

CROSSING THE CHACO

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis is a collection of poems based on experiences during two years of travel in Central and South America in 1975-1977. The order of the poems reflects the chronology of events, so that themes are continually allowed to resurface in new contexts.

Much of the subject matter is specifically Latin American: the relation between pre-Columbian civilizations and the modern population; the ways of life of workers and peasants; the struggle for survival of the Indians. However, the poet is also searching for the roots of his own psyche, both in the wilderness and in society, and many of the poems reflect aspects of his personal life.

Effort has been made to develop a style that is at once concise and meditative, and that opens possibilities rather than defining them. Experimentation with concrete forms is meant to complement the content of the poems. Spanish and Portuguese words and geographical names are often used, both for directness and for phonic qualities. Most of the foreign words are cognate with English.

The collection deals with a wide field, but the individual poems are selective and experiential. The poet's goal has been to communicate certain thoughts and events as vividly as possible and perhaps to draw conclusions from them.

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North Pacific

sunlight
extends golden wings
from no horizon
over the shore

the dunes are breasts
under the south wind
soft curves cut
by metal roofs
towns neon peeling
under the southward wind
the dunes

Tula

the four gods

with help from archaeologists

stand stone-eyed

still vigilant

for Chichimec barbarians

who plundered the sacred city

and left

a thousand years ago

at the base of the temple

red ants spiral furiously

out of their own fortress

5

Guadalajara

there is a canyon
outside the city
a waterfall
foams in sewer detergent
stinks
but people splash
in thermal baths
oblivious

on the hills above
forms of cactus align with cliffs
a lizard
devours a grasshopper
thrashing it from side to side
remembering dinosaurs

at dusk
Sunday promenade
a single star
sends distant light
over the gazebo band
while arm-in-arm

4

the girls pass

whispering

flood-lit fountains

rise

into night.

ruta nacional

huge stacks of corn stalks

bounce down the road

on four legs on two

somewhere underneath

are patient eyes

waiting to put down

their burden

Tlaloc

the murals were painted

at the fall of Rome

not a tremor reached here

tlaloques frolic

in the ponds and fountains of paradise

Tlaloc the rain-god

mask of a geometric bee

carved out obsessed

above every pyramid step

a woman by the road selling guavas

pulls at her shawl

thunder

Siglo de Oro

the church is
the quietest place in a Mexican city
outside
the convent courtyard
sounds of horns, exhaust,
street vendors
within
on the walls
bizarre fish
crude, with happy snouts
swim alongside
a boatload of saints
under gilt ceilings
huge wounded Christ
enameled feet trickling blood
cracked stones of a fortress
against the terror
of a conquered world in flames

desert

they have grown up together

branches mingled

trunks touching

the somber cactus circling long thorns

around the tree

that offers wide yellow flowers

to the arid sky

Zempoala

turkeys wander through the ruins

the fronds of coconut palms

chatter in the wind

old women sell embroidery

at the steps to the altar of human sacrifice

squatting men cut the grass with hand scythes

while their sons play soccer in the courtyard

beneath sculpted players of the sacred ball game

faces in anticipation

human forms stone forms human

Santa María de Uruapán

she works with her parents
in their restaurant
black hair pulled back
face of a Zapotec madonna
reticent soft-voiced
she talks to strangers
her father glares and sends her on errands


the anonymous men
eating comida corrida
each at his own
formica table
dream of pushing the world aside
of kneeling over her thighs
caressing her innocence
opening her moist flower
entering
through warm endless petals

when they are finished
she takes their plates away


San Francisco Acatepec

I lay down on the pew
and stared up at brown cherubs
brows arched high
from an ethereal world
circling vines of ripe grapes
silver doves spreading their wings
for flight
the old keeper's shuffle
"¡Váyase de aquí o llamo a la policía!"
thought I was sleeping
I'd crossed half a continent
to see the work of his ancestors
and had forgotten him

Popocatepetl



light
falls .
as particles
of shining dust
the volcano's crater
rises to receive this power
transmits
force deep within the soil



below
a brown haze
floats over the plain
where twenty million people
are awakening

tu coraje José

he listens to the dry voice
that comes down from the sierra
rattles the thorn bushes
and makes the corn-fields whisper

less rain this year

the tender beanvines
are already withering

but if he works hard
as always
there might be just enough

it's only that
old age is dragging him back
into the soil
and the morning cold
draws water from his eyes

