

A SPARROW IN THE HOUSE OF
SEVEN PATIOS

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SEVEN PATIOS**

MIGUEL ANGEL ZAPATA



First Edition, 2004
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Published by the Latino Press
Latin American Writers Institute
500 Grand Concourse
Bronx, New York 10451
U.S.A.

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios

ISBN

1. Title 2. Peruvian poetry 3. Peruvian poetry-20th century 4. Peruvian poetry in English 5. Peruvian poetry in the U. S. 6. Latin American poetry 7. Latin American poetry in the U.S.

Illustrations by Ana, Cassandra, and Christina Zapata Kincaid
Cover by Jorge Valdivia-Carrasco:
«Desde el silencio» (From the Silence).

Wise are ye, O ancient woods! wiser than man...Give me
a tune of your own like your winds or rains or brooks or birds;
for the songs of men grow old when they have been often repeated,
but yours, though a man have heard them for seventy years, are
never the same, but always new, like time itself, or like love.

(1839)

Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803-1882)

*To my children: Ana, Cassandra,
and Christian Miguel*

A Sparrow in the House of
SEVEN PATIOS

The Poetry of
Miguel Angel Zapata

Edited by
Anthony Seidman

With Translations by
W. Nick Hill, Suzanne Jill Levine, Anthony Seidman & Rose Shapiro

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A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios: The Poetry of Miguel Angel Zapata

In his essay, *The Prose Poem As An Evolving Form*, Robert Bly writes how among the several types of prose poems is the «object poem» which «centers itself not on story or image,» but on an object, peeling away its layers, word after word, assaying to enter the object itself, as if truly naming it and re-creating it in order to participate in its life, so that the glass-pane between addresser and addressee becomes as thin as onion skin. One thinks of such poets as Francis Ponge, Alvaro Mutis, and José Emilio Pacheco, or the contemporary American poet Alan Britt as adept at writing great poems in that genre. The danger, or tumble into delusion, would be for the poet to believe that he or she could shatter that pane separating the object addressed in words and the object itself. Yet, if an equanimity is achieved between rhapsodic abandonment and observation of beast or mineral, there is a power that surpasses the type of poetry—anecdotal, pedestrian in tone, full of «colloquial mimesis,» as Duane Locke scoffed—being written in many workshops, and lavishly published by many university presses. The best poems of Miguel Angel Zapata—who indeed has a predilection for the prose poem—are in this «object poem» genre, and achieve a grace in which addresser and addressee reach shimmering moments of fusion, empathy, before shooting back to their quotidian spheres.

Zapata, born in Piura, Perú, has been publishing his excellent poetry for almost twenty years, and his work has deservedly received praise; in 1998, the Mexican newspaper, *La Jornada*, selected his collection, *Lumbre de la Letra*, as one of the best books written in Spanish in 1997, and in 2003 was awarded The Latino Prize of Literature given by The Latin American Writers Institute of New York for his book *El cielo que me escribe* (2002). As a professor of literature at Hofstra University, he has continued to be respected as a scholar of contemporary poetry, and as an anthologist—see his thorough anthology, *Nueva Poesía Latinoamericana*—and as an editor of the journal *Código*. *A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios* is the first book-length collection of Zapata's poetry to be translated into English, taking poems from several collections originally published in Perú and México. It also marks the opportunity for the reader to savor not only his bestiary of objects, but other remarkable attributes that make each poem included in this collection an occasion for celebration. Canaries, iguanas, the writing clouds leave in the sky, daughters drawing on the living room floor, crows more urban and loquacious than Poe's, the family dog, rose gardens, the desert, are only some of the vistas and living things that Zapata not only celebrates, but addresses with the type of camaraderie better expressed in the Spanish familiar pronoun, *Tu*. The skill in many of these poems is how he probes these objects, writing into their metaphorical and metaphysical, as well as material space. Thus, an idiosyncratically silent parrot in Zapata's «Notes For A Parrot That Doesn't Know Sadness,» becomes more than an oddity, but a conjurer of that silent stasis, that language of epiphany which Paz, in *El arco y la lira*, and paraphrasing Chuang-Tzu, said is a doctrine without words, a sentence best expressed by silence or a smile, or even paradoxical statement.

A theme cropping up in these poems is language itself. In the poem, «The Hill,» Zapata writes not only about the act of writing itself—thus avoiding the sterile and static trajectory of much «Language Poetry»—but of how writing, or «some flame» might bring him into the «center of the chrysanthemum,» and how language itself might lead

him outside the margins of language. Yet despite these moments of exaltation in which words nearly take on flesh or the texture of a petal, there is also a sadness in many of these poems; that is, there's a worldly recognition, a postmodern symptom, that the poem is just *that*, and that it can't, in the end, be a complete substitute for reality, or re-invention of our world. But it almost is, and in moments of jazz-like riffing it is all that is needed. During such moments, Zapata re-establishes contact with the fading concept of the poet as an individual mesmerized by his own words, that tradition of Dylan Thomas or Breton and Desnos in their most rapturous passages. This aesthetic, or spiritual, endeavor denies a rigorously postmodern stance toying with self-consciousness and artifice. Reading such poems by Zapata as «Dust and Darkness» or «The Hour of the Poem» might teach a thing or two to many contemporary American poets who are either completely fixated about writing about their lives and common protests in common language, or who strive to write a poetry which eschews *any* reference to oneself, and is not written for comprehensibility. In «Dust and Darkness» Zapata writes of a certain faith, of his rapture with language and of bartering words and terms with conditional reality:

