



# *In Chontales*

*Selected New Poems & Sonnets*

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1980

## NATURAL, AS WASTE. . . .

In high summer  
plants cluster  
together. The growth  
so many different flowers  
makes on soil  
never plowed con-  
fuses yellows with pinks.  
Green still predominates  
of course. Everywhere  
there's a flower there  
also is much green  
surrounding, or  
encircling it, or  
intersticed between  
it and another. Brocade  
we call a cloth  
so textured. this  
is natural, as waste;  
a world is breathing  
upward through this  
earth. High summer  
growth headies us  
with perfumes: grass  
mashed beneath a foot,  
the high rancid  
sweet smell of sap

## WAKING HERE

*(Georgia)*

When even the birds are still dreaming  
I wake up to a dense wet island darkness.  
The bugs are still snoring as I walk outside  
into hot mist, and the shrimp boats in the channel  
half a mile off have all dimmed their lights  
to doze another hour. Only me and the deer  
walk the lawn to feed ourselves on memories:  
how she lay beside me as in a trance of tenderness,  
and the words we did not need to say  
when we held each other closely in goodbye.  
This island comes unrooted in such mists.  
Hangings of oak are ropes of masted ships.  
We are sailing into the morning pinkness  
so smoothly I am jolted by deer flies  
only when the rising fog shows me  
we have approached another island  
impossibly bright blue and green  
that was there all the time in the beyond  
night mist.

## THE AWAKING

*for Linda Waugh*

This morning just at dawn  
beautiful grayish blue  
like certain dry colors  
we blow onto canvas  
a little light flashed  
across the fat marshlands  
beyond the flat channel.  
Nothing anywhere seemed harsh  
though in the tallest shore-  
line palmettos a bird squawked  
as if upon these calves  
chewing their way across the lawn.  
I did not feel reproached  
that you were sleeping on  
without me because you would be  
with me all of another day. But  
if I wished to see you now  
that would be because I have felt  
happy to be so touched  
even to my isolation and  
in such a way the animal  
becomes the human

the human  
the animal

## CONTEXTUALIZATION

*for John Ashberry*

Sometimes in dreaming we are given  
greater gifts such as fairies know exist  
for others, as if we might still find  
such treasures in our hands when  
the eye, after waking, credulous,  
blinks down at its own impulses,  
and fingers no longer tremble  
at being so bold to keep what they have  
from others. Then some may want to shout  
***we are here***, as if it were important  
pleasure had not been avoided again;  
pleasure has not been avoided again:  
the parched lust to drink water,  
shade hovers always underfoot,  
the less the more it doesn't always so,  
but spot our brows with heavy leafy blows  
and we are in that shadow's eye again  
when the sun holds the lawn at dawn  
under orange and purple strips of light  
and there is so much silence in us then,  
if looking told a thing it would  
endure one very beautiful warm sob.

**SONNET 6 + 5/8s**

Every day  
the world I love gets uglier; now  
what? I breathe. Poisons.

The price paid  
for caring this meagerness. Harsh  
lights make the flesh whiten.

The naked meaning  
our eyes die first.

From such dis-  
turbances possibly what pleasure?  
For what joy shaking these trees  
in the night?

Cold disaffects  
us as water brought to surface frozen.

What can one say to the lost  
people of this planet, going among  
their slumbering ghosts of trees  
between seascapes, watching nights,  
watching the nevertheless – the hungry  
or desperate? Tragically they know  
they are tragedies. Instruct them  
in their dooms? But they are ours.

**SONNET 7**

*for Emily*

Another painting  
himself in pieces  
notices the paint  
touching his finger  
was about to be  
this eyelid, or nose.  
The colors can't mix  
always. Mud where there  
might have been softish  
browns. The blues make more  
blues. Yellows whiten  
more than you would think  
with a dab. I learned all  
this some time ago love.

**8 JANUARY, 1980**

*for Alice*

At the edge of the body  
the stars sometimes come out,  
and if it's nighttime we  
begin to glow a little.

So much tender naked  
glitter everywhere  
entrances the still  
air, as we embrace  
here in this dark room  
on this quiet bed  
with our edges only.

You are with me sometimes  
before I am aware I  
am even there, at the edge  
of my body, at the edge

**SONNET 9**

*for Etain*

Our acts define us  
actors only, not as  
people. Then we must  
know our thoughts are  
contradictory  
acts of imagination.  
So a man hunts for  
deer but brings along  
his fly rod. Who told  
you he was going  
to be a fisherman?  
He says he hunts deer.  
We say this is odd  
even knowing better.

1980

**SONNET 23**

*for Spyker*

My birthday. I am here. Where am I  
exactly? I shall have to call a friend  
and what can he tell me? It is not his  
birthday. It's his friend's birthday, at best,  
perhaps less: Some anger, it being so while  
he was otherwise occupied. God it hurts  
for his dissatisfactions with me are  
almost implacable at times. Loving you  
I see how I can do it differently  
but what is only tentative at best  
when I have known you so little bothers me:  
My celebrations may be mindless, touching  
nothing much more than myself but I am wise  
to think of myself with you among these.

