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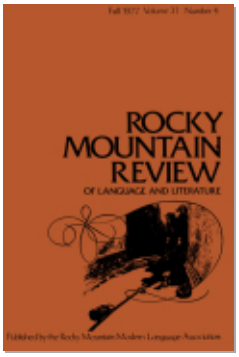
Roberta Kalechofsky

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# *Sarai and Atahualpa*

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## I

Sarai's cousins, Leila and Rivke, sat on the daybed, their hair suspiciously hennaed. They were two years apart, but looked almost like twins. Faded freckles were their outstanding feature, delicate legs, doll-like hands and feet, small frames overladen with bosom.

Their apartment was on the fourth floor, two bedrooms, a kitchenette, a pink stucco terrace off the living room. It was a modern apartment house in Lima. The terrace looked toward the Pacific Ocean, a bedroom window looked out on the Andes, Machu Picchu and Cuzco buried in its ribs, Indian villages and descendants of Incas scattered among the cliffs.

The visitors paid condolence calls. Leila's sons and their wives came, an old business partner, neighbors, old friends. They came chastely, did their best to ignore grief and left. "A shame," a neighbor said, "to take such a trip all the way from Israel only to bury his mother." Respectful eyes examined the tragedy, not too far and not too closely.

Benyamin sat in an armchair and picked at his thumbnails, a gesture that in no way conveyed his feelings but had to do in lieu of anything else. He avoided his cousins' eyes. The red in them was terrible. They looked at him with faces drained of heroic pretensions.

For forty years Sarai had planned this trip to visit "her last remaining relatives from the old world." All their lives Leila and Rivke had planned to go to Israel. For forty years letters went back and forth. Then Benyamin's mother, the adventurous Sarai, as she was fixed in

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her cousins' minds, took the initiative. Her husband was dead. It was time to travel. Leila and Rivke, widowed too, six and seven years respectively, were flung back and forth between youth and old age. The past crashed into the present and produced an acute attack of vanity. Sarai always inspired in them a volatile mixture of mockery and awe, envy and love. She was "the brains" of the family, a reference filled with dark allusions to admirable but tricky ideas. They were the ones with "good sense," an honor not altogether so admirable. Forty-five years ago when they had parted company in Kerch on the Black Sea, Sarai had done the typical thing for Sarai. She went to Palestine without a friend, without an address, only with a membership card in a workman's organization. A year later a picture of herself on a kibbutz arrived. She stood with another girl, the two surrounded by six men. The letter that came with the picture said that's how they live: she and the other girl and the six men.

She looked the same to Rivke and Leila but, considering the situation, reasonably different: old-fashioned braids wound around her head, the unhandsome bosom, same as theirs, oppressing a narrow chest, the ungainly skirt to the ankle, the desperately ill-fitting blouse. But the eyes and the mouth! Bold! Wiped of all sobriety. Same as the men's in the picture.

Rivke shivered beneath their expressions while thoughts rose unbidden to the mind. "Some workmen's circle," she said, and Sarai became for them the paragon of modern adventure. She had, it seemed, stepped out of the pages of the Communist Manifesto onto the sands of Israel, pitchfork in hand.

When her letter came, Rivke and Leila went immediately to the Turkish bath in the basement of their building. They would not be washed ashore on a — to Sarai — peculiar strip of beach. Everything they owned, had collected for forty years, was suddenly inadequate. Since their mutual widowhood, conveniently experienced within a year of each other, they had taken this apartment together. Death had come. A change was due. But it was the only change they had managed, and that with much gnashing of teeth. They loved their old neighborhood,

the one Rivke's daughter called a ghetto. They moved into a new, pink apartment building and opened stout windows on the green Pacific.

Sharing widowhood together, Rivke and Leila became girlish. They no longer worried about such staples of middle class life as a prepared meal. Merry lived on metrecal and Leila and Rivke, now also diet-conscious, lived on grapefruits. The day they left for the airport in a taxi they looked back on their pink apartment building and were glad they had moved.

But they had trouble recognizing Sarai in the crowd. Reason told them she had aged, the same as they had. Three sons had been born to her, two had married, one had been killed in 1967. She had grandchildren. Her youngest son, Benyamin, had girls on his mind and elsewhere. Her husband had died. A terrible death. Attacked by guerrillas in his office. All this they knew, since communication had never stopped, but her hair, now short to keep up with the times, was as white as snow and the family bosom was covered with Yemenite jewelry. It was by her hands and her feet that they identified her. Fragile as a china doll's, they saw immediately the family resemblance was still great. They were recognized instantaneously, because certain aspects of family property, like bosoms and hands and feet, remain constant. Sarai's wet eyes folded them like two stems of dyed flowers beneath her wet lashes. Their kisses were terrible. People naturally scattered or became rooted to the ground. Some watched, delighted that destiny was sometimes kind. Some were abashed by the drama common to airports and terminal stations, gusts of human attachments roaring down the years. Leila, Rivke, and Sarai rocked helplessly in each others' arms.

Then Benyamin appeared. Behind Sarai's right shoulder. "My son," Sarai said.

"Your youngest?" Rivke said.

"The baby," Sarai confirmed.

Benyamin shifted feet. He stood six feet two. Rivke's eyes drifted from his toes to his head. She tried to settle the question of how such a small woman as Sarai had had such a tall son. The six men in the photograph revolved through her head. Then she thought of Merry.

Leila cautioned. They were third cousins. They would consult Deuteronomy that night.

Benyamin thought the name Merry was silly and ticklish. Leila and Rivke, he saw, were as he had expected them to be: faded, gossipy, nervous with pinched vitality, unsubtle.

"Wait, I'll introduce you to my daughter," Rivke said.

"Wait till you see my niece," Leila said.

