



# Literary Landscapes

Literary Landscapes is a monthly column by Indra Wussow, a writer, translator and director of the Sylt Foundation.

Peru is a country of extreme contrasts. Seventy-seven per cent of its population live in its bigger cities; a quarter of Peru's population of 30 million live in Lima alone. In this capital city, the contrasts are most obvious. Affluent neighbourhoods with fancy shops and restaurants and a rather European lifestyle define the lives of the rich and the upper middle class. The majority of Peruvians cannot afford such a life and its poor people live in the outskirts of the city in *pueblos*. The inhabitants of the *pueblos* have not profited from modernism, globalism and economic development. Over the last few decades, these quarters have become bigger as many people from the countryside have flocked to the city of Lima in the hope of a better future and to escape the terror of the *Sendero Luminoso*, the 'Shining Path', that held the country in its grip for decades. The consequences of this civil war, which took place from 1980 until the 2000s, are still haunting Peruvian society today. The traumatised new citizens in their makeshift *pueblo* homes still live without electricity and water, and have for almost 20 years.

Peru's conflict began in the 1980s with violent insurgencies led by the Maoist rebel group, *Sendero Luminoso*. The Peruvian state also unleashed systematic abuses during this armed conflict. Small, rural communities and native peoples of the Andes and Amazon bore the brunt of the violence and lived under a reign of terror and torture. In the 1990s, President Alberto Fujimori's repressive rule further eroded the rule of law, enacting amnesty laws and granting impunity for the members of government death squads.

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the TRC, set up in 2001, provided the Peruvian judiciary with a wealth of information, much of which would prove essential for the prosecution and ultimate convictions of Fujimori and the leader of *Sendero Luminoso*, Abimael Guzmán.

The findings of the TRC also demonstrated how racial and cultural discrimination of Andean and native populations played a fundamental role in the conflict: according to its estimates, of the more than 69 000 dead and disappeared, 75% were native Quechua speakers or

other indigenous languages. The Commission also made recommendations calling for reparations for victims, the strengthening of the rule of law, and for foundations to be put in place for true reconciliation based on justice.

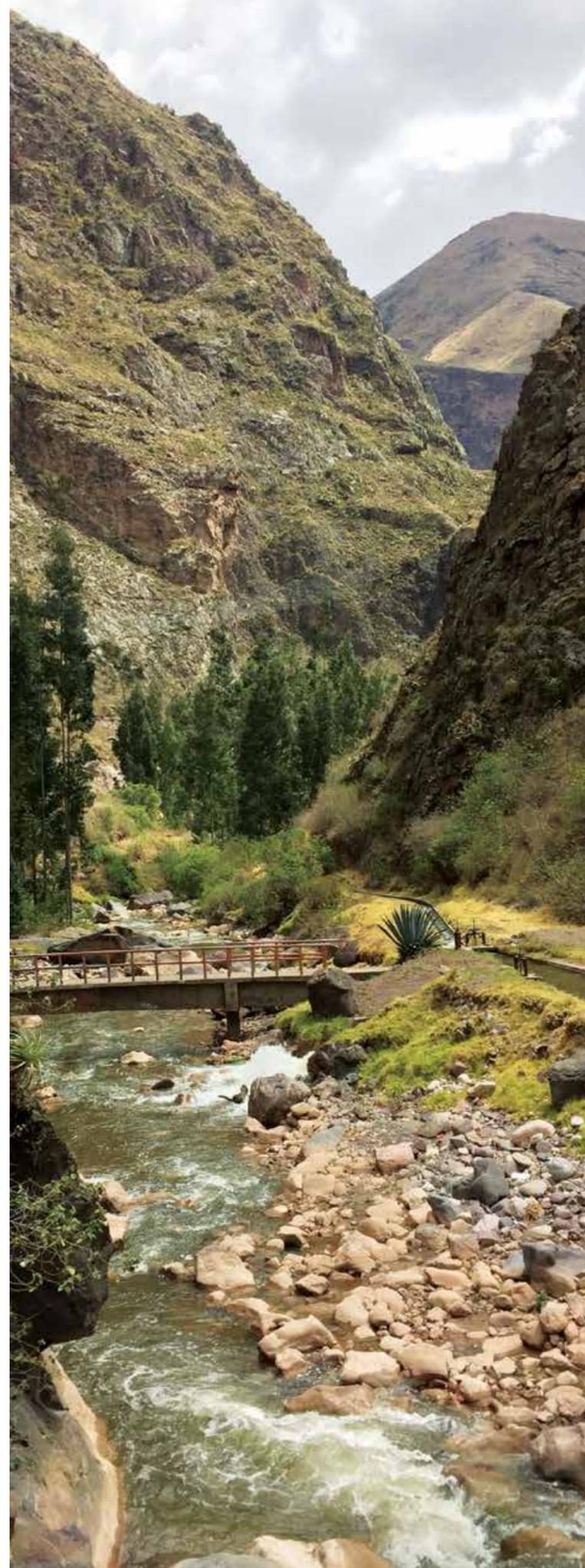
In the broader field of transitional justice, Peru's TRC is recognised for its successful execution of a daunting and complex mandate: to analyse 20 years of violence and authoritarianism.

