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LATINOCANADÁ:  
A CRITICAL ANTHOLOGY OF TEN LATIN AMERICAN WRITERS OF  
CANADA

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## RÉSUMÉ

Cette dissertation se veut une étude approfondie du phénomène de la littérature produite au Canada par des auteurs d'origine latino-américaine. Elle consiste en une introduction générale, suivie d'une étude biographique et critique individuelle et détaillée de dix auteurs latino-américains résidant au Canada. Chaque étude est accompagnée d'une sélection de l'oeuvre de l'auteur traduite en anglais.

La thèse développée est que la littérature latino-canadienne dépasse un simple corpus d'écrits de diffusion limitée qui pourrait peu à peu disparaître à mesure que les nouveaux venus sont absorbés par le courant dominant des littératures des deux langues officielles du Canada. Elle soutient que la littérature latino-américaine du Canada est généralement produite par des personnes nées en Amérique latine, mais qu'elle est sans cesse renouvelée par les vagues d'immigrés provenant d'une vingtaine de pays compris dans l'Amérique du Sud, l'Amérique centrale, le Mexique et les Caraïbes. De plus, le fait que ces écrivains sont originaires du Nouveau Monde et qu'ils partagent des éléments historiques et littéraires communs avec le Canada anglais et le Québec (colonisation, recherche d'une littérature axée sur la réalité du nouveau pays et non sur celle de l'Europe, inclusion du parler régional dans la littérature nationale) unit le monde des lettres latino-américain, canadien-anglais et québécois dans le contexte d'une littérature des Amériques.

L'introduction à la monographie présente un survol historique de l'immigration des gens d'expression espagnole et portugaise au Canada et de l'évolution de leurs écrits personnels isolés vers le concept d'une lit-

térature latino-américaine et ibérique du Canada. Elle parle aussi de la thématique de ces écrivains, de leur adaptation au nouveau pays, de leur intégration aux lettres canadiennes et québécoises et de la réception de leur oeuvre. Finalement, elle explique les critères employés dans la sélection des dix auteurs analysés.

Les études individuelles mettent l'accent sur le développement de l'auteur par rapport aux réalités historiques et culturelles de son milieu. Nous examinons ensuite le départ de son pays et l'effet de son immigration au Canada sur l'évolution de sa production littéraire, son acceptation (ou non-acceptation) de la réalité canadienne, ainsi que ses contacts et relations avec les littératures anglo-canadienne ou québécoise. Finalement, nous établissons l'importance de son oeuvre dans la littérature nationale de son pays d'origine et la mesure de son intégration aux lettres du Canada.

La poésie, les contes ou les extraits de roman qui suivent chaque étude ont été sélectionnés à partir de l'ensemble des oeuvres de chaque auteur. Les textes choisis n'ont jamais été traduits en anglais et ont été jugés représentatifs de l'oeuvre globale de l'auteur ou d'un aspect particulièrement important de sa production littéraire.

Nous espérons que cette dissertation aidera à la découverte de la littérature latino-canadienne et au rapprochement des littératures canadienne-anglaise et québécoise à celles de l'Amérique latine.

**In Memory of**  
**Manuel Betanzos Santos**  
**and**  
**Larry Shouldice**

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Latin American Writing in Canada: Formation of a Literature**

A new literature is sprouting up today within Canadian society, a body of writing created by people from twenty different countries that share our hemisphere. It is the work produced by Latin American writers living in Canada and might be called Latino-Canadian literature. Its writers are of foreign origin and yet are also part of the Americas and thus share many of the characteristics of Canadian letters, such as colonization, the implantation of European culture in an indigenous environment, the gradual freeing from Eurocentric literary modes, and the search for autonomous means of expression. Some of these writers are from nations with longer and more acclaimed literary traditions than that of Canada itself, and yet most of them are also anxious to find a place for their writing within Canadian society and perhaps to enrich Canadian letters with their work.

Latino-Canadian writing has expanded over the last quarter-century to include every principal literary genre, from the novel and short story, to poetry, theatre, testimonial writings, literary criticism, children's literature, autobiography, history, and journalism. Much of it has been of necessity self-published, but there now exist a number of small trade presses that function primarily in Spanish, producing work within a linguistic community that numbers roughly a quarter of a million in Canada and 310 million in the Spanish-speaking countries of the world — and 200 million more if one counts those nations that speak Portuguese. The continual arrival of new immigrants from Latin America, coupled with the growing importance

of Spanish as a second language in university education and international trade, gives a certain degree of autonomy to the world of Latino-Canadian letters. As in the United States, which is now home to 25 million Hispanic-Americans, Spanish-language writing in Canada now forms a world unto itself and constitutes what critic and poet Gary Geddes has referred to as "a parallel literature" (personal conversation), one that runs alongside those of mainstream English- and French-speaking Canada. Latino-Canadian writing is also, however, a continual source of writers who are gradually absorbed into the literatures of the two official languages. The Hispanic community in the United States is, in reality, fragmented into large blocks of Puerto Ricans, Chicanos, Cubans, Dominicans, and other nationalities, each of which has a strong culture of its own and does not mix readily with the others. The Latin Americans of Canada are far fewer in number, a fact which has brought them together, so that there is now a surprisingly high degree of integration and a fertile cultural interchange between the various Spanish-speaking nationalities resident in the country.

### **Arrival**

Contact between the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking worlds and Canada is hardly new; in fact, it has been a constant ever since the fifteenth-century. The first Iberian visitors to Canada were the Basque and northern Spanish and Portuguese fishermen and explorers who are said to have begun to fish and winter on Canadian soil even before the voyages of Columbus; many of them named the coves, harbours, and land masses of Atlantic Canada, from Labrador to Fogo Island and Bonavista Bay. Later,



toward the end of the eighteenth-century, Spanish explorers sailing from Mexican ports explored the British Columbia coast; one of them, Alejandro Malaspina, wrote a seven-volume history of his expeditions. In the early 1800's the Cuban poet José María Heredia, an early Romantic fascinated by all things of the Americas, came to Ontario and wrote a celebrated ode to Niagara Falls. Latin Americans consider the New World to form one basic continent, that of the Americas. In the broad sense, they consider the adjective *americano* in Spanish to apply to the entire hemispheric land-mass from Tierra del Fuego to Ellesmere Island and believe that the term *American* has been willfully appropriated by the United States, whose citizens some argue should rightly be called *estadounidenses*, or "Unitedstatesians."

The first large immigration to Canada from the Spanish-speaking world was that of political refugees from the Spanish Civil War after the fall of Barcelona to General Franco's troops in 1939. Several of the community centres that they established in Toronto published poems and short stories by these early arrivals by typing or later mimeographing them and posting them on the centres' walls. The themes of these works dealt largely with the horrors of the civil war and the exiles' longing for their homeland, just as the early works of Latin American refugees would do thirty years later (García interview). This Peninsular immigration increased during the 1950's and 1960's as more Spanish- and Portuguese-speakers left their countries' repressive régimes and struggling economies to search for work in Canada. The first published writers among this group were primarily professors of Spanish literature and language who gradually assumed positions in universities across Canada. Many of them, such as the poet and novelist José Emilio Pacheco, were already successful authors in Spain

before they emigrated. These writers, a number of whom worked in complete isolation — though some of them were in contact with each other — produced an array of works, both in terms of their creative and academic publications, but a detailed examination of their literary production lies beyond the scope of the present study. One important figure among them for later Latin American writers, however, was the Galician poet and critic Manuel Betanzos Santos, who became a pioneer in the study of Canadian letters in the Hispanic world and a bridge between the original Peninsular immigration and the later Latin American one. Betanzos Santos, who taught at the Université de Sherbrooke for several years in the 1960's, was always fascinated by the interplay of literatures. His trilingual (English-French-Spanish) literary magazine, *Boreal*, first published in Montreal in the 1960's, was to appear intermittently for the next twenty-five years and served as a forum for new writers in all three languages, often providing new Latin American arrivals with their first forum for publishing in Canada. At the same time, Betanzos translated and published two anthologies of English Canadian writing, one in Argentina and the other in Mexico, and up to his death in 1995, regularly read his work at French, English, and Spanish poetry venues in Montreal.

The initial wave of Latin American migration to Canada was of economic immigrants from Ecuador, who arrived in the late 1960's and settled mainly in the Toronto area. This group did not at the time, however, include any regularly active writers. A few years later, the political turmoil in Latin America caused by heightened popular demand for more economic and political power and the ensuing military repression during the 1970's caused large numbers of people, primarily from the Southern Cone of South America (Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay), to flee to Canada. Most of

those who arrived were refugees — often from the most idealistic, progressive, and artistically involved sectors of their societies — who had never considered leaving their homelands until forced to do so by the military dictatorships that took root first in Brazil in 1964, then in Uruguay in 1972, Chile in 1973, and Argentina in 1976. Sometimes Canada was chosen as a destination because of a particular affinity with or interest in the country; often the choice was determined simply because the Canadian embassy was accepting refugees on a given day. Economic immigrants from the Southern Cone — as well as from other nations, such as Colombia, with a high degree of political instability — joined the flow of refugees northward.

A second wave of Latin American immigration to Canada took place during the 1980's, as the rigidly stratified societies of other regions such as Central America and the Andean nations (particularly Peru and Bolivia) were rocked by insistent new demands for fundamental improvements in human, social, and economic rights. Such movements were again dealt with harshly, often precipitating all-out civil war and a mass exodus of the population to neighbouring countries such as Mexico, as well as to the United States and Canada. Again, many in the exodus were artistic and cultural figures of repute in their countries of origin who continued to write, paint, and work in the theatre when they came to Canada. Others were young writers and artists who were just discovering their talents when they were forced to leave their native lands; they then published their first works and held their first exhibitions in Canada. Since then, beginning in Argentina in the aftermath of the Falklands War in 1982, democracy has gradually been reestablished in almost all of the countries of the hemisphere, though in many cases this has simply meant declaring an uneasy truce between the warring parties. Thus immigration to Canada since 1990

has been mainly for economic rather than political reasons, though refugees are still coming in from conflicts in Peru, Guatemala, and even Mexico; and, as the Argentine-Canadian poet and critic Margarita Feliciano has pointed out, immigrants themselves are economic exiles (Feliciano 2).

Several Latin American authors had established themselves individually in Canada by the end of the 1960's; these early arrivals generally evolved in isolation from other Latin Americans, however, and often chose to write in English or French rather than their native language. Among them was Gloria Escomel, a poet, playwright, and fiction writer of French and Catalan parentage who was raised mainly in Uruguay but who settled in Quebec in 1967; paradoxically, though most of her work is set in the Río de la Plata area, she writes almost exclusively in French. The Chilean experimental poet Ludwig Zeller took up residence in Toronto in 1970, from which he maintained a lively presence in the worldwide surrealist movement, while his compatriot, Renato Trujillo, arrived in Montreal as a traveller in 1968 and decided to stay and write poetry exclusively in English. The Brazilian painter Sergio Kokis fled Rio de Janeiro after the overthrow of President João Goulart and the establishment of the military régime there in 1964; he subsequently lived in Europe for several years before settling in Montreal at the end of the 1960's. Though Kokis did not start writing until the 1990's, his three novels — all written in French — have been warmly received in Quebec. Gerardo Barreto-Rivera, a bilingual Puerto Rican poet, moved to Toronto in the late 1960's and later became a principal innovator in sound poetry and member, along with b.p. nichol, of the poetry performance group The Four Horsemen. Though deeply influenced by the Spanish oral tradition of declaiming poetry (a favourite pastime of his Galician grandfather), as well as by his reading in Spanish and

Latin American literature in general, Barreto-Rivera nevertheless also writes mainly in English.

Large-scale literary activity by Latin Americans in Canada began in earnest, however, with the advent of the first Chilean refugees following the coup d'état that overthrew President Salvador Allende on September 11, 1973. Most Chileans coming to the country settled in or around the large urban centres of Montreal, Toronto, and Vancouver, with smaller communities forming in Ottawa, Winnipeg, Calgary, and Edmonton. In the majority of cases, the writers among them came into the country alone, with the notable exception of the Chilean immigration to Ottawa. Chilean poet and critic Naín Nómez had known Canadian graduate students at the University of Chile and was later invited to teach Spanish at Carleton University. Nómez's associates from the "School of Santiago" poetry group at the Pedagogical Institute of the University of Chile, Jorge Etcheverry and Erik Martínez, along with other writers also associated with the university, all went on to settle in Ottawa, thus creating an early focal point for Chilean literary activity in Canada.

The exiles arriving in Canada in the 1970's were still enormously stimulated by the vibrant artistic and political milieus of their native countries, while at the same time often being left deeply scarred by the military repression there. It is not surprising therefore, that the Latino-Canadian literature of the period is highly politicized, doggedly and even fiercely optimistic, and often poignant in its lament for their vision of a more just society and for the people who died and were tortured trying to achieve it. Poetry is an integral part of Chilean life and culture, and poetry readings formed part of the *peñas* [benefit parties] and other cultural events held by Chilean exile communities all across Canada. Many of the Uruguayan and

Argentine exiles — along with some Chileans and Spaniards — had been active in theatre in their homelands and established Spanish-language theatre companies in Canada. In Montreal, Chilean playwright and author Rodrigo González was putting on children's theatre and workshopping collective productions by the mid-1970's; in Toronto, the Uruguayan and Argentinean theatre group El Galpón also created its own productions and was influential in bringing the noted Argentine satirical playwright Osvaldo Dragún to the city. The 1970's also witnessed great activity in music, especially in the formation of Chilean groups playing a mixture of Andean folk-songs, adapted poetry, and protest songs. Alberto Kurapel, a Chilean exile who had studied the work of the Living Theatre and acted in a Spanish translation of Megan Terry's *Viet Rock* in Santiago in the Allende years, established himself in Montreal and brought out six consecutive albums of poetic — and politicized — folksongs celebrating and mourning his country's tragic destiny. Chilean filmmakers such as Leutén Rojas in Ottawa and Marilú Mallet and Jorge Fajardo in Montreal were also already active at this time.

### **Adaptation**

Toward the end of the 1970's, Chileans living in different cities, especially in the Ottawa-Montreal-Toronto triangle, began to become conscious of and interested in each other's work; at the same time, the first books by Chilean-Canadian authors began to appear. One of the earliest Chilean writers to publish in Canada, the poet Francisco Viñuela, did so with a small press in Montreal that was funded at least in part by the political

party he was then associated with. Within the following few years, however, independent Latin American publishing ventures began to spring up. In Montreal, the Chilean poet Manuel Aránguiz was influential in setting up Les Éditions Maison Culturelle Québec-Amérique Latine, which in 1979 published *La ciudad* [*The City*], a work by Chilean exile Gonzalo Millán that poet and critic Jorge Etcheverry has called “one of the most important books of contemporary Chilean poetry” (“Chilean Literature” 55). Millán, who lived mainly in Ottawa but also resided for a time in Montreal, was later awarded the Pablo Neruda Foundation poetry prize in Chile in 1986. In 1981, Aránguiz published a bilingual (Spanish-French) edition of his own laconic, highly crafted poems, *Cuerpo de silencio/Corps de silence*. Nain Nómez moved from Ottawa to Toronto in 1976, where he came into contact with two other Chilean writers, poet Claudio Durán and short-story writer Juan Carlos García. Durán published a bilingual (Spanish-English) book of poetry, *Más tarde que los clientes habituales/After the Usual Clients Have Gone Home*, translated by Rafael Barreto-Rivera, with Underwhich Editions in Toronto in 1982. Argentine poet Margarita Feliciano, who had moved from California to Toronto in 1969, brought out her first book, published in Pittsburgh by the Latin American Literary Review Press, in 1981.

It was in Ottawa, however, that Chilean publishing established its strongest base. Fiction writer Leandro Urbina arrived there from Argentina in 1976 and soon afterward set up Cordillera Editions, which within a few years published a book of short stories by Urbina as well as the first collections of the innovative poetry of Nómez and Etcheverry. In 1982, Cordillera brought out *Literatura chilena en Canadá/Chilean Literature in Canada*, edited by Nómez and translated by Christina Shantz, a graduate student at Carleton who later became Urbina’s wife and

the principal translator of the Ottawa-based Chileans. This book was the first anthology of Latin American writing to appear in Canada. A well-produced work, it included both poetry and prose by the Ottawa writers, as well as work by Aránguiz of Montreal and Durán, García, and Ludwig Zeller of Toronto. Moreover, its bilingual presentation opened up Chilean-Canadian writing to an English Canadian public and publishers; Cormorant Books, of Dunvegan, Ontario, for instance, brought out translations of works by both Urbina and Nómez in the mid-1980's. The Latino-Canadian beachhead in Canadian letters had been established.

Subsequent literary and publishing activity in Spanish in Canada has revolved around five main fields of activity, all of them interrelated: readings, festivals, anthologies, small presses, and literary journals. Recitation of poetry is a strong element in Spanish and Latin American letters, and the Hispanic community in several cities was already large enough by the early 1980's to offer an interested and surprisingly loyal audience. In Toronto, the café El Caballo de Troia [The Trojan Horse] on Danforth Avenue was an early centre for poetry recitals, while in Montreal the *doyenne* of oral poetry and bohemian writing, Janou St-Denis, began to regularly invite Latin Americans to read in French and Spanish in the early 1980's. By 1995, there were no less than four venues for Spanish-language poetry readings operating simultaneously in Montreal. In Ottawa, where there are only about a thousand Chilean immigrants all told, readings have been more likely to be held with writers from other ethnic groups (Etcheverry interview). This also holds true for Vancouver, where the Latin American literary audience is larger but more diffuse. The Salvadoran writer Alfonso Quijada Urías states that his closest reading associate there, with whom he has recited at the Octopus Bookstore, is a Malaysian (telephone interview).



Festivals have been of strategic importance in the development of Latino-Canadian writing. In Toronto, Ludwig Zeller, Naín Nómez, and Leandro Urbina all read at Harbourfront during that event's early days, thus giving them exposure to the English Canadian public. Moreover, the *Agrupación de Artistas Latinoamericanos* [Latin American Artists' Network] — a loose association of musicians, painters, filmmakers, actors, dancers, performance artists, and writers — has held several festivals of Latin American culture, some up to five days long, that have included multiple poetry readings. Such events have permitted Latin American writers of varying backgrounds and nationalities to meet and mix with one another, as well as with their audience. In 1987 the Peruvian-Canadian journalist and critic Alex Zisman of Toronto organized what by Latino-Canadian standards was a mega-festival, inviting both Hispanic-Canadian, Latin American, and English Canadian writers to read at his North/South Encounter at York University. The extraordinary mix of participants included native-born Canadians Margaret Atwood, Graeme Gibson, Timothy Findley, and Yves Beauchemin; immigrant Canadians Janette Turner Hospital, Neil Bissoondath, Austin Clarke, and Josef Skvorecky; Latin American writers of renown, such as Miguel Barnet of Cuba, Alvaro Mutis of Colombia, and Jesús López Pacheco of Mexico; and a wide selection of Hispanophone Canadian authors, including the Spanish novelist Ramón Guardia from Montreal. This was the largest single literary event ever organized by the Latin American community in Canada and was a major step in bringing Canadian authors into contact with other writers of the Americas. It was followed by the establishment of the *Semana del Idioma Español* [Spanish Language Week], a week-long festival of poetry readings, critical papers, and theatrical and musical performances that has been held yearly

in Toronto since 1991. This combined academic and cultural event, organized primarily by Mario Valdés of the University of Toronto and Margarita Feliciano of York University, is now the largest Spanish-language venue in the country.

In Montreal, two festival readings in the late 1980's finally brought together the disparate talents of the Latin American authors who were living there. The Latino-Québécois writers of Montreal were from a broad spectrum of nationalities and literary tendencies and — aside from the Chileans — had not previously had any common interest that bound them together. The first large Spanish-language poetry reading in Quebec was held at a secondary school in Outremont in the fall of 1986, as part of a "Latin American Week" of cultural activities. It involved a dozen or so immigrant and refugee writers from a variety of Spanish-speaking countries and demonstrated that regardless of national or stylistic differences between them, the Hispanic writers of Montreal shared a common language, were part of the same overall literary tradition, and — if they chose to unite — could form a new branch of Quebec literature, *la latino-québécoise*. In 1989, the Colombian poet Yvonne Truque, who was working with a Latin American community organization, organized a second, much larger reading within the context of another celebration of Hispano-American culture. This event included fifteen authors and took place at the Outremont bar *L'Imprévu* over three consecutive evenings and participating Spanish-speaking authors were asked to read in both Spanish and French. Moreover, Quebec authors with a long-standing interest in Latin America, such as Paul Chamberland, Claude Beausoleil, Janou St-Denis, and the author of the present study were also invited to read. The festival established a new cohesiveness among the writers involved, led to increased

contact between Latin and Québécois authors, and, for the first time, received some notice in the French-language press.

Anthologies have also played a crucial role in bringing new Spanish-speaking authors to light and in shaping the direction of various groupings of writers. One of the first English Canadians to take an active interest in Latino-Canadian writing was Geoffrey Hancock, editor of *Canadian Fiction Magazine*. In 1980, Hancock organized a "Special Issue of Fiction in Translation from the Unofficial Languages of Canada" (*Canadian Fiction Table of Contents*), which was — in effect — an anthology and included short stories by five Chilean-Canadian writers, as well as by the Argentine-Canadian short-story writer and novelist Pablo Urbanyi. In 1987, Hancock dedicated an entire issue of *Canadian Fiction Magazine* to Latin American writers living in Canada, including work by most of the better-known Chilean-Canadian authors of Toronto and Ottawa, as well as by other Latino-Canadian writers such as the Argentine Raúl Gálvez and Guatemalan Alfredo Saavedra, both of Toronto; Chileans Renato Trujillo, Marilú Mallet, and Miguel Retamal, all from Montreal; the Argentine Naldo Lombardi, from Edmonton; and the Uruguayan critic Javier García Méndez, from Montreal. This issue again constituted a veritable anthology and reached out beyond Canada to the larger Spanish-American world through its inclusion of an interview with Julio Cortázar and critical appreciations of his work. It established Latino-Canadian writing as a major force in Canadian letters.

Meanwhile, in Toronto and Montreal, new anthologies had begun to appear, compiled and published by Latino-Canadian writers themselves. In Toronto, Diego Marín, a professor of Spanish literature at the University of Toronto, compiled a trilingual (Spanish-English-French) anthology entitled

*Literatura hispano-canadiense/Hispano-Canadian Literature/Littérature hispano-canadienne*, published by the Alianza Cultural Hispano-Canadiense in 1984. This collection included short stories, poetry, and extracts from plays by both Peninsular and Latin American writers living in Canada. Most of the authors included were from the academic milieu: some of them, such as Manuel Betanzos Santos of Spain and Luis Pérez Botero of Colombia, were of the generation that had arrived in Canada during the 1950's; others, including the Spaniard Ricardo Serrano and the Dominican Raúl Bartolomé, had been born after World War Two and had immigrated to Canada in the 1970's. The Alianza Cultural held regular literary competitions for Spanish-language work produced in Canada, and perhaps the greatest precedent of this anthology — apart from its trilingual presentation — was that it united writers from the two generations and two cultural traditions, Spanish and Ibero-American.

A few years later, in 1987, José Varela and Richard Young, both professors of Spanish at the University of Alberta, founded the APEDECHE, or Asociación para el Desarrollo de la Cultura Hispánica de Edmonton [Association for the Development of Hispanic Culture in Edmonton], which was modelled on the Alianza Cultural of Toronto. This organization, together with the Spanish Embassy to Canada and Multiculturalism Canada, organized a pan-Canadian literary competition for Latino-Canadian authors in 1985 and published a bilingual (Spanish-English) anthology of the prize-winning works and other entries in 1987. This book, *Antología de literatura hispano-canadiense/An Anthology of Hispano-Canadian Writing*, included poems by Naín Nómez and Jorge Etcheverry, short stories by Chileans Hernán Barrios and Francisco Viñuela of Montreal, as well as poetry by Argentine writer Nora Strejilevich (then of

Vancouver) and Chilean author Luis Torres, of Calgary, and work by other writers.

Due to the large number of Hispanic nationalities that had settled in Montreal and to the relative isolation in which writers there worked for many years, it was not until the late 1980's that Latin American writers in Quebec began to put together their own anthologies, the first of which, *Palabra de poeta* [*Word of the Poet*] was published by the Mexican Association of Canada in 1988. As in the readings in Montreal, the anthologies published there were marked by their heterogeneity. *Palabra de poeta*, though modest in form, included poetry by four Chileans, a Guatemalan, a Uruguayan, a Mexican, a Salvadoran, a Colombian, and an American, and was illustrated with drawings by the Mexican artist Roberto Ferreyra. The following year, Les Éditions de la Naine Blanche brought out the first anthology of Latino-Québécois writers to appear in French, *La présence d'une autre Amérique*, an anthology which included the authors who had read at L'Imprévu. This work went through two printings and received a highly favourable review from the Haitian critic Jean Jonaissant in *Lettres québécoises* ("Des poésies québécoises actuelles" 36). A year later, in 1990, Chilean poets Jorge Etcheverry and Daniel Inostrosa published the Spanish-language anthology *Enjambres: Poesía Latinoamericana en el Quebec* [*Swarms: Latin American Poetry in Quebec*], which included most of the authors of *La présence*, as well as the Peruvian poets Alicia Núñez Borja and Yolanda de Saldívar (who writes in Quechua). This anthology, and the world of Latino-Québécois letters that lay behind it, received a full-page article and review in the literary pages of the *Montreal Gazette* (Henighan K4). Daniel Inostrosa went on, in 1992, to bring out the first anthology of Spanish-speaking women writers of Canada,

*Antología de la poesía femenina latinoamericana en Canadá* [*Anthology of Latin American Women Poets of Canada*], a collection that included sixteen Latina writers from Chile, Argentina, the Dominican Republic, Uruguay, Ecuador, Cuba, Peru, Venezuela, and El Salvador. Its contributors were from across the country, from Montreal to Vancouver, and ranged from twenty-five to eighty years of age. A French translation of the work, *Anthologie de la poésie féminine latino-américaine au Canada* was published by the same firm, El Unicornio Verde, the following year.

Perhaps the most inclusive anthology of Latin American writers in Canada was, however, one in which they only formed a part. *Compañeros: An Anthology of Writings About Latin America*, edited by Gary Geddes and the author of the present study, comprised the work of eighty-seven Canadian authors of English, French, Haitian, and Latin American origin. The theme of the anthology was Latin America itself, so none of the works by Latino-Canadian writers dealt with living in Canada. For the twenty-six Latino-Canadian writers included in the work, though, the anthology provided an opportunity to publish with mainstream (and not so mainstream) English Canadian and Québécois authors, thus providing an interface between the long-standing interest in Latin America in Canadian letters (stretching back to Malcolm Lowry, Hugh Garner, and Earle Birney) and the burgeoning new world of Latin American writers of Canada. The anthology, together with the readings associated with its launching in Ottawa and Montreal and the numerous reviews it received in the Canadian press, was characterized by a feeling of inclusion — of the two principal streams of literature, English Canadian and Québécois, flowing together with the newer currents of Haitian- and Latino-Canadian letters into the river of shared interest in Latin America. It emphasized Canada's commu-

nality with South and Central America, and the absence of a component of writing from the United States underscored the fact that Canada and Latin America had their own unique relationship.

Many of the Spanish-language presses that originally started up to publish local works either in Spanish or in bilingual editions during the 1970's and 1980's eventually became small commercial concerns. Government grants from Multiculturalism Canada, the Canada Council, the Ontario Arts Council, and other institutions have been helpful in financing translation and publication. The principal Hispanophone small press is Cordillera Editions of Ottawa, which is still run by Leandro Urbina and has now published twelve titles. Cordillera specializes in Chilean literature, particularly that of Chilean-Canadian writers, but has also published an anthology of Salvadoran poetry and books by Chilean exiles living in Paris and New York, as well as work by writers living in Chile itself. It has received grants from several government agencies and its editions are available in Chile as well as Canada. In the mid-1980's Jorge Etcheverry also established a press in Ottawa, *La Cita Trunca/Split Quotation*, which now has some eight titles in print, including *Northern Cronopios*, an English-language anthology of short stories by fourteen Chilean-Canadian authors, and *Strange Houses*, a selection of poems by Gonzalo Millán, translated by Annegrit Nill, which was very well received in the English Canadian press.

Two small presses have stood out in Toronto. The first is Oasis Publications, directed by Ludwig Zeller, which has specialized in publishing surrealist poets from other countries, such as Édouard Jaguer of France and Jorge Cáseres of Chile. Oasis is remarkable for its frequent production of bilingual or even trilingual (Spanish-English-French) editions, as well as

for the visual attractiveness of its often quite simply produced books. Zeller himself enjoys illustrating them with his ubiquitous collages, and his wife, Susana Wald, often provides them with her own elegant, enigmatic drawings. Moreover, in true surrealist tradition, Oasis often uses “found” materials, such as overruns of industrial paper that the publisher buys second-hand (Beatriz Zeller interview). Ludwig Zeller and Susana Wald have now moved to Oaxaca, Mexico, and it is presumed that Oasis publications will be continued from there. The second small press of note in Toronto is Mala Hierba [Weed] Editions, established in the early 1990’s by the Mexican poet Juan Escareño, who is also a professional typesetter. Mala Hierba — formerly known as Palabras Prestadas [Loaned Words] — specializes in small, attractively produced books of poetry by Hispanic Canadians and has published several works by the young Bolivian writer Alejandro Saravia, experimental poetry by the Mexican author Juan Pablo de Ávila Amador, and a bilingual edition of *Civilus I Imperator*, by Salvadoran poet and fiction writer René Rodas, a long poem that reflects on the effects of power on the human psyche.

Small Spanish-language presses have proliferated in Montreal. CEDAH (Centre d’Études et de Diffusion des Amériques Hispanophones), founded by Colombian poet Yvonne Truque and her printer/translator husband Jean Gauthier, has published a dozen books of poetry and short stories by Latino-Québécois writers. Ediciones El Palomar was started up by the Guatemalan poet Rodolfo Escobar in the mid-1980’s and was noted for its Cuadernos de Cultura Popular, a series of chapbooks of work by Hispanophone authors such as Alfredo Lavergne of Chile and Maeve López of Uruguay. Las Ediciones de la Enana Blanca [White Dwarf Editions], a trilingual (Spanish-French-English) publishing concern, has brought out *La*



*présence d'une autre Amérique*, as well as poetry by Maeve López and a book of bilingual (French-Spanish) children's stories by the Chilean dramatist and short-story writer Rodrigo González. Other presses include Chilean poet Jorge Cancino's Les Éditions Omélic, his compatriot Daniel Inostrosa's Ediciones del Unicornio Verde, and the Cuban publisher Yolanda Gómez's Fourmi Rose, which has to some extent specialized in the publication of women writers.

Finally, literary journals have also been focal points of Latino-Canadian writing. In Vancouver, the Chilean poet Carmen Rodríguez has worked since 1989 with the bilingual feminist magazine *Aquelarre* [*Witches' Sabbath*], which, although it is a publication of general rather than specifically literary interest, brought out an important special issue in 1991 on Latina writers in Canada. Toronto, which is the centre of Hispanic journalism in Canada — with at times as many as ten newspapers and magazines publishing simultaneously in Spanish — has seen two chief experiments in literary publishing. *Indigo: The Spanish/Canadian Presence in the Arts*, was a very attractively produced review published under the direction of Margarita Feliciano from 1990 to 1991. It included poetry, short stories, and critical articles in Spanish, English, and French (without accompanying translation, the editors supposing their audience to be trilingual), as well as photography, interviews, translations of new work, and articles about Latin America and Latino-Canadian art and writing. *Trilce*, a completely bilingual review edited chiefly by the Salvadoran poet René Rodas, published Latin American authors of Canada and other countries from 1992 to 1993 and included such cutting-edge writers as the iconoclastic Alejandra Pizarnick of Argentina and Miguel Piñero, a Puerto Rican dramatist and poet living in New York.

Besides Manuel Betanzos Santos's *Boreal*, three main reviews have appeared in Montreal. The earliest two, both of which began to be published during the 1980's, were indicative of the polarity that sometimes exists in Latin American letters: the first, *La Botella Verde* [*The Green Bottle*], published by Chilean poet Jorge Cancino, was purely literary in orientation and eschewed politicized writing, which it considered pamphleteering; the second, *Sur* [*South*], published by another Chilean poet, Tito Alvarado, was a cultural and political review that embraced socially committed work and was periodically printed in Cuba. In 1992, *Ruptures: The Review of the 3 Americas* also made its appearance, under the editorship of Haitian-Canadian poet Edgard Gousse, who had studied several years in Buenos Aires and Montevideo. *Ruptures* has given itself the goal of working toward a literature of the Americas and publishes all its texts (if possible) in the four principal languages of the Americas: French, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. Many Latino-Canadian and Latino-Québécois authors published in its first volumes and have continued to work as volunteer translators in succeeding special issues on the literatures of Mexico, Quebec, the Caribbean, and the Southern Cone. Thus, through *Ruptures*, Latino-Canadian authors are now translating the works of writers from Canada and other parts of the world into Spanish and Portuguese in order to make them better known in Latin America.

As Latino-Canadian letters have moved progressively toward the mainstream of Canadian writing, increasing numbers of authors have begun to publish in translation in English and French. Cormorant Books of Dunvegan, Ontario, has taken the lead in the publication of Hispanic writers of Canada in English. Since 1987 it has brought out works by four Latino-Canadian authors — Chileans Leandro Urbina and Naín Nómez,

Salvadoran poet and short-story writer Alfonso Quijada Urías, and Mexican novelist Gilberto Flores Patiño — and has published *Compañeros* and other works on Latin America as well. Girol Books, a primarily Spanish-language publisher in Ottawa that specializes in works of and about Argentine theatre, has brought out a work by the Argentine-Canadian Pablo Urbanyi, as has Williams-Wallace of Ontario. The Muses' Company, of Dorion, Quebec, has also published two bilingual (Spanish-English) books of poetry by Chilean writer Elias Letelier-Ruz. On the French side, Les Écrits des Forges has brought out the poetry of Salvadoran Juan Ramón Mijango Mármol and the Chilean writer Alberto Kurapel, while Humanitas has published all of Kurapel's exploratory avant-garde works of performance-theatre, as well as other books, such as a prize-winning collection of poetry by Salvadoran writer Salvador Torres Saso, in bilingual French-Spanish editions. VLB Éditeur has established a "Collection latino-américaine," under the directorship of Uruguayan critic Javier García Méndez, which to date has translated and published works by Pablo Urbanyi and the Chilean filmmaker and novelist Jorge Fajardo, but has generally shown greater interest in the works of Latin Americans from outside Canada. Boréal and Éditions Trois have published most of Gloria Escomel's work, and Hexagone is planning two bilingual anthologies, one of poetry and the other of prose, for publication over the next two years. The main publisher of Latino-Québécois work, however, has turned out to be the venerable Éditions d'Orphée, which has been bringing out works by bohemian and lesser-known authors for almost half a century and has printed unilingual Spanish and bilingual Spanish-French editions of virtually all the principal works of Chilean poets Alfredo Lavergne and Tito Alvarado.

One of the principal characteristics of Latino-Canadian writing is its capacity for self-renewal. Authors arrive and create in Spanish, and although their children — especially if born in Latin America — may well feel as strongly connected to their original culture as to their adopted one (as Chilean journalist Sergio Martínez has shown in his anthology *Creciendo en el desarraigo: Jóvenes chilenos en la provincia de Quebec/Grandir déraciné: Jeunes chiliens dans la province de Québec*), their descendants will eventually speak mainly either English or French. Meanwhile, though, new immigrants (and refugees) continue to arrive to carry on literary activity in Spanish in Canada. If there is increased political stability in Latin America in the future, the numbers of refugees will diminish; hopefully no further countries will have to undergo the political, intellectual, cultural, and artistic hemorrhage that afflicted so many Latin American countries when they fell under military rule in the last quarter-century. In the absence of further coups d'état and civil wars, therefore, it is doubtful that Canada will again receive such a concentrated immigration of artistic talent as it did from Chile, Argentina, Uruguay, El Salvador, and Guatemala when military governments there literally purged the intelligentsia and the general population of their most progressive and creative elements. Given the significant, but nevertheless relatively slow rate of amelioration of Latin American economies, however, Canada is certain to continue to take in a steady stream of economic immigrants and self-exiles over the coming years, a certain number of which are sure to be writers and artists. Of the ten authors included in the present anthology, for instance, six came north seeking asylum and four chose to immigrate to Canada for other reasons. Latino-Canadian writing thus differs from previous patterns of "immigrant" literatures in that it is — and will probably

continue to be — the product of a steady, not discrete, flow of immigration from a variety of nations.

### **Theme and Artistic Development**

Although Latin American writers in Canada show a high degree of thematic congruity, they evince surprising variation as to when and in which ways their thematic interests evolve. There is generally, of course, an initial period in which the homeland is still uppermost in the writer's mind, and themes of political struggle, economic hardship, and family relationships predominate. In many cases, this stage eventually gives way to the loneliness of exile and nostalgia for the native land, which is often idealized and transformed into a mythical paradise lost. The adventure of living in a new country gradually wears off, revealing what can often be a terrifying degree of alienation. As Sergio Kokis has remarked, "*À la fin, ce passé fictif est si parfait que les gens et les choses de son pays d'adoption pâlisent et perdent de la valeur*" (Kokis 358). Eventually, however, unless the writer chooses to return to his or her country of origin (which is not always politically or economically feasible), he or she gradually begins to accept the new environment and increasingly to write about the present, often bringing new insights to Canadian reality when it is viewed through Latin American eyes. Finally, if the impulse is strong enough and the writer has sufficient linguistic ability, he or she may assimilate completely into the English Canadian or Québécois model and even choose to write directly in English or French rather than in Spanish or Portuguese.

Each author, however, has his or her own internal thematic timetable. Some writers, such as Chilean poet Elias Letelier-Ruz, write almost exclusively of political militancy, even after several decades; usually the theme is displaced from their homeland (in this case, Chile) to another region undergoing a similar struggle (such as Central America) so it may continue. For most authors, exile and nostalgia are the rites of passage of immigration; in the case of the Venezuelan poet Edith Velásquez de Málec, her longing for her birthplace, the island of Margarita, is transformed into a poetic celebration of a lost tropical eden in her poem "Brillo en los tejados" ["Radiance on the Rooftops"], from the book of the same name. Other writers, though, may become thematically obsessed by exile. Alberto Kurapel, for instance, has made it the single overwhelming metaphor for isolation and marginalization within his work, even naming his theatre company "La Compagnie des Arts Exilio." For Kurapel, everyone is ultimately in exile from society and even from him- or herself, regardless of political circumstances. Likewise, an author may simply refuse to write about his or her country of adoption: even an author as completely assimilated into the mainstream as Gloria Escomel continues to write almost exclusively about returning to Uruguay.

One of the characteristics that marks a certain amount of Latino-Canadian writing is its relative urbanization and technical complexity. Literary circles in many large Latin American cities have been far more deeply affected by twentieth-century European artistic movements such as futurism, dadaism, surrealism and absurdism than have Canadian letters; indeed, in the case of Chile, the experimental poet Vicente Huidobro actually introduced his avant-garde "creationism" to France, while the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges has revolutionized the idea of the

short story with his *ficciones*. Argentine authors Julio Cortázar and Anderson Imbert have also been influential in the development of *minificciones*, or extremely brief, condensed, often poetic tales ranging in length from a single sentence to several paragraphs. Literature and literary activity have traditionally been integral and dynamic forces in Latin American culture; one has only to remember the diplomatic positions held by Pablo Neruda, the thousands of mine workers who would show up for his poetry readings, or his exile from Chile in 1949 to realize the importance of the writer in Chilean society. Moreover, Latin American literature has a long and distinguished trajectory: in Chile, Alonso de Ercilla began publishing *La araucana*, his epic poem on the Spanish conquest, in 1569; in Mexico, the earliest known individual poet was the fifteenth-century Aztec prince Netzahualcóyotl, though anonymous bards had been writing since Mayan times, and the first great feminist writer, Sor Juana de la Cruz, wrote at the end of the seventeenth-century. Furthermore, beginning with the works of the Guatemalan novelist Miguel Ángel Asturias and his Cuban contemporary Alejo Carpentier some fifty years ago, the literary style known as magic realism arose in Latin America itself and has spread outward from there to influence writers all over the globe, from Salman Rushdie in Pakistan and England to Robert Kroetsch in Canada.

Given these antecedents, then, it is often difficult for the Latino-Canadian writer to adapt to the frequently documentary, straightforward style of English Canadian poetry and prose while at the same time trying to maintain a place in the more avant-garde world of Latin American letters. Canadian critic Milan V. Dimic has commented that much "ethnic" writing in Canada, such as that of Ukrainian- and Italian-Canadian writers, is fun-

damentally conservative in its desire to recreate and preserve a reality that has been overwhelmed by historical change, but admits that “this option to remain traditional, does not apply, of course, to *émigrés* such as the Chilean writers in exile who are catering to Latin American audiences used to avant-garde writing” (Dimic 18). Though this clash of literary worlds is somewhat cushioned in Quebec by a greater openness to experimentation in francophone letters, the Latin American writer must also face the fact that his or her concerns as an exile may be far removed from those of English- or French-speaking writers and their audiences. Moreover, Canadian readers and reviewers are likely to be more interested in “foreign” Latin American writers who actually live in South or Central America than in “immigrant” authors of Latin American origin who are writing in Canada.

In terms of literary reception, the response to Latino-Canadian writing has been mixed. The works that have fared best are those that have been published by better-known presses and those that have been written directly in English or French. Certain works have been very favourably received and widely reviewed and commented on: this applies on the French side to the novel *Esteban*, by the Mexican novelist Gilberto Flores Patiño, and on the English one to a collection of short stories by Salvadoran writer Alfonso Quijada Urías, *The Better to See You*. Such a broad reception would seem to depend on an established press’s capability in promoting its publications. Despite its very positive reviews, for instance, actual sales of Quijada Urías’s book have remained extremely small, and government subsidies for its translation were impossible to come by due to the fact that its stories were set in El Salvador rather than Canada.



The language in which an author writes is also an important key to critical recognition. Works by authors such as the Argentines Alberto Manguel and Guillermo Verdecchio, who write in English specifically for an Anglophone audience, have been very well received indeed. This also applies in Quebec to authors such as Jacques Folch-Ribas, a Catalan raised primarily in France who writes in French and is now considered one of the leading novelists in French Canada. Writers who continue to work in Spanish are considered to be somehow foreign, even when translated into English or French, while those that write in one or the other of the two official languages are thought to have joined the mainstream. A recent special dossier on immigrant writers in *Lettres québécoises*, for example, limited itself solely to those who wrote directly in French; thus the only Latino-Québécois author to appear in the issue was the Uruguayan critic Javier García Méndez. Even authors such as the Chileans Alfredo Lavergne and Alberto Kurapel, both of whom have published widely in translation and enjoy a high degree of recognition in literary circles, were eliminated, along with virtually the entire body of Hispanic writing in Quebec (“De l’autre littérature québécoise” 2). The review *Ruptures*, despite its output of ten visually attractive and high-quality issues of poetry and prose from all over the Americas, published in four languages — including a special issue on Mexican literature that was widely acclaimed in Mexico itself and a massive issue on Quebec literature — has received hardly a mention in the Quebec press or other media. Given these rules of engagement for literary acceptance, then, many Latino-Canadian authors simply keep publishing in their native language, are promoted on local radio programs and in the Hispanophone or Lusophone press, and choose to remain in the parallel universe of Latino-Canadian letters.

## Latinocaná

The grounds for selecting the authors included in the present study are a complex interplay of geographical, cultural, and literary factors. Among the preliminary criteria are the actual presence of the author in Canada, the scale of his or her work, and the extent to which it has been previously translated into English. This anthology only includes writers who are still living in Canada; it does so in the hopes that it will be of help in making their work more accessible to the Canadian public and in developing increased contact with the worlds of Hispano-Canadian and Anglo-Canadian letters. Such a decision has meant, however, that some unique and intriguing writers with colorful backgrounds, such as the Chilean surrealist Ludwig Zeller, who now lives in Mexico, and the Uruguayan poet Maeve López — whom critic Stephen Henighan once called “the best-kept literary secret in Montreal” (Henighan K4) — but who has moved to Caracas, have not been included. Another talented writer, Naín Nómez, is both a skilful poet and a key figure in the development of Latino-Canadian writing but has returned to Chile, where he has acquired considerable renown as a critic and editor. His *Poesía chilena contemporánea* [*Contemporary Chilean Poetry*], an anthology of the principal Chilean poets of the twentieth-century — including Mistral, Neruda, Huidobro, and de Rokha — was co-published by the prestigious Fondo de Cultura Económica and Editorial Andrés Bello and is a defining work in modern Chilean literary history. Two of the first Chileans to publish in Montreal, the prize-winning poet Gonzalo Millán and his compatriot Nelly Davis Vallejos, have also returned to live in Chile and thus are not included.

Moreover, the authors who have been chosen have all produced a body of work consisting, at the least, of three or four books or manuscripts. The close focus and detailed critical analysis that has been allotted to the individual authors in the study made it imperative that each have a substantial *oeuvre* to investigate. It was also important that the anthology be completely composed of material that had not been previously translated into English. This again involved certain restraints, both in terms of the criteria for selection and the works of the authors included. Carmen Rodríguez, for example, who works with *Aquelarre* in Vancouver and has published a bilingual volume of poetry titled *Guerra prolongada/Protracted War* that examines exile and her homeland from a feminist point of view, is fully bilingual, and virtually all of her work has been translated into English, either by herself or others. Jorge Etcheverry, who is included in the present anthology, is the author of five published texts, three of which have been translated into English; the choice of his work was, therefore, limited to only two of his works. It must also be noted that the first selection in the present study of the novel *Homo eroticus*, by Leandro Urbina, appeared in an English translation by Christina Shantz in issue Number 1, Volume 2, of the review *Possibilitis* in late August, 1996, just as the present study was being finished; the translation included here, however, was made the month before. Latino-Canadian literature is an on-going field.

Great effort has been made to assure that the selection includes authors of varying national, regional, and — as much as possible — socio-economic backgrounds. Given the sheer number of good Chilean writers in Canada, for instance, it would be relatively easy to make an anthology of Chilean-Canadian work alone, as both Naín Nómez and Jorge Etcheverry have already done. Limiting the number of Chileans, however, has again meant leaving out some notable writers, such as Tito Alvarado of Winnipeg and

Montreal, Ramón Sepúlveda and Luciano Díaz of Ottawa, and Claudio Durán of Toronto. Furthermore, despite the relative strength of authors from the countries of the Southern Cone, it was felt that an overall balance among the various regions of Latin America was also necessary, so that Mexico, Central America, northern South America, and the Andean countries would be represented. Given the numbers of Salvadoran-Canadian writers now at work, for instance, it is quite likely that in the coming decade their influence will match that of the Chilean and Argentine authors who arrived in the 1970's. Salvador Torres of Montreal and René Rodas of Toronto are both well on the way to producing substantial bodies of poetry and fiction, while Ernesto Jobal Arzozales of Kitchener has published a book of short stories (with an introduction by Manlio Argueta) on life in the Salvadoran countryside and has several manuscripts of poetry and testimonial texts awaiting publication.

Balance also had to be achieved within Canada itself, so that not all the authors studied were from the Montreal-Ottawa-Toronto nexus in the two central provinces. Nela Rio, of Fredericton, and Alfonso Quijada Urías, of Vancouver, serve as partial balance to the pull of Canada's capital and two largest cities. Contacts were also made with writers in Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Calgary. Gender was a consideration, too. There are a large number of Latin American women writers in Canada; Daniel Inostrosa's *Antología de la poesía femenina latinoamericana en Canadá* included sixteen women poets and did not exhaust the field. Though authors such as the Peruvian poet Lady Rojas-Trempe have produced work of high quality, however, many women writers have not yet written a sustained enough body of material to subject to close analysis. Others, such as the Venezuelan poet and fiction writer Edith Velásquez de Málec, author of the manuscript novel *Una comedia no muy divina* [*A Not Very Divine Comedy*], are still

putting the final touches on their work. One noted woman writer, the Chilean filmmaker and short-story writer Marilú Mallet, who published two very well-received collections of short stories with Québec/Amérique in the 1980's, is now concentrating on cinema rather than fiction. Two other criteria were also important. In view of the powerful centrifugal forces exerted in Latin America by capital cities, great effort was made to include authors from both rural and urban environments and, within the latter group, to achieve some balance between those from the capital and others from smaller provincial cities. Finally, it was also necessary to find writers who were of differing backgrounds and socioeconomic levels, who had lived through a variety of circumstances (all of which, however, had ended in emigration from their native lands), and who had adjusted to life in Canada in different ways.

Perhaps, given both the linguistic alienation and the potential for self-discovery that are involved in the experience of exile, it would be fitting to end this introduction with the opening and closing verses of an untitled poem by the Chilean poet and songwriter Patricia Lazcano, who has recently experimented in writing in Spanish, French, and English simultaneously. Her lines mirror the flow of language through the mind of the displaced writer:

La lluvia tombe sur my window  
y me invita simplement  
to evoke your présence.

.....

