

# Una Vida de Piedra y de Palabra



poems by Charles D. Tarlton



# **Una Vida de Piedra y de Palabra**

**Improvisations on Pablo Neruda's *Macchu Picchu***

**Number 23 in the 2River Chapbook Series**

**poems by Charles D. Tarlton**

## ***Una Vida de Piedra y de Palabra***

### **About the Author**

Charles D. Tarlton is a retired professor of political theory now residing in Oakland, California. After more than forty years writing and teaching, he has returned to his love of poetry. He is the author of *Carmody's Notes*, a reflection on Hobbes's *Leviathan*, to appear as an E-ratio chapbook.

### **About the Artist**

Ann S. Knickerbocker, the wife of the author, is a painter and printer and a graduate of both Skidmore College and Syracuse University. Her work, for the most part abstract and expressive, has concentrated on trying to capture the ideal viewer's elusive and shifting experience of landscape.

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## ***Una Vida de Piedra y de Palabra***

## I: In the Dialectic of Over and Under

1

surrounding the air,  
beating  
the surrounding air;

wind blowing  
through a loose stocking  
in the streets,  
lifting yellow  
the sky over me,  
coming and going.

dry leaves,

gold and red, sienna  
like old Mexican money  
crinkling to the touch,  
exhausted donkey ears  
resembling a lover's  
hard fist  
in a glove of kisses.

they pitch us  
at the lengthening moon.

2

sparkling tiara days,  
but nights spent in the rough,  
our bones dissolved in vitriol,  
abraded quietly to rust:

long sad nights  
and all the flowers  
to the last dead seed  
from the anthers to the stigma  
ground down,  
fatherless  
womb to womb.

## II: Truth in the Larger Sense

1

flower after flower  
cut

(old flowers  
camellias,  
hibiscus,  
orchids,  
wisteria)

back to their insipid roots;

ageless rocks hoard  
their diamond-and-silicon  
seeds.

Someone crushed  
the few bright petals  
we had picked (laboring,  
in the ocean's turbulence,  
to pound in the iron,  
drilled clear through).

2

then, with smoke heavy  
on our clothing,  
and our wits disheveled,  
siliceous and disordered,  
our tears cold ice  
floes (and of the sea  
a Japanese print  
postponed crescendo)  
in the slow throes  
of death's protocols,  
platitudinous  
shrouds hanging  
from a bit of barbwire.



### III: "Lives in the Balance"

1

what if the memory of all  
our labored actions  
had gone to seed,  
old corn stored too long?

what if all we did had been forgotten,  
nothing remembered  
across the long afternoons  
and into the night?

2

we were all of us dying  
every day, anyway,  
a little more each day,  
from dust to dust,  
each small mortification  
coming in on the thick wings  
of coffin worms,  
                    piling up,  
smothering our lamps;

3

the dust of the streets  
                    transfixing each  
mid-trajectory,  
on an interrupted sequence.  
holed up in dark rooms,  
eating small meals  
cut with dull knives  
from the common rusk;  
lonely shepherds and guardians,  
plowmen and street rats,  
disabled ones, dreading

these deaths, trembling  
choking down, one each,  
each day, his own black cup.

#### IV: On Death, and Dying's Threshold

1

I was drawn  
to death's seductive luminescence,  
his sweet kiss:  
    and the tang of salt.

when a breaker topples the swimmer  
you can smell

    and taste shipwrecks  
    under the surf  
    glimpse cities  
    under the sea  
    a little out of focus  
    like toy castles  
    in a fish tank  
    whole snow cities

chiseled by the winds.

2

I crawled the cutting edge  
along narrowest ledges  
of high rock;  
    fields and stone  
formations spreading out  
below me, the sky empty  
above,  
    a dizzy, spiraling road down:

across ghost oceans  
waves of waves ride up and crash.  
death astride  
his armored *Destrier* defies  
an infinite meteor shower.

3

no one comes to rummage  
through our pockets now  
there are no  
pockets in our red *pallia*;

dawn's blanket  
an encircling silence,  
an obliterated legacy of tears.

## V: "Give Me Men to Match my Mountains"

1

not you,  
to the end unsmiling,  
unable to fly;  
no, it wasn't you  
the flophouse prince  
brought mountains  
of uncooked flesh  
wrapped in folds  
of his own loose skin:

but it was  
something, all right —  
sad fake flowers,  
crudely textured  
cast off rope,  
shriveled, unwanted  
dugs, their anger spewed  
in everyone's face,  
what strained to be

2

reborn, escaping

shards of *quietus*,  
shattering  
calm, shredding  
landscape, a bone  
rattling a bell;

echoes that fade away.

holding up discarded  
soaked, stained bandages,  
I sank my hands  
to their wrists  
in that sadness,  
blocking death's access,  
finding little  
in the empty wound  
    a spreading  
    of cold fingers  
probing shadows,  
scarecrow phantoms,  
fluttering tatters.