Dust comes to this place is if it were part of us. Water runs and crickets burn in the bottomless well. I do not look up and breathe slowly. When the caterpillar dies and the water stagnates in the street I write like the caterpillar, and in the morning the sun returns as if nothing had happened: my dog looks at the sun and I write trembling in the patio of the house.

One must also remember the pages that celebrate the Southwestern desert where Zapata lived for several years, Colorado, his childhood Peru and its costal beauty, and his celebration of nature in poems which catalogue flowers, rain, stone, and specific landscapes, as in the poem «Machu Picchu, First Vision.» In the aforesaid poem, Zapata intones: *I write without a watch, without thinking about anything (...) the word reaches me with the mud of rain and wood (...) and the*

stone writes me its best sound. This writing of natural landscapes and objects is not a characteristic of Latin American poetry, but more of a prevailing theme in the American canon from Emerson to Snyder. Zapata seems more in tune with one of our more bardic nature poets; I'm thinking specifically of Walt Whitman and his «Song of Myself.» In Zapata's poetry there is also the speaker who addresses objects, landscapes, or imagined vistas too specific to be a cousin to Dario's ethereal *Nocturnos*, and in a true Whitmanian fashion, the speaker dissolves, is granulated into the addressed object and surroundings so that he now sees how even the humblest thing harbors the infinite. In Zapata's best poems there is always that flash where the speaker attains a state of *samadhi*, or the feeling of being omnipotent by union, as Malcolm Cowley wrote of in his introduction to *Leaves of Grass* in 1959. If one were to read Zapata's *Lumbre de la letra* or *Escribir bajo el polvo* as open sequences, many of the «passages» would take on the characteristic of Whitman's catalogues, and their aim to fuse polar extremes, time and space, continents and intimate rooms in «one elbow swoop.»

Yet Zapata's poetry also has the best qualities of Latin American poetry; as already stated, there is no over-usage and abuse of the biographical «I» in these poems, and there is also that sophisticated balance of appropriating the best of surreal poetry, the Baroque and the playfully avant-garde, as well as the moods and indigo nights which populate the lines of the *Modernistas*. That is, the things and places in these poems are to be viewed for their skill in describing the «thing itself» as in much of excellent American poetry, but also for their deft and organic abundance of metaphor begetting metaphor as seen in much Latin American poetry. The consistent usage of the verb *escribir*, to write, conjugated in the first person, reminds the reader of such seminal Latin American poets as Alvaro Mutis and Octavio Paz and their poems which address the words themselves, and treat words as avatars of something holy and unpronounceable. In such poems by Zapata as «The Tongue That I Want» or «The Space of The Poem Is A River,» Zapata follows the unspoken center of a poem to its arriviste—at times

a grandeur which both the speaker invents and which invents the speaker, or at times a talisman of one's mortality—and this echoes such poems as *Una palabra* by Mutis or *Libertad bajo palabra* by Octavio Paz. What is most moving in the thematically related poems of Zapata is a certain realization that crystallizes by the close of the poem; that is, there is often the mention of a «sign» or of a «shadow» crossing the space of the poem, the door, or the «window.» In fact, such a poem as «Lilac Rain» can also be seen as part of the great tradition of Latin American poetry obsessed with the viability of language as a substitute for reality, and the recognition of the word as perhaps not being an effective substitute for reality, or tool for modifying the waking world. In «Lilac Rain» Zapata writes:

The day starts with memory. In the windowsill one can still feel the old dust of these lands, the fear of deciding whether the sea is blue inside a text, or the rain on roofs is lilac. No one is given knowledge of his fate. Snow covers the city, and all is white and radiant. Nothing else must matter: the shade dissolves at my windowsill. Everything passes through these borders and this page of air teeters over the burnt surface.

As the title of one Zapata's book suggests, *Lumbre de la letra*, a title skillfully translated by Nick Hill as «Letter Glow,» language itself has the capacity to illumine and either make the addressed object truly, even if momentarily, visible in the darkness of daily life, or to grasp it in its hands of flame and char it beyond recognition. When Zapata's talent is right on target, which is often, he is able to both light up and embrace this world, and that is no small feat. Zapata is without a doubt, one of the most innovative poets in Latin America today.