Olmec

the warrior's face
arrogant, fearless
looms gigantic
across 3000 years
of volcanic stone

down what maze
of arteries
flesh pressed into flesh
lost moanings
has his blood flowed
to the hands of children
that now touch his image eyes

skyakyskyskysky

herface

toucan
toucan

whitecloud

temple

above and above

Final Force Is for Finality.

to dominate closer dominated.

ritual order immortal order ritual

memory gods my the i r c t e m y t h g o d s m e m o r y

glyphsculpturePalenquesculptureglyph

designbellefeardeafearbellefdesign

bringeatdreamworkfuckworkdreameatbring

ons'weatfallstonecutfacedstonefallsweaton

earthwork upon wood on metal on wood upon work earthen

shoulder buildust people dust buildust shoulder

greenhereinsectsporetouchquethillwanderingainairunknownairainwanderinghillquilet

assault

the sleeping bus
stops in a blacked-out town
a kid on the sidewalk starts yelling
cacahuates - cacahuateseeeeeees
peanuts
shhhh from the bus driver
climbs on jumps through the aisles
cacahuates?
followed by a ragged friend
chicklets?
cacahuates-cacahuateseees / chicklets?
cacahuates-cacahuateseeeeeees / chicklets?
nobody buys anything
but someone asks
why has there been a blackout?
Cacahuates ponders
"I guess no one ever paid"

the Gulf

the milky way strides across the sky
fireflies beam fallen stars
and long waves
break echoing down the shore

luminous jellyfish wither on the sand
while palms wave their spidery arms
the fisherman is lifting
his empty nets

Merida

the roach floats in the toilet
half-squashed, it still tries to escape
antennae flailing

lying naked

crumpled sheet odor of sweat

under the ceiling fan

listening to the cantatriz

from the theatre below

singing Marie, Marie

becoming Toltec

the place is deserted
in late afternoon
when the shadow
of the pyramid
extends across the grounds
one person
steps around
the temple on the summit
and watches his form
detached yet joined
to the massiveness
waver on the grass below

Tulum

white sand
transparent
pale green waves
blue thunder on the reef
a Mayan city
walled, abandoned
carved gods diving
above the gates

ancient priest and villager
or wanderer
have all seen
the rainbow columns
standing out of the sea
tried to carry the hope
descending from the sky
as a message
through defeat

the bus ride from El Cruce

around the railings of the seats

small children's palms

the smooth brown hand of

a young woman from town

an old peasant's grizzled fingers

"I will provide"

hands of six billion people

motionless in sleep

grasping their work

caressing, holding others

reaching

on an earth of endless circling day

from the brain's flash

they can make a new reality.

hands

the transformers

Solola

coming up behind you
on the slope
I want to pass unnoticed
a trespasser on your terraced fields
a vulture's shadow, gaining on you
having usurped your land
built an omnivorous machine
on your father's bones
emerged, technologic voyeur
to watch you
struggle forward
carrying a tree-trunk
on a tump-line across your forehead
as I step by
you turn and
wish me good afternoon

la fantasía encarnada

miracle
to meet a living fantasy
no don't speak
to whisper in your ears
tender fruits
I don't care if your father owns supermercados
to nibble on fragrant pastures
beneath your hair
shh, not now
about your hour and a half at secretarial school in the mornings
or how you spend the rest of the afternoon watching TV
to feel your apple breasts
nipples poised
or that all Hondureños are stupid
and that you prefer gringos
your smooth skin rolling against me
I say you're beautiful and before your answering kiss you murmur
"que bandito"
to drown
thoughts of survival
in black, irises

un volcán de Centroamérica

flocks of green parrots
circle squawking to their roosts
cattle graze soft muzzles
on the tall grass along the edge

of the chasm's infernal colours
ash encrusted on baked cliffs
sulphurous
ooze
into the blackened crater
where red
lava spurts
ripped-open heart

escuadrón de la muerte

every year

10,000 people

who think, who struggle, who speak out

are tortured

assassinated

disappear

in the mountains

guerrillas still fight against

generations of airplanes and American advisors

the General

inaugurates a new plantation

with armed guards

the peasants

paid in threats and malnutrition

are sharpening their machetes

for the day

of their wrath

solamente

a name on the map

nothing else

the door closing on the street

nothing else

a range of mountains from the window

nothing else

his song heard once in a crowded bus

nothing else

her face smiling

altitude

the line of volcanoes
thrusts
from dense cloud
over rivers.
that pour
their silt
into the sea

earth
I will not fear death
to disintegrate
into the water and humus
of your flesh