## VI: Going-to-the-Sun

1

at a reluctant moment,  
I clung in the cut,  
to the worn footholds  
chipped from the stone  
rather than climbing up

— through thick vines  
twisted roots, *lianas* —

all the way up;

blindly lost now  
utterly dazed  
before soaring  
obdurate architecture.

*Macchu Picchu*,  
enormity of rocks,  
rising on itself, at last:

fugitive earth  
uncovered lairs  
terrains, abodes  
empurpled nests  
curled beneath  
their windings of sky  
coat of mountain mists  
wet vectors

converging in you.

2

a matrix of placenta  
and the thunderbolt,

praying men, who sway  
deeply in caves,

hidden from the wind's  
searching talons,

mothering stones,  
spots of condor spume

splashed dawn  
on reefs of human bones

dug with flat shovels  
buried in sand's oblivion.

this was purple, here,  
out of place; over there

broad kernels of maize  
rising up. And they rose up

blowing  
in virginal flurries,

misspent storms  
of red snowflakes.

## VII: “. . . but Eternity Remains”

1

you were certainly dead,  
but astonishment  
remained  
    in the shadows  
    the hollows  
under your eyes  
your mouth ajar  
as if to wonder  
if the likes of you  
could generate  
such disproportionate dying:

    one as rock-drilled  
    in red-columned autumn;  
    as hierarchical  
    as bridges flow;  
    collapsing head to foot  
    as no rain today!

no washing away  
unrealized potential  
pedestal of clay,  
along with handfuls  
of filed-down blades  
below an isolate  
giant Eucalyptus  
first swallowed  
in a fog bank  
then embarrassed  
    by the wind.

2

a god lifted his hand,  
a cue, and let it  
fall suddenly  
from these heights  
beyond Time.

Still



you could not remain  
unscratched,  
    those spidery hands,  
    rotted cordage,  
    “the tangled webs we weave”

where you had  
always practiced.  
Your deceptions  
dropped away, a stray;

just a bad habit,  
in depleted phrasings  
undisguised and held under  
brightest lights.

3

but, for an eternity  
of stone and word  
the city, grasped

by everyone;  
the living,  
the dead,  
the silenced,

raised up,  
a chalice held up  
between rows of death,  
a necropolis, a wall  
ducking under a hail  
of stone petals.

undying Andean rose  
you wedded the reef,  
these icy outposts.

## VIII: Convergence of Time and Distance

1

clamber up here,  
my American lover, lean  
over and kiss  
the speechless stones.  
the molten silver  
Urubamba  
shakes flowers and trees  
in the moment of coitus,  
drinking what spills.

unburdened of grapes,  
denuded vines rise  
on the wind, dragging  
their stiffened winter  
silent coronals  
out and over

the yawning gorge.

Come! Come!

tiny organisms under rocks  
wings against the rocks  
simultaneous ice, like glass  
rocks the crashing air  
divisive war of sparkles  
green shadows of rocks,  
savage waters  
under the dissolving snow.

Love! Love!

until night

in the mute Andes  
breaks off, light  
flying off the stones  
where the child of the snow  
on red knees strikes sparks  
with flint under the snow.

2

O, Wilkamayu  
narrow and deep  
slash of river, echo  
the lines of pounding storms  
geysers of white froth  
the injured snow broken  
off.

The rising tempest  
singing, ripping the sky.  
what language can we hear,  
what ancient rumbling  
phonations reach the ear  
so recently uprooted  
from these Andean mists?

# # #

what does your hounded  
your castaway brilliance  
recount these days?  
your occult and rebellious  
thunderbolts?  
did they once tell  
your whole story  
in words?

## IX: Tantum Ergo

1

eagle on a star  
    vineyards laughing  
fortress nowhere  
    an eyeless talwar  
diamond-studded fascia  
    some pompous bread  
tumbling staircase  
    monstrous eyelids  
three-sided jumper  
    rock-hard sperm cells  
sculpted in streetlights  
    igneous baguettes  
crumbling to serpents  
    pebbled rosebuds  
on a ghostly shipwreck  
    fractured boulders  
moon pony rides  
    on stone beams  
seasonal squadrons  
    granite steaming  
ultimate Euclidean line  
    across rock pages  
plowing ice from antipodes

# # #

deep roots into the mountains  
    on the sea's roof.

2

wrought pinnacles  
of forlorn eagles

fastening the sky;  
buzzing on high

flat pattern of dried blood  
on a hand-fashioned star

endless vacuity of salt  
a citrine moon

coiled snake of the mountains  
contemplating seed

mute basilica  
for a perfect *patria*

an ocean of virgins before  
the nave of towering oak

# # #

eruption of clasped hands  
enshadowing waterfalls

molten swells clocked  
on a future weather vane.

## **X: Blood of my Blood**

1

under mountains  
of stone there is little  
sign of the people;  
in the air around  
there is even less,  
their dust has all blown away  
in the passage of centuries.

unfinished people,  
you Inca ghosts  
abandoning the cutting bridle  
to the famished eagles,  
scavenging empty streets,  
turning over dead leaves  
beating their lament.

hand to mouth  
an impoverished life now,  
but when they swallowed  
the light fragment  
by fragment, promised rain  
soaking  
expectant fields  
on proud flags —  
could they eat  
the black globules  
as they pooled  
and dropped off?