Anthony Seidman
Los Angeles, California

Miguel Angel Zapata (Piura, Peru) currently lives in Long Island, New York, where he is an Associate Professor of Latin American literature at Hofstra University. Miguel Angel Zapata's work has appeared in anthologies and periodicals all over the world. He is the author of seven volumes of poetry, and several books of essays, critical editions, interviews, and anthologies. Among his published works are: *Partida y ausencia* (Madrid, 1984), *Periplos de abandonado* (México, 1986), *Imágenes los juegos* (Lima, 1987), *Poemas para violín y orquesta* (México, 1991), *Lumbre de la letra* (Lima, 1997), *Escribir bajo el polvo* (Lima, 2000), and *El cielo que me escribe* (México, 2002), *Moradas de la voz. Notas sobre poesía hispanoamericana contemporánea* (Lima, 2002), *Nueva poesía latinoamericana* (México, 1999), *Metáfora de la Experiencia. La Poesía de Antonio Cisneros* (Lima, 1998), *El Bosque de los Huesos. Antología de la Nueva Poesía Peruana* (México, 1995) (co-edition), *Literary Journeys. Selected Letters to Arturo Torres Rioseco* (Berkeley, 1995) (co-edition), *El pesapalabras. Carlos German Belli ante la crítica* (Lima, 1994). He is the recipient of The Latino Literature Prize and the Hostos Essay Award 2003. He studied at the Universidad Nacional Mayor de San Marcos in Lima, Perú, and earned a PhD in Philosophy at Washington University in St. Louis, Missouri.

Editor's Note:

Some of these translations originally appeared in the following journals: *New Letters, the Bitter Oleander, Delos, Poetry International, and Solo-A Journal of Poetry*. Others appeared in chapbooks entitled *My Hermit Crow* and *Brookings Hall*, translated by Nick Hill and published by *Aerea*.

Poems translated by Anthony Seidman are indicated by A.S., Nick Hill by N.H., Suzanne Jill Levine by S.J.L., and Rose Shapiro by R.S.

The Window

I am going to build a window in the middle of the street in order not to feel so lonely. I will plant a tree in the middle of the street, and it will grow before the astonishment of the passersby. I will raise birds that will never fly to other trees and they will remain here in order to sing amidst noise and indifference. An ocean will grow in the window, but this time I won't get bored of its seas, and its seagulls will return to fly circling over my head. It will have a bed and a sofa beneath the trees so that it might rest the flame of its waves.

I am going to build a window in the middle of the street in order not to feel so lonely. This way, I'll be able to see the sky and the people passing without talking to me, and those vultures of death that fly without being able of ripping out my heart. This window will light up my loneliness. I would even be able to open up another one in the middle of the sea, and I would only see the horizon like a firefly with its glass wings. The world would stay far off, on the other side of the sand, there, where solitude and memory live. Whichever, it's certain that a window will be built, and especially now that I no longer write or go out for walks like I once did beneath the desert pines, even though this day seems fit for discovering bottomless lands.

I am going to build a window in the middle of the street. How absurd, they'll tell me, a window so that the people pass by and watch you as if you were madman who wanted to see heaven and a lit candle behind the curtain. Baudelaire was right; he who looks from out of an open window doesn't see as much as he who looks at a closed window. Because of this, I have closed my windows and I have gone out into the street running, in order not to see myself lit up by the shadow.

[A.S]

I.

Where the Voice Lives

1

The sun illuminates the city, and the sky falls away in the distance with children's kites. This is the time I go out walking, losing myself among the towering trees of Woodland. I carry a small umbrella to protect myself against autumn's debris; I wear a blue jacket and tennis shoes. These breezes get you started writing poems, which you copy on the blackboard of your mind; they appear and vanish within a block or two, like green shades. And so I labor to understand the calligraphy of leaves scattered on the ground, the silence of the oaks that keep vigil over the neighborhood and offer shade to passers-by, who, on sunny days like this, go out for a bit of air. But we flee when the sun has no mercy and inflames these same streets in summer; and here the summers are fiercest fires, so far away from mild Pacific waters.

2

Every day I go walking along these open streets so that I may forget everything and nothing in my life, just to feel the autumn sun against my skin, this tender sun whose warmth can do no harm to our dreams or to the poems we can never hope to begin. And so you begin to decipher the poems that appear in a row across the sky; you can already see them fashioned on paper, without a single comma, like skyscrapers riddled with windows, while from the vast emptiness below great crowds of people wonder at its height, see the scaffolding, but do not comprehend its architecture, the heavy bricks, the steadfast adobe. You walk so that you may learn to fly, to certify your solitude in an unknown land where language shakes in the branches in the autumn wind, to

learn to read the brittle, yellowed leaves. So that you may know at last that seasons are the magi of the poem, and that the city of your youth had never seen an autumn's day, that you were not ripe for writing: because the words were brittle and broken and your heart was lost in the abysmal fog, lost between the seawalls where you spent your childhood days, loving the language that hoarded all its light.