La pluie qui tombe sur my hands  
me invita à m'asseoir  
at the table solitaire. (unpublished poem)

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**JORGE ETCHEVERRY**

The poetry and prose of Jorge Etcheverry are the works of a linguistic explorer in search of new forms of expression and ways of subverting the conventional. As one of the four founding members of the "School of Santiago," a group of young poets of the 1960's who believed in an intertextual, fragmentary, and urbanized form of literary art, Etcheverry has continued to push the limits of writing from his exile in Ottawa and has also become a publisher and critic of Latino-Canadian letters. He has published in many literary reviews in Canada and the United States, sometimes under the assumed name of Patrick Phillmore, and is also an accomplished painter and sketcher.

Etcheverry was born in 1945 in Santiago, Chile. His mother and father were both employed by a bank, though his mother also became politically active in the Unidad Popular, the umbrella group of political parties that supported Salvador Allende. Jorge attended public primary and secondary school, though he also studied one year in a private English-language institute and at one time had a French tutor. As a child, he read omnivorously, especially from the personal library of his grandfather, who had been a military officer in the left-of-centre government of General Carlos Ibáñez in the 1950's. His early interests ran to French literature (Hugo, Balzac), the occult and the paranormal (Mme. Blavatsky), and science fiction. His father had a subscription to the Argentine science fiction magazine *Más Allá*, which included stories by American authors such as Ray Bradbury, Isaac Asimov, and Robert Heinlein.



By the time he entered secondary school, Jorge was already painting and writing poetry. He studied English and French, both of which were obligatory at the time, as well as philosophy and psychology, and often spent part of the afternoon or evening listening to radio plays, which included works by Oscar Wilde and other playwrights, as well as dramatized versions of classic novels such as *Manon Lescault*. In poetry, he read works by classic Spanish authors such as the nineteenth-century romantic José de Espronceda and Federico García Lorca, as well as Pablo Neruda. He also had a keen interest in world literature and as an adolescent read Goethe, Hesse, Stefan Zweig, H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walter Scott, Jules Verne, the Italian satirist and futurist Giovanni Papini, the austere Swedish novelist Pär Lagerkvist (author of *The Dwarf* and *Barabbas*), Françoise Sagan, and James Joyce. Out of this heterogeneous choice of authors grew the seeds of Etcheverry's later interest in psychology, exoticism, science fiction, the grotesque, and the avant-garde.

Jorge entered the Instituto Pedagógico of the University of Chile in 1965. Though he was by now regularly painting figurative canvases and would like to have studied at the School of Fine Arts, he initially chose the more practical teaching of philosophy as a career program and later switched to literature. He also at this time became involved in leftist politics and entered the newly formed MIR (Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionario, or Revolutionary Movement of the Left), which followed the political thought of Che Guevara and exerted constant leftward pressure on both the Christian Democratic government of Eduardo Frei and later on Allende himself. Etcheverry's poetry began to change rapidly during his university years, first moving into a singular interplay of chorus, strophe, and antistrophe based on his readings of Aeschylus and then mov-

ing forward to the discontinuous, experimental, hallucinatory style that still characterizes his work today. Jorge's readings during his university years had turned to the avant-garde and included Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Eliot, Pound, Saint-John Perse, Whitman, Beckett, Kafka, the phantasmagoric work of the Uruguayan Felisberto Hernández, Kerouac, Ginsberg, and the Whitmanesque Chilean poet Pablo de Rokha — as well as Gurdjieff and Ouspensky (even as a *mirista*, his interest in the occult continued).

The literary atmosphere, like its political counterpart, at the University of Chile during the late 1960's was one of great ebullience. Ariel Dorfman and Antonio Skármeta were on the faculty; Gonzálo Millán, Leandro Urbina, and Marilú Mallet, all of whom were later to emigrate to Canada, were also writing and studying there. Various literary groups were formed, including the Grupo América, which gave readings both at literary venues and in the *poblaciones*, or shantytowns, outside the capital. The nature of poetry itself, especially in its potential as an avant-garde and revolutionary medium, was intensely discussed, and there was a great deal of questioning and subversion of existing literary structures and trying out of new techniques in form and style. In 1966, Etcheverry and three other poets — Naín Nómez, Erik Martínez, and Julio Piñones — joined together to form the "School of Santiago," a poetic and artistic movement that believed that the new poetry must be primarily urban, personal (prefiguring post-modernism), and as fragmented as urban life itself. The group was to have an immediate impact on Chilean letters, and the avant-garde poet Raúl Zurita has said that its members were "precursors of the New Vanguard of the 1980's" (personal interview). Nómez, Martínez, and Etcheverry would all eventually end up in Ottawa, while Piñones stayed in Chile during the dictatorship. Though the individual members of the group

never completely agreed on a plan of action — their published manifesto consisted of four individual tracts — they did all believe that the idolatry of Pablo Neruda and the calculated flatness of Nicanor Parra’s “anti-poetry” had both become conventions that held sway over Chilean poetry but had lost their relevance. Likewise, Chile had industrialized and urbanized to the extent that Santiago, Valparaíso, Concepción, and the other large cities now dominated the national consciousness; poetry that simply extolled the beauties of the countryside was no longer of primary significance.

Among the characteristics that united the young poets, Etcheverry himself points to “the long poem; a kind of de-lyricizing of the subject that permitted the inclusion of elements that were more distanced from the real and that sometimes were part of the fantastic; and, also, a sort of exacerbation of the rhythmic aspect and of the fragmentation of the poem” (qtd. in Bianchi 114)\*. “HERE THERE DOES NOT EXIST EITHER POETRY OR PROSE: HERE ALL THAT EXISTS IS THE WORD — powerful, undifferentiated —” wrote Etcheverry in his section of the Manifesto of the School of Santiago (*Orfeo* 229). He and his associates were groping for a new kind of poetry as revolutionary as their politics (though, curiously, they did not insist, as Neruda had, on a connection between the two): a poetry that could enter into prose and move back again, a *texte éclaté* in which various voices could intrude and images abound, in long, complex lines. Within recent Chilean poetry, they found a predecessor in the uninhibited, Whitmanesque exuberance of the poetry of Pablo de Rokha, whose “way of

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\*This and all succeeding translations are by the author of the present study unless otherwise indicated.

writing . . . was important for almost all of us: forceful, using long paragraphs, rhythmically charged, and with an idea of the poem as a fragment. You could almost say that de Rokha's poetry consists of one enormous long poem that continually coalesces and disintegrates" (qtd. in Millán 53). Indeed, the School of Santiago was influential in the reappraisal and revival of De Rokha's oracular and exultant work, which had been eclipsed by that of the other two great Chilean writers of the nation's avant-garde in the first half of the century, Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda. Other poets in the same tradition, such as Lautréamont (for his prose poetry), Whitman, Pound (especially his *Pisan Cantos*), Lorca (particularly the surrealistic and urban *Poeta en Nueva York*), Ginsberg, and Kerouac, were also important figures for the members of the group (personal interview).

Considering that they were still young, unpublished poets and university students (and that none of them would bring out an entire book until well after the coup d'état in 1973), the members of the School of Santiago received a great deal of attention in the Chilean media. An interview with them appeared in the Santiago daily *La Nación* in 1967, and in 1968 they were invited by the critic Jorge Vélez to publish short selections of their work, along with their manifesto, in an anthology he was editing for the literary journal *Orfeo*, to be called *Treinta y tres nombres claves de la actual poesía chilena* [*Thirty-Three Key Names in Contemporary Chilean Poetry*]. Their inclusion in the anthology caused a certain stir in the literary milieu of young and experimental poets, and some criticism was voiced that their work was not politicized enough. Nevertheless, they were invited to appear on Chilean television, where they were interviewed by Antonio Skármeta, and their work was solicited for literary reviews in Germany and Mexico. The group began to become less active after Allende's election in

1970, however, when literary activity in general was eclipsed as the level of political activity at the University of Chile went from intense to frenetic.

The poems included in the selection of Jorge's work in *Orfeo* show to what an extent his style had already matured. They are deliberately fragmentary, consisting of poem I from a work titled "G" and poems VIII, I, II, and IV (in that order) from the unidentified longer poem "X." Though the poet was only twenty-three years old when they were published, most of the major formal and stylistic elements that characterize his work even today are already present: the lines of varying length that occasionally change to prose paragraphs and back again (222); the spontaneous use of dashes, accompanied by an almost complete absence of periods (dashes are telegraphic and open-ended, while periods signal closure) (221, 224); the use of multiple voices, neologisms ("autodiálogos" ["autodialogues"]) (223), odd spellings ("noventaisiete" instead of the conventional "noventa y siete"), and contradictions ("We have to speak of the things that constitute the framework for our references, I'm lying, it's not the framework" (223); a certain lyrical element that includes images of the sea; and unexpected and often bizarre images ("Like the inside of the eyelids of people who cross the desert with their eyes closed. In order not to go blind" (221). The content also has a characteristic touch of science fiction, in this case combined with revolutionary or clandestine undertakings. Much of the activity of the poems seems to take place at night; and there is a fascination with all that is marginal, in this case including a party of beggars in a garbage dump (224). Although there is a degree of chaos or hermeticism in this first anthologized selection of Etcheverry's work, the poetic independence, technical ability, and desire to transcend and transgress the existing limits of poetic expression are remarkable in such an early work.

Following the coup d'état in 1973, Etcheverry began looking for a country of asylum. Naín Nómez emigrated to Canada and settled in Ottawa, where he had a friend studying at Carleton University. In 1975, Jorge and his young wife (who was pregnant), also went to Ottawa, where their daughter was born. Jorge enrolled at Carleton, where he began teaching part-time as he worked on a master's degree in Spanish literature. Though far fewer Chileans had chosen to settle in Ottawa than in Montreal or Toronto, the number of writers among them was impressive: besides Nómez and Etcheverry, there were also Erik Martínez, Leandro Urbina, Gonzalo Millán, Manuel Alcides Jofré, Luis Lama, Ramón Sepúlveda, Arturo Lazo, and others. Reflecting the relative importance of poetry in Chilean culture, the Chilean Association of Ottawa would regularly ask the exiled poets to read at *peñas* of solidarity with Chile, or at other social or political gatherings. These events would involve Chileans of all political tendencies, though on a daily basis Chilean immigrants and refugees tended to group together according to their political affiliations established in Chile (and many of the writers were *miristas*).

After Leandro Urbina founded Ediciones Cordillera in Ottawa in 1979 with the specific purpose of publishing Chilean-Canadian and Hispanic-Canadian work, the Ottawa poets began to hold more readings and evenings dedicated solely to poetry. The indefatigable Christina Shantz also began to translate much of their work into English, and books and anthologies of Chilean-Canadian writers began to appear. Jorge's first book, *El evasioneista/The Escape Artist: Poems 1968-1980*, was published by Cordillera in 1980 in a bilingual edition translated by Christina Shantz and contains black-and-white illustrations by the author. There is no indication as to when the various poems were published, so it is impossible to

follow the author's chronological development; but perhaps there is no need to, for stylistically the poems are part of the aesthetics laid out in Etcheverry's manifesto in 1968 and continue in the same vein as the work he published in *Orfeo* in Chile. Again there is the fascination with the work-in-progress, which is continually becoming rather than a creation of static being: thus many of the poems are simply named "State of Things 1" or "Fragment 5." Again there are also long lines, occasionally interspersed with very short ones, but more often assuming paragraph form and then breaking down once more into individual verses. Etcheverry also continues to prefer dashes to other forms of punctuation, but now makes more frequent use of completely capitalized words for extra emphasis.

The tone, however, has changed somewhat from Etcheverry's earliest work: it is more discursive, relaxed, and colloquial. The poet has also begun to include bits of "flat" material such as conversations filled with clichés or expected information, somewhat in the style of certain novels of Réjean Ducharme, such as *L'hiver de force*. These banalities and truisms are used in counterpoint to flights of imaginative and even capricious imagery and seem intended to point out the dullness and predictability of many human exchanges in the midst of unexplored creative possibilities. Moreover, the speaker will often interject decidedly "unpoetic" phrases such as "To get back to the subject at hand" (13), or "Something else, let's say it straight" (111), or even the comical "the cheapest kind / to be found in K Mart (there is no Spanish word for that)" (17), as distancing elements to insure the tone does not become too elevated. On the other hand, he frequently uses imperatives such as "Listen" (43) or "Look" (99), or even whole sentences beginning with imperatives, as in "A Drowsiness of Birds II" (105), in order to bring a sense of immediacy to the poem.

The themes of *El evasionista/The Escape Artist* are as protean as in the work published in *Orfeo*, shifting from one stanza or paragraph to another, and yet many of the poems seem at least to consist of certain thematic clusters in which one or more threads stand out over the others. Moreover, the three sections of the book are quite distinct. It is noteworthy that the first poem in the collection, "The Winged Dog," as well as the very last, "Epigraph for the School of Santiago," should deal quite matter-of-factly with the historiography of Etcheverry and his friends' poetic development and the ensuing onset of artistic fossilization that set in on them in Ottawa. In a sense, the two poems frame the work by setting its chronological parameters. Throughout the first section, there is an interplay between apocalyptic depression as the speaker witnesses the triumph of violence and militarism and the dogged hope that some new and higher form of human interchange may be possible, or that perhaps even already exists in simply experiencing each moment of enjoyment as completely as possible. Often, as in "State of Things I" and "Ahimsa," the speaker takes on a prophetic, visionary persona, recounting dramatic scenes he has witnessed in a tone that oscillates between the Biblical and the futuristic. It is a world of archetypal images juxtaposed in a certain medieval surrealism:

The girl of the tales and the golden braids  
picking ripening cherries, barefoot on the snow  
A blind cat perched on the Gate of the Sun  
Ragged bands of people pass by, maddened with  
hunger (23)

Yet within this chaotic landscape, bands of clandestine fighters and militants struggle to spread revolutionary justice "like a Red Flower" (23) across the earth.



The second and third sections of the *El evasionista/The Escape Artist*, however, draw back a bit from the hills of Armageddon to examine aspects of human relationships that may eventually free people from the hell they have made for themselves as a world society. Here the speaker (or speakers) of the various poems often bursts into a surprising lyricism, either about women ("Dawn"), the netherworld of dreams ("Dream's Advent"), or the inability of humans to understand the natural world ("Transverse Cats on Blue Ground at an Uncertain Hour"). Beneath the surrealist imagery, there is often an echo of esoteric philosophy, though stated in an unusual way. "Central Flower," for example, is an odyssey in search of the meaning of human coupling that ends with this strange twist on Tantric thought: "When the TARANTULA OF SEX or the STARFISH OF SEX / may be discerned at the CENTRE OF ALL PROCESSES" (57). "A Caucus of Quail" parodies the twelfth-century Sufi text *The Conference of the Birds*, by Farid Ud-Din Attar, but instead of finding enlightenment, the Chilean immigrants of the poem encounter a grey reality of "heavy shoes, the rat of inflation, ill-fitting / clothes" and "On Saturday morning, the immigrants fill MacDonald's to / overflowing" (113), a reality in which their dreams of revolution slowly wither and fade.

In addition to his writing, Etcheverry also continued his academic career during the 1970's and 1980's. He finished his master's degree in Spanish at Carleton with a thesis on the Argentine writer Manuel Puig, studied comparative literature at the University of Ottawa, and began and abandoned a doctorate in Spanish literature at Laval (where he met the Spanish writer of literature of the fantastic, Antonio Risco). He then enrolled at the Université de Montréal, where he completed his doctorate in comparative literature with a thesis comparing the novels of Samuel

Beckett with those of the Chilean writer José Donoso. One of his long-term literary interests has been the comparison of Quebec and Chilean poetry, and in the mid-1980's he presented a paper comparing the work of Gaston Miron with that of Pablo Neruda. Etcheverry has also been a pioneer, along with Margarita Feliciano, in critical work on Latin American writing in Canada, on which he has presented a number of papers and has published articles in journals both in Canada (*Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, *Canadian Fiction*, *Canadian Ethnic Studies*, and *Arc*) and Chile (*Araucaria*). Curiously, although he worked as a lecturer while at Carleton and the Université de Montréal, he did not go into academia when he obtained his doctorate, but instead has preferred to work as a specialized translator in electronics, which perhaps gives him more time to write.

In the early 1980's, Jorge met Patrick White, who was then editor of the Ottawa-based literary journal *Anthos*. He also participated in the "Convergencias" readings by people of different nationalities that were organized by Leandro Urbina, where he met Patrick Lane, Lorna Crozier, and Paul Savoie, a writer from St. Boniface. These readings have led to many others at gatherings of writers from different ethnic groups, and Etcheverry has now read with Pakistanis, Kurds, Jamaicans, and authors from various parts of Africa. He is also in sporadic contact with writers in the Ottawa area such as John Metcalfe, Francis Itani, Cyril Dabydeen, and Gary Geddes.

Furthermore, Jorge has published a very large amount of material — including poems, short stories and *mini-ficciones* in English, French, and Spanish (as well as pen-and-ink drawings) — in an array of literary journals and newspapers including *Now*, *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Vice Versa*, *Indigo*, *The Antigonish Review*, *Waves*, *Existere*, *Possibilitis*, and *Revista*

*canadiense de estudios hispánicos* in English Canada; *Urgences, Moebius, L'Apropos*, and *Ruptures* in Quebec; *The Americas Review* and *Texts* in the United States; *Lar* in Chile; and other reviews in the Netherlands, Cuba, and Spain. His work is also well represented in anthologies of Hispanic-Canadian writing in Canada. Moreover, he has frequently published under the name of his alter ego, Patrick Phillmore (created in 1983), a poet who rejects Jorge's involved aesthetics in favour of a direct, purposefully deflated poetry that Jorge has described as "a kind of anti-poetry in English" (personal interview). Poems and drawings by Patrick Phillmore have appeared in *Tidepole, The Tower, Drum, Skinny, Bouillabaise*, and *International Poetry Review*. Following the establishment of Ediciones Cordillera in the late 1970's, Jorge participated on its editorial board; in the mid-1980's, however, he and his *compañera* of the time, Paulette Turcotte, founded Split Quotation Press/Ediciones La Cita Trunca, under the imprimatur of which he brought out his second book, *The Witch*, in 1985. Since then, Split Quotation has brought out a variety of other works, chiefly by Chilean-Canadians, in both English and Spanish.

Despite its unilingual title, *The Witch* was a bilingual Spanish-English edition, translated by Paulette Turcotte and illustrated by the author. It is also a text that continually straddles the line between poetry and prose. Though blocked off into generally unindented paragraphs, periods are again usually missing, and the various sections fit together more as a collage or mosaic than as a linearly coherent work; moreover, the text breaks into poetry (of variable lengths of line) in the last few pages. "It should be read in an intellectual rather than Kantian way," says Etcheverry, "without looking for any necessary transcendence" (personal interview). The narrator is an unidentified immigrant who shares at least part of the

interests and trajectory of Etcheverry himself. His discourse is an ironic but increasingly claustrophobic description of his progressive marginalization in Ottawa as old friendships fall apart and he moves away from his wife and child; he experiences increasing disorientation as a highly urban bohemian obsessed with the written word who finds himself living in an essentially audio-visual, suburban or rural-inspired culture; and his sexual fantasies and dreams begin to be dominated by succubi. Into his life comes *The Witch*, a woman from the countryside who has “burnt down the farm buildings, dispersed her cattle, frightened away the dogs” (29). Far from being a malevolent hag, however, she is a young woman in touch with deep telluric forces, a brewer of magical herbal potions who has lived alone in the narrator’s parodic conception of the Canadian bush, and she proves to be — despite the speaker’s protestations — a perfect complement to his aesthetic cerebralism and obdurate scientific materialism. The reader is thus surprised to find that, beneath the disjointed, tentative, sometimes obtuse nature of the text, *The Witch* is ultimately a love story.

Etcheverry’s next book was *La calle* [*The Street*], a collection of poems principally about the coup d’état in Chile and its aftermath. It was also his first book to appear in Chile, where it was published by Editorial Sinfronteras in 1986, as military censorship began to erode. *La calle* is the only work of his poetry not yet fully translated into English; several extracts from it are included in the selection of his work that follows this essay. What is remarkable about the book is that its style and form are radically different from the rest of Etcheverry’s work and far removed from his stated aesthetic principles. This time, perhaps in rebellion from the restrictions of his own parameters, Jorge has opted for a simple, unadorned style in which each short piece deals precisely with a given

theme. The content is factual, without direct intervention from the speaker, and most of the poems are constructed around a single, indirect, encompassing metaphor. The lines, which all begin flush with the left-hand margin, are relatively short and are devoid of extraneous images. Though the undercurrent of anarchic humour of his other works is also absent, it is compensated for by a dry, realistic irony that suits the somber subject matter of the text. Fear, hatred, and distrust are omnipresent; the point of view, however, is sometimes that of the population and at others that of the military themselves, affording a painful but effective view of the degree of dehumanization necessary to enforce the dictatorship, from the tyrant himself down to the common soldier. The poem "Recommendations," for instance, is indicative of how the troops who carried out actions against their own people were taught to fear and distrust the general population; it is a nightmare vision of a military that has become a caste unto itself and then has turned upon its citizens:

Don't smoke at night  
 Consider every civilian your enemy  
 Make the uniform respected wherever you go  
 More than anything else  
 Uphold the prestige of your weapons  
 The school tradition  
 The name of the homeland  
 Remember especially  
 Not to speak to anyone on the street  
 Not to take your finger off the trigger  
 Don't accept cigarettes from strangers  
 Walk in pairs  
 Mentally repeating the current password to yourself  
 Don't keep anything from a raid  
 And above all  
 Show no weakness  
 Never forget the password. (*Compañeros* 260)

Jorge's next book, *Tánger* [*Tangiers*], was co-published in 1990 by Cordillera in Ottawa and Documentas in Santiago and includes the Spanish text of *The Witch* at the end. An English version of *Tánger* has been translated by Jorge and Sharon Khan and will be published by Split Quotation in the fall of 1996. *Tánger* is a collection of some fifty-four unnamed, unnumbered poems, the shortest of which consists of two lines and the longest of three pages; formally, there are poems using short, staccato lines as well as others with much longer ones or written in paragraphs. All, however, are unified by the central image of the seaport. Few specific geographical references are given beyond Valparaíso, Ottawa, and the title itself, Tangiers, which is a symbol for the mixing of cultures and the interaction of peoples and even literatures (Jean Genet, Paul Bowles, William Burroughs, and Mohammed Mrabet — to name a few — all wrote there). Yet the seaport (especially Chile's largest port, Valparaíso) is also a metonym for Chile itself, a nation that is quintessentially identified with the sea, whose border runs only three hundred kilometres inland, but which has over four thousand kilometres of coastline (not including the innumerable islands of its southern archipelago). There is, moreover, a constant association between the first person plural used by the various speakers in the poems and the recurring images of seagulls and other maritime birds.

Within the context of its maritime imagery, however, the book touches on a variety of themes, from the celebration of women and cosmopolitanism to the ravages of civilization on maritime fauna (and humans), the difficulty in maintaining revolutionary fervour in the developed world, and the possible disappearance in the audio-visual society of the tradition of literary bohemianism. Despite the fact that the speakers are of all ages and sexes, the principal narrator seems to be an exile and

poet who is speaking of his generation. A notable split has occurred, though, in Etcheverry's earlier enthusiasm for the urban environment as the key context of modern relevancy: the port, with its vast mixing of peoples and languages, continues to be a positive urban symbol; industrial production, however, especially in terms of capitalist exploitation, is now a negative phenomenon associated with the destruction of the natural world. Nowhere else in Etcheverry's work, in fact, is nature so lyrically presented, often simply for the pleasure found in naming and describing all that comes from the sea and sometimes in order to elaborate metaphorical comparisons between the ocean or the seaport and women.

The tone of the poems has also softened: it is now gentler, more playful, sometimes even serene. Various devices are still used, however, to break down and subvert the poeticalness of the text, thus continually renewing its primary function of communicating in a poetic way rather than letting it become a construct. These stratagems include contradictions, anecdotal diversions, clichés, repetition, lapses into minimalism, unidentified quotations, sudden changes in point of view, and the placing of portions of text or even whole poems in italics or parentheses (or both). Such techniques also enliven the text by adding a whimsical, unexpected, sometimes comical element. At times the speaker also plays with the reader's perceptions by first describing something with no identifiable end in mind and then developing it into a metaphor, as in the following example:

The small citrus fruits  
with their thin, dry skins  
of intense orange,  
and a fine network of white threads within,  
thickly wrapping together the sweet,  
but lightly acidic segments

Such are the days we bite into,  
 the solar food that rejuvenates us  
 and makes us lazy.  
 This is helped along by a liquor  
 something like brandy  
 but sweet (41)

Jorge's two latest works have been in prose. "Dreamshaping" is a sizable short story (almost a novella) that was published along with the work of three other Chilean-Canadian authors in the anthology *Exilium tremens* by Éditions Omélic of Montreal in 1991. It tells the story of one François Laffayette, an Anglophone of Francophone descent who grows up in Medicine Hat, Alberta, and later moves to Ottawa and Montreal in order to become a writer. During his quest for a literary vocation, however, François begins to develop a mental process called "Dreamshaping" that is later to revolutionize human communication: it permits humans to realize their fantasies or wishes by mentally saturating themselves with them as they write them down. The whole tale is, in fact, a satirical picaresque based on alienation and marginalization. Alone and unemployed, François moves to Montreal in order to get in touch with his roots and enrolls in a government-sponsored course of French as a second language, only to become the laughingstock of his immigrant classmates, who can't understand what a Canadian with a Francophone name is doing stammering out his first words in French along with them. The narrative, told in third person by a biographer who occasionally speaks directly to the reader, is filled with post-modernist touches such as references to other biographies of François (who has become one of the key figures in world history after his discovery of Dreamshaping), allusions to rumours and other spurious sources of information, and mention of several Chilean friends François



has had, including a possible contact with Pablo Jorquera, whose name closely resembles that of the protagonist of Etcheverry's next novel, in Paris. François's isolation in Canadian society is, of course, a mirror image of that of the foreign exile, even in its linguistic aspect.

The novel *De chácharas y largavistas* [*Small Talk and Binoculars*], which was brought out by La Cita Trunca/Split Quotation in Ottawa in 1993, is Jorge's latest major work. This novel, written in the third person, details twenty-four hours in the life of Pedro Jorquera, or "P.J.," as he is known to his Anglophone friends, a Chilean exile living alone in Ottawa. Older and just as isolated as François in "Dreamshaping," Pedro (also referred to as "The Observer") spends much of his time wandering about the city observing life around him and meditating on his past as a political activist in Chile (from which he feels increasingly distant and even imagines it was somebody else). He has also developed a proclivity for spying on and fantasizing about a nubile neighbour (an activity which is given a boost by his discovery of a pair of abandoned binoculars). Pedro does have a limited circle of friends who haunt the city's cafés and bars with him and includes several Latin Americans of different nationalities, as well as the somewhat cantankerous but intellectually vital Patrick Phillmore. Pedro's most meaningful recent human contact, in fact, was several years previously with Patrick's sister, Patricia. Toward the end of the novel, Pedro returns home from an excursion to the nightclubs of "The Other Side" (Hull), discovers that the object of his voyeuristic attentions is (he thinks) being molested by her boyfriend, and actually enters her house in order to save her. Pedro's passivity and preference for watching rather than acting are emblematic of his long-term alienation and disorientation as an exile, a young and idealistic Chilean militant who finds himself washed ashore by

the tide of history onto a depoliticized, consumer-obsessed land seven thousand kilometres from his birthplace. Exile has largely reduced him to observer status in life. The novel is interspersed with poems by Patrick Phillmore that comment upon the action. One of them, "Lifestyle," seems particularly relevant to Pedro's forlorn existence:

I couldn't really say  
My way of life is tremendous  
though at least  
I do like it a bit

But  
I can't help noticing that  
it's definitely been below  
my expectations

For about  
the last  
ten years or so (45)

*De chácharas y largavistas* represents a vanishing point for the Chilean refugee who has been in Canada for over twenty years without assimilating, but has adopted a cyst-like symbiosis within the body politic of the host country. It stands in contrast, however, to the literary life of its author, who has adapted his creative and publishing interests well to his new environment, and who has a range of future projects in both Hispanic-Canadian letters and Latin American literature in general.

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- . "Recommendations." Trans. Hugh Hazelton. *Compañeros: An Anthology of Writings About Latin America*. Ed. Hugh Hazelton and Gary Geddes. Dunvegan, Ont.: Cormorant, 1990. 259-260.
- . *Tánger*. Santiago, Chile: Documentas; Ottawa: Cordillera, 1990.
- . *The Witch*. Trans. Paulette Turcotte and Jorge Etcheverry. Ottawa: Split Quotation, 1985.

## PRINCIPAL WORKS OF JORGE ETCHEVERRY

### POETRY

#### A. Books

*La calle.* Colección Manieristas. Santiago, Chile: Sinfronteras, 1986.

*El evasioneista/The Escape Artist: Poems 1968-1980.* Trans. Christina Shantz. Ottawa: Cordillera, 1981.

*Tánger.* Santiago, Chile: Documentas; Ottawa: Cordillera, 1990.

*The Witch.* Trans. Paulette Turcotte and Jorge Etcheverry. Ottawa: Split Quotation, 1985.

#### B. Poems published in anthologies and journals

"Carnet de crapaud." Trans. Manon Bilbeau. "Viriato." Trans. Geneviève-Ann Rogers. *La présence d'une autre Amérique: Anthologie des écrivains latino-américains du Québec.* N.ed. Montréal: Naine Blanche, 1990.

"Consumerism & Guilt." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *Arc* 35 (1995) 46-48.

"Estado y sistema," "Parábola," and "Oda a una mujer enferma de las tiroides." *Enjambres: Poesía latinoamericana en el Quebec.* Montreal: Cordillera/Enana Blanca/Gallo Rojo, 1990.

"Ethnical Blues," "El pueblo"/"The People," "Flor central"/"Central Flower," and "Cuaderno del sapo"/"Toad's Notebook." Trans. Christina Shantz. *Chilean Literature in Canada/Literatura chilena en Canadá.* Ed. Naín Nómez. Ottawa: Cordillera, 1982.

"The Fence," "The Torturer," and "Recommendations." Trans. Hugh Hazelton. *Compañeros: An Anthology of Writings About Latin America.* Ed. Hugh Hazelton and Gary Geddes. Dunvegan, Ont.: Cormorant, 1990.

"G," "X," and "Manifiesto de la 'Escuela de Santiago'." *Treinta y tres nombres claves de la actual poesía chilena.* *Orfeo* (Santiago, Chile) 33-38 (1968). 220-225, 228-229.

## FICTION

### A. Novel

*De chácharas y largavistas*. Ottawa: La Cita Trunca/Split Quotation, 1993.

### B. Short stories published in anthologies and reviews

"De aquí y de allá"/Here and There," "Calle con gaviotas"/"Street with Seagulls," and "En eso andábamos"/"That's What We Were Up To." Trans. Christina Shantz. *Chilean Literature in Canada/Literatura chilena en Canadá*. Ed. Naín Nómez. Ottawa: Cordillera, 1982.

"Dreamshaping." *Exilium tremens*. N.ed. Montreal: Omélic, 1991.

"Dream with Guaracha." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *The Americas Review* (Univ. of Houston) 19.2 (1991): 14-17.

"Fame." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *Symbiosis in Prose: An Anthology of Short Fiction*. Ed. Luciano P. Díaz. Ottawa: Split Quotation, 1995.

*Logbook* (extract). Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *Arc* 35 (1995) 45-46.

"Men & Spiders (United and Divided)." Trans. Pauline Turcotte. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 61/62 (1987): 176-181.

"Poissons." *Alter Vox: Poetas chilenos en Canadá/Chilean Poetry, Canadian Branch*. N.ed. Ottawa: Split Quotation, 1996.

"Reflexión hacia el sur"/"Reflecting on the South." *Antología de literatura hispano-canadiense/An Anthology of Hispano-Canadian Writing*. Ed. José R. Varela and Richard A. Young. Edmonton: APEDECHE, 1987.

"Strategy." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *Hispanic-Canadian Connections. Canadian Literature* 142-143 (1994): 62.

"A Ticket to Santiago." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *Northern Cronopios: Chilean Novelists and Short Story Writers in Canada*. Ed. Jorge Etcheverry. Ottawa: Split Quotation, 1993.

"Twin Beds." Trans. Sharon Khan and Jorge Etcheverry. *The Americas Review* (Univ. of Houston) 19.2 (1991): 12-14.

"Written on a Blank Page." Trans. Diego Bastiunutti. *Canadian Fiction Magazine* 36/37 (1980): 148-150.

Selections from *La calle* [*The Street*]

by Jorge Etcheverry

## The Satraps

Sunk in contemplation  
of the void that seems to fill their heads  
Listening to the echo of their leaden footsteps  
Blind to the eyes of others  
Alone in the world, though not so alone  
Feeling hate sprout up around them  
like sudden vast wheatfields

Dreaming their dreams of blood and gold  
never satisfied  
Condemned someday to die shattered  
Or to expire, rotting  
in their own petrified bodies.

## The Permanence of Voice

When literature went off  
with the ashes of the last books  
a word began to flower  
soaked in sunlight and blood  
copied on the backs of bus transfers  
whispered secretly in movie theatres  
While those walking  
along the double hostility of the streets  
with their scissors for cutting tongues  
and the newscasters invented  
a silence of words.

## The Hard Stone

They have harvested people like ripe wheat  
They have emptied women like gloves turned inside out  
They have turned bodies into infinite maps of pain  
Hunger has enlarged the black pupils of children  
They have changed life into sweat  
and sweat into salt and blood  
and blood into fresh weapons  
and weapons again into hunger

They have separated the vast human flocks  
But they have not been able to pulverize their spines.



## Perfection

The best poetry is that which is read in private  
not spoken out loud  
The hardest coin is the one that is kept  
not spent  
And even  
The most beautiful women are models  
not lovers

Just as the freshest drinks have no taste  
and efficient torture leaves no marks on the body  
they've been careful to clean all the beggars off the streets  
change out of uniform into civilian clothes  
fill the Alameda with gardens  
the radios with silence  
the newspapers with blank space.

## Eminence

A horseman comes by. Then four of them. One stays while the others disappear over the horizon, beyond the mountains, beyond the masses of people.

His horse finishes off everything green. Its hooves dry up all the earth beneath them. Its breath desiccates the air, eliminates the rain.

Horse and rider stop in the middle of the plaza and turn to stone. The volume and edge of people's ribs increase, while their lips become parched. Skin shrivels on stomachs. Flesh becomes sear; eyes dilate.

Men sit on the curb, their strength sapped. Women lie on beds and children abandon their toys, while the bottoms of cooking pots simmer with cobwebs.

## Report

Listen:

When the Great March of the Dark Years  
expelled us from the cities of Latin America  
The sun over our heads was a slice of lemon

We went for a final walk before leaving  
We heard the vultures hiss

—Someone was proclaiming the news on a deserted street.

## Newcomer News

Get off the plane  
Don't ask anyone anything (you don't speak English)  
let them stamp your visa and go through your suitcases  
Search for someone you know  
Try to tell things about back there if they ask  
Go to a hotel  
Have somebody accompany you to Manpower  
Play your cards right so they'll give you the course  
Learn how to say, "I need some help"  
Buy used furniture  
Don't be afraid of the locals  
Don't stop buses with your finger  
Clean floors, work at whatever you can  
Don't try to speak with the neighbours  
or think you're rich  
when you buy a used car  
Let the time pass  
Try to read a bit of news from Chile in the newspaper.

Slides  
for Leutén Rojas

The back of the nation has borne this situation for many years. I suppose it must be getting tired. None of the rocks, trees, or suburbs of the city seems to be awake. None of those pallid faces carved from stone seems to be alive. None of those debilitated minds seems prepared to fight. The soldiers look like they're made of stone, standing on street corners, guarding government offices. Or driving dusty, heavy death machines. Or just standing there in front of a store, slowly smoking cigarettes with confidence and patience, their rifles slung over their shoulders, day after day. Can you listen to the news; can you read the papers?

But maybe you can notice something else, unspoken, forgotten by us, the people who watch and blame themselves. From the other side of the world.

## Children and Planes

The planes will cross the sky of these vast cities  
and we will tell the children  
that ask with their hands raised  
that they are headed for Chile

While they learn an accented Spanish  
that they speak within the four walls of their homes  
and invent a country with a geography of dreams.

from the novel *De chácharas y largavistas* [*Small Talk and Binoculars*]

*Easier said than done.* One morning on a day in early summer, The Observer was strolling along a well-known boulevard whose name need not be mentioned here, when a strong wind suddenly began to blow, forcing him to take shelter in a modern shopping centre familiar to everyone.

He had just cashed his last miserable unemployment insurance cheque and was feeling more or less secure, at least for the next thirty days, thanks to the way of looking at things in the short term he had been acquiring lately — or perhaps had always had. When the present month was over, he would (seriously, now) have to start looking for a job again, re-enter the ruthless jungle in search of anything. His expectations would undoubtedly diminish with every box he crossed out in the “Help Wanted” ads in the newspaper, with every failed interview in which he felt ever more insignificant, aware that he was no longer young (in this milieu being old or even middle-aged was considered a sin); he would swallow his pride about his lengthy studies in his indeterminate country of origin (all of them now totally useless) and would apologize for his lack of experience, for the frequent and obvious holes in his curriculum vitae. “Please don’t take the past ten years too much into account”: another job hunter had once passed this escape clause on to him in a whisper — something that had been heard from somebody else in some other place, perhaps from a joke about a hippie who had come down from the hills and tried to get back into the job market.

He would end up working as he had before — just for the time being — cleaning floors, waiting on tables in some second or third-class

restaurant, washing dishes, or at the best pumping gas in a service station, giving private Spanish lessons to groups of housewives, employees, or future tourists, or working as temporary help in an office.

The provisional nature of these jobs would stretch out like a piece of gum, as it had in the past, for months, sometimes years. He would probably end up labouring side by side with burly immigrants who had just arrived, full of energy and enthusiasm (he had never felt that way), and who would inevitably ask him where he was from and how long he had been in the country and, after listening to his laconic reply, would look him up and down with a kind of pity, a kind of astonishment, and would afterward avoid speaking to him unless absolutely necessary. Those young people who needed to dream — despite (or precisely because) they were up to their necks in self-sacrificing, inconsequential little jobs — would see in him the exact and complete negation of everything they would one day like to become here in America as soon as humanly possible, and would draw away in fear — as if from some piece of bad news, or nightmare — from the potential future he represented.

And he, with his innate pride of an intellectual temporarily — and out of necessity, he liked to believe — plunged into this milieu ruled over by the crudest capitalist materialism, would implicitly recognize that those young immigrants were justified in their attitude; he would absolve them of blame, knowing that part of the unwritten folklore of the working classes of every country (whose least fortunate representatives ended up here), were those sayings affirming that good luck as well as failure stick to you, are contagious. “Money brings money,” was the expression in his homeland.



As he thought of these things — or rather, as they drifted through his mind — he went down the escalator that led into the bowels of the palace of consumerism. He put one hand in his pocket and instinctively squeezed his wallet, swollen now with the money from the cheque he had just cashed at the bank, feeling safer, with the solidity of a payday, even though he wasn't working. There was a kind of melancholy seductiveness in being one of the herd, in being able to give himself small pleasures in an anonymous way, feeling happy just walking along, as he was doing now, or enjoying a cup of coffee with the newspaper open before him as he smoked a cigarette, relaxed, in no hurry, but looking, observing. There had been a song in his country that was popular just before he had had to leave, a line of which now kept running through his head — “How nice it is to have a little budget” — and which whenever he repeated it to himself, would fill him with a feeling of soft sadness, a tenuous, almost voluptuous self-pity.

The hours had accumulated with that effect of saturation left by people, streets, and things that are repeated. His movements, the details around him, his footsteps, required only part of his attention. His mind was therefore only half-aware of his surroundings; he seemed to have been standing for years on the steps of the escalator that now deposited him below onto the gleaming tiles of the First Floor of the Shopping Mall. The emptiness in his head was filled with images of far-away scenes, perhaps remembered, perhaps seen in dreams or on television, which formed part of what he himself called — being an introspective type of fellow — his filmstrip review (which was the name given to the slides in the textbooks used in teaching Spanish): a long beach, lots of sunlight, the cries of sea birds. The Observer had been born in another country, near the coast,

which he continued to miss even after all these years. But that origin was not so out of this world: Who here didn't come from somewhere else? His rather swarthy skin and large eyes — dark and deeply set in their sockets — clearly marked him as a foreigner. People in stores, offices, and bars (which he now almost never went to unless to meet Patrick) always used to speak to him in French. A few years before, in a hotel in Montreal, during the last vacation he had allowed himself the luxury of having and in the midst of the final moments of his relationship with Patricia (“Ptrichia,” they pronounced it here), the concierge — a woman from Picardy, he had later learned — with a beautiful, transparent, almost angelic face, but who walked about burdened by a hunchback, had told him, “I’ll bet you’re Italian.” He had answered truthfully, correcting and disappointing her, as would usually happen in such cases, as if apologizing for not being from Italy, with its Mediterranean monuments and gigolos, its St. Peter’s Square with the pope and pigeons, its Passolini and Red Brigades, its judges assassinated by the Mafia and its striptease parliamentarians — but instead being from (and here he supplied the name of the country in question).

## MARGARITA FELICIANO

Margarita Feliciano is a poet of migrations and worlds of the imagination. Born in 1938 near Syracuse, Italy, her family emigrated to Argentina when she was nine years old and then to Oakland, California, when she was seventeen. In 1969 she came north with her American husband and settled in Toronto, where she has been a professor of Spanish and Latin American literature at York University since the early 1970's.

Like many immigrants, Margarita's personality is a palimpsest. As she herself has said, she always feels the greatest affection for places she has left behind (personal interview). Her childhood in Syracuse gave her a deep attachment to the sea, Mediterranean light, Greek mythology, and Italian poetry. However, although she only lived in Argentina for six years, she is most at home in the Spanish language and closely identifies with Latin American culture and literature. Her years in California, on the other hand, have left her with a love for the seascapes of Northern California, which in many ways is a more rugged North American version of the Mediterranean landscape. She has also lived for varying periods of time in Italy and has travelled extensively in Europe, where she published two of her three books of poetry, and has an extensive interest in medieval mythology. Interestingly, although the greater part of her life has been spent in Toronto, direct references to Canadian settings or landscapes are infrequent in her work. Nevertheless, her familiarity with English, as well as her critical work in comparative literature and participation in bilingual Spanish and English poetry readings, have brought her into close contact with writers of the English-speaking world.

Margarita grew up in Sicily during World War II and has vivid memories of the house across the street being blown up by an Allied bomb and of her own evacuation to the countryside to avoid subsequent air raids. Her father was in the Italian Navy and spent the last year of the war in Japan, near Hiroshima. The family immigrated to Argentina in 1948 during the last great wave of European migration to that country to “hacerse la América” (“make our America”) and settled in Mar del Plata, where Margarita’s uncle was already living; her father worked as a naval officer on passenger liners between Argentina and Spain. The seven years or so that Margarita spent in Argentina marked her linguistically and culturally for the rest of her life. Though she continued to read in Italian and spoke it with her parents, Spanish became her mother tongue, and she read in it voraciously: Dante (in the translation by Argentine president and poet Bartolomé Mitre), Shakespeare, Dumas, Cervantes, and the nineteenth-century realist novels of Pérez Galdós of Spain. It was also in the Argentine school system that she developed her taste and capacity for the memorization and recital of great works of poetry. By the time she left the country she had begun to write poems herself, and her tastes in literature had broadened to include the Argentine poet Rafael Obligado and the *gauchesca* poetic tradition, as well as novels and fiction by Dickens, Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Pushkin, Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, and Sienkiewicz.

In the mid-1950’s, Margarita’s father began working on tankers owned by Standard Oil, and in 1955 the family moved to Oakland, California (other relatives were already living in Monterey). The following year Margarita completed secondary school and then enrolled in the University of California at Berkeley, where she studied Italian, French, and Spanish. What is remarkable about her second experience of emigration is

that she continued to identify closely with Latin America and rejected American culture, which she found egotistical and self-absorbed. She also returned to Italy for a year of study at the University of Florence, where she deepened her knowledge of Italian literature both through her studies and her conversations with her uncle, a professor of literature at the nearby University of Arezzo.

In the mid 1960's, Margarita enrolled in the M.A. program at Berkeley in Spanish and Latin American literature and linguistics, where she became a close friend of the noted Chilean poet and critic Fernando Alegría. She was also stimulated by the enormous political effervescence at Berkeley at the time. In the late 1960's she married her first husband, a freedom fighter in the 1956 Hungarian Revolution who had later lived in Paris, and the couple moved to Santa Barbara, where he completed his studies in French linguistics and she took courses in Portuguese. However, in 1969, disillusioned with the staid and conservative atmosphere of Santa Barbara, appalled by Governor Ronald Reagan's purge of California universities, and fearful that her husband would be drafted into the U.S. army, the couple moved to Toronto, where her husband taught at the University of Toronto and she at York. Since that time, she has had two children, divorced, and continued her teaching career in Spanish and Latin American literature at York. She has also kept on writing both poetry and criticism and in her profession has specialized in lyric poetry, comparative literature, and archetypes and mythology in authors such as the Guatemalan Miguel Ángel Asturias and the Nigerian Chinua Achebe.

Feliciano's cultural cosmopolitanism has resulted in a peculiarly rich cross-section of influences and affinities. She has maintained her interest in Italian poetry, especially in the work of the mystical poet Giovanni

Pascoli and the Sicilian Mimmo Morina, editor of the pan-European literary review *Nouvelle Europe*. Her years in Argentina have left her with a great attachment to the work of the three great women poets of the first half of the twentieth-century in the Southern Cone: the lyrical work of the Chilean Gabriela Mistral, the rebellious love poetry of the Uruguayan Juana Ibarbourou, and the later metaphysical meditations of the Argentine poet Alfonsina Storni, who, stricken by breast cancer in the late 1930's, swam out into the sea to drown herself off Margarita's hometown of Mar del Plata. Other Latin American poets who have also been important to her include Nicolás Guillén, the first great Afro-Cuban poet, renowned for his use of African rhythms and colloquial style; the Argentine Jorge Luis Borges, whose anglophile inclinations inspired her to learn Anglo-Saxon in order to read *Beowulf* in the original; Pablo Neruda, to whom she has dedicated an ode to the tomato, in reference to the Chilean poet's *Odas elementales* [*Elemental Odes*], such as "Oda a la alcachofa" ["Ode to an Artichoke"]; the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, especially in the early love poems of his first anthology; and the hermetic philosophic poet César Vallejo, of Peru. Finally, her work in Spanish literature has also led her to identify closely with the work of the Spanish poets of the "Generation of 1927," particularly the unadorned lyricism of Lorca, the intense poetic affirmation of Jorge Guillén, the metaphysical love poems of Pedro Salinas, and the politically charged verse of Rafael Alberti, who at age ninety-four is the last surviving poet of the time, and whom she has met in Spain.

Feliciano has also been active within the context of North American letters. While still in California, she became interested in American literature, especially in Walt Whitman, whose universality of spirit and sense of belonging to the New World have always held great appeal for Latin

Americans; she dedicated a poem to him in her second book: "By Blue Ontario Shores," a very personal reverie quite unlike Whitman's poem of the same name, but with the same love of the lake's vast expanse, albeit seen from the other side. She also developed an interest in the poets of the Beat Generation, although she comments that by the time she met Ferlinghetti at the City Lights bookstore in San Francisco, she found that he had become rather rigid in his views on poetry (personal interview). She has read in Toronto with Miriam Waddington, whose poems in *The Visitants* she is particularly fond of and who has become a personal friend, as well as with Irving Layton, who, after listening to a poem she had written in a particularly telegraphic style, asked her, "Where's the subject? Where's the verb? Do you think just because you're writing poetry you can forget about subjects and verbs?" The advice, she says, was well-taken (personal interview). She has also given readings and published with Fireweed, a women's poetry cooperative that has included Miriam Waddington, Dorothy Livesay, and Bernice Lever (later editor of *Waves*). She was in frequent contact — in her capacity as critic rather than as poet — with Eli Mandel, who taught at York University for many years.

Finally, although Margarita has at times felt isolated and culturally removed from Canada, she has been one of the most active literary and organizational presences in the world of Latin American writing in Canada. The only Spanish-speaking groups active in Toronto when she arrived in 1969 were a few immigrants from Spain and Ecuador, but four years later, after the coup d'état against Salvador Allende in Chile, thousands of Chilean refugees began to pour into the city. Among the most influential writers who settled in Toronto were Juan Carlos García, Manuel Jofré, Naín Nómez, Gonzalo Millán, and Claudio Durán, all of

whom published books in Canada and/or Chile, and who eventually invited her to read with them. In the mid 1970's she participated in an informal literary group that held frequent readings in Toronto and included Claudio Durán, from Chile; the avant-guard sound poet Rafael Barreto-Rivera (who writes mainly in English), from Puerto Rico; the poet, critic, and translator José María Valverde, from Spain, who was teaching at the University of Toronto at the time; and the English-Canadian poet and critic Joe Green. Later, in fact, she translated Durán's collection of poems, *Homenaje* [*Tribute*] into English. Despite her fluency in English, she continues to read almost exclusively in Spanish, in which she feels more at home.

