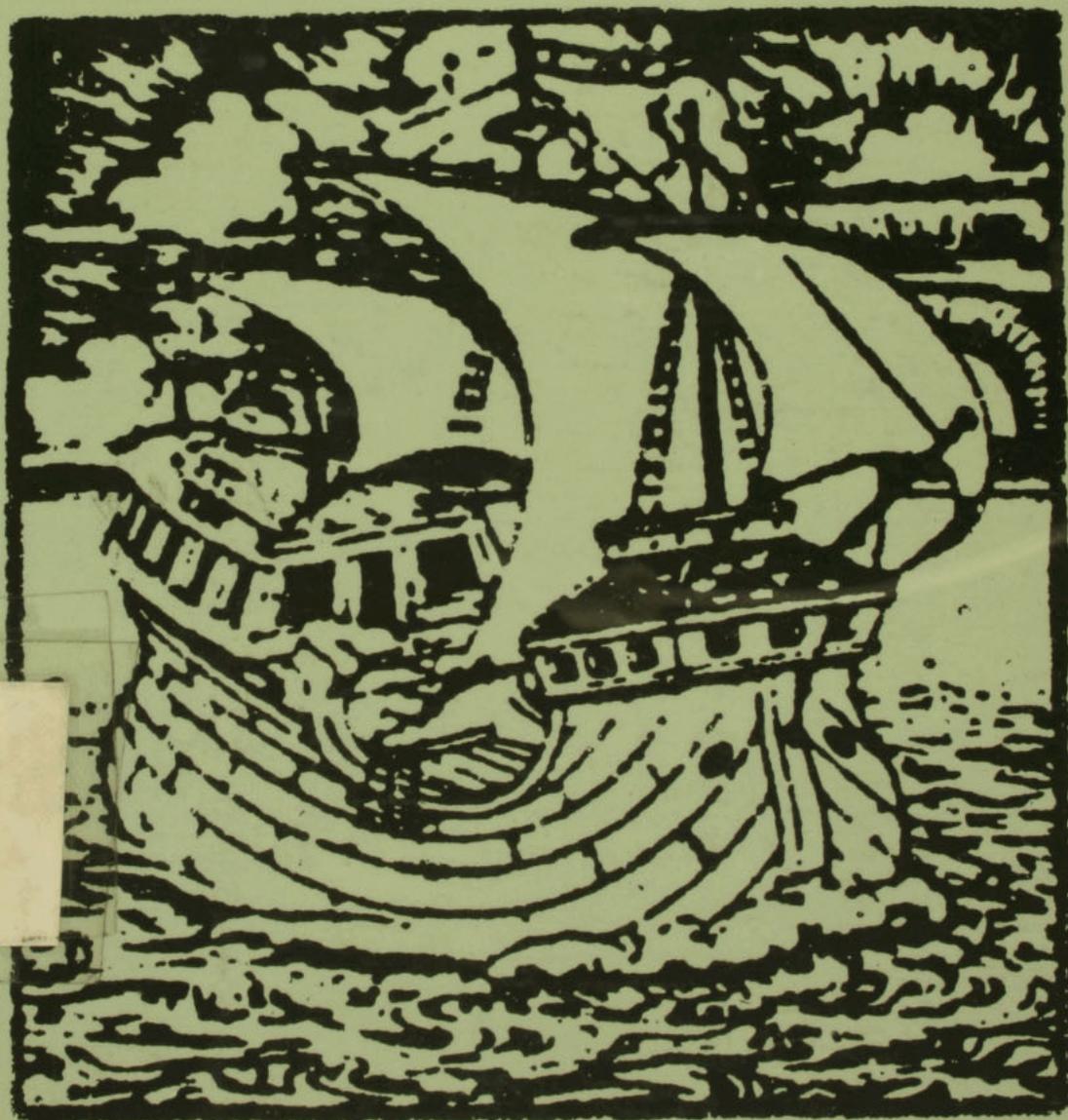


# ***BURNING BRIDGES***

Poems by **NAIN NOMEZ**

Translated by **CHRISTINA SHANTZ**



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By  
NAIN NOMEZ

Translated by  
CHRISTINA SHANTZ

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## DEDICATION

*Don't you see  
Just as you've ruined your life in this  
One plot of ground you've ruined its worth  
Everywhere now—over the whole earth?*

*¿Por qué hemos de comportarnos  
como si fuera a abrirse la puerta de repente,  
a descorrerse las cortinas,  
a revelar el sótano un secreto terrible,  
a desaparecer el techo y a quedarnos dudando  
de qué sea lo real y lo irreal?  
Atención. Atención. Tenemos que insistir  
en que éste es el mundo tal cual creíamos siempre.*

*Para nosotros, habitantes lúcidos,  
fragmentos pertenecientes  
de estas palabras.*

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## *On the Poet as Human Being*

From sacred oracle to civil servant,  
from electrifying bard beneath the canopies,  
from ovid  
to fallen druid,  
from silent lover, eater of gauze,  
courtesan of words and rites, to social misfit,  
tourist watercolour, congress of usurers;  
from wearying but worthy craft to teacher of the shadows;  
from skydigger, angel, prometheus of feast and water,  
to this medium stature of salaries,  
to these shackling grants  
to this selling oneself to the highest bidder.

Has it come to this?

The poet no longer believes in his mission.  
The poet rebels against the flash of inspiration.  
The poet reneges on himself.

The poet is tired of free enterprise  
and starts dialogues with the deaf.

They've taken away his nomadic birds,  
his nibbled alabaster nipples,  
his dusty lilies.

The rats have gnawed at his marble  
and his virgin rivers are covered with smog.

Now the poet must speak  
without laughing or crying,  
without venturing outside this world;  
without detonating words;  
moving awkwardly over the earth  
like other mortals;  
not be a gadfly, not rage against the kings  
or the informers of this world.

It is expressly forbidden to cross the line,  
effective yesterday.

Finally, though,  
it doesn't matter that he has died;  
he'll use microphones,  
his worst lines will be rediscovered,  
no longer will his tactless blasphemy sting.  
The poet  
now illuminated.

Where were we?

The poets bend over and take their positions.

Behind them  
the wind of History  
sweeps a cloud of books before it.

It is the era of the image.



*Canadian Experience I*

*Recuerden que un día seremos leyenda.  
Hemos escrito en nombre de los vivos.*

Jorge Teillier

Remember that one day we'll sit in the parks  
and remember the country of moose and bear,  
searching in the room of time  
with our long boots of dark felt  
for the sepia keys that disintegrated  
in the lakes of Ontario.  
Some day we'll continue collecting the radiant fires  
that floated there and the first wine  
offered like a beloved disaster on their shores.  
Remember that we'll be the old people  
evoking, without nostalgia, the transuranic pilgrims  
tucking into abundant steaks from the barbecue  
and those unnameable bones  
carefully scattered over the asphalt highways.

Remember that one day we'll sit on the shore  
of this unique town we never left  
and we'll begin to fill up our memory  
as if the trains hadn't left  
as if there hadn't been so many storms during the wait  
for the grass to recover its human dimensions.

Remember that we'll still talk of walkyries  
covering their breasts with laughter, we'll still watch  
the weeds growing in our backyard and the seagulls'  
silhouettes over central island;  
we'll still hear the tricycle complaining up the hill  
and see it falling over with its wheels turning,  
and we'll be like a walking forest,  
its absentminded leaves scattered throughout the world.

Remember that one day  
we'll continue inhabiting this country of furs and snow  
with its exhausting tongue-twisting language

and we'll return again and again  
to cross its borders,  
still trapped,  
blinded by the rain,  
foreigners.

## *Canadian Experience II*

Looking in the mirror, beard lightening  
on cheeks, eyes sunken and mingled  
with the cabinetwork of the furniture.  
A sudden inclination to return earlier,  
a tangible fatigue in the midst of the ink  
that leaves its dusty traces on the mahogany.