3

Today as you leave you become a bird. You spent all afternoon reading Roethke, refining the praise you think to write of his art and scope, and then the poems you'd write, after him, to satisfy yourself, to swell yourself with an invigorating envy, for now this fragile peace delights you, and you can read the fallen leaves, you can weed the garden and light a fire in your hearth, and laugh with your children, be for them the merry rhinoceros, king of all the jungle. This is why you go walking every day, so that the trees may learn your silence, the idleness that proffers the fruits of endless wandering, dancing over the wind that lifts the world, dreaming of the sweetness of love beneath a fig tree, eating an apple in the space between kisses.

4

Winged, I go out to fly above the city. You are the chattering bird that watches over everything: the shops and the umbrellas of sidewalk cafés, the forests of people crowding together before the news of the day. From up here the buildings glitter, the dawn cracks open, a green fissure, the enormous branches grow everywhere, covering the landscape. Then you remember the magnificent pines in Tahoe and the mute sensuality of Albinoni and how you wept for your happiness; and you can see once again the deer parading with their antlers held high—all beneath

the omnipotent sky, all stepping on the yellow leaves of the sun, which is your sun; and all the trees are bound to an oath, determined to give us eternal consolation.

5

How can I end the day without having written a single word? How can I go to bed if the quill reclaims its flight while everyone is sleeping? It is enough to hear the whistling air erasing the rhythms of this day's prose, letting go the spirit and the soul to gather lilies, the footprints of shadows that obscure the rooster's vision at dawn, to dance in the Oracle, and to be a slave of your own enchantments—a fattened fish that floats to the surface again and again when the sun illuminates the city; and you go in search of the answer that holds you captive, that you find in the street, when the urgent rain leads you to where the voice lives.

[R.S]

The Crow's Candle

No one knows why the city hides the dark
language of the birds and the dead.

The crow keeps silent; he doesn't want to open
the hinge and let the light out through the crevice
of a crossing.

Beyond the sleep of the cypresses is the shadow of a
green apple, the door that leads us to
happiness.

They say that solitude comes to us with the rain, and that
the sand of the beaches rises up like an old clock
toward the ruined towers.

Wine speaks to fire; your dog looks at you writing,
and he senses the clouds that distract him in the garden.

The sound of a cloud is the ringing
of the rain.

No one knows why the door is still closed and why
the birds haven't passed through again.

There is only one window, and from there one sees a woman,
with her dazzling hair, trotting astride
a white horse.

[R.S]

My dog observes

It seems that the rain will finally come. My dog observes attentively how the swollen clouds will start coming from behind the hills. I write with my dog's paws tunneling in the sand at the base of the biggest tree in the garden. When the rain arrives, there is a mixture of happiness and sadness, something that cannot be described in words. Suddenly the feeling of the landscape changes; the splinters of the moon pierce the living room window; the tree illuminates the leafless patio, and the geraniums change the color of the sky. The red sky ages with the clouds, and my dog sticks out his tongue at the dead birds.

[R.S]

I no Longer Have a Guardian Angel

I no longer have a guardian angel. One unforeseen day she got lost on the plains looking for peace and plenty. In spite of everything, the movement of the sky still hasn't stopped. I go on walking through the forest with open eyes, and sometimes I sense in the air a brief eternity. I think that my guardian angel—because of that enormous love for the islands—is watching over the depths of the sea, which, after all, is the other face of the sky. I know that she's not on Mount Nebo contemplating the time to come. My angel had long black hair, and her eyes followed you everywhere. When she would go riding on my bicycle her hair was a conflagration that caught everyone's attention in the neighborhood. No one could see her except my dog, who would bow down his head when she flew over the geraniums. I no longer have a guardian angel. Now I walk alone down dark, pine-bordered streets, and I sense that someone is still watching over me.

[R.S]

Mocking Crow

My crow watches me while I write, and he laughs; he stretches himself and looks at the moon while he cries.

He says he is a steppenwolf when he opens his wings like an ancient cypress in India.

My crow lives on the surface; he knows the gold of a delirium and the stubbornness of a bell.

He lives alone on the summit, and he flies and flies in circles until his spheres all start to burn.

[R.S]

The Mirror

Seizing the sound
of the light of the sun,
with the sea risen up
to the stars
in lofty thought,
we look for excuses
to see and to hear in the mirror
the seven
roses
that
whisper
in
the fountain.

[R.S]

A Vision of a Deer's Antlers

In the forest, more than the silence
of the stars, the sound
of a deer beneath his own
reflections, which bend to drink in the water;
a moon that gazes upon him and celebrates him,
some shepherds, their trumpets
coiled in his eyes, which are taking
flight: in the forest with neither moons nor tides.

[R.S]

After Reading Roethke

For Carlos Germán Belli

The hunchbacked heron shakes his prey over the sand. The cormorant dives beneath the water like a black witch who is afraid of the storm.

The unlittered sky encourages flight: the hour has arrived to ascend to the heights, to be the phoenix against black storm clouds; the hour of letting loose the body to the subtle blue sky so that it may fly over the shores, riddled with birds, to light upon a high cliff, finally to comprehend the eternity of the orb.