During the last decade, Feliciano has played two key roles in hispanic writing in Canada. First, she has been one of the principal organizers of the annual *Semana del Idioma Español* [Spanish Language Week], which is held in Toronto each fall and includes theatre, dance, singing, and seven evenings of poetry readings and critical papers by Latino-Canadian writers as well as guest authors, such as Luis Goytisolo of Spain and Elsa Cross of Mexico, from around the Spanish-speaking world. Second, Margarita was the founder and publisher of *Indigo*, a trilingual (Spanish-English-French) literary and artistic review published twice in Toronto, in 1990 and 1991. Despite its brief life span (plans are afoot to bring it out again), *Indigo* was the first review of its kind in English Canada. Attractively produced and laid out, the hundred and fifty pages in each issue contained poetry, short stories, scholarly articles, interviews, and translations into one or the other of its three languages, as well as photographs and art work. It included work by recognized authors such as Timothy Findley, Jan Conn, and the Ecuadorian novelist (and ambassador



to Canada) Alfonso Barrera Valverde, as well as providing space for a variety of Spanish-speaking authors of Canada.

Margarita has published three volumes of poetry, all of them, curiously, outside of Canada. Her first book, *Ventana sobre el mar/Window on the Sea*, was a bilingual text with illustrations by the Italian sculptor Gino Masciarelli, published by the Latin American Literary Review Press in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1981, and includes an introduction by Fernando Alegría. The translator is Feliciano herself, and the poems are often English versions rather than close translations of the Spanish texts. As the book's title indicates, the principal physical setting is on the sea-coast, seemingly that of Northern California, and the constant references to the ocean are often mixed with evocations of the joy and nostalgia of love found and lost. In contrast with the rest of Feliciano's poetry, which is almost always laid out flush with the left-hand margin and grouped into verses, there is also some formal experimentation, especially with typography. One of the poems, "Océano Pacífico/Pacific Ocean" uses an oblique margin running progressively right as it descends the page in the Spanish version and another running progressively left in the English one; other poems opt for a diffused typography in which the words spread out to cover a large part of the page, jumping from left to right and imitating their own actions with their forms: "Derrumbes / . . . Caaeenn" ["Landslides/. . . Are faalliinng"]\* (50).

Feliciano's second book, *Circadian Nuvolitatis*, was published by Euroeditor in Luxembourg in 1986. As the Canadian-Tunisian critic Hédi

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\* This translation, and all succeeding translations of Feliciano's poetry similarly marked (\*), are by the author of the present work. I have preferred a more literal translation than that of Feliciano herself, in order to render more closely the sense and feeling of the original Spanish version.

Bouraoui notes in his introduction, the title of the work is a neologism, “‘Circadian’ from the Latin ‘circa diem,’ implying everyday behaviour, feelings, sentiments and attitudes, and ‘nuvolitatis’ meaning the effect of clouds, haziness of feeling, mistiness of any interactions we have daily” (Bouraoui 8). Many of the poems are more exotic than this reading of the title would imply, however. *Circadian Nuvolitatis*, like Margarita’s earlier collection, is also bilingual, but this time she has written about half the poems directly in English and the other half in Spanish, and then translated each into the other language. The accompanying texts, each displayed on the facing page, have again been translated by the author herself and are actually other versions of the poems rather than exact translations. Turquoise skies, groves of pine trees, bright sunlight, and the sea are also present in this collection, but many of the settings have a more European than North American flavour and the seascapes bring to mind the Mediterranean rather than the California coast. There are also more frequent references to topics from Greek and medieval mythology and more poems set in Canada.

Margarita’s latest book, *Lectura en Málaga* [*Reading in Málaga*], published in 1995 by the University of Málaga in Spain, is a collection of poetry that she read at an international festival of poetry there. This work, published only in Spanish, deals with a variety of themes and is much less linked to specific topographical landscapes than the previous collections. Indeed, it represents a new direction, both in theme and in tone, in her poetry: a reorientation back toward the objective world and an increasing realism. Most of the poems translated in the present selection are from *Lectura en Málaga*, though a few have also been drawn from the unpublished poems that she continues to write.

Although there are certain recurring elements in the themes and images Feliciano uses in her poetry, there has also been a progressive evolution from feeling, or lyricism, to idea, or metaphysical construct. There is a high degree of continuity in the first two books, which is then transformed in the last. *Ventana sobre el mar/Window on the Sea* and *Circadian Nuvolitatis* share certain key themes: love and its loss within an idealized landscape that exists or has existed specifically for the lovers that inhabit it; the renewal of ancient myths; friendship; and the existential acceptance of solitude. Of these four themes, the first two are the most common.

The love poems of both *Ventana sobre el mar/Window on the Sea* and *Circadian Nuvolitatis* largely take place within the natural world of the ocean shore, yet these settings are constructs — fragile, idealized worlds in which the lovers meet, love, and separate, or in which the speaker later reflects nostalgically on her loss. In the first book, Nature and human elements are metaphorically fused, as in “Océano Pacífico” [“Pacific Ocean”], in which it is unclear whether the speaker is addressing the absent lover, the sea, or both (*Ventana* 2). In “Nahual” (a Mexican nature spirit), the speaker imagines receiving “your love, / [a] huge, round seashell / washed ashore by churning tides” (*Ventana* 11). Again, in “Nairobi Blues,” which ostensibly would seem to be a poem of longing for an absent lover, there is no reference at all to Kenya, but rather to an elaborate fantasy world in which the sky has replaced the sea as the vector for the lovers’ feelings. In *Circadian Nuvolitatis*, though there is a poem, “Santa Cruz” (23), in which the lovers meet and then separate in a place that is objectively rendered, the settings for many of the love poems, such as “Flores/Flowers” have evolved even further into symbolist gardens of jewelled light and

chiaroscuro shadows that recall Rubén Darío and the *modernista* poetic vocabulary of the turn of the century. Even in “Bajando por la 280/Going Down [the] 280,” in which the title would seem to indicate a more realistic geography, the twists and turns of the lovers’ road seem to arise as imaginary incarnations of the speaker’s feelings rather than from the topographical features of an actual coast, and Californian and Mediterranean images are fused to the extent that the “glistening mirage of white / and multi-coloured buildings” of the distant city is more like the Bordighera of a Monet painting than any identifiable Californian coastal town.

The imagery that Feliciano uses in her love poems is usually associated with aspects of the sea and looks back on erotic interludes from the safety and distance of nostalgic reflection. There are, however, some surprising reversals of sexual roles. First of all, the sea is frequently used as a metaphor when describing the male, as in the title poem of her first book, “Ventana sobre el mar/Window on the Sea”: “You become an ocean wave / blindly beating against my breasts”\* (4). This reversal of the usual association of the sea with the feminine echoes Indian poetry, such as a verse of the third-century Tamil romance *Shilappadikaram* [*The Ankle Bracelet*]: “. . . where the shining sand / is beaten by the lustful waves” (35). Moreover, although the female lover is often compared to a flower, she is a decidedly active bloom: “I unfold as a flower, / whose moist, / shifting petals / entwine around your neck”\* (*Ventana* 4). The speaker in “La puerta/The Door” is alone in a sun-drenched garden, where “The thirsty flesh of a yellow rose / kisses the air with multiple mouths”\* (*Circadian* 33). Finally, in “Juegos/Games,” it is the female speaker who seizes the initiative and tells her lover, “I ask you, let yourself be penetrated, / accept this love / in barter for your own” (*Ventana* 12).

Another theme of Margarita's poetry is the reliving of myth in the modern age. Many of the poems in her first two books situate characters — especially lovers — within Greek, pre-Columbian, or medieval myths. In “Cuesta abajo/Downwards,” the speaker likens herself to a siren who wishes to find and “submerge” her lover, presumably in her passion and body (*Ventana* 26). Likewise, the speaker in “Fénix/Phoenix,” compares herself to the immortal bird of Egyptian myth as she is reborn during the act of love (*Ventana* 36). In “Diana cazadora/Diana the Huntress,” the narrator, whose sex is not specified, compares the simultaneous power and equilibrium of a statue of Diana shooting an arrow with energy of the beloved (*Ventana* 42). Several of the poems of *Circadian Nuvolitatis* also refer to the renewal of ancient myths. In “Penelope,” the female speaker recreates the Ithacan queen's story and then looks forward to the return of her own Odysseus (perhaps her Jungian *animus*) upon her “internal sea” (16). “Aquitaine,” a tribute to Gérard de Nerval's poem “El desdichado,” invokes the troubadour's world of aesthetic refinement and declares that the minstrel lives again through Nerval's poem, in which:

he comes to life like a withered bird,  
as he is rescued from the gloom of libraries  
into the light where dreams are shared once more. (18)

Finally, the entry of the two lovers of “Les Jacobins” into a city in “the heart of Occitaine” (presumably Toulouse) is described in such a way that it is impossible to tell whether the pair are medieval visitors or modern tourists; here, however, in the heat of the *Midi*, the couple will fulfil their love as never before, to the point of becoming one with the rhythm “of love / which moves the sun and other stars” (60), the very lines that end Dante's *Divine Comedy* (Dante 595).

The poems of Feliciano's third and latest work, *Lectura en Málaga*, break with many of the themes of the earlier two books and show renewed interest in the outside world. Certainly "Ciudad" ["City"] and "Ojo dorado" ["Golden Eye"], with their respective themes of urbanization and government surveillance, are new features in Feliciano's poetic repertoire. Moreover, the earlier love poems of meeting, sharing, and parting have given way to poems of solitary exploration, such as "Buscando" ["Searching"], in which the speaker is now on a quest for the "essence of things" (23), vultures wheel over a putrefying carcass on the beach, and death is the ruling force. "Durmiente" ["The Sleeper"] describes a landscape without any human component whatsoever, in which the focus of the poem is on the implacable forces of water and rock as they work upon one another (29). The theme of one of the only poems that mentions physical love, "Eras una caravana" ["You Were a Caravan"], is actually one of loss, as one of the lovers moves off into the night (15). Moreover, the mythical siren of earlier poems has now been transformed from playful and enticing lover back into the sinister schizophrenic creation of Greek mythology, whose beautiful female upper body is dominated by the bestial lower self and whose chief passion is murdering sailors rather than loving them.

*Lectura en Málaga* turns away from romance and idealized love poetry, which Feliciano had already written with great ability, toward a more balanced equilibrium between interior and exterior worlds in which the quest for truth supersedes the search for love. Although the reader may feel a certain nostalgia for the romanticism and warmth of her earlier work — which has now been replaced by a more rigorous, implacable questioning — Feliciano is nevertheless able to bring her considerable poetic ability and refinement to bear on sterner themes. It is perhaps not simply

coincidence that the book should include two poems with *buscar* (“to search”) in the title: “Búsqueda” [“Search”] and “Buscando” [“Searching”]. With the passage of time, the narrative voice has been transformed from meditative lover into philosophic explorer.

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**PRINCIPAL WORKS OF MARGARITA FELICIANO**

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*Ventana sobre el mar/Window on the Sea*. Pittsburgh: Latin American Literary Review Press, 1981.

Selections from *Lectura en Málaga* [*Reading in Málaga*]

by Margarita Feliciano

## City

Evening falls overcome with tedium.  
The passers-by of indifferent life  
glance from the corners of their eyes  
at glittering store windows.  
And the light spreads out  
like a milky shroud,  
enveloping me in its quiet chrysalis,  
driving the shadows  
into the cracks of night.  
Who knows where  
tumultuous life will come from,  
or if unexpected forms exist  
to forge once again  
the defenceless advance of hours.  
Slender skyscrapers,  
impassive sentinels of the world,  
look down from their rarified minarets  
upon the winding lights of the streets,  
immense serpents that writhe forward  
toward their slaughterhouse suburbs.

## You're a Caravan

Morning light filtered between our bodies  
opening up a helpless questioning,  
the sensation of sacks falling through a void  
onto stone.

Our bodies met  
leaving shreds of affection,  
the tempest contained,  
the rose petals withered.

With fallen arms I watched you  
abandon me as you fled.  
Like a caravan you disappeared  
into the humble tenderness of night.

## Cartography

Studying maps of the afternoon,  
the rivers become reckless with me;  
watching the imprisoned clouds  
I feel a dark tightening in my throat.  
At your strong touch  
the water fills with violent fish,  
and the black rain deafly shakes itself  
when I hear your name that sails  
across azure seas;  
and my spirit grows calm as I reach shore.  
We are two drops of water that unite  
to become the sea that protects us.

## Highway

The song has died on the air.  
Now only silence:  
Sadness withers the minutes.  
    The highway  
    opens up  
    in my dark strangeness.  
    I hear the beating  
    of the tires  
    on its naked surface.

The mute highway  
    coils  
    its serpent rings in  
    upon itself.  
    Riding with me  
my thoughts pulsate,  
spurred on by the engine's horses.  
Solitude bites into the twilight.

## Searching

I am searching for the marrow, the essence of  
things,  
leaving behind the depth  
of leaves and branches,  
arches twining together in gothic greenness.  
Tautly they sway over us  
as we descend toward the coast  
where vultures sluggishly circle  
around a putrefying skeleton,  
and swarms of horseflies  
pullulate, goading my stupor.  
Sky and sea fuse together  
uniting in a soft caress of bodies.  
Death has become the inscription  
on the golden coin that bribes the days.

## Golden Eye

There is a golden eye that watches me,  
an eye that silently follows me  
through distant labyrinths.  
Like a burning torch it searches my inner world  
leaving me piles of broken shells  
and handfuls of earth where flowers once grew.  
Its insistent stare gives no refuge,  
only leaves swept by darkened winds.  
My reflection wavers in the mirror  
in the grey barrens of forgotten carnivals.  
The golden eye pursues me everywhere,  
gold stillness without respite,  
it advances on me in the night,  
directs my footsteps toward a blind path  
extinguishing life born from earth,  
from the turgid leaves of trees.  
It destroys my existence  
leaving behind echoes of empty bottles.

## The Mermaid's Gate

The anvil of the unrepentant sea  
carved a rounded hollow in the rock,  
a perfect mirror to see  
and admire yourself.

Seated on the reef you only perceive  
your delicate arms;  
light encircles your slender neck  
and envelops your breasts,  
a fleeting snow on the tall broken windows  
of a shaken sky.

Your other half of disconsolate fish,  
the scaly half that holds you captive,  
doesn't look down into the mirror of the waters;  
and you, like a new Circe, lead seafarers  
to their death, relegating them  
to the fresh stars of night  
and the burning atoms of sunset.



## Sleeper

They climb the rocky slopes  
towards a burning, shaken sky.  
In the still blue  
a cross of distant goshawks  
wheels motionlessly.

No one knows if all  
has ceased to exist  
or if new life is tenuously present  
in the murmur of the wind.  
Who will bring us the hopeful green,  
the current of subterranean waters  
that flow toward the edge of uncertainty?

The waters of this river  
disappear forever into the distance  
in a slow sleepy flow.  
No light will glint from them  
as thirsting for space  
they pass beneath the dark rust of rocks.  
They will fall still like a wounded hand  
bleeding in the sleeper's silence.

## unpublished poems

## Words

If I could say what I desire  
if I could carry this love I feel  
like a banner in the sunlight,  
if I could expose you  
like a ruined wall  
to the truth that lives in your epicentre,  
untranslated into glory, riches or ambitions,  
then I would proclaim with my lips  
with the very words I speak,  
that I had forever defied  
unyielding time.

## The Basket of Tomatoes

(for Pablo Neruda)

Who knows from where  
or from what blue bed of sun and earth,  
they sprouted in all their redness  
and sweet passion for the infinite.

There they lay in their basket nest  
in all their rounded smoothness,  
like small sparrows waiting to be fed.  
Their fire lit up the day  
reflecting the colour and light of the village  
as it slept in its fullness.

They had come from faraway,  
from a land usurped from the sea  
that human patience had known how to build.  
Daily the skilled hands  
(and those of my lover)  
had tilled their unceasing hope  
preserving their burning growth  
as they prepared their voyage to the city.

And here they have finally arrived,  
ready for the decisive moment,  
awaiting their entrance into pots or trays,  
for festive meals or the envy of brushes.  
Knives don't dare stroke their skin  
nor has anyone been bold enough to kill  
the dark radiance pulsing through their beauty.

## Return

“and never again did you return to that old neighbourhood”  
(anonymous tango)

As in the words of old tangos,  
I return one Sunday  
with a shrivelled brow  
and snow at the temples,  
adorned with the glass beads  
of absent youth.  
The train leaves the station promptly  
on its colourless journey through time.  
A few barely remembered names  
vanish like spells  
that measure distance  
for the phantom sorcerers of years.  
The tree-lined street leaps violently out  
of the fatuous dens of remembrance,  
but the house with its dark gate  
is now only the scent of yesterday.  
It is in this receding return  
with a sad forehead and faded curls,  
that my tired footsteps drive off  
the anguished winter drizzle.

## GILBERTO FLORES PATIÑO

Born in Mexico in 1941, Gilberto Flores Patiño is a novelist and short story writer whose work has dealt with a variety of different themes and has achieved a considerable degree of recognition in Quebec and English Canada. Flores Patiño is a man of eclectic, even esoteric, philosophical interests who is also capable of writing from the point of view of a child in unaffected and lyrical prose. As a writer, he is highly interested in experiments in narrative technique and in the inner workings of the human mind.

Gilberto grew up in Celaya, a provincial city of about a third of a million inhabitants in the north-central state of Guanajuato. The area is steeped in history, especially from the time of the colony and the wars of independence. The capital, Guanajuato, is a beautiful old colonial city that was a great silver and gold-mining centre in the 1700's and whose picturesque architecture has made it a national monument. It was in the town of Dolores Hidalgo that the father of Mexican independence, Father Miguel Hidalgo, gave the call to arms against the Spanish in 1810; together with Ignacio Allende, from the nearby town of San Miguel (where Gilberto lived for many years), the two leaders launched the first rebel campaigns. The state is extraordinarily rich in legends, stories, and folk tales of the past.

Gilberto's paternal grandfather lived several blocks away from the family home, and Flores Patiño vividly remembers how, whenever he visited the old man, he would find him reading the Bible, not so much for its religious meaning as for the incredible wealth of stories it contained. "Take away the holy water, and it was like the *Thousand and One Nights*," Gilberto explains (personal interview). He would later listen for hours as

his grandfather retold the stories of the Bible, which served as his introduction to the world of the fantastic, the unexpected, and the mythical. Together with pre-Columbian and colonial tales, his grandfather's stories were to form the basis of his own particular magic realism. As he grew older, Gilberto read Mexican and Greek mythology, as well as the works of Verne and Dumas, and was particularly fond of Gustave Doré's engravings of Biblical scenes.

Flores Patiño wrote his first short story at the age of seven and kept on writing through adolescence; he was also fond of jazz, especially the work of Dave Brubeck and Paul Desmond, and played harmonica with local jazz bands. After secondary school, he played semi-professional soccer, worked as a salesman, and eventually became a reporter and columnist for the daily newspaper *El Sol del Bahío* in Celaya. His reporting led him into a variety of aspects of city life: both its underside — bordellos, murders, and political corruption — and the impressive variety of human experience of its everyday citizens. His daily column, "La ciudad dice" ["The City Speaks"], included short stories, sketches and interviews with a cross-section of the remarkable people hidden within seemingly ordinary lives in the city.

Although he also worked as a journalist for a year in Mexico City, Gilberto was put off by the gargantuan scale of the city and the dehumanization of life there and returned again to the provincial, but more human, world of Celaya. By this time, Gilberto's interest in reading, especially fiction, had taken off: he was fascinated by the suffering and inner anguish of the characters of Dostoyevski, Sartre, and Camus; by the surreal hatefulness of Oscar Matzerath in Gunter Grass's *The Tin Drum*; and by the labyrinthine destinies of the inhabitants of Faulkner's rural South. He also

read widely in the Mexican novel, whose strongest current had traditionally been the realist, descriptive mode (Brushwood 23). Among the works that most impressed him at the time were Mariano Azuela's novels of the Mexican revolution, with their unadorned style and onomatopoeic language; Agustín Yáñez's novels of rural Mexico, which uncovered the mythical qualities of the relationship between the land and its people and used new narrative techniques to express them; Juan Rulfo's brilliantly concise, haunted fiction, situated in rural Mexico, but often strangely disconnected in time or space; Luis Spota's journalistic tales of corruption and hypocrisy in Mexican society. Gilberto's second novel, *Sin salida* [*No Way Out*], which he wrote at age thirty-two, has a journalist protagonist and is dedicated to Luis Spota.

Flores Patiño's first novel, *El reino de silencio* [*The Kingdom of Silence*], published in Morelia (capital of the neighboring state of Michoacán) in 1969, covered several centuries in the life of a central Mexican village, Zapote de Palomas, that gradually sinks back into atavistic superstition and is finally cursed by God. The novel begins with an epigraph from Faulkner and runs to 600 pages. Unfortunately, the author no longer has a copy of this work and does not know where one would be attainable (personal interview). Following this early experiment with magic realism, he largely put aside the novel of external description in order to better concentrate on the interior world of the mind.

*Sin salida*, which was published three years later, is set in a modern provincial city of Mexico and ostensibly focusses on three days in the life of its central character, an unnamed crime reporter for the city's main newspaper. The novel culminates in the character's temptation and subsequent rejection of committing suicide. Within this structure, however,

there are a multitude of flashbacks to other periods and experiences in the journalist's life, including various crimes and instances of human suffering that he has witnessed, as well as his own disillusion with his wife and love for a prostitute and dancer whom he meets in a local brothel. His wife becomes increasingly prone to hysterical rages, in one of which she finally puts an end to her own life and that of their infant daughter. Although this early novel at times seems overloaded with Dostoyevskian suffering, including several murders, a horrendous train wreck, scenes of police interrogation and torture, and the protagonist's childhood relationship with his mentally handicapped brother and manic-depressive mother, the characters are complex and generally (with the exception of the wife) well-defined. What stands out in the novel is the character of the protagonist himself, who is gradually revealed to be engaged in a valiant and solitary effort to take in, accept, understand, and in some way mitigate the pain and degradation that surround him and into which his work — and perhaps his own psychological need to suffer — have plunged him. Flores Patiño himself has summed up the novel as the search for an answer to the question, "Why do you exist, Cain?" (personal interview).

The settings of *Sin salida* are remarkable for their gloominess. Almost the entire novel takes place at night, and the intense sunlight and clear skies that are usually associated with the state of Guanajuato are replaced by darkness and perpetual cloud. The anonymous journalist works by night and sleeps by day, as do virtually all the other characters he is in contact with, from his fellow newspapermen to his prostitute lover, his police chief friend, and the woman restaurant owner, Lin, who lets him sleep in her room when he collapses from fatigue at a table and later makes love to him. The nameless provincial Mexican city in which he lives, rather



than being a centre of human activity and interaction, is perpetually asleep and deserted. Like a modern “*Il Penseroso*,” the protagonist is given to long contemplative nighttime walks through empty streets lit only by electric streetlamps, thus shifting the focus of the novel from the city itself to the inner workings of the main character’s mind. The only scenes from the journalist’s disappointing honeymoon by the sea are flashbacks in which he escapes from the bedroom to wander alone among the dunes in the moonlight. Although it is afternoon when he eventually makes love to Lin in her bedroom above the restaurant — and in some way finds a brief solace with her from his loneliness — the sky has darkened and a thunderstorm is coming in. Yet light is a redemptive element in the novel: virtually the only daytime scenes are the flashbacks of his walks, swimming, horseback riding, and lovemaking with his mistress at a house in the country — which are also the happiest moments of his life. Moreover, his long pre-dawn meditation on suicide ends when dawn breaks and he hears his landlady’s collection of pet birds begin to sing as the earth reawakens and the sun returns. He rejects committing suicide and makes his way through the dawn streets to the central square of the city, where in a strange scene he lies down and feels “the freshness of the trees and of the grass that he felt pressed against his back as he lay in crucifix position on the lawn and felt the spikes of the morning sun nailing him for awhile longer to the earth, fastening him to life” (*Sin salida* 170). Like Christ, he has achieved atonement for his own suffering and that of those around him.

Flores Patiño’s third novel, *Nudo de tinieblas* [*Knot of Darkness*], published two years later, again deals with the theme of suffering and redemption, but this time in the hermetic context of extreme psychological isolation from the rest of humanity. This bizarre and well-structured novel

has only two principal characters, Señor Arzate (his first name is never given), who is the director of a public library in a small (again anonymous) Mexican city, and his unnamed secretary. The only other figures are the members of the library advisory board, with whom he has a brief meeting described in flashback; Benita, his landlady; and the clerk in the liquor store where he buys brandy. The novel takes place in a single evening and night, in which a rainstorm keeps Arzate and his secretary from going home after work, and they eventually end up making love in his apartment. The scenes are limited to Arzate's office in the deserted library; the night streets of the city as he walks home with his secretary; the parlour of the vast rooming-house where he lives, where they talk and share drinks; the stairway upstairs, which is haunted by figures from Arzate's imagination; and his grimy bedroom.

What is extraordinary about the novel is the gradual revelation that virtually the entire novel is taking place inside Arzate's mind. His secretary does indeed exist, but she has gone home for the night; the woman whom he romances throughout the novel is a creation of his own imagination. Moreover, another character, an anonymous parenthetical voice that keeps up a sarcastic commentary or chorus on the progress of the *liaison*, is in fact a second, weaker, aspect of Arzate's personality; this voice accepts reality, but is unable to stand up to the dominant, fantasizing persona of Arzate's mind. Indeed, Arzate suffers from a withdrawal so severe that he is incapable of direct amorous contact with a woman; instead, he has turned to fetishism, buying small objects from the servants of the various women he knows (he believes that the women in question have actually left the articles in his house for him) and keeping them in a trunk in his dreary lodging-house room, where he periodically takes out the handkerchief,

undergarment, or even childhood doll that he has purloined and goes into a prolonged sexual reverie about the woman it comes from as he caresses it, eventually stimulating himself to orgasm. His fantasies are, however, much more than just a few sexual images: they are complex human creations which take on a life and personality of their own and serve both as foils to his own overwhelming loneliness and as expressions of their own longing for human contact. The character of his secretary, for instance, is so fully developed that it is not at all immediately apparent that she is not an actual person. Arzate is, in fact, not altogether certain whether she is real or whether he is simply imagining or even speaking her voice, and his landlady hears voices and finds two brandy glasses on the coffee table in the boarding house lounge. There is the question of whether or not, given the highly repressed and sometimes violent nature of Arzate's fantasies about his secretary, it isn't better for him to be fulfilling his desires in secret. Very little information is ever given about Arzate's past, which has the effect of keeping the focus on the irrationality of his alienation rather than on explanations of why it exists or how it could be cured.

The imagery of darkness and light in *Nudo de tinieblas* is similar to that which haunts *Sin salida*. In keeping with Flores Patiño's taste for temporal unity, the whole novel takes place in a single night, which is again a time of rain, mist, and deserted streets. The "knot of darkness" of the title is in fact the extreme isolation of Arzate's interior self (or selves), yet the dichotomy has now also taken on the aspect of a struggle not only between shadow and light, and night and day, but between the artistic imagination (Arzate the fantasizer) and the reality principle (his mocking other self), as well as between evil (or rebellion against the accepted) and good (the defence of cosmic order). In fact, Arzate's final progress with his

secretary up the rooming house stairway to his room is impeded by a vast kinetic fresco of the fall of Satan from Paradise that he imagines on the walls, a battle that is described with great poetic imagination. "Without light," says Arzate at the end of the novel, "there would be no darkness, for shadows are the dark part of light itself" (*Nudo de tinieblas* 151).

The novel is also part of a major shift among many Mexican writers away from the novel of external events and toward an increasing focus on the psychological and fantastic. This change in the concept of the novel was prefigured by the dreamlike, often phantasmagoric indeterminacy of Juan Rulfo's short stories in *El llano en llamas* [*The Plain in Flames*] and his novel *Pedro Páramo*, both published in the mid-1950's. An interesting parallel to *Nudo de tinieblas* is Carlos Fuentes's novella *Aura* (itself possibly inspired by Gérard de Nerval's hallucinatory narrative *Aurélia*), published in 1970. Like Flores Patiño's novel, *Aura* also deals with eroticism, perception, and the interface between reality and fantasy: a centenarian sorceress lures a young man to her dark and claustrophobic home by conjuring up the image of herself when young. As Octavio Paz has observed, "In *Aura* desire is all-powerful — desire and its terrors, lovely apparitions that fuse together into one single unbearable vision: not the image of death, but rather its mask, the grimace of the old woman" (Paz 13). In contrast to the somewhat breathless pace and supernatural overtones of *Aura*, however, *Nudo de tinieblas* proceeds at a leisurely but suspenseful rhythm and includes a great deal of dialogue and physical detail; perhaps the contrast is due to the fact that the protagonist of Fuentes's tale is the victim of enchantment, whereas Señor Arzate wishes to take all the time available in order to fill in every detail of his onanistic and psychologically fulfilling fantasy. It also must be mentioned that *Nudo de tinieblas* marks the first

appearance of the lyrical and poetic asides that refer to Mexican mythology, colonial legends, Biblical stories, and cosmological whimsy that later came to occupy much of Flores Patiño's imagination.

In the late 1960's, Gilberto moved from Celaya to the nearby old colonial town of San Miguel de Allende, which has had a large colony of foreign (chiefly American and Canadian) artists, retirees, and language students ever since the 1940's. He played harmonica in a jazz band and later taught classes there in Spanish, philosophy, and history in several private academies and later married an American woman with whom he had two children and spent several years in her home town of Spartanburg, South Carolina. They divorced, however, and in the late 1970's Gilberto met his present wife, the Québécois translator Ginette Hardy. In 1980 the couple moved to Montreal. Gilberto had imagined Quebec as a northern version of Latin American culture and was disappointed by the relative reserve of the Québécois and the fundamentally North American ethos of their society. He found that people spent a great deal of time in their apartments and missed the atmosphere of the corner café; he also felt isolated from other Latin American writers in the city, none of whom were Mexican. In the mid 1980's, he and Ginette returned to San Miguel for several years.

During his years in San Miguel, Gilberto's reading took several new directions. On the one hand, he read a great deal of Beckett, especially the trilogy *Molloy*, *The Unnameable*, and *Malone Dies*. He was also very impressed by the movie *Rachel, Rachel*, the film version of Margaret Laurence's *A Jest of God*; following the success of the film, the novel was translated into Spanish, and Gilberto found in it many similarities between small-town life in Canada and Mexico. On the other hand, he also deepened his exploration of esoteric philosophy, moving from Borges and Aztec

philosophy to the *Divine Comedy*, the *Apocrypha*, Heraclitus, and Isaac Bashevis Singer. During the early 1980's in Montreal he wrote his best-known novel, *Esteban el centauro* [*Esteban the Centaur*], and finished a fourth novel, *El último descendiente* [*The Last Descendant*], in San Miguel.

*El último descendiente* continues the story of Señor Arzate, but in a more realistic and positive mode. Arzate is still living in his boarding house, but the city is now specifically San Miguel and the other characters are all real. As in *A Jest of God*, love for another person offers redemption from solitude and gives meaning to life, and Arzate is finally able to establish a relationship (though this too could be another elaborate fantasy) with Angelita, the ageing daughter of an elderly woman on the library committee. Angelita shares Arzate's fear of others, yet is valiant enough to drug her domineering mother and come to his lodgings to spend the night with him. The next morning Arzate can hardly believe that she was really there and actually falls physically ill when faced with the possibility of abandoning his self-centred fantasy world. Indeed, Angelita's main competition is now an antique mannequin whom he imagines as having been the daughter of the Marquis of Syria. The two chapters in which the mannequin relates her mythic past are among the most lyrical and poetic in Flores Patiño's writing, blending Aztec fairy tales and oneiric colonial legends with cosmological myths that are retold by cranes, and were included in the anthology *Compañeros* (39-41). The novel ends with the revelation that the huge old rooming house actually belongs to Arzate himself and that his emotional frigidity is the result of two traumatic experiences of his youth: being savagely ridiculed by a grimy, obese prostitute whom he had visited for his first sexual experience; and witnessing his mother's murder at the hands of

his father, who then committed suicide in front of him. He comes to terms with his past by unlocking the door to a cloistered garden where he used to spend the afternoon with his parents and accepting their deaths. In the final scene, he burns the contents of his fetish-filled trunk and turns his thoughts to Angelita. Curiously, however, although the Arzate of the second novel finds a way out of his personal hell, *El último descendiente* is a neater, less intriguing novel than its predecessor.

*Esteban el centauro*, Flores Patiño's third novel, is generally considered his greatest artistic and popular success. Here the style and theme are completely different from his earlier works. The novel is told from the point of view of an eight-year-old child, Esteban, who narrates much of it to his best friend, a wooden horse. Esteban is the son of American parents who lives with his single mother in San Miguel; he knows virtually nothing of his father, not even his name, and his artist mother is often more intent on alleviating her own loneliness with a series of lovers (whom Esteban calls "them") than on devoting herself to her son. Perhaps Flores Patiño's greatest success in this novel has been his ability to actually tell the story in the oral narrative voice of a child. Esteban's prose is virtually without metaphor, ingenuous and unadorned, yet precise and often incisive in its observations.

*Excelsior*, Mexico City's equivalent of the *New York Times*, included the novel in its list of the thirty best books of 1985 and compared it to Saint-Exupéry's *Le Petit Prince*, but the similarities between the two books are limited, particularly since *Le Petit Prince* is a fantasy narrated by an adult, whereas *Esteban el centauro* is essentially a realistic work told by the child himself and ending in tragedy. The novel, though short, is a tour de force, and its very directness marks a major break with all of Flores

Patiño's former and later work, which is characterized by hallucinatory flashbacks and mythological asides. Three general elements of his work are, however, present. First, Esteban, like the journalist of *Sin salida* and Señor Arzate, is deeply concerned with his own identity. Although his parents are American, he identifies strongly with the environment in which he lives and feels profoundly Mexican; Esteban is an immigrant, just as Gilberto was when he wrote the novel during his first stay in Montreal in the early 1980's. Second, the novel takes place over a short, limited space of time: three days in which the lonely boy converses with his wooden horse while his mother fails to return home. Many of his thoughts and descriptions are again given in flashback, but the continued, unexplained absence of the mother fills both Esteban and the reader with an increasing sense of foreboding. Third, as in *Sin salida* and *El último descendiente*, there is a violent crime involving the death of someone in the protagonist's family: in this case, his mother is eventually found murdered, and the child must face the reality of death and solitude.

Gilberto's wife translated *Esteban el centauro* while they were in San Miguel and sent the manuscript to Éditions Boréal in Montreal, where it was read with great enthusiasm by Jacques Godbout; the novel was published soon afterwards and was warmly received in the Québécois press. It was also translated into English several years later by Linda Gaboriau and published under the title *Esteban* by Cormorant Books in 1995; its reviews in English Canada were very favourable. In the aftermath of its success, Flores Patiño has become more involved in Quebec literary life: he regularly participates in readings sponsored by the Union des écrivaines et écrivains du Québec and in 1991 translated Michel Marc Bouchard's *L'Histoire de l'oie* into Spanish for presentation in Mexico City, where it



won the yearly award for best foreign theatrical production in 1992. Bouchard's work in general particularly intrigues him because of the similarities between the small-town and rural environments of Quebec with those of Mexico. Gilberto is also interested in the historical novels of the late Roman Empire by Jean Marcel and the Biblical structure overlaid onto modern life in A.M. Klein's *The Second Scroll*. He is also somewhat more integrated into the growing Latino-Québécois literary scene; his work has been included in *La présence d'une autre Amérique*, as well as *Compañeros* and the quadrilingual review *Ruptures*, and he has read with other Latin American writers in Janou St-Denis's Place aux Poètes. Meantime, his reading has increasingly moved into the esoteric, including alchemy and the works of C.G. Jung, and particularly Jewish philosophy, in which he has explored the *Talmud*, the *Torah*, and works on the Cabala, such as the *Zohar* of Moses of León.

It is his wide knowledge of myth, allegory, and mysticism that have provided him with sufficient background for the extraordinary blend of material in his latest work, a book of short stories entitled *El pegaso de cristal* [*The Crystal Pegasus*], which has only appeared in a French version, translated by Ginette Hardy and published by Boréal. These stories, though presumably for children, are in fact perhaps more appropriate for adults who enjoy remembering or are nostalgic for their own childhood. The seventeen tales in the collection include elements of Aztec, Greek, Jewish, Arabic, and European folklore, but are nevertheless all highly original stories of their own; the settings are generally in Mexico, though the time frames vary from mythological to historical to modern. Almost all of these tales include single or multiple stories-within-a-story, interwoven into the text as storytelling competitions or Scheherazade-like series of dis-

tractions. In fact, the principal theme of the book is the sheer joy of storytelling itself. The final tale, "The Universal Story," is only three lines long and sums up the book's objectives: "There was once a child who lost his way among his adult dreams and never returned" (*Le pégase de cristal* 151).

Flores Patiño is presently at work on another book of stories, *Los cuentos de mi papá* [*My Father's Stories*], which will be published in the fall of 1996 by Fides. As with *Le pégase de cristal*, the first published version will be in French, translated from the Spanish once again by Ginette Hardy. Perhaps the author's choice of language for the first edition is symbolic of his increasing orientation to the world of Quebec letters rather than to that of Mexico, with which he says he is steadily losing contact (personal interview). Gilberto continues to write principally for his own enjoyment, without a well-defined public, as his last two books attest: *Esteban el centauro* is a book written by a child but is basically for adults, while the short stories of *El pegaso de cristal*, though they contain elements of fantasy associated with children's literature, are in fact drawn from a highly eclectic and erudite list of sources and often include philosophical conundrums that are probably beyond the ken of most younger readers. He is also presently at work on a novel that takes place both in Montreal and Mexico; it would be his first work at least partially set in North America and would mark a new direction in his writing. Yet changes in theme and style have always marked Gilberto's writing — from magic realism to the interior confessional, from the simplicity of a child's perceptions to the whimsical and unforeseeable world of fantasy. Flores Patiño has always followed his own path, wherever it might lead.

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Two selections from *El último descendiente* [*The Last Descendant*]

by Gilberto Flores Patiño

Before, I was a tree in a forest of evergreen oaks, though I was not an evergreen oak myself. And before that I was the daughter of the Marquis of Syria. And before that a woman of the temple of fire and one of the brides of the god, who appeared every night to set fire to us with his spear of flame. And before that the guardian of a garden, where I looked after the fragrance of the flowers and would call for help when someone tried to steal it. And before that the bearer of an alabaster vase, along the path of prayer to the god of water. And before that the mother of a monster that fed on young men and damsels. And before that the scribe of a woman who told stories to a king every night to keep him from killing her. And before that a virgin who when she fell asleep would be seduced by a wooden swan, and at the end of the thousand and one nights that the dream lasted, would wake up and give birth to a girl who then became a virgin who slept beneath a tree and dreamt that she was her mother and then the scribe of the woman who told stories to that king and had a son who devoured young men and maidens and was a devotee of the rain god and keeper a garden and one of the wives of the god of fire and a tree and the Marquise of Syria and now I am here. It's been so long since I've seen a fire in a fireplace. I spend my life in the window, or in a cluttered room strewn with objects. From the window I see people pass by without noticing me, or perhaps they stop and speak of my attire. Then a man lifts me up and takes me to a room, where I am naked, because a girl has taken off my clothes. There is another there like me, but we don't resemble each other. And boxes and

trunks and wagon wheels and rolled-up carpets and vases and dried flowers and beds that have been dismantled and a wooden swan and three elves made of papier-mâché and a cast-iron statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe and sheet-metal roosters and mirrors with brass frames like suns, and a rainbow on a folded serape and a suit of armour said to have been abandoned in the sixteenth-century by the person who inhabited it and that was made two weeks ago. . . .

“Who revealed my secret to you?” A heron. There are golden grapes shining in the two brandy glasses. I feel the warmth from the fire. A garden of orange trees burns on her dress. The bird of sand takes flight from her head. I have removed her hat and leave it on the armchair. Her jet-black hair on her shoulders. I stroke it. Thick. Cold. The firelight envelops her face and her bare arms. Her hands, held rigid before her, seem to search for the warmth. I caress them and — she moves slightly. I kneel before the fire. I see her seat herself on the flowers of the rug. She rests her body on her right hand. The glasses are between us. Her grey eyes watch the dancing flames. “At night, after supper, we would go to the drawing-room. I would work on my embroidery and listen as they talked. Like the time my father said that no, it wasn’t true; it couldn’t be. ‘I assure you it is, Your Grace. The innkeeper told me about him and described him just as he is in the book: tall, dry, deranged-looking, with a squire and everything.’ ‘I can’t believe it,’ said my father. ‘That’s understandable, Your Grace, quite understandable. The innkeeper said the same thing, that he couldn’t believe it even after seeing them.’ ‘The Spanish are all mad,’ said my father. ‘Unfortunately not, Your Grace.’ ‘Artists and madmen,’ the Marquis of Syria continued, raising his hand above his head; ‘I don’t know

where art ends and lunacy begins.’ ‘It’s difficult to tell, Your Grace.’ And all morning they would keep me there, very still, seated next to the bed, with my hands folded in my lap. And he would look at me... No, he would pierce right through me, plunging into my eyes or the flesh of my cheeks or my breast. Into my breast, without even being bothered by the presence of my duenna, who those days embroidered more than ever. He would say out loud that my face was the most beautiful in the world, that there wasn’t anyone as graceful as I and that the colour of my hair was blacker and more beautiful than all the nights of time gathered together into a single instant and that my skin was as soft as flowers. In the afternoon we would walk among the trees and the dry leaves breaking apart beneath our feet reminded me of the story of the deceitful sorcerer and we would sit on the edge of the hill and watch the sunset and the duenna would hide among the boulders. . . .”

Chapter Three from *Sin salida* [No Way Out]

He left the newspaper office and went out into the street. A cold, light wind was blowing: a breeze from the early hours of the morning, trailing along the burnished night pavement that reflected the light from the streetlights. The sidewalk looked like hardened glass that had lost its vitreous quality and had turned to common concrete. There was no one in the street now. He looked at his watch: it was one minute before two in the morning. Everything around him was muted and still.

The only sound he heard within the silence was that of his own footsteps, like a resonating trail scattering around him, invading his own void — a footfall that would gradually keep on diminishing till it encrusted itself in distance and oblivion, out past the end of everything, beyond the last block of the Great Street of the World, where there wouldn't be a single house left to wrap up in a quiet hour such as this. Nothing would exist then, neither time nor counting.

“I still have the bizarre feeling,” he thought, “that the dead are nothing more than the things with which I work, the dead whose importance lies in whether or not they're worth an article in the paper: the terrible cruelty of civilization's cannibalism. Tomorrow, like all tomorrows, someone will be feeding once again on the blood we turn into question marks, periods, and commas and then disguise in sentences. The sensation will take hours to disappear; sometimes it's with me for days before I'm finally able to somehow vomit it out.”

He stopped to light a cigarette and felt the enormous weight of the night subside, as if it were only an instant entangled in a web of silence,



fixed beneath a grille of stars. Then he walked on, tossing the still-burning match onto the ground behind him.

The clock on the tower of the Church of San Francisco struck two and was followed by the shrill whistle of a locomotive, like a trail of its sound. He imagined the outline of a dark train slipping across the plain with its cargo of counterfeit dead, of bodies paralyzed in the parody of death known as sleep.

A second, longer whistle cut through the coagulated darkness like a bolt of lightning before a thunderstorm.

He thought of the railway station and remembered the distant Sunday afternoons of his childhood when his mother would take him there to walk along the platforms and watch the trains. Later, when his brother was born, those outings ended.

Once he had felt afraid there, terribly afraid.

It had been almost night when they saw a train coming in. First they heard a blast from its whistle; then they saw the brilliant headlight in the distance. They were sitting on a bench, among the shadows of the platform. He stood up and his mother held him by the wrist to make sure he wouldn't get too close to the rails. The locomotive arrived panting and stopped just beyond the end of the platform, where it blew out a jet of grey steam. Before them stood an interminable row of illuminated windows, at one of which appeared an old man's face topped with a wide-brimmed black hat. He was frightened by the man's long, thick grey beard and terrified by the dark eyes that stared back at him; the continual smile on the man's face, instead of calming his fears, began to fill him with panic. And when that face that fascinated and repelled him finally disappeared from

the window, he found he was again able to move and took refuge in his mother's arms. Yet something, some impulse from beyond him, made him watch the door of the car, at which the old man's complete figure soon appeared. He was completely dressed in black; a cape floated over his back as he walked forward, and the face beneath the beard was still fixed in that endless smile. He began to tremble with fear as the old man walked slowly toward them down the platform. His mother somehow seemed to be an accomplice of this strange traveller, because she began to laugh at his fear, whereas he would have preferred that she pick him up from the bench and that they run off as fast as possible. He closed his eyes, squeezing them tightly shut, in the hope that when he opened them again the strange figure would be gone. But no, it continued to come slowly toward them, its legs becoming longer at every step, the cape billowing out behind as if the man were running at them and only an optical illusion made it seem that he was advancing so slowly. When the stranger came up to them, two large hands reached down and lightly picked him up. He was paralyzed with fear and didn't offer the least resistance; he hadn't the strength left for anything. The hands held him up even with the ancient face, so that he could clearly see the tangled beard with its threads of zinc, the reddened eyes and toothless mouth that opened to ask a "What's your name, my boy?" that smacked of soft gums, like those of a newborn baby. "Hmm? How's that? You don't want to tell me?" The train whistle blew once more, and the old man stopped insisting and put him back down. He ran to his mother's arms and heard the old man's voice thickly adding "What a cute kid!" from that mouth of flesh and no teeth. Yet something, some strange fascination, like a desire to punish himself, made him look up once again, and now all he could see was the cape floating away behind the man as he quickly moved

off and then disappeared back into the door of the passenger car, as if he had never existed. He later dreamt of that man for many nights, until the dream itself became routine, and the routine removed the figure and stored it in the apparent void of remembrances that slowly petrify behind the wall of memory.

Again he heard the train whistle drill through the night, a sharp cry that was longer than before. Its passengers would once again be moving onward into uncertainty.

“How many times have I listened to the wheels of trains?” he thought. “That sound which even seems to reach me here, which could be right next to me now. Wheels that drag themselves along toward the dark precipice at the end of the voyage. It doesn’t matter where they set out from or where they are headed. Each journey has a beginning and an end, and all it leaves in its wake is the dust of the travellers that pass through. My own voyage will also end one day.”

The part of the city that never slept lay in the direction of the train whistle, in the midst of streetlights, taxis humming in the distance that now at night seemed so near, footsteps of shadows wandering through the solitude of a life whose direction had been set at some previous two o’clock in the morning. Other two’s in the morning of other nights, of other lives captured by the invisible, hidden nature of the same reality that surrounded them all.

“At night the city spreads out before me,” he thought, “as if it were a place of such importance; in fact it’s just a mass of viscous anguish, palpitating beneath electric lights — those lights that irrigate the lonely streets like some giant sprinkler.”

The screech of an ambulance cut through the silence of the night, making it seem almost palpably heavy. He looked over his shoulder; the pale green of the reporters' van was still visible in the light from the door to the newspaper building. He waited to hear the motor start up. Then the engine whined as the van sped past him, setting off an avalanche of accumulated shadows over the street as the headlights flashed violently by and shattered against the invisible barrier of darkness beyond their reach.

"They didn't see me," he told himself, though he had seen three figures in the cab as the van went by. "Blanco must have finally come off his drunk. Or perhaps I'm also on my way with them, glancing at myself and thinking that I'm here on the sidewalk. Or maybe it's just my shadow walking along here, like some forgotten silhouette."

Now he could hear the sirens of several ambulances: three, four — then more.

"It must be something big: they're not letting up!"

The sound of the van's engine faded as it moved off into the distance. The sirens, however, kept on, until they eventually also subsided into silence. The aftershock of all the sudden sound continued to buzz in his ears, like the echo of something that no longer existed. The street returned to its habitual calm in the depth of night.

From farther off now, as if from the summit of a mountain beyond the dark clouds through which the moon occasionally broke through, the howls of other sirens came rolling softly across the air.

He thought of death as an abstraction, a void that in the end annihilated all possible effort. He looked at the locked doors of the houses as he walked by and imagined the occupants asleep, immersed in dreams. He felt an inexplicable compassion for them and for himself, too: a mixture of empathy and depression.

“An anguished existence,” he thought, “of people grappling with sterile problems and strapped into a daily routine, without any higher ambition. And to top it off: death! A destiny like a bottomless well with no way out, a canal filled in at the end by eternity. Death is the endless way out, the irrevocable escape, but so what? Life’s not really worth that much either.”

The sirens wailed on, increasing in intensity, as if legions of monsters were being tortured and were crying out in hideous cracked voices that ascended into the night and floated over the rooftops like living screams.

“It’s something terrible,” he said softly to himself, “but what could it be?” He felt the hair on his neck stand on end as one of the ambulances gave a particularly haunting wail. “Nobody in the newsroom will be getting any sleep tonight.”

The howling of the sirens had now become terrifying. An enormous tension was building beneath the previous calm of the night. Something dreadful had happened.

He thought of how this morning the printing presses would be stopped and the paper would change its layout. The sirens had now become like the voices of the insane, keening and unreal. He wondered if he were going crazy.

The ululating lament enveloped the city in death.

He raised his eyes to the sky and saw that the darkness had moved in again: dense cloud had taken over everywhere. It seemed to him that farther up, above the clouds, there was nothing.

“I wonder if total nothingness actually exists: a nothingness that can’t even be spoken of? Had life first come from that? If it had, then human beings themselves were also born from it, each in order to roll for-

ward a huge wheel inscribed with the word "Solitude." At first, people had only had nature to distract them, and nature, with all its mysteries, possessed a silence that filled them with anguish. Humans had therefore learned to think, but when they did so they came face to face with themselves. That was when they discovered nothingness. Someone once told me that human emptiness had created God in its own image and likeness — or was it just the opposite? Had the image and resemblance to God created the void out of the human mind?

