he marvelled at Madeira's leafy trees, especially its laurels, as red as the island's celebrated wine. Curious by nature, his favourite science being botany, all the rage in the eighteenth century, he left his ship in the hands of the second officer and with the sole company of a nun who was free to speak to foreigners, so Byron claimed, he devoted several days to studying the smooth leaved *Laurus magnoliaefolia maderiensis*, named by Lamark, his friend the expert botanist in Kew, or the fleshy fibred *Caladium*, a plant with a two-colour leaf, deep red on its back and bottle green on its edges, that invites you to take a bite and taste its dry sting, as Byron himself noted.

For my part, when Oliver launched into a rapturous commentary on things wild and fabulous, I sometimes tried to bring him back to what I believed was the core of his narrative, his journey to the Straits of Magellan. But nothing could stop his flow; on the contrary, as winter follows autumn, and autumn spring, a new shoot of a story was born with each fragment of his tale. That's how I discovered that the *Minerva Janela* – as Griffin decided to tell me when we were crossing the Casino Gardens on our

way to the Sheraton – was a 480-tonner, a 120-metre-long merchant ship that became his home, or rather his world, for a number of months. After leaving that boat and returning to the life he had led before his long voyage, he was beset by a strange melancholy and recurrent fond memories of his companions on his voyage to find Desolation Island. A boat is a live being, Griffin suddenly commented in the bar at the Sheraton, and that's why it can have a dark purple, gloomy air, as in a photo that's been deliberately darkened, or can be a cataclysmic sight from land, yet breathe an exhilarating vitality from the sea, like the sweat exuded by an athlete.

I could never, Oliver confessed, forget that morning five years ago when I saw the *Minerva Janela* moored to the bollards on the Pontina wharf. It was the picture of an untameable beast languidly hiding its real self like a person whose acquaintance one has just made. Twenty and a half metres across, six deep, a top speed of eighteen knots, recounted Griffin, nodding towards the port where similar ships were anchored. It could go even faster when swept along by a favourable wind. That morning the *Minerva Janela* seemed to be asleep, as if waiting for a word, order or command. It was breathing, if one can say that about a ship in port, which I think one can. It's what ships in port do: they breathe as we do when we are dreaming. Its hull was dotted with rust, which didn't seem to be the result of neglect as much as wear and tear, particularly around the capstan; it wasn't a beautiful vessel, rather it seemed unpleasant or at odds with my state of mind, and unexpectedly vulnerable. However, these impressions vanished as soon as I saw the modern plastic-covered Navsat carapace for satellite connection, an eye-catching elegant grey and aerodynamically lined. Piles of containers dominated the boat, each a murky orange, and generally rusty, battered and worn. A dog barked at me from the

deck, said Griffin, welcoming or perhaps threatening me, it had yet to decide.

We changed direction when we left the Sheraton the second Griffin entered one of his silences and started climbing the steep Rua Aranhas to the Palacio de Sao Pedro. Shortly after we'd reached the top of the street, Griffin remarked that it now houses a strange kind of aquarium, though it was Carmen Polo de Franco's residence when she visited Madeira in 1955, and many of the elderly in the area still remember how she was astonished, not to say stunned, to discover there was a famous Madeiran homonym of her husband, the Generalísimo. Griffin was sure she was angered by that unexpected revelation. At least, he continued, one deduces that from a letter written by Doña María de Borbón, the king's mother, who from her gilded exile in Estoril considered that famous collector of necklaces to be a fraudulent and uncommonly stupid witch. Everywhere one looks, said Griffin, one sees the name of Francisco Franco: on boats, schools, squares and hospitals; there's even a museum named after him and his brother Henrique, or maybe it's his son. I'm not sure and frankly I don't care, but I imagine Polo de Franco with a big scowling smile and I find that amusing. Then abruptly, though not impolitely, Griffin shook my hand and headed downhill. I didn't follow him because I realised that, for one reason or another, as far as he was concerned, the day's session was at an end.