Merry, luckily, was not bad looking. Where her mother was short, she was a little taller, the family bosom, comfort to three husbands, was molded to a modern perkiness. Her hair, still natural, was as black as in the days of Sheba. The doll-like hands and feet that looked uncomfortably fragile on Leila and Rivke as if they belonged to nervous birds, had been passed on to her, but in jeans as she frisked hither and thither in front of Benyamin's eyes, they achieved a delicate triumph. A Latin patina had settled into her hips.

Benyamin and Merry toured Lima slowly while Sarai, Rivke and Leila stayed home and consumed each other. His accent intrigued her, a modification of his mother's who did not say her name correctly. "Allegra in Spanish," Merry told them because that form she considered romantic and appropriate. "Ah, yes," Benyamin said, "let me say it. Allegra." The vowels came out of his chest like dusky organ peals and struck a nerve in Merry which shook her national allegiance.

She gave him a private tour of the city, the Museums of Anthropology and Archeology, the Museums of the Republic, the Viceroyalty, and Military History. The church of San Francisco, the Plaza de Armas, and Pizarro's statue where tours in Peru begin and end. Benyamin asked a question about its construction which Merry could not answer. Instead, to manage the trick of appearing to answer and to make a point, she said the statue had originally stood on the porch of the Cathedral, but that objections had been raised concerning the delicacy of an equestrian statue, warrior with sword in hand, on the porch of a religious building. "Hypocrisy," she sneered and flashed him a smile. Her moral energy was entertaining, but he agreed slowly, uncertain of its meaning against a foreign background. When it came to moral configurations Benyamin was cautious, raised in an atmosphere

where ideals and reality were intense and unyielding. He studied Merry as if she were a delicate puppet with thrilling black eyes. His gravity knocked the confidence out of her. As for Pizarro, he sneered too: the fate of the conquered was sealed by their conversion which cut off any return to their former culture; equestrian statues are commissioned to convey triumph.

It was a logical step from Pizarro's statue to Las Barriadas, Lima's famous slums built on a mountain of garbage, and from there to the begardened streets of San Isidro and Miraflores, Lima's famous suburbs. So Merry gave Benyamin a capsule sociology of the city built upon its geography built upon its history, beginning with the left bank of the Rimac where Pizarro laid out the city and in the Plaza de Armas where his adobe palace had stood and where now stands the Palacio de Gobierno and the Archbishop's Palace.

On the fourth day Sarai decided she would venture forth. Plans were made to see "Lima and Environs," "Lima and Suburbs," "The Nightlife of Lima," and for a trip to Cajamarca, to Cuzco and Machu Picchu, and from Calla down the coast to Nazca, Arequipa, Lake Titicaca and back to Lima, or what were known as the Grand Tours.

Leila and Rivke were alarmed. Further than the bus could take them to a beach north or south of the city they had never been. Inland they knew lay a desert, beyond that the Andes, beyond that a jungle, and beyond that Europe, so exploration of the country had always seemed to them risky and speculative. They could think of no greater happiness than to fold Sarai into a Turkish towel and keep her on the beach with them.

Three days together after forty-five years of separation, and feuds were resumed as if they had taken place yesterday. "Not one bit has she changed," each said of the other, awed by the persistence of psychological traits. But when Benyamin expressed ridicule of their provincialism, Sarai shut him up. They were still, she said the words that were her sublime trap, "her only living relatives from the old world." Benyamin had no patience with this apology he had heard all his life. It seemed to him an undistinguished way for one to earn one's spiritual living, by the mechanics of plain persistence. Sarai clung to one sentence

and snapped her fingers at fancier metaphysics. So life had not made of them what they themselves had hoped life would make of them and were now glad it worked out as it did, and they defended the process. She threw her hands in the air. Benyamin was right. You couldn't do much for people when they came to that.

But she won the argument. Leila and Rivke were harassed into movement and they circled Pizarro's statue and Merry read to them the details of its removal from the porch of the Cathedral and sneered at the hypocrisy of it. "Quite right," Leila said, "a horse does not belong in a church." Merry's fears about travel with them were confirmed. She told Benyamin to ignore their comments. They gazed at Pizarro's mummy on view in a glass coffin in the Cathedral and Rivke said, "A shame." They stood in front of San Pedro Church built by the Jesuits in the mid-seventeenth century. "The richest church in South America," Merry read, "it has long been regarded as the most fashionable church in Lima," and Rivke said, "I should hope so."

They posed for pictures. Benyamin and Sarai. With satisfaction she came to the middle of his arm. He put it around her and looked proprietary. She looked like the governing class, small but certain. Merry clicked the camera. A new group was formed. Leila, Rivke, and Sarai, arms around each other, Sarai in the center, clutching their waists, girlishness flooding her face, Leila staring obstinately, Rivke's eyes caught in the sunlight, caught with her mouth open in a burst of unexplained laughter, convincing later generations who found the photograph that the occasion had been a happy one. Sarai took the camera. Benyamin and Merry posed, self-conscious, side by side like poles. Sarai objected. The sun was in shadow. Another pose. Another click. Benyamin and Merry self-conscious, his hand on her shoulder.

Merry said, to normalize matters, "The building to your left is the Torre Tagle Palace."

Rivke said, "Doesn't she read beautifully?" Benyamin, attacked, tried to be gracious. Merry told her mother where to get off in Spanish and continued. "Built in 1735, it is one of the finest examples of colonial baroque and houses the Foreign Ministry. On its site stood the building which once housed the Inquisition from 1584 until 1820."

Leila looked up at the building from under her sun hat, her brown eyes elevated to humorous distances. "Imagine that," she said.

The wit of cultivated stupidity shook loose the past. It was too much for Sarai, fear transformed into nostalgia. Why hadn't they come to Israel with her instead of here where they clung to little neighborhoods and safe shops and days on the beach and were happy to settle for little and were ridiculed for settling for little. Why didn't they come now?