Meanwhile the sirens continued on as dozens of emergency vehicles were now evidently converging on some unknown tragedy, sounding like a swarm of grieving voices tearing at the night air.

**ALFREDO LAVERGNE**

Alfredo Lavergne was born in Valparaíso, Chile, in 1951. The city and its long international history were to play a key part in his development. Valparaíso has always been Chile's greatest seaport and the principal point of access between Santiago and the outside world; indeed, before the opening of the Panama Canal, when all shipping between the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans had to go round Cape Horn, Valparaíso was one of the principal ports of the world, and many European shipping firms established offices there. Two aspects of the city had a great effect on Lavergne. First, his grandfather on his father's side was the son of immigrants from France and England and spoke and read fluently in French. He remained an enthusiastic francophile who scoffed at Chilean culture and kept a large library of books in French in which Alfredo was encouraged to read; in fact, Alfredo was even forced to memorize and recite passages of French poetry when he was a child. Second, Valparaíso's prosperity in the nineteenth-century was followed by a slow and irrevocable decline, especially as the upper and middle classes moved out of the crowded hilltop neighbourhoods of the port to the more spacious site of Viña del Mar, one of Chile's wealthiest cities, a few miles to the north. Thus, Alfredo's earliest memories of the city itself were of poverty, decay, and lost grandeur.

Alfredo's mother was a *criolla* (native-born) Chilean who was employed as a secretary in a German import-export company, and his father worked for International Telephone and Telegraph. Both parents had active cultural interests: Alfredo remembers his mother taking him to

performances of *zarzuela*, or Spanish opera, and his father playing him his favourite jazz records. Lavergne's early explorations of his grandfather's library gave him a taste for French surrealist poetry, the literature of the fantastic, and astronomy (he remembers trying to look through the moon, which he thought was a hole in space). Alfredo also spent a great deal of time with his uncle Sergio — his father's brother and the family rebel — who was a professional painter, Communist party member, and alcoholic who endlessly discussed art with Alfredo and encouraged him to think outside of conventional norms. Sergio was an admirer of the work of the great Chilean surrealist painter Roberto Matta, who spent most of his active life in Paris and New York; at about the same time, Alfredo remembers discovering the work of the Chilean avant-garde poet Vicente Huidobro, who also lived many years in France and wrote part of his work in French.

In late adolescence, as Chile entered the spiral of years leading up to the election of the leftist Popular Front government of Salvador Allende in 1970 and eventually to the military coup d'état of 1973, Alfredo experienced an instinctive and visceral rejection of his parents' middle-class expectations. His family had moved to Santiago, where he received a scholarship to a strict German-Chilean private school; upon graduation, he left his studies to take part in the growing student protest movement of the time and work in a textile factory. His parents, who had dreamed of a medical career for him, were appalled, but in the political turmoil of the late 1960's, Lavergne forged a strong and enduring personal identification with the Chilean working class, a factor which is central to his poetry. By the early 1970's, he was working in a plant that made electronic components for the automobile industry (an occupation that was to become his specialty),



where he became active in the union; then, in 1971, at age twenty, during the first years of the Allende administration, he joined the Socialist (Marxist-Leninist) Party and married a young fellow militant.

Alfredo began to write poetry in early adolescence, and his reading at the time ranged from Verne to Wilde to Hemingway (whose extreme individualism he rejected) to the great Chilean poets of the first half of the century, including the socially conscious work of Pablo Neruda; the “Creationist” experimentalism and iconoclasm of Vicente Huidobro; the lyricism of Jorge Teillier; and the Whitmanesque enthusiasm for life of Pablo de Rokha. Lavergne has always been almost exclusively a poet, and his style has consistently been marked by a rigorous minimalism, which he says he first developed from reading the barrage of political graffiti that covered the buildings of Santiago at the time — messages such as the following, in which fear of arrest made brevity a necessity:

I've lost my house  
My job  
My bread —  
Now let's lose our fear. (personal interview)

He remembers a specific day in 1970, soon after the election of Allende, when he was walking from his factory job to a night school class and saw a poster for the First Annual Festival of Protest Songs, to be held that evening. He skipped his class and went to the concert, which included the group Quilapayún and his own cousin Payer Grondona; as he listened, he suddenly realized that poetry was not an isolated interest, but an active part of society as a whole, and that artistic expression could be both profoundly personal and socially committed. It was then that he decided his vocation was to be a poet.

The coup d'état that overthrew the Allende government and installed a military regime under General Augusto Pinochet in 1973 forever changed Chile and the lives of virtually everyone in Alfredo's family. His father, who had been active in the union at ITT, lost his job; his mother began to work with resistance groups; his sister went into exile in Australia. Alfredo and his wife lived underground for several years and then decided to leave the country: they tried to obtain refugee status from France, but received a more open response from Canada, to which they immigrated in 1976. (They eventually went back to Chile to work in the resistance movement against Pinochet in the early 1980's, but returned to Canada two years later.) The year following his arrival in Montreal in 1976, Alfredo's experience in automotive manufacturing allowed him to find a job on the night shift assembly line at the General Motors plant in Boisbriand, where he has worked (except for his return to Chile) ever since. He has two children, and his second wife (and translator), Sylvie Perron, is currently completing a doctorate in Spanish Literature at McGill.

Although Alfredo had recited his poetry at literary and political events and published individual poems in magazines, pamphlets, and flyers in Chile, it was in Montreal that he began bringing out his work in book form; his body of work now runs to twelve books and two unpublished manuscripts. His first collection, *Desde el suelo* [*From the Ground Up*], was written in Chile during his return there in 1980-1982 and deals primarily with Chilean themes such as the loneliness and fear associated with living clandestinely, the military mind, exile, love in the midst of political repression, and solidarity. Alfredo's laconic, understated style is already apparent, though many of the poems have a narrative element that would later fade in importance. Two of Alfredo's poetic trademarks are also pre-

sent: several poems are in loose *haiku* form, while there is a very well-executed concrete poem, “Un humano y su yo” [“A Human and His I”], in which the narrator’s greater self locks horns with his ego, the whole arranged symmetrically as if it were one side of an hour-glass, so that a series of lines of ever-diminishing length is finally reduced to:

sólo tú ego	only you ego
pensastes	thought
en ti.	about yourself.
Tú	You
y	and
yo	I
solo	alone
decidí	I have decided
combatirte.	to fight you. (n. pag.)

The lines then expand out again in the form of a mirror image of those above, but with a wholly new content that reaches out beyond the self. The poem brings to mind some of Huidobro’s best concrete work from the 1930’s and 1940’s. The edition was illustrated by the Guatemalan artist, J.R. Vasques, and was published by the author himself.

By the time Alfredo had resettled in Montreal and published *Desde el suelo*, his reading had widened immensely and had taken his poetic interests increasingly further afield. He had gone through the Spanish classics and had discovered a particular affinity for the work of Luis de Góngora (1561-1627), the Cordovan poet of the Siglo de Oro [Golden Age] whose work is the apotheosis of baroque decorativeness and ambiguity. Góngora’s ornate, enigmatic style, filled with mythological allusion and hyperbaton, was famous for its masterful use of multiple meanings. Moreover (and this was of particular interest to Lavergne), it forced the reader to assume an active role in decoding the text, to become an explorer

and discoverer within the poetic construct itself. Alfredo was also drawn to Federico García Lorca's later work, especially *Poeta en Nueva York* [*Poet in New York*], in which Lorca combines his unembellished Andalusian lyricism with modernistic, surrealist techniques. Finally, Alfredo began to find other poets who shared his own interest in minimalist poetry and concrete verse. He first came into contact with the *haiku* through the work of the Mexican poet José Juan Tablada (1871-1945), who travelled to Japan at the turn of the century and is widely credited with introducing the *haiku*, *tanka*, and other forms of Japanese verse to the Hispanic world around the turn of the century (Paz et al. 444). Tablada also experimented widely and incessantly with concrete verse, using the arrangement of the words on the page as a further artistic element of the poem. Another Mexican, Efraín Huerta (1914-1982), whose bare-bones "poemínimos," often with only one word per line (Zaid 593), were loosely modeled on the Japanese *haiku*, was also important to Lavergne as an author who had taken traditional Japanese forms and had pushed them to the limits of modernism and surrealism.

Subsequent reading, both in Chile and Canada, included the witty, sarcastic verse of the Spanish classical poet Quevedo; William Blake, whom Alfredo discovered on a visit to Boston; the great seventeenth-century Japanese poet Basho, whose *Narrow Road to the North* combines travel commentary with *haikus* about nature and concentrates the five senses in the poetic moment, so that the reader might actually touch, feel, smell, see, and taste the landscape; Walt Whitman, especially for his dedication to the common man; Allen Ginsberg, whose heightened sense of orality and bohemian subject-matter had a particular influence on Alfredo's manuscript *Ese José y esas Marys* [*That José and Those Marys*]; the

Spanish poets of the Spanish Civil War, including not only Antonio Machado, Miguel Hernández, and Juan Ramón Jiménez, but also the popular songs of the war itself; and, finally, the imagistic poetry of Mallarmé (especially “Un coup de dés,” with its free-form typography and open-ended meaning) and the concrete and experimental work of Apollinaire.

Almost immediately after arriving in Canada in 1976, Alfredo became involved in the Latin American artistic scene in Quebec. He was an actor in the troupe of the Chilean-Canadian playwright Rodrigo González in the late 1970's, presenting plays by Brecht and González himself in Montreal and Toronto, and was also in contact with two other Chilean-Canadian artists: the filmmaker Leopoldo Gutiérrez and the playwright/poet/singer/songwriter Alberto Kurapel. In 1982, he read with Yvonne Truque and Nelly Davis Vallejos at Place aux Poètes and, as his work progressed, was invited to poetry readings at the Festival International de la Poésie in Trois-Rivières and the Salon du Livre de l'Outaouais in Hull. In the mid-1980's, the Spanish poet Manuel Betanzos Santos, publisher of the trilingual (English-French-Spanish) literary review *Boreal*, invited him to read with Milton Acorn.

Right from the time of the publication of *Desde el suelo* in 1982, Alfredo has produced a steady stream of poetry, roughly at the rate of one book per year. All but the first three of his books have been brought out by les Éditions d'Orphée, a publisher which has been able to obtain funding for the translation of several of his works. What is fascinating about Lavergne's literary production is its constant thematic change and development; moreover, each book presents a new aspect of his minimalist, unadorned, imagistic style as he strives for fresh, transcendent insight into reality. *Alas dispersas* [*Scattered Wings*], published in 1986, deals with

elements of love and eroticism, as well as with work on the assembly line, and is firmly set in Quebec rather than Chile. One of Alfredo's most personal books, it includes a series of *haiku*-like verses on class and the relation between the sexes ("A Juan Panadero" ["To Juan the Baker"]), as well as poems that play with form in various ways. In *La primavera piedra* [*First Stone of Spring*], written in 1986 but published in 1988 by Editorial El Palomar of Montreal as the first in its series of "Cuadernos de Cultura Popular" ["Tracts of Popular Culture"], with superb drawings by the Mexican artist Roberto Ferreyra, Alfredo returns to Chilean themes, specifically that of working-class resistance to the Pinochet regime during the 1980's. In the most geographically specific texts in his work, he returns to the impoverished streets of Valparaíso at the nadir of modern Chilean history: Pinochet was in complete power and there was no mention of eventual return to civilian rule, opponents to the regime were disappearing regularly, and the economy was hemorrhaging from the first years of neo-liberal restructuring. The book is an uncompromising call to the streets, if not to arms, yet still includes a variety of concrete and sound poems. It is also the last of Alfredo's works to deal primarily with Chile.

Lavergne's next two works, *Cada fruto* [*Every Fruit*], and *...Índice agresivo* [*Aggressivity Index*], published in 1986 and 1987, respectively, by les Éditions d'Orphée, both deal primarily with industrial society and worker alienation, based on the poet's experience at the G.M. plant. With increasing cynicism and irony in *Cada fruto*, Lavergne describes work on the night shift of the assembly line and its psychological effects on the employees; in *...Índice agresivo*, he broadens the focus to include society as a whole, and the ire of a highly politicized Latin American worker is vented against the stagnation of North American working-class life: the

corrupt, silent unions; the false bonhomie of the corporation directors that tour the plant; the inhumanly fast rhythm of production; the psychological effect of having to keep up with increasing numbers of robots; and the gradual transformation of the workers' home life into a simple space between shifts.

There is a great deal of irony and some grim humour in both books; in "Tiempos modernos" ["Modern Times"], for instance, in ...*Índice agresivo*, the narrator draws an implicit comparison between himself and Charlie Chaplin in the silent film of the same name as he describes an unauthorized trip for a drink of water as the assembly line rolls on, thus losing "Thirteen seconds plus thirteen seconds" (73) on his way to the spigot and back. "The pace making you punchy [to take off like that]?" a fellow worker asks him, rather than insisting on the right to satisfy one's thirst. Throughout ...*Índice agresivo*, the words march obliquely across the page, as if they were units to be inserted into a machine, or had been composed to the rhythm of the assembly line, as in "Bouquet de dirección" ["Directors' Bouquet"]:

P. R. N. 1 — 2 — 3 — Drive.

Workers

Exist

In neutral

The liquid

Gear

Box. (91)

In his next book, *Rasgos separados/Traits distinctifs* (1989), Alfredo again changed themes and, to lesser extent, styles. The book appeared in one of Orphée's curious front-to-back bilingual editions, in

which the Spanish and French versions begin from opposite sides of the book and meet, upside-down to one another, at the book's centre. This work is solely concerned with Central America, especially Guatemala, to which Lavergne travelled the year before, during the vicious civil war there that pitted the army and oligarchy against the Indian population, workers, and guerrillas. Alfredo's interest in the country was stimulated not only by its indigenous cultural diversity and political divisions, but also by his readings of two key Central American poets: the Nicaraguan Marxist priest, Ernesto Cardenal, and the Guatemalan revolutionary, Otto René Castillo. Perhaps the work is a poetic journal of the writer's impressions; in any case, his personal experiences have been completely excluded, and the book concentrates on concise, imagistic portraits of the Guatemalan people. Formally, the longest poem in the collection is thirteen lines; most of them vary between four and six lines and are modern, open-ended adaptations of the *haiku* style, as in "Las máscaras" ["The Masks"]:

The fiends  
 Incense  
 Candles  
 The priest who learned their language  
 The elders with arms around each other  
 Santiago de Atitlán  
   Fiesta  
   this is the day  
   the Indians  
 Wear masks. (17)

Lavergne's next book, *Palos con palitos* [*Sticks and Chopsticks*] (1990) was a pure homage to the *haiku*. Almost all the poems are in three short lines, though not necessarily of seventeen syllables: the poet is interested in following the idea or feeling of the *haiku* more than its exact metric replication. Most of the poetry also deals with nature, though the polit-



ical element is periodically recurrent. The narrator is not content with a mere description of a natural state or event, though, but strives to break through the material level to reach a deeper order hidden within, as in the following untitled poem:

The flowers organize  
the movement  
of bees within the garden. (n. pag.)

Moreover, often, as in the above poem, the narrator points out how the *yin* element subtly subverts or controls the *yang*, an observation also found in Taoist verse.

By the early 1990's, Lavergne's books were beginning to receive some attention in the Quebec literary world, both in *La Presse* and *Le Devoir* and the yearly critical review *La poésie au Québec*, published by les Écrits des Forges; reviews of his work also appeared in Chile (*Última hora* and *La gota pura* in Santiago), Colombia (*Kanora*), and Spain (*Manxa*, from Ciudad Real). His poetry, as well, was now being published in literary reviews in Chile (*Simpson Siete, Añañuca*), the United States (*International Poetry Review: Voix du Québec/Voices of Quebec, Nuez*), Mexico (*Blanco Móvil, Norte*), English Canada (*Arc*), and Quebec (*Estuaire, Ébauche, Ruptures*), and was included in a variety of anthologies (*La présence d'une autre Amérique, Enjambres, Compañeros*). Moreover, Alfredo was becoming increasingly interested in Québécois literature, especially poetry, in which his reading took him from Crémazie and Nelligan to the working-class poetry of Alfred Desrochers and Jean Narrache. Among more contemporary Quebec authors, his tastes run to Jacques Ferron, Michelle Lalonde (especially "Speak White"), Nicole Brossard, François Charron, the minimalist poetry of Jean Royer, the rebellious voice of Janou

St-Denis, the politicized verse of Paul Chamberland, the unadorned short poetry of José Acquelin, the mocking, disillusioned poems (particularly *L'Amérique*) of Jean-Paul Daoust, and the descriptions of growing up in Abitibi in the work of Louise Desjardins (*La 2e avenue, La love*), which to Lavergne were reminiscent of life in Chilean mining towns. Alfredo has also been active in the translation and dissemination of Québécois literature in the Spanish-speaking world and has translated the work of many of the poets listed above for publication in both Latin America (especially Chile and Cuba) and Quebec (*Ruptures*). He has returned to Chile on several occasions, where he has given papers on Quebec literature in Santiago, La Serena, and even Punta Arenas, across from Tierra del Fuego. He continues to give readings in Spanish and French (though he writes exclusively in Spanish) at a variety of venues, and he now enjoys, with Alberto Kurapel, the highest degree of recognition in Quebec of any Latino-Québécois writer. He has never, however, learned English and has had only limited contacts with English Canadian writing.

Although the combative streak of political protest is present throughout his work, Alfredo's latest volumes of poetry have focussed on new themes. *Retro-perspectiva/Rétro-perspective*, published in 1991, is a bilingual collection of cerebral, longer three-line poems that deal with art and aesthetics, reflecting his interest in the philosophy of the French critic Julien Benda. Lavergne's eye as poet-critic is implacable: every aspect of the artistic experience is thrown into question, from the influence of the academy to poetic machismo, reader passivity, and the weaknesses of narrator himself as autodidact. The collection ends with "Tragedia" ["Tragedy"], a brief, powerful comment on artistic freedom and political censorship:

One word too many  
and the present poet might  
stand accused (n. pag.)

Lavergne's subsequent two works continue the theme of critical observation but apply it in new ways. *El viejo de los zapatos* [*The Old Man with the Shoes*] (1991), written exclusively in quatrains, uses series of spaces as interior line breaks — a technique often employed by Paul Chamberland. This time, however, the critical sights are set on a mix of political, artistic, and existential icons. *La mano en la velocidad* [*Touching Speed*] (1993), which contains an insightful short appreciation of Lavergne's work by the Cuban critic José Prats Sariol, continues in the same vein, but with a more open poetic style in which virtually all punctuation is eliminated and the line breaks become so frequent that the linkage between word clusters is increasingly charged with ambiguity. One unique aspect of this book is the series of critical poems dedicated to other Latino-Canadian writers. Lavergne is one of the few Hispanic writers in Canada to speak of the influence that other Spanish-speaking writers in the country have had on his work, from the verbal exuberance of the short-story writer Hernán Barrios in "El discurso de la Macarena" to the fabulations of Francisco Viñuela in *Las memorias de doña Alma Errante*, the condensed poetic *minificción* of Leandro Urbina, or the sardonic neo-baroque verse of Salvador Torres.

In the last few years, Lavergne has published two new thematic collections of poetry. *Alguien soñó que no moría/On ne rêve pas encore à la mort* (1993), is an idiosyncratic set of poems on childhood written from the point of view of a child as it gestates, is born, and is raised through infancy that at times brings to mind Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* and at oth-

ers Pär Lagerkvist's *The Dwarf*. The persona of the prescient, uncompromisingly observant child is used to demolish various clichés about the family, human development, and political systems. *El puente* [*The Bridge*] (1995), is a series of reflections on exile, in which the narrator/artist journeys from his land of adoption to that of his birth and back again without ever finding a physical or psychological space which he feels is truly his, for after years outside his native land, he is also a stranger there when he returns. Specific references to place (other than the fact that we are in "the Americas") are omitted, and the world in which the exile moves is one of indistinct shapes, generic situations, and dream-like actions. Only in the last few poems does the narrator break out into a naming of places, from Chile, Argentina, Cuba, and Guatemala to Montreal. The bridge to transcendence of the anguish of exile is the philosophical acceptance of the essential solitude of being, no matter where that being may transpire; in the final poem, the narrator concludes that all of the inhabitants of the Americas are "transterrados," a neologism that implies both uprooting and search for a new land. The psychological bridge has been crossed; the journey is over. The exile has finally discovered where he belongs: his true homeland is within himself.

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Selection from *Desde el suelo* [*From the Ground Up*]

by Alfredo Lavergne

## The Birds and I

I'm a person of evenings  
of bolts and pruned trees  
of lengthening shadows  
of wooden desks  
and green lanes.  
I know nothing of swallows;  
I've only seen one  
and I didn't like its long  
emigrant flight.

from *Cada fruto* [*Every Fruit*]

The Multinational

In this place  
insecurity is earthly  
without monastic complications.

In this place  
chaos is everywhere  
though a few are in control.

In this place  
depression is routine  
hunched up in your temples.

In this place  
the failing economy has its own graph  
in our consciousness and wallets.

In this place  
the capitalist neither improvises  
nor lets up.

In this place  
automation is a banquet  
for the shareholders.

In this place  
the populist speaks of independence  
and we work in lines.

In this place  
the social democrat smiles at us  
and the company supports his re-election.

In this place  
the union is underdeveloped  
and officially deplores anti-communism.

In this place  
every human being is a number  
and I am unionized worker 87653.



## Nocturne

While stars  
                  the night of work  
awakes at dawn. The echo  
of its metallic corona floats.

Day sleep everyday

Follows us whipping our bodies  
We say good-night  
                          to the sun  
And the cars, sheep that keep us awake.

## Worker

What they say  
                          about you

Because they won't  
                          let you speak.

## GMC Paint Shop

Storm cloud

the paint shop.

Different colours for every owner

All with the same toxic perfume painting

the lungs "Essential Grey"

and running down the throat

enemy of joy.

Shade of revulsion

linear design

plastic radiance

North American format

darkening spot.

Infantile resource the colourless varnish

Rust

will avenge aesthetics

Before the three-year guarantee runs out.

from *Rasgos separados/Traits distinctifs*

Caterpillar

for Francisco Ximénez, Order of St. Francis

They are making a black road  
knocking over trees  
filling in holes  
paving

A new mystery  
the airport at Tikal  
on the ancient Quiché Maya trail

A mystery?

For the inauguration and its  
Politicians  
Soldiers  
Tourists  
They hide all the heavy machinery.

## The Sweep

Uniformed forms  
 Raid the neighbourhood  
                   the town square  
 A storm. Concentration camp.  
 House by house  
                   they interrogate the inhabitants  
 In their gardens.

## Lake

They do the washing on its shores  
           Dry things on its rocks.

The little girls  
           Distract  
                   The lake.



from *Retro-perspectiva/Rétro-perspective*

Imaginary Malice

for V. Huidobro

The rose of dreams  
spikes itself  
onto the rose of history.

Species

Each time harmony is born  
our ancestral memory  
reawakens.

Critical State

In one tear the word  
and in the other its appearance.  
The dragonfly goes by unseen.

from *La mano en la velocidad* [*Touching Speed*]

I who am an enemy of symbols put  
 dreams onto the earth lower with my hands  
 believe for years in concrete facts  
 and it so happens that for months  
 I have been jumping out of various devils or angels  
 because we are resuming the assault  
 from below on the property of the celestial  
 state

for this and other museums

a 1500-year-old woman and a mummified  
 dignitary both were Incas  
 leased to this civilization of glass mirrors  
 museum beings that sell their labour power  
 and buy products  
 with other levels of sacrifice

from *Alguien no soñó que moría/On ne rêve pas encore à la mort*

Manuscript

Flesh doesn't grow  
It stretches  
To the maximum that food  
Permits  
Flesh  
Is a yawn  
In the face of death

Cockcrow

Mothers  
Before the first step  
Before the second cry  
Before the third kiss  
Before the darkened room  
Before we start refusing  
The cord that unites us begins to wither



from *El puente* [*The Bridge*]

Stateless

Since I feel far away from where I am  
 Or because they push me toward places I won't go  
 I walk onward  
 And with a quick touch of a pencil  
 That sums up images That takes you on a trip  
 I board the train.  
 I return to where they should know me  
 Go back because what happened before is still with me  
 Reappear in my city and arrive in another.

Poetry

The vehicle advances at full speed  
 And leaves  
 The city  
 The shantytown  
 Behind  
 Utopian Naked Open  
 To the stone of development  
 The jaw of progress  
 The dust of humanist emancipation.  
 I  
 Who claim not to be at war  
 Take the inspiration within reach  
 Of everyone  
 The pencil  
 A sheet of paper  
 And construct my own fortress.

## Toward an Atlas of Industrial Man

In the name of flight  
 I step on the airport floor without kissing it.  
 Flag Anthem Independence  
 Nation Constitution Liberalism  
 Do not exist  
 Nor is there a cultural antidote  
 To dispute my option.  
 Here (I'm going to speak of the ticket of respect)  
 As in the native Córdoba of Góngora  
 To use language is to worm your way into solitude.  
 We poets are an untrustworthy creation  
 And  
 only death treats our feet gently.

## Vinegar Is Not Sour Wine

In the braided belt of these verses  
 I carry the banal jewel  
 The poorly placed city  
 The native land  
 The land that produces emigrants  
 The land that grows impoverished from banishing  
 The land that oppresses you within its walls  
 The land of existential exile  
 The land with its sand  
 And it's in another city that we learn  
 The difference  
 And the need to stop reading about it.

from *Sombrero* (unpublished)

Blue Adaptation

A dog chases a squirrel  
 Between the pines  
 Night falls on the first snow  
 That flattens dead grass.

A  
 THE COLD  
 R  
 O  
 S  
 S

It's  
 fall  
 in Montreal.

Today  
 the emigrants are climbing  
 The mountain            Mount Royal  
 To wait for                    The horizon  
 That will cut off their heads.

Remembrance in the Form of a Spear

Let us never            Forget  
 That far-off land  
 That static image  
 Of past against past

## ALFONSO QUIJADA URÍAS

One of the leading writers of modern El Salvador, Alfonso Quijada Urías, has lived in Vancouver since the late 1980's. A writer of both poetry and fiction, Alfonso has produced a body of work that runs to eight published volumes, as well as several unpublished manuscripts. Several important — and seemingly contradictory — stylistic currents run through his work, from highly innovative structural techniques to an extreme concision and transparency; from a baroque, multifaceted play with voice and archetype to succinct, two-line prose poems. His short stories and poems have been published in Spanish in El Salvador, Honduras, Cuba, Mexico, and Spain, and in translation in the United States, Canada, France, the Netherlands, Italy, and Russia.

Alfonso was born in 1940 in Quezaltepeque, a city of some 60,000 inhabitants about an hour's drive away from the capital city of San Salvador. His father was a farmer who had acquired several properties, most of them at that time within walking distance of the town. Of the nine children in the family, Alfonso was the youngest. His strongest contact with books when he was young was through the collection of his grandmother, a spirited woman who had run away from home in the early part of the century "because she wanted to learn how to read. Reading used to be considered a sin, something almost diabolical," in rural El Salvador, Quijada comments (telephone interview). Apart from historical novels such as *Quo Vadis*, his grandmother also read *Don Quixote* and the works of the seventeenth-century Spanish satirist Miguel de Quevedo, which she would lend to her grandson.

Quijada attended secondary school in Quezaltepeque, where he composed and played songs on the guitar, though he could not read music. During his adolescence, he read Verne and Dumas, but also the lyrical and often politically charged work of Pablo Neruda and the metaphysical meditations of the Peruvian poet César Vallejo. He also discovered the works of writers from Central America, including the poetry of the Nicaraguan symbolist Rubén Darío, as well as the classic short stories of the Salvadoran countryside of Salvador Salazar Arrué (“Salarrué”), and the impassioned, rebellious poetry of Carmen Brandon (“Claudia Lars”). Roberto Sosa, a young Honduran technician in water purification — and aspiring writer — settled in Quezaltepeque at this time and befriended Alfonso, showing him his writings, loaning him books, and introducing him to modern Spanish poets such as Antonio and Manuel Machado. The 1950’s were a time of dialogue and questioning in El Salvador. The national newspapers of the period were increasingly opening their pages to public debate and even publishing a certain amount of creative material, such as poems and short stories, by a range of urbanized, uncompromising young authors who later came to be known as the “Generación Comprometida” [“Politically Committed Generation”] (Argueta 143). Among them were the great revolutionary poet Roque Dalton; the poet, novelist, and critic Manlio Argueta; and the poet, essayist, and short story writer Italo López Vallecillos. Artistic rebellion was in the air.

After high school, Quijada studied in a teacher-training program in the nearby town of Suchitoto. By the age of twenty-two, he was already married and teaching in a rural secondary school not far from the capital. In the meantime, his interest in song-writing had evolved into a desire to

write poetry, and he had begun to publish in the national press. It was now the early 1960's, a time of great political and intellectual ebullience in El Salvador: the old order, under the control of the military and the ruling "fourteen families" of the oligarchy was increasingly challenged, as were traditional and conventional modes of artistic creation. Widespread censorship and massive political repression were not, however, to appear till later. Quijada remembers the decade as being an era of debate and discussion, when people of all political and artistic tendencies would meet and talk in the cafés of San Salvador. A few years later, he and his young family moved to the capital and then finally settled again in Quezaltepeque, from which Alfonso commuted into San Salvador to work for the newspaper *El Diario Latino*.

In the mid-1960's, Alfonso (like Borges in Argentina) was offered a job at the National Library, where he worked for the next five years. There he was able to read as voluminously as he wanted and explored the poetry of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and Whitman, as well as the works of such twentieth-century authors as the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa, the Cuban novelist José Lezama Lima, the Nicaraguan poet and Marxist priest Ernesto Cardenal, Jorge Luis Borges, and Octavio Paz. Like Cardenal and several other Central American writers of the period, he was also interested in the work of the American writers of the Beat Generation, including Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, and Kerouac. By now Alfonso was regularly writing and publishing poetry and was included in an anthology of new writers of El Salvador, *De aquí en adelante [From Here On]*, edited by Roberto Armijo and Manlio Argueta. Despite the fact that he was a decade younger than most of the other poets of the "Generación Comprometida," he was asked to participate on the editorial board of *La Pájara Pinta*, a new liter-

ary review that was just being founded by Italo López Vallecillos, Manlio Argueta, Roberto Cea, and Roberto Armijo. This review, which appeared monthly for the next four years, published works by writers from all parts of Latin America and brought Salvadorans into contact with writers of the “Boom” in Latin American literature during the 1960’s, including Julio Cortázar, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Octavio Paz. It also included works by Roque Dalton, whose political activity in the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People’s Revolutionary Army, or ERP) had by now forced him to go underground.

Quijada was now becoming well known in the world of Salvadoran letters. His poetry was twice short-listed for the Casa de las Américas poetry prize in Havana, in 1968 and 1969, and was included in two Cuban anthologies of the best writing from Latin America of those years, *Ocho poetas* (1969) and *Seis poetas* (1970). At the end of the decade, he left his post at the National Library and went to work for the press of the University of El Salvador. Despite the negative economic effects of the Hundred Hours’ War (also called the “Soccer War”) with Honduras in 1969, Salvadoran culture continued to flourish in the early 1970’s. The EDUCA publishing house, which was to involve university presses in Nicaragua and Costa Rica as well as El Salvador, was founded by Sergio Ramírez and eventually published a journal, *Pensamiento Centroamericano*, and the Ministry of Culture brought out its own review, *Cultura*, which was edited by the poet Claudia Lars. Alfonso was able to enjoy the cultural life of the capital, listening to jazz and tangos, and frequenting the cinema, where he particularly liked the works of Italian directors such as Antonioni and Fellini. In 1972 he published his first two books, both of which show the influence of these somewhat bohemian years and underline Quijada’s inter-

est in a variety of themes and experiments in form. *Cuentos* [*Stories*], published by the cultural wing of the Ministry of Education, is a short collection of six surrealistic, fanciful short stories, many of which have to do with transformation and reincarnation or elements of the grotesque and fantastic. "Decapitación" ["Decapitation"], for instance, deals with the paranoid hallucinations of a young artist who imagines he has become an ant and that a fat man who has been observing him has metamorphosed into a dangerous toad, whom he perceives as the embodiment of bureaucratic philistinism. In "Los hongos" ["The Mushrooms"], the unnamed protagonist is gradually converted into an enormous colony of flowering mushrooms; he is then watered and cared for by his neighbour, Doña Flora, while his wife charges a five-cent entry fee to the village children who want to see him. In the end, his house is burned to the ground by the townspeople. Both these stories, along with others in the book, are remarkable for their symbolic representation of the highly precarious existence of the artist and non-conformist in Salvadoran society, a peculiar creature in a world suspicious of the imagination. Finally, another tale, "Otra manera de vivir" ["Another Way of Living"], would seem to be set in an ambiance similar to that of the San Salvador hipsters of the 1960's. Two young jazz musicians vie for the attentions of a beautiful waitress; when one of them, the narrator of the story, is unexpectedly shot by the other, he is immediately reincarnated as a small songbird who spends the day warbling outside the young woman's window, where she feeds him.

*Estados sobrenaturales y otros poemas* [*Supernatural States and Other Poems*], published the same year as *Cuentos* by the University of El Salvador, is an even stranger and more experimental work. The first section, "Estados sobrenaturales," has become somewhat of a classic of its



time. It consists of nineteen untitled poems in paragraph form, with a high degree of formal eccentricity, including writing without capital letters or periods (and then whimsically breaking the pattern by introducing a few of each), numbering pages in Roman numerals, and highlighting certain passages in boldface script. Many of the poems are made up of what might be described as clusters or constellations of words that have been grouped together in cryptic, capricious, and often revelatory ways. The speaker, sometimes referred to as “el loco” [“the crazy one”], is a bisexual, vegetal, ludic character who liberates himself and possibly his lover, “la loca” [“the crazy woman”] from the confinement of conventional existence by pushing the limits of words as signifiers to the limit as he searches (like Rimbaud) for illumination through disorientation. He ends poem XXVI, for instance, with the fervent wish that lice devour his rational mind. The narrator is in contact with other forms of consciousness, “[p]ossessed by what cannot be seen or heard by anyone” (XVII), and his madness leads to enlightenment (XVIII). He wishes to become

unknown and familiar to all, keeper of events in the reality of dream, of the keys that open the noise of silence, the wide doors of the senses. (XXI)

The speaker wants to say the unsayable, to find out — like the jazz musician in Cortázar’s short story “El perseguidor” [“The Pursuer”] — what underlies reality. There is an echo of Taoist philosophy here, viewed through a surrealist prism. Quijada himself says that he “was looking for a new style, experimenting as I went, working toward a revolution in language” (telephone interview).

Most of the other poems in the collection are concerned with more direct, sometimes personal themes, such as the recurring one of families

(often metaphors for the nation) that are either locked into suicidally rigid patterns of behaviour, or are slowly disintegrating: “from abundance we went to poverty, that design of history, that dialectical step backwards” (XLI). There are also meditations on love, nostalgia, death, human cruelty, and the frustration of not being able to read Lawrence Durrell because one doesn’t have enough money to pay for the book (XCI). The poems are written in verse (though often in extremely long lines), with conventional punctuation (though certain passages are in capital letters this time), but maintain much of the same playful seriousness of tone as “Supernatural States,” together with a desire to approach subjects obliquely, enigmatically, and with unexpected imagery. The collection was well received in El Salvador, especially among younger, more experimental writers, who believed that Quijada was opening up new directions for them. It also gave rise to a certain amount of controversy among left-leaning literati, due to its only partial inclusion of politicized material: many of the poems, especially those comparing the family to the nation, have a great deal of political relevance, but some critics wanted *all* of them, especially those of “Supernatural States,” to be equally militant. Unfortunately, Quijada has lost many clippings of reviews and articles on his work during his travels and exile (telephone interview). It may be noted, however, that Roque Dalton himself is quoted on the back cover of *Estados sobrenaturales*. The text was taken from an interview that Dalton gave to the Uruguayan writer Mario Benedetti; in it, Dalton describes Quijada as having an “uninhibited, contemporary vision of the world,” and praises his ability to write of “the objects, visions, fears, and neuroses of the people of contemporary Central America.” Interestingly, Dalton also adds that Quijada’s poetry is “a cry of alarm that is much closer to the heroic deeds of Che Guevara than to the

poetry of Ginsberg" (Dalton), an assertion that Quijada disputes, emphasizing his affinity for, but creative distance from both figures (telephone interview).

In 1972, Alfonso left his job with the university press, where he had been working as editor of the publication *El Tiempo*, and began to travel. Leaving his family in San Salvador, he first set off for San Francisco, where an older brother of his was already living. He worked in a variety of jobs there, from busboy to labourer in a factory that made cardboard boxes, and also began to paint, mainly in acrylics. These experiences served as the basis for the short story "Salvatruchos, salvatruchos," that is included in the present study. He also visited City Lights bookstore and gave readings of his work in Santa Cruz. Upon his return to San Salvador the following year, he chose to work in more marginal employment, such as the manufacture of handicrafts, in order to have more time for his work and his own personal development and study. During this period, he was especially concerned with poeticizing the short story and read the baroque seventeenth-century Spanish poet Luis de Góngora and the Uruguayan masters of short fiction Horacio Quiroga and Felisberto Hernández, as well as Kafka, Poe, and Swift. He was tempted to write a novel, but found such a project too involved and time-consuming. In 1975, he again left El Salvador, this time for a year in Peru, which he spent mainly in the ancient Incan capital of Cuzco; he then returned to San Salvador by land, seeing much of Latin America as he travelled back through Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Costa Rica, and Nicaragua.

In 1976, the publishing arm of the Salvadoran ministry of education brought out his second book of short stories, *Otras historias famosas* [*Other Famous Stories*]. This collection points to new directions in

Quijada's short fiction and contains some of his best-known work. One thematic realm that the author seems to have wanted to explore is that of the village as archetype for the nation, which is often treated in a style associated with magic realism. In the *minificción* "Noé el hombre isla" ["Noah the Island-Man"] a fanciful Noah, who is a "magician, tightrope walker, priest, telegraph operator, alchemist, poet, and globe-trotter" (12) arrives in a Salvadoran village just after the Flood and the day before the Plague, to establish his clan. "Contádoles el cuento" ["To Tell the Story"] gives a poetic account (with little punctuation) of the destruction of a village by an earthquake and its effects upon various individuals and classes of people, from the partial point of view of an aged medium named "Adelina la turca" ["Adelina the Arab"], who includes a two-page memorial of the names of those who died. One of the most powerful of Quijada's experiments with archetypal figures is the story "De Hijos Suyos podemos llamar" ["And Proudly Proclaim Ourselves Her Sons"], the title of which is taken from the Salvadoran national anthem. In it, a young man has his first sexual experience with an aged prostitute of immense proportions known as "The Giantess," who whispers to all her young customers an endless litany of the generations of men of the nation, from the boys' fathers to generals and presidents, whom she has serviced. The Giantess is thus identified with the homeland itself and its endless passive exploitation by those in power. *Otras historias famosas* was well received in El Salvador, where Quijada now had a high degree of recognition as a writer. Some critics found it too close to the magic realism of Gabriel García Márquez, though Quijada's archetypes would seem to have more in common with Jungian philosophy than with the Colombian novelist's Macondo. Certain stories, especially "El presagio" ["The Omen"], which is narrated in dialect, would

seem to have their roots in the rural tales of Salarrué, but the treatment is unremittingly contemporary.

A third collection of short stories, *La fama infame del famoso (ap)átrida* [*The Infamous Fame of the Famous Stateless Man*], was published by the University of El Salvador Press in 1979. The title is from the *Iliad* and includes a word-play on “atridas,” or the House of Atreus, and “apátrida,” or “stateless person,” and the volume itself is visually as fanciful as its title. The cover is a pop-art collage of childhood scrapbook photos and film and sports icons, arranged to include a surrealist painting; inside, there are various photos, pen-and-ink drawings, collages, medieval drawings, newspaper clippings, and concrete poems in German and French that serve as introductions to each of the stories. The stories deal with a wide variety of themes, though they are unified stylistically by the use of long, baroque sentences, stream-of-consciousness techniques, and frequent movement beyond the limits of prose into a lyric prose-poetry that bursts the bounds of conventional punctuation. Several of them again deal with archetypes, notably “Florencia Sánchez,” which immediately follows this essay, in which a female figure again becomes a symbol for the suffering of the Salvadoran people. In this case, the character is mythicized beyond individuation, but is understood to be a wise woman of the countryside who has also lived in the city. Her subjection as a woman of Indian ancestry to generations of abuse and cruelty at the hands of the men in power within the Spanish-inspired colonial structure mirrors the dichotomy in Latin American culture between the “I” of the conqueror and the “Other” of the conquered that Tzvetan Todorov has commented on in *La conquista de América* (Todorov 13). By writing from her point of view, Quijada stresses an identification with the Other in Latin American culture: the indigenous,

the female, the exploited, the forgotten, the poor. Yet the story ends with the prophecy that the “hour of the jaguar” is fast approaching, when autochthonous forces will wreak their revenge (81).

What stands out about the collection as a whole is the increasing use of first-person narrators of differing socioeconomic backgrounds and ages to tell their tales in the language specific to them as individuals. Each short story narrated in this way becomes the personal account of the speaker, a unique voice both in experiential and linguistic terms. Thus “¿Me entendés?” [“Know What I’m Sayin’?”], the story of a young student’s participation in a demonstration that is ruthlessly repressed by the military, is told in the slang of bohemian youth in the capital in the 1970’s. In the same way, “¿Qué jais?” [“¿Qué Hi?”], in which two opportunistic car thieves are arrested by the police, mistaken for leftist kidnappers, and repeatedly tortured, is a linguistic tour de force of inventive marginal slang integrated into long, poetic sentences of non-stop staccato narration:

That’s what we were into when we heard the Animal’s siren behind us but when were they ever going to catch us with a wonder car like that? So we danced them a mambo through the city and traffic, flat out down the boulevard all the way downtown, where we messed up their heads and lost them and then took off north down Trunk Road in that car that hauled ass like a mother and leapt over potholes like cotton clouds.  
(*The Better to See You* 60)

Quijada had already used this technique in the epistolary story “Mi José” [“My José”] in *Otras historias famosas*, in which the wife of a Salvadoran immigrant to the United States writes home to her mother-in-law, describing her husband’s (and the family’s) difficulties in integrating into their new environment. In *La fama infame del famoso (ap)atrida*, however, the approach is applied to a much broader spectrum of characters, including,

in the title story, the ferocious right-wing (though cultured) mayor of a provincial city in which there is an insurrection against his authority. Overall, then, the disparate stories in the collection form a mosaic of voices that give multiple points of view on the contradictory elements of Salvadoran society. Among the writers who influenced him in the development of his technique of internal monologues, Alfonso credits the great Brazilian novelist João Guimarães Rosa, author of the epic *Grande sertão: veredas* [*The Great Backlands: Paths*], as well as the Guatemalan novelist Miguel Asturias and the Cuban fiction writer Jorge Lizama Lima.

Just as *La fama infame del famoso (ap)atrida* was being published in 1979, however, Salvadoran political consensus was disintegrating and the country was heading into civil war. Leftist guerrilla activity had been increasing steadily since the middle of the decade; in 1979, the democratically elected government was overthrown by a military junta; in 1980 the principal leftist parties in the country withdrew from political activity and integrated into the Frente de Liberación Farabundo Martí (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front, or FMLN), which coordinated guerrilla activities; soon afterward in the same year, the archbishop of San Salvador, Oscar Arnulfo Romero, was assassinated as he was saying mass, and right-wing paramilitary death squads began kidnapping and murdering opponents at will.

For Alfonso, the time had come to leave, and he and his family began an odyssey that was to take them to Mexico City for five years, then to Cuba and Nicaragua, and finally to Canada in the late 1980's, where he had a brother living in Vancouver. It was a decade in which he continued to write, but during which none of his work could of course be printed in El Salvador. Alfonso did publish in the Mexican literary reviews *Plural* and *El*

*Cuento*, however, and one curious effect of the civil war and U.S. involvement in it was that his work began to receive increased international attention, not only for its own literary merit, but because the war there had become an international issue and many Salvadoran writers and anthologists, including Manlio Argueta and Roberto Armijo, were now living abroad. Stories and poems by Quijada were translated into Dutch, German, Russian, and French. In the United States, several poems were included in the anthology *Volcán: Poems from Central America*, a bilingual edition published by City Lights in 1983, and the story "A la sombra de una viejita en flor" ["In the Shadow of an Old Woman in Flower"] was included by Rosario Santos in the anthology *And We Sold the Rain*, published by Four Walls, Eight Windows Press in the United States in 1989. Finally, in 1991, when he was already living in Vancouver, Curbstone Press of New York brought out a bilingual anthology of his poetry, *They Come and Knock on the Door*, translated by Darwin J. Flakoll, the husband of Claribel Alegría.

In 1987 a Honduran publisher, Editorial Guaymuras, brought out a fourth collection of his short stories, *Para mirarte mejor* [*The Better to See You*]. This work has been translated by the author of the present study into English and was published in Canada by Cormorant Books in 1993. The collection is perhaps the strongest, most cohesive of Quijada's work and is unified by several factors. Most of the stories deal with aspects of the political turmoil in El Salvador in the late 1970's or during the civil war that succeeded it in the 1980's. Moreover, of the sixteen stories that comprise the collection, eleven are narrated in the first person by a variety of individuals that include a clandestine leftist printer who is unknowingly betrayed by his ex-lover, an unidentified family member who is riding with



a funeral cortège on its way to bury a centenarian relative when their route is blocked by a huge political demonstration, and a seven-year-old daughter of a market vendor who unwittingly witnesses her unknown upper-class father's marriage to another woman. As in his previous collection of stories, each of these tales is narrated in the language appropriate to the age, class, sex, and level of education of the speaker. *Para mirarte mejor* also includes five stories from Quijada's previous books, four of them told as first-person interior monologues, which is clearly the fictional device that the author has wished to explore and that binds the collection together.

The language and structure of the stories in *Para mirarte mejor* are much more controlled than in Quijada's previous work. Certain previously published stories, such as "¿Qué jais?" ["¿Qué Hi?"], have been reworked to bring them into tighter focus and eliminate some of the intentional spelling and punctuation mistakes which, though they originally gave the impression that the story had been written by someone of limited literacy, also slowed down the text and shifted the reader's attention away from the content and the rhythms of the language. Several of the stories — especially those that are told in the third person and thus achieve a greater degree of distance from the nation's trauma — also have a great deal of humour. "Historia trivial" ["A Trivial Story"], for instance, satirizes cultural colonization in its description of the posing and posturing of an upper-class woman and a social-climbing poet who is trying to pick her up — characters who successively take on attributes of Joan Crawford, Julio Cortázar, Madame Bovary, Fernando Pessoa, Wonder Woman, Dostoyevski, Greta Garbo, and Rudolph Valentino as they court. In "El cuento en El Salvador" ["Short Fiction from El Salvador"], Quijada lampoons the rigidly controlled Salvadoran press during the war in a straight-faced narration of the sup-

posed kidnapping and subsequent enslavement of two circus clowns by guerrilla forces. The breathless, humorless newspaper style preferred by contemporary military censors, coupled with the bizarre facts and highly improbable situations of the tale, underline the speciousness of many of the articles published in the national media during the war. After they are freed by a military patrol, for instance,

The young getaways also revealed that the terrorists who captured them regularly held diabolic rituals at night, including invocations of Satan, the Magnetic Stone, and the Dark Spirit of the Night, as well as other practices forbidden by our holy Catholic faith.

The two young people are now being well-protected by the Arce Battalion; they have been provided with good-quality clothes and shoes and are presently receiving excellent nourishment to help them recover the strength they lost during their captivity.

Moreover, the information disclosed by the two youngsters is of great importance to the Armed Forces, according to a communiqué issued by a military spokesman. (87)

This, as the title of the story suggests, is fiction as written by the military régime.

What, it might be asked at this point, had been happening since the early 1970's to Alfonso's poetry? After the promising start of *Estados sobrenaturales* and publication by Casa de las Américas, Quijada continued to write and publish in literary reviews, but did not bring out a complete work of poetry until 1992, when Claves Latinoamericanas of Mexico City published *Reunión: Selección 1971-1988*, a collection of his poetry that spanned almost two decades. The hiatus in the publication of Alfonso's poetry was due not only to the fact that he had been working more frequently with the short story, but also to the loss of his natural audience and access to print in El Salvador during the civil war. Cut off from

his homeland and wandering from country to country, it would seem from the dates associated with the different sections of *Reunión* that he increasingly began to turn back to writing poetry in the 1980's. The style of his poetry after *Estados sobrenaturales* became more controlled, focussed, and terse; though his lines remain for the most part quite long, a number of his poems are short, incisive, examinations of specific themes. The twenty-year overview of his poetry in *Reunión* permits the reader to follow the development of his work and to observe the interplay between recent Salvadoran history and the themes of Quijada's poetry. During the 1970's, for example, when the social structure of Salvadoran society was undergoing increasing rigidification just at the moment that the general population's expectations were opening up, Alfonso's work was gradually becoming more politically conscious. Furthermore, much of his work from the period of civil war in the 1980's is filled with pain — though not despair — at seeing his homeland ripped apart and his compatriots killing and torturing one another. Other themes, especially dealing with nostalgia for his childhood, also recur, and even his bitterest laments at the tragedy of his country and most virulent attacks on its oppressors contain enough distancing, irony, and humour to assure that they are powerful, successful poems in their own right and do not fall into either complaint for pamphleteering. The following two short poems are illustrative:

#### Poor Us

We'll die along with Capitalism,  
we've been sentenced.