3

WHEN I MET Griffin a few days later in the Os Combatentes restaurant on the Rua Ivens, he launched into his childhood experiences, as if we'd not been apart for a minute. In 1955, the year when Carmen Polo de Franco was astonished or stunned in Madeira, said Griffin, I was astonished or stunned in my classroom at the age of seven or eight. I shall never forget that day, he said, lowering his voice before pausing. I was late for class, my school's long corridors and empty galleries were extremely distressing, and made me feel both guilty and vulnerable, and years after, when analysing that state of mind, I've always attributed my lateness, that was frequent at the time and no doubt the result of my mother's inability to wake me up and give me breakfast, to a powerful sense of being set apart from my peers, my companions and the rest of the human race in general. Moreover, my name emphasised that difference, if not a sense of rejection. I don't mean the fact I was related to Wells's Griffin, that invisibility that turned me into literature, because I imagine nobody around me, let alone myself, had read or knew anything about the English writer. No, I'm alluding to the fact that I had a foreign name, and those silent corridors heightened a contemptible sense of alienation that might have felt nightmarish had it not been true that I was completely

awake during every second that brought me closer to the classroom door. I remember knocking and someone I couldn’t see opening up. As the door receded, something untoward entered my field of vision: I wasn’t facing the usual lines of attentive classmates sitting at their desks, but reorganised rows with all manner of stuffed animals set out on the desktops. There were lizards and snakes of all sizes, two huge crocodiles held aloft by two iron bars, small chickenish birds, brightly coloured pheasant-like birds, plump poultry, long-shanked fowl, a kind of two-headed sheep, Galapagos Island turtles and others as tiny as a fingernail, bottled frogs, dozens of boxes of butterflies, others with fireflies or poisonous Tierra del Fuego scorpions, and my empty desk stood there with the item the teacher had assigned me, the Patagonian penguin or Chilean partridge, the words ‘discovered on the northern shore of the Straits of Magellan’, exquisitely written in black Indian ink on a small label stuck to its wooden base. I recalled that skinny, forlorn bird and its stiff feathers the moment I saw the photo of my grandparents with the automaton from Desolation Island, and subsequently have often thought about the sequence of coincidences that brought me to that remote part of the world and how one was undoubtedly that stuffed Patagonian penguin, an unequivocal sign that destiny spreads its nets wide and catches its prey in the end, for good or for evil, said Griffin. These specimens were on loan from the city’s Museum of Natural Sciences, he continued, on the occasion of a festive event so they could do the rounds of classrooms at that time, and had been collected by the famous Scientific Commission to the Pacific, led by that exceptional man Almagro y Jiménez de la Espada. After the Great Exhibition in the Botanic Gardens greenhouses in May 1866, it was decided to take the splendid South American fauna on tour in Spain, and they were displayed in Sevilla, Valencia, Barcelona, Valladolid and Madrid, whence, continued

Griffin, they erupted into my school life almost a hundred years later. I must acknowledge that on that morning in 1955 the idea of foreignness again surged within me, in the shape of a keen desire to travel, to see the world, to be someone else, and, he went on, it had been nurtured by the novels I was already reading, being such a precocious reader. Over the years I incubated the idea further, and my reading nourished it to unsuspected levels, to the point that they became part of the web of coincidences that were to dominate my life. Thus, in 1978 I once again found stuffed items from the Scientific Commission to the Pacific where I'd least expect to find them, in a place I had gone for literary reasons, because of my long fascination for Gustave Flaubert, my favourite author, said Griffin. I discovered a pair of stuffed birds from Patagonia, very similar to the penguin I'd found on my desk in 1955, in the Museum of Natural History in Rouen, where, pure fetishicist that I am, I happened to be searching for the Amazonian parrot Flaubert had rented for a time as a model for Loulou, in *Un cœur simple*. The parrot was with other Latin American stuffed birds, on the top of shelves in a narrow attic in the museum, and, level with my eyes, I distinguished in that great assortment of birds, those Patagonian specimens with labels attached to a leg by a piece of string that said 'Spanish Commission to the Pacific, 1862–1866'. It may seem incredible, but it is absolutely true, Griffin declared categorically, before referring to Flaubert's journey to the Orient with Maxime du Camp, a friend from his youth.

