

Una Vida de Piedra y de Palabra



poems by Charles D. Tarlton

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Improvisations on Pablo Neruda's *Macchu Picchu*

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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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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

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Richard Long, Editor

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