Poor us

and without ever having enjoyed it.

*(They Come and Knock on the Door 25)*



much of his earlier work was also, at the same time, continually turning out the succinct, concise, often minimalist work found here. *Gravísima* shows a completely new side to Alfonso's writing; its short pieces are frequently paradoxical, whimsical, oneiric glimpses of the fantastic in which destinies fit together like Chinese boxes. Though Borges and Anderson Imbert of Argentina are also both masters of the *minificción* (and there are echoes of Borges in some of these pieces), their work is more discursive, more in the realm of the brief short story, than the one- or two-paragraph Zen-like sketches and *koans* that Quijada provides. Some, however, like the longer "La casa grande" ["The Big House"], are complete short stories in reduced form:

It was in that house of vast corridors, bifurcating gardens and large (rooms) and multiform spaces that seemed to have been designed specifically for hide-and-seek, that I would (almost always) lose my way in the early evening, startled by the melodious vibration of the crickets or overwhelmed by some miraculous passage in a book I'd never read before. Then I would hear the voice of my mother calling me, playfully pleading with me to come out: calls that I would never answer because part of the game was not answering, and she would begin to search for me from room to room across the velvet shadows, in the corners of clear darkness where sooner or later she would find me.

Now, after so many years, I have returned to that house of my most secret memories. Today I was the one who went from room to room calling for my mother, but my cries were useless, for she was so well hidden that she never answered, nor was I ever able to find her. (*Ruptures* 64)

Alfonso's latest book, *Obscuro* [*Obscure*], is another exploration in a new direction, this time that of the long poem. Self-published in Vancouver in 1995, with pen-and-ink drawings in pointillist technique by the author, and brought out, like *Gravísima*, under the pseudonym of "Alfonso

Kijadurías," this work deals specifically with exile and the word. It is also the first of Alfonso's works to speak of living in Canada, a personal examination of the power of the word in the life of a now-ageing poet in a land where a different tongue is spoken. The act of writing is presented as a supreme self-affirmation in the face of repression, isolation, and indifference, and is compared to making love (5). It is also linked directly to the speaker's embattled idealism; as with many of the Chilean writers in exile in Canada, the dream of a new and better society lives on in the speaker's inner world. Despite his feeling of isolation and uselessness in Canada, the speaker reasserts his identity as shaman-poet-prophet, even in the midst of the city.

Alfonso is now a well-known writer in El Salvador and is especially popular with readers in their twenties and thirties who appreciate his varied trajectory and willingness to experiment and go his own way, all the while maintaining an independent political awareness. Many young people who fought in the FMLN are now working in the Ministry of Culture, which is to publish a novel by Quijada — his first — in the fall of 1996; Alfonso maintains it will be his most experimental work so far. Quijada has returned to Quezaltepeque at least twice over the past several years to try to reestablish himself there, but each time the economic hardship and the shortage of work have driven him back to Vancouver. Although he is now beginning to write about Vancouver, he has never felt accepted there. Carmen Rodríguez, the Chilean poet and editor of *Aquelarre*, is his principal literary contact there in Spanish, but like Etcheverry and Urbina in Ottawa, Quijada now also reads with other refugee and immigrant writers from Africa and Asia (especially Malaysia) as well as Latin America. He feels there is a strain of frivolousness in North American society, a ten-

dency not to take anything too seriously, which at times reduces poetry to the status of a diversion rather than viewing it as a way of thinking and considering the world. Yet the isolation, solitude, and even marginalization that he feels are not necessarily as negative as one might imagine, for he maintains that they help him focus on his writing and give him the time to do so. His contacts with Canadian writers have also been limited: he says that up till now he has only read some Robertson Davies, Leonard Cohen, Gary Geddes, and Margaret Atwood, and knows nothing of substance about Québécois literature (telephone interview). The constant drive to create in new genres, however, that has marked his work since the beginning of his writing career, indicates that there may be more stories, poems, or even novels in the future that will be at least partially set in Vancouver, for Alfonso Quijada Urías is not only a deeply Salvadoran author, but also linguistic and cultural wanderer and searcher.

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*Para mirarte mejor*. Tegucigalpa, Honduras: Guaymuras, 1987.

#### B. Translations of short stories

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#### C. Translations of short stories in anthologies

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### POETRY

#### A. Books of poetry

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**C. Poems in anthologies**

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*Poesía contemporánea de Centroamérica: Selección de poetas nacidos alrededor de 1900-1950.* Ed. Roberto Armijo and Rigoberto Paredes. Colección El Bardo. Barcelona: Los Libros de la Frontera, 1983.

*Seis poetas.* Ed. Ernesto Cardenal, Roque Dalton, Washington Delgado, Margaret Randall, and Cintio Vitier. Colección Premio. Havana: Casa de las Américas, 1970.

**D. Translated poems in anthologies**

"Antes de la muerte"/"Before Death" and "Crónica"/"Chronicle." Trans. Barbara Paschke. *Volcán: Poems from Central America.* Ed. Alejandro Murguía and Barbara Paschke. San Francisco: City Lights, 1983. 20-21.

*And We Sold the Rain.* New York: Four Walls, Eight Windows, 1989.

two short stories from *La fama infame del famoso (ap)atrida*

[*The Infamous Fame of the Famous Stateless Man*]

by Alfonso Quijada Urías

Florencia Sánchez

The horses of the Conquistadors ride in through her eyes; clouds of dust darken her retinas. Florencia Sánchez's memory is of the ruins of a hut fragrant with the smell of copal incense and wooden dolls; of ears of corn, clay heads, the stench of stagnant water from the withered flowers in a vase, and notions of prophesy. It is the memory of a life forever close to death, a memory that knows how to cut and separate the different cycles of the tale of when they arrived, when they left, when they returned, when they killed somebody, when they drew and quartered somebody else, and even when you heard a *merecumbé* being played for the president's or general's daughter. It is the memory of having her ears tuned from very early on in the morning, the green and fragrant hours of her sun-dial of fruit; the hour of Salomé Durán and his mule and his strongbox on wheels that would beat out 1812 Overtures on the cobblestones just as the train would come into view belching black smoke — the noisy old Number 14 with its whistle and martial bellowings; the hour of packages, the hour that lasts a century of centuries because the rebels fight on even though MalEspín and his imperious armies schooled in the Bismarck method of warfare always win. It is also the hour of the coconut trees, of the fruit that for her has always been another kind of star, a moon hidden behind the husks that are perfect for burning in the fires of her rituals, of her regal syncretism.

Herself the daughter of a chimera, Florencia Sánchez has seen her children leave for other lands, her offspring born to be sacrificed. She has eyed up the man who insulted her deities and god by calling them sons of bitches, forgetting that he himself was nothing more than a desperate little demiurge. She has seen her children eat raw shit, clothed in rags, their weather-beaten skin cracked and swollen with poverty and tuberculosis — she, Florencia Sánchez, who came into the world when it was something else, long before this welter of signs and billboards in foreign languages; she has seen with her pure eyes the graves of her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren; she has seen the scraps, the trash, the worms, the muck, the garbage, the gut of Don Bureaucrat Palacios and the riches of Don Idontgiveadamn Aboutanyone.

She has seen the woman lying on her bed of roses in her bedroom filled with perfume and and the music of Liszt, with her gilt curtains, her jewels, her little love-nest, her hypocrisy after tea, canasta, or making love; she has seen the woman's image in the bottom of her grimy cooking pot and the grey water of the ravines.

Florencia Sánchez has waited for the child who left and never came back and has shovelled dirt onto the grave of the son who sold his soul and that of his people for a few miserable pesos, the one who moved up and up until he finally rose so high that he no longer remembered Florencia Sánchez, the root of all roots, the old woman, the witch, the angel, the lady selling beans or kneading tortillas, the wise farmer, seared by innumerable tragedies, the priestess, door, vessel, pitcher, griddle, gate to heaven, window on hell; the open wound, mother of blind Indians, grandmother to a thousand half-dead grandchildren, sister of hens, healer with chicken droppings, untiring worker, emaciated seamstress at the Vampiros & Co. textile

mill, wife of Pablo Jaguar, oldest daughter of the legendary grandfather; sallow, with a sundial of fruit, a ring of lianas, the fragrance of nopal and a dress of ashes, the repository of all the injustices the unjust have decreed to justify their hate, their crucifix of crossed rifles. Florencia Sánchez, old as the first night of time, she who knows how to wait behind the door while putting up with the dirty tricks of history, the outrages, blows, insults, and false glow of the land of smiles. It might be said that I have invented you or that you are another of my great plagiarisms from more original sources. It might be said, but you and I know that you are real and are made of flesh and bone, Florencia Sánchez.

You see how they have cleaned up the city by dragging all the beggars off to jail, along with the unemployed, the hoodlums, the simple-minded, the drug addicts, the thieves from Santa Anita and Plaza Barrios, the hawkers, and anybody who speaks out against the whole lousy system: the insomniacs, the homeless, the porters, the panhandlers, the girls who flaunt their asses, the mournful women from the wild side of life, the pregnant girls, the grimy kids from Candelaria, the women selling fly-covered nance fruit as they suckle their babies, the student and the radical bricklayer tied up and tortured, thrown down and kicked, hauled off to jail, driven half-crazy by all the torment. You see how they have cleaned up the city, how they have washed the blood off Liberty Park so it looks like a smiling Tower of Babel, spotless, shining, disinfected, its teeth polished, refined, well-to-do, healthy, beautiful, without any problems at all.

Florencia Sánchez knows how to look through the walls and far into the distance to see the jails, the tunnels, the courtrooms, the accused, those without gangster lawyers to defend them; the blood and crap of the sewers, the black headlines of the yellow press, the news items under the

flowerpots, cantaloupes and watermelons; all the seething noise, the pain, the anguish like a jar of chilis, the sadness like a crate of rancid nance fruit, like lemons with salt. She also uncovers, as her gaze slides like a sponge over the tassels and anonymous landscapes of the ice-cream hawker's push-cart, the benumbed mind beneath the brim of an enormous elfin sombrero.

She knows how to smell bread, Florencia Sánchez, good bread and rancid cheese, the ancestral tortilla; she knows how to listen for the sound of the village that travels through her veins: vendors of lottery tickets, tonics, saints and candles, earthenware cups, rooster feathers, iguanas and alligators, herbs, spices, and fried food. She watches and listens as a lazy, sticky cumbia inflames the hips of the woman selling tortillas, the one with the face of a sleepy, olive-skinned Virgin of Guadalupe; the wail of her child and the whack on the behind that the tax collector plants on her ass to the laughter of the police that just yesterday were selling home-made nougat in the neighbourhood or shining shoes or running errands for the big men.

She doesn't sleep anymore, though she'd be more than willing to take a little nap; instead she stays awake looking up and down the street, prying into things, opening holes in the earth, making crosses, urinating in the drainage ditches, invoking the name of her people, because the day is drawing near, and her sons — the ones she gave birth to on the straw mat, the ones who left never to return — will have to come back to her womb that is now squashed flat as a tube of toothpaste and *ay-ay-ay* that day for those that effaced her from their landscapes, maps, and homes of iron, from their farms and luxurious automobiles and brothels and offices of sweat, blood, and tears, and from all their learned culture. Because Florencia holds life and death in her power, heaven and hell, water and

dust, stones and the eye of the deer, flint and jade. Because she, only she, knows that day is drawing near — the night of the sun, the day of the moon, the hour of the jaguar.

## Salvatruchos, Salvatruchos\*

When Sabas Olivares got off the plane that had brought him from California, he felt a strong sense of relief, as if he were getting out of jail; the fresh, mentholated air flowed through his nostrils and down deep into his lungs. The observation platform of Ilopango Airport was crowded with people waiting for their relatives: nervous, good-natured fathers on the lookout for their children; impatient women staring fixedly at the doors of the planes, hoping to see their husbands come down the stairways after a year's absence. It was the year of the fall of Nixon, and no one ever again had the slightest doubt that the United States was run by the mafia. Salvadorans were coming straggling back to their homes, which were probably rented houses in the tenements of some obscure, forgotten town. And there was Sabas, raising his hand to his beard and running his fingers along its small waves like Errol Flynn. Nobody was expecting him, because his arrival was a surprise; it was going to be a real shock for his wife and kids, as well as his parents, who hadn't seen him for over two years and had hardly heard anything from him other than a few stray letters and messages that his friends brought with them when they came back to the country. He took off his beret and combed his hair. How good it was to return: it was like living the experience of that old tango by Gardel in your very bones, he thought, as he smoothed down his greying hair and again imagined the faces that were so dearly familiar.

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\*Translator's Note: The use of "Salvatruchos" to mean "Salvadorans" is the colloquial equivalent of "Canucks" for Canadians.



As he walked toward the gate he lit a Chesterfield, and it felt as good as the first cigarette he had ever had when his old man had found him smoking in the backyard. He walked toward the sea of people, the waves of heavy bags, first to get his documents cleared and then on to the baggage claim.

He smiled. The tricks of fate: his old friend from primary school, Antonio Sánchez Mayrena, was working in the customs office looking through suitcases. Then there wouldn't be any problem with customs: none of those awkward moments when someone brutally paws through your things, your squalid possessions, that we all go through when we travel — unless you happen to be one of those big shots who fly in with all sorts of contraband that no one even looks at. Just at that moment he found himself standing next to Antonio, who turned and saw him, and they embraced each other with an urgent distraction befitting the airport, after which Antonio went through the motions of opening and closing his suitcases, and then with a hearty handshake and "Say hello to the family," Sabas stepped out of the customs area.

"Thanks, man," he told his friend quickly and headed for the doors outside, where he ran into a few other faces he knew and greeted them with a slight nod of the head since his hands were full carrying out his army surplus duffel bags filled with worthless things of great value: cheap books, used clothes, and second-hand records — much of it bought at the Salvation Army.

He went out into the street. A taxi pulled up as if by magic and the driver — a little skinny guy who looked like Eisenhower — got out and put the bags in the trunk. It was Saturday, and the air was fresh and tropical; the stores were shut and San Salvador had an air of apparent calm, the dissembling look of an advertisement that said nothing ever happens here, and

if it weren't for the whores and drunks that were out on the avenue and the beggars in the bus stations, you could say that the nation was living up to its name. Sabas looked out on it all just as he once had for the very first time in his life, when he had gotten off the train and discovered that same avenue in the 1950's, with its antiquated homes, seedy boarding houses, its terrifying bars where you were likely to get stabbed, but that had also inspired him with real emotion. It was a shame they had torn out all the statues of gryphons and chimeras, eagles and serpents, and that old one of the Atlacatl warrior by Valentín Estrada: it had all given the city a personal air — but that was poetic sentimentality. The avenue had had to be widened to make room for the increased traffic of cars, vans, trucks, tractor-trailers, tanks, motorcycles without mufflers, and overloaded delivery trucks. That was how San Salvador, which always managed to endure everything they did to it, had resisted the history of conquest, street battles, political riots, earthquakes, and fires — which turned out to have been good for business — along with the wars, coups d'état, demonstrations, penetrations, and molotov and embassy cocktails.

They turned off the avenue and the taxi began to climb the slopes of Santa Anita. Four drunks and a grotesquely painted woman were singing a popular song on the street; the cab went down San Jacinto and swung onto Avenida Cuba and he remembered the year he had had to cosy up to his uncles while he looked for a bit of luck in whatever he could find so long as it would let him finish up his degree at night. He let himself remember, but now the memory was triumphant, not like those days when he'd gone around with his pockets sucked dry by poverty, the poverty that according to his father came from dreaming too much; because if he had just taken to farming, well then, What, his father had said, would he have had to com-

plain about? He could have sowed whatever he'd wanted. But Sabas, he would say, is the only one of my twelve children to go looking for trouble.

As they emerged from San Jacinto and took the road up the hill to San Marcos, the darkness became thicker. He stopped looking out the window and let the cab continue on without thinking about where they were going; the only thing he saw was the road ahead like an enormous serpent. He still couldn't get away from those memories of his days in San Francisco, cleaning floors in the Town House Hotel on Mission Street; the face of Limpiao, the Filipino in the box factory; the infernal noise of the machines there, those giant guillotines that cut ten thousand cartons at a single slice; Anastas the Russian, running his machine; Julio Santana, the cousin of the famous guitarist; the van that came at noon selling lunches of plastic French fries and Coca-Cola, meat pumped full of injections to keep it from smelling bad; that beautiful crazy Salvadoran girl on the beach, a real Little Red Riding Hood with teeth for biting into the apple of the World. But most of all, he remembered the Infernal Factory where Comandante Chan amused himself by playing with his nostalgia, disguising it. It was a game that reaffirmed that fire is unquenchable. Chan would spend the whole day handing out military promotions to his fellow workers, a group that had been baptized with the name of Sandino Company in honour of the hero of the Segovia Mountains, in whose forces Chan said he had been a bull sergeant in those years long before in his native Nicaragua. "No kidding, my friend: even as a kid I had stripes on my balls, not like those soft Nicaraguan kids today." As far as Chan was concerned, only William, the black guy from Honduras, showed any promise of becoming a real *comandante*, the upright leader that his country so urgently needed, because he'd made his mark. He'd fought in the Honduran Army during the Hundred Hours' War with El Salvador, a war in

which four of his brothers and five of his uncles had died. Sabas had heard from William himself how he had gone from Tela to Tegus, where they'd prepared him for combat. "It was all a stupid mess: they send you out to kill and meanwhile they make off with everything they can loot, and that's when a bullet comes and opens up your skull or you come back all fucked up without a cent to your name, like I was when I got back to Tela. Just give me one good reason I should go back. There's nothing there, and as far as I'm concerned, they can take their war and shove it. I'm going to live my life right here, even if I do work like a mule. At least I'm making dollars now; what's more, my older brother has a fantastic apartment and lives like a king — though not with a king's dignity, like I do. I tell you again: I wouldn't go back there for anything — Why would I want to? — even though things are screwed-up here as well, with the immigration cops checking up on you all the time." When Limpiao the Filipino, the factory foreman, would go off on his rounds to see if his slaves were keeping up with their quota of cutting twenty-five thousand cartons a minute, the Comandante would start to elaborate on his experiences in the Segovias and then Julio Santana would pick up his guitar and begin to tell us about the night he had spent so nice smoking hash with a drag queen named Emmanuelle, who was from Georgia and had a nice big ass like a woman and a face like Ninón Sevilla — a perfect make-up job, a real work of art — and they'd been drinking some excellent gin and turning on to the music of his cousin Santana, stretched out on Indian cushions, with Persian perfumes, Chinese oils, and Nepalese incense, between some babes with beautiful huge privileged tits, greedy for anything that was up for swallowing, never saying no either to the gin or to the longest of cocks: a wild weekend, man, stoned-out and whenever you'd like, just give them a call, brother, and tell 'em I sent you.

The others, like Sabas, William, or the Ecuadorian who had gotten his entire family through the barbed wire entanglements and into Arizona, just went along with things. There were a lot like them, buddies of mine, who didn't talk much but led strange lives, as if the air in their homelands had hit them over the head and then tied them down forever to the dusty streets of remote little towns in lost provinces, still with a few virgin forests, places under volcanos, shantytown villages that tried to keep up with the times, poor and dirty, malnourished, baked by sun and drought. They would appear from those longed-for places with eyes etched with the lines of distant horizons. They also spoke only when necessary, like Isidro from Jalisco, who would say, "Motherfucker, what a jerk!" or Lico the Puerto Rican who ran the huge baling machine and played the bongos in Dolores Park on Sundays or his buddy Lorenzo who said he'd done three years of architecture at San Marcos, the oldest university in the Americas, and that he was hanging on in this goddam city just for the money and then he was taking off for Spain to finish his studies. There was also Luisito, who had been in the merchant marine and had lived in Manila with Mariya, who used to dance in the nude for him waving around brightly coloured ribbons before going to bed, in accordance with a sacred rite of purification and respect that came from her people, and whom he had left in Argentina, where she was waiting for him with their young daughter Nicole; and there were also those Salvatruchos, Paco Martínez, Alejo Gallardo, and the others whose names I've forgotten, the youngest almost adolescents, smoking marijuana in the storeroom and talking about Che Guevara, the fall of Nixon, the Chilean resistance, Pinochet, the nature of real salsa music, and a whole endless tropical rap.

All of them were more or less like Esteban, the poet without poems or books, the poet of life, the dreamer, who had once dragged his nonconformity through the salons of a government ministry and the halls of a public library in order to continue his undergraduate studies and in his free moments had handed out leaflets and manifestos, which finally cost him his job; and after that had gone from café to café and park to park without being able to figure out where he could find work and there he was with a wife and three children and another kid on the way. "It's bloody hopeless," he would say to himself as he walked along in those days; "What a shitty life." They were all like him, and he them: they had the same unmistakable seal; they had been through the same trials; they were all without identity papers — wetbacks, illegal immigrants. They had dodged the customs and the immigration police; they had crossed the river at Ciudad Juárez in the darkness, pursued by the flashing lights of the patrol cars, or had gotten through a fence on that horrendous stretch of border at Tijuana; they had slept badly, putting up with drunks, whores, and smugglers; they had crossed the border inside of trucks and in danger of suffocating, or bouncing along in the trunk of a car during nights of nerves and weariness.

But there they were afterwards on Mission Street, looking as if they owned Manhattan, dressed to the teeth in jeans and jackets; owners of decade-old Fords; "You looking very naice," with ties, safari suits like Tom Jones — flashy dressers with platform shoes. They regretted ever being born in their miserable villages, some god-awful backward place in the middle of nowhere; they wandered around unrecognizable, but easy to detect from their personal details, their way of speaking, their good or bad habits; they were sentimental to the hilt, hardworking, manipulative, intelligent, marginals, and proud — myself among them. They'd venture into murky

nightclubs where people would cut your throat just out of curiosity and chat up the topless dancers. They would buy everything they were never able to afford in their homelands: over-the-hill jalopies, electronic junk, electric pianos, sports jackets and formal wear; their wives would go shopping on Market Street, while they would buy *pupusas* and fried beans on Saturday nights at the Pulgarcito Café, and would drink in order to forget the open wound of their homeland, the stain that couldn't be removed by all the bleach in the world, and that would never let them be.

Everything was left behind now as the taxi climbed up the hill now along Anastasio Aquino; on the radio the Musical Mockingbird was inviting the listeners to listen to the next tango by the Thrush of the Americas. Sabas offered the driver a Chesterfield and they smoked like chimneys. Suddenly he was trapped once more by the memory of that fabulous woman he had met one Sunday at the beach, a drunken blond, a real Marilyn Monroe in a worn, transparent dress under which her lovely form showed the tattoos of a scandalously sexual life. That morning the tide had stranded an incredibly dead iridescent dolphin on the beach; the two of them had stood there looking at it, and that was enough for the girl who could have been a movie star to take hold of his hand and invite him with her eyes to fornicate behind the rocks. No one liked her; all of them, he found out later, including Esteban, unloaded all their guilt on her and treated her badly. Her name was Tetis; she had been born in New York, but had never got beyond second grade in school; she was a heroin addict at thirteen and then had spent three years in a mental hospital. To rehabilitate her they fed her barbiturates all day, and when she was well again she married Jerry Stanley from Arizona, who died a year later in Vietnam. She was a hard case; she couldn't live without drugs and said it was the coun-

try that made her so fed-up: the Imperial Sodom, the bastards on Wall Street. They talked that day from morning to sunset. The next morning she came back to the beach to continue her dance, her sarabande, in search of another tattoo for some untouched part of her body, with her Marilyn Monroe face. That was the morning Esteban had taken the plane.

“Got a light?” he asked the taxi driver, who immediately pressed in the car’s cigarette lighter.

“Here you are,” the driver said, passing it to him.

He fell silent again, as dark as the darkness along the road. The car’s headlights shone on the rocks now and on more than a pig or two grunting in the mud at the foot of the fence-posts, but in spite of that it was more than pleasant to smell the scent of the earth again, to feel the wind on his face, just as he had years before, and the dream of returning and touching the ground with his feet again was becoming real.

By the time they got to San Pedro Nonualco, the electricity had gone out.

“What a coincidence,” he said to himself. “Just when I come back.”

He gave the driver the street address — “Turn left up here; it’s the house with the green window” — got twenty *colones* out of his wallet and gave them to him with his deepest thanks.

At the sound of the car, his children came tumbling out the windows and front door — how they’d grown since he’d been away — and as they shouted “Papa! Papa!” his wife emerged like a character out of a tale from the Thousand and Forever Nights, unsure and unable to believe that he was really there at the door; as they hugged the kids were already getting his bags out and going through them to see if he’d brought any presents.

Last night, his wife told him, I dreamt that a white horse was riding across the sky with you holding onto its tail, dragging you over the stones



and the dust of the clouds, and about six this morning a brightly feathered *torogoz* came flying through my window; something was trying to tell me that you were coming home.

And his aged mother appeared in the backyard with candles in her hands, repeating over and over again, "Thank God, my son, that you've come home; thank God, my son, that you've come home; thank God, my son, that you've come home."

## NELA RIO

Nela Rio is the author of more than six collections of poetry and a number of short stories on three major themes — repression, personal loss, and the reinvention of mythologies — the last two of which are rarely treated in Hispanic-Canadian letters. She has written powerfully on imprisonment, torture, and recovery, but has also produced a variety of work dealing with aspects of love and sexuality among mature and older people, with the effects of disease and death on a spouse, and with the struggle of women to find self-realization in their daily lives. Her work is characterized by an uncompromising and forceful imagination that examines every aspect of her subject, and by a direct, uncluttered, yet accomplished style of writing in which her primary desire is to communicate as effectively as possible.

Nela was born in Córdoba, Argentina, in 1938, but moved to the city of Mendoza with her family when she was twelve years old. Mendoza, which now has a population of almost three quarters of a million people, is the largest city in west-central Argentina and lies at the foot of the Andes Mountains on the main road through the pass to Santiago, Chile. Although founded in colonial times, much of it was destroyed by an earthquake a century ago, and it is now a relatively new and prosperous city, in the heart of the Argentine wine-growing district, surrounded by vineyards and rows of poplar trees reminiscent of Italy or Catalonia. Nela's parents were, in fact, second generation Italians (which is why her family name is spelled without the usual Spanish accent on the *i*), and her grandparents spoke only Italian; she and her three sisters and one brother were able to under-

stand Italian but did not speak it at home. Her father worked for an insurance company and was very fond of music, especially opera.

Nela's earliest memory of writing was winning first prize in primary school for her composition on the Argentine declaration of independence at the governor's palace in Tucumán in 1816; she wrote a short story about the event, however, instead of the obligatory ode to the forefathers. She was regularly writing poetry by the time she was thirteen years old. Rio attended secondary school at the Colegio Universitario Central in Mendoza, which offered an accelerated program and awarded university credits for higher-level courses. The school had a great numbers of first- and second-generation immigrant students from Russia, Belgium, Yugoslavia, Spain, and Italy; Rio says that she has always identified closely with immigrants, whether in Argentina or Canada (telephone interview).

Her program at the school required the study of several languages — Latin, Greek, English, and French — but Nela still had time to read, especially poetry. She particularly appreciated the Spanish Generation of 1927, including the innovative *ultraísta* Gerardo Diego and the lyrical Federico García Lorca; the Chilean poets Vicente Huidobro and Pablo Neruda; the Peruvian metaphysical poet César Vallejo; and, perhaps above all, the Argentine rebel and iconoclast Alejandra Pizarnick, who was almost of her own generation. Along with some of her classmates, she also founded a literary review, the *Folletín Literario*, in which the Mendoza newspaper took an interest, even publishing their work in the Sunday supplement. It was during this time that she realized that her vocation was to be a writer. She also acted in local theatre productions, which she says were often thought of at the time as being subversive (telephone interview). And there were the inevitable student strikes, even in high school, associated with the ris-

ing tensions between the working-class bias of the régime of Juan Domingo Perón and his wife Evita and the bitter opposition of the Argentine upper class and church in the early 1950's.

Rio attended the Universidad Nacional de Cuyo in Mendoza, where she gravitated toward Italian literature, especially in the works of Pirandello, Pavese, and Moravia, and in the French women writers Marguerite Duras and Simone de Beauvoir. She was also interested in the short story and particularly liked the works of the Argentine writers Borges and Cortázar, and the Uruguayans Horacio Quiroga and Felisberto Hernández, both of whom touched on aspects of the grotesque or fantastic. In political or activist circles, the Liberation Theology movement was just becoming active at the time — coinciding with the diffusion of the writings of the Brazilian bishop Hélder Câmara — and she identified closely with the *comunidades de base*, or “base communities,” in which priests and laypeople lived and worked with the poor. Unlike many Argentines, for whom Buenos Aires is the absolute centre of cultural and intellectual life, Nela was not interested in moving to the capital: she visited there every few years, but felt that the *porteño* literary scene was too exclusive, too dominated by quarrelling cliques and fashions, to really be relevant to her writing.

After completing four of the five years required to graduate, however, she married a fellow student who had been offered a fellowship at Emory University in Georgia to complete his doctorate in Spanish literature. Though they travelled extensively in the southern United States while her husband was at Emory, the death of their son from cancer left them with crushing debts. When her husband was offered a position teaching Spanish at the University of New Brunswick in 1969, they moved to

Fredericton, where she herself completed a master's degree in Spanish and Latin American literature and began teaching at St. Thomas University. In 1974 she returned with her three children to Mendoza for a sabbatical year, in the middle of the rampant inflation and paramilitary terrorism of the chaotic presidency of Isabel Perón. Upon her return to Canada, she and her first husband divorced. She has continued to teach at St. Thomas, where her field of specialization is women writers of the Spanish colonial period, especially the brilliant Mexican seventeenth-century poet and feminist, Sor Juana de la Cruz.

Nela's arrival in North America in 1962, coupled with the tasks of raising a family, led her to exchange her public persona as a poet that she had acquired in Mendoza for a more private one, and though she continued to write, she stopped publishing and had no contact with other writers until 1979. This was a period in which she closed in upon herself. "Liberation begins at home," she says (telephone interview), and after her divorce she began to take a far greater interest in the world around her, both in terms of becoming more active in Canada, renewing ties with Mendoza, and seeking new affinities in Spain and the United States.

As a part of her increasing interest in feminism and of her identification with the suffering of women in Argentina and other parts of Latin America, Nela became active in Amnesty International. She also began working with groups that helped and advised women immigrants and refugees to Canada. Listening to and often translating these women's stories gave her new insight into both political and patriarchal repression, themes she would return to later in her writing. Often, she discovered, there was a deeply disturbing absence of respect for women even among militants on the left, who supposedly had dedicated their lives to fighting

political oppression. In the early 1980's, she attended an Amnesty International conference in Toronto on writers and human rights, where she heard testimonials of women political prisoners. Luisa Valenzuela, a fellow Argentine writer whose works have virulently denounced government repression, was also there. The organizers of the conference had symbolically set out eight empty chairs on a stage, each with the name of an imprisoned writer who could not attend: a moving gesture, except that all the names were those of men! It was this double absence of women writers that later inspired her to write *Túnel de proa verde* [*Tunnel of the Green Prow*], a book of poems about the imprisonment and torture of a woman author, a selection of which has been translated for the present study. Toward the end of the 1980's, she also began working with the Women's Inter-Church Council of Canada and other groups wishing to further the cause of women's rights both within the church and beyond.

It was not until the mid 1980's that Nela decided to reassume her career as a writer, and she did so with a boom of literary activity. She was still writing both poetry and short stories, and the themes that characterize her work were already present. Lacking contacts in Canada at the time, however, she began to send her work to Spain, in order to enter it in the some of the large number of literary competitions there, most of which are open to competition from around the world (in contrast to many other countries, which limit participation to their own residents). The results — two books of poems in second place and seven short stories short-listed for international literary awards — were gratifying and gave her new energy and encouragement to continue her work. Moreover, two Spanish publishers offered to bring out books of her poems: *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* [*In the Nights That Disrobe Other Nights*], a powerful cry of

defiance, pain, and mourning in the face of state-sponsored terror, was published in Madrid by Editorial Orígenes in 1989; and *Aquella luz, la que estremece* [*The Light That Makes Us Tremble*], a lyrical and passionate book of love poems, was published by Ediciones Torremozas of Madrid in 1992. Since that time, two of her short stories have been anthologized and another eight poems are to be included in *An Anthology of Hispanic-Canadian Women Writers*, now being prepared at York University; seventeen other poems and three short stories have been published in literary reviews in Spain, Argentina, Canada, and the United States.

Rio is now a member of the League of Canadian Poets (the only one who has been permitted to join on the basis of books published in Spanish), but does not have much contact with other Canadian writers, preferring instead to concentrate on her contacts in Spain, Argentina, and the United States. She returns regularly to Mendoza, where she participates in workshops and publishes in the literary review *Aleph*. She is also active in Spanish-language women's writing in Canada: she has read at the Women's Day celebrations in Fredericton and Inter-Church Council meetings in Toronto; has published in *Aquelarre*, the Hispanic women's magazine in Vancouver; and in 1990 attended the first conference of Hispanic Women Writers in Toronto, where she met Margarita Feliciano and a fellow Argentine-Canadian testimonial writer, Nora Nadir. Finally, Nela has been invited to read at an array of literary events and venues, many of them bilingual, in the United States, from North Carolina and Kansas to Albuquerque, Los Angeles, and San Juan (Puerto Rico); she has also made a number of contacts with translators and writers at professional conferences on Spanish and Latin American literature. She is a member of the Association of Literary Translators of America, where she has found great enthusiasm

for the translation of her works. *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* has already been translated into English by Elizabeth Gamble Miller, a professor at Southern Methodist University; three short stories and a number of other poems have also been rendered into English by other translators. Jill Valéry, a professor of French at St. Thomas, has translated *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* into French. Both Nela and her translators are currently searching for English- and French-language publishers for the books.

What distinguishes Rio's work dealing with political repression is the power of her imagination, her ability to enter so completely into the mind of her subject that every detail of mental development and reaction rings true. Five of her principal works — three collections of poetry and two short stories — deal with the specific theme of such repression and its effects primarily upon its victims. Part of *En las noches que desvisten otras noches* and all of *Túnel de proa verde* are written from the point of view of a woman who is held prisoner, tortured, and raped in a clandestine jail. The earlier of the two books, *En las noches que desvisten otras noches*, is the more outward-looking and ideologically committed of the two, and is specific to a certain historical time: virtually every poem, for example, is dedicated to a *compañera* who has fallen in the struggle against the military (the author was inspired by the women fighters of both Guatemala and Argentina). It is a cry of resistance, defiance, and mourning, a cry which the speaker wants to "resound like thunderbolts" (7) through the world. The national setting of the work is never given, but the struggle it describes is an epic battle between the implacable, monolithic powers of "The Repression," and the fragile, individual humans who stand up to it, either as guerrilla fighters or other, more pacific opponents. In



poem III, for instance, a guerrilla fighter in the countryside is shot to death in his sleep as he dreams of his beloved, who is associated metaphorically with the sun, laughter, the earth, and rebirth; in IV, another woman fighter is encircled by The Repression, which is described as a “thirsty beast” that “sniffs the grass” before annihilating her with bullets in “the only part of her homeland she had left” (12). In poem VI, an Indian peasant woman meditates on the devastation caused by the fighting; it is clear, however, that she regards the guerrillas as simply an extension of her own people’s fight for survival. Readers familiar with Argentine history might instinctively place such poems in the back country around Tucumán, the only geographical area of Argentina ever under complete guerrilla control during the mid-1970’s, and which the military retook in a fierce campaign of extermination, using overwhelming force. The poems could just as easily, however, be set in any one of a number of other countries in Latin America (or Africa or Asia) that have experienced the same struggles.

*En las noches que desvisten otras noches* then changes setting and goes on to describe the anguish of a woman political prisoner (or perhaps various prisoners) who is viciously tortured, including being repeatedly shocked with *la picana*, or electric prod, and then raped by her captors, but who does not divulge any information. The language here is direct, brutal, full of pain and fierce tenacity, especially in its use of obscene insults to punctuate the rape scene in poem XII. In the last poems of the book, however, a new theme is introduced. Poems XXI and XXII present us with the image of the woman guerrilla fighter triumphant and the revolution for social justice and liberty finally a success, but the female speaker closes poem XXII by stating that the moment of victory is ruined by having to trade her gun for “a cup of coffee / I have to serve the new executives” (42).

Then, in the last two poems in the collection, the speaker voices her disillusion with a new world in which “No one listens to this [revolutionary] woman / because the men are all celebrating the victory” (44). Liberation, therefore, when it comes, must be for both sexes; patriarchy must not continue in a post-revolutionary world. This sentiment has been echoed by other writers, including the Uruguayan-Canadian Maeve López in “the last to have died”:

and the women were finally convinced and laid down their guns  
and returned to their homes with lustreless eyes  
to wait for the men to build the new transparent world.  
(López 241)

Nela’s other book of poetry that deals with a woman’s imprisonment and torture, *Túnel de proa verde*, a selection of which is included after this essay, concentrates on the interior world of the victim/resister. In this later work — which underwent its final revision in 1990 and is still unpublished — all reference to the exterior world has been stripped away, baring the protagonist-speaker’s mental processes as she journeys through hell at the hands of her tormentors and then returns to the outside world. The setting here is virtually anonymous: it is anywhere that such practices are carried out. Again, as in the previous book, the prisoner does not divulge any information to her captors, nor does she physically write the poems; there is no place to hide them, and their discovery would reveal her interior world and make her even more vulnerable to her captors. The poems have simply been composed in her mind as she recovers in her clandestine cell between bouts of torture. No mention is made of the woman’s previous life or of any kind of revolutionary activity; the work concentrates solely on her present situation. Though she draws strength from her dead

women comrades (as well as from loves of the past), these women are principally *compañeras* in idealism, activism, and suffering rather than necessarily in armed struggle. In contrast with *En las noches que desvisten otras noches*, this collection ends with the speaker seeking healing — on her own terms and time — with the man she loves. Rio also has another collection of poems, again in manuscript, *El mundo que tú no viste* [*The World You Never Saw*], which recounts the stories of children who disappeared in Argentina's Dirty War.

Two of Nela's best short stories, "Lucrecia" and "El olvido viaja en auto negra" ["Oblivion Travels in a Black Car"], also deal with the theme of government oppression, but from a more objective point of view. "Lucrecia" tells the story of a brisk, homey, middle-class Argentine matron who "didn't even buy the newspaper so she wouldn't find out about anything; why make your life more difficult?" (188). On her way down to the local kiosk, however, to get the latest issue of a magazine of knitting patterns, she is caught up in a demonstration and later detained, tortured, and humiliated by unidentified men. At the end of the story, devastated and stumbling, she is comforted by the other women prisoners: an overwhelming irony, because she had previously done her best to ignore their struggle. The second of the two stories, "Oblivion Travels in a Black Car," narrates the arrival of a black sedan (a type of automobile favoured by paramilitary death squads) on a quiet suburban street; here, however, the author has opted for a highly effective experiment in presentation, giving seven different one-paragraph versions of the car turning onto the street, as seen through the eyes of one man and six women neighbours. The car itself is the protagonist, a metonym for state terrorism, and its approach is variously described as tentative, arrogant, furtive, smug, ashamed, and

haughty. Armed men are finally seen getting out of the vehicle, but the actual kidnapping is not described.

Two further short stories by Rio, both of which are still unpublished, deal with aspects not of politically motivated oppression, but with violence committed against women. One of them, “Encarnación de la Palma,” narrates the rape and murder of a young girl by “one of those about whom you shouldn’t talk because they’re too important” (6); the perpetrator is then torn to pieces by the estate’s mastiffs as he tries to escape. The tale takes place at some unspecified time in the past, perhaps in the eighteenth or nineteenth-century, but periodically recurs — according to village legend — as the spirits of both the victim, Encarnación, and her aggressor eternally try to escape their fate. Although narrated in third person, the point of view is that of Encarnación, whose ghost hears the hoofbeats of the man’s horse and sees him come in the house; she tries to stop him, but his form moves past her and continues up to her bedroom to re-enact the crime. The second story, “María Candelaria,” is about a woman of the same name earlier in the twentieth-century who wanted to be a writer but was forced by her mother, Delia, to give up her writing in order to be a conventional wife and mother. The story is told from the point of view of the woman’s granddaughter, who later publishes her forbear’s work, and is accompanied by marginal notes for teaching the story in a literature class. All three characters in the story are women, and it is a woman, Delia, who is the oppressor. María Candelaria reflects that:

Delia . . . , in her bitterness and frustration, imposed the same life on her. María Candelaria wanted to believe that if women helped one another, that life could change. . . . Why not . . . put an end to the fear, envy, prejudices, bitterness, and desire for power *among women themselves?* . . . (6)

Another of Rio's principal themes is that of love and sexuality among older people. The collection of poems *Aquella luz, la que estremece*, for example, is a celebration of love, intimacy, and eroticism that has strong echoes (especially in the lyric second section) of *The Song of Solomon*; in this case, however, the speaker is a mature woman in search of both sensual fulfilment and emotional and psychological partnership. The work as a whole is prefaced by an epigraph by Alfonsina Storni, the first great (acknowledged) woman poet of Argentina, who also wrote on the same theme. The epic, visionary tone of the poems points to the need to create new mythologies, in which female power is enhanced so that males and females may meet (and mate) freely as equals. In "El leopardo de la piel de estrella" ["The Leopard with the Skin of Stars"], for example, the first daughter of the "first mother" learns the power of touch from caressing "the leopard with the skin of stars"; later "the daughter will go out into the forest of harmonious desires / and will teach her chosen man the caresses she has learned" (14). Female sexuality is clearly presented as an active, primordial force of great power.

Several other short stories and manuscripts of poems deal with the death or loss of a partner in life, or with the loss of a part of the body: *Temblor de amanecer* [*Shiver of Dawn*], for instance, charts a woman (and her beloved's) reactions to her breast cancer and ablation. In these works, death — or its representative, disease — is a force which must be faced and accepted by a human couple, whose ties to one another are deepened by it. This difficult theme is not often touched on in literature, especially in such a calm and inherently positive way. One of Rio's most moving works, the collection of poems (in manuscript) *En el umbral del atardecer* [*At the*

*Threshold of Dusk*], chronicles the death of a woman's husband and her subsequent stages of mind as she tries to cope with her loss; she does not find a new partner or other person in her life. Instead, she is finally able to will herself into imagined contact with her beloved's presence, which would suggest that such bonding can only take place rarely in life, and cannot be easily repeated. The speaker accepts the deepest silences and loneliest moments of life and old age and finally dies, to be mourned and remembered by her daughter. The forty-five poems in the collection are a poignant and lyrical mental and spiritual odyssey, expressed with great emotional accuracy and a complete lack of sentimentality.

An outstanding short story on the same theme, but from an altogether different point of view, is "Carlota todavía" ["Ever Carlota"], a celebration of the vitality of old age. It is, simply, the story of a woman taking a bath and having a self-induced orgasm as she does so. The woman in question, Carlota, is a widow and grandmother who is capable of accepting all the wrinkles and sags that she looks at unblinkingly in the mirror as she dries herself off afterward, yet is still a deeply sexual being who aches for love, but gives herself joyfully to her own touch if she cannot find that of another. Yes, Carlota is old, but she is a dynamic and fulfilled woman, one who enjoys sexual pleasure and satisfaction, even in solitude — though she wishes other people her age were liberated enough to share the energy she knows must also lie at least potentially within them.

Rio dedicates an entire collection of poems, *El laberinto vertical* [*The Vertical Labyrinth*], to the theme of inventing new mythologies and archetypal legends for humankind — myths free from the prejudices and inequities found in the traditional Judeo-Christian tales that underpin Western beliefs. In her customary clear, unaffected, spontaneous language

and a serene, but slightly elevated tone, *El laberinto vertical* relates the epic, quasi-Biblical story of the birth of the universe and the development of humankind, but the processes and stages of development are quite different from those of Judaic scriptures. From the very beginning, the omnipotent monotheistic concept of deity has been replaced by a dualistic, bi-polar pairing of opposites that have been created to live in harmony; moreover, the sexual tags given to various natural phenomena are reversed from those of conventional Western symbolism. In the genesis poems of the text, light is referred to as “shaking out its head of hair / into the black sky they call night” (3) thus perhaps implying a correlation between light and the feminine, darkness and the masculine. In the balance of yin-yang dualism, “. . . the days and nights pursued one another / with care and love / each respecting the other’s presence” (3); furthermore, “. . . all that has a still movement / lives another kind of life called death” (5). In “La esfera” [“The Sphere”], the principle of duality is restated, though it is understood to be simultaneous with Oneness: “It was at times called Mother, at others, Father / and from it were born all things” (8). When people appear in the world, they form couples and mate peacefully and joyfully, giving themselves over calmly to desire and pleasure. Humans live in a Golden Age of harmony and love, in which greed and covetousness are unknown, as early peoples take what they need from nature and are sagely content with its balance. Gradually, however, civilization and its patriarchal values of domination and control gain the upper hand over the natural world and its equilibrium, driving them, along with the worship of female deities, into the recesses of sexual mysticism (the *devadasis* of “Las místicas” [“The Mystics”]) and into folk consciousness. The triumph of the Patriarchy brings with it war, repression, and hierarchical squabbling, and is finally

abandoned by women, who re-establish their own alternative culture that will somehow bring back the values of the Golden Age.

Since she started producing what has become an outpouring of poems and stories in the late 1980's, Nela Rio's eloquent and forceful voice has spoken of feelings and people often overlooked by other authors, as well as by society at large. Her contribution to Hispanic-Canadian letters is unique, and hopefully her work will now begin to receive far more attention than it previously has in Canada and will be increasingly translated and published in English and French, so that its impact can also be felt here.



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Selections from *Túnel de proa verde* [*Tunnel of the Green Prow*]

by Nela Rio

I

I begin  
 in this silence engendering apocalypse  
 in this world chiseled with words of air  
 in this time when written accounts are forbidden  
 to create  
 the long radiant nightmare  
 of a woman of flesh bone blood  
 a scent of reborn ashes  
 and a yearning for rescue through the word.

With a seal without lions or crests  
 I decide to isolate myself in the most open space possible  
 to protect me from this confinement  
 from these walls raised up by strange ideologies  
 imprisoning torturing imposing silence  
 on my throat.

Because I live in the space where imagination  
 liberates  
 because I walk in circles through reality  
 that betrays  
 I write poems of refuge  
 on the inside of my tongue  
 poems that rise from paralysis  
 and the need to discover I'm still alive.

I create a metaphor to encompass the great nightmare  
 words to inscribe realities with white fire  
 poems they cannot touch  
 poems locked within my eyes  
 poems they can't rip out because they have become the skin of my voice.

In the time of imprisonment  
 when you live forever with just yourself  
 the word opens worlds  
 in the quiet tenderness of poetry.

## V

*When the time for torture  
comes  
it is already familiar to me  
I have lived through it a thousand times  
as I lay awake*

I have seen her there  
crouching  
unhurriedly counting  
the minutes of those hours that do not pass  
toothless mouth  
pricking darkness  
shapeless horror  
there  
waiting  
waiting for my body to vitrify with fear  
she is there,  
moves toward me hunched  
stretching herself slowly savouring my frozen sweat  
slithering forward on feet like polyps  
reaching out her hands  
like birds devouring a macabre feast  
her breath wounds me  
like hot thorns  
I want to shut my eyes  
                  that don't respond  
the loathsome shadow advances  
closing off all exit  
my feet of terrified ice  
try to move  
so her touch will not destroy them  
I watch  
look into her mouth of fathomless loss  
feeling a torrent of destruction dragging me down  
and I don't know — I don't know! — where the shadow water horror leads  
if this nightmare of all my vigils has an end  
or if its coming is eternal

## VI

*My eyes search for light in the gloom  
of this cell darkened  
by my silence, punished with isolation  
and I relive the splendor of my women comrades  
who though dead live on*

I was on a vast plain  
like a torrential theatre  
where the wind blew thirstily  
its laboured breath  
caressing  
breathing through my hair  
with its many mouths  
preparing  
like a mad virtuoso  
a strange vision.

The clouds silenced the whispering  
silently on tiptoe  
they had gathered in the sky  
to contemplate to protect forever  
in this changeable reality  
of mist and snow  
the presence of the wonder.

The wind  
rose with the splendour and mystery  
of a primitive winged priest  
soaring to the heights  
and suddenly plummeting with rare shrillness  
searching  
beneath the rocks  
among the dunes  
in the mountains cliffs crags  
searching overturning uncovering  
the magnificent stars  
that had boldly fled the captured sky.

They were there  
 unmistakable among the rocks, sand, dust  
 among the cries in the blood clubs ropes  
 mica glistening triumphant gloriously alive!  
 The wind  
 in a gigantic display  
 like a carnival magician's cape without laughter  
 blew across the precious particles  
 of the shattered stars  
 whirling them away from the greenish purple of the engendering sky  
 and then  
     like a rain of shining  
     gold  
     alive  
     attracting with every right the light of all things  
     incredibly emphatically beautiful  
 laughing wildly as though forgetting their time asleep  
 the companion stars  
 descended once more to never be extinguished

and I was there a spectator made by history  
 bathed in the light of shining victorious smiles  
 sequins of planetary matter  
 contemplating  
 from the edge of the origin of time  
 the creation of the first day of mica  
 and the triumph of women comrades who will never die again.