"Too late," Rivke said. She floated through the apartment to escape Sarai's argument that echoed through the four rooms for two days. She bumped against her husband's portrait and old dishes and a picture of Merry in graduation dress and told Sarai that she hadn't mellowed a bit, on the contrary she had gotten worse, and stepped out onto the terrace for a view of the beach that she clung to like a barnacle. Sarai snapped her mouth shut out of bitterness that she could not save them.

The next day they did the museums and the shops. Rivke's and Leila's feet swelled. They faded out into a park and rested on a bench, while Sarai went in and out of every store on the Jirón la Unión and Merry talked to the shopkeepers for her in Spanish and Benyamin admired her skills. She was third year at the university and planned to be an archeologist. He invited her to dig in Israel. He said he knew some excellent sites. She said she thought it would be all dug up by the time she got there.

"Never," he said, "it's only just beginning and there is no end to it."

"Here," she said, "they have to dig up the jungle before they can begin to dig up the cities."

He convinced her that they had much in common. "In Israel," he said, "we dig up the desert."

His accent, not exactly like her mother's and not exactly not, changed her career.

Sarai floated back from a counter with a bib of Inca jewelry on her neck. Merry admired it but said she thought what Sarai wore the day she arrived was nicer. Sarai flashed a patriotic smile. In a helpless rush of generosity she said, "I give it to you when I leave." Merry, flabbergasted, said the usual thing, "Oh, I couldn't accept it." Sarai clasped her hand. "Yes, you can," she said, "Meriam."

## II

The Pan American Highway goes from Lima to Trujillo along the coast, which was the path of the Spanish conquest. At Trujillo you take an inland road to get to Cajamarca. Their small rented car sped along the coastal route. Benyamin drove. Merry sat alongside of him. In the back amidst a litter of lunches, sat Sarai, Rivke and Leila. Because of the atmospheric conditions, the day being clear, the air a hard azure, the inland country rose like a wall on their right. The horizon was bitten off. Rock rose out of desert. Corderilla rose out of rock. The brilliant landscape clutched its history like a blue jewel.

On the left, the view yielded to softer interpretations. Pelicans and cormorants said that not everything in nature was hard rock that swallowed history. The curve of a bird's flight was hopeful evidence alongside that desert, the driest on earth, where a mummy may remain intact for centuries, where dead Incas were exhumed from their graves and invited to reign at feasts, where death keeps an imperishable human outline.

In Peru everyone drives at a hundred and fifty miles an hour. Hence, it took them no time, it seemed to Rivke, to go from Lima to Trujillo. That is the city Pizarro had named in honor of his birthplace in Spain.

They climbed out of the car in a flurry of sun hats and sunglasses and swollen ankles. Then ensued a conversation about whether to stay in Trujillo for the day or go on to Cajamarca.

"What's in Trujillo?" Leila said. She did not like the name. It reminded her of a dictator somewhere. In the interest of economy, they decided to go on to Cajamarca, and save a day's lodging.

The car climbed mercilessly, ten thousand feet. Rivke felt it in her ankles. She looked out over the precipices, confirmed in her views about travelling. "Don't look," she said to Leila.

"Benyamin," Leila said, "he knows how to drive?"

Breathlessness attacked Sarai. "No," she said maliciously. To her surprise, Leila laughed. "Good," she said, "so we'll all die together. It's the only wish I have left."

Wind pressed into Sarai's cheeks. Into her ribs. She felt herself filling with a mysterious pressure. Rivke rattled sandwiches out of their wrappings. The noise attacked Sarai's ears like hornets. Her mood became cold, but no one noticed.

"Caxa-marca," Merry said, looking out the window through dark sunglasses, "means Frost-town."

"That is not Spanish," Benyamin said.

"Quechua," Merry said, "the language of the Incas, now an Indian dialect. You can still hear it in small villages."

"Merry is an honor student," Rivke said. Benyamin saluted her in the rear view mirror.

They caught sight of the town by the smoke that rose from the hot sulphur pools, once the baths of kings. By the time the car stopped climbing and came to a halt, Sarai had recovered. But she was pale. She brushed their questions aside. The climate, the altitude, the strange food. There were half a dozen reasons, when traveling, to account for indisposition.

They circled the square where Atahualpa had been killed. A guide was pleased to point to the very spot. Another family circled with them. The guide folded them up into a small group, strangers made intimate by size. He became one of them by insinuation, stepping in sandals across the courtyard with lugubrious solemnity. They entered the quarto de rescate, the ransom chamber where Atahualpa struck the fantastic bargain with Pizarro when he agreed to fill the room with gold in exchange for his life.

"Did he really fill the room that high?" a young English-speaking boy asked.

The guide was delighted by his incredulousness. He made his living by it. He was the descendant of the incredible conquest. "Si," he said enthusiastically, "si, so high." He stood on tiptoes and reached as high as he could and pointed to a spot on the wall as if a notch in reality were there. The English-speaking boy kept a pair of sober eyes on him, wavering between common sense and the fabulous nightmare. He had watched a great deal of science fiction on television and knew that the line between legend and reality was crafted by human beings. The

guide grinned and kept his finger grooved to the spot on the wall. The English-speaking boy regarded the spot skeptically. The skin on the guide's face loosened. His nose, his jowls, his lips lost their emotional motivation. He lost the power to convert his audience and fell back on entertaining them. "Señores, señoras, please to examine room. Caxamarca was private villa for Atahualpa like for Roman emperor. Here it is he hears of Pizarro's army coming across mountains from the coast."

He left the room. They followed and filed out into the courtyard. He pointed eastward and sketched upon the air the route Pizarro took. Below the Andes that Atahualpa felt would protect him from his enemies, the valley was swept by benign mimosa and willows. Benyamin scanned the view through his binoculars. The English-speaking boy was intrigued. Benyamin let him use them. The boy put them on and became transformed. He scanned the countryside with a professional sweep, assessing the logistics of survival with hard-boiled assurance. They would not, he told Benyamin as he gave him back the binoculars, have gotten as far as Cajamarca if he were king.