*Fort Edward, N.Y.*

*April 23, 1976*

**15 LINE SONNET**

*(Toward a Grammar of Nuances)  
for Nick Delbanco*

So the delight of our  
life is in the Exper-  
ience of language any-  
way we choose to make it  
work for us: You, tell us  
our Dreams, make luminous  
our flesh like the moth-  
er and child in La Tour,  
flame for us now in the  
light of just one candle,  
if you can. But do we  
need it? Tell us why we  
use words to make the future  
out of some bright tunes we  
hear small stops in our minds.

**SONNET 24**

*for Barbara*

I guess when you leave for a little while  
you like to shut some doors on people:  
I do miss you. Don't know where you are. Where  
am I, or when we'll be seeing each other  
again. You say maybe you don't like  
doors open or shut? Just the way things are?  
How is that love? My door is neither  
open nor shut. Just half ajar, I'm in  
the hallway on the dark nubby wool  
runner again. What's for breakfast?  
What's for lunch? Beyond the transom is that  
supper? How much volume on the record  
player? Neighbor, what time is she now?

## ENJAMBMENT ON NATURALISM

(for Henry Chapin)

Certain frogs are said to jump  
beyond our wildest ex-  
pectations Those with the bags  
beneath their eyes are buck-  
shot easily, or stepped on. Call them  
these *froggy froggy dewz*, delight  
in their unexpected *dressage*; leap-  
ing like synonyms they are  
abounding as the insects of the  
summer fields, or warm au-  
tumnal afternoons, when the frogs  
are sticking to paradise by their tongues –  
hanging toward their feet under heaven's  
forever.

## **GAINSAID**

*to L.S. Asekoff*

It isn't true we souls  
gather nothing here  
but what we have al-  
ready. Silence choirs  
us as we work to  
more knowledge of what  
we can be together. Some-  
times I see you as stories you've told me  
and never have been  
allowed to finish. Some-  
times, impatient, touch-  
ing myself I know you  
are kind and so near.  
Could this silence be  
when you are with others  
I am all the more  
with you? Means, plain-  
ly, as observing you,  
I will then see your  
joy upon returning.

## SONNET 25

As certain as I am of your love  
I am sometimes distant from it, too,  
like Balboa crossing one sea came  
upon an isthmus that was but the shore  
line for departing on another even broader  
ocean. Then the land he left behind  
drew ever nearer as he went further  
from it, and there were times, in the maelstrom,  
when strange tidings were predicted, or  
sea monsters, he may have been most fearful  
the winds simply would cease, and he would be  
adrift on all that calm water around him.  
You are true North, but also East, West, South,  
and I spin (helpless me) in your pullarity.

## SONNET 26

I like the butcher's daughter, the pull of her  
breasts downward when she leans over me,  
and her good-natured sulks, those fat childhood  
memories her flesh gives running off  
from her sinews.

She lists over me, and covers me with  
her strong white thighs.

She kneads my flesh, as if I were so  
much veal.

Or she takes me for the lean beef  
I am.

Her smiles are as rich to me as the  
odor of roasting meat.

## IN CHONTALES, NICARAGUA

*for Caroline Forché*

The woman wakes  
before first light,  
grinds corn in her *metate*  
and stows the patty cakes  
in palm leaves to go off  
again to the marketplace.  
After five miles, or more,  
she will sell tortillas  
to the laborers from town  
moving like early morning ghosts  
to go off to their fields,  
and then she must walk home  
empty-handed again.  
All day long in a sun  
warmer than her own poor  
thin blood she stoops  
to her work: Her children  
all grow thinner, life  
is a short pain between  
oblivions. Even the barn yard  
animals are better fed than she,  
and sometimes they can rest.  
How she would like to rest, too,  
in deep shade somewhere  
beside a pool of limpid and  
cool water. Then she might dream  
herself a fine fat fowl with angel  
wings, as in the church, sprockets  
of plumage, and a corn-  
pecking strut, but now again  
she has clothing to mend,  
to wash, water to fetch:  
cooking, fixing, gathering, selling,  
the fullness of her wants  
and fears her life. . .At noon  
she'll go to the fields  
with food for her husband.  
While he eats it's her turn  
to lean heavily over his hoe. Women  
such as this have put the dust  
of so many lives into their one  
pinching gnaw of a life and yet

they remain measly, meager,  
wane, as a scar of that dust.  
At night, when she finally rests  
the lantern light still rusts  
on the shelf above her pallet,  
and when she gets up to blow it out  
this one dreams for a moment  
in the darkness Jesus himself  
in long white robes has asked her  
to *paseo* with him  
under all these scented trees  
in Chontales plaza, and then he  
will whisper in her ears  
the many dark uncouth urgings  
of the paramour. But matrimony  
intrudes, which is like one more chore  
for her husband she can't refuse,  
though sometimes there's a little pleasure;  
and then she will measure out the days  
she has left to her life  
like handfuls of dry corn,  
and maybe fall off to sleep a little  
as though she were already dead.

