



In Chontales
Selected New Poems & Sonnets

RICHARD ELMAN

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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.