## VII

*In the excruciating routine  
of turning through the hours  
in the endless nights*

I am coming to the point  
where the river changes course  
where the waters flow back up their channels  
overflowing their banks  
drowning the fields the plains the mountains  
the mouths that remain open like caves.

I am coming to the point  
where the breeze turns into a hurricane  
melodramatically blowing off the roofs  
of sacred things  
scattering burying days and nights  
ideas thought to be untouchable.

It's the point close to obliteration of faith, reason  
the vortex of chaos  
the immobility of hope  
the paralysis of gesture.  
Like the most wretched phoenix that has lost  
the mythical power of rebirth  
and beats its wings in the ashes as it devours itself  
I see  
that point becoming larger like the crater of a volcano  
point of no return.

## XII

*How strange it is  
to feel  
my body like a hand.*

When my fingers grow  
into long sharp-pointed questions orphaned of names  
in barbed conclusions of frauds and betrayals  
when like trembling springs frenetic divers  
they leap down to pierce the ground  
I think there must be truth behind the scream.

When my fingers multiply  
incessant, palpitating  
turning back at me like fingernails growing the wrong way  
trying to seize the smallest part of a story  
breaking, tearing apart  
I think there must be truth behind the scream.

When my fingers return from this longest of searches  
twisted, burned, bleeding  
my scream my scream my scream  
is lost in echoes!

## XIII

*Memories entangle  
solitary hours  
with those when life  
used time as though inexhaustible.*

Rippling multicoloured banners  
separate  
                        trembling lips longing  
as if pushed by thick breaths of silence  
and I enter into the space  
eternally trapped within my memory  
slowly  
solemnly as into an ancient temple

covered only by gestures of fulfilled loves  
I slip my sharp nakedness like a sigh  
into the warm mist  
carrying in my hands  
all the leaves of freely given autumn.

Offering of colour and perfume  
I bend my head of unbraided hair  
before the moist gaze I remember  
and gather up my body my skin shining with desire  
in the contemplation of transparent objects  
that offer and refuse themselves  
silencing  
with a single gesture of my hand  
the murmurs around us.

My flesh transformed into a burning flower  
I let the rain of silence  
vehemently  
run across  
my body  
like an embrace deferred  
or held back

in the anxiety of remembrance  
that rescues reconstructs  
and again I possess you in the vital exercise  
of memory  
in the ancient temple of the trinitarian goddess.

## XIV

*When sleep no longer belongs to night  
nor nightmare to sleep  
to close your eyes is to awaken.*

Dishevelled in the wind  
I run through the merciful corrosive exhaustion  
          thirsting from days without water  
          my dry tongue brittle and cracked  
opening my body  
like an immense mouth.

My feet walk upon  
the treetops  
shaking terrified birds  
from their branches.

I am like a vision  
children's nightmare  
my flight increasing  
my dread of stagnant water.

And there I see myself  
          disappearing into screams  
                          impaling myself  
  on the horizon  
perforating the desert  
in search of the water that accumulates among the rocks.

## XVII

*Tonight they came to get me.*

*Tonight they came to get me  
and I don't know if I will return.*

The scrubland has gathered  
shadowy heads of hair pretentiously slicked down  
delving into the darkness with eyes like coals  
                                  eyes like tongues tongues  
running heavily over my body  
guiltily  
palpably lascivious  
                                  moist  
covering me in their sharpened breath of razors  
                                  crushing my resolute proud flesh against the hard earth

they want to know  
shadows eyes tongues  
why my mouth is closed like a coffin  
keeping alive the ones they want dead.

The uninhabited branches of these impotent scrublands  
arching their sharp inquisitorial points  
claw at my back  
                                  drawing strange oracles of blood  
wrench my hair  
wanting to exhume the secrets that keep rebels defiant  
but my aching forehead does not open to thrusting knives.

The crazed moon of memories  
wants to find paths through the undergrowth  
to throw itself like an arrow  
cutting with its sharpened rays of ice  
at the lewdly curling scrub  
that will drag itself  
sniffing

mumbling frightful words  
the wind doesn't dare repeat  
    and leave in a gallop of thunderstorms  
    crushing the clouds till they are heavy with shadows.

They are stubborn inquisitors  
I am stubbornly silent  
in this night when they have come to get me.  
Now I know that I shall return  
finally victorious  
grasping with my painful flesh  
a written word they shall never violate.

## XVIII

*When the word inscribes itself  
willingly  
with a vocation of eternity...*

Immense whirlwinds  
scatter these leaves  
that I write with blood among the shadows  
and my arms like mad seagulls  
flutter  
without being able to restrain them.

Everything disappears in circles of order and punishment.

Wind  
wind full of howling  
wind of devastation.  
    I struggle creating barbed-wire thickets to stop  
    the bristling invader  
    full of insignias useless for propping up  
    what dangles between his legs like a pendulum  
    oscillating suspended by gravity and impotency  
    snorting wheezing  
    furiously trying to raise its erect fetidness  
and my dress and hair are torn loose  
raped by the centaur riding over bones.

Wind  
wind  
I've got to swallow you in huge mouthfuls  
to shout to you in leaves  
that no wind will ever erase.



## XXI

*I declare and proclaim  
with a fury I do not wish contained*

that the hair of the hopeful sinners  
will become entangled  
with all the cries that shore up  
the dilapidated paradise  
that promises consecrated hallucinations

that all the trees planted  
in rows like lead soldiers will turn grey  
and their leaves will fall like ashes

the flowers shall radiate strange lights  
burning every facet of footlight visionaries  
and colour will flee from the earth.

Because they will try to leave me  
denuded of dreams  
waves will sweep away the cities  
with spectacular brooms  
books will lose their letters  
full of festive images  
history will again take up its improbable monoliths  
and the universe shall drown in a sterile genesis.

## XXIII

*When the letters  
those fragile censured words  
that join me to the world,  
those words that silence chaos and violence  
are seized*

you will hear...

when the world is shaken  
by primordial cataclysms  
transforming the surface of the earth

when the seas  
turn their wombs upside-down  
ejecting terrified fish into space

and bones become dust  
ferociously close their petals  
drowning the heart that beats

when the rocks melt  
into metal  
and harden into crystal

or when the roads  
lose their horizontality  
and rise into the sky  
to plunge back into the earth like spears

...my cry demolish walls!

## XXVIII

*The imprisonment is finished  
the freeing continues  
over years and memories of continual leaving,*

yet love  
like the most tender rain of hope  
embraces me  
with your newly found arms  
and with those of my companions that have never been forgotten.

In the hours when your eyes search for mine  
to rescue me from something you do not understand  
do not ask me again  
why my days are forever full of nights  
why my hours are forever shaken by the wind  
why there are forever cries and exhausted stars  
do not ask me again.

Do not tell me again that I am hitting against your heart  
with pains you wish to forget.

I know my words seem the same  
in every poem  
they return because they return  
in every poem  
like pristine but already painfully old signals  
from a lantern of flesh memory presence.

I also want to rescue myself,  
I am responsible for images  
that fly back and forth across a horizon full of visions  
each day viscerally rebuilding those of yesterday  
flocks of images that come to look for me transmigrating  
from a wealth of suffering settling into  
my impoverished words  
using this dictionary

of an obscenely limited number of words,  
but you know, my love,  
they strapped it on me like a tight dress  
that I must tear off ripping at skin and blood  
to staunch a story that they spat upon my flesh  
in unfamiliar nights when I was alone without you  
and I felt far from everyone.

A story spun in the clamours of a past  
that lives on in our days.

And in the nights of these days  
when your love fills space with tenderness  
I give you my old nights  
so you may embrace them, kiss them, remember them  
and together we may forget them as we remember.

I would like to give you another world, my love:  
that is why I am casting off the one they gave me  
during the nights when you love me.

**ALEJANDRO SARAVIA**

Born in Cochabamba, the third-largest city in Bolivia, in 1962, Alejandro Saravia is one of the new generation of Latin American writers in Canada. His literary output spans a variety of genres: articles (he is a professional journalist); poetry (two published works and another manuscript ready to appear in the fall of 1996); the novel (a work in manuscript form is also ready for publication in 1997); and short stories (one of which has been selected for the present anthology). Throughout his work, however, certain characteristics are present, in particular a complete disillusion with the official history of his homeland; a fascination with language and the intersection of linguistic groups within a single national unity; a constant feeling of loss, both of his previous cultural sphere and of individuals; and an abiding interest in world literature.

Bolivia is a nation of extreme contrasts, both geographical (the Altiplano plateau and Amazon forests), ethnic, and historical. A majority of its population speaks either Quechua, Aymara, or another Indian language and traditionally has not had a representative voice in government; the rest of the nation, including mestizos (*cholos*), blacks, and immigrants, speaks Spanish. Power is tightly concentrated in the hands of a powerful wealthy upper class and the Armed Forces, which are riddled with factionalism. The nation holds the Latin American record for coups d'état (over one per year since independence in 1825) and has the lowest per capita income in South America.

Saravia's childhood in Bolivia, like the country itself, was marked by a façade of stability that was continually undermined by internal conflict.

On the surface, his family led a relatively comfortable middle-class existence. His father was an administrator for a government-owned bank, and his mother, who was originally from the mining centre of Oruro, worked in radio broadcasting and later as a secretary. There were six children in the family, of which Alejandro was the oldest. When he was five years old, his father received a new position with the Banco Agrícola de Bolivia in La Paz, where Saravia attended a Jesuit-run private grammar school and spent a year studying in the Canadian Baptist Institute (his first contact with Canada), where he learned English from his Canadian teachers.

Beneath the apparent economic stability of his family, however, chaotic forces were at work. His father was active in the union at the bank where he worked, and his mother held strong beliefs on the need for social and economic justice in the country. Frequent coups by right-wing military factions, especially that of Hugo Bánzer in 1971, led to his father and mother's periodic imprisonment, during which the children stayed with other family members. His father was also exiled to Paraguay for a year, during which time the military raided the family home, smashing and overturning everything they found in a supposed search for documents. Alejandro's first attempts at reading were the newspaper accounts — with photos — of the search for, capture, and murder of Che Guevara in the forests of eastern Bolivia in 1967. As Saravia observes in reference to his memories of his grandfather, a veteran of the Chaco War with Paraguay in the 1930's who suffered from shell shock, "The country's history is engraved on your family" (personal interview).

One of the discoveries that most marked Saravia's childhood was the book collection of his uncle, an agronomy student, who read widely and encouraged his nephew to do the same. Alejandro remembers that until

then books had been “austere, almost inquisitorial entities” (personal interview) that he associated with school and obligation; now he began to understand them differently as he read Kafka, Cervantes, and Dostoyevski. He also went through the Bolivian classics, by authors such as Alcides Arguedas, the nineteenth-century novelist in search of a Bolivian identity; the symbolist poet (and enthusiast of Norse mythology) Jaimes Freyre; and *Tradiciones bolivianas* [*Bolivian Traditions*], by Antonio Paredes Candia, as well as other works on life in the old Spanish silver-mining colony of Upper Peru. He remembers reading his mother’s copy of Sartre’s *Le mur*, which he says showed him that literature need not necessarily be something elevated and removed from the world, but is instead a way of living (personal interview). Finally, La Paz had an active cinémathèque, where he became familiar with Italian neo-realism, the French New Wave, and the politically inspired films of the Bolivian filmmaker Jorge Sanjines.

At seventeen years of age, Alejandro made a decision that was to change his life and to be the source of *Rojo, amarillo y verde* [*Red, Yellow and Green*], his only novel: he accepted conscription into the Bolivian army. Most middle-class Bolivians, though nominally as liable for one year of conscription in the Armed Forces as are working-class and Indian men, traditionally use family connections or make pay-offs to stay out of military service; Saravia, however, wanted to have the experience, which proved to be traumatic. Though it gave him the opportunity for the first time in his life to establish friendships with Quechua and Aymara-speaking Indians, he also experienced the violent and destructive disdain and racism — and unremitting verbal abuse — with which the largely Indian conscripts were treated by their officers, virtually all of whom were of mestizo or European descent. Far worse, however, was the fact that a par-

ticularly vicious right-wing coup d'état occurred in 1980 (there had just been one in 1979), in which Argentine military advisors, skilled in torture and counter-insurgency techniques during their own "Dirty War," aided General Luis García Meza in crushing popular resistance. Conscripts were forced at gunpoint to participate in raids on houses, churches, and union offices, and aircraft were used to strafe and bomb striking tin miners and rebellious towns.

After finishing military service, Alejandro had to wait for a year to enter university, because the armed forces had closed down the campuses. In the early 1980's, however, he studied journalism and communications at the Universidad Católica in La Paz and then switched to the literature program at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés. He also studied English and discovered Swift, Yeats, Kerouac, William Carlos Williams, and Sylvia Plath in the original; he also deepened his knowledge of Latin American writing and found an affinity for various authors that would later influence his work, including Borges, the experimental Argentine novelist Julio Cortázar, the cryptic metaphysical Peruvian poet César Vallejo, the avant-garde Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, the Quechua-speaking Peruvian novelist José María Arguedas, and the Brazilian magic realist novelist Jorge Amado. Some of the books he read had belonged to the Canadian priest Maurice Lefebvre, who was assassinated on August 21, 1971, the day that General Hugo Bánzer came to power in a particularly vicious coup d'état. Alejandro joined the Partido Obrero Revolucionario [Revolutionary Workers' Party] and worked with it for four years; eventually, however, he became interested in political activity on a more pragmatic, independent basis. Curiously, his father had prohibited him from engaging in leftist political activity because he did not want his son to experience the same



difficulties he had; the result, however, was that Alejandro had to break with his family.

After university, Saravia worked in a bank, where he helped bring in a trade union, and as a broadcaster and journalist in community-based and private radio. By this time he had travelled throughout Bolivia, as well as to parts of Peru and Chile. Despite his antipathy toward upper-class Bolivians who lived as expatriates in the neocolonial motherland of Europe or (even worse, he thought) in the Empire itself (the United States), he began to feel the pull of a more stable, economically viable life for himself and his young family outside Bolivia. He had already been imprisoned once under martial law, and his young wife was pregnant. Nevertheless, he enjoyed and was proud of his work as a trade-unionist and had risen to a position of some importance in the labour movement. Even now, ten years after leaving Bolivia, he still feels ambivalent about his decision — which he says was at first only to be for a year or two (personal interview). After considering immigration to Mexico, in 1986 he obtained permission to come to Canada, where he had relatives living in Montreal.

Saravia's strong interest in literature led him to decide almost immediately after his arrival in Canada that the best way to understand a country was by studying its writing. He therefore enrolled the following year in the Université de Montréal and began to take courses in English Canadian and Québécois literature, in which he was most impressed by MacLennan, Findley, Ondaatje, Atwood, Laurence, Anne Hébert (Bolivia has had few famous women writers), Nelligan, and W.P. Kinsella (whose sense of humour he enjoyed). He also worked in Spanish-language broadcasting at Radio McGill and Radio-Centre-ville, where his weekly program "Encuentro" ["Encounter"] compared cultural life in Canada with that of

Latin America, and translated stories by Kinsella and parts of Michel Tremblay's *À toi pour toujours, ta Marie-Lou* into Spanish for presentation on the show. In the last few years, he has worked in the printing business, in CUSO, and for the Canadian Human Rights Foundation. He has also travelled extensively in Europe and Central America and even to Senegal, where he participated in a conference on community radio. He has never, however, returned to Bolivia.

Saravia began to write poetry and short stories in high school and has continued to do so ever since. He frequented a writers' group, "El Averno" ["Hell"] in La Paz, and had a variety of well-known Bolivian writers for professors at university. He had only published one short story in Bolivia, and it was not until he came to Canada that he began to publish more regularly, chiefly poems in Spanish-language reviews such as *Enfoques* in Montreal and *Hispanos* in Toronto. Despite his interest in Canadian and Quebec literature and his ability in French and English, he has had little direct contact with Canadian writers and his work has not been translated. In contrast to other Latin American writers in Montreal, however, he has also travelled frequently to Toronto, finally living there for a year in 1994, and has been a bridge between the Latin American literary worlds of the two cities. While in Toronto, he met the Mexican poet Juan Escareño, who invited him to participate in *Hispanos*, a bi-weekly cultural review. Over the next two years, Saravia contributed more than twenty-five articles on the politics and culture of English Canada, Quebec, and Latin America to the review. He also met the *engagé* Mexican poet Juan Pablo de Avila Amador and attended readings held by the Latin American Network, which was actively promoting local Spanish-speaking cinema, theatre, dance, and poetry.

Saravia's knowledge of both Ontario and Quebec has permitted him to make certain comparative observations between the Spanish-speaking communities in the two provinces. He finds that Latin Americans in Toronto define themselves more in the context of the hispanic experience in the United States and, in literary terms, with Chicano writers such as Rolando Hinojosa and Sandra Cisneros; those in Montreal, on the other hand, look more to the experience of Latin American writers living in Paris (the favourite Latin locale for expatriation and exile since the Wars of Independence), such as Julio Cortázar and the Peruvian novelist Ernesto Bryce Echeñique, both of whom have set much of their fiction in France. Even the terms of definition are different: Latin Americans in Toronto refer to themselves as "hispanicos" ["Hispanics]," while those of Montreal prefer "latinos" ["Latins"].

Saravia also finds remarkable similarities between Bolivia and Canada from the point of view of linguistic interchange. He says that it was "the struggle the Québécois have gone through to maintain the French language that has made me realize the terrible injustice and linguistic deprivation of the Aymara and Quechua-speaking peoples of Bolivia" (personal interview). Certainly the isolation of the two indigenous language groups within the framework of an arguably imposed and artificial Spanish-speaking national superstructure is a central theme of his work, especially in "Miguel's Night," the story selected for this anthology, as well as in his novel. The racial and cultural prejudices that have aligned with linguistic ones in Bolivia are, however, far more severe than in Canada; moreover, the Bolivian situation is all the more idiosyncratic in that the two minority languages are spoken by the racial majority (indigenous peoples), a phenomenon that is similar to the South Africa of apartheid times, in which

Afrikaans- and English-speakers dominated the more numerous Zulu and Xhosa. Despite such similarities, however, Canada is still primarily a country rooted in the Occidental, materialist, desacralized spirit of domination and exploitation of natural resources, a way of thinking that has overcome indigenous philosophies and is only now being attenuated by other more holistic points of view. Due to their deep native roots, however, many people in Bolivia still retain a preference for coexistence over exploitation, for accepting nature — often in an animistic sense — rather than domesticating it. A surprising number of Bolivians of all classes, Alejandro says, still perform ancient ritual offerings called *challas* to Pachamama, the Mother of the Earth (personal interview).

Saravia has three collections of poetry, two of which have been published in Toronto by Juan Escareño in the series “Palabras Prestadas” [“Borrowed Words”], put out by Hispanos Publishing. The first, *Ejercicio de serpientes* [*The Book of Snakes*], which appeared in 1994, was the third book in the series (after volumes by Escareño himself and by Juan Pablo de Avila Amador). The second, *La brújula desencadenada* [*The Unchained Compass*], came out in January 1996, and the last, *Oilixes helizados* [*Elixes Propellers*] (a neologism coined from “exiles” spelt backwards) is due out in the fall of 1996. His remaining two works, both unpublished, are a collection of short stories, *El libro que ladra a la luna* [*The Book That Barks at the Moon*], and his novel *Rojo, amarillo y verde*. All of these works have a high degree of thematic and even formal consistency. The principal themes of Saravia’s work are identification with the homeland, exile and loss (especially of love), and language. Stylistically, his work often shows a desire to experiment with new forms and ways of expression, while maintaining a high degree of skill and other, less experimental structures as well.

Identification with the homeland is the perhaps the key theme of all, from which other themes and motifs have grown. Repeatedly, characters in Saravia's work are unable to orient themselves in any meaningful way (as in the title of his second book, *The Unchained Compass*) within the national parameters presented to them. Alfredo Cutipa, the protagonist of Saravia's novel *Rojo, amarillo y verde* (the colours of the Bolivian flag), has lived through a terrifying year as a conscript in the Bolivian army during the 1980 coup d'état, after which he moved to Canada. Even there, however, thirteen years later, he is still so obsessed with his experiences in the army that he tries recording them on paper to try to understand and perhaps free himself from them. As he writes, he hallucinates the presence of two important characters from his past: his dead girlfriend, A., and a rebellious Indian conscript, The Boxer, whom he and his comrades found in their barracks with his rifle in his hand and half his face blown off. The military authorities say it was a suicide, but Alfredo and other soldiers examine the magazine of the dead man's rifle and find it is full. As he writes, Alfredo gradually comes to the conclusion that Bolivia is an artificial construct imposed by force on a group of indigenous peoples or nations and has impeded their natural development ever since the conquest, ". . . a country fractured into different societies, languages, and simultaneous historical times" (*Rojo* 15). The only lasting relationship between the native Quechua and Aymara-speakers (the descendants of the Inca and Tiahuanaco peoples, respectively), as well as the Guaraní and other indigenous groups, and the European (and mestizo) national structure that has been grafted onto them is one of domination, and, in this sense, Bolivia has been a failure as a nation: ". . . a population that furiously tried to hide its Indian fingernails, Indian names, its collective memory of

mestizos perpetually ashamed of their Indian blood and inheritance" (10). "Bolivia is an imaginary homeland: a territory that doesn't exist beyond a contradictory geography. . . . It's the collective ways of imagining ourselves and of dying that unite us" (24). Such a stand, however, involves rejecting the entire official historiography of the country and replacing it with a new interpretation: a lonely and difficult task, especially given the fierce opposition of those who have created and upheld the established order.

In the opening and closing scenes of *Rojo, amarillo y verde* (the novel has a circular structure), Alfredo runs through the cars of the Jean-Talon line of the Montreal Metro shouting flirtatious compliments in Quechua in the hope that some woman will understand him. Immigrant passengers from a multitude of countries prick up their ears, trying to understand what he is saying in this, "the city with the largest trilingual population in North America" (132). He imagines (or perhaps it is real) that a woman passenger asks him:

"Are you from Cuzco?" A laugh. "No, no, I'm a mutt" [meaning he's not from the Quechua heartland; Cuzco was the Incan capital]. "But even mongrels have a homeland, don't they?" "No, ma'am, I'm Bolivian." . . . To be Bolivian was to have a wound that never healed. (4)

Indeed, Alfredo's obsession with his homeland reaches such a point that he dreams that he sleeps with the motherland, who tells him she will be whatever he wants, that "there are as many motherlands as there are Bolivians" (28), and then asks him, "Are you positive that I'm...a woman?" (28), upon which he sees that she isn't and wakes up.

As a soldier, Alfredo has been assigned to the garrison guarding El Alto [High Point], the country's main air base, built atop the Altiplano just above La Paz. After the coup d'état, El Alto becomes the point of departure

for bombing runs against the civil population, and Alfredo is forced to carry out raids on churches and homes; at one point he is disciplined for insubordination for refusing to take part in a gang rape, initiated by an officer, of a woman trying to get home after curfew. Writing in Montreal years later, he asks himself why he never mutinied, why he didn't assassinate General García Meza when his unit escorted him down to La Paz from the base, why he remained silent when the army covered up The Boxer's murder. In a highly poetic passage, he finds escape from his guilt, remorse, and disorientation by mocking his oppressor:

I laugh at their symbols . . . , at their love of coats of arms and cockades. I laugh at the words of their anthems. I laugh at the admirals of inland waters and rubber ducks, at the rearguard generals, at the colonels in their slippers, at the dipsomaniac captains. . . . I laugh at history. I laugh out loud, laugh until the high command becomes bewildered, laugh as hard as I can until laughter scares away the tears and makes death a little less death. (113)

It is as he writes his memoirs in Montreal that Alfredo finally finds a strange completion to his destiny in the form of a Kurdish woman, who is initially attracted to him because of his Bolivian socks. It seems the Kurdish national colours — red, yellow, and green — are the same as those of Bolivia. The woman, who later becomes Alfredo's lover, is an urban guerrilla working with the PKK (Kurdish Communist Party) for the establishment of an independent Kurdish homeland. Her dream is to have a country, while Alfredo's is to rid himself of one, and, as a final irony, her name is Bolivia.

The rejection of the official version of Bolivian history also, of course, implies the rejection of the larger political configuration of which it forms a part: what many on the left in Latin America refer to as "el

Imperio,” or the American Empire. Thus, in the *minificción* entitled “Who’s Pedro Domingo?” (the original title is in English), a Bolivian fighter in the War of Independence flees through the mountains, pursued by Royalist forces, when he is suddenly fired upon by a patrol of American troops. He survives and continues on his way. Moreover, in the sinister *minificción* “Un mensaje capital” [“A Capital Message”], in *La brújula desencadenada*, the unnamed narrator meditates upon the fact that “an imperial message” of death can be delivered to anyone, anywhere in the globe, if deemed necessary. Thematically, however, the rejection of political systems and power relationships ultimately extends far deeper, to a rejection of violence itself. The poem “La confesión de Caín” [“Cain’s Confession”] is a monologue delivered by Cain to his dead brother, asking for his forgiveness and telling him that the only reason he has not cut off his own hand — the hand that killed Abel — is because he hopes he can now use it to work for freedom from violence for everyone.

The theme of exile in Saravia’s work is closely intertwined with those of forgetting and lost love. Although the title poem of *Oilixes helizados* is about the slow corrosion by time and distance of memories of life in another land, a more typical work dealing with this theme might be the prose poem “Nonagésimocuarto ejercicio para olvidar” [“Ninety-fourth Exercise in Forgetting”], in which the narrator, like someone in a hall of mirrors, reflects that:

“Saying ‘I have forgotten you’ is, in reality, another way of remembering, of deepening the roots of memory. Thus, as you embrace someone, you find without wanting to another figure behind those lips, who observes you kiss; other eyes that watch you, filled with a rainy nostalgia that you yourself are perhaps inventing.” (*Brújula* 21)



In the short story “La cena” [“The Dinner”], a young Bolivian and his girlfriend sit in a quiet square in La Paz, talking of the future. She invites him to dinner that night, but instead he impulsively decides to finally do what he has always wanted to and books a flight out of the country. Forty years later, near the end of his life, married “to another woman who never knew this square” (*El libro* 6), he returns to the same plaza and finds himself sitting with the other old men, wondering whether he would be able to recognize his long-ago girlfriend once again, realizing the alienation of exile.

One of the most original themes in Saravia’s work is that of the power of language. The human voice and its vowels and consonants are all living things for Saravia; they are part of primordial communication between beings, the desire to reach out beyond oneself to the Other. The initial poem of his first book, *Ejercicio de serpientes*, entitled “Hoy quizá llueva una ‘a’” [“Today Perhaps It Will Rain A’s”], is an ode to the liberating power of the word — and the vowel — that will carry the reader (or listener) far into the world and the imagination if he or she will only cease banalizing language and become aware of its true significance. In the poem “Preguntas III” [“Questions III”], the narrator wonders whether the apple in the Garden of Eden wasn’t made out of vowels, thereby suggesting that speech is the most powerful human gift. In the poem “Desorden nocturno I” [“Nocturnal Disorder I”], in *La brújula desencadenada*, words define all human interaction, whether vocal or not:

Populated with words, like an anthill of vowels,  
 your fingers, your hands are nothing more than texts  
 in another language,  
 a human text that the words in turn  
 read and reread in the night,  
 inventing you. (17)

Given Alejandro's fascination with language, it is not surprising that whimsical titles, experimental typography, sounds, neologisms, and the running together of words all play a major part in his work. Though *Ejercicio de serpientes*, his first book, consists mainly of poems conventionally typeset flush with the left-hand margin, two poems signal an early interest in experimental layout. The first, coincidentally dedicated to the avant-garde Chilean poet Vicente Huidobro, is entitled "Aquí yace Susana cansada de pelear contra el olvido" ["Here Lies Susana, Tired of Struggling Against Oblivion"]; its use of centred lines of varying length to physically shape the poem recalls the devices of concrete poetry that Huidobro used in his famous poem "Nipona." The second poem, "La casa donde habitas" ["The House Where You Live"], positions certain words as if they were the steps and floors of a house. "Oh Canada..!", from *Oilixes helizados*, in which the narrator silently makes love to an unknown but extremely sensual woman (Canada?) within the warmth of her house, is a prose-poem divided into two parts: the first, the description of their coupling, is written without capitals or punctuation, though with brief telegraphic spaces for pauses; the second, in which he leaves her house on foot and heads into the snow and wolves, is written in conventional style. Several other poems in the same book are printed sideways in order to use extremely long lines. "Agonía de la cucaracha global" ["Agony of the Global Cockroach"] runs together the repeated word "olvido" [both "oblivion" and "I forget"] and then adds an "r" at the end, thereby providing the intertextual reading of "vi dolor" ["I have seen pain"].

Saravia's taste for word-play is especially evident in the titles of his poems and in his verbal mockery of authority. One of the poems of *La brújula desencadenada*, for example, is entitled "Traducción de un

antiquísimo texto hallado en una caverna próxima al Mar Muerto, escrito por la apóstola Mariam durante la gobernación de Poncio Pilato y que actualmente se encuentra resguardado bajo siete llaves en Tel Aviv” [“Translation of an Extremely Ancient Text Found in a Cave Near the Dead Sea, Written by the Apostle Mariam during the Governorship of Pontius Pilate and Presently under the Safekeeping of Seven Keys in Tel Aviv”]. In *Rojo, amarillo y verde*, Alfredo falls in love with the Kurdish woman Bolivia and then feels obliged to change the name of his homeland to “volibia” (“b” and “v” have the same sound in Spanish), as a way of deconstructing the concept of the nation. Alfredo also uses comic deformations of military titles in order to poke fun at his late oppressors in the “glorious Volibian Armed Farces” (113), such as Colonel Bánzer and the “megalodipsomaniacal” “Gonorral García Meza” (64), whose cabinet included Johnny Walker, and upon whom history should bestow “a crown of coca leaves” (64).

Saravia’s particular mixture of playfulness and extreme seriousness, coupled with his interest in stylistic experimentation, indicate that his work may well keep evolving in unexpected ways in the future. His interest in Canada and Quebec and the unique linguistic perspective that he provides as a Bolivian bring new perspectives on language and identity to a nation that is — like his — obsessed with both.

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## La noche de Miguel [Miguel's Night]

by Alejandro Saravia

Out there the dogs are afraid of people. As soon as they hear footsteps on the gravel or dust in the road, they run away as fast as they can without dropping whatever they have clutched in their jaws. Their eyes are full of fear, yet also of the hope that this time the footsteps coming toward them will signal something good, not of having a stone thrown at them, but perhaps of being offered a bit of bread by some wayfarer trying to elicit a propitious omen from the air, earth, or space around him.

Against this straw-coloured backdrop of afternoon on the Altiplano, several pigs could be seen rooting among the freshly sown fields. The potatoes had been harvested several days before, and there was an air of expectation on the sunburnt faces of the Indians of the community, who were now looking forward to the coming agricultural fair. On that day they would sell and ship off their loads of potatoes to the city in huge woven sacks as thick as *phullus*, or blankets, which they themselves had made and sewn shut with large needles and damp hemp cord. In the meantime, the pigs ran about among the recently harvested furrows, turning over the tightly packed earth with their hairy snouts, searching for the few potatoes that had been left in the ground because they were too small. From time to time a dog would bark. Miguel stood at the door of the only restaurant in the village, watching the order of the world and wondering why the pigs today seemed happier than the dogs. It must be because the pigs could eat the potatoes that were left, whereas the dogs couldn't. At dawn tomorrow, Doña Cecilia was going to have three hogs slaughtered for the fair, and later on people would give the dogs the leftover pig bones from their plates.

Even on clear days, there were always clouds over the peaks of the blue and red mountains that could be seen from the restaurant window rising high in the distance. If you listened carefully on certain sunny days in June, you could hear the deep, almost silent hum that came from those mountain ranges, as if immense and benevolent forces lay resting beneath the far-away blue haze; as if the mountains were sleeping in a vast dream, and you were hearing the magnetic rhythm of their powerful breathing that altered the flight of birds.

A rectangular piece of wood nailed to the door of the building announced "Restaurante Calamarca" in peeling red letters that seemed to have once been tentatively traced by paint-covered fingers,

A cold, dry wind blew across the Altiplano at this hour of the evening, as it had for centuries, and the customers wore woolen *lluchu* caps beneath their felt hats; most of their hats were discoloured, though a few had been well cared-for and looked as if they had spent their days asleep under plastic covers in closets rather than outside. The women, wide-framed and dark-skinned, with taut, shining cheeks, wore austere brown and ochre-coloured blankets that blended with the colours of the landscape. There were also stoutly built mestizo girls eating steaming platefuls of potatoes and lamb, seated tightly four in a row on rustic benches at tables covered with cloths smuggled in from Yunguyo long ago. At the foot of each table lay a few grey-whiskered dogs with their heads resting on their front paws and their eyes raised to see if any bones might fall their way.

Miguel was Doña Cecilia's serving-boy. One day a pair of very poor Indians had arrived at the restaurant saying that they could no longer

afford to take care of him or feed him, and begged Doña Cecilia to keep him for them until the day they could come back to reclaim him, assuring her that in the meantime the child would be of great help to her. They spoke softly in Aymara, sucking at the juice from the leaves they chewed, which flowed steadily from their denuded gums toward one side of their mouths; they seemed embarrassed and repeatedly called the proprietress *Mamita* and *Mamay*. When Doña Cecilia finally agreed, after looking kindly at the child who was crawling around in woolen diapers on the hard earth floor, the couple thanked her in unison — “Graishias, Mamay” — and left.

The boy was now nine years old and in all that time his parents had never returned to see him. Occasionally customers at the restaurant would bring back stories from faraway villages of droughts so severe that the stones died of thirst, or of floods that caused landslides that buried whole towns, or of frosts that killed the crops, animals, and even people. Perhaps Miguel’s parents had already died or moved to the city.

“What have you been up to, my boy?” asked a man who had just entered the restaurant. The child hadn’t seen him come in because he had been looking out the window, watching the movements of the pigs as he wondered which one would be slaughtered the following day. “I’ve known you ever since you were very young,” the stranger told him. Miguel began to feel afraid and searched for the eyes of Doña Cecilia, who was busy with two customers paying their bill; she was seated behind the wooden counter on which were several packets of cigarettes of dark tobacco and a row of beer and soda bottles. The mestizo proprietress first looked at Miguel and then at the visitor; then, tilting her hat to one side, she went over to them.

“How have you been, young man?” she asked, with a certain mix of joy and calculation in her shy smile.



"Fine, Doña Cecilia. How about yourself? I can see you've been selling good health," the stranger replied.

"Ay! Here we are, working hard as always. And you, sir, what brings you out here?"

"I've come for Miguel."

An even greater fear now began to spread over the boy, starting in his feet and climbing up under his skin and clothes, wafting across his back with a frozen breath; not knowing what else to do, he escaped into the kitchen.

"But young man, why do you want to take him away? The boy's a big help and everyone likes him. He's used to life with us. You're going to make him feel bad; his soul might even take flight."

"He's got to come back with me to the city. There he'll go to school and learn how to read and write. How's his Spanish?"

"He can understand it, but sometimes you have to speak to him in Aymara."

The Indians turned their heads and continued to work as they saw Miguel come in; one of them greeted him with a brief smile, asking him in Aymara, "How are you, son?" Miguel didn't know what to say and began to cry quietly. When they heard him, the men and women stopped peeling potatoes and sat watching him. There were twelve of them; their job was to keep the restaurant supplied with water, firewood, and sometimes kerosene, as well as to make adobe bricks, peel potatoes, cut up onions, plant oka, and occasionally play the *zampoña*, or panpipes. Tomorrow they would also have the task of butchering the hogs for the fair, the day when

Calamarca filled up with outsiders from other villages. There would even be people from the city, who came to buy part of the harvest — they were market middlemen — and sometimes to look for child servants, the sons or daughters of impoverished Indians that the mestizos would take back with them to the city to work in their houses and learn to speak Spanish.

Miguel tried to explain the situation to the Indians more clearly by speaking in Ayamara.

“They want to take me to the city. A man came yesterday and wants me to go back with him.” The Indians picked up their knives again and slowly returned to their peeling, placing the potatoes in a large pan full of water.

“And do you want to go?” one of them asked.

“No, no, no!” answered Miguel, shaking his head. “I don’t want to leave here.”

“I wouldn’t want to either,” another of them said. “They speak a different language there and take advantage of you. Do you remember Sabino? Sabino Ajhuacho? He went back there after his military service. ‘Stinking Indian,’ they used to call him in the army; ‘Dumb Indian, fucking idiot.’ The others, the ones who’d been there a while, told him it was just in the army that they treated you like that, that the rest of the people were all right.”

The other Indians and Miguel listened with their eyes fixed attentively on the man named Tomás Nina as he spoke of these things while his broad, earth-coloured hands quietly continued picking up potatoes and peeling them by touch. Little by little the child drew nearer the circle of people until he was sitting among them.

“When Sabino finished his military service,” Tomás continued, “he returned to the community to tell his parents that he didn’t want to work

on the land anymore and that he was going to the city to make more money. His folks begged and cried for him to stay. He refused, and the day he left he got drunk and began to curse us all out in Spanish. He was bitter that none of us wanted to go to the city with him. We speak Aymara, and only a little Spanish. We're Indians, but I guess he didn't want to be one any longer. But then down in the city they treated him worse than in the army, almost as if the city were one big barracks full of quick-fisted sergeants. He still couldn't speak their language very well, so the only work he could find was as a carrier in the market. Sometimes he toted stuff for Doña Cecilia, back when she bought up food here in the village and resold it in the city. Sabino always used to ask her about his parents. One day he found out that his mother had died and that the family house was in bad shape: the roof had half fallen in, there weren't any relatives left to help with repairs, and he didn't have enough money to do anything about it. After that he started drinking and his face got covered with scars because he kept getting into fights and the police — who were Indians themselves, but had forgotten they were — used to beat him till he was half-dead. "*Tombos khenchas*," Sabino would yell at them: "Bad-luck cops." Finally he got so he couldn't carry things in the market any longer; people got scared just at the sight of him. He used to sit on a street corner and beg from passers-by and got skinnier and mangier until the priests locked him out of their churches. Even the dogs wouldn't come near him because it seems he used to eat them; animals were frightened of him. He was found dead the day after the feast of Saint John last year. Doña Cecilia wanted to have him brought back to Calamarca, but they say some other beggars had already dragged him down to the river and left him there for the dogs to eat. To this day his old father still doesn't know he's dead. That's why I don't want to go to the city. An

Indian who lives outside the community isn't an Indian anymore; he's like a lost dog that everyone kicks and throws stones at. That's also why I'm not going to do my military service, even if everybody in the community gets mad and says I'm not a man. Why go there to get yourself kicked and insulted by people who don't know how to work the earth, or even what moon to plant potatoes in, or what month the rains come?"

"Migueeeel! Migueeeel!" called Doña Cecilia. Tomás Nina and the other Indians turned toward the kitchen, where the call had come from, and then looked back at Miguel with a mixture of sadness and affection as the boy stood up and walked slowly toward the door. Tomás Nina gestured to the boy to go where they called him. Calixto Yujra, in an effort to comfort him, told him, "We'll help you, son. You won't have to go to the city."

"Come here, Miguel," Doña Cecilia called. "This man wants to take you to the city."

"Aren't I going to help you here, *Mamita*?" Miguel asked in Aymara.

"Speak Spanish, child!" the mestizo woman answered, looking at the visitor with an apologetic air, trying to read the reactions in his eyes.

"Would you like to have supper here?" she unexpectedly asked the stranger, making an effort to be friendly. He looked out the window at the sun slowly being engulfed in mountains and snow and checked his watch. It was 6:30 PM. He thought for a moment and then replied, "Yes, I would."

Doña Cecilia rose from the bench where they had been talking and disappeared through the door into the kitchen.

"You haven't told me yet what happened to your face, Miguel," the visitor said. Miguel didn't answer. "Don't you want to say?"

The child was on the verge of tears, but remembered the words of Calixta Yujra and felt reassured.

"I burned myself," he replied.

"How?"

"I was helping Doña Cecilia. She asked me to pass her a pot of hot soup and I fell with it and the soup spilled on my face."

"Does it still hurt?"

"No, not now."

"Does she make you work hard?"

"No, not much."

"Do you serve the customers breakfast?"

"Yes."

"And lunch?"

"Yeah, that too."

"And dinner?"

"Yes, I also do that."

"So you're in the restaurant all day long."

"I sleep here."

"Do you like that?"

There was no answer.

"Look, I know you don't remember me. Doña Cecilia once worked as a cook in my house. That was when she was much younger and I was a boy like you. Once she came back to the city to sell produce and had you with her, and you were crying the whole time. 'Ay! I don't know what to do with that child!' she said. So I told her that one day I'd come up here and get you and take you back to live with us. That day has come, Miguel. Now you'll have to return with me."

Miguel watched the man's lips move as he spoke, glancing out the door of the restaurant now and again at the symphony of yellows, ochres, browns, purples, and blues that covered the evening landscape in Calamarca. The restaurant itself was made of adobe, plaster, wood, and corrugated iron. Intuitively, Miguel knew that even if he insulted this man with all the ugliest and angriest words in Aymara, it still wouldn't be enough to keep him from carrying out his intention.

"That's how it is, Miguel. Now go get the things you'll need, because we'll be leaving after supper. You know, in the city you'll be able to go to school and learn how to read and write and — who knows? — maybe even go to university some day, or become a skilled technician. That pays pretty well. Go on, now, and get ready."

The boy quickly went inside, and a dog lying under the table watched lazily as he disappeared behind the door that led to the kitchen, through which Doña Cecilia appeared a few seconds later, bringing in a plate of steaming *thimpu*, a lamb stew with white rice and boiled potatoes covered with an onion sauce seasoned with strong yellow chilis. The dog's eyes shone and it raised its wet jowls as it smelled the wholesome aroma.

"Help yourself, young man," Doña Cecilia invited her guest as she put the plate before him. A pleasant hunger made him moisten his lips as he picked up his knife and fork. The proprietress brought him a glass and a bottle of beer and then sat down across the table from him, cushioned by her springy petticoats.

"Have you taken him to a doctor?" her guest asked.

"For his face?"

"Yes."

"Ay! Of course. But I'm forever after him not to play with fireworks."

“What?”

“It was during the Saint John’s Day celebrations that he hurt himself. He started playing with skyrockets and that’s how he burned his face so bad.”

“When did he see the doctor?”

“You think we’ve got a doctor here in Calamarca? There isn’t anybody like that here, aside from the *callawaya*, or healer, and even he sometimes asks me for money, though he never makes the Indians pay anything.”

“In any case,” said the visitor, lowering his voice, “the city has plenty of good doctors. I’ll get him looked at; something must be able to be done about those scars.”

“But the boy doesn’t want to go. What’ll you do?”

“He’ll go with me — and understand later,” the visitor replied in a confidential tone.

“Yes, but what about me? What am I going to do now without that boy? I’ll have to look for another one.”

The visitor began to eat with relish. The knife and fork diligently peeled off chunks of meat, covering them with the onions cooked in chilis, and the man’s jaws worked with gusto on the white, floury potatoes from the first crop of the year.

Meantime the child had come back into the kitchen; he stood watching the Indians peel potatoes and told them in their language as he fought back his tears that the man and Doña Cecilia had agreed on it: “He’s going to take me away, whether I want to go or not!”

Night fell over the distant peaks, from which it spread its deep and subtle shadow over the Altiplano, where only sounds now gave things form. Miguel left the back door of the restaurant under a blue-black sky and went out to hide in the old church. Because he was a child, he knew little about the half-ruined building, which had been built at the end of the sixteenth-century and repeatedly burned in succeeding Indian rebellions. The last battle there had been almost a hundred years before, when the central government had sent a detachment of soldiers to the village at the request of the local landowners, who probably felt uneasy about the way they treated their tenants. Perhaps the Indian serfs had also decided they'd had enough and had taken to the mountains with their guns and *pututos*, or cattle-horn battle trumpets, to combat the troops from the capital. At any rate, the soldiers were finally forced to retreat into the church, where they dug in amid prayers and entreaties to a god that had once long before just barely been able to cross the Atlantic in a fragile caravel. The Indians surrounded the building — which was made of adobe, straw, rock, and wood — and, despite the gunfire from inside and the casualties they received, set fire to it, turning the church into an inferno. Even now people said that sometimes on the night wind you could still hear the cries of the soldiers as they burned alive.

Before picking out a corner of the ruined building to spend the night, Miguel picked out two sheep to bring in with him. He convinced the animals to lie down on the ground and then stretched out between them in order to keep warm during the night.



Doña Cecilia's cheeks were turning red with impatience and frustration as she looked for the child. She came into the kitchen shouting and asked the Indians in Spanish if they knew where the boy was. Tomás Nina answered slowly in Aymara that no one had seen Miguel anywhere.

"Migueeeeeeeeeel! Migueeeeeeeeeel!" cried the woman again from the restaurant door out into the deserted street. All the customers had left. Seated on a bench with his feet up on a chair, the visitor looked up at the corrugated iron roof of the restaurant and at the sheets of flypaper that hung from the beams, and from which came an intermittent and feeble buzz of some insect that had become trapped on the sticky surface and now struggled there uselessly. The proprietress came over to him and forced a bit more worry into her voice as she said, "I really don't know where he is."

"Now what am I going to do?" the visitor asked impatiently.

"You can stay the night. I'll give you a room, and in the morning I'm sure we'll find the boy. Besides, tomorrow's a holiday in Calamarca. Tonight we're going to slaughter some pigs and tomorrow there'll be feasting. I'll make up a special dinner for you and serve it along with another beer." The woman's voice filled with anxiety as she tried to convince the visitor to stay. "We'll fix you a fricassee. The Indians will be working in the kitchen all night."

The traveller looked out the window. It was dark now and the light from the kerosene lamp on the rustic table softened their faces and left the outlines of their bodies in darkness.

"You'll sleep well here. In any case, there's no way to get back to the city now. The last bus left a while ago."

A dog barked briefly in the distance.

"You're right," said the man, rising to his feet and hiding his annoyance. He picked up a small travelling bag from the floor and looked at her expectantly. She rose and, turning to one side, went out onto the rectangular patio next to the kitchen and showed her guest to a room next to hers.

"If you need anything, just knock on my door. I'll be sleeping right here in the next room." The visitor looked at her for a moment in the flickering light and told her he probably wouldn't be needing anything more for the night.

"I'm tired," he said.

The proprietress opened the door, gave him the lamp, and wished him good night. She disappeared into the darkness for an instant and then her silhouette emerged again against the light that came from the kitchen as she opened the door there.

At two in the morning Doña Cecilia awoke in the midst of the Altiplano cold, startled by cries, whispering, and the sounds of a struggle, followed by the noise of footsteps and doors opening and closing in some part of the house quite close-by. Later, almost in her dreams, she heard the sharp squalling of a pig as it had its throat cut and was hung up to bleed in the hot steam of the kitchen. Her mind grew quiet as she remembered the preparations for the fair. The Indians must be continuing to work, and as she thought of that, she went back to sleep, letting her head sink back into the dark river of hair that during the day she kept twined in two long, shining braids.

The holiday in Calamarca began in the restaurant at seven in the morning, when Doña Cecilia entered the kitchen and asked the Indians in Aymara if they had finished all the preparations. Tomás Nina replied that they had. The proprietress looked with satisfaction at the three pig's heads lying on the table and smelled the odour of seasoned, spicy meat coming from the enormous pots that boiled above the great fire.

"Have you cooked the potatoes? And the onions?"

While she was asking such questions and listening to the Indians' answers, Doña Cecilia bent over the pots, took off their lids, and tasted what they contained, squeezing the new and dried potatoes to see if they were well cooked.

"Those pigs had a lot of meat," she declared, "and they didn't look that fat."

Suddenly, with an anguished gesture, she remembered the child. She turned to Tomás Nina.

"Has Miguel been found?" she asked.

Tomás motioned with his eyes toward a corner of the room where sacks of potatoes were stored. On top of them, on a small improvised bed in the midst of the steam and smoke of the kitchen, slept Miguel.

"Ay, that kid! I couldn't sleep all night because of him," the proprietress exclaimed in a querulous tone. "Where was he hiding?"

"In the old church," said one of the Indians.

"Ay, the kid's hopeless: he's always been like that!"

It was now long after the cocks had crowed, and the light outside the window was strong enough to show people from outlying settlements arriv-

ing with their donkey trains laden with large bundles. There were also cattle and sheep that made the pebbles on the road clatter as they passed and raised small clouds of dust that dissipated quickly in the clear air. A few women were carrying hens that moved their heads restlessly, shaking their gelatinous crests.

The Calamarca restaurant was still closed. Inside, in the kitchen, Doña Cecilia was hurriedly preparing coffee in an enamelled metal cup, which she placed on a small tray next to two bread rolls and a large slice of sheep's cheese. She wiped her hands, picked up the tray, and was just going out the door to the visitor's room when Tomás Nina told her in Spanish, "Don't bother, *señora*; the young man left early this morning and said for you not to worry, that he'd come back for Miguel another day."

The proprietress remained motionless, amazed, trying to comprehend the situation.

"What time did he leave?" she asked.

"Before the cocks crowed, when it was still dark."

Doña Cecilia left the tray on a table and went out to see for herself. No one answered the door. She went into the room; the bed was made and there was no sign of her guest. Puzzled, she looked carefully at every detail of the simple place. Then, after a few moments, without having found an explanation for the visitor's abrupt departure, she returned to the kitchen, picked up the breakfast tray, and sat down at a table in the dining room. There she sat, thoughtfully chewing the bread and cheese and taking sips now and then from the coffee. When she had finished, she called for the child.

