

Sky Below: Selected Works

Raúl Zurita

trans by Anna Deeny Morales

Forrest Gander

While there are excellent recent English translations of discrete books by Raúl Zurita, the Chilean poet and artist who is unarguably one of the most influential figures in contemporary Latin American literature, this new collection is the first to draw from Zurita's long body of work from 1979 to 2011. When it comes to presenting Zurita, a selected poems is a risky endeavor since many of his books are written operatically, as book length scores that depend upon every page—including drawings, photographs, and collages—to conduct the tumultuous and shifting emotional registers that characterize his work.

After all, here is a poet who riffs on Bob Dylan, repeatedly references God and Christ, “loneliness” and “song,” and offers up lines as sentimental and downright corny as this one: “let the sun leave planets that surround it / so that the universe can speak only of love.” At the same time, Zurita's phrases are often anacoluthic, his images unforgettably violent, sourced from Chile's paroxysmal twentieth century and from the whole world's archive of savagery, his lexicon given to slide into vowel explosions, and the structures of his poems closely related to their subject matter—prose poems iterative and dense as sepulchral niches and lyric poems breaking over their enjambments like wave sets. One of Zurita's poems, a drawing called “My Love of God,” invokes Christian Morgenstern's humorous “Fisches Nachtgesang/ Fish's Nightsong” even as it connects eternal life to schools of fish that swallow the hacked flesh of victims from Augusto Pinochet's reign of torture and murder.

Zurita draws from a well of talismanic words (like sky, love, stain, and cordilleras) in ways that might make North American readers think of W. S. Merwin's “deep imagery.” Like the French poet Edmond Jabès, Zurita develops major motifs concerning *the desert*, *the face*, and the *echoic voices* of dead lovers. Like CD Wright's poems, Zurita's can shift from the erotic to the perverse, from

the hilarious to the ethically implicative in any given stanza. Is he populist or avant-garde? He's both and more; the categories splendidly fail. And those "sentimental" lines about love and song, and all the Christian stuff? Zurita often recuperates such language from its proprieties. His religious references attach themselves to a psychic space and a landscape, not to the familiar Christ. And love and song become condensed polymorphs of forgiveness and grief. Zurita's beloved, the "you" addressed in his poems, clasps together—in its broad pronominal ambiguity—the disappeared, the sentient, and the land, Chile itself, whose mountains and volcanoes and seas received the corpses of many in Zurita's generation. Acknowledging this context, we begin to understand the forceful originality of a singer who rises

With hills, with cordilleras, with valleys
with the meek and mild, the living and dead
with all as is alive this promised woman of love
that can bloom glaciers and deserts

Notice in that stanza how Deeny draws woman and landscape closer together by translating—"woman of love/ *that* [not *who*] can bloom". Deeny is scrupulous about Zurita's bookkeeping words—the prepositions and coordinating conjunctions like "of" and "that" which English language translators find they can often eliminate in service of a modernist aesthetic valuing economy. For Deeny, such an aesthetic might be complicit with capitalism, a bugbear for Zurita, so she's adamant about including every syntactical link as though syntax too represents the kind of inclusive communalism essential to Zurita's vision.

I would guess that most Americans who read poetry know something about Raúl Zurita. They know that as a young man with a family in the late 1970's, he co-founded CADA, an activist performance collective in Santiago, Chile. In one now-famous event, he scarred his own face with acid, an experience referenced in his first book of poems, *Purgatory*. In 1982, he hired planes to sky-write poems over New York city. But before that happened, in Chile, in the post-coup tumult, Zurita was swept up, along with so many who were never seen again, by soldiers loyal to General Pinochet, the military dictator who, with help from our CIA, unseated and forced the death of the democratically elected President, Salvador Allende. Zurita was brutalized as a prisoner, but survived. Like Czeslaw Milosz who managed to live through World War II in

Poland, Zurita was handed by history his subject matter; it is a subject matter from which he's never averted his face. He struggled with survivor's guilt. He urged himself— like James Baldwin— to find, in writing, a means to keep bitterness from eating him alive. In many ways, it seems as though Zurita is still writing one long serial poem in book after book. And for this reason especially, Deeny's *Sky Below: Selected Poems* doesn't fail us.