I couldn't identify any obvious connection between Flaubert's trip and the central thread in Griffin's story, if there was one, given his tendency to go off at a tangent, but the appearance of the words Cape Horn mid-flow restored formal coherence to Griffin's narrative, as he noted that Flaubert and Du Camp left Marseille on a boat bound for Alexandria, the *Nile*, which they boarded on the morning of Sunday, 4 November 1849. The captain's name

was Rey, Griffin said he'd read somewhere, a strange, aloof individual, and his second-in-command was Lieutenant Roux, with whom Flaubert soon struck up an excellent relationship, much better than the one he enjoyed with Du Camp, who was fatuous and vain, as is well known, Griffin commented. Young Roux entertained passengers by spinning tales of dangerous voyages and adventures that took place around Cape Horn. However, Gustave was most struck by a tragic incident involving an albatross, perhaps a relative of the many albatrosses in that attic in Rouen's Museum of Natural History, next to the Amazonian parrots he'd rented and my Patagonian penguins. Roux apparently related how on one of the voyages around Tierra del Fuego in a brig on which Roux himself was serving as an able seaman, a man fell overboard, a surgeon from Limoges he'd just been playing cards with, and before they could throw him a lifebuoy or do anything to help, a huge albatross swooped down on his head, attacked him with its wings and beak until it had submerged and drowned him, and perhaps did so – such was the argument Roux used to lighten the tragic tenor of his tale, said Griffin – to wreak revenge for the death of the albatross rhapsodised fifty years before by Coleridge in his *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. Perhaps that explains why, Griffin concluded, it was the only sea voyage Flaubert ever made, because he was afraid that one day the phantom of that or another benighted albatross might swoop upon him. He mentioned it briefly in *L'Éducation sentimentale*, by way of exorcising it, when Frédéric Moreau his alter ego has him merely 'journey' and 'return', in a three-line paragraph resuming his reflections on gloomy steamers, cold dawns, vertiginous landscapes and short-lived loves. And that's all, added Griffin, lamenting such literary miserliness, given the hugely eventful nature of any return sea voyage: as Kafka wrote in 1913 to his beloved Felice, there is never a dull

moment at sea, and I, who have travelled the seas, can confirm how very true that is.

After we'd lunched and walked along a good stretch of sand, Griffin resumed his flow, but once again he didn't focus on his own story. Griffin said that earlier, when mentioning the albatross, he'd suddenly remembered a poem by Baudelaire, whom he read assiduously in the vain hope of learning all his poems by heart, that's devoted to the huge seabird 'that inhabits the storm and mocks the archer'. Griffin went on to say that Funchal had also enjoyed the pleasure of Baudelaire on its streets, and he suggested I should accompany him to the house of one Filipe Pereirinha, an antiquarian whose great obsession had been the gradual conversion of his business into a local museum, something he'd completed a mere five years ago, when Griffin set out on his voyage in the *Minerva Janela*; by visiting the Pereirinha Museum, that is, the antiquarian's house, I saw with my own eyes how it had been devastated by an accumulation of dozens of glass cases with countless, probably thousands, of objects that I reckoned were old rather than antique, big and small, ridiculous or predictable, letters, photos, paintings and model boats, huge bony whale jaws hanging on walls here and there, flags, coins, medals, books, prints, clocks, weapons and dozens of other categories. To his great surprise, Griffin continued, and to mine now, he found a note written by Charles Baudelaire, dated Madeira November 1841, addressed to the head of the Fishermen's Guild that was influential at the time in the politics of the port, in which he begs them passionately to let him sail for Europe, a letter Filipe Pereirinha or his son Antonio had bought at an auction, his son who emigrated and became wealthy in that same Europe Baudelaire was desperate to return to.