Moche

fog devours the hills
and tiny plants grow on its breath
enormous waves break
from the ocean sky
even grey lines

desert mountains are burnt
almost sterile
but in the delta
banana trees, sugar cane, corn
grow green flesh
veined by irrigation

man
has made dust fertile

paseo

white herons motionless in a rice field

wet leaves of banana trees

low green cloud

two people

ride by on a grey donkey

a child, with thin arms.

and an old woman whose eyes

passing

do not turn away .

Stepfather

I do not know
where your soul has gone
if there is a soul
you have already
discovered that future

entering for art, not faith
silent faces in votive light
I left a candle
burning for you,
in Quito

Cañon de Huaylas

20

cold rain on people still sheltering
under grass mats
three years ago an earthquake
destroyed their valley
potato fields are climbing back
up to the snow-line
and old men, bent double under huge bundles
wade through the market mud
dogs attack without barking
and kids in the hills run toward me yelling
gringo, gringo give me some money

I came to see your ancient - not present - ruins
your snowy peaks and costumed women
I have nothing to give
and your faces are locked doors
that send me away

letter from Caraz

the mountain rises

over the cleft

holds green slopes

in brush-covered arms

stone fists grasp

the river's shore

I am searching

for our valley

El Imperio de los Chimu

Chanchan

they've dug up only one of your ten citadels
it's a poor country now, with little money for history

Chanchan

and all your labyrinths were for kings and nobles
the dwelling of the common man leaves no trace

Chanchan

in the other palaces there's garbage and holes from grave-
robbers
and the last man who spoke your language is dead

Chanchan

but the desert and the sea-wind haven't changed
and the same valley has a new city
its evening streets filled with people
as yours once were

Chanchan

ancestral flowers

he studies tiny plants

that grow at the snow-line

of equatorial peaks

"perhaps the most ancient of flowering species"

pays for the trips himself

sleeps in shepherds' huts

with numb fingers

gathers the fragile leaves

and links them

to the world below



Yeo

through bitter rain

three horsemen ride

on a cold Andean plain

no herds or people in sight

the youngest leads

at a canter

face tensed against the wind

moving onward

the "shameless ones" of Carnival in Cajamarca

it's a cattletruck
of the hopeless laughing
random survivors
swaying through medieval villages
where peasants
their faces smeared with paint
sing drunken carnival songs
and children "sinvergüenzas"
spray water and throw mud

two boys sit high up over the cab
defending us with waterbuckets
the women
huddle on the floor
suckle babies
cover their bundles
the men joke
spit between the sideboards
and a minstrel
soaked with water and
trembling in the cold air
plays flute and drum

ventanillas

the mummies were stuffed
like dead fetuses
into the "little windows"
and left to overlook
their farmland
as a blessing

graves carved from graves
from limestone strata
fossil bodies
numberless tiny sea creatures
sifted to the ocean floor
layer on layer
pressed into rock

pushed upward
lifted from the sea
raised above a field
that gives rest
to the ancestors

without the man from South Dakota

the evangelist left
in the jungle morning
indians
grateful for school and medicine
shyly waved good-bye

in the afternoon
a single drum
sounded
then others
slowly joined it
till thirty drummers
pounded rhythm together
firelight splashed on
women's bodies turning
hair flailing the skin
faces
wide with laughter and
yucca beer
exploding through the veins
shout
into warm darkness