The hunchbacked heron takes flight; he has gone to tease the sun. The sun and all we may hope to become in the open fields, where the spirit is the wing of a dove, the song of the first moon.

[R.S]

Saint-Saëns Walking on the Pier in Santa Barbara

For Álvaro Mutis

Today I return to the village well, which is fresher and cooler than the moon; I return to my jungle to measure its briny foliage, to the warm air of my valleys.

I leave behind the silver mountains and their angels condemned to neon towers. I am going away for a while, turning my back on the high skyscrapers and their flights of fancy: the sky I am looking for is bluer than this city sunk in silence, my stars are sweeter than these pained voices haunting the university. I gather up my things in a hurry; I sketch the harbor and the last gulls that came to say farewell with their wings. Everything is written in the flowing of the fountain in the richest commercial center in the world. Pity the doves who sing without end in the square. Pity the trees whose branches bend to the rhythm of the whistling wind.

My new world requires a new firmament, other splendors, another glass, one more doe-eyed woman, yet another moon who light reveals us, naked, on the sand. I am going away and will write no more of the mirror's metaphor: my mirrors are dying of boredom in a corner of the house. I am going away to be a different man, he who rebelled against the buildings of Manhattan while ice fell from the heavens. Today I am returning to my well, to the word that twists in the wind, to the breeze which is the emblem of my shore. From the pier I can see the twilight swelling with angels. I walk along the white sand, listening to Saint-Saëns' last concert for violin: I see seven stars, seven whispers, seven enchantments in the sky. Everything is visible beneath the sea, even my

flimsiest thought. Seven heavens together sing to me and lull me, seven oceans that shipwreck in my boats, as I roll over the sand to become the dust of the sea, the bare outline of a salty syllable.

[R.S]

Poem for Violin and Orchestra

Here is the succession
of strings in the universe,
lips and hands
beneath a thousand trees
in the finest spring, singing praise
of the great Saint-Saëns,
who rests, well pleased,
in the *musiki* of the heavens.

[R.S]

Cuzco

In the beginning, the moon did not inspire song.
Rather its reflections in the water, vibrating
in the depths, the murmuring of the leaves, the whispers
of the trees, stones in crystal streams.

Language belonged to the waters.

The willows gave us the meaning of one day; the poplars
taught us the language of the laurel, they sang it
incessantly after having heard the harps of
the forest. Unlike words, music hides nothing.
There they are, the Japanese wind chimes, singing with
the breeze.
The drumming of hailstones dancing on the tiled roofs
of Cuzco.

The contrast of the trees and the swallows invading
the granaries.

The sun is the music of the sea that everything hears.
Let's listen, stretched out upon the earth, to the sound of the
trembling aspen and its proud foliage, the rolling of this train
that carries us to the landscape, echoing in high fidelity,
to kiss its perennial plants, moving us through like a turbine.

[R.S]

Love in Passing

Entering you as dolphins enter the water, without wounding it,
leaving no
evidence that I have not shipwrecked in searching for you,
in pursuing you
through the bars and lights of the city to fill you with kisses, though I
have always known that I would leave you, as one leaves a country,
or a
courtyard with no flowers to cut.

[R.S]

Femme a sa toilette

(Toulouse- Lautrec)

Through the steam of the mirrors,
a citron flower emerging from the bath.

We do not see the steam.

A melody
traces the silhouette of a body:
orange blossom on a sensuous
back.

The brush gives a mind to desire.
It is music we smell, heavenly sheets
drinking a clean darkness.

[R.S]

Unter

Naked on the carpet
I read *Chamber Music*,
Bocherini between the
 2
of us is all our intimacy:
thus rest and peace console
my *ferocia animi*.

[R.S]

Easter

I persist without suffering here in Easter's Meadow: from the snowy heights, the coveted image does not despair, nor a sketch of the word fall like a swift bird in this day of sun and recollection.

Without me and without you, just after leaving, without a single swallow or purpled metaphor of the owl, I will write these terraced fields and these stumblings of the grasshopper that witnesses in wonder the rebirth of the Meadow.

[R.S]

Snow covered Hill

1

The fresh air from the mountain range gives me a new language. Now, closer to the Mountain, the voice of the Bard sounds; hotter than in the misty jungle of the south, I write what I see and what I would like to see, wanting to see it all like water in the fountain of the air; the word still fighting its abyss, the traffic light and the stag that change their signals when the moon snows.

2

From my window I sense the pines. The mills float among the branches of a limitless forest. Black masts throw shadows on the mills, and the vines breathe the bronze of the trees. We walk to read the leaves and the rubber stuck to the branches. Sometimes the rain calms our nerves, most of all in these fields filled with purple trees, far from the city, wandering with leaves of words. Looking and wandering without going astray in the splendor of the foliage. And so I thought I saw an alpaca running through the meadow, looking for the snow that never touches the green oak. And I thought about a bathrobe against the skin after a shower, trails of vapor glowing in this kindling forest.