Starving  
while sea rocks grew  
in them,

salvation  
with axe and saw,  
scavenging

the dead blossoms  
leading to the high rocks?

2

I ask you,  
if salt swept from snowy  
highways,  
your brooms wet  
leaning with hunger,  
did you carve footholds  
against these tower walls,  
fashion

Corinthian,  
rococo,  
Romanesque,  
ancient ashlar

garden walls defining  
where some Inca Tarquin  
beating flowers with a stick  
signaled the destruction  
of his dazed enemies?  
can we search the air,  
beat out the empty wombs  
searching for the dead?  
never turning up  
even a pock-marked bone  
from the living founders?

3

*Macchu Picchu*, did you  
heap stone upon stone  
over a foundation of imagination,  
use tears to buttress  
your coal slag,  
throw blood  
into the gold smelter?

dig up the potter's field  
where you dumped the naked  
bodies of slaves.

never knowing  
the difference between  
their fitful sleep  
and more restful death.  
do the dead sputter and snore?  
do they drool, mouths  
hanging open  
slumped against  
any handy wall?

which wall? that wall!  
where the weight  
of all the stone

walls of stone  
teeth in the stone  
gnawed stairways  
floors of flattened stone

hovered above them  
under a cold hard moon  
crushed by sleep.



## **XI: Only the Rational is Real**

1

through a profuse splendor  
astride hard night,  
I sank my naked hands  
into the heart  
of an ancient oblivion;  
I let it beat,  
                    let it echo in me,  
the caged wings  
of a thousand years.

forget what was spoken  
today; no joy wider  
than the sea. I reach  
across oceans and islets  
diving the black depths  
so I can come up,  
conches and abalone  
bursting,  
into the light.

I bear holy waters  
and deep, deep truths.

forget stone expanses,

                    regal insignia,  
                    invisible yardsticks,  
                    the perforated rocks

climb upon the upright  
isosceles,  
the supine scalene,  
ride down the razor  
straight edge,  
the penitent and bloody  
hypotenuse.

2

Arched in red  
steel, the stone wings  
of the condor pound  
in flight upon  
my feverish temples  
my white-hot forehead,  
a furious feathered broom  
sweeping coal dust  
where I am climbing up.  
I cannot see the  
bird

I cannot avoid  
the sawing of its claws.

3

all around are  
once human slaves, exhausted  
in the fields  
before unfinished labor.

One dead,  
thousands moldering,  
another dying;

women in widow's weeds  
by the thousands  
black against the black  
night, the black rain.

we all pass through  
carved stone arches,  
these names inscribed:

the stone-breaker — the creator's son  
the cold-eater — son of the green star  
the shoeless one — grandson of the turquoise;

born again with me, my brothers!

## XII: Ecce Homo

1

we are born together,  
born brothers;  
reach out to me,  
your hands  
from sorrow's seed-lot.

none risen from the stone  
none risen from lost hours  
none risen croaking like rocks  
none risen blind, their own fingers  
for eye sockets

eye to eye with me  
on flat desert stones —

the farmhand, the weaver:  
the mute herdsman:  
tamer of the overseer llama:  
thatcher of the Watchman's hut:  
precarious brick-layer:  
aqueduct of mountain tears:  
worn-fingered jeweler:  
farmer shaking out seeds:  
centrifugal potter

scattering his clay:

2

we are here,  
we have climbed up  
to redeem your sorrows,  
to plant new life.

lead me to the bloody  
furrow, show me where  
you were beaten  
because the earth  
would not give up

its diamonds, elaborate  
tiles, or its corn.

scratch the spot  
where you crawled,  
tear a splinter from your cross,  
make a spark  
to light the old lamps,  
pull out  
the flinders of bullwhip  
festering under your skin,  
the axe-blade dulled  
with dried blood.

teach me your dead  
utterances, to speak  
through your dried lips.  
bring all the lips  
together, a chorus  
in my hear, hold my ear  
to the stones.  
tell it all to me,  
each and every chain  
each welded link.

be thorough, painstaking  
when you sharpen knives  
under your pillows  
stab me here,  
and here, and here!

make a river of blinding light  
wild cats hiding  
beneath the surface  
and leave me to wail,  
sob for all time,

through unseeing eons,  
centuries in the  
numbers of the stars.

give me silence,  
draw me water,  
make me hope.

give me warfare,  
sharp steel,  
make volcanoes.

glue yourselves  
to me  
top to bottom

enter my blood,  
come in my veins,  
in my mouth.

use my words,  
use my stones,  
use my blood.

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### **About 2River**

Since 1996, 2River has been a site of poetry and art, quarterly publishing *The 2River View* and occasionally publishing individual authors in the 2River Chapbook Series.

Richard Long, Editor

[www.2River.org](http://www.2River.org)

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