"How would you have stopped them?" Benyamin asked.

The boy regarded him superciliously. "Stopped them? Are you fooling? They wouldn't have gotten off the boats."

"Ah, but that's hindsight," Benyamin said. "Atahualpa didn't know they were dangerous until it was too late."

"Then he was stupid," the boy said.

They climbed in straggling fashion up to Atahualpa's rock-throne from which one could see any approach from Cuzco, the montaña and the coast, from which the guide again, as if the moral could only be grasped by repetition, pointed out against the blue sky the route Pizarro took through the mountains with only one hundred and eighty-three soldiers, a trip less likely than Hannibal's. The English-speaking boy thought about it methodically. He said, "Of course, who would have thought that anyone could be dangerous with only a hundred and eighty-three soldiers."

The guide was grateful for the reflection. He smiled flatteringly. "Exactly," he said. The insight exonerated Atahualpa from the charge of capricious naïveté. He rested a leg on an outcrop of rock and bent,

wrapped in his cape of traditional design, over a ledge. "Exactly," he said again. "Atahualpa had with him one hundred thousand soldiers. They filled the mountains." He swept his arm. Sarai wrapped a handkerchief around her neck. The thin air and the hot sun were weakening her. Odors of wild flowers drifted up from the valleys. She fought an impulse to go to sleep.

The English-speaking boy's parents were embarrassed by their son, and proud of him. On behalf of their embarrassment they told him to stop asking so many questions. Sarai was diverted by their problem. The boy was too thin and very sturdy with legs like a gazelle which the young have only once in their lives. "No, no," she said, as if their embarrassment threatened to put an end to something good.

"Not at all," Benyamin said, "I listen to him. He is very intelligent."

The parents gave acknowledging smiles. "Rob is," his mother conceded, "very advanced for his age."

Rob did not require further approval. He took over from the guide and pointed out for the benefit of everyone how Pizarro had crossed the Andes with one hundred and eighty-three men. It took months to complete the journey. Famine, disease, a march in full armor under hot skies, with horses on trails meant for the llama's hoof, pushing, pulling cannon and weaponry.

And Atahualpa observed it all, observed the starved, wriggly band of men with the strange animals and the intriguing thunder-fire, knew from his scouts the number of hairs in Pizarro's beard. Pizarro, conqueror of Peru, crossed the mountains with his victim's permission, crossed by the charity of a ruler who believed that God and His divinity protected him.

There is a legend in the neighborhood that a graffito is written on the sky that hangs over Cajamarca:

> Here lies Atahualpa, king
> Slain by strangers, not his own,
> Who waded through slaughter to his throne
> And shut the gates of mercy on mankind
> And heaped the shrines of luxury and pride
> With incense kindled at religion's flame.

Protect this sky from further insult,
This frightened flesh dishonored in conversion.

The English-speaking boy picked up a pebble and rolled it down the countryside. They followed it back down to the courtyard. Rivke descended in badly chosen shoes. They stopped at a small hotel and drank Inca kola. Sarai flushed her mouth with it and spit it out. The guide suggested pisco sour. Leila rejected anything whose name she could not pronounce. The day wore warmly. The drinks did not refresh. Rivke would have been happier if they left her behind to sit in a chair somewhere, but she was on her best behavior for Merry's sake. She put her sunglasses on her perspiring face and tried to concentrate on this remote fate.

They wandered, drinks in hand and thirsty, back to the courtyard. Skepticism attacked Rob again. "I still can't figure it out," he said. "Even when they were killing him his soldiers were out there and could have saved him."

The guide tried to appear sympathetic to Rob's problem. There was a complexity to the matter which could not be articulated in terms of numbers and power. The problem dissolved into the generalities of culture. Perhaps it was the differences in languages. The guide said, "His soldiers put aside their arms." It was inadequate. Rob looked around the square coolly and gave his verdict. "That was dumb."

Atahualpa's honor resided with the guide. He said, "Pizarro gave his word no harm would come to him."

"You mean he lied," Rob said. He licked the words up from around his lips.

"Don't be impolite," his mother said.

The guide, with historic malice, transferred his eyes from Rob to her. "Si, señora," he said, "Pizarro lied." The confession seemed to crush him. His chin sank on his chest. He twisted his hat in his hands. Atahualpa, king, royal incarnation of God, descendant of the sun, laid down his arms because he did not believe a mortal man would break his word to him. For those assigned the destiny of others, trust pro-

ceedeth from hubris. "Si," the guide said, "he lied." He stood hat in hand and begged forgiveness of a ghost, but whose?

Rob betrayed the limit of his sophistication. "Why did he do that?" he said. The apologetic air left the guide. His eyes gleamed. He pressed home the barren point, grinning. "Because he wished to conquer."

Then with a snap of his fingers at fate, he swaggered his poncho about him and walked out into the middle of the courtyard. "Aqui," he said, "here. Right here." Once more the voice, the finger, the jolt of the jaw became emphatic, directive. "Atahualpa was strangled, garroted. Why?" He put his hands on his hips. His cape spread like wings. A hawk circled in the air. "Because," he hissed for Rob's sake, "he did believe he would return and rule his people again." He smiled. He let the idea rest for a moment. He turned around and around, his elbows bent, his cape hawk-spread. "That is why he accepted the conversion. Not," his eyes watched Rob and gleamed with obscure intelligences, "because as the book says he was afraid of the auto-da-fé. Si. He was afraid for this. Because he knew if his flesh did burn he could not come back. Si. He knew for the sake of his people he must lie to the priest." He smiled vindictively. He held out his hand in an invitation to all men of good will to understand what he was saying, to join him in the resurrection of a king. "Si, Atahualpa knew if he put the wafer on his tongue they would not burn him and his people would know that he would return to rule them, but if they saw his flesh burn, a thing never yet done to an Inca king, they would lose faith in their religion. For the Incas believe the flesh is immortal." His hand withdrew quickly beneath his poncho where he made the sign of the cross, and said, "As does every good Christian."