[R.S]

The Dunes

I am thinking about that fleet of clouds that descends to my patio with the humidity of the roses. My mind travels through distances: along the docks, through abandoned planks in the shipwreck of rivers. I try in vain to banish the image of the sea by looking at the clouds that fill my head. The sea is in my blood, and it is the burning carnation that watches over me when I write. It observes me moving my bones while a river of milk descends from the clouds. I am a cloud, and I want to fly with the clouds to penetrate their womb heavy with salty water. The sea moves in its labyrinth: I don't need to see it to be aware of its subtle movement, of the thread that encircles me and leads me to its cosmos, the dawn of its simple happiness. Perhaps for that reason I love the dunes; they are my consolation, the uncentered labyrinth and sword. I write next to the tree, and I can't unweave the webs of stone with love. Instead, I find another labyrinth in this air; its chancy chaos brings me to write the first shot in the dark.

[R.S]

II

A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios

I insist that you should have fled, flying through the geranium patio without looking at the sky's roses. Then you could have written something in Homer's patio and sought some great love in Passion's patio. Stop over in Virgil's patio and look at how the trembling light in the water of a clay pitcher echoes the moon that rises up with your wings through this sky. Remember that, as we were going down the alley, I said to you, «better that you go flying with the herons of Lake Patzcuaro, or you will end up prone in the patio of the Silent Ones.» You folded your frozen wings while your seller, from his black cage, tried to convince me to take you home with me, to my pine tree patio—where the spirit loses itself in sweet idleness—without knowing that you are the master of signs, he who never stops thinking.

[R.S]

While I write

While I write the island's angels
descend from the sky with three violas to
celebrate the sea.

While the sand writes its desert,
a clarinet sounds at the edge of the horizon.

While I write, the steamy rose
melts the lilies; the stone soothes
thirst, and the wind waves with the water.

[R.S]

Bed with no Flowers

Among these unadorned pillows, I roll over with you, without mirrors, and I go riding on the meadow of your firm back: I feel your body settling over mine again, my fireless eyes spinning against the motion of your hair, and you cry out again like a mare lost on the plains of the sheets, moaning, dying upon my bed with no flowers.

[R.S]

Fragrant Woman

I write for the sake of the fragrant woman in the shower. She is naked: the soap flies with the aroused towels as she leaves the shower, unfurling herself under the cords of my bathrobe. Her wet hair revives me. The vapor inspires desire, and her back throws shadows on the blue sheets that drink her clean darkness. My reckless room celebrates her, and the masculine items of my newly washed clothes smell her. She is naked: covered in foam, she turns beautifully, the brazier burning.

[R.S]

The Road to Logroño

I leave for the bus station. The sky, strangely gray, lowers with the steam of the city. The previous night, I had gone to bed earlier than ever, and I no longer believed in superstitions. Naked, I once again asked the shadow for a bit of peace for my depleted and lost soul. All night, Goya's dog had been licking my arms; inconsolable, it had cried for its master who left, dressed in black, through a deep pool. The dog couldn't bark its grief, and it watched me with its languid eyes, slowly moving its tail. It's that the world is a deep pool, I told myself, and we are here in order to keep vigil for the soul of our masters. And it repeated to me: I see in your eyes that your soul is like mine, but you lack a tail. Of course, I said to it, but in my house I have a small dog that flits about the neighborhood with an unknown angel. My angel decided to abandon me for a while, but at times I see him in my dog's eyes.

And now I pass through the green fields of Soria, I see dozens of sheep grazing with happy dogs awaiting May's rain with great care. I had never seen pigs so at ease, gloating beneath the sun. The cows sauntered across the stream and glanced at the dogs while they contently chewed their cuds. Goya's dog would have been happy here among this heavenly sky and these clouds touching the hills. While I observe the landscape, I think of the distance of time and of those who wish to burn one's dreams. I wanted to get off the bus and run across those fields and stay there in order to write of the first signs. But they're waiting for me in Logroño, and I thought: The rain and the sky of Logroño, the life and the flowers of Berceo. It'll rain again. And at once the scent of pine will return, and the mist that ignites it with birds, and again I see the sea that around here comes only from the sky, and makes its presence

known within my thoughts. I write in the cemetery with the mausoleums that cast their light upon the blonde woman who runs beneath the water. Her under-garments fly through the air of these valleys, and beat against the window of the bus. Another lovely cow drinks waters from the stream; its sole pastime is to watch the water and to flick at the insects that live across its large back.

Its ears listen to me talk to myself in the bus.

[A.S.]

My Hermit Crow

My crow shines in the sun and no one can see him as a canary. He writes the night's solitude with his beak and drums his little song at the grotto of water that watches it descend without a single letter. My crow is a hermit bird, a canary sculpted in coal. Crow who snuck into bedrooms is quicker than a green parrot repeating syllables signifying nothing. My crow shines and shines better than a shooting star caught in the pane of glass. He already perches upon my papers when I speak to him without even thinking, and when he looks at me he's a plumed aura, a flute dripping ink from my housecoat.