It had all begun a few months before, in 1840, on 19 April to be precise, Griffin recounted in that local museum, when Baudelaire's stepfather, General Jacques Aupick, told

Alphonse, the poet's elder brother, that it was time 'to rescue our Charles from the slippery pavements of Paris', a euphemism that covered the pernicious company he kept, namely whores and drug-addicted poets. On the initiative of the Family Council that regulated Charles's life, it was decided to send him on a long sea voyage, a journey that would be both pleasure and punishment, and could be to the Caribbean islands of Martinique, the coastal cities of the Indian Ocean, or even Indochina. They resolved he should go as far as Calcutta and that the trip must last eighteen months including the voyage and stays in the area. It was expensive, 5,500 francs, almost double any other journey to Asia, but Aupick and the other members of the Council considered it a good investment, even though it meant requesting a three-year bank loan. The indomitable Charles set sail from Bordeaux, in the *Paquebot-des-Mers-du-Sud*, that raised anchor on 9 June, a three-master, 450 tons, and a merchant rather than a passenger ship, 'lined, riveted and pegged with copper', as advertising leaflets specified at the time, added Griffin.

Charles had been allowed on board because the skipper, Pierre Saliz, was a friend of Pierre Zédé, who in his turn was a friend of the frosty General Aupick. Charles took along the complete works of Balzac as his only source of entertainment, and had already begun to devour them when on 8 August they rounded the Cape of Good Hope. That day, and over the next twenty-four hours, a vicious storm that seemed to centre its wrath on their vessel alone, its turbulent waves twice the height of the ship, battered the boat to the point that it almost capsized. According to eyewitnesses, Baudelaire helped the crew carry out emergency measures, and even acted in the face of danger like a sailor skilled in manning the masts. The serious damage done to these, the rigging and sails forced Saliz to dock for longer than planned in Mauritius and Réunion,

and Baudelaire eventually disembarked in the port of Saint-Denis de Bourbon.

Saliz departed for Ceylon some days later but failed to persuade young Charles to accompany him. The poet's vehement refusal was more than the old skipper's patience could take, yet he'd noticed in Charles, continued Griffin, the symptoms of an acute attack of melancholy that Saliz feared might lead to suicide, and consequently he negotiated with Jude de Beauséjour, the skipper of the *Alcide*, a return passage for his young protégé. But the *Alcide* was also in need of repair and it was two to three weeks before it could set sail. Baudelaire spent that time in the company of landowner Gustave Adolphe Autard de Bragard, to whom he was introduced by one of the *Paquebot-des-Mers-du-Sud*'s officers on one of their excursions around the island. Autard de Bragard, a law graduate, was a cultured man and he invited Charles to stay with him until he could embark on his return voyage, but what really led Baudelaire to accept his kind invitation was the beauty of Emmeline de Carcenac, Mme De Autard, the landowner's wife and an ardent fan of Gautier's poetry, as was Baudelaire himself, and he wrote a sonnet to her in which he describes her as 'the Creole lady whose charms go unnoticed', predicting that if she went to Paris, every poet would be her slave. Young, romantic, svelte, Emmeline was infatuated with the poem and the poet, said Griffin, but although she lived for weeks in the grips of an exciting seduction, perhaps the greatest passion of her life amid the tedious routines on her husband's plantation and the boredom of grey colonial life, she would never see him again after the *Alcide* sailed away on the tide of 4 November, would never walk the streets of Paris or meet its poets, those potential slaves to her charms, because Emmeline died on the high seas sixteen years later, on 22 June 1857, said Griffin, almost forty and less beautiful I expect, in a boat that was finally taking her to the