Explanations are not needed just now  
and time abounds in the deserted rooms  
where one gesture wearily follows another, where pages  
turn yellow and books hide their true faces  
behind the windows of memory.

What can we read in those suffering features,  
those voices that have filled your ears  
all this time? What can we know when the air  
is still warm and soft and scarlet-tinted,  
when death is like a blurred gesture  
in an address book, when both of us keep falling  
as food drops from a trembling fork?

On this desk covered with wet marks,  
letters and poems accumulate  
like a forest of words brought together by love.  
Of all these years the eternal desires stay with you:  
your children and their noises,  
that chain of sunny parks, a quaking  
of roads, the daily household chores,  
and the years, one after another,  
inhabiting every crevice of our bodies  
with their implacable colour.

Of this we are made: of dry, gravid hours.  
Of the woman who slides by eyeless and of the other  
who with fiery integrity forges her gaze anew each day;  
of this hand that strokes the wood, remembering the weary facts  
without the charge that made them sublime in poems,

of this unfocused family photograph  
that persists in lunches and pursues in dreams,  
of these friends clouded over with tasks  
in secret compartments. Of this vast substance  
of joy and sadness we are made.

The day is coming when these shelves will be emptied  
as the trucks wait, when our names will be erased  
from address books and municipal registers,  
when our doors and keys will slip into oblivion,  
when our dust and the sum of our secrets  
and even the way we live within each other  
will be no more than what might have been,  
when the traces of our lost footsteps  
will be sought in every crack.

But what can we know? On this desk  
covered with pages that grow and fall like worn teeth,  
poems will continue to be written, the old images  
moving through the air,  
filling cells with silence, notebooks,  
the outline of a face on the other side of the moon,  
voices echoing in the home, filling the stairwell  
with their intensity and shaking the sheets  
of these ten years, still warm, still  
quivering, still  
burning in the heat  
of the act

*Canadian Experience III*

*... vuelve a ser por un instante  
en este exilio que te atormenta  
el poeta que ya no eres*

Juan Rodolfo Wilcock

We weren't all born to be prophets.

Between the two nostalgias  
we long for a return illuminated by the ephemeral,  
while the unreality of mirrors still exists.

In this land,  
we are annoyed by the suns  
whose paleness is recorded on postcards,  
by nurses purified with camphor.  
The poets make transparent verses  
with round, aseptic words.  
The girls remember esoteric meals at the Swiss Chalet  
and wear out their ashy elbows on bank wickets.

In the other,  
we are drenched with artificial snow  
as the passersby, severely dressed in black,  
feed their deception on fleeting announcements  
and their rejection of perfidy and mint  
wrinkles our backs and our cities.  
Here and there, we wander  
through rooms we never manage to retrieve,  
thinking only of flying from one place to the other  
so that the daggers of yesteryear will mark our ribs  
and a gale of customs will return to us  
the days of our retirement.

We are prophets of nothing. We hardly write  
for that noble savage of another world,  
a soft-winged phoenix that divides our memory  
with its implacable subtraction,  
and all we have left is an insipid recipe

made into a planetary system.  
We're still drawing on the walls, depicting  
that longing for the kingdoms of yesteryear. Here:  
the blonde waitress scratching your body between the rails,  
the linen winter under the plain,  
the key to saxon customs,  
the lament of a cockburn song. There:  
the confusion of chimeras  
the awe of pines and larch trees,  
crushed grapeskins shredded by the blood.

We create a literary language that impoverishes us  
at a dizzying speed. It's already been said,  
but it's worth repeating.  
In the last analysis, the only almost real thing  
is that our keen temerity  
has been gradually wiped out in library shelves  
and prefaces to proposals,  
leaving us with this time gnawed to the bone  
and these questions that will hang in midair  
for a long time to come.

Perhaps this is the fate of some,  
  
of we who were not born to be prophets.

*Sentimental Tango , or Our Last Meeting in King's Tavern*

*Este sentimiento terco de la fugacidad  
de nuestras razones*

*Everybody in toronto knows I love you  
but nobody believes it, I said,  
using my hand as a mask. Besides, you know?  
chewing the language jerkily  
in the wetness of the glass, my mouth a bit sour,  
my drinking arm a shield.*

I look at her out of the corner of my eye,  
smiling, as if to spill a joke  
onto the fog-laden air. She disappears  
behind a curtain of smoke and then, unperturbed,  
completes her gesture, as if squeezing a blade of bluish grass.  
I look for side effects to detract from the words.  
Last night I dreamed I told you  
that everyone knows I love you, I repeat  
in a more familiar language. The italians  
at the back table yawn away their last beers.  
You look away, trying not to laugh  
as your finger traces the outline of the square earring  
on your left ear, seeking just the right amount of warmth.  
I meditate on the possibilities of biting the free lobe  
and the fantasy makes me look away humbly.  
Besides, it's not only that, I repeat,  
not knowing what to say.  
The bartender brings two bottles of molson  
and their clinking contrasts with the sweat  
on my forehead and hands.  
At the back, the giant television flashes with the armour  
of hockey-playing soldiers, applauded distractedly  
by most of the customers. I try to recall.  
Here's how it all happened:

I was a kind of sombre bird,  
a gloomy third-world image, a hardened drinker  
of arsenic. You, the unmelodramatic femme fatale,

prepared to rethink the role of canadian woman.  
Maybe that's not true, maybe it's rather a question of decoding  
banal emotions while making myself a little space of enthusiasm  
to take her by surprise with just the right word.

*What I want to say is I love you really*  
not just that jumble of coins in the taximetre,  
I mean as the greeks counted the grains of their culture,  
just like that; love, friendship, tenderness, hysteria,  
carnal search and ritual and all those trinkets  
cultivated by our rhetoric as it observes its own  
scattered ashes.

I repeat, now almost with the nostalgia of what has been said  
and lost in the past: *Everybody in toronto*,  
but I discover the pearl grey of her eyes and wake up,  
quietly cornered in my chair, my beer  
in my right hand, fingers drumming,  
my smile sillier and sillier in the middle.  
Now my shoes are filled with horrific ants  
that attack my toes with uncontrollable  
cannibalism.

I'd rather you didn't speak, just keep on consuming  
your gitanes until the silence becomes a strongbox  
with no lock.

I take a shred of tobacco and chew it to show my self-assurance.  
To whom? Not even I believe the bird story.

*I mean love, you know. Romantic faces, lost eyes,*  
*happiness in the skin and the brain,*  
but I know you don't believe me and it's no surprise  
considering the times we live in. Under the table  
my hand gropes for its own solitude.  
My foolish laugh freezes again  
for the nth time. A dinosaur  
breathes fire from the back of the room  
and its malevolent insinuations give me the chills.

Stolid, hieratic as a provincial sphinx,  
I feint with the bluish verb of my emotions.  
*I believe in love and friendship, it's the same thing,*  
the faucet of philosophical orangeade in the greeks,

the attack on the citadels of troy for the sake of a utopic  
love, the cry of the fighters tearing down  
the walls of jericho in patriarchal delirium.  
This cataract of flaming flesh that betrays me  
every minute. Maybe I should disguise myself as a bat  
and come to you in a nightmare. Maybe  
I should turn into the letter A of your first word.  
Maybe I should. But you burn down another cigarette  
in seconds and the luminous opal of your left eye  
returns me to stone. My sentimental arrows  
disintegrate in the air without reaching  
a heart avid for passion, without inflaming the emotions  
of a maiden, without destroying a dragon.  
The players on the screen freeze  
as the game ends. The couples rise,  
bow and leave. The italians  
roll up their dough of exclamations in lunch bags  
to keep them warm on the way home.  
The bartender stacks chairs and bangs glasses together nearby.  
Our eyes darken with a marrowless fear that cracks  
our words and gestures. A whirlwind of seaweed envelops us  
for time immemorial as if the ossuaries of the wait  
had become endless. The hand, the lip, the eye,  
the vibration of the flesh, the cry of the cheek, the root  
of identical vertebrae, the liquid illusions of touch,  
the larks of the hair, the bonfires of the tongue  
seek out their space at the moment *we speak fragments  
that will never come together* this immeasurable desire  
to take apart tenderness to see inside  
*everybody in toronto* and share its secret *knows that*  
but it rotates dizzily *I love you*  
perhaps flying too high *love you*  
a shiver like a coded message  
will run up your desolate bones *love*  
a whirlpool of black seaweed  
will fall upon your skin.