[S.J.L.]

The Hour of the Poem

It's the hour of the poem; you see the first letter in the landscape, you open the window, and up there is the violet of the sky. It is the day when the moon bursts and lavender perfumes the walls of the house. And now that you're taken over by passion, you know that in vain other signs will arrive; the oboe of the forest has already poured into your ears. It's the hour of the poem; the tongue dances to jazz, your saxophone lets rip the first rollicking riff, and the world changes for you, a century of lights rising up, your soul in the emptiness of the river, the sea on the dock where its angels sing hymns of glory. You see all as you feel the light thought of the sea. It is the hour of sacrifice, the hour to purge all guilt. You write the poem; any and everywhere are sky-violet for song. You write the poem while the girls draw in the living room and the canary sings of your pen excited by the arrival of the flames. Your fairy of flesh and bone serves you coffee and cream, a cube of sugar and walnut cake. You eat and savor and watch the smoke rise slowly through the bricks. Fire doesn't cease to soothe us. And so, you write the poem again and again to satisfy yourself, to see an instrument writing itself on the pungent page, your body trembling from the encounter. It is the hour of the poem; you lift it up to a green hill, beneath blankets, with she who whispers words vaporous to hearing.

[A.S.]

The Hill

I

I write on the bluest hill of the universe: the wind howls and guides
my hand through these mountain-chains which are my cliff and my
cloud, the closing
of the game. Everything moves to my motions, and the rocks are roses
on
tombs. The clouds in the sky are a presence in the void,
an ancient garden, the brilliance of the flame crackling in space.

II

Among leaves, one glimpses the clarity of the sky, the clarity of the
void. Now I listen to the chorus of stones that tell me something of the
secret canals of the roses. The sky alliterates with stone, and I await a
signal in order to write about its back polished by the centuries, some
flame that might bring me to the very center of the chrysanthemum.
And this is why I write on the hill: to be closer.

[A.S.]

Machu Picchu, First Vision

I write without a watch, without thinking about a thing, within the spheres of the stone soaring with the river. The word reaches me with the mud of rain and wood. Here lives straw, seed, and the flame of the poem penetrating the stone of the centuries. Down there lives the city and its pottery of churches, cafes and clouds which grow thin and rise. Here, on stone, I survive, and among astounded eyes the flame of the river grows and the clay strikes its memory in solitude. The jungle, the iris, and the violet of stone whisper in my ear. From here I see the secret pathways and the dejected foreign girls who open their thighs. There are no ideas, only air, an air that calls you with the music of stone. Already the gold has been spoiled; the false beauty of the crystal fountain. Here, I write, a pilgrim, with my bottle of chilled wine while wandering and watching the running vicunas. Here, the soul pierces the air, the mist, and the stone writes me its best sound.

[A.S.]

Notes for a Parrot That Doesn't Know Sadness

For my daughter Ana

The parrot watches me from his cage and doesn't talk to me. It seems that he already knows happiness. I can't figure out who is inside or out. He turns his neck and looks up; his sky is a dried tree from which spring frees itself. This parrot knows how to grasp the air with his wings, and although he may feel that he can't fly as he wishes, he looks at me and doesn't say a word. At times, he dances with his light body, and rocks with the sun that falls through the tree; the sun that watches him suspended in the space of his cage. Like the butterfly that doesn't know sadness, the parrot constructs an ideal way of life so that geraniums whistle at morning; he too knows how to whistle, yet I have no idea why he doesn't speak to me. He is a conjuror of silence, and he knows how to stay quiet, just like poetry.

[A.S.]

Dust and Darkness

Dust comes to this place as if it were part of us. Water runs and the crickets burn in the bottomless well. I do not look up and breathe slowly. When the caterpillar dies and the water stagnates in the street I write like the caterpillar, and in the morning the sun returns as if nothing had happened: my dog looks at the sun and I write trembling in the patio of the house.

[S.J.L]

In My Patio I Have a Rosebush

In my patio I have a rosebush and a river of milk that awakens. At dawn, the mud detonates its silence in the secret tunnels reaching the sea. No one knows its color or its course, except the bees that write odes of honey, and the birds hoping to re-write of the sky panting with the beast in its notebook.

[A.S.]

The Fountain

The old tree unclothes itself. My giddy dog leaps across the grass. He tells me that words will arrive like birds that descend to the fountain or that they'll fall like leaves from our tree. Perhaps he's correct. The garden arrives with the night and the sonata awaits the wild heart. The sun shoots its fire in order that we may live out its blindness. Once the fountain sings, the knife of the forest stalks it and brings it angels muddied with slime. You close your eyes and refill the goblets of smoke as a sign of sacrifice.

[A.S.]

Cairn terrier

For Christian, eight years old

My dog has soul, that's why the purple geranium of the garden makes him so silly.

His only sin is in trying to trap those birds that come to drink water from our patio's fountain. He likes listening to Mozart when it's raining, and takes to dancing over a few inches of sand when it's sunny.

