Petrina Barson

**Cacique Dos**

*for Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who explored the Rio Paraguay in 1543-4*

Remembering all this I have the feeling, the sense of Paraguay: the sudden delapidation as we left Argentina and its sleek stores behind; canvas stalls sprouting from muddy roads - weighed down by their crop of oddments: onions toothpicks radios some beaming plastic toys. On the bus to Asunción, worlds scoot past our steamed-up windows: men sitting on rainy porches, a pink donkey tethered to a tree, a rooster running, washing spread out on a hedge.

What would you have made of this tatty place: the legacy of Irala and his long line of swindlers - or of all the gold that wasn’t there? I think you’d feel at home here - *Guaraní* faces eyeing you from beneath basket-loads of *Chipá*. I can see you stepping carefully along the disastrous pavement, between the daily pot-holes of corruption. I looked for you in Asunción, found only Irala embracing a *Guaraní* on the cathedral wall - no sign of the knife in his other hand.

Approaching the port along a street lined with oranges we stuck out like watermelons: too big, too groomed, too rich, too much luggage. We walked the plank onto the Cacique Dos and felt already launched - well before the horn sounded and the tide of hawkers fell away. You left Asunción with twenty brigantines, one hundred canoes, and an army of *Guaraní* - metal plates on their foreheads bouncing the sunlight between them. We had lightning, and herons fishing - their white wings stirring the pink air.
For a few hours we managed our awkwardness with sleep then surfaced to face the gleaming river and the challenge of passing time in Spanish. Made ourselves busy with our books - made ourselves an oddity amongst these still-rooted people who let the hours pass like the Camalote plant that drifts by the boat in little islands. Eventually curiosity brought us Alicia - sixteen and just married and wanting to be girly with me about hair and husbands; and Martin - who nursed our Spanish through comparisons of wages and genocides and the price of bread.

At night we sat on the prow with Martin, drank mate talked philosophy, crawled across the language bridge until exhaustion had us watching the stars in silence. Sat entranced as the boat became a catalyst for flashes of river life: as swinging lamps hailed us, or the search-light teased out a man and his row-boat from the darkened banks. Watched as a sweet-faced woman climbed aboard his little ferry, held out her arms as a baby bundle was passed down to her, then sat still beyond silence as he rowed her to the shore. Wondered about her life amongst the waiting chickens and about all the lives we are abandoned to.

You were the second chief of that unruly tribe of Spaniards who wanted riches and the services of women more than the brotherhood of man. You were on Garcia’s trail and I on yours - both looking for a kind of gold both chasing someone whose traces are unreliable stories in unreliable mouths. Garcia led you to near-starvation at Los Reyes, and while the Arianicosies shot arrows at your misery, last hopes dissolved in the deadly glares of your men. You led me into the wide arms of the river and a plunge without ripples into quiet and distant eyes.