Yavarí Mirim

wilderness of dense photosynthesis
breathing foliage breathing
since the first green fiber formed
trees soar like monumental pillars
distant branches twined
with lianas
that hang motionless
into shaded light

fallen log across the ravine
a column of army ants
swarms over it
dead insects carried on a mass of red bodies
soldiers' pincers poised above

the woman
with bare breasts and lines of tattoos on her face
is taking her child to the river
as I come forward,
they run away screaming
white man and bush ghost
are the same word
in their language

the slaughter-house in Iquitos

the machete

jabs into

the pig's heart

a cry of unfinished, lost rootings

with bare feet

he nudges the hot blood

down the drain

coastal desert

wordless
you left
frightened
and ran
to the stranger's arms

your caress
touched his drowned senses
that rose like singing whales
to air and light

but the cries of your child
and the murmurings of others
reached out
and pulled you back from dreams
frightened
you left
wordless

Chileö

mid-day

short shadows fall

on the empty street

the beggar

slouched over his accordion

is asleep

southern archipelago

our star

rising again

in blue space

giver of life

source of light

kindle our minds with your fire

Última Esperanza

climbing

the glacier

covered in shadow

thinking

of your breasts

their beads of young milk

those of Tierra del Fuego

they stare
 from brown photographs
 on mission walls
 two laughing boys
 in orchestra uniforms
 a woman, serene, draped
 in a guanaco skin
 and a hunter,
 holding proud arrows

a few traces
 survive
 in the faces
 of local people
 and the last three Yahgans
 refuse to speak

fragile
 they withered at our touch

we step on their graves

without knowing

following our own circles

la oligarca de Buenos Aires

furred, dyed, perfumed, booted

painted with

inquisitive disdain

you're an objet d'art

from a private vault

Cementerio de la Recoleta

in a city of lovers

I always seem to be

even here

walking behind them

scurrying past as

their secret smiles fade

and they glance at me

a reminder of solitary doom

tu

I've searched for you

as wind for silence

across years, shores,

wasted landscapes

found and lost you

through eyes, bodies, minds

seeing you

reality or hallucination

appear and disappear

longed for you

image of changing faces

rejected your existence

mirror of false dream

and suddenly you're here

Graciela

it's life against death

woman

your skin is grace to man

and your warm anarchistic laugh is pure joy

our bloods rush together toward something

beyond thought orgasm knows

these random seconds

are ours

Buenos Aires, 1976

blocks, rectangles, garden ziggurats

steel reflection

centre

poplar boulevard apartment quiet

cobblestone tires

círculo

mud shout rotting wood labyrinth

baby shit weeds

villa miseria

midnight police breaking down the doors

while guerrillas circle firing into the empty palace

Justin

Yanqui! yells the bey .

Yanqui! Move it! God-damn you!

he cracks the whip

an inch above

the ox's ear

the grey muzzle snorts

and the cart strains uphill

San Cosme de Paraná

the face is worm-eaten now

and his hands broke off long ago

but he's the patron saint

so once a year they parade him

through the village

and debris

of the Jesuit mission

afterwards

there's a merry-go-round

and dancing

next year

a giant hydroelectric dam

is being built half a mile away

and twenty thousand workers

are coming here to live

Yaguarón

white sky

fading

ground turns black

Venus appears

a bird calls softly

dreamlike

locusts begin

amplifying electronics

tentative crickets

children's voices

and the frogs

chanting

in Gregorian basses

conversational tenors

with shrill peepers

all of them saying

here I am here I am here I am here

I'm alive

crossing the Chaco as I think of your death

thorn forests uninhabited

limitless on either side

and an empty dirt road

that runs straight to the horizon

I think of you

your voyages to the tropics

studies of obscure species and tribes

your house filled with snakes,

cockatoos, orchids

how you taught us to keep still

to watch for animals

on the river

there is so much to tell you

but now you're dead

and in other regions

I have become

an explorer

Potosí

you work

on one of seventeen levels

in the dark

suffocating heat

an oozing corner

the drill deafens you

and the dust

kills you in twenty years

place the dynamite

explosions echo

through the chambers

you, the hill

hollow

with thousands of holes, passages

since the Whites
squeezed an empire of silver
from your bones
how many dead men
inside this particular
dry mountain
after the night shift
you walk down
to the city that crouches
while overhead
the aerial cars creak by
just visible
they will be carrying ore
when you are dust