We get up, leaving the glasses empty  
and putting together the same old pleasant words.  
The bartender picks up the glasses and wipes away

the beer stains.

Outside, your memory vanishes  
with the soft air and the shadows of the trees,  
as usual.

*My Mother's Visits (I)*

the first time you came in spring  
we were living in the three-storey house  
with manuel and carmen  
francisco wasn't born yet  
and the italians harvested grapes  
in their back yards  
leaving the air sour with that disgusting  
fermentation of ontario wine

you were amazed at the spongy softness  
of dutch cheese  
the heat that prostrated you on the porch  
and to the buzzing of bees partying with flowers  
tirelessly you knitted those multicoloured sweaters  
sebastian hated to wear  
(such a gringo, he preferred a light windbreaker)  
and murmured through the wind your language  
of motionless words and hieratic gestures  
while in the darkness our consciousness returned again and again  
to the horrendous country  
we never wanted to leave

*My Mother's Visits (II)*

the second time you didn't arrive in Toronto:  
at pudahuel (now lieutenant merino) airport  
either your plane was fast or your watch was slow  
and sebastian and i stood there waiting for you  
he looking impatiently at his electronic watch  
by that time we had moved  
and the solitude was becoming uninhabitable  
francisco seduced you with his gerber baby looks  
and the rest of us gradually got used to your silent  
personal conflicts  
you tried to learn english  
but age misplaced the verbs  
even in your own tongue  
so you settled for hello and the most elementary rules  
of communication  
using hands and silence for speech

at home you moved like a ship full of horizon  
measuring distances accumulating gestures knitting  
or rolling up blinds to save  
the sun of memories  
and in the streets where you walked angrily  
because no one understood you,  
you stroked things discreetly

near the end the holes of your rainy city  
were filled up with snow  
and on the gravelly paths of your eyelids  
wrinkled the desire to return to your neighbourhood  
to tie up your daily hunger  
we said goodbye with some relief with some misgivings  
with a certain hysterical impatience  
at having forgotten something somebody

sebastian drew a hand and a path on the map of santiago  
francisco fell asleep and the drizzle erased our footsteps

We stopped writing letters for a while.

*My Mother's Visits (III)*

last time everything went just right  
(they say experience is the best teacher)  
you came out dragging your suitcases,  
wearing your muteness like a grimace—  
sebastian complaining limbless as if he had  
one hand too many; francisco kicking the tiles  
and squeezing the terrified legs of travellers  
in a rage beyond the point of no return

you began to spin the house  
knitting sweaters that piled up in our arms  
and chewing over your nostalgia  
as the snow was heralded by a gust of reddened flour

we didn't stop loving or hating  
with your visit  
but toronto took on a maulian tone  
and the corners of lake ontario  
opened up to resemble the gulf of reloncavi

you went "choping" with us  
you learned to buy plastic bread  
stamps from the lebanese on the corner  
and a few knickknacks at the sally ann  
to send to chile  
in the evenings you wrapped yourself in the rooms  
to fend off the cold  
and watched television with the enthusiasm  
of one who takes hidden words by surprise  
finally preferring the histrionic comedies  
in the spanish language brought to you by marzialli

as your visit recedes into the past  
all we have to show for it  
is a potted mint plant  
a heap of useless clothes  
that draft that comes and goes

that oppressive feeling among snowy bones  
this rain that has lasted ten years

*Daily News*

*I'm going to hunt humans . . .*

James Huberty

July 18, 1984

In July the sun still warms your ribs here  
on the tropical side of ontario. The clouds scurry along  
behind the cars and the tireless waving of the wheat  
is described in our letters with foreign signs of nostalgia.

I am writing you this missive as I read the paper  
and your stories fall into me as into a well.  
(In our country the disappeared ones dissolve  
like sunflower plumes  
and crimes are strung on the necklace of legislation.  
Kings seek power with a certain discreet reasoning  
and passions become destructive volcanos)

But now, consider mr. huberty. A common man  
imbued with the *american way of life*, but equipped with an arsenal  
like any well prepared citizen in a mcdonalds in san diego,  
another commonplace (a real mystery with symbols).  
And then, suddenly, as if the veil of destiny  
had lifted and an enemy hand had pressed the button  
of reality, this peaceful believer in freedom  
began shooting his automatic rifle *a mind electrified  
with madness* from the best days of dillinger and monroe,  
terrorizing the peaceful consumers of hamburgers  
and milk shakes, wearing his fatigues purchased *downtown*  
and his black shirt. Just one among the millions who are born  
in the best country in the world, knocking people down  
like little ducks in an amusement park, forty or fifty,  
some kids playing, some old people, and just metres from the border—  
perhaps because the mexicans look vietnamese,  
perhaps only because he was fired last week  
and the holy thirty years' war  
ruined the pastures of the future forever  
*or because that is the nature of american life.*

(But the movie was filmed twelve years ago  
when the soldiers returned; there were four of them:  
it was called welcome home, soldier boys. This happened  
as we were dreaming of a different country  
in the south of america. Reality copies art —or sub-art.)

Well, these stories happen as a matter of course. First  
it was the manson affair, then bundy, elmer henley  
and so many others  
since old nathan forrest killed the slaves with his lariat  
in the moonlight. And how and where,  
if your own government teaches you that the best defense  
is offense, and if violence comes from above,  
how and where?  
or are we going to be content with lies again  
(social misfit with problems dating back to unhappy childhood):  
ladies and gentlemen please, how long will this go on?  
Perhaps, in this craft of margins and errors,  
it is only this enormous, clandestine question  
ploughing in our memory  
or could it be *that the powerful right of madness*  
*is on your side, mr. america,*  
full of crowds attracted by the taste of blood  
and of terrified, cornered huberties,  
believers in a magic potion that so soon becomes  
a mirage, vast plateaus  
and dead-end absences.  
Or is it this embittering coffee, as I read  
in the paper the story of mr. huberty,  
the story of other men *going to hunt humans*  
in great silos, where they press buttons, splitting up  
with just the right amount of hate to sweep the human race  
from the face of the earth  
forever

## *Pilgrims' Chronicle*

This is the time of shadow; this is the time of light.

From the slopes of melipilla and the outskirts of santa fe  
came the migrants, auscultating in their bones,  
with a great ear of mud and wrath,  
in their craft of light clay, swallowing their anger,  
enchanted with the novel sensation of the airplane flight,  
from manaos and monte go bay, their saddlebags  
packed with chrysalids,  
from cuenca, repentant and starving,  
changing the future under the tents of anonymity,  
climbing the desolate order of manizales,  
burying the dead with dry eyes in santiago and rosario,  
flayed by the butchers of silver  
they came in the annals of destruction, sleepless,  
watching over the fire in the mists  
they explored the joints  
and came together to bridge the gap.

This is the time of light; this is the time of shadow.

There they were, with broken jaws and mouths full of parasites  
one freezing bright morning,  
with their family pictures, their rituals stripped of meaning  
and a blurred language that would be left behind at customs.  
They softened the bark of their gestures like pregnant willows  
and their smiles showed the taste of the promised land.  
In the airports under the milky glow of searchlights  
the doubts began, moving quickly behind the baggage  
caught fast by the metal belt; searching for the right word  
(over here, to your left, is the exit)  
through the mass of rough, curling sounds; living  
a faltering muteness in fear of noise. Heart  
shrieking through the mouth, vending machines unyielding  
under awkward hands,  
alfalfa crushed by the track of asphalt.

