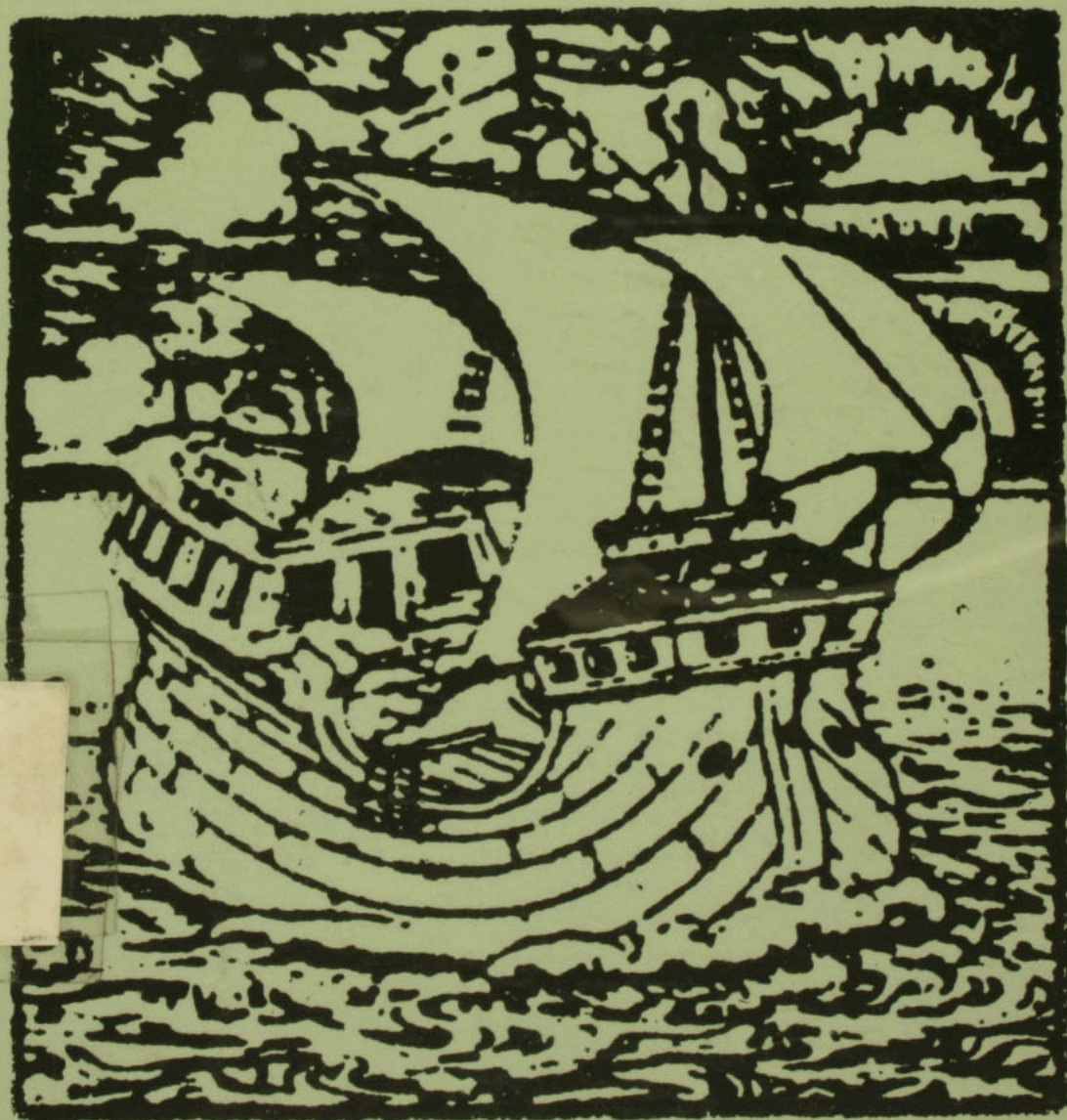


BURNING BRIDGES

Poems by **NAIN NOMEZ**

Translated by **CHRISTINA SHANTZ**

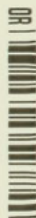


BURNING BRIDGES

By
NAIN NOMEZ

Translated by
CHRISTINA SHANTZ

Cormorant Books
1987



81711

© Nain Nomez, 1987

The publisher wishes to acknowledge the support of
Canada Council, Multiculturalism Directorate, and
Ontario Arts Council.

Typeset in Dunvegan by Greenglass Graphics.
Printed in Winnipeg by Hignell.

Published in Canada
by Cormorant Books
RR 1, Dunvegan
Ontario K0C 1J0

ISBN 0-920953-28-X

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.*

TABLE OF CONTENTS

On the Poet as Human Being, 9

CANADIAN EXPERIENCE, 11

Canadian Experience I, 12

Canadian Experience II, 14

Canadian Experience III, 16

Sentimental Tango or Our Last Meeting in King's Tavern, 18

My Mother's Visits I, 22

My Mother's Visits II, 23

My Mother's Visits III, 24

Daily News, 26

Pilgrims' Chronicle, 28

Natural Cycle, Magic Circle, 30

Canadian Poets, 33

Post Card from Kingston, 36

After a Long Voyage, 38

The History of Your Country, 40

FERVOUR OF RETURN, 43

A Movement of Salamanders, 44

Saudade, 46

Utopia, 48

When This War Is Over, 49

The Bad Guy, 51

Never the Same Waters, 53

The Fervour of Return, 54

THE OTHER MEMORIES, 57

Paraphrase, 58

I Won't Read *The New York Times* Again, 59

Portrait of Francisco, 60

Unfaithful Memory, 62

Time to Love, 64

Apparition Shattered by a Stone in a Puddle, 66

The Woman We Love, 67

The Writer and His Ghosts, 69

Incognita, 71

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

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 starched 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.

Christina Shantz is the foremost Spanish/English translator in Canada. She lives in Ottawa.

CORMORANT BOOKS

ISBN 0-920953-28-X