

Apocalypse

1

Miniature Christs:
bloodied armpits,
knee caps hacked out,
cuts to sternums and legs.

Thorns missing,
spike marks perforate shaved crowns,
skulls and serpents
at the feet of crosses or totem poles.

2

In a Cordovan shopping mall
a child is slapped across the face by his father.
No one had a peso to spare for the incense
he'd tried to sell.

3

War museums: bayonets,
cannons with shells and blades,
sheaths with curved steel-tips
and pistols with gold-tipped bullets.

One can also study a country through its art galleries.
Eva Peron with a tiny naked Lenin on her knees,

spanking *el niño marxista-leninista*,*
or an obelisk of the dame in a large intersection,
breasts pointing in each direction,
no one to feed.

In another gallery visitors will be told
to leave all hope behind:
videos of malnourished tear-filled children
starving on streets in war zones.

A young couple doesn't flinch
at an oil painting of other infernos:
religious and lay people
wading through rivers of blood.

The couple tongue-kiss, their children
darting past a canvas of Dante
wearing a papier-mâché hood,
shrouded in red.

Nearby a picture frame over a white wall.

4

Some halls have the silence of cathedrals,
but without the marble echoes of others approaching.

* The little Marxist Leninist.

If one abandons the gallery,
beyond streets with four lines of traffic
heading towards outer barrios,
a white horse gallops alone,
its upper front legs covered in dried blood.

A barbed wire fence,
clean air and wild dogs.
The study of art ends here.

Farewell Cordoba

broken footpaths perfect for spiked heels,
your malls stock all manner of goods,
except coins for beggars at church gates.

Cordoba, romantic figment of the pursuit of happiness.
Divine canvas for the muses who believe that wisdom
is elegant and demands virtuous refinement,
who'd wish that classical language
be a part of the marketplace
(an ATM withdrawal from every gringo handshake)
in all walks and clashes of drums,
whose jugglers twirl fires among street dancers,
their symmetry eulogised for these cobbled streets,
kegs and vats of my last night on your earth.

Cordoba, farewell.

Your tiled church domes and dreams of new designs,
Moorish motifs built in the halo of the 1600s,
spires making refuges of my words;
though I remain suspended within metaphors,
the burning of frankincense in your churches
is a mist evaporating over your altars,
Jerusalem's evocation in overcrowded naves.

Patient

1

Went to the river but it had no water
– mud patches, hollow breezes and willows,
a misfit thicket by a misfit life source
good for four-wheel drive tracks.

In abandonment, extensions to ridges
where cattle forage tufts of grass,
the dust of passing vehicles filling lungs.

2

Some hands seem far older than they are,
callused, wracked with sprains, sculpting,
prying life from stone, furrowed tree trunks.

To lie on earth, skin on rock,
shadows of ossified upper reaches,
my eighty-five years versus those of these hillsides.

To await nightfall in the mind's refuge.

3

Draw the curtains. Keep me warm.
The river's twilight stalks.

Its handiwork in mine –

Ebbing.

Hotel abode

Some places reflect the archetype
of a great homecoming.

Faint winds through willows
whose clear skies and light
mark the contemplation
of an earlier world,
a childhood of Kodachrome.

Years could melt away
in these rooms, furnishings,
aged, yet of their time,
belonging to a future
yet to arrive.

A key that twists in locks,
the allure of croissants
and tea with warm milk.

Some places deserve to be photographed,
if only in mind.

No summer or winter can pass.

At night a soft breeze
rustles curtains and shutters.

And dreams follow
one after the other.

Mina Clavero

A sea of granite,
torrents a petrified cauldron.
Ferrous oxides and sulphurous colours,
white stone that could pass for frost.

Beyond canyons,
exile in clouds and days of dust.
To scale an impending fissure,
seek out rain.
To have the years of these valleys,
a glint of moon rising above thickets of elms.

Nimbus. Rock faces breached by the river,
a gorge of sweat prey to heat and drought.
Burning soles.
Earth whose colours stain the quartz,
silicates or oxides of these cliffs.

Crumbled granite and silt –
aridity, the opposite of what it seems.

Italy, Argentina

1

Bologna, mid-autumn with its terminal sadness,
red vines and weeping skies,
fogs that render emotions wistful,
medieval buildings stained by orange light as it fades.

In lengthening days and enduring light,
the green a collage of imported trees,
at times Mendoza seems a Europe with greater space,
these spring evenings no match for brooding skies
as chestnuts fall, leaves a soggy carpet.

2

In a restaurant a passer-by recalls
Italian spoken in the home long ago,
a grandfather and husband born in Turin,
and cousin, a shoemaker with a flair for making
butterfly-shaped brooches of pearls and silver,
belt buckles and handbags,
shoes of gold-patented leather.

In mixed Italian and Spanish, she'd defined
Puente del Inca as the reason for God's existence,
thanking me for the chance to speak her lost tongue.
She, a native of Mendoza, had never been
to the land of her ancestors.

3

The greatest signatures are the elderly
– the tanned skin and white hair
of one face marked by furrows and a thinning hairline,
his Mediterranean gaze, snow white shirt
and trousers immaculately worn and pressed,
the son of an immigrant who lives in Mendoza
among his own people.

4

The Ligurian anarchist who'd rather
live here because driving a truck 15 hours a day
six days a week means having to find a country
cheap enough to live for months on end.

5

The storekeeper who jots his surname, Bianchi.
Italy is doing badly,
the post-War boom unheard of.

Within two days the son of a Brazilian
states his father is Italian,
and the waitress who serves me buckwheat pasta
has a father from Calabria.

Northern and southern dialects
transformed to Castilian:
tricolours, surnames, nostalgia.

6

Diego, Sicilian background, the professor's
400-peso-a-month salary short of the 1000 needed.
As a tourist guide he quantifies
rainfall in desert areas outside Mendoza,
and points to rock formations
of imagined elephants and dishes of strawberries,
balancing his leather belt on a stick
so that in the dark it resembles a long black snake.
Never have I spoken so much
in a language I know so little.
If Diego could see his grandfather's town,
catch a train from Palermo to Catania,
sit in a waiting room
and hear his grandfather's dialect
– hand gestures, facial expressions,
those passed down.

Mendozan tryst

Bus terminal.

She places a cup of yerba maté in his hands.

They're almost arm in arm,

until he takes her bags,

allows her to check departure times.

On her return it's his years greater than hers,

his crinkled brown trousers pressed to her dress

as their makeshift kitchen is packed away,

his shoes in step with her platforms,

her height still lower than his,

his dishevelled hair and leanness,

her obesity.

As they struggle with their luggage,

the cautious glances, the silence.