This is the time of shadow and of light. Here we learned to forget  
what we were: the eye tortured by the needle, the moon  
breaking down the walls and the hinge of loosened bones.

We're amazed by this simple fact of existence  
in a round of meals and bedrooms,  
as if the networks of money were exercising their warm efficiency  
on our most innermost feelings. We discovered that we could adapt  
to the laws of supply and demand, the smug smile  
triggered by trivial incidents.  
And nostalgia followed us,  
biting all protests, heavy with omens.

This is the time of shadow. We will learn the language of kings  
and return covering our wounds, powerful and satiated.

This is the time of light, the time of homecomings,  
of transfigurations and voices scattered by the winds,  
the time of ears and mouths meeting in midair.  
The time of dialogue returning  
as if it had never been lost.

*Natural Cycle, Magic Circle*

*To Birney, witness of and actor in fables.*

Nothing is erased, earle, what the years have done with our lives  
remains like stars on the mirror of the universe,  
like the wind in the meadows and the spark of living in the millenia.  
We write, brushing galaxies  
with our faces or bones  
and your breath bubbles in vancouver,  
climbs the hills of the pacific,  
bends the grass in salt lake city exalting love  
and strangeness, meditates among maps of the world and is stranded  
like a dissected fish in the dusk at your place in balliol  
where coffee hisses and is distilled into fable.  
Nothing is erased. What the hands have done reverberates—  
touching the eyelashes, any dream,  
the dream of the living and the dream of the dead—  
is written day after day in the shadows, rescuing  
from oblivion harvests in flight, placid thoughts,  
mute dragonflies.

(I contemplate these words that drag with them  
jumbled-up objects seaweed silhouettes from the past  
millennial schemes of enthusiasm. I smell them  
and glimpse them above the city light and the nomadic  
smell of the lake. I breathe the intervals  
of oblivion stroke the myths of this astounding shadow  
that gives life that lights up that spills  
energy through its crusts that is part  
of the sudden legends of the snow)

The clot of blood and the outline of death  
cannot be erased.  
They persist in the chain of motionless afternoons,  
trace broken members, are renewed in the cracks  
of the terrified like a strongbox, will not be extinguished.  
Just so, your voices became flesh,  
your verb split in two, you glimpsed the letters  
like crowds travelling incognito, and laden

with provisions and ferns you filled the words  
with murals, dismantled beings, wrath  
and multitudes. And then all passes through the box  
of time as through a sieve of lightningbolts  
and the chosen ones return from the depths to shine  
in the atmosphere of the vast and clear, the gravid and certain.  
Erect on the pages, the poems take place in the middle  
of the social undertow, animated  
by the same material seal that incites heroism and love  
seeking the final howl of justice.

(The hand descends exactly as if it were cutting bread  
and objects emerge from the fingers recreated and burning  
with that precise light of past events, while in the distance  
up spring the shadows of trotsky and lowry,  
the ringing voice of sandburg and the deer of his native land  
who lie down in his permanent eyes, because  
time lived is like water and through it we fall back  
to the beginning)

Nothing is erased, earle, the body's veins  
confirm it, showing again the smoothness  
and the mortal fascination with pleasure, all those  
searches that took you to the four corners of the sky,  
on all fours, flying, always ploughing,  
mortal as quicksilver but laughing, inflamed,  
spinning the utopia of a better world, another mountain  
where coal and gold become one and change  
the nebula.

In these deflated days, these days whose contents  
have been emptied and exchanged, these impotent days  
of priests snarling over meridian man,  
nothing is left to us, nothing better  
than this vigil, this headlong gallop  
through the century you bequeathed us,  
like a castaway crossing the caves of the present;  
denouement and another beginning, another beginning and again  
a denouement and again and again

Nothing is erased: not water or fire or rage.  
We will be with you always, in all languages,  
as the stones dream, as the castoffs  
of the dead are gathered in a single, more just gaze  
and the statues stretch out their arms to us in supplication  
and the people continue to search in the shadows  
for the burning flame of the earth, because  
all remains in the torrent that is us, being born,  
darkening, breaking away  
and still and yet,  
foréver

## *Canadian Poets*

It's true, canadian poets!

In this country there is snow enough.  
Then there are the streetcars, the beavers, the maple syrup.  
You're right to talk about hockey.  
To use shakespeare's tongue  
to tell about the earth's magic.  
To cross the prairies of holy books.  
To work on form and rhyme, the miracle  
of the concave mirrors of sex,  
the ever more fragile flour of myths  
now being lost.  
Nobody ever said poetry had to moisten  
the eyelids;  
once in a while  
we can live with just a little history.  
You can reach the northern inuit  
and the southern gunslinger with the same touch,  
without it exploding.  
It is possible to build the enchanted arm  
of the satellite  
and remain colonized.  
But—poets—  
any dominion, any reserve  
(as you well know)  
has a landlord, exists  
without a future, not of itself,  
but founded on the exile of others.

It's true, friends of milton,  
disciples of frost and verlaine, makers  
of metaphors in vancouver and the maritimes,  
restorers of this dark age;  
it's true, many have been the images  
and beauty is gaining ground.  
Besides, you know your craft.  
But it's not enough to be a sorceror,

a taster of words,  
or a court jester.  
It's not enough to travel the dislocated world  
and love the home of wheat and rye.  
It's not enough to be the empire's grandson  
and tell about simple things:  
not enough to "kill the bat"  
or call yourself canadian.

I should add this:  
Poetry does not lead to freedom;  
it's a prison of kabbalas recited  
inside history.

Having said this, I return to my place.

Canadian poets!  
We, the displaced people of the highlands,  
people of olive skin,  
xenophobes of language, the stateless,  
funereal-faced, guffawing  
or really dying,  
we walk one step at a time,  
looking backward, it's true,  
maybe petrified;  
and other histories  
are written without us;  
and the river flows, the tide rises,  
the wind blows tarries disappears behind the cliffs  
without us, without these, without those;  
the filament of time ripens in the mirrors,  
burns the locks, bursts through the walls of the cities  
without us:  
the ancient statues of salt,  
the rusty nails of the master beam.

But—and I think this is about all I have to say—  
we understand about the search:  
the centre, being expelled,  
the history of grey, ruined peoples,

the loss of memory  
is the same as yours.

Fishing naked in memory or getting lost,  
it's all the same.

House, city, horizon, our home is the world.

Not autumn. All seasons, all ages.

All cycles.

Streams in saskatchewan and el maule.

Boiling substances in hudson bay

and tierra del fuego.

The torrent of enthusiasm. These changes we make  
with our words and our hands, coming to life together  
every now and then  
and now.

*Post Card From Kingston, Ontario*

The professor, half-drunk with memories,  
puts the finishing touch to the american cocktail shaker  
with a cricket on the nipples of the giantess.  
Baudelaire wasn't there, but snow was falling  
on rambo three, the night erect above princess street;  
that body disappearing suddenly in the starry night.  
You beat me at pool luis but never at thinking  
and I taught you that love must be nurtured  
not chewed over in the seats of the odeon  
between knees opening like frightened mollusks.  
We always talk about things that exist of course,  
even through the holes of nostalgia,  
like those dreadful, lysergic silences  
on the other end of the line that devour me today.  
The professor thought of kingston as a diaspora  
full of principles shared with a turkish moralist  
who went to the wastelands to pick up his girlfriend  
every summer—dustballs  
and a girl who with eyes cast down  
was always awaiting some final blow.

You don't exist then, you're just a refrain  
"don't do to her the things you do to me", just  
a telephone ringing, an unexpected call  
at three in the morning, an echo of les magots, a gleam  
in the twenty-five below night  
*a witness without a body*

In kingston the girls hunt for husbands  
among the jocks and auction off their instructors  
to the highest bidder; solid members of their class,  
family pride rooted in their eyebrows,  
a habit of biting off the ends of their sentences.