Rob absorbed this slowly. The guide said again, "Si," softly and smiled. He watched Rob with simulated good will. "This he did for his people," he repeated, "to give them the faith that he would come back."

Rob digested the message. It had adventurous implications, though as a pattern in cultural survival it had no precedent and established no successors. Rob studied the courtyard where the action had occurred.

The guide gave a pantomimic interpretation of the events. In the center stood Atahualpa, the eyes of his soldiers upon him. In front, Valverde, cross in hand, waiting for Atahualpa's response. To the side of him, the stake which would be ignited if Atahualpa gave the wrong answer. The choice, as Valverde told him, was to die by the fire or to live forever by being garroted. Atahualpa stuck out his tongue and Valverde placed a delicate wafer upon it. For a few seconds it rested there, moistening, melting, while Atahualpa's gaze moved out over the homeland peaks. A civilization sat on his tongue. The eyes of his soldiers caught at his face like fishhooks. Faith that he would deliver them. Slowly his tongue rolled back like a lizard's and swallowed their gaze. A cheer went up from the Spanish soldiers. Two minutes later, Atahualpa was dead, benignly garroted in an instance of Christian charity.

The guide turned on his sandaled feet, bringing his performance to an end. He fluttered slowly on the stone courtyard in his cape of traditional designs. His movements were delicate, the meanings surreptitious and visional. He stopped turning. An air hawk swooped upwards, wingspread against the sky.

Rob was torn by a conflict: whether to seem ill-mannered and press home a point or to be polite and confused. His red eyebrows wriggled with intellectual discomfort. "I don't understand," he said, hanging on to the challenge like a hooked fish. "By this time he knew Pizarro lied. Why did he believe him again?"

The guide put his hands on his knees, bent down towards Rob and pressed home the malignant point. "Por que? He had no more no choice." He swept his hat off for his tip and his lips were loosely gracious.

The ride home was hot and boring. They said goodbye to Rob and his family and climbed back into the car. Rivke pushed off her shoes and fell asleep. Sarai sat near a window and watched the dry scenery. The hot wind from the desert swirled her hair and raced down her throat. The landscape was spotted with cactus plants that made her homesick. She thought of her children and of their generation born in Israel who took the name of a cactus plant and became the landscape. Occasionally she saw people on the horizon, strung along the curve of

the earth, walking, men and women with children. She poked Benyamin on his shoulder and directed his glance towards them as if they shared an intimate concern. "Those are Indians," Merry said, "some say descended from the Incas." She told them of their civil difficulties. Plate-like hats sat on their heads. Their backs were bent beneath their babies that swung in papooses from their shoulders, the timeless posture. Nothing about motherhood escaped Sarai's notice. She closed her eyes and dreamed. She was the mother whose children clung to her back like gourds, like clusters of grapes, like jewels. She had gone out into the desert and dug cactus for them. "Dein b'ruf," she had said and they ate it, needles and all. She opened her eyes. The men marched along the horizon, the women behind them, their babies molded to their backs, an exotic herd of human. Good luck, she called to them. Her white hair whistled around her face.

## III

Sarai had a low temperature for two days, but on the third day she announced herself cured and made plans for their next side trip. Leila and Rivke took turns expressing dismay. "What's in Cuzco," Leila said quarrelsomely. Merry, who had never succeeded in interesting them in anything about Peru except its food and its beaches, listened to their arguments with a vested interest punctuated by "narrow minded," "petty," "provincial," "small-minded."

Rivke and Leila were unperturbed. Everything about Merry left them unperturbed, mainly because she always attacked them together and they had each other for comfort under her common assault. She treated them as a social phenomenon and this, in fact, was their defense.

But Leila and Rivke lost the argument. "What a shame," Sarai said, "to take such a trip and not see the country." Rivke complained that she hated thin air. She couldn't breathe properly except at sea level. Cuzco was ten thousand feet up. "Not so bad," Sarai said, "we'll walk slowly."

The small, rented car climbed through the mountainous terrain. Sarai sat between Leila and Rivke, cushioned. Leila and Rivke looked

out either side of the car, down the abysses, down the salacious drops and wet cliff walls. Indian faces swept past their car as they climbed the llama-laden peaks. The racial world shifted. Eyes redolent of oriental migrations, faces flattened by Mongolian and Andean winds possessed the rocky cliffs and upper air, grew in numbers towards Cuzco. The name means "navel." The antiquated race, like ancient Jews beneath Solomon's wall, like seeds in the ground, gathered within the ruins of the old capital to suck the stones and to wait.

But Cuzco is modern. Not exactly. It is baroque, Spanish, colonial, which is modern enough. The very stones have been converted. Take the House of the Chosen Women which furnishes the foundation walls of the Convent of Santa Catalina, or the Temple of the Sun now the Monastery of Santo Domingo, or San Angelo in Rome or the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem.

They climbed out of the car in disorder and checked into a hotel. Leila and Rivke thought the car trip deserved a nap. Sarai, Benyamin, and Merry were too anxious to see the city. Out of deference to Leila and Rivke they left them at the hotel for three days while they did the more strenuous touring without them, which meant the forts of Pisac, Sacsahuaman and Ollantaytambo. Cuzco, as Inca capital, had been a fortified city. Within, palaces and temples, royalty and religion, art, silver and gold. Without, the forts, the soldiers' barricades, the raw rocks of defense.