La Paz

new armchairs and a sofa
walk down the street
a human living-room
strapped to the backs
of three carriers

the narrow sidewalks are filled
with market people
the armchairs and sofa
trot along the pavement
behind them

accelerating
a car blasts its horn
they scurry aside
and wait till it's gone by

nothing changes
but the people know

Olliyantaytambo

their bones, his flesh

his bones, their flesh

how many generations

have walked down this path

hoe in hand

Runikuraqay

standing at the centre
of a spreading valley
Inca shrine
hummingbirds drink from flowers
lines of peaks curve up
from the jungle
to snow
mountains, water, air itself
suddenly collapse
molecules tearing apart
spin down funnels of time
substance wheeling back
to a single source
the last differentiated particle
returned to
chaos
reverses
explodes again
matter flying out
into new configurations
other mountains, atmospheres, structures, selves
universe beating

my heart

a nerve transmitting

world-self

world-self

world-self

the same

the same

the same

Abuelito

an old man now

he dreams their dead son

returns

wants to take him on a long walk

across the hills

he argues with his wife

she doesn't understand

cries, begging him to stay

at dawn, they set off

leaving their bodies behind

Rio Madre de Dios

a thin streamlined
light-green
grasshopper
cleans a feeler
with delicate mandibles

pale moth
brown and grey markings
design of transparent spots
stares at the light
breathing slowly

the glossy-plated
woolly beetle
drones down over the candle
in long passing banks
and puts it out

Serra do Roncador

I am coming to you

down from the mountains
mist rising in myriad
pillars from the jungle

I am coming to you

the bridge is washed out
we all get down from the truck
and rebuild it with loose rock

I am coming to you

through tall, cooling palms
and giant ferns
smelling fresh with rain

I am coming to you

the trucker's helper is chanting to him
"don't go to sleep, don't go to sleep"

I am coming to you

waiting in a river port
playing poker with the hotel keeper and his cronies

I am coming to you

on a boat's tin roof
the smokestack deafening
lying staring up at the Amazon sky
next to the carcass of a wild hog
drying in the sun

I am coming to you

five days hitching and on mud-covered buses
watching them chop down the forest
daydreaming, dozing off

I am coming to you

with an aging face and hands of failure
filled with plans and impossible desires
and a battered, resurgent faith

I am coming to you

because you love
and demand justice and love for others
because you spend hours wading in tidal pools
watching the forms of life
because making love we cease to exist
because you exist

I am coming to you

Atlântico do Sul

we stand in the night

my arms around your waist

lips against your hair

and watch

long, white, even waves

break out of nothing

São Paulo

peasants from the country-side

they also have just arrived

under sky-scrappers

and sleep on cardboard in the street

the difference between us

is on the printed paper

in our pockets

sons of the Cangaceiros

the highway

is a black river

that cuts

across their lives

without touching

they stare from mud shacks

crouching at the roadside

of vast estates

cars, express buses

huge chromed transports

pass laden with

bread, meat, fruit

that they'll never taste

for another nation

within their country

boys hold up small pet monkeys

for sale

as drivers go by

they scream and wave their arms

wanting to throw their monkeys

splattering across the windshields

Sertão ou Selva

dawn

filters through

the boards of the truck

your face

turned toward me

in a slat of faint light

sleeping

I don't know where we are

Río Iriri

cattle wade home

through the river's twilight waters

the jungle exhales

oxygen through green pores

heat lightning silent

on the night horizon

ilhas flutuantes

islands of grass and lotuses

float turning down the silver river

their roots trail in the sweeping flow


or rest quietly in backwater swamps

till the current finds them

lightly spins them out

and brings them to the sea

salt death



Trans-Amazonica.

BR-174

writhing vibrant lime green line

snake

trapped by the banks
of the road

people stopped

surrounded it

hurled rocks

ran their tires over it

squashed its head with a crowbar

and watched a graceful agony

on a dirt highway through cut-open forest

long eroded wound of red soil

Boa Vista

new country

long-grassed rolling savanna

blue-forested distant mountains

fences of fresh steel

and herds of fat zebu hybrids

people from every continent

come to buy land

hitch-hiking

at the side of a mud track

a jungle indian turned peon

his adolescent wife

carries a withered baby

who stares, from a scab-covered face

with old eyes

dying

Kaieteur and beyond

we inch forward on our bellies

peer over the cliff

and watch

through lush green

the brown water

flow sluggishly

then

fall

exploding

disintegrate

into mist

suspended

condense

form itself again and

burst over far rapids

into the unknown