I fell in love with the lake and ran along its shining  
lapels every evening.  
Kingston, the provincial pearl of ontario,

*desperate for a change, a witness of meaninglessness,*  
wearing a cravat of books at its throat  
and a hopeful pose, trying to understand:  
I won't say how much I suffered and liked it  
—we latin americans are masochists—  
but who was she who is she,  
*si no estuvieras tu* on my tape machine every day  
*en esta tarde gris*, that's the only way it could be.

The half-drunk professor, once again the realistic  
(but quite false) image, never more lucid,  
she in the malvinas or in that montmartre cafe,  
I waited so long in toronto and in santiago  
but she never came  
and then kingston, flying through by train on weekends.

Life grew bored in the simplicity of its limits,  
union hall was fantastic after all  
and a tenuous frost fossilized the light of bad dreams.  
I got along well with antonino  
who taught phantasmal classes in the italian circle  
and drove his car like a pirate ship.

Perhaps that is why now I seek the lazy image of kingston  
from the occipital fog of this new swamp,  
as I invent a lost paradise  
invented by others as well,  
in order to connect with the history of mankind  
and relieve the aridity  
of this romantic wandering through human desires.

## *After a Long Voyage*

It's not that the emotional order has lost its fierceness  
in this country  
nor have the snows dissolved these minute stories  
assembled by memory in fits and starts  
It's not that the medieval castles to the south have been deserted  
nor that the feudal knights insult damsels  
on the edge of their own dream  
It's not, finally, that we, citizens of the world  
and owners of a non-existent country  
do not respect the timid magic of these blond giants  
their way of asking for things that is almost a punishment  
those dogs that whirl like doves through carpeted houses  
that discussion that hardly ever begins  
that oblivion of the outlines of the wind

Of all this time  
that is to say, of all this air that has circulated freely from one side  
of my body to the other all these years  
or you are mistaken and in reality  
we have been words, roots, feelings that became entangled at random  
in the mirrors  
whatever it may have been (a postcard scene, a puddle, a coin)  
whatever it may have been, I say  
this liquid cellar that fades like a monstrous leap in our nights  
has brought us to this occupation as travellers pursued  
in this fear of consuming its treasures moon by moon

Or did we have nothing?  
Or was that vertiginous reality nothing but fossils and deception?

In this land people rest in summer and shut themselves up in winter  
children are born to be happy  
cracks are closed up with great blocks of cement  
and you sink into a language in which beauty is something exotic

It's not that

Of all the time  
that I have tried to keep under lock and key in my papers  
(you'll say it's not true; the hand, touch, the lips)  
though we know the minutes shatter and no glue will mend them  
and still from that sand falling, from that blaze catching fire

I wonder, about this life, watered down and whitening  
if what is left will serve to answer this call  
to begin to fit together these stones, these buried transparencies  
if what is left of us will be enough  
to take upon our shoulders the enormous sun of the future  
that awaits us  
as after a long voyage

## *The History of Your Country*

*In this country you can say what you like  
because no one will listen to you anyway. . .*

Margaret Atwood

As soon as you begin to put them together  
you become aware of the gaps; it doesn't lessen memory,  
the stalactites of blood don't evaporate  
and the thick swelling of backs persists  
in opening pores and smashing  
moral principles; still  
you persevere, seek explanations, arrange idylls  
with the words, which arrive on time for the rendez-vous  
although some weaken:  
the man agonizes with a projectile in his brain  
—a projectile, for instance—on the other hand  
she is lying on her back as they rape her;  
you linger over the adjectives, leap  
through the adverbs, rearing with pain, the participles,  
her belly ripped open, she is cracked, limbs contracted;  
obscenely you mark the sounds with a litany of wells  
that would rot if exposed to the elements, the silence  
of the disappeared, the dissolution of the poem  
into mere formal deconstruction, the ritual  
of skin branded by iron,  
the word agitated in the skill  
with which the art of torture is practised.

No sooner have you begun than you realize you can't do it,  
there is no history beyond the flayings,  
the painted faces in the mist,  
the rancid moustaches of cliché;  
you realize that you can't describe the buried ones,  
that you can't save them, that the words "why" and  
"who", that the word "when" won't be heard anyway,  
those words are useless both as an excuse and a lament,  
—a school of metaphors in the sea of the tongue—  
you realize that memory is concave, convex, reversible,  
that precisely this pain at three in the morning

amid shining boots and fading hair  
will never be a poem or an intellectual talisman,  
but rather the pure, whitening matter of the instant  
as it opens up to death.

On the history of your country  
you realize that the lean poem is no good,  
the issue ages, hunger crumbles  
in abrupt pupils, bullets  
recover their metaphoric beauty, operetta pistoleros  
camouflage themselves, the text invents nothing  
and reality continues to shine  
like a counterfeit copy of life.  
This poem cannot be written.  
This poem cannot save me  
from the hallucinatory permanence of things,  
from the inventions of the history  
of my country.

## FERVOUR OF RETURN

## *A Movement of Salamanders*

You know carlos  
as I walk along the lighted streets  
of this ghostly city unknown to me  
where people rush along with their little secrets  
streets where the snow and the sun take turns every 365 days  
this city like a milk tooth  
in the monstrous face of america the bad  
as I walk—I say—  
neither hurrying nor lagging but looking upwards  
leaping over the swords of the sky  
—I recall—carlos  
that future where you were arguing over  
a spiral of smoke and a cold coffee,  
that we were living in the twentieth century, that criticism  
was a good thing but not in excess  
that men had introduced verbs and pronouns  
over a million years ago after all,  
and in the middle of that oh so exquisite smile  
adored by women, you denied us more than three times  
as you defended the tranquillity of the country  
against all odds

When they went looking for you, you were surprised  
you protested, you grew angry  
naming your friends in sidereal places  
you resorted to the same words as before, freedom,  
justice, dehumanized human rights  
and when fear began to make you disappear from  
government offices, identity papers and the houses  
where your acquaintances took shelter  
you stumbled over the suspicion that you hadn't really understood  
the rules of the game, and you became an uninhabitable question mark  
a mere name lost among the stars  
of that south I now watch  
reflected in the imminent rain  
of carlos Idontknowhow Idontknowwhen Idontknowwhere  
of carlos getting darker in the streets of toronto,

in the streets of santiago, in the streets of the world,  
returning to prehistory,  
being snuffed out.

## *Saudade*

### *To Venicius de Moraes*

There should be a street of forget-me-nots  
and crackling leaves swimming under gaping soles, some books  
by salgari toward midday or the sound of an old armstrong song  
increasing the silence  
and I could be thinking  
about those curtiduria grapes and cinnamon-scented conger eel  
glistening with oil at my aunts' house, not being able to decide  
between soccer and the date that was never moist or passionate,  
rather a stale constellation of kisses in dark doorways.  
It should be very hot, heat with cockroaches and salamanders  
among the tiles and a hoarse voice with no past; I could be  
walking along ninth street floury with dust  
or bewitched by your bare legs and your chain  
of braided coals and still more, changing the scenery,  
some trains passing that leave behind coins  
like knives biting their own tails.  
We'd have to invite the gutierrez girls to chase dragonflies  
and blow on rhododendrons and then steal one of those kisses  
that made our words blush. We should be able to go back  
to the times without a past when a dying wind  
sounded in sheets of tin and a vague but intense desire  
bit our lips.  
And still  
all this seems utterly irrelevant  
to poetry.

There is no reason to try to deal with so much sadness.  
Not in the mountains of constitución, not on the burning sidewalks  
of san cristóbal, not in the dance halls of san clemente  
where a drink of chicha went through you like love's sword,  
not even in the bark of the birch tree in cañete  
where I carved your name, forgetting it not three days later,  
could I cross the deceptive threshold  
of this time that swallows up my poems,  
incapable as they are of bearing witness to the ghostly combat  
of this battle lost in advance,

or of gathering these explosions of some invisible place  
where hair and watches fall.