The experience of a long period of terror and displacement of its communities, of its subsequent silence and the revisitation of past traumas in the TRC form important topics for writers, poets and artists of Peru to negotiate the social situation through their works. These important voices attempt to recollect collective memories and show how the individual pain is still a sad reality in a country whose way into a civil society has been long and winding. Their works also join the ongoing debates in Latin America about identity recognition in the face of globalisation, neoliberalism and post-modernity.

Among the most important books is definitely Mario Vargas Llosa's novel *Death in the Andes*. It is a harsh and instructive book and its writer's way of storytelling is as direct, rigid and enigmatic as the Andean landscape in which its story is set.

In the isolated community of Naccos in the Peruvian Andes, a series of mysterious disappearances has occurred. Army corporal Lituma and his deputy Tomás believe the *Sendero Luminoso* guerrillas are responsible, but the town's people have their own ideas about the forces that claimed the bodies of the missing men. This riveting novel is filled with unforgettable characters, among them disenfranchised indians, eccentric local folk, and a couple performing strange cannibalistic sacrifices. As the investigation progresses, Tomás entertains Lituma with the surreal tale of a precarious love affair. *Death in the Andes* is both a fascinating detective novel and an insightful political allegory. Mario Vargas Llosa offers a panoramic view of Peruvian society, from the recent social upheaval to the cultural influences in its past.

Vargas Llosa won the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2010 and is Peru's best known novelist. In the 1980s, the writer



Images of Peru courtesy of Indra Wussow

was a presidential candidate and lost in 1990 to Alberto Fujimori. Vargas Llosa became a fierce defender of the TRC, in opposition to many of his colleagues who regarded him as politically suspect. Because his novel was published shortly after his failed presidential campaign, many of his critics felt that his book was too one-sided and drew too dark a picture of the Peruvian reality.

Many consider him conservative, but maybe he is just a realist who understood that a revolutionary utopia will not lead Latin America into paradise but into devastation. The troubled land has staggered from bad to worse, from one dictatorship to the next, and is still recovering from its wounds today.

*Death in the Andes* is not a realistic account of events, brought by a colporteur from the Peruvian highlands – Vargas Llosa masterly combines magic realism and postmodern ideas to link the power of the *Sendero Luminoso*'s terror of virtues with its appropriation of the ancient Indian myths and rites to something universal. Something universal that does not only belong to the history of Peru but to the history of mankind: the belief in the necessity of the human sacrifice.

This intense story of disappearance and death, the wall of silence that surrounds the investigation, the juxtaposition of the violence of the *Sendero* with that of the state and the apathy of the defenseless victims, introduces us profoundly into death's melody and uncovers the streams of blood that seeped into the Peruvian soil.

The happy ending to this book's love story is thwarted by the ancient ecstasy of dissolving boundaries. Guilt and redemption are forced on everyone. Seduction and power take possession. Something has happened that cannot be compensated anymore: the destruction of souls through guilt and the utmost breach of taboo.

It helps us see that deeper truth that is often subscribed to literature.

Two other important novels from Peruvian writers are Alonso Cueto's *The Blue Hour* (2007) and *Red April* (2008) by Santiago Roncagliolo. **CF**