On a ledge of the Ollantayambo fort they discovered Rob chewing bubble gum. His parents popped up their heads a second later. Delicious surprise, the continuity of things. They agreed to join forces for the afternoon and decided that introductions were now in order. The father was a doctor in Edinburgh. They were in Lima for a convention. Rob was their only child. He went everywhere with them.

"A bit spoiled, you know," Mrs. Ferguson said proudly. She expressed the hope that Rob wasn't going to pester them again with questions.

Sarai did not like an apologetic parent. "Spoiled!" she said. Her harsh "s" brought a raised eyebrow to Mrs. Ferguson's face. "Such a brain we need in Israel," Sarai said.

Dr. and Mrs. Ferguson searched one another's face for a sign of understanding about such a need. Up on the heights the breezes blew. Rob asked to borrow Benyamin's binoculars again. The terraced countryside swung like chartreuse ribbons through his view. Rob appreciated it. "Wow," he said. Benyamin liked his enthusiasm. "They were expert farmers," Benyamin said as if the compliment had a specific value. Merry felt slighted. Reading the guide book was her department and this was her country. "How would you know?" she said. "By looking," Benyamin said, but he was flattered that he had annoyed her.

They took the bus back to Cuzco and agreed to meet for dinner.

Breathlessness, a headache plagued Sarai. She lay down as soon as she got back to her room. "I warned you," Leila said. Rivke ssshhed her. Was this the time to be right? Beneath her white hair, Sarai's face was the color of a plum. Her small hands and feet looked like inert wings on the bed. Leila pulled her fingers in distress. Sarai ssshhed her. "I'm all right," she said. "Tomorrow we will go easy."

"Why must we go at all?" Leila said. "Let's go home tomorrow."

Sarai was one of those people of whom it is said she never knew a day's illness. She did not recognize death from the inside out, only the other way. One was struck by lightning, by a car, by a bullet. The force belonged either to nature or to history. Human beings were inviolable until stopped by one or the other. She looked at Leila's and Rivke's puffy, worried faces and wondered how they had come from the same family, from the same town, from the same street. Can anyone account for how anyone turns out? Rivke looked as if worms were in her toes and in her mouth, and something mysterious was with Sarai that she did not feel the same worms in her. So, even dying, they quarreled with each other. Sarai got off the bed, brushed her hair and said, with the intention of frightening Rivke and Leila, that she would continue to move until she fell in her tracks. Rivke and Leila, spiteful with alarm, decided that if Sarai wanted to die like that they would let her.

They met the Fergusons and went to dinner. Leila and Rivke ate little. A piece of fish, some corn. Sarai ate escabeche, rice, and chupe de camarones, a soup made of potatoes, milk, shrimp, hot chili peppers and eggs. She asked Rob to sit next to her. She complimented him

again on his brains. Rob was happy to be appreciated for what he was.

"So what are you planning to be when you grow up?" she asked. Rob said he expected to be a famous neurosurgeon. He was working now on a plan to replace the nervous system with laser energy. Sarai was properly impressed. It was her genius to ignore Rob's trap as a child and go right to the heart of his reality. "When you grow up you will come to Israel," she said and patted his thigh.

Dr. Ferguson's spoon stopped midway on route to his mouth. "I'm sure it's a lovely country," he said.

Sarai showed him her better side. She was generous. "You come too," she said.

Merry pronounced the conversation tactless. Not to Sarai, who rocked her a little, but to Benyamin whom she felt she had earned the right to criticize.

They found a slope of soft ground the next afternoon, beneath a peak, near a gorge, near the sound of running water, underneath the sky. Sarai relented in her pressure on Leila and Rivke and agreed to spend the next day in town with them. Alone with Merry, Benyamin put his jacket on the ground, sat down on it and studied the terraced farms through his binoculars. "Expert," he said.

Merry looked out over the terrain with naked eyes. She fed him information maliciously. "It was pure communism, the old Inca system." He said, "And don't you want to bring it all back?" Her politics shrivelled, but she forebore. "Do you think it's wrong?"

"I think ideas don't matter."

"Super-realist," she sneered.

He looked at her. Stars glistened in her black eyes. He put the binoculars on the grass and asked her if her mother would take it amiss. She was touched. She said, on behalf of her mother's conscience, "In South America the women are very protected." He thought about the answer for thirty seconds. A hawk circled in the air over ancient moss and the terraced gardens of an old world. Afterwards she accused him of being uncivilized.

"Uncivilized?" he said. He lowered the binoculars from his face. "What do you call uncivilized?"

She told him. He had no appreciation for the art of the people. He spent his time staring through binoculars instead of looking at the great works they had left behind.

"Art?" he said. "You mean what you find in the markets and the museums?"

"What's wrong with that?" she wanted to know.

He told her. "Pizarro, I read in your book, he melted it down, their art for money. I see all over the world how the art of conquered people is appreciated."

They went down from the hill and became better acquainted. She wanted to linger in the markets. He scorned it. She swayed from one store to the next, fingering the ponchos and the carved masks. He examined and measured the masonry in the buildings. She admired the pottery. He explained to her the engineering that went into the construction of Inca Manco's palace. The explanation bored her. In retaliation, she spoke Spanish to him. He thought that was very ill mannered. She danced before him like black lightning and did a sarabanco all the way up the hotel steps, clicking castanets.

## IV

It was in Machu Picchu that Sarai died. They took the train on the fourth day, sixty-eight miles further up from Cuzco, Rivke's and Leila's protests to no avail. That morning Sarai got out of bed and again pronounced herself cured of whatever had been ailing her. "I knew it was the food," she said.

"Well, considering what you've been eating," Leila said.

The Fergusons went too. Sarai kept Rob next to her on the train seat. She loved to see the world through children's eyes, and Rob loved to show it. They gave him the binoculars to hold for the trip and that moody city, the final retreat of the harassed Incas, rose out of the Urubamba gorge, under Andean clouds.