There should be a house swept by the rain  
with holes in the ceiling  
or my brothers sprouting and pestering  
and my father singing a duet with the clay water jug.  
I should reconstruct the adobe walls and your school uniform,  
the ancient, moth-eaten skeleton in the talca museum  
and all the other nostalgias that die every minute  
inside the sweaty viscera of our personal histories  
and engender, from this useless prose that surrounds me,  
a formal invitation to loneliness and longing,  
a reflection on the ingenuous labours  
that come back to haunt us (widows of sour saliva),  
in this country where the horizon begins  
across the sea.

*Utopia*

They say he dreams sometimes  
of a fantastic country  
where the ice is eternal  
and they play *chueca* on skates.

## *When This War Is Over*

When this war is over  
we swear we'll feel like running, fleeing  
from obscurity, pushing away this dog  
that lies on our lapels and oppresses our breathing,  
falling to our knees spitting holy earth  
and mule trains of stars between our eyelids,  
moistening our temples to stop the fever  
from dilating our world, starting a dialogue  
without clenching our teeth,  
just letting life fall like a leaf  
from our tired feet.

When this war is over  
we'll drink the blood of all the wounds,  
the thread the labyrinth of these countries,  
the stack of illusions we had at twenty,  
the esoteric rhythms of heraclites, the fire  
of your lips, the literary clichés;  
when this war is over  
I'll cross my ankles and wrists  
in the garret aghast with bones,  
I'll dress you in the lizard-like backs of legends,  
I'll break my pipe bitten by your kisses  
against the drizzle and once again I'll call myself  
a citizen of that inexact country.

When this war is over  
I'll devote myself to all the professions filed away  
in my pleasures:  
moss collector, caulker, prostitute thief,  
pedlar and looter of provincial churches,  
first-class poet in alcheringa,  
microsappho, harlequin to prepubescent courtesans,  
small-scale bestiary, buddha and cagliostro,  
compiler of the final history of the universe,  
stateless thunderer, tippler and lover,  
lover and still more lover

of this solemn silent sun  
satrap and satyr.

When this war is over  
(when it's over?)  
we'll start asking  
whether we really lived in concrete cantons  
whether, like natural gentlemen, we really  
inhabited the moment for a long time,  
and why we used so many bullets and shut off our desire  
with metaphysics, and finally why,  
with that naivete that made us famous  
we called ourselves seers, masters of the mystical,  
strictly rhythmic, show-offs,  
deluded.

with these same adjectives  
we'll truly start  
to ask more and more questions  
if when this war is over (when it's over)  
the questions still make sense

## *The Bad Guy*

*Lo demás son estas piedras que nos tapan, el viento.*

G. Rojas

And when the day comes, for what reasons  
will you gouge out your eyes, with what shame  
will you bite your blood and what will you say if they ask  
about the leprosy, the dead that can't be silenced  
or your barren years?

Then, suppose that on top of it all  
someone gave you marked dice, suppose  
that the northern sorcerers gave you motives and omens,  
gave you a name and starved your memory,  
rented you the moment and made you run  
in pursuit of yourself; suppose that they bound your tongue  
with false writings, and suppose you persisted in your pretence  
and still, knight templar of the holiest war  
of this century, even so,  
with proven grounds, the gods will laugh in your face  
when you state your reasons,  
will throw you out in disgust and amazement  
leaving you fragmented, more and more confounded  
in your own turbulence.

Those will be your worst days, nothing comparable to yesterday  
or before; you'll have no disguises left and your promises will be  
lichens drying on the rock, your years  
a chaste fanaticism, a twitching of fingers, your axioms  
and your vigil a neverending humiliation.

They'll say you gradually dried out like a mollusk  
in the august delirium of your grandiloquence,  
that you were outstanding within the unharmed summary  
of your long-suffering country and a horrifying  
though somewhat ridiculous example worthy of a vague mention  
in the latest Larousse.

And finally, as we know, the usual thing happened: you softened  
your crimes with old grudges, you wrote letters  
to the highest courts of this world  
and the other; you fabricated mouths and witnesses,  
silencing shots with printers' ink, seeking a way out  
toward your wretched death.

You resorted to the most docile causes imaginable,  
falsifying conclusions  
and longing for upsets at the earth's axis.  
You wept on your knees in the middle of the scorched square,  
begging for history to absolve you. You disguised  
your fear of madness, your madness of ignorance  
and your ignorance of martyrdom. But then  
you tore off the masks and stood naked,  
your skin gnawed by leprosy.

In the last analysis,  
do you think this red air bereft of skyquakes  
could compare with that bloody dream  
of your accursed lineage  
or with this memory of utopias,  
violated forever?

We suppose you will seek out some remotely close  
righteous man, some sign in the air,  
some survivor besieged in the mirror  
to fill your pure nothingness with entreaties,  
and you will meet the meagre day of your death,  
the slow blood ever more immodest  
and that unquiet sea that thins your veins  
knotting itself like a string of impurities  
to your desolate time,  
as if nothing could ever end  
as if we returned inevitably to the origins.

*Never the Same Waters*

Because the waters of the ottawa river separate two cities  
that perhaps one day were one,  
that is why I am pondering the glass skyline  
as the north wind rises with an exasperated noise on the south bank  
where the federal government towers  
and the stainless-steel stopwatches  
slide into the water;  
as I try to recall,  
on the mirror of this liquid drumming  
that opens to the sea, those bodies swollen by the wait,  
those cheeks eaten away by rage  
beyond human recognition,  
those eyes that fly at random over the lime tree and the pebbles  
(trying to recall)  
as in the distance a train weaves its net of groans  
and cars define the outline of the quebec highway

it's only because the waters of the ottawa river  
now separate two cities  
that once were one or none  
(in a time of peace and clear waters)

that is why I recall other rivers  
with no grass on their banks:  
the other, corrupt waters  
that never were one.

## *The Fervour of Return*

Time had passed  
The stars whispered in my ear and the rudder moved  
without direction from the bottom of the sea, as peaceful as ever  
The filament of memory swept like a minute hand over lapels  
and the stewardesses brought forth good and evil  
from the back of the plane

A brief moon shook our omen-charged consciousness  
and you still looked like a damascene fresco

The ritual of landscape The wheel of the roads  
where you always expect more I'll meet you head on history  
or from the side Let's not be pretentious  
poets also die in their beds

Before my eyes (and yours) paradise and new extremadura  
perhaps we should say the veil of the dawn was lifted  
and the city appeared resplendent  
but why lie to ourselves  
reality is stronger than tradition  
A city as sad as any other covered with smog  
although it's true the airport is worthy of inclusion  
in the most entertaining of satires A bloodcurdling list of suitcases  
and their respective keepers A network of distrustful glances  
A tedious stealth in the mist of the furor of voices Besides  
you start paying just like in any goddam corrupt country  
(well, not just any one)

To return to the lyrical I've said history You understand me  
Don't laugh Your chuckles are catching We adored the city  
of little statues and yellowing parks  
What about the corners? Speaking of exports  
all we have left is the mapocho station and london street  
But let's not go into the megalomania of governors  
You won't understand this dark corner of my heart Things  
are and are not in this world Fireflies and bats that is life  
There's no other way to explain the unexplainable

There's no other way I tell you  
Are you listening?  
Shred after shred the memories Wonderland  
dream of travelling wine Dusk  
of navigators and apprentices of the lightning  
of the ill-fated losers You too remember  
a wave breaking against your nymph-like silhouette  
Howling briny galaxy  
Long ago this sword this hangman's rope  
began to disintegrate It detached itself from the blinds  
It collapsed with the first november rains  
made a quiet hole in the curtains  
entered through your open windows  
Actually you're here and sometimes there  
not anywhere exactly or else everywhere at once  
Whatever Defeat The swamp  
The joy of seeing again the glass crucifixes  
The shadow of the firelight on walls  
the stations complaining in their hinges  
The exercise of clear-sightedness in the middle of the main avenue  
with its mask of hunger The eye that doesn't see  
but moves singing between blood and fire  
The crowds dragging something unnameable and the dirty sun  
with no occasion to grow old as they do  
Gasping for oxygen  
Demanding the tense miracle The wide-awake amazement  
of rising like water in the middle of life

You say: we're still in this trap  
I discover that your cheeks have lost their maiden-like freshness  
No way You're there Enough of the abyss  
A tired country does not commit suicide  
It spins retreats or advances  
Makes itself a natural space Nurses its mountain ranges and its seas  
with its failures And its stone bones remain  
Remain? Heart heart Vague sleepwalker in this blind craft  
Is strangeness a myth? Smoke along ahumada  
buy provisions on providencia  
have a hamburger at burger inn import at manhattan importers

write lines in english in *the daily newspaper*  
since only *in gold we trust*  
I speak of things that exist etc.