"Migueeel!"

The boy's small sunburned face appeared sleepily from behind the door.

"Take this tray to the kitchen!" she told him.

The holiday, with all its bustle and swarms of people, moved rapidly through the hours and the entrance to the restaurant. Plates came out of the kitchen, heaped high and steaming, and were sent back again with the bones picked clean. In the midst of the frenzy of bottles, voices, and laughter, someone would begin to sing a *huayño*. In the kitchen the Indian men and women had rolled up their sleeves and were busily washing plates and serving new potatoes, meat, dried *chuño* from years before, and fried onions and tomatoes; they cooked soups, made coffee, and washed the glasses used for beer and soft drinks. Doña Cecilia herself was sweating hard by about three in the afternoon. Two hours later, she was still adding up bills and making change. By seven o'clock, as night was falling, all there was left was a bit of rice, a few pieces of meat, quite a lot of cooked potatoes, and a bit of cheese and boiled corn. The customers had gone home, and the dogs that had spent the day prowling beneath the tables, guided by their noses, had all been thrown out. A few had managed to escape with pieces of bone and other leftovers in their jaws to savour at their leisure in the calm dusty lanes of the village.

At eight o'clock Doña Cecilia closed the doors of the restaurant. Miguel, half-dead with fatigue, threw himself down full-length on one of the benches. When she found him lying there, Doña Cecilia was going to say something to him, but instead stood watching him for a moment and then went back into the kitchen, where she found the Indians sitting in different spots, all of them worn out, but with a certain relief in their faces as they slowly ate bowls of cheese and potatoes.

“Why aren’t you eating the meat? Have some pork. Don’t you want to finish off what’s left?”

“Yes, *señora*, but we’ve already had enough.”

“When?”

“Earlier in the day.”

## YVONNE AMÉRICA TRUQUE

Yvonne Truque was born in Bogotá, Colombia, in 1955. Her mother, Nelly, was active in the Colombian trade union movement and was the first female member in the union of telephone workers. Her father, Carlos Arturo Truque, was a well-known Afro-Colombian author who had grown up in the predominantly black and geographically isolated department of Chocó on the Pacific coast. Carlos Truque was a prolific writer in his short life and an important figure not only in the black community of Colombia, but in Afro-Hispanic literature as a whole. Many of his stories were about aspects of rural and urban Afro-Colombian life, and he had a deep interest in questions of social and economic justice; he also read widely in modern American literature, especially the works of Faulkner and Hemingway. Carlos Truque made his living as a journalist and translator from English, French, and Russian into Spanish, but also wrote poetry, plays, short stories, and film scripts, and won many literary awards. As a child, Yvonne remembers reciting the verses of the Nicaraguan poet Rubén Darío for the family, and both she and her two sisters would later also be writers. The early death of her versatile and energetic father from a stroke in his early forties devastated the family. Yvonne was only fifteen years old at the time.

Four years later, Yvonne went to Spain to study sociology at the Universidad Complutense in Madrid. The year was 1974, and the regime of the ailing General Francisco Franco was waning as the burst of social and artistic freedom known as "La Movida" erupted joyfully in Spanish society. It was in the same year that Yvonne began writing poetry, in a style which she herself qualifies as influenced by the work of the Chilean poet Pablo

Neruda, both in terms of the epic, declamatory style of his *Canto general* and of his concern for social questions and Latin American unity. During her studies in Spain, Yvonne also became interested in the lyrical and politically committed poetry of the Spanish "Generation of 1927," which included Antonio Machado, Miguel Hernández, Federico García Lorca, the revolutionary León Felipe, and the more meditative Blas de Otero.

Yvonne left the university in her second year and spent the following three years travelling, living and working — often accompanied by her sister, Colombia — in various parts of Europe, including France, Switzerland, Holland, Germany, and Sweden. She studied French for a year in Geneva and also learned German; her reading at the time included German authors such as Hesse, Nietzsche, and Rilke, as well as Whitman (a great favourite in Latin America), the Mexican poet Octavio Paz, and, of course, her own brilliant compatriot and contemporary of her father, Gabriel García Márquez.

Upon her return to Colombia in 1979, after five years in Europe, Yvonne made a dual decision. First, shocked by re-entry into the chaotic living conditions in her country, she began to become increasingly concerned with issues of social justice. Second, she decided that she wanted to be a writer. Her first public readings were principally with other women poets in Bogotá in the spring and fall of 1982, and an early edition of her first collection of poetry, *Proyección de los silencios* [*Projecting Silences*], was brought out by *Árbol de Tinta* in Bogotá the following year. Her work was subsequently included in three Colombian anthologies of the 1980's: *Poetas en abril* (Bogotá, 1982); *Poesía colombiana contemporánea*, edited by José Luis Díaz-Granados (Bogotá, 1984); and *Momentos de poesía nueva colombiana*, edited by Orlando Barbosa Rincón (Bogotá, 1984).



During this period, Yvonne obtained a job at the National Library in Bogotá and spent a great deal of time exploring the streets and lanes of her city, from the wealthiest to the poorest neighbourhoods. This interest in the social conditions illustrated by street life is reflected in early poems such as "Someone is Sleeping," "This Labyrinth of Entrapment," and "Watching the Dusk," all of which appeared in *Proyección de los silencios*, and are at times reminiscent of the ambulatory reflections of Borges's early poems about the suburbs of Buenos Aires or Neruda's famous "Walking Around." Yvonne's reading at the time was principally of contemporary Colombian poets such as Aurelio Arturo, Porfirio Barba Jacob, and León De Degreiff. Her sister Colombia was also beginning to write poetry and short stories and would go on to win the national short story award from the Instituto Colombiano de Cultura in 1993 and to become editor of the literary review *Vericuetto*.

Meanwhile, though, Yvonne met a young Québécois printer named Jean Gauthier, who was working in a SUCO project to help set up a community printing service in a working-class *barrio* of Bogotá. Although she was more drawn to European than North American culture, Yvonne returned with Jean to Montreal in 1984 with their one-year-old daughter. Perhaps because of her years of travel in Europe, she quickly adapted to her new Québécois environment, polishing up her French and soon becoming active in the Latin American poetry scene that was just developing in Montreal at the time. In 1985 she and the Chilean poet Nelly Davis Vallejos organized a reading in French and Spanish at Janou St-Denis's Place aux Poètes to celebrate Latin American poetry in Quebec. Among the readers was the Chilean poet Alfredo Lavergne, and the event marked the first time that Latin American writers had read in Place aux Poètes. André Jacob,

Desirée Suczany, François Charron, and Paul Chamberland were all in the audience. Later Yvonne was active in the program Actualidades Literarias de Latinoamérica on Radio-Centre-ville. In 1988, while working with the Carrefour Latino-Américain (CLAM), she was the principal organizer of the largest Spanish-speaking poetry event ever presented in Montreal, *La Présence d'une autre Amérique*, which featured readings by eleven Latin American poets of Quebec, as well as by four Québécois (Francophone and Anglophone) writers with a special interest in Latin America. The poems from this series of readings were later published by Les Éditions de la Naine Blanche in *La présence d'une autre Amérique*, the first French-language anthology of Latino-Québécois writers.

Yvonne continued to write in Montreal, publishing an expanded, bilingual edition of *Proyección de los silencios* in 1986 and a second bilingual collection of poems, *Retratos de sombras y Perfiles inconclusos/Portraits d'ombres et Profils inachevés*, in 1991. Both of these books were brought out by the Centre d'études et de Diffusion des Amériques Hispanophones (CEDAH), a Spanish-language publishing firm that Yvonne and her husband founded in the mid-1980's and that eventually brought out over fifteen titles by Latino-Québécois authors, making it the largest publisher of its kind in Quebec. She also became interested in the work of contemporary Quebec poets of a lyrical, bohemian, and politically involved tendency, including André Leclerc, Hélène Blais, Gilbert Langevin, Dania Maisonneuve, Claude Charron and Janou St-Denis. Her poetry received first prize from Humanitas Press in Montreal in 1987, and she was one of the first Latino-Québécois authors to be invited to read at the Salon du livre de l'Outaouais in Hull. Yvonne has also been active in journalism and has published lengthy articles in the Latin American press on such

Canadian events as the siege at Oka in 1990. Her work, as well as that of other prominent Colombian artists of Montreal, such as the filmmaker Germán Gutiérrez, was recently the subject of an extensive article in the prestigious Bogotá daily, *El Tiempo*.

Ironically, it was after her arrival in Montreal that Yvonne became increasingly aware of her Afro-Colombian origins, recalling songs of the Chocó region where her father had been raised and following up on her interest in African music, especially in the West African drums, on which she often now accompanies herself in her poetry readings. Simultaneously, Afro-American scholars and authors, especially from the United States, have increasingly invited her to attend seminars, conferences, and readings in the U.S. The September 1987 issue of the *Afro-Hispanic Review*, published at the University of Missouri, was entirely devoted to the life and work of her father; Yvonne wrote the introduction and included a moving poem dedicated to Carlos Truque, both as poet and father. Critical writing has also appeared in the United States, however, on Yvonne's own work, especially in Afro-American Studies programs. At the moment, Yvonne is finishing a B.A. degree in social work at the Université du Québec in Montreal (UQAM).

Both of Yvonne's published collections of poems are written almost exclusively from a Colombian perspective and include only a few poems — such as VII from *Portraits d'ombres*, which is dedicated to her daughter — that refer to Quebec or Canada. Since the early 1990's, however, as she neared the tenth anniversary of her arrival in Quebec, Canadian imagery has appeared increasingly in her work. She is aware of the fact that Quebec culture now has a more immediate impact upon her life than does that of Colombia and says that she sometimes feels more Québécois than

Colombian, yet she continues to write creatively almost exclusively in Spanish and to feel more closely identified with her country of origin than with that of adoption. She is now divorced from her translator-printer husband, yet has decided to stay on permanently in Quebec with her daughter. Moreover, her courses in social work have also stimulated her interest in prose writing and in testimonial literature, which is an increasingly important genre in Latin American letters.

The themes of Yvonne's work have retained a surprising consistency. Thematic constants of her early work include the struggle for self-realization as a woman; the implacable exploitation and subjugation of one human being by another in modern civilization; a dogged, insistent faith in the power of love and the human spirit; the pain, longing, and rage of lost love; the regenerative force of nature — especially symbolized by maternal and female forces — for those who are lost and isolated within the labyrinthine urban environment; and an indomitable faith in the human ability to build a better future.

Her second collection of poems, *Retratos de sombras y Perfiles inconclusos/Portraits d'ombres et Profils inachevés*, however, added a new theme to her repertoire: that of elegy for those fallen in the struggle for a more just society, as in her untitled poem in the section "Retratos de sombras" on the massacre at the National University in Bogotá, or simply for those who have been overcome and crushed by natural forces, as in poem II of "Perfiles inconclusos," which is dedicated to the survivors of the mud slide that wiped out most of the citizens of Armero, Colombia, after a volcanic eruption in 1985. Even in her latest, unpublished poems, grouped together in *En mi marcha y otros poemas [On My Way Forward and Other Poems]*, she continues to speak of the endless struggle between the

idealism of love and community and the ruthless Machiavellian logic of power, as well as of how the urban environment has progressively alienated the human spirit: “a sense of estrangement exacerbated by the urban experience,” as the Afro-American scholar Marvin A. Lewis has noted about her work (Lewis 8). In poems such as “Itinerario al eclipse” [“Itinerary to an Eclipse”], however, the inherent human violence of the Colombian urban landscape has been replaced with a more dehumanized, roboticized, automated destructiveness wrought on the human psyche and body by the cities of the exploiter nations of the North.

Although Yvonne’s imagery has also had a strong undercurrent of key, recurring images, different patterns have predominated at various conjunctures in her work. *Proyección de los silencios* is dominated by surreal images of the city, captured while wandering the streets on foot; of light and fulfilment in the midst of darkness and barrenness; and especially of love, innocence, and intimacy destroyed by ugliness and degradation. In the short poem, “Y qué bella ha sido...” [“And How Beautiful It Has Been”], for instance, the narrator returns from a night of “dreams, digressions, and longings” to “the painful emptiness of this / G A R B A G E D U M P C I T Y” (*Proyección* 11). In “This Labyrinth of Entrapment,” a description of a nighttime stroll through streets filled with abandoned children, homeless people, prostitutes, soldiers, and criminals ends with the morning headline “NEW QUEEN CHOSEN FOR COFFEE FESTIVAL” (*Compañeros* 179). The city becomes a “World jail/Jail World” in “Hasta desgarrarme” [“To Even Rip Myself Apart”] (*Proyección* 23-24), and the narrator’s voice in “Debatiéndome en el mundo” [“Debating Myself in the World”] falls silent from pain and then “Explodes in me, completely in silence” (*Proyección* 25) as she gropes along in the darkness in search of “The clarity that I fore-

tell / [that] comes rising up from within me" (*Proyección* 25). This struggle between the word and silence, between darkness and clarity, is resolved in the final poem of the collection, "Proyección de los silencios" ["Projecting Silences"], in which human touch and voices break through walls of silence into a world of light and sound.

In her second book, *Retratos de sombras y Perfiles inconclusos*, particularly in the first section, "Retratos de sombras," the less-focussed alienation of the first poems gives way to a more identifiable enemy: the power-wielding oligarchy, as well as those who support them (imperial and multinational interests) and those who carry out their orders (the police and the military). The narrator's world is now a battleground in which forces for constructive change are systematically blocked or eliminated by those of established power, and the predominant tone is one of anger. As in the first book, however, hope is still possible, though it is now transformed into a more utopian vision of a just, sharing society of brother and sisterhood which will almost magically appear in the future. The second section of the book, "Perfiles inconclusos," however, changes imagery once again. Here dream and world, altruism and reality, are locked in a more universal combat, once again resulting in an apotheosis, this time in the form of butterflies of harmony and idealism that take flight along with the narrator and the reader in the final poem toward "A free-fall that awaits us tomorrow" ("XI"). Images of flight and colour predominate as the spirit liberates itself from gravity and darkness.

The imagery of Yvonne's latest poetry, as yet unpublished, remains consistent with that of her two published works, especially in its dichotomy between light, freedom, and the natural world on the one hand, and darkness, emptiness, and the city on the other. Now, however, bright

colours, nostalgia for her tropical homeland, and springtime have been added to her repertoire of positively charged images, while northern images of greyness, numbness, and stasis are now associated with those of the city. The tone of these latest poems is one of resignation, isolation, and exile. Political struggle is still a touchstone of her work, but it is now a responsibility that is taken on gravely, existentially, with far less hope of a positive outcome than in her earlier work, though the possibility of joy and wholeness is still there; moreover, references to the building of some future community have completely disappeared from her later work. The integration of world and ideal is now to be achieved on a more personal basis, and although society as a whole will be involved, no clear vision of a common bond of wholeness is now enunciated.

Although she continues to write, Yvonne has lately chosen to take a less prominent role in Latino-Québécois literary activities. She no longer organizes readings or appears regularly at Place aux Poètes as she once did, yet she continues to read at the half-dozen new venues for Hispanic poetry that have opened up in Montreal over the past several years. Her publishing concern, CEDAH, is also now inactive. Yet Yvonne is at peace with herself and continues to write; she has simply chosen to withdraw somewhat from literary socializing and to concentrate on her social work career and on raising her daughter. At the same time, however, she has rediscovered long-time interests in music and drawing that point to possible future combinations with poetry in the form of performance recitals and artists' books. Her poetic production continues to stand out as one of the most significant in Latino-Canadian letters, especially within the area of female writers, and she is considered by other Latino-Québécois writers to be one of the key figures in the development of Spanish-speaking writing in Quebec.

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**PRINCIPAL WORKS OF YVONNE AMÉRICA TRUQUE**

"A modo de introducción" and "A mi padre." *Afro-Hispanic Review* 6.3 (1987): 5-7.

*En mi marcha y otros poemas*. Unpublished manuscript, 1987.

*Proyección de los silencios/Projection des silences*. Montreal: Centre d'études et de diffusion des Amériques Hispanophones (CEDAH), 1986.

*Retratos de sombras y Perfiles inconclusos/Portraits d'ombres et Profils inachevés*. Montreal: CEDAH, 1991.

Selections from *Proyección de los silencios/Projection des silences*  
*[Projecting Silences]*

by Yvonne América Truque

Someone is Sleeping

Moon  
     rolling  
                     cautiously  
 Embracing  
                     flicker  
                             of  
                                     lights  
 Grey satin,  
                     the rain has stopped  
 My street is gleaming again

As I smoke a cigarette  
 far-off silences surround me  
 perhaps detecting  
 an unexpected event  
 Wind  
     battering  
                     fragile  
                                     windowpanes

Fine  
     brush  
                     of wind  
 mute brush painting in silence  
 coagulating words with no meaning

Today I don't know how to say anything  
 it's midnight  
 and somewhere  
 a child is wandering in silence  
 walking aimlessly through his loneliness  
 while  
     in great houses  
 the executioners sleep peacefully

## Watching the Dusk

To keep warm as I advance  
down this glacial street  
I walk as if I were sound  
or incandescent grimace:  
this is how I must move  
to discover my city.

Living at the crossroads of the void  
gnawed by routine,  
with fear and lies  
surrounding the senses,  
this is what it means  
to inhabit my city.

Vultures descend  
beaks twisted with rage;  
vultures devouring vultures,  
even the rats scurry away in fear.

Today we are alone  
living together in the entrails  
of an octopus that reaches  
out furious tentacles.

Today we are alone, silencing silence.  
Evening is slowly falling  
over the neon lights  
that now start blinking on.

from *Retratos de sombras y perfiles inconclusos/Portraits d'ombres  
et profils inachevés*  
[*Portraits of Shadows and Unfinished Profiles*]

from "Retratos de sombras" [Portraits of Shadows"]

We have been searching ever since the beginning  
And we will search until the end of time  
For the feeling of belonging to ourselves  
The imperative need to look into the mirror of years  
To see we are our own masters  
And within the wholeness of All  
Direct our destiny with the firmness of light  
And not in doubt and fear

We have also been searching  
For far-off happiness, remote  
Indefinable when faced with the truth of the moment  
In which we are broken fragments inside  
We are witnessing a forced orphaning  
Vertigo, fear, society offers  
Desolate delights for forgetfulness  
Stereo melodies, repeated rhythms

There is no promised land, nor paradise  
No homeland to cling to  
After the long voyage  
And a seedless return  
Anger unites with nostalgia  
For what might have been but in which so many failed  
I walk past ruins, rubble, muddy corpses  
My people are being murdered and I call out to them

We are spectres projected onto oblivion  
A long exile toward the void, an agony alive  
Wisps of straw scattered across a new sky  
Shipwrecked victims escaping again from yesterday  
Pain growing infected into open sores  
And yet which keeps on advancing toward the centre  
Toward the wound that never heals  
The longing for what *could* be but which is always barred

from "Perfiles inconclusos" [Unfinished Profiles]

VI

Ah no! No! No! No!

This time

I will not give you the pleasure

of drinking my blood

drop by drop

Nor of excising my joy

like a boil

Nor of playing with my dreams

Or appropriating my words

No! No! No! No!

*This time*

I am moulding wings of greater strength

and none of you

shall hold me back

from this final flight



## VII

for my daughter Isabelle

For you, I have just ended  
my world in yours  
and I skilfully separate  
a past full of solitudes  
both voluntary and imposed

## I

*deliberately*

destroy my world

For you, I will forever invent  
whatever moon you desire and put it in your hands  
the fulfilment of games  
places all our own

For you, my love is different  
though as tomorrows and years pass  
and distance approaches  
in your illusion of creating yourself  
you may possibly even  
hate me

**PABLO URBANYI**

Though he currently lives in Ottawa, Pablo Urbanyi is one of the most active writers of satirical fiction in Argentina today. Since the appearance of his first collection of short stories, *Noche de revolucionarios* [*Night of the Revolutionaries*], in Buenos Aires in 1972, he has written five other works — three novels and a collection of short stories — all but one of which have been published in Buenos Aires to considerable acclaim. His latest work, *Silver*, a satirical fantasy based on the memoirs of a preternaturally intelligent gorilla raised in California, was runner-up for the prestigious Planeta award in Argentina in 1993. Throughout his literary production, which has included portraits of drawing-room revolutionaries, bumbling detectives, and Canadian academics, Urbanyi has retained a remarkably consistent satirical style and ability to touch on basic societal and existential problems in a comical way. Within Argentine literature, his work is part of a long satirical tradition that began in the *gauchesca* era with authors such as Estanislao del Campo and in the twentieth-century has included Leopoldo Lugones, Leopoldo Marechal, and Julio Cortázar.

Pablo was born in Hungary in 1939 and lived there throughout World War II, during which time his father fought in the Hungarian resistance movement. After the war, the family wanted to emigrate and had the choice between Argentina, Australia, or Canada. His father, thinking that English would be difficult to learn, opted for Argentina, and in 1949 the family settled in Longchamps, a town in the pampas just south of Buenos Aires, where his father eventually set up a toy factory. Although he continued to speak Hungarian with his parents, Pablo has always felt himself

to be thoroughly Argentinian. (He is still in contact with Hungary, however, and some of his works have been translated into Hungarian and published there).

Irony has always been part of Urbanyi's life. The Hungarian village where he was born was ceded to Czechoslovakia after the war, so his first years of schooling were in the Czech and Slovak languages. In Argentina, despite once being thrown out of school for misbehaviour, he became interested in literature and started writing stories in sixth grade. The poet Roberto Juárez, who was the librarian at his high school, encouraged him in his reading of authors from French (Diderot, Voltaire, Rousseau, Sartre, Camus, Genet, and Girardot), Russian (Dostoyevski, Tolstoy, Andreyev), and Argentine (José Hernández, Roberto Arlt) literatures. He attended the University of Buenos Aires for five years, enrolling in medicine, psychology, and physics, but finally dropped out to get married and become a carpet salesman and desultory writer of fiction.

In the mid-1960's Urbanyi and his family moved to the mountain resort town of Bariloche, in the Argentine Andes, where Pablo worked as a wool merchant and travel agent before opening up a small nightclub. They later returned to Buenos Aires, where he continued with odd jobs of various sorts and curiously gave up writing altogether, all the while devoting himself to reading voluminously in world literature, as if unconsciously preparing himself for a future writing career. The "Boom" in Latin American literature was on, and Pablo read the works of Carlos Fuentes, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Gabriel García Márquez, as well as the darkly humorous Polish-Argentine writer Witold Gombrowicz. In Spanish classical literature, he was drawn especially to *Don Quixote* (which he says he has read and reread at least ten times), *Lazarillo de Tormes* (the anony-

mously written picaresque adventures of a young boy who serves as a blind man's guide in the slums of imperial Spain), and in world literature to the works of Swift, Balzac, Gogol, Poe, Prévert, Hasek (*The Good Soldier Schweik*), and Faulkner. Urbanyi, like many Argentines, was also interested in science fiction, particularly in the work of Stapleton, Philip Dick, and Ray Bradbury.

In 1968, at age twenty-nine, Pablo decided that his real vocation was writing, and he again returned to the University of Buenos Aires, where he enrolled in the Faculty of Literature and Philosophy. During his studies, he put together his first volume of short stories, *Noche de revolucionarios*, which offered a mordant, comical portrait of various aspects of Argentine society in disintegration. Urbanyi's talent for pinpointing humorous contradictions in human behaviour, whether among envious suburban neighbours, upwardly mobile engineering students, or ladies' men leftists, was already evident, and the book enjoyed a generally warm reception in the press and a high level of popularity with the reading public. The work also reflects Urbanyi's continual experimentation with point of view, which has been a constant in his fiction. The first piece, "Me matan si no trabajo y si trabajo me matan" ["They Kill Me If I Don't Work and If I Work They Kill Me Too"], which is actually not written in an ironic tone, is the story of a semi-politicized artist who works in a factory and is kidnapped and murdered by a death squad. The character himself never appears; instead, the story is told from the multiple points of view of those who knew or were involved with him. The story "Mario... ¿Dónde te metiste?" ["Mario, Where Have You Gotten To?"] is composed of one half of a dialogue, that of a loud-mouthed and rebellious critic of the Argentine military who is holding forth to an audience of passengers on a bus in a traffic jam and is eventually hauled

away by the military while his friend Mario looks on. Aside from using such innovative narrative techniques, Pablo also shows his ear for language, capturing the intonation and lilt of *porteño* (from Buenos Aires; literally “of the port”) speech and using the vocabulary of *lunfardo*, the street slang of the Río de la Plata area, with great naturalness and assurance.

Two years later, in 1974, Urbanyi published *Un revólver para Mack* [*A Revolver for Mack*], a detective novel that simultaneously parodies and fulfils the rules of the genre, while at the same time criticizing the corruption and egotism that were undermining Argentine society. The novel was widely noted in the Argentine press, including enthusiastic reviews in *La Opinión* and *Clarín*, two of the capital’s largest dailies, and was for a while the second best-selling work of fiction in *Clarín*’s weekly ratings (Borges’s *Prólogos* were fourth). The protagonist (and hero) of the novel is one Gerardo Romero, an ex-police officer who has set himself up as a private detective under the name “Mack Hopkins,” which he believes has a more Raymond Chandler ring to it. Gerardo is a powerfully built, big-hearted loner, fond of large-caliber weapons and platinum blondes, for whom friendship, loyalty, and honesty are more powerful motivating forces than money and power; Urbanyi himself has called him a “detective Quixote” (personal interview). He lands the job of his dreams, all expenses paid, when an underworld boss sends him out to Bariloche and then to Mar del Plata, on the seacoast, in a prolonged chase of a sinister pornographer and drug-trafficker who always manages to elude him. It is only later that Gerardo/Mack learns that he has been set up, that the whole job has been a ruse to lure him away from Buenos Aires while the gangsters get rid of his best friend, a fellow private detective who has become a rival drug-dealer. In the end, despite his naïveté, incompetence, clumsiness, and propensity

for falling into traps, Gerardo/Mack manages to wreak his revenge. In a subsequent short story, "Concurso" ["Competition"], Urbanyi resurrected Mack to deal with police and military abuses, accompanied by two friends, the Astrologer and the Philosopher, who seem to be continuations of characters from Roberto Arlt's famous novel of the 1930's, *Los siete locos* [*The Seven Madmen*].

Following these popular successes as a writer, Urbanyi was hired as an editor for the cultural supplement of *La Opinión*, at the time the leading centre-left newspaper in Buenos Aires. After the military coup against Isabel Perón in 1976, however, the paper was placed under government control. A few years later its editor, Jacobo Timerman, was kidnapped, imprisoned, and tortured by an anonymous paramilitary death squad and the newspaper was closed; Timerman's account of his ordeal, *Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number*, became a classic in testimonial literature against the military regime. Urbanyi, however, did not wait for Timerman's disappearance: in 1977 he and his family left for Canada, the only country in which his wife, a pharmacologist, could find work; they settled in Ottawa.

Emigration to Canada was a shock to Urbanyi: now nearing forty, increasingly successful as a journalist and already popular as a writer, he found himself parachuting down into a country that was virtually unknown to him and to which, if not for the political chaos in Argentina, he had never dreamed of immigrating. Given the vast cultural and linguistic differences between Buenos Aires and Ottawa, he decided to forgo his journalism career and make a living teaching Spanish; within a year he was on the part-time faculty at the University of Ottawa. He also plunged ahead with his writing, undeterred by the isolation of working alone in Spanish in Canada;

as time has gone by, in fact, his relative detachment from his surroundings may have even caused him to focus more closely on his literary vocation.

By 1980, just two years after his arrival in Canada, Pablo had already finished a new novel, *En ninguna parte* [*The Nowhere Idea*], a sophisticated, humorous, satirical portrait of life in a Canadian university. The book was published in Argentina by Editorial Belgrano in 1981 and was translated into English by University of Ottawa professor Nigel Dennis and published by Williams-Wallace in 1982. A French edition, translated by Jean Potvin under the title *L'idée fixe*, was published in the "Collection latino-américaine" of VLB Éditeur in 1988.

*En ninguna parte* marks another major thematic and stylistic shift in Urbanyi's writing, though the mordant wit and sarcastic eye of the narrator remain constant. To begin with, the novel is a post-modernistic parody of academic post-modernism: the narrator is an Argentine part-time lecturer in Spanish at a university in Ottawa, who is working on a thesis on nineteenth-century Anglo-Argentine writer W.H. Hudson, but has decided to set down the "true" account of an extraordinary event that has occurred in his department; he then voluminously annotates his own text in a series of rambling asides on everything from the minutia of the story itself to feminism and Spanish literature and the principal characteristics of North American society; there are also periodic notes by the editor of the book, as well as others by the proofreader and "a reader." One is reminded of the playful and skilful use of annotated commentary in the novel *Trou de mémoire*, by Hubert Aquin. Added to this multi-leveled interpretative flux, in which the narrator is both chronicler and critic, is the fact that most of the characters in the book are highly literate people whose livelihood is literature and who make constant literary references and asides. The literary

world is also systematically deflated, though, not least by the distancing effect of referring to all the academic characters only by their departmental nicknames, a distinction that “gives us, in a single combination, the illusion of life and the distinct impression of a mechanical arrangement,” which Bergson considered an essential element of the comic (Bergson 53).

The plot of the novel is simply described. Two Spanish professors, Shorty and Aztec Mask, at an unnamed university in Ottawa (a footnote specifies that there are only two universities in the city, but that the author must maintain their anonymity) are initially discovered fighting in a university corridor, each claiming that the other one has stolen an unspecified brilliant idea from him. Although neither of them ever reveals exactly what the breakthrough idea really is, their dispute eventually rocks the department and the legal system and ends up before the Supreme Court. The court decides to accept the decision of any magistrate in Canada who will hear their case: only one such offer is made, by a judge named William Wilson (a bow to the responsible side of the *doppelgänger* character of the same name in a tale by Edgar Allen Poe), who resides in the village of Erewhon (population 2.5), to be found at an exact distance of ninety-nine miles west of Ottawa. A convoy of vehicles sets out from the department for the village. The hamlet of Erewhon is, of course, a reference to Samuel Butler’s classic utopian satire, originally published in 1872, in which a young emigrant to New Zealand discovers the hidden land of Erewhon (“Nowhere”), populated by an (ostensibly) eminently sensible, anti-mechanical, and conformist people, who train their youth at colleges of unreason. Judge William Wilson is himself a left-over from a saner, slower, more peaceful age that eventually ended when the first bank opened in town. He offers the litigants a choice: either they accept settlement by a



toss of the coin, or they give up their lawsuits and agree that the idea never be revealed to anyone. The two opt for the latter solution, and the expedition of Spanish-speaking academics returns to Ottawa.

Beyond its simple narrative structure, the novel and its annotations give Urbanyi the opportunity to pillory North American society and the academic world in much the same way that he did that of Argentine politics and attitudes in his earlier work, especially *Noche de revolucionarios*. Yet behind the satire and mordant observations of the narrator, the novel is a serious examination of societal and personal values. One Argentine critic has called it “an allegory of the loss of meaning in life and of the consequent superficiality within which modern man must struggle. . . . The author seems to suggest that the road to knowledge can only be traversed by a few, . . . [o]nly those who dare to renounce all the intellectual and material securities the world offers . . . (“Sátira social”). It is on the level of society as a whole that the literary allusions to Poe and Butler reveal their true meanings. William Wilson’s understanding and good-natured probity stand in sharp contrast to the overwhelming frivolity of the academics who stand before him in the Erewhon courthouse, just as the double of the Poe story was forever ready to denounce the decadence and mendaciousness of the wastrel William Wilson himself. Moreover, Wilson’s sentence, which includes a brief history of Erewhon, parallels Butler’s text in its denunciation of money, power, and the “rational” systems of thought that support them. The settlement of Erewhon, like Butler’s imagined land, exists beyond the limits of known reality, but whereas Butler’s pseudo-utopian vision was of an entire functioning society, Urbanyi’s Erewhon is a village in its last stage of decomposition, with a population of the judge, his assistant, and a horse (the .5 of the 2.5). Clearly, despite the transparent

and ridiculous vacuity of the modern world (symbolized by the academy), the impulse to a more meaningful and humane society has died down to the merest flicker.

Urbanyi's next published works were two collections of short stories, *De todo un poco, de nada mucho* [*A Bit of Everything, but Not Much of Anything*], published in Buenos Aires by Editorial Legasa in 1987, and *Nacer de nuevo* [*Born Again*], which was brought out by Girol Books in Ottawa in 1992 (although based in Ottawa, Girol specializes in Argentine literature and is distributed in Argentina). Both of these collections of short stories are in a lighter, less literary vein than *En ninguna parte* and bring the author's perennially acerbic wit to bear on North American society, specifically in the debunking of a certain unthinking and (often falsely) ingenuous positivism that underlies popular culture north of the Río Grande. Urbanyi also continues to experiment with voice and narrative construct in unexpected and amusing ways. Two of the texts of *Nacer de nuevo* are ostensibly papers on different topics, delivered to imaginary professional organizations in Argentina and Canada; the others are stories of varying length that are part of a "Curso Superior de Español Moderno," consisting of listening exercises for students of Spanish as a second language, and come complete with comprehension questions at the end. *Nacer de nuevo* contains a variety of texts, including a series of letters written by a certain "Pablo" (who may or may not be the author) to "Alberto," a friend in Latin America, describing and reflecting on certain occurrences and anecdotes of life in North America; short stories, related in either the first or third person; lists of instructions for carrying out certain technical operations; frame-by-frame descriptions of television talk shows; two playlets; and a series of final stories in which a certain "Pablo"

manages to make a mockery of several formal cultural events organized in Ottawa by the Argentine Embassy.

*De todo un poco, de nada mucho*, as its title suggests, is the more playful of the two works and concentrates more on the United States. The lead “paper” (including two coffee breaks) is a detailed analysis of a certain historic event in the United States, given by an expatriate Argentine, Pedro Urbano, at an unspecified conference in Argentina. The event in question is the progressive constipation of the American nation, due to an imbalance in the supply and demand of commercial laxatives. This scatological catastrophe, which tests the eternal optimism and fiber of the nation, is the basis for a satirical deconstruction of everything American, from the obsession with statistics to the hunt for those responsible by the FBI and CIA to the costly high-tech surgical interventions proposed by the medical community. The author’s wife, however, comments to him that the problem never really existed for her in Argentina, where “Just having a police officer look at me in the street was enough to make me have to duck into the first café I came across” (35).

The second section of *De todo un poco, de nada mucho*, consisting of seventeen listening exercises for Spanish students, includes a variety of sketches and short stories that poke fun at both the clichés and shibboleths of Argentine culture (including a dead-pan tribute to the two great tourist attractions of Buenos Aires, grilled meat and the obelisk) and those of the United States (especially the confession of a continually back-sliding born-again pyromaniac to his brothers and sisters in the Lord — whose church he has also burned down). The last piece in the book, another talk delivered to a conference, this time of women writers of the Americas on the authors of the “Boom” in Latin American literature, provides the narrator

with the opportunity to direct his jibes at academics, feminists, and fellow Latin American authors more interested in travel junkets than originality. It is of interest to note that the two people charged with organizing the schedule of the conference are “Pablo [the narrator], the writer with the soul of an academic, and Paco, the academic with the spirit of an artist” (131).

*Nacer de nuevo* continues in the same vein as *De todo un poco, de nada mucho*, with two major differences: the satire has become somewhat embittered, and the setting is now Canada. In a very cynical (and funny) piece on inheritance, an aged father who is about to commit suicide wills his body to his children to sell, piece by piece, for the best price possible. In “El señor sin pata” [“The One-Legged Man”], a father who has lost a leg to cancer cavorts loudly and mirthlessly with his family at a lake resort, trying desperately to fit into the Pollyannaish refusal of North American society to accept disease and death, and ultimately sinks into depression when his family leaves him alone at the picnic table. “Directions for Phoning Faraway Grandmothers” is a series of comparative instructions for carrying out this task in both developed and developing nations:

Regrettably, [as to] grandmothers [who] live in underdeveloped countries, not all of them have telephones and calling them thus becomes quite a vexing task. You have to rely upon some neighbour with a compassionate soul who will be willing to go out and get them, and then call back some time later when you calculate that the grandmother’s faltering steps — which become slower every year — will have carried her to the spot where the phone is located. The danger in this, however, is that no chronometer has yet been invented that measures the rate of ageing, and thus it becomes difficult to judge the speed at which the grandmother trots panting down the dusty streets of some distant land to get a bit of news about her progeny and grandchildren whom she perhaps doesn’t even know or who don’t yet exist or who she hopes may possibly even now be on their way as she trudges patiently toward the phone. (112-113)

One Argentine reviewer of the book, in an article entitled “What Must Canadians Think of This Radical Demystification of the First World?,” rediscovered the same vein of humour in Urbanyi’s stories that he had found in reading Swift’s “A Modest Proposal” (Alonso).

Urbanyi’s latest novel, *Silver*, published in a handsome edition by Editorial Atlántida in Buenos Aires in 1994, has been called his best work to date (Borello) and was enthusiastically received by the Argentine press. Both satire and tragedy, it is the story of Tarzan told in reverse (Alberó), in which a young albino gorilla is bought in a market in Gabon by an American anthropologist and his British wife, who take him back to California to raise in the “enriched environment” of their home and to use as the subject of their research. Silver learns how to talk and to read (from *Sesame Street*) and matures into a being of considerable charm, sensitivity, and taste — considerably more so, in fact, than the philistine anthropologist husband and his two sons. Silver forms a close bond with Dianne, the wife, and gradually displaces her husband in her affections. On the night in which their love is consummated, though, he is attacked by the husband, whom he throws through the window, and is then wounded by the police.

Silver’s guilt or innocence consequently becomes a *cause célèbre* in California, and he is eventually sent back to West Africa along with a group of a dozen other “maladjusted” apes as a part of Operation Great Return, under the supervision of anthropologist Jane Gudart, who wishes to reinsert the corrupted beasts into their natural environment. Jane’s encampment on an island in the middle of a river in the interior of an unnamed African country gradually comes to resemble a Khmer Rouge re-education camp more than the happy experience of Paradise Regained that she has

envisioned. Weakened by malnutrition, cold, disease, snakebite, and depression, all the apes eventually die except Silver, who by this time is living with Jane in her cage (set up to protect her from wild beasts); finally, she herself runs off on all fours to join a colony of baboons across the river. Silver then staggers back to the capital, where he convinces the American embassy to fly him back to New York, despite their suspicions that he may be involved in Jane's disappearance. Upon his arrival, however, he is taken into custody by the FBI and placed in a home for handicapped apes on the campus of Stanford University. It is from a wheelchair on the university grounds that he relates his story to Marco, an Argentine filmmaker living in Canada, who later writes it down — with the aid of Silver's memoirs — after Silver dies.

In *Silver*, the ferocious and somewhat heavy-handed irony of the preceding collections of short stories has been refined into a deeper, subtler, more philosophical form. As one Argentine critic has noted, "Urbanyi continues to be an eminently Argentine author" (Madrado), characterized perhaps by the eternally raised eyebrow of the *porteño* sense of humour. It is interesting that the novel, although lauded in Argentina, has yet to find a Canadian publisher. Beneath the entertainment of the story, however, lies a work that is rich in symbolism. Silver himself is ruthlessly exploited by civilization, specifically in the form of the anthropologists who continually want to study his behaviour and build their careers out of their findings. Urbanyi himself has acknowledged that his inspiration for the tale came from a short story by Franz Kafka, "A Report for an Academy," in which an ape captured for a circus learns to speak, write, and deal with civilization however he can in order to find a way out of his predicament; he adds as well that a re-reading of *Gulliver's Travels* reinforced his desire to finish

the manuscript (“Aventuras de un simio”). Yet, as in the Kafka story, there is also an opposite behavioural transference that takes place, this time from Silver to the anthropologists’ two sons:

I’ll never forget one night at dinner, a scene fearfully recorded in my memory, like a sequence from a silent movie; years later, Dianne, during our talks, with a cigarette in one hand and a glass of whisky in the other, would provide the soundtrack. The day she and Gregory received the note from the teacher, after we had all dined together at the kitchen table, at which I now sat as a member of the family and first tried to use a knife and fork, Gregory, brandishing the letter and with great good humour and understanding, asked Bill and Charlie if it were true, or at least how much truth there was in what their teacher had written. The two boys looked at each other and then back at their father as if they hadn’t understood a word he’d said and immediately began to scratch their armpits and grunt, opening their mouths noiselessly. As was evident from Gregory’s guffaw of laughter, their imitation was perfect. The kids continued their antics, and Gregory kept on laughing. Dianne had lowered her head and sat staring at her plate. When Gregory was finally sufficiently amused, he told the boys to cut it out. But they didn’t stop. They pretended they couldn’t understand him. Gregory insisted, come on, guys, that’s enough, seriously. All to no avail; they refused to stand up or answer. Finally, infuriated, he told them to leave the table. Still no effect. Only when Gregory raised his arm as if to hit them and then pointed ominously to the door with his index finger did they creep around the chairs on all fours, nyick, nyuck, and slink off to their rooms. (38)

Silver is, ultimately, a symbol of exile and alienation, alternately loved and appreciated for his exoticism or xenophobically hated. Although he is cheered and adored by a crowd at Stanford when he does a Statue of Liberty imitation (much to Greg’s distaste), Bill and Charlie (his theoretical stepbrothers) call him a “shitty nigger” (41), while Dr. Whatever-He-Was punches him in the stomach to test his reactions. Silver has been raised as something he cannot become, and then is expected by Jane Gudart to return to a state he has never known; he is really neither ape nor man.

Thus he finally opts for the semi-retirement of the Home for Handicapped Apes where Marco finds him. There is also a curious play of nationalities in the novel: the Americans, typified by Greg and his sons, as well as Jane, are insensitive, unimaginative, bossy, and essentially cold-hearted boors; the British, such as Dianne and the university dean, are relaxed, cultured, and tolerant; the Argentines, such as Marco and the zookeeper who watches over Silver after his arrest, are the most friendly and understanding of all, and the most apt to share a smoke or a shot of whisky with him. The roles assigned to these three nationalities closely reflect many Argentines' alienation from imperial American power and closer identification with British and European culture.

Urbanyi continues to devote himself almost exclusively to his writing. He has abandoned his teaching at the University of Ottawa in favour of less time-consuming and demanding teaching in language schools and returns to Argentina on a fairly regular basis. Curiously, with the exception of Spanish author Antonio Risco, whom he met at Laval University before he abandoned a master's degree there, Urbanyi has only limited contact with other Spanish-speaking writers. He has not, for instance, read regularly or participated in many literary activities with the Cordillera group of Chilean writers in Ottawa. Nor has Urbanyi had much contact with English Canadian or Quebec writers; indeed, he still reads almost exclusively — though widely — in Spanish. He has published, however, in literary reviews in both English Canada and in Quebec, including *Canadian Fiction Magazine*, *Possibilitis*, and *Ruptures*, has done all he can to further the translation and publication of his works both in English and French and has received several grants from the Canada Council, Multiculturalism, and External Affairs. Jacques Lanctôt, in particular, of



VLB Éditeur and now Lanctôt Éditeur, has shown continued interest in his work. Yet Urbanyi continues to be an author in exile, writing and publishing in another language, enjoying quite a degree of success in his native land, but largely unknown in his adoptive country. Certainly there are parallels between his situation and that of W.H. Hudson, the subject of the doctoral thesis of the narrator of *En ninguna parte*, whose most memorable works about Argentina, such as *Far Away and Long Ago* and *The Purple Land*, were written and published in English while he was living in Britain. Yet Hudson, in translation, has become part of the pantheon of Argentine letters. Urbanyi is presently at work on several new novels. Perhaps these will be the books that will finally make him as well-known to readers in Canada as he is to those in Argentina.

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## Siempre algo más [Always Something]

by Pablo Urbanyi

The eminent professor sighed and continued to look out the window. Yes, something was missing; there was always something either missing or getting in the way. Standing with his hands in his pockets, he surveyed the university courtyard. Hardly any students were left now. Classes had finished five days before and the visiting lady professor had gone; now he would finally be able to devote himself to his work. Not that teaching, preparing his classes, counselling his students and listening to their problems, organizing conferences, receiving visiting scholars, writing reports, and participating in meetings and committees wasn't work; but it wasn't his *real* work, the true calling for which he had quietly been preparing for so long — years, decades even. That was his book, the book everyone was waiting for, the book that had to be written, the book that was so badly needed and that only he could write.

Like a shadow, like a voice, the certainty that the moment had finally arrived suddenly overcame him. It wasn't a new feeling; on the contrary, it was as old as the book itself. Strange, as soon as he felt so sure of it, some other new demand or research topic would spring up. There was always something else that was needed in order to have the ideal conditions for writing.

The telephone rang. With a hint of irritation, he left the window, walked over to the desk, and picked up the phone. It was his wife: she wanted to know what time he would be coming home for supper and if there were anything "special" he wanted to eat, anything he might particu-

larly fancy. No, nothing really, whatever you'd like; you know I don't pay much importance to... Well, actually, pork chops might be good, if there were any in the fridge. He hung up. How many times had he told her not to interrupt him while he was working? It was useless. Those phone calls, in some way, were also part of that something else. He'd have to put a stop to them once and for all.

He went back to the window, put his hands in his pockets once more, and looked out onto the grounds. He watched the birds; the windows were all shut for the air conditioning, so he couldn't hear their songs, but he could follow their movements as they hopped among the budding branches of the trees that were still pale green with the colours of spring.

Yes, all the bustle of university life was finally over. Well, there was still that conference in Dijon this summer; ah yes, and that symposium in Michigan. In order to avoid surprises, fatigue, and distractions, he had had to cancel his trip to the conference in San Francisco. He congratulated himself on the decision: it would have left an empty space in his life and his work. If it proved necessary, he'd pull out of the other conferences too.

Yes, the optimum conditions for writing were all inexorably falling into place. His children, all four of them, had grown up, completed their studies, and graduated; two of them were married now and only the youngest was still at home — technically, at least, because he was almost always out. Soon, in fact, he'd be a grandfather. He smiled. He also had the perfect office, exactly the one he'd wanted so much and had fought to have for so many years; its large windows overlooking the park were perfect for relaxing and meditating as he worked, just as he was doing at the

moment. It contained three desks, each for a different task: one for receiving visitors, one for answering correspondence, and one for writing his book. There was also a padded reclining chair, just for “taking it easy,” as they said these days. The walls were lined with books, two or three thousand of them, each either related to his topic or of the greatest importance to it, some even indispensable (though each of them also an always something). He’d been collecting them for years. There was also a small table with an electric IBM typewriter and, on another, larger table (specially designed for the handicapped, he’d thought to himself with a smile when he’d first gotten it), his computer and laser printer.

Everything was a matter of making the right choices, and the most important decision had already been taken: he would write his book (or the final version of it, really, because he’d already worked through it all in his mind) here in his office rather than at home; that way he’d have all his notes and books at hand, as well as the great university library if he needed any extra information or references. A formidable array of notes (arranged historically in layered stages, from the initial handwritten observations, in pencil and ink, to those typed out on his first typewriter, then those on his second, and later his third) now lay in an immense pile next to the computer. He could, in fact, almost say that the book was already finished, that all he really had to do was neaten it up a bit in the final draft: just edit it a little, rewrite a few pages. Of course things had changed enormously — both with reference to the outside world, to his book, and even to himself — since that first handwritten note so long ago. How long had it been now since he’d stopped taking notes? He suddenly felt a wave of strange, conflicting emotions: sometimes those notes appeared to be a burden, a threat, a reproach.

The telephone rang again: a further irritation to add to the last one. Sometimes there were so many irritations — like ocean waves among which he had to struggle to keep from drowning. His “Hello!” this time had an almost military ring; then he heard his name almost like a question, in a soft, affectionate tone of voice — a tone that had once been that something else — the voice of love that had inspired him, but that he, the philosopher, knew would ultimately prove ephemeral. Memories and desires were one thing, reality another; with the anxiousness of a twenty-year-old welling up in the throat of a man of fifty-five, he answered, “Yes, it’s me. Are you still here? You haven’t left yet?” The visiting lady professor, the one he himself had invited, replied, “No, not yet; I wanted to, but I’ve taken a long walk by the places where we used to go to talk because you couldn’t be seen out for a stroll with me for fear that... I thought maybe you’d changed your mind.” “No, no, I told you I couldn’t; I love you, but...” “Good-bye, then.” “Good-bye.” And he hung up.

He couldn’t return to the window. His mind, his emotions were like a volcano. He paced around the main desk, cursed his annoyance, his confusion. Inevitably, his thoughts turned to his wife, to how she had also once appeared in the middle of *his* road, to impede the writing of *his* book, like a stone wall, like the Great Wall of China. She too had been that something else: the quiet, insistent, problematic temptation to get a divorce, to free himself. Wasn’t she any longer? Well, he’d learned that women were all alike and better the one you knew than the one you hadn’t met yet. And anyway, let’s face it, nowadays, the way things were going, was there any other woman in the world who could make pork chops like that, exactly the way he liked them? Yes, and on request, too. Would there be any in the fridge?

He stopped short, exactly at the angle from which he could see the entire room, an office that was only accessible by appointment, sometimes with a two-week waiting period — or directly by phone on a private line whose number was known only to a select few: his wife, the visiting lady professor, and one or two others. Everything around him reflected his place in the world, his personal importance, showed how indispensable he was, with important work that simply couldn't be put off. The only thing that he did keep putting off was his book, the most important thing of all. No, that wasn't it exactly, or well, yes, maybe it was: as he'd said before, when it came to the book, there was always something missing. At first it had been his own maturity, then the maturity of the mind, of his ideas, and of the main idea itself. Lately, however, those ideas...