But the reason the book is a runaway success is because Anna Deeny is so tuned to the poet that she begins to translate the way that Zurita writes. She refuses to mitigate the weird glory of his language. Where Zurita writes

Porque no eran esas playas que encontraban sino el volcarse de todas las llagas sobre ellos blancas dolidas sobre si cayéndoles como una bendición que les fijara en sus pupilas
Deeny doesn't make it easier for us in English:

Because those were not beaches they found but the overflow of all sores on them colorless in pain upon *itself falling over them* like a blessing that he'd set in their pupils [my italics]

“Upon itself falling over them”? You might, as a translator, be tempted to smooth that construction into “falling over themselves,” but Zurita's purposefully irregular grammar enacts the discombobulated scenario and psyche. Also, because phrases of Zurita's language frequently return like a chorus, when a similar phrase eddies forward into a subsequent poem, Deeny draws from the earlier case, basing her new translation on the kinds of decisions that Zurita makes throughout his whole body of work. To wit, Deeny translates Zurita's poetry, not discrete, disconnected lines:

Lazandose sobre las cordilleras recién nacidas que emergían tras las demenciales líneas de las nevadas

Itself thrown over the just birthed cordilleras that emerged among the demencial lines of squall [my italics]

I love Deeny's transmission of *llanto*, so often rendered as “cry,” as “grieve,” drawing “llanto” closer to “luto” or mourning, which is nearer Zurita's register: “like an uncontainable grieve rent from his chest,” Deeny writes. She

also retains Spanish here and there. For instance, she translates “mi lindo” as “my pretty boy” and then, two lines later, as “my lindo.” *Los muchachos paisa* becomes “the boys paisa”—and we get some of the texture and sound of the original, even if we don’t know exactly what it means.

Zurita’s peculiar “Perdiendo negro todo se va desaparecido por islas, paisas y nombres si; ¿me llamas?” might have been normalized as “Losing its black luster everything disappears into islands, countries, and names, right; are you talking to me?” But Deeny insists upon the jammed awkwardness of the Spanish—because the emotional register here has nothing normal, nothing suave about it: “Getting lost is every thing goes disappeared through islands, countries and names yes; do you call me?” Bravo.

Zurita taps an illimitable mine of styles and poetic trajectories. Here the poem swells with images of oneiric horror, here the voice shifts into stinging irony; here that very language that seemed sentimental (when it was out of context) strikes us with its plaintive, unimproved frankness. Zurita imagines, with empathy, not only the marginalized and oppressed, but the torturers, bombers, pederasts, because (his poetry exhorts) each of us contains all of them.

Rereading *Sky Below: Selected Poems of Raul Zurita*, I occasionally thought of John Coltrane’s *Meditations*, how the album starts in a chaos of sound, pure screaming wound, and how Coltrane slowly coaxes a melodic sax line upward from the mayhem like a wisp of holy smoke from some still kicking, burnt offering. Zurita, like Coltrane, often begins with and revisits tumult and agony, the shambles that are our lives among others. He urges his poems forward in anaphoric riffs such as this one, where he alludes to human body parts dumped from helicopters into the sea:

I heard a deranged sky and sea, I heard suns shattered of love falling
like fruit, I heard whirlpools of fish devouring the pink meat of strange
flesh.

And just as Coltrane’s saxophone can both rage and pray, Zurita’s linguistic inventory can shift from choked howl into extraordinarily gorgeous lyrical passages such as this one in which the poet’s humility emerges as he dismisses both the grandeur of words and the signal place of humans in the universe:

In the foreground the mountains emerge like a tulle gauze undulating against the shadows. The snow on the cordillera lightly phosphoresces, like gauze that floats. Above the infinite stars and the black sky. The words are slight, the stars are slight.

There is an undeniably transcendent apotheosis to Zurita's gnarly, tumultuous work. This selected poems offers us, living in a world upside down, a world with sky below, a vision— no, less a vision than a feeling as rare and unaccustomed as the hope for redemption.