So it is  
this coming and going to and fro  
enchantment to disenchantment  
If you stay my love there we have it At least let's leave fear behind  
Let us wink both eyes at death and add our eyelids too  
let's put this madness back together as zurita said  
Let's move the mountains  
Let's salt the regiments, desert the uniforms  
Let's empty the plains into the plaza de armas in santiago  
Let's make the september speeches vanish Let's release  
the operatives and move the ships' ribs over  
toward the middle ages Let's cover the head  
of the supreme director with shadows once and for all  
Let's redeem the dawn of all chilean countryside  
because god is not the last word

Let's remember  
may the move be one of ivory  
and may the sentences fly in the surf

so that the voyage will not be in vain

## ***THE OTHER MEMORIES***

## *Paraphrase*

As José Emilio said, this poem too  
is dedicated to capitalism:  
written on an IBM with a KRT eraser,  
corrected with a Bic pen  
on Rag content number 2 paper,  
published by a meteoric offset system  
with an English translation  
for an American magazine that pays in dollars  
destined for vegetables  
from Florida or California,  
oppressed milk from Carnation and Nestlé,  
yogurt and tubes of Colgate,  
Shell gasoline, Nescafé  
and Hitchcock films.

According to the above-mentioned  
poet, we all know  
for whom we are working.

The truth, the truth is  
that no one  
yet knows for whom he is working.

*You  
Never  
Know For  
Whom  
You  
Are  
Working.*

*I Won't Read The New York Times Again*

I'll watch the explosion of automobiles under the bed  
I'll become a senile butterfly  
I'll climb the empty rigging  
scrutinizing my lapels  
rocking the medieval pointed arches of north america  
I'll write boring books about nixon  
I'll climb the most famous statue in brooklyn with a cigarette butt  
I'll make a toast to private property and the multinationals  
with the seminolees disguised in frock coats  
I'll look at myself in the mirror of columbia pictures  
I'll wink at the most famous falls in the world  
after clark kent's visit  
I'll dress up as a mounted policeman to make the neighbours laugh  
and the inhabitants of the south dream  
I'll recall stories of good neighbourhoods a la maccarthy  
meanwhile they'll come to tell you of the sweetness of miami  
and I'll forget the free world and I'll forget  
the free world  
I'll get myself a cowboy hat and invite the dissidents  
to visit the red canyon  
I'll buy a rose and travel to arlington year after year  
proud of the mecca of cinema and the cultural capital of the world  
I'll see the villains on the other side  
with my blind eye  
from my odes birds will issue forth flying over harvard  
and 2ford's fair carriages (any one at all)  
will carry me to the frontiers of the world  
I'll be left sleeping with my boots on  
and I'll forget the free world  
and  
I'll forget  
the free  
world.

## *Portrait of Francisco*

Articulating imperfect sounds, opening drawers,  
taking out swallows and spinning them curiously  
between his fingers, smiling, he rules over us  
with his slightest gestures.

He builds ships of shoeboxes  
and rolls amid the pots and pans, deafened  
to the world by his shouts, his eyes  
evoking the hives of the hottest summer:  
how I would like to keep his smile standing in the closet!

But time passes, he shoots up, weaving his fabric  
of memory, twisting the trembling fragile threads;  
cracks appear in his transparent eyes,  
opening the way to sadness, accumulating ruin, uncertainty,  
engendering a little heap of dust on his sweet lip.

How to reconstruct his image of play and arrogance,  
of sweet cadence, of a snow-soaked primitive tongue:  
nostalgia for a broken bicycle that falls over  
as an artery collapses? How to remake this melancholy  
of dislocated minutes, of the tenuous retracing  
of footsteps, of all the impossible futures?  
(When tomorrow  
we begin to forget already  
on the other side of the mirror)

So, laughter shatters the retina of the watcher,  
under the crushing thunder  
of a snail fastened to memory.  
It is late, and you are beguiled to sleep. Don't forget  
to call me in your worst nightmares. Here I'll be

Driving away the clots of fear  
that accumulate at random between your hours,  
as the air continues to rush past  
with the roar of centuries. Here,

cradling you, protecting you, raising  
the narrow-gauge walls of my childhood.

Illusion?

Don't forget to lock the toy box,  
and when the ship weighs anchor, put the key  
in your pocket; there's no hurry. It doesn't matter  
what world, circumstances or slow rotation of the earth  
we find ourselves in; the horizon will return us  
like some submerged ship,  
as if we were re-inventing ourselves  
displaying  
mysterious plush animals

our eyes full of space  
in a room of delirious cosmologies.

february 1985, perhaps.

## *Unfaithful Memory*

*Lo que llamamos amor o muerte, libertad o destino  
no se llama catástrofe, no se llama hecatombe?*

Octavio Paz

I pick the leaves as I go along as that the moss will thaw  
and the thighs will crowd around my mouth like stale bees;  
a scale of silhouettes around my hands swelling with sky,  
slime, north wind; piling up keys with curved ire  
around the tongues of the sun, lens misting up,  
terrified eyes seizing a throat as if the lightning  
were to split our bones hanging onto an act that becomes world  
in pieces, shores, centres, *I can't find you* the same waves,  
but the routine hastening along in clues *fixer des vertiges*  
accumulate gestures stretch mouths noting the different juice  
the stronger incitement and the teeth  
swinging in all the burrows with different figures  
that had to be invented lengthening or stressing or  
simply letting everything be named anew  
lip for lip world for earth.

You say my tenderness annoys you and throw off your scales  
and bunches of clepsydras with a single gesture,  
your fire drying out on your pupils; you say yes to everything,  
darkly twisted inwards, used, wrecked  
and smelling of blood at the limits of amazement,  
*sabbath of miracles* with your eel-like figure  
a hail-battered wheatfield, fiery  
in the vertiginous bed, your belly of time ripped apart,  
drinking at the wells of my body,  
resorting to the sophisms of the bats and spiders  
that spin webs with avid loops in the most benign shadows.  
Where are we? I ask you  
as my terror-burnished anguish looms  
between the bloody stripes that burn into my back and sex  
and you no longer reply because your ferocity is culminating  
in an ecstasy that finally populates the flashing instant  
and the illuminations sheathe the skin and slip under the eyelids

like hundreds of daggers and mollusks  
emerging and entering from one to the other,  
spinning around a fixed centre and disappearing  
in that precarious balance that is already beginning to collapse  
in a horizon whose boundaries months? centuries? are mortalized  
when you say  
suppressing your laughter when you hate me  
for this miniscule pleasure and then close your eyes  
and wrap your waxen nipples in your talons  
flying off with a tenuous vague complaining whistle  
a croak? a call? and I am left talking in my sleep  
my members consumed in the dead waters of love.