As everyone knows, a special romance attends lost and recovered cities. Their burial and resurrection from the jungle or the desert contain a moral. An entire civilization sinks beneath the ground. And

then one day a sunny-faced explorer looking for butterflies skins his knee on an angled rock which puzzles the mind: is it natural or not? The dig begins. A year later a city emerges from its drugged sleep beneath moss or sand and thrusts its roots and embryonic stones, all phallic forms, to the sky and asserts that nothing that ever was of good or evil dies, but awaits recovery. Machu Picchu, life and death, womb and tomb, city of a hundred abandoned stairways that go and come from nowhere, rooms and passageways and temples, lies like a hatchery of stones between twin peaks, Machu-male and Huayna-female, parental guardians whose stones are seeds.

It was Hiram Bingham of Harvard who discovered Machu Picchu in 1911. Let credit be given. He took the advice of an innkeeper who said, "Keep climbing. There's something at the top." On that day, it is recorded, the naturalist on the expedition went butterfly-hunting and the surgeon stayed behind in camp to do his laundry.

Everyone in the train stared out the window. Machu Picchu is a gloomy place with a gloomy moral. It is cut into a steep rock with one approach over a deadly river. To clear the sharp hills out of Cuzco, the train makes four switchbacks on the three hour journey. The rails follow first the Huarcando River and then the Urubamba, whose rush of red water is so violent that nothing sits on its surface for more than a second.

The train stopped at a station in the jungle. Tourists got off with cameras and binoculars, thermos bottles and lunches. Mrs. Ferguson said, "Well," as the tension bubbled out of her mouth. Leila and Rivke showed a capacity for resignation. Leila kept her sun hat on, Sarai kept a kerchief around her neck. They boarded a bus which took them across the suspension bridge that spans the Urubamba, and then the bus groaned, swayed, crawled and hairpincurled its way up the last two thousand feet, and they were at Machu Picchu against the sky.

All who have ever seen Machu Picchu advise everyone else to go see it, but except for those who have a technical interest in its construction, few return. There's not enough sentimentality here, of hope of charity, friendship, of even doubt and reassertion. All reference to the human has been scraped away. One must re-invest the stones with stories. It

is said that Manco Inca was murdered in the area by a handful of Spanish refugees whom he had befriended. The extensive gravesite contains mainly female corpses. These are presumed to be the bodies of "The Chosen Women of the Inca," who elected death and escaped the Spaniards.

A special wind blows over places like these, the elegaic air of perished civilizations and perished efforts.

Sarai felt it as soon as she got off the bus. The air barely moved. On the contrary, it was delicate and sweet, but it oppressed her. A storm would have relieved her. It was the still air that oppressed her. It absorbed the human sounds of camera clicks and talk and paper wrappings as if such doings were as irreverent as dancing on a grave. The air said: move reverently. This is a cemetery. She looked up at the blue sky and closed an eye under the pulse of the sun. The color of the sky was too familiar, the air was too familiar. She had been in cemeteries before. She tucked her blouse into her skirt and smoothed her hair down. She had come apart after the train ride. They walked from a wall to a building to a stairway and commented on the masonry, the construction, the multiple flights of steps, the wonder of the setting. Rob scanned the countryside through the binoculars. Merry read them the details of Bingham's discovery. The tourists spoke naturally in hushed voices. Even the sound of a camera click seemed awkward.

Sarai searched the landscape for anything that could relieve the oppression she felt. It would not go away. It sat on her chest like a bubble. She lingered behind the small groups of tourists, posing curiosity. But she knew she had seen the place before. She knew the terrain, she knew the geography: an eruption of stones surrounded by space, a fort built at the end of the road, on the edge of the desert, in the center of the jungle, at the end of all things where all go down into earth together, the communal suicide; the final ploy of a people; the final conflict: unyielding heroism against power which is never charitable; the final grave: a collection of bones in the desert, a formation of rocks in the jungle.

Masada and Machu Picchu: a spiritual geography connected them. She spun between the two points and suspected she was getting them

confused. The blue air became bluer. It became circular as a fort, as a womb. It wrapped her round as a winding sheet. She climbed Masada with her family in the dawn, as one must before the heat comes up. It was a picnic for the children, a pilgrimage in the dawn. Yitzhak, aged nine, Reuven, aged six (may his soul rest in peace), Benyamin, aged five and Moishe (may his soul rest in peace), who insisted on the climb. He held all the symbols in his hand like a lightning rod. So they came as moderns, in sun hats and sneakers, to pay their respects to old stones. Benyamin complained. The pebbles cut his feet. "Must we climb all the way to the top?" He was the youngest.

"Yes, you must." That was her husband's voice.

Oh, God! she cried. It is not the future which wounds us, but the voices from the past.

The others had climbed the steps to see the Intihuatana, a projection of stone which stands up into the sky. Merry read to them from the guidebook. The purpose of the Intihuatana is not clear, though one was found in many Inca forts. It has been suggested that they were used for calendrical calculations, that it was a shadowclock by which the Incas told time. It is assumed that it had a religious significance and has been translated as the Hitching Post of the Sun. It might have been a fertility symbol. Its resemblance to the male organ cannot be dissimulated. Without benefit of guidebook, the Spaniards understood it had a religious significance and broke off the stone wherever they found it. Only the Intihuatana at Machu Picchu escaped their detection and survived.

Sarai could see them from the distance. Leila and Rivke, protected in sun hats and sunglasses, Benyamin and Merry and that boy, Rob and his parents. Merry read to them as from a prayer book, and Rob wrinkled his brow and poked his fingers everywhere. She could see them clearly, but they could not see her. She was wrapped in the blue air. No one missed her and she was glad. It was her only weak moment. The sky was too immense, too blue, too unchanging, too demanding. Its color sucked out her soul.