## CALLE EL PROGRESO, NICARAGUA

*12 September, 1978*

Right outside the door of this thick little house  
soldiers are shooting people. If I stick my head  
out there I'll be dead. In this thick little war on the streets  
the Guard patrols from a point downtown with tanks  
against shotguns; and their rockets and bombs  
rock the baby in her cradle. Up the streets some rebels  
are asleep behind barricades. Airplanes overhead  
in a perfectly neutral blue sky nose the silence  
which has dropped heavily down when the shooting stopped;  
and whether I like it or not I'm in the middle  
in the house of this small fat grocer, hating the Guard  
but loving my life too well to walk uptown right now  
and go behind the barricades. Here we are all behind the  
flimsy rebel lines of paving blocks. Yesterday, in Leon,  
on the *Calle Ruben Dario*, that long black sleeve of tar  
was severed at the elbow by some Guardsmen  
standing at a streetcorner with their guns  
pointed like public workers pushing pneumatic drills.  
In Masaya, city of weavers, tracers shuttled  
patterns of light and smoke on ether:  
The marketplace ablaze, and all the fruit  
gives off an odor of roasting flesh.

## THE BALLAD OF THE BOSS' SON

Blood being thicker than water  
that son of the boss Tachito  
spills blood like making water  
all over Nicaragua.

All across Nicaragua  
much water from the Somozas,  
and the fire of little pistols  
drowned in a flood of *Galils*.

But in the mountains men  
determining by such business  
never to be slaves  
learn how to kill, and live.

It's a family business we run,  
says Tacho to his son. I  
don't want to share with others:  
All men are not brothers.

And he gives Tachito the keys  
to the family planes and tanks  
while he will remain in charge  
of the real estate, and the banks.

But in the mountains women  
learn how to kill in silence  
and the men to care for the children  
when they are hungry, or ill;  
and the countryside's at peace  
except at night when shadows  
explode like contact bombs  
around the Guard *cuartels*.

The heart of El Jefe hurts  
and the people weep for the pain  
his dying causes them:  
The Heart of the People aches.

But the Family takes and takes.  
And the Guard continues to suck  
until water is thicker than blood  
and the mountain comes to Managua.

God of the machine gun and bomb  
bless that Household with mortal harm.  
God of the mortar's wrath,  
And of the homemade bomb:

Sandino is in Jinotepe;  
and by night in Diriamba;  
Give to everyone your peace;  
And Sandino his revenge.

## LEAVING NICARAGUA

( 9/25/78)

*for Matt Naythons*

*Peligroso*, warned the Guard,  
pointing his weapon at my heart.  
Outside the war  
a slower world began  
beyond the speed of sound  
moving above slow clouds,  
a bullet, charged  
with contradictory particles.  
So much for dying. We drank  
champagne at 30,000 feet  
with the Ambassador's wife.  
Her breasts were like amber,  
her heart was embalmed in resins, too,  
for she told me talk  
of bodies rotting on the streets  
in Esteli could make entertaining  
the right people in Washington  
this coming season difficult.  
O, she said, you must not believe  
we are all as self-absorbed and cruel  
as *they* say we are, sucking  
the moment on her amber brooch,  
and then a black olive, as she  
offered me her breasts, and her hips,  
her excellent perfume, and the musk  
of her desire, in a handful of rebel dust.  
In Washington our wheels set down  
like *Galils* firing near the cemetery  
wall at my rebel friends in Monimbo  
when I thought, by the crater lake,  
by the waters of Masaya, where I sat down,  
then did I cry as I remembered Zion. . . . .

## **RHODODENDRONS**

In the warmer  
days of late May  
the rhododendrons  
open blushing faces  
to the song of  
birds. The woodpeckers  
tap out intricate  
signals to a world  
growing thick under  
foot, and the sweet  
sounds of bobolinks  
and piping shrieks  
curlews make then  
interrupt their openings.  
All the tightly furled  
buds of these bushes  
erect strict symmetries  
while throughout the  
long days the flowering  
pinkens what was once  
dark green and purple.

## AZALEAS

Delicious Kool Aid  
colors recombient  
leave this tinny after-  
taste. Again and again  
not so much a bush  
as these bushels of  
small bright fragile brushes:  
Red, white, orange, pink,  
lavender – o delicious  
like buttercream flowers,  
or some large kid's summer  
play drink, a vast  
jumble of brightly colored  
jacks. These will last like  
this only so long as the  
weekend before branches  
turn bare black again  
under the weight of  
so much hidden greenery.

## **MID MAY**

Jagged white and pink  
full blossoms extolling  
all the squeaky clean glass  
contours of the morning.  
Amid lilac plumes, and  
dog wood peelings, the very  
green grass displays azalea  
swatches, red, pink, lavender,  
white, like shirt fronts. The eye,  
so abashed by so much spring  
beauty, wanders towards the  
heavens where greens are  
again interlaced with sway-  
ing boughs, and branches. This  
day seemed so bright it was  
brittle, at first, and now  
it softens, nuzzling summer.

## **5:35 A.M. SUMMER**

White music of the landscape.  
Birds landing in it and alighting.  
Trees, houses, cars, burgeoning forth;  
suddenly full, darker, even if  
white also, out of the white noise  
this soft foggy morning  
settles over itself like a shawl.