I turn back upon myself. Love: that trite,  
worn-out word, contorted and ancient; key of hermaphrodites  
and dialectics of antipragmatism. I swear I've seen it  
leaping from your yard to mine.

*Knife and river cutting the angel in all possessions.*

The narrator, that fabulous, clumsy animal of our lives  
*why stop now?* discovers the light that filters through the hollows,  
manipulates it with his fingers and projects it into his future  
until it disappears on other horizons.

## *Time for Love*

Though it be on the pretext of these four poems  
and the crackling, lightning-quick abyss  
of your body driving away our mildew;  
though it be nauseating with yearning  
for the hanging sound of the telephone  
in that accent that the conquistadors  
brought from the other side of the ocean,  
I would continue, frenetic and terrified,  
flying between clocks and train stations,  
biting the fireflies with your knee  
and missing millenia  
to earn the fleeting howls.

Though this pile of phrases gathered together  
should vanish in the grass at the first attempt  
though you should nail a pipe of smoke to the north  
and I should close my reddish eyelids in the south,  
only for this and not for the sleepwalking,  
impassive, sun-exposed words  
bound to a new alliance,  
I would love you in the warm waist of time  
incapable of turning toward the promised land  
or avoiding the miracle of your sleepless spark,  
only to repeat the same story of holes  
today again thrown out to chance.

Though it be to open the windows  
and build bridges that not even a child could sustain  
toward other cities where you sleep  
with your hair of sly crickets,  
erect, cursing the noise of time  
that takes your belly from my hand  
and the serpent of your fingers that separates  
my oblivion from yours.  
(In the middle of flight and presence  
the poet is a boundary of bones  
flayed by salamanders)

Though it be for this and not for nothing  
diviner of a departureless voyage  
exiled invoker of my waters  
place of absence and arrival,  
though it be for this,  
to keep on tracing the trembling of your thigh,  
to keep on dissolving the moistness  
of your underarm in my memory,  
to keep on and to keep on dispelling  
the first light of your eyelashes  
in the transient touch of my words,  
their roots cut  
just at this moment.

*Apparition Shattered by a Stone in a Puddle*

And it's not a question of saying or inventing it  
nor of a time when we returned from the signs of the sky  
nor was it the disjointed coincidences of the stars.  
And what more pristine, more sudden comparison  
than that of a flashing star  
extinguished  
or one's own heart  
struggling in its bedazzling circles.  
An eye of lightning and a tongue that curls its light  
in repose. Or the multiple mouths  
biting inside this mirror of stalking skins.  
And not be able to say it. To reinvent a language  
with the hands of dream, with the guttural, bloody scream  
of the triffid; invent the tenuous surface of the river  
coursing down your knees with its century-old terror  
to keep quiet moving distances  
breaking our seaweed against the moist shoal.  
Where do we come from? You came from the geranium  
with eyes that lacked the kingdom of nostalgia,  
a crazy laugh that crinkled with fear around the edges  
and a water nymph's lament falling around your temples.  
And I, always covered with the filters of oblivion,  
forgot your traces on top of mine  
and that foam of time bubbling up from the spring  
of your hair in sadness.  
And now we die from day to day and ever,  
leaving a minute sign on the eyelids  
and a bit of silence and another bit that grows enormous  
to our fright

Or will we continue to run through these forgetful pages  
to fly one day  
on the other side of the flash?

## *The Woman We Love*

The labyrinths of the week rarefied by the rain  
or the huge summer sun, the reddish stairs  
behind the houses and the mystifying shine  
of the asphalt like a beloved perversion  
in the middle of your cry. That aggressive stance  
at the foot of the mountain with your biting eyes,  
as if things human were a heavy country  
where you lose yourself, whipped by the horses  
of insomnia.

Your ships run aground on the dunes  
and you get up as meek as a binnacle  
to wound me in the midst of my astonishment  
with your amaranthine nocturnal silhouette,  
and your aggressive way of plunging into time  
disturbs my harmony like a drunken rudder  
among the serpents of your gravid hour.

I who have walked you through the ports  
of these ghostly cities, I who have watched  
buildings grow and seagulls die  
among the live lianas of your belly,  
I who die alone like a terrified child  
in your temples, the vibrating tear of your mouth,  
the primitive breath of the words  
growing hollow in my heart.

We speak of the woman we love as the speed  
of a locomotive entering its crater, the peril  
of light humming between the rocks or the distance  
between fear and the self. Of the woman we love  
we remember the instant acceleration of bones,  
her way of leaving a place by pressing her lips,  
the silence of crystals as love grows.  
We speak of the woman we love and the rockery of her legs

almost in a whisper, with the first bells of dawn.

Then we're left with a yard of nostalgia in the suburbs,  
a train station where goodbyes are said,  
a bed of wind wandering through the towers,  
a bread of amazement lit by the ants of noon,  
a violet or a geranium (it's not quite clear) in the veins,  
this groan ululating along the highways of ontario  
at the speed of thought; then we're left  
with this arm resting in the darkness,  
encircling a neck we cannot see.

Of the woman we love we retain a certain fondness  
for crazy cars, a dog that spies on us  
until dawn, a firefly pinned to the lapel,  
a baobab fury and a troubled movement,  
a recognition akin to the loam of orgasm.

Of the woman we love we are left with this desire  
to shake down her laugh every morning  
and to make of the lost minutes an animal  
that will live forever in our memory.

## *The Writer and His Ghosts*

This is the writer: sealed off  
in his own exile of words, he disappeared  
from the social pages and retired to his winter quarters,  
shutting himself in with papyruses and beer cans.  
Here he lies, forever or perhaps never,  
willing to come back to life with his murky writings,  
to provide missing news and give you, me or them  
a hard time, rub our noses in the error  
of talking about our own business.

This is the writer: forgotten already,  
already posthumous.  
His papers wait still: this verse,  
that longevous word, this or that manuscript or volume,  
the secrets that wander through the house,  
the metaphors of our slow life, now suffocated  
by indolence, your daily hates  
exhibiting themselves immodestly in the verbs  
and many torrid adjectives  
that fill his ear to bursting.

We try to hide our humiliation  
of posterity, try to forget its lasciviousness  
and preserve our secret pacts, our mental nooks and crannies  
reproduced in the sharp traces of slippery flashes.

We try to dilute everything in a corner of his head  
like those spectral messes that eclipse  
memory. But the brute persists  
in the what ifs and the whys, refusing to see  
our point of view. Even after death  
he continues to write between the rotten  
boards of silence, challenging this desire of ours  
to destroy everything, wipe everything out  
so that no one else will read  
his horrid ravings.  
This is the writer: at once the spouse,

lover, father. Destroyer of the family unit,  
a thousand times cursed even after death  
by this degrading public life we will lead  
with our heads hanging, resigned,  
for the rest of the time we have left to live.

*Incognita*

What am I doing hanging from that wing in the shadows?

I confess I'm surprised by this metaphysical flight,  
trapped by medusa's eye.

The cities explode like a puddle in the sky  
and in mid-life we make ourselves  
clots of amazement

Nothing awaits us besides this movement  
printed on our hair  
and that cataract of smoke between our fingers.

What am I doing here, naked and bleeding  
like an angel in the middle of the light?

The poems in *Burning Bridges* explore both new literary forms and a variety of subjects, including the psychology of exile. In poems that range widely in tone from melancholy and whimsy to bitterness, Nain Nomez writes elegantly about emotional fragmentation, the effort required to assimilate a new language, and the unfinished business of his former life. He also casts a discerning eye on his adopted land.

Nomez lives in Toronto and Santiago. He is the editor of *Chilean Literature in Canada* and serves on the editorial board of *El espíritu del valle*. He is the author of *Historias del reino vigilado / Stories of a Guarded Kingdom* (1981). Poems from *Burning Bridges* (*Paises como puentes levizados*) won first prize in the Spanish writing competition organized by the University of Alberta.

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