It was Rob who found her sitting on a step and thought she was resting. Her head was folded on her knees.

## V

The tourists were disconcerted and sympathetic. Dr. Ferguson did what he could. A small crowd gathered. Leila and Rivke were turned to stone. Their feet would not move. They clomped about in shoes made of lead. Benyamin pushed through the crowd. "It is nothing," he said, "nothing," but he knew he was lying. He picked up her hands and rubbed them and rubbed them. He called to her, he spoke to her, he accused her of playing tricks. Dr. Ferguson counselled him as best he could. Rob drifted to the edge of the circle, conscience-stricken in his role of discoverer, too young to know that he was irrelevant. Merry put her arm around him and shielded his spirit.

The scenario for death is simple. The soul leaves the body. It is no longer responsible for it. Others must now care for it. Benyamin carried her onto the bus where they made a bench out of the back seats. Only Leila and Rivke, Merry and he and the Fergusons went back. They carried her down from that old world, newly recovered, and recrossed the bridge over the gorge, over the river, past the terraced terrain of old Inca lands that overlooked the valley of bones. The bus climbed an incline of willows and poplars and the peaks of Machu and Huayana faded behind the trees. And all the while she lay on the back bench in a woolen skirt and a blue blouse, a blanket covering her and slept like a tourist after a strenuous trip.

In Cuzco there was great confusion. The hotelkeeper sent for the priest from Santo Domingo church. The priest came running, but he saw that the body was already rigid on the hotel lobby floor, and there were no rites to be performed. Dr. Ferguson took it upon himself to explain the situation. She had died so unexpectedly. Could they leave her overnight somewhere until the family collected its wits and could travel back in the morning. The priest was sympathetic. He offered the churchgrounds. Leila objected. The hotelkeeper tried to persuade her that it was the only practical solution. Self-consciousness afflicted Rivke. Inarticulate protests gurgled in her throat. Leila tried to be more articulate, but succeeded no better. She tried to explain her position, her sister's, Sarai's and broke down into a babble of Spanish and Yiddish.

Merry intervened. She argued with her mother, she explained to the hotelkeeper. He explained back. He did not want a body lying on his lobby floor. No hotelkeeper does. A crowd gathered. Tourists, an Indian family, the waiters. Somebody sent for a policeman. The clerk was kept busy attending to clerkly matters and trying to be in on the action. Vespers rang. The priest apologized effusively. He must attend to the service. He said he would send some workmen with a casket. Perhaps the family would like to rest in his living room. His servant would take care of their needs and the body could rest in a nave. He gathered up his cassock and said he must go. The hotelkeeper blocked his path. In aspirant Spanish he told him it was his duty to care for the dead. The priest hunched his shoulders and rolled his eyeballs. Dr. Ferguson turned to Benyamin and suggested they do as the priest said. There were no more trains out of Cuzco that day and the drive home at night through the mountains was dangerous. He undertook to explain their differing civilizations to each other. He asked the priest if he could not keep the body in his living room where the family could sit with it, but the priest became alarmed. The hotelkeeper grew impatient. Dr. Ferguson turned to Leila and Rivke. "Be reasonable," he said, but his words had the opposite effect on Leila. Her knees became unhinged. She crumbled to the floor. Grief poured from her eyes. She covered Sarai's body, in protection or protest, with scalding words as if yesterday's arguments still glowed in the dead woman's brain whose death had carried them into such terrible familiar territory. "I warned you, Sarai," she cried, "I warned you. We both warned you. But you always knew best. You were the one who always knew best."

The drama drew more crowd. The hotelkeeper tried to shoo them out of the doorway. Rivke's face turned red with embarrassment. The hotelkeeper's patience snapped and he picked on the pickable. He told the Indian family to go and he made menacing motions at anyone who did not look as if he clearly belonged. He singled Merry out as the only one who seemed to understand him and told her please to remove her mother from the floor. Whether he meant Leila or Sarai was not clear, but it did not matter. Benyamin made up his mind to leave for Lima immediately.

He brought the car around to the front of the hotel. Leila and Rivke squeezed themselves into the front seat with him. Merry sat in the back with Sarai's body on the floor of the car. Dr. Ferguson was horrified. The hotelkeeper pressed his face into the car window and expressed apologies, explanations, consolations. It was best they go now. He shrugged his shoulders. He waved his hands. Today, tomorrow. The trip was the same. So what difference did it make? Dr. Ferguson still tried to persuade them to stay until the morning. His philosophy could not account for their unreasonableness. Mrs. Ferguson kept her arm around Rob's shoulders, who insisted on saying goodbye to them, though he stood rigid with a forlorn strangeness. He still wore the binoculars around his neck.

They drove slowly. It is an eleven thousand foot drop from Cuzco to sea level. They had time to deal with the practical problems. Leila and Rivke took command of themselves. Their distrust of Benyamin's driving disappeared. Indeed, exhausted, they surrendered all worries to him and were oblivious of everything else except of making the proper funeral arrangements as if they had rescued Sarai's body for this lonely purpose. In the morning they would call their rabbi. In the afternoon they would make arrangements with an airline. They counted off on their fingers whom they would call, whom they would inform, how they would arrange matters. Sarai's death became a family affair. It rested on a cushion of gossip, recollections of how they had said this to her, of her stubbornness, of how she had never changed. Now and then a rush of grief caught them and they sank into a wisdom of catharsis. They ssshhhed one another for Benyamin's sake and fell into silence and fell back into talk. Rivke said they would fly back with Benyamin. He said it wasn't necessary. Leila looked out the window at the perilous road hanging over chasms. She said it was necessary. He tried to see Merry's face in the rear view mirror. Sarai lay on the floor at her feet, kin and stranger. Merry did not know how to mourn for such a relationship. It struck her as altogether inexplicable, and she was too young and too optimistic to cry over that.