He continued pacing and gradually began to feel calmer; all sorts of good ideas began to come to mind as he walked back and forth. He liked to stroll through the university courtyard and be greeted by his colleagues and students — feared by them, even. Those beautiful evening walks with... There it was again, that same acidity, that queasiness in his stomach... His ideas, yes: it was all a harmonious process, regrettably slow and painful, and these days no one, neither young people nor anyone else, had the patience and serenity to wait. They wrote every which way, scribbling down whatever inanity came to mind, like chickens laying eggs and then cackling as they threw them in people's faces, piling up garbage on top of garbage. He, on the other hand, had already gone through all that in his time, had overcome the temptation to show off the very first egg he had laid, written in pencil. He had waited till he had a Parker 51 fountain pen, and hadn't started writing even then, but had kept on waiting till he had his first typewriter; then had left his Parker and run after a Mount Blanc,



waited some more, fought for and won a second typewriter — electric, this time — that even erased, but which had also not been enough because even though it was electric, it didn't have a memory; and then at last, he had gotten the final typewriter — there it was on the second desk — an IBM with memory, which (what irony!) was also now obsolete.

Yes, walking was always good for the nerves and stimulated new ideas. Every human being, every professor, every intellectual was a microcosm of human history. That thought, the one he'd just had, was a beautiful metaphor — or was it more of a parable? While still in the cradle, the species had begun to write in cuneiform on clay tablets, then had evolved to the quill, thence to the pencil, the fountain pen, the odious ballpoint, the typewriter, and finally the computer. That was progress. Ideas and the impossible task of writing a book. He smiled: that could be the subject of another book, or essay, or even short story. Hmm...what? An idea. He made a mental note. No more jotting things down; he had enough written notes now; he'd save that idea for a work in his tranquil old age, when he'd watch his grandchildren run around in the garden. He'd call it, "The Professor Who Could Never Write His Book: There Was Always Something."

The idea — it really was quite brilliant — that had just occurred to him like a communicating vessel flowing into his spirit, gave him renewed vigour. All right, enough beating about the bush, let's see if, with state-of-the-art technology at my fingertips, I still believe the book is going to write itself. Don't be naive. Come on, just a page, nothing but the first page and the rest will...

He stopped in front of the computer. It was just a machine — a sophisticated one, he had to admit — but a machine all the same: a fourth

generation model 386, with a 100 megabyte hard disk that still — even with all his software, of which he had the most advanced, user-friendly, easy-to-use versions, including one with the ancient Greek alphabet that was perfect for quotes — had 80 megabytes left over, enough for 150 books (depending on how long they were). Plus there were 4,800 K of random-access memory and 24 megahertz for fast resolution, so he could call up any page he wanted in a fraction of a second. He could hear the voice of one of his colleagues who had commented behind his back that if you added up all the time he'd spent in getting the computer for free — from filling out order forms to writing administrative notes and official justifications — he would have had enough time to write five books. Yes, there were those around him who were writhing with envy.

Tap, tap, tap. He drummed on the computer, remembering how in banks, offices, even the university itself, women would talk to their computers — “Come on, little fella, be good; don't let me down” — in order to humanize them. He took off the plastic covering that protected it, turned it on, and sat down. A quick “beep” let him know that it was ready, that a whole world was opening up. He put his hand on the mouse and entered WP51, Windows, and in a few seconds, while the machine asked him to “Please wait,” a blank page appeared on the dark screen (he hadn't been able to justify his demand for colour). Let's get going; what else could still be missing? Hmm, nothing, frankly: nothing at all. He picked up the first note written in pencil and read the date in the top right-hand corner: it was from over thirty years before. The page shook; it was his hand that was trembling. The stress, the near paralysis that occurred whenever he had to overcome such quaking was now so familiar. It came over him once again, and before it could turn into a cold sweat, just as he had foreseen, though

it seemed this time that nothing whatsoever was missing, he quickly left WP and tapped CM with the mouse; the computer shuddered slightly and then the words "WELCOME TO CHESS MASTER" appeared happily on the screen, accompanied by music, followed by the chessboard and pieces.

No, he wasn't like one of those professors who played Pac-Man or Pac-Girl or Star Wars or Tetris; he preferred the classic game of logic to rest his mind, relax, and yet simultaneously sharpen his intellect by putting it to work. But he'd better not force it or tire it out too much; he set the program for elementary level. Come on, he knew himself well enough by now: he'd spent his life waiting for that one last thing. He'd had more than enough experience with all the possibilities: going to the post office to mail something; finding it was a sunny day (or a rainy one); reading someone else's latest book (the chessboard was beginning to blur a bit); buying a lottery ticket; filling out grant forms, evaluations. He typed in P4R and the machine responded faithfully, immediately.

The telephone rang again. A further annoyance, his wife again: she knew it would take him a while to get home; he was so busy, but she was waiting for him... He asked a quick loving question, followed by an answer just as tender: yes, there were pork chops in the freezer, but she hadn't put them on yet because she knew him so well. They would have gotten overcooked, and she knew just how he liked them. She certainly was well-mannered, really very cultivated; she'd learned everything. That was exactly what his book was about: education, the philosophy of education. He was about to ask his wife about something else, but no, he knew there wasn't any — the doctor had forbidden it. Yes, well, but doctors won't let you do anything, though it was really a question of self-discipline: he had forbidden it to himself. He hated easy answers. He told his wife he still had ten

minutes or so of work left; he'd call her again as he was leaving. "O.K., honey. Bye." He hung up and turned back to the computer: "Now you've had it. Just watch!"

When he left the office, he was in a bitter mood: so bitter, in fact, that he forgot to call his wife again. Despite the fact that he'd been playing at Level One, he'd lost the game, and his feeling of impotency had gotten worse; now it was almost a complete defeat. It was pointless sitting there waiting for the phone to ring. Nobody called.

As he walked out to his car, he wondered what that one last something might be. Of course, it was a better society, one that was wiser, more just, more sensitive. This was an eminently practical thought — the kind they say philosophers never have — that he would understand and know how to make real use of in his book. There were so many things that were still needed, really: a new world, a universe, a reincarnation, a new life.

The eminent professor lived well outside of the city. His house was in the country, far from the anarchic din of spurious civilization, with a living room the size of a football field and a fieldstone fireplace where he could sit in front of the flames lost in meditation as he listened to the crackling of the logs, a fireplace that had also once been that something else but that now was his. Of course, he still had to pay off the mortgage, but that was all worked out. He'd send in the final installment out of his last cheque from the university before retiring.

A few kilometres before the entrance to the freeway, faced with the anguish he felt as he looked at the open and infinite sky, which reminded him of other skies and filled him with the desire to escape, he remembered the conference in San Francisco that he'd cancelled going to in order not to squander his time. It would only be a week; of course even that would be

a waste — a painful one — but the visiting professor would be there, and breaking off with her... True, she also was an impediment, a something else. Would it be too late?

He could already taste those pork chops: pieces of dead meat...or life. They wouldn't be enough this time, though. He couldn't go on living like this. He thought of that tranquil moment he had always wanted so badly, in front of the fire, and had so rarely been able to attain. But now something was really missing. He almost shouted, "Enough! I can't take it!" And of course it was spring: there wouldn't be any crackling fire in the hearth tonight, but there could be a feeling of peace. He looked at his watch. If he hurried, he might just be able to make it.

He slowed down, turned at the next corner, then turned again onto another street and accelerated once more.

He stopped. With relief he saw that the wineshop was still open.

He got out of the car. He'd already decided: in order not to always have the same problem, so there wouldn't be anything missing, he'd buy a case this time.

## LEANDRO URBINA

A master prose stylist, the Chilean-Canadian writer Leandro Urbina has published only two major works since he came to Canada in the mid-1970's, yet both works have received a high degree of recognition in Latin America, especially in Chile, and some degree of success in Canada. The first of the two is *Las malas juntas*, titled *Lost Causes* in the English edition, which has been published in three different editions in Spanish and one in English, and consists of a collection of concisely written, realistic short stories that deal with aspects of the coup d'état against Salvador Allende in 1973. The second work is *Cobro revertido* [*Collect Call*], a novel of exile set in Montreal that was a runner-up (the only Chilean one) for the Planeta award in Argentina in 1992; this work was published by Planeta and extremely well received by the Chilean press and has since been translated into French. Urbina also has an unpublished manuscript, *Homo eroticus*, as well as various fragments of other texts that have appeared in Canadian literary journals and anthologies.

Leandro's experience is essentially an urban one. He was born in Santiago in 1949, the oldest of five brothers. His father was an automobile mechanic with a taste for reading, and both parents were anxious to have their children secure professional careers (which all of them have). Urbina's father was partial to European authors of the nineteenth-century such as Balzac, Daudet, and Sir Walter Scott; he would pass these books on to his sons after he had finished them. As a child, Leandro frequently listened to plays produced on Chilean radio (television production in Chile was limited at the time); he also read Salgari and Verne, played soccer and chess, and

was a fan of rock and roll. One of his earliest stories, written in secondary school, received a prize in a competition for young writers; a teacher of his, the well-known Chilean author Antonio Skármeta, was on the jury.

Urbina entered university in 1967, changing his major in tandem with his interests: from civil engineering to economics and then to literature. Like many young Chileans of his generation, he had been involved in leftist political activity since secondary school, but in his case with a special emphasis on teaching and contact with the inhabitants of the *poblaciones*, or shanty-towns, of Santiago (where roughly 40% of the population lives). He participated in meetings, wrote and handed out pamphlets, taught and explained the works of Marx in clandestine gatherings, and worked in literacy campaigns. He also immersed himself in the works of the novelists of the Latin American literary "Boom": Julio Cortázar, the experimental Argentine novelist living in self-exile in Paris; Gabriel García Márquez, the master of magic realism, from Colombia; Mario Vargas Llosa, the prolific Peruvian writer who touched on both national and European themes; Juan Rulfo, of Mexico, whose spare, haunted prose moves between hallucination and reality; and Juan Carlos Onetti, the Uruguayan creator of the bleak, sinister, phantasmagoric world of *Juntacadáveres* [*Corpse-Gatherer*]. He was also interested in American and European fiction, especially Faulkner, Hemingway, Mailer, Raymond Queneau, and Lewis Carroll.

During his years at university, Leandro studied Spanish literature (specifically *La Celestina*) with Ariel Dorfman, the Chilean author of *Death and the Maiden* who now lives in the United States. Dorfman published Leandro's work in the review *Quimantú*. In the meantime, Urbina continued to frequent the writers' workshop of Antonio Skármeta, who also included one of his early stories in the review *Paula*. Immediately after

university, Urbina began to work as a story-writer for a publisher of science-fiction comic books, for which he says he would rework themes from literary classics, setting them among the galaxies (personal interview). He tried his hand at poetry, which traditionally has been held in greater esteem than prose in Chile, but decided, after rereading his first love poems, that he would concentrate on prose.

The coup d'état of 1973 changed the entire direction of Urbina's life. His house was raided by the military, and his father and two of his brothers were taken to the Santiago stadium, where they were held, interrogated, and tortured for three months. Leandro and another brother managed to escape across the rooftops; later he crossed the border into Argentina and arrived in Buenos Aires with fourteen dollars in his pocket, along with the names of a few other Chilean refugees who were already there. The intensity of these experiences would later be reflected in his fiction. During this first stage as a refugee in Buenos Aires (the second was to be in Ottawa), he worked in a textile factory, as a postman, and as a journalist, and, despite the fear in the air during the final years of the Peronist regime, when inflation raged out of control at over 6,000% per year and paramilitary death squads disposed of suspected leftists (and of course, Chilean refugees) with impunity, Leandro found the cultural and political intensity of the metropolis exciting. He became interested in the theatre and read extensively in German drama — including works by Wedekind, Brecht, Dürrenmatt, Kleist, and Georg Büchner (the author of *Woyzeck* and an exile himself) — as well as in Argentine drama, especially the interplay between fantasy and uncompromising reality in the works of Roberto Arlt and the manic black humour of Osvaldo Dragún. He acted in Argentine theatre and worked as a dramaturge with the Teatro Circo.



While in Buenos Aires, Urbina met an Argentine literary critic, Mariano Aguirre, who was putting together an anthology of texts about the coup d'état in Chile. Leandro worked with him on the project and was struck by the emotional difficulty many refugee writers had in writing about the coup: anger, guilt, pain, disorientation — all the effects of trauma seemed to impede the focus of their work. Urbina resolved to write his own stories, using some of Brecht's techniques to achieve a certain distancing from his subject. The result was *Las malas juntas*, which was to become a classic work about the coup and subsequent military repression. Urbina sent it off to the Casa de las Américas literary competition in Cuba in 1976, where it was short-listed for the best collection of short fiction from Latin America for the year. It was first published in Canada by Ediciones Cordillera five years later and then by Ediciones de Obsidiana in Chile in 1986, when the Pinochet regime began easing up on censorship; finally, an augmented edition was put out by the prestigious Ediciones Planeta (Chile) in 1993, following the success of Urbina's first novel. An English version, entitled *Lost Causes* and translated by Urbina's Canadian wife, Christina Shantz, was published by Cormorant Books in 1987.

*Las malas juntas* deals with the effects of the military takeover on the lives of a variety of Chileans of different economic backgrounds and levels of education — from professionals to schizophrenics — immediately after the coup. Its power derives from the spare, concise prose and understated, unemotional tone; Urbina has found exactly the right style in which to be able to narrate such terrible events and focusses solely on one event or character per story. The stories vary in length from *minificciones* of as little as eight lines to longer pieces of ten to fifteen pages; each, however, concentrates on one particular character or event, which is so succinctly

told (either in the first or third person) that it becomes an emblem of political repression as a whole. Consider, for instance, the *minificción* “Padre nuestro que estás en los cielos” [“Our Father Who Art in Heaven”]:

While the sergeant was interrogating his mother and sister, the captain took the child by the hand to the other room.

—Where is your father? he asked.

—He’s in heaven, whispered the boy.

—What’s that? Is he dead? asked the captain, surprised.

—No, said the child. Every night he comes down from heaven to eat with us.

The captain raised his eyes and discovered the little door in the ceiling. (*Lost Causes* 28)

The note of tragic — but never black — humour that is often found in these stories has offended some Chilean readers; it is, however, probably one of the most powerful effects of the book. The characters confront their individual fates with dignity and a certain ironic courage that underlines their human fragility in the face of the carefully planned brutality and treachery of the military and its rightist supporters. For Urbina makes it clear just how divisive the coup was to Chilean society, pitting family members against one another, as in “El amuleto” [“The Amulet”], in which a young man’s rightist aunt, who is having an affair with a military officer, turns in her left-leaning brother and his family. In “Las malas juntas” [“Bad Company”] (the title story of the Spanish editions), a young man is tortured to death by his former classmate at military school — the same one who used to persecute him when they played after classes. Divisions also ran through the left: “Relaciones” [“Relationships”], for example, is a two-paragraph *minificción* in which two leftist friends who have quarrelled and had a falling-out over the correct policy for the Allende government to take to protect itself from a coup now find themselves in the prison together.

Yet Urbina also makes it clear that, despite its brutality, the military was well prepared for the take-over and had meticulously planned and executed a total reorganization of society. “La vuelta a casa” [“The Homecoming”] follows the young surgeon Dr. Martínez as he walks back into Santiago — and his former life — from the Stadium, where he has been imprisoned and tortured for an unspecified amount of time. In his overwhelming relief at being free, Dr. Martínez naively believes he will be able to resume his way of living just as it was when the military first picked him up; instead, he is horrified to find that his imprisonment was only the beginning of his pain, for the entire society has been changed, and he has been shut out of his previous existence. The barman at his old café turns out to be a military supporter and now scorns him; his former girlfriend asks him not to call again; his old friend Soto has been thrown out of the house by his wife, who thinks his presence there is a danger to herself and the children; Martínez’s apartment has been confiscated and now houses a policeman and his family, who apologize to him for the inconvenience; and his mother believes he is one of the leftist traitors who has brought such misfortune to the country. At last, defeated and alone, he wanders back toward the Stadium from which he was released that morning, wondering whether his true home is not among the people still incarcerated there.

In March, 1976, the Argentine armed forces also staged a coup, overthrowing the government of Isabel Perón, and immediately began rounding up and “disappearing” suspected leftists. Chilean and other Latin American refugees there were prime targets for paramilitary death squads; a few months later, in fact, the Canadian embassy was occupied by Chileans seeking refuge. Urbina stayed in Buenos Aires until the police came to his

apartment building twice in the same week to ask his whereabouts. Then, for the second time, taking only his manuscripts and personal effects with him, he and his Chilean-born wife set out for the previously unknown land of Canada as refugees. Aided by a Canadian graduate student who had studied literature at the Pedagogical Institute of the University of Chile with him, Urbina and his wife settled in Ottawa.

Though at first he worked cleaning office buildings, Leandro soon secured a job as lecturer in Spanish at Carleton University, as well as work as a translator. He received a Master's degree in Spanish-American literature from the University of Ottawa, and his career as a writer began to take more definite shape. During this time, Urbina founded Ediciones Cordillera, a Spanish-language publishing house that was to specialize in works by Chilean-Canadians. In 1979, he was the first Chilean to receive a Canada Council grant, specifically to write a novel, *El pasajero del aire* [*Traveller of the Air*], about his experiences in Buenos Aires. He had separated from his first wife in 1978 and the following year met his second wife, Christina Shantz, a graduate student in comparative literature at Carleton University, whose skill in translation, coupled with her inexhaustible energy, were to make her the principal translator of all of the early Cordillera publications. In the early 1980's, he and three other Chilean-Canadians — Jorge Etcheverry, Naín Nómez, and Toronto resident Juan Carlos García — were also invited several times to read at Harbourfront. Urbina states that he was finally able to overcome his initial rejection of English as the language of the American Empire — a feeling shared by many Latin Americans — by concentrating on the literature of the English-speaking world, and more specifically, of Canada. He has periodically been in contact with Gary Geddes, Pat Lane, Lorna Crozier, and

Earle Birney, and has worked with Cordillera to bring Chilean-Canadian writing to light in English.

Despite the success of *Las malas juntas*, Urbina felt that he wanted to move on from writing short stories and come out with a novel. The realistic, objective style of his first book had worked well for short stories and *minificciones*; by the late 1970's, however, Leandro wanted to move into a much looser, more flowing style that he felt would be more suited to long fiction. Accordingly, in *El pasajero del aire* (which has never been fully published), he made a conscious and radical shift in style toward an open-ended, first-person, stream-of-consciousness way of writing that would enable him to move back and forth across time — often including dialogue and conversation within long paragraphs of remembered details — in the way in which the human mind remembers and mulls over events or fragments of experience, rather than in the chronological pattern in which such events actually take place. One of the works that most interested him at the time was Julio Cortázar's *Rayuela* [*Hopscotch*], an immense novel entirely made up of fragments of interior monologue from various characters' minds, arranged so they can be read and interpreted in different sequences. Urbina did not, however, want to step over the line separating the subjective and objective worlds, as had magic realists such as Alejo Carpentier and Gabriel García Márquez (personal interview). Two chapters of the novel were included in *Chilean Literature in Canada/Literatura chilena en Canadá*, an anthology edited by Naín Nómez and published by Cordillera in 1982. Although the transitions in his new style are somewhat abrupt, Urbina is already working out some new and effective strategies: certainly the scene in which the protagonist, a young Chilean refugee, goes to the Turkish baths in downtown Buenos Aires is a remarkable one. As he

lies in the sauna and swims in the pool there, he reviews the painful memories of the coup, all the while overhearing bits of gossip and business deals among the wealthy *porteño* businessmen who surround him, much of which presages the later coup in Argentina as well.

In 1988, Christina Shantz received an offer to work as a translator at the United Nations and Leandro moved to New York with her; in 1991, the couple went on to Washington, where Christina continued her translation career. Though they have since separated and Urbina has moved back to Ottawa, his years in the United States saw the accomplishment of three key projects. First, he finished a doctorate in Latin American literature at the Catholic University in Washington, with a thesis on the relation between history and fiction in the theme of the European arrival in the Americas. Second, he put aside *El pasajero del aire* and began writing a new novel, *Homo eroticus*, the manuscript of which is complete (until further changes, at least), though it has not yet been published. *Homo eroticus* consists of a series of texts written by a Latin American immigrant (from an unnamed country) living in Canada; the anonymous author has signed a contract to serve as the object of a study entitled *The Sexuality of Underdeveloped Peoples*, which is being carried out by a doctor and his staff in conjunction with a certain multinational pharmaceutical company that would like to try out a few new products on him. The patient is confined to his bed and given doses of various drugs; he then records his fantasies on tape or on paper (he prefers the latter) for analysis by the medical and psychiatric staff. Though the novel includes a variety of erotic and comic passages, it is also a mordant satire on the mentalities and stereotypes associated with both “developed” and “underdeveloped” countries, as well as on the authoritarian nature of the medical world. There is also, as

Chilean critic and writer Naín Nómez has pointed out, “a marked identification between exile and the hospital, in which the protagonist feels alienated, used, and repressed by his constant confrontations with the doctor and nurses” (Nómez 27-28).

While he was in Washington working on *Homo eroticus*, however, Leandro suddenly decided to work on a new project (though he had been turning it over in his mind for many years), one that he was to complete within two months and which would meet with an enormous degree of success: his novel *Cobro revertido*. This work, essentially on the theme of exile, deals with twenty-four hours in the life of a Chilean refugee living in Montreal who has just received the news that his mother has died and is set against the surreal background of a somewhat amplified Caribbean festival in the streets of the city. The protagonist is unnamed, other than being called “the Sociologist,” in reference to his studies in that field — which he has never completed. The Sociologist is an amiable, anarchic, sensitive individual whose failure to understand or accept the rules of the game in both Chilean and Canadian society ultimately leads him to tragedy. Women (most of whom have names beginning with the letter “m”) have largely directed his life, starting with his mother, a woman of lower-middle class origins who meddled in his affairs at every turn in order to try to assure that he would pursue a career in law and secure a better place for himself (and the family) in society.

The Sociologist first hears of his mother’s death when he returns from a night’s drinking to the apartment he shares with a Portuguese immigrant from Angola. He calls his uncle the next morning and impulsively (and guiltily) swears that he will be in Chile within two days for the funeral. He doesn’t, of course, actually have the funds for his ticket and must turn

to his ex-wife Megan, a Montreal anglophone who is now a doctor, in humiliation to ask her for a “loan” to cover it. He then joins a group (or chorus) of his Chilean friends and fellow-exiles in a beer parlour, who comfort him and later accompany him on a drunken odyssey — punctuated with endless conversations about Chilean and Quebec-Canadian politics — in search of suitable clothes and gifts for him to take back, only to end up frittering away his funds in a striptease bar. Finally, while dancing to Caribbean music in Parc Lafontaine, his good-natured advances toward one of the women in the gyrating crowd are badly taken, and he ends up getting knifed in a scuffle with her boyfriend — who is himself a Chilean.

The Sociologist’s decline and fall are both a product of his own personality and of the disorientation and hopelessness of exile. The Chilean critic Grinor Rojo (who also introduced both Chilean editions of *Las malas juntas*) has compared the novel to *Under the Volcano*, but in reverse; Urbina himself comments that “It’s the voyage of a marginal to the centre, where the character does what English travellers used to do before in the colonies” (Olivárez 5). The Sociologist does not have the type of personality that bears up well under exile: his political beliefs, such as they were, are now fossilized memories unconnected to any real activism in Chile, where events have passed him by, or in Quebec, which he still does not fully understand or feel a part of; his career is dead, though he has never admitted it to his mother or relatives in Chile; he makes his living from odd jobs — when he can get them — and owes money to half the people he knows. As his failure becomes increasingly evident to him, he takes refuge in silence (even during the political discussions and litanies as to what went wrong during the Allende régime seventeen years before and six thousand miles away), in alcoholism, and in erotic adventures (deserting his



wife for a new girlfriend and then making love to the second woman's roommate). He is a man in flight from himself (Hazelton 6).

The strongest character in the novel, in fact, is the Sociologist's mother, who inevitably becomes identified in his memory with Chile. For although she has sacrificed everything for the sake of her sons — even saving the Sociologist from drowning when he was a boy — and has died with their names on her lips, she also believed that the military intervention was necessary for the good of the country. Moreover, after the coup she betrayed his former girlfriend and her cousin by refusing to give them her son's address in Montreal so he could help them flee the country — after which both were picked up by the military and disappeared. As the critic Sylvie Perron points out, the dead woman's laugh is even compared to the rumble of tanks outside (Perron 231). The Sociologist's mother, like his homeland, has rejected and shamed him. Is it any wonder that he flails about in a permanent state of self-destruction, bouncing from one picaresque adventure to another, and that he never actually returns "home"?

Stylistically, *Cobro revertido* is a tour de force. The prose surges forward, weaving its way through long, complex, often lyrical and humorous reminiscences and events without losing its logical sequence. It is also agile, incorporating other conversations and even accents into the text, so that the narration suddenly takes on a Lusophone tone as João, the Sociologist's Portuguese roommate, tells him of his mother's death, or is interspersed with a mixture of popular song lyrics, Chilean slang, and Québécois French as the Chileans converse while watching the topless dancers. Urbina credits his early teacher, Antonio Skármeta, with having shown him that "language could be poeticized, even in prose" ("Leandro Urbina: 'Me interesa'"). In terms of point of view, the various unmarked

sections of the novel alternate between two methods of narration: the first person is used for memories, especially of the Sociologist's mother and the other women in his life, while the third person is reserved for the settings and scenes of his twenty-four-hour descent.

Urbina sent the manuscript of *Cobro revertido* to the Planeta (Argentina) literary competition for 1992, where it was short-listed from among the over 300 novels entered from all over Latin America. It was consequently published by Planeta (Chile) and won the award for best novel of the year from the National Book Council of the Ministry of Education and Culture of Chile. The work received a great deal of press coverage in Chile, and Leandro was interviewed by both *Epoca* and *El Mercurio*; the latter newspaper, Chile's largest, accorded him front page in the Sunday literary section (ironically, *El Mercurio* had also been one of the strongest supporters of the military régime). The novel and the publicity it received gave a great boost to interest in Chile in work written by Chileans living abroad. A French edition of the novel, *Longues distances*, translated by Danièle Rudel-Tessier, was published by Lanctôt Editeur of Montreal in June, 1996. The novel has also been translated into English by Beverly de Long-Tonnelli in California, but has not yet been published. Urbina is now back in Ottawa, teaching at Carleton, all the while publishing new Chilean writers with Cordillera in Santiago. In the past, he has waited until he has felt he really has a manuscript ready before publishing it. Readers in Chile and Canada are now wondering what the next surprise will be.

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Selections from *Homo eroticus*

by Leandro Urbina

## I

Last night I again had a nightmare that I haven't been able to rid myself of for years. It starts out in this same damned hospital bed, which keeps sinking down on one side or the other, grating under my uncontrollable weight like teeth on the verge of breaking. Every time I go to sleep and wake up again, I get fatter. They've diagnosed my illness as being fatal, but the end never seems to come. My body feels as if it were full of pins poking into me and forcing the greasy serum from the plastic bag above me into this bloated sack of skin that refuses to abandon me and instead prefers to live within four walls like a rag doll, a stubborn survivor. "Die, will you!" I yell at it, and at that minute an entire police brigade kicks down the door to my room and starts hitting me over the head with their nightsticks, forcing me to jump through the window into space. Bristling like a porcupine with shards of glass, I go hopping along over the neighbourhood rooftops, squawking like a parrot, "Mea culpa, mea culpa, mea culpa!" The sun burns me as I run toward the horizon that is now painted with rainstorms. Just at the moment I arrive on my own roof, the tiles give way and I fall through amid a rain of black dust, scraping myself and leaving slices of my fat flesh on the dry clay and rotting, splintered beams. "For God's sake, son," sobs my mother, coming toward me in the darkness. "Look what they've done to you. Every limb's broken." "Don't worry, mother," I answer. "They've promised to put me back together again at the hospital."

I calm her down and my voice begins to choke up. Then there's the noise of a siren wailing and the thundering of horses' hooves, and horseshoes scatter sparks of fire on the grey cobblestones in the distance and a growing horror comes over me, and my uncles are all yelling at me in chorus, pointing at me with their dirty fingers, "There he is; there's the fat slob, on top of the wall! Take him away, take him away!"

Someone turns on the light and I wake up in the white room that has been assigned me. There are signs of activity in the corridor, echos of shrill voices. My mouth is dry and my neck muscles hurt. I look at the inert mass of my body and think I'll stop eating forever. "Good morning," I hear as they pull back the curtains and a sudden burst of light burns my eyes. I sit up in bed, scraping at the covers. Grabbing hold of the bedside table, I reach out for the breakfast tray that the nurse has just left under my nose and gulp up the nauseating coffee. Then I force down the tasteless eggs and cardboard toast.

This is how my days begin, as they have now for the past several years, or perhaps months. Some mornings, in spite of my aversion, breakfast puts me in a good mood and I try to talk with the woman who cleans my room and brings me my mail about how hot it is, or how cold, how much snow, how little snow, how hot it is, how cold it is, how much snow, how incredibly much snow. Then I settle back against the pillows to wait like a cat for a veterinarian while I read a letter from my mother asking me for money because the family's been having a hard time lately. Soon the doctor will come, a pale chunky guy who looks like a balding Valkyrie, to readjust my needles and check on my condition with a vacant smile and monotonous patter full of obvious genial fibs with which he has to impress his poor little patients who run around trying to find some charismatic

authority figure to grab onto who will save them from the hell of their own degradation. He thinks he's the Holy Father, Our Lord Himself, the Little Pope, Saint Hospitalarius. He must be a couple of years older than I, though perhaps he looks younger, yet he's forever treating me like some kid with emotional problems. "The doctor is so kind," the nurse says. "So generous." But with me his posing falls flat because I'm onto him and all the arm-wavers of his kind. Still, I belong to him. Let's face it. As long as he goes on paying I'll continue to be his experiment, and he'll keep coming around with his solemn puss and putting his nose in my papers and tapes to try to see if the work I owe him is getting done. They've given him a grant to study "The Sexuality of Underdeveloped Peoples," and at the moment I'm his sole source of information, his Latin American (under the terms of my contract, I cannot reveal my exact nationality), and his last hope. There were others before me, all of them recruited by Nurse Seltzer in bars and discotheques — distrustful Salvadorans, Nicaraguans exiled for health reasons, Jehovah's Witnesses from Cuba — all of whom tried to carry through the project, but ended up constipated or didn't really have the aptitude or had gotten violent or had had problems with their conscience and had been discharged. I fantasize and write enough for any ten of them, and the doctor has a shameful, anxious desire to rummage through everything that comes out of my head. The nurse helps him by spying on me and stealing the notes I keep separately as my own private papers and running off to photocopy them.

The nurse and the doctor have certain forebears and other things in common which I will relate later on. It was she who acted as go-between for the initial contract. She met me at a party given by some Colombians. I had dropped by for a drink one Saturday night out of pure coincidence,

pure boredom. There she was, definitely not alone, exchanging looks with a few fawning toadies. She was dressed up according to her version of what was sexy, which meant showing a lot without much grace, and her followers, most of whom were immigrants, were going wild, like flies after honey. After a moment, I noticed she was looking at me. I asked her to dance and, since suppleness is not one of her outstanding characteristics, I became bored after a while and began — out of pure inertia — to rub against her body, pelvis to pelvis, in an effort to give some direction to her crazy waggings: “This way, this way, baby,” like a cubist painting trying to be an icon of Eros, looking her in the face, but without the least intention of whispering in her ear *Come closer closer closer, no come on much much closer/ and kiss me like this, like this, like this, the way I know you kiss*, like the rest of the cretins chasing after her and imitating television Casanovas. She blushed and began to talk on and on, asking me what I did for a living, whether or not I liked my new country, the city, its people, the trees in the fall, supermarkets, department stores, malls, going shopping, opportunities, work, and snow. “Yes, sure, of course, yeah, you bet,” I replied, “because right now I don’t have a job,” and I put my hands on her hips. I could tell she was excited, but I didn’t want to push it, and when the dance was over, even though she kept on talking with me with the indisputable intention of staying with me, I told her I had to be going. I didn’t need an excuse. As soon as I let go of her, two other guys came up to ask her for the next set of boleros, cumbias, pasodobles, salsa and cha-chas. *What have you done with the love that you swore me?/ And what have you done with the kisses I gave you?* She looked in her purse and gave me her card in front of everybody. “What luck, man. The *gringa*’s given you her phone number.” “How about another glass of wine?” “Cheers, buddy.”



“I’ve been after that one for the last four hours.” “Why don’t you share her a little with me there, pal? If she’ll go with you, she’ll go with me.” “And now you’re leaving?” “That’s life: some boil the water and others drink the *mate*.” She asked me to call her the next day, adding that she had some information about a job that might be of interest to me and that it had been a pleasure meeting me. See you later!

I called her. We agreed to meet that afternoon, in a café, where we talked for several hours. She explained to me — in general terms and the most professional tone possible — about the project at the Medical Research Centre. I told her something of my life, the most romantic parts, at least. Her eyes shone. I put my hand on her back as we left. My fingers could feel her warm skin beneath the silk of her blouse, together with a slight trembling that made her turn her head toward me with her lips open.

I asked her if she’d like to have a drink at my house so we could continue the conversation. She said no, that there was someone else in her life and that he was waiting for her. I could tell by the way she looked at me that I’d only have to insist a little more in order for her to dare throw herself into an adventure of hidden passions and unrestrained libido, oh, ah, oh. But I didn’t push it; instead I told her I understood, that love must be treasured and cared for and she finally went off a little surprised — and a bit irritated, I think — by my lack of perseverance. It was basically better that way. Why complicate things?

A few days later, I signed a contract with the doctor and his institute. As soon as we met I confessed my genital problems to him, and we negotiated a salary according to the price lists on several tables of transactions. Essentially, he would furnish me lodging, food, and a small stipend, in return for which I would provide him with stories of erotic incidents “that

I had experienced,” and act as representative of the imagination and the supposed sexual impulse of the Third World, through which he and his colleagues would be able to unravel our obsessions, motivations, and primary desires. Moreover, I also agreed to submit to injections of a certain new drug that they were trying out on behalf of a prestigious maker of pharmaceutical products and which they believed would help me after the restorative operation, though its success rate would have to be further evaluated before they used it on me. Although they’ve never told me so directly, I know they can’t guarantee the results.

I console myself now with the fact that whatever happens, some record of my passage through this land of opportunity will be left in my papers and voice recordings. I’d always played with the idea of being able to relate certain events in my life: not necessarily write them down or anything, just tell them. Lately my desire to do so has intensified. I never wanted to open my mouth before. I don’t consider myself one of those people who torture their friends with interminable anecdotes in order to show off a sensitivity that would otherwise never be apparent. In any case, I still miss the decrepit confessions of my youth; it’s funny I should be making them now. The doctor has entrusted me with one task and here I’ve immediately thought of taking on another. That’s always been a part of my nature. . . .

## III

. . . I was brought up surrounded by women, my mother and her sisters. My father was most notable by his absence, while my older brother was busy with "his own things," and the younger ones were forever tangled up in my mother's skirts.

My aunts were dressmakers of great renown. Jobita, Rosaura, and Marieta sewed everything from beautiful simple blouses to highly complicated and ethereal bridal gowns. Dozens of clients paraded through their fitting room in search of a touch of elegance that would make men slowly turn their heads and would dim the combativeness in the eyes of other women. In the afternoon, when I would come home from school, I used to look through the keyhole into my mother's room and watch the continual falling of skirts, flying of petticoats, the dressing and undressing of anonymous bodies. Bristling with fear, covered in goosebumps, I constantly expected to hear a voice like a trumpet suddenly sound in my ear: "What are you doing here, you diabolical little pig!" I used to remain glued to the door until my back couldn't take it anymore.

Sometimes, when the light would begin to burn my eyes and my knees would be tingling with impatience, I would put my fingers under the buttons of my shirt and grasp my scapulary and ask the angels to please turn me into a mouse so I could wriggle through the cracks in the walls — tling-tlong — underneath the door, up over the transom, and hide beneath the heavy legs of the great "antique" chairs, that had feet the size of wild animals of the night, and that my aunts had had made to order according to French designs, which were by far the most elegant and solid and would last forever ("In the style of Louis XVI, the king of France who was

beheaded by the commoners, my child, and Marie Antoinette, his queen, who they say was so beautiful that she's now the name of a cake.") And then I'd be able to watch everything from mouse-level, without fear of anyone noticing me, hidden behind my friend the guillotined head that would protect me from attack and had been tossed into a shadowy corner of the room (which it shared with the old enamel spittoon) and that smiled at me with half-closed eyelids and a pointy nose. And I could look at all the ankles and defenceless calves of the women and girls who were waiting to be served in just a moment and then suddenly jump out in front of them with eyes red with magic fire and scare them — "Ay, ay, ay! A mouse!" — and then the greatest miracle of all: they would lift their skirts and get up on the sofa and I'd have a nice view of their panties, laughing like a wild mouse — "What a terrible kid!" — and then would rub my magic wand and turn into a pampered cat and they would say to me "What a beautiful cat! Here kitty-kitty!" and would pick me up and hold me on their laps and pet me along the spine of my back — "He's a furry thing, isn't he? And his neck's so soft!" — till my tail would stand on end with pleasure and I'd be able to purr against their breasts with my nose right in between them, rising and falling as I lay there half-smothered.

And in the protective darkness they would go on chattering to the rhythm of petticoats and pins — "Jobita this," "Marieta that" — "Ay, Juanita, for heaven's sake don't make me laugh: I'll prick my fingers" — and then I'd watch as they walked over to the mirror, under the lights — sometimes with gestures of approval, at others of disappointment — and always anxiously asking, "Mirror, mirror, who's the most beautiful, the most elegant, the most attractive, the most desirable?" And then, "What do you think, Rosaura, about making it a bit lower-cut?" "Shouldn't it be brought

in more at the hips? It's so loose, I look like a nun." "I try to hide it, but it just makes them jealous." "I look like a perfect little princess." "I'm the queen of sensuality." "The underwear's from France; they call it *lingerie* there." "How daring, Silvia dear: your husband will be wild about it." "Are you kidding? He never notices anything; he'd rather go to the burlesque show and watch all those common little tarts." "For God's sake, Silvia, how could he be so blind?" "That's why I want it to show a bit more, so his friends will go wild. This party is mine: all his bosses will be there, a bunch of dirty old men whose eyes bug out whenever they see a pretty woman." "You're worse than the wife of that lawyer Rodríguez." "Maybe, but she's really got something to complain about. They say that sneak of a husband of hers, besides being a cripple, is partial to boys aged fourteen to eighteen — nineteen, at the most — and that the only reason he married at all was to stop the rumours and please his Mama." And my aunts would say, "Yes, that's right," or "No, it's not," "Ah! Don't tell me!" or "Sew up the sleeve," "Backstitch the hem," "Take her measurements," or "You'll have to wait a bit, Maruja dear; do you want some tea?" "Child, go tell your mother to make tea for Doña Maruja and bring it in to her, will you?, with some biscuits, too." "Yes, Maruja, nice and sweet, just the way you like it."

My mother was mistress of the house, vastly pregnant with my fourth brother. She would sit with her legs apart in front of a fan in the dining room on hot afternoons and listen to the soap operas on the radio. My father had bought a refrigerator a short time before, and she would make herself pitchers of bananas and milk with ice cubes and drink them parsimoniously with her head turned toward the radio as if it were an old acquaintance who was always a pleasure to listen to as he told tales of his adventures out in the world. Then orders would come in for lemonade for

the Zamorano girls, who were waiting for their First Communion dresses and would giggle like idiots when I would bring in the tray and offer them their glasses; or for tea and biscuits for Doña Maruja who has to have her skirt adjusted because she's put on a touch more weight over the holidays and the bulges show under her slip and on her legs that she crosses so nonchalantly as her pale bare arm lifts a haughty cigarette.

"Ah, such a good little boy," she says as she hugs me when I put the tray down on the table next to the sofa. My face is buried in her mass of red hair and enraptured I breathe in the perfume from her neck. She lets me stay like that a few seconds and then tells me I'm the only one who really knows how to wait on her and take care of her. I pull away and she asks me to massage her feet. She's walked all day. I get down in front of her and caress the moist skin of her foot, which is as tender and plump as a tiny animal. She stretches out as if she were tired and asks me to go a little higher up to her calf and then to rub my fingers in gentle little circles on her knee, and she opens her legs and her lips and feels for her purse and takes out a bag of chocolates and begins to pop them into my mouth one by one, like communion hosts on my tongue, and I'm wishing there were more light to be able to see between her thighs because her knee is as far as I can go. But the windows of the salon are never opened: the darkness is sacred; it protects against heat and indiscretion; the light belongs to the area around the mirror, which is lit by lamps. By now she and I are both sweating. My nostrils and chest are bursting for air, as are her mouth and mine, in mutual wonder. She begs me in a whisper to go faster with my little circles and begins to move her legs as if she were running, but discreetly, restraining herself, and my fingers sink into the little soft hollows behind the bone and begin to feel gelatinous, almost as if they were melting, as

they penetrate her body, dear Doña Maruja, and she stuffs me full of chocolates, candy and sighs — one-two-three-four — her breasts beginning to slip out of her blouse now, my mouth full — four-four-four — as I keep running uphill on tiptoe and she's swinging her hips from one side to the other, her thighs trembling with exhaustion, raising her hand in the air with her fingers starting to clench and her eyes open to direct the finale of the music that suddenly stops with a hoarse sound and her hands fall on my head and my head falls on her stomach and she holds me there tightly for a minute so her inflamed flesh can feel the waning motion of my jaws still trying to liquefy the thick ball of dark chocolate that she has offered me. Then she whimpers, "Nice dog, such a nice little dog," lifts my face toward hers, so open and luminous, as if there were a moon on her forehead, and tells me, "Study mathematics, my boy, lots of math; you've already got poetry in your body." And her full lips kiss my eyes. Then I get up and she takes her cup of tea and crosses her legs and my Aunt Rosaura comes nervously in saying, "Sorry, Maruja dear, we'll have the fitting in just five more minutes," and she says, "There's no hurry; I'm still drinking the tea my boy here brought. . . ."

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE: HUGH HAZELTON**

Hugh Hazelton is a teacher and translator who has specialized in the literatures of the Americas. He obtained his B.A. in English literature, with a minor in French, from Yale University in 1969. After several years teaching French and English at high schools in Canada, he travelled and lived in Latin America for two years, principally in Peru, Argentina, and Brazil. Upon his return to Montreal, he enrolled in the Master's program in English literature at Concordia University, from which he received his degree in 1981. Over the past decade, he has taught English at the Faculté d'Éducation Permanente of the Université de Montréal and at the Université de Sherbrooke; English and Spanish at Collège de St-Laurent, in St-Laurent, Quebec; and Spanish — particularly Spanish translation — at Concordia University.

His work as a translator and anthologist has concentrated on Quebec literature, Latin American literature in Canada, and the comparison of Argentine and Canadian literatures. He is a member of the Ordre des traducteurs du Québec, as well as of the Union des écrivaines et écrivains du Québec and the Sociedad de Escritores de Chile. His translated books include *Jade and Iron* (Douglas & McIntyre, 1996), a collection of legends and stories from Latin America, edited by Patricia Aldana, and *The Better to See You* (Cormorant, 1993), a book of short stories by the Salvadoran author Alfonso Quijada Urías. He also edited, with Gary Geddes, and was principal translator of *Compañeros: An Anthology of Writings About Latin America* (Cormorant, 1990), which included poetry and prose by eighty-seven writers of English-Canadian, Québécois, and Haitian- and

Latino-Canadian origin. His latest work in the field, *Chasquis: Anthologie de la poésie latino-québécoise*, a bilingual (French-Spanish) collection of poetry by Latin American authors living in Quebec, is to be published by les Éditions de l'Hexagone in 1997.

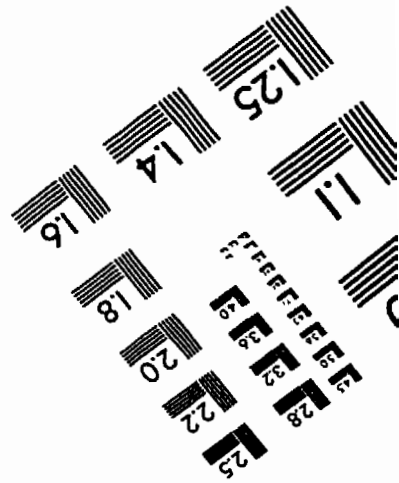
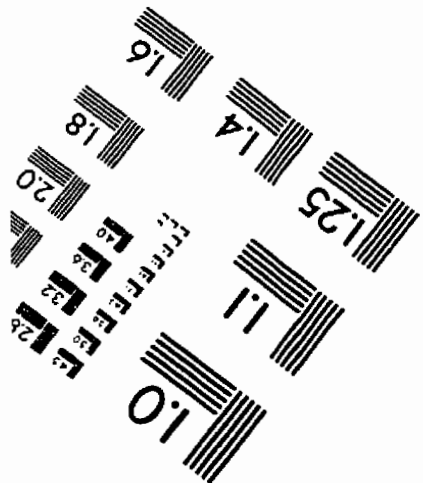
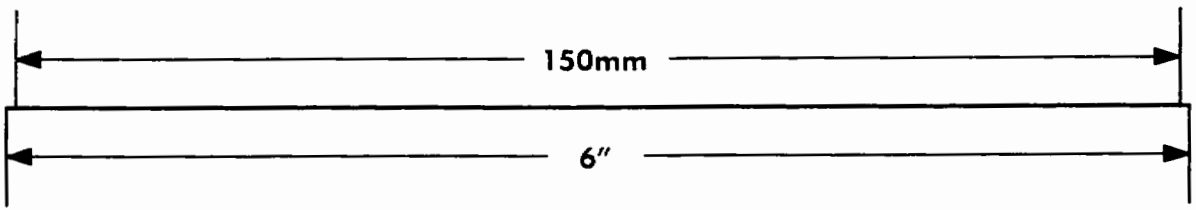
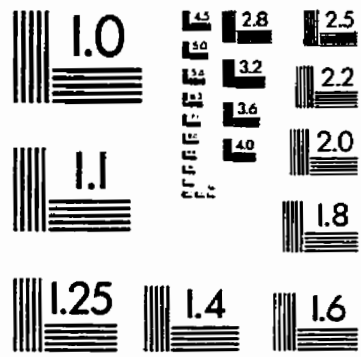
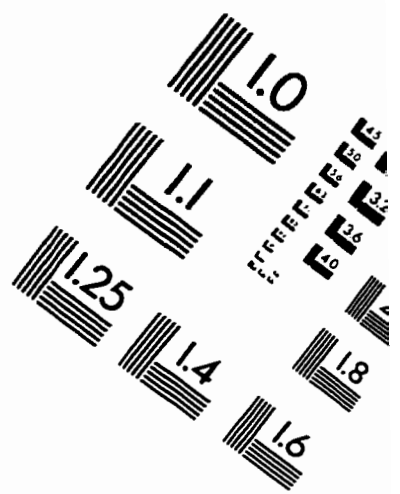
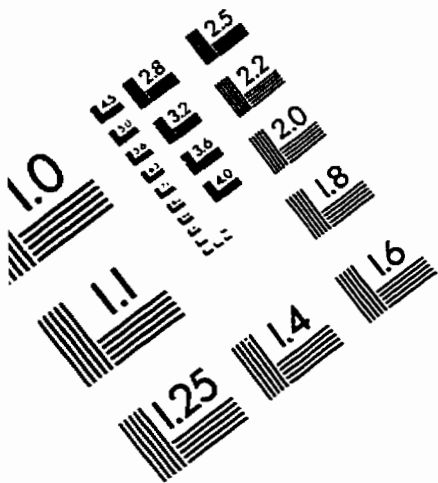
His translations between Spanish, French, and English have also appeared in reviews such as *Possibilitis*, *Ruptures*, *Ellipse*, *International Poetry Review*, and *Amaneciendo*. He has published articles on various aspects of Latin American writing in Canada in *Metonymies: Essais de littérature canadienne comparée/Essays in Comparative Canadian Literature* (Sherbrooke, 1990), edited by Larry Shouldice; *Other Solitudes: Canadian Multicultural Fiction and Interviews* (Oxford, 1990), edited by Linda Hutcheon and Marion Richmond; *The Reordering of Culture: Latin America, the Caribbean and Canada in the 'Hood* (Carleton, 1995), edited by Alvina Ruprecht *et al.*; and in the journals *Canadian Literature*, *Dires*, *Sur*, *Impressions*, and *Prensa Libre*.

He has given a number of papers on Latino-Canadian writing and served as chair of the Canadian writers' delegation to the Canada-Mexico Cultural Symposium sponsored by the Canadian Department of External Affairs and held in Mexico City in 1993. He has been a member of the editorial board of *Ruptures: The Review of the 3 Americas* since 1993, has worked as a project evaluator for the Canada Council, and has been editor of a small trilingual press, Les Éditions de la Naine Blanche/White Dwarf Editions/Las Ediciones de la Enana Blanca, since 1981.

Hugh Hazelton has published three books of poetry, two of them in English (*Sunwords* and *Crossing the Chaco*) and one in Spanish (*Ojo de papel*), and his poetry has appeared in reviews in English, French, and Spanish.



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