CROSSING THE CHACO

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ABSTRACT
CROSSING THE CHACO
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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
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
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
h{}uge 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
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 kneading 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
"¡Ay, no! 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
Popocatépetl

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
Ulmeo

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
assault

the sleeping bus
stops in a blacked-out town
a kid on the sidewalk starts yelling
cacahuates — cacahuatesee
peanuts
shhh from the bus driver
climbs on jumps through the aisles
cacahuates?
followed by a ragged friend
chicklets?
cacahuates — cacahuatesee / chicklets?
cacahuates — cacahuatesee / 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 spiderly arms
the fisherman is lifting
his empty nets
Mérida

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
cressing, 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
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
gattle graze soft muzzles
on the tall grass along the edge

of the chasm's infernal colours
ash encrusted on baked cliffs
sulphurous
soze
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

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 Chimú

Chanchán

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

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

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

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
Chanchán
ancestral flowers

he studied tiny plants
that grew 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
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
Yavari 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
Chile

mid-day

short shadows fall

on the empty street

the beggar

slouched over his accordion

is asleep
southern archipelago

eur star
rising again
in blue space

giver of life

source of light

kindle our minds with your fire
Ultima 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
tú

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
Justín

Yanquili yells the bey.

Yanquili 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 pepers

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
off the river

there is so much to tell you
but now you're dead
and in other regions
I have become
an explorer
Potosi

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
Olyantaytambo
	heir bones, his flesh

his bones, their flesh

how many generations

have walked down this path

hoe in hand
Runkuraqay

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
ly ing 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
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-scrapers

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.

ER-174

writhing vibrant lime green line

d. 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