He modifies the desert with his tiny paws and knows the other side of the garden like no one else.

He has no memory whatsoever; that's why he's happy.

[A.S.]

The Space of a Poem Is a River

The space of a poem is a river, a forest of deer watching me write in the humidity. The river smells my nakedness and the water catches fire. A sea wind enters my room and I awaken. After a snow flurry, words freeze in the throat and there is thunder. I dance, and the voice trembles in the silence of the poplars. I pluck my zither here, in the temple where we cleanse our wounds, and love each other on the grass. The brush gives thought to desire; I read Paul Klee and silver roses penetrate the window. After bathing, her body unfolds beneath the strings of a cello. I write the splash of her body refreshed by cool water. I see her body leave, naked, with firm thighs, and her legs suggest a few kisses into the deep well of bliss. The river's mutilated body trims visions, and her body in the sand is the moon's transgression. I feel satisfied, because here the snow is erased by the mountain sun. The mountain guides me to the wide river, and again I write of the sign which dissolves at the window.

[A.S.]

III

Murmuring Cave

I mount and ride to see the torch of the poem begin to flare at the edge of this temple that comes apart in front of me. I mount and ride to find the buried treasure, the clay melted into flowers, the dazzling light of the murmuring cave.

[N.H.]

Thighs upon the Grass

I am writing because of the girl I saw jogging this morning in the cemetery, the one who floated against the dead. She ran and her body was a feather that swayed against death. Then I said in this kingdom sports were good not only for the heart's delight but for the orgasm of sight. Seeing her run in her little transparent shorts I concluded that cemeteries don't have to be sad, and that the girl's steady gallop gave the landscape another perspective; the sun took on a reddish hue, and again I thought that death was not the subject of tears but rather of joy when life continued vibrating its thighs upon the grass.

[S.J.L.]

The Red Sky I Pour

Look at those black birds pecking at the rock, the red snow that springs from the stone of centuries. Look at the gothic city and its hues of red, the cadmium of the birds flying along the cliffs, the celestial air printing on the rock the red sky I pour.

[N.H.]

Voice and Lily
For Oscar Hahn

When birds chirp at your window, you set off, searching for a trace of the ghost. The wind whips at your window and knocks down memory. In the sands, the trace of your voice becomes lost, and the blue irises, once again, appear shaken. Words, as in a sonata, struggle to create a sweet rhythm, a fine, sweet celestial dust that fills you with feeling and strikes sparks from your desk.

[A.S.]

Traveling By Train

I travel in a train watching the Mediterranean Sea.
The view's a true delight.
The world starts here; angels bathe in the foaming sea.
The seashell advances to the summit without struggling.
A chorus of stones sings to us in the train-car and roses lift
their blue suits in order to see the bottomless ocean.
In the train, there's my poor silence.
I always return with too many books in my bag, postcards,
and the scar of time.
I have been in various trains, but this one's the most beautiful.
There's no one, only a television that doesn't watch me and
a moon that isn't felt. The sea's naked; it's my road.
The pack is far from me, and the air cleanses me with the horizon's
threads. There's no one here; my eye's a magnifying glass that slips
away
beneath the pines growing in the sea.
I have never seen such beautiful pines, tall and serene, they navigate
towards another whiteness. Here there are no trees to fell,
only eyelids that slip past the captivity of the rocks.
Here, the buried stones sing, the dead who remember
the large boats lost at high sea.
I don't speak of the rose that floats, but of the rose that hears the water.
The rose that is blue, and is the crack, the lance, and the cord of the
sky.
The sky watches us, and writes us; we don't have to tell it a thing.
The sky has flowers and speaks in another way:
its fragrance comes from the nets of islands,
the mist that radiates the sun when it

opens its mouth to embrace us.

I search for an island in my small canoe; from my forest of shadows

I discern a flame while the sea barks to me.

[A.S.]

The Language I Want

To start walking again, and the text that is the sky reads you when the city goes out. A rainbow on the roof of your house makes the day. The house smells of heavenly ash. My daughters taking color pictures while the apple trees are in bloom. This is how I survive, protected by the seven lightning bolts and by the kind of clouds that celebrate the creator of everything and nothing. That's why I write what the snow would want, and I write what I see and would wish to see, wanting to see it all as the water of air.

[N.H.]

My Crow Is Unleashed

Here I am with my curved beak so beautiful: desired am I by the white crow who lives in the snow, my blackness is divine and rests in honey with the white ink that bursts from its murmuring cave. Florid birds pursue me because they don't believe in its muddy river of darkness, while I strut exultantly over the seven spheres with the queen bee of the fleur- de-Lis. Here the surface is curved like my jovial beak; besides, with these wings I advance toward the woodland grove of your big lip, so that you'll reread me and linger again and shriek with my gutter bird's voice.

[S.J.L.]

The House on the Hill

The sky keeps me awake by the window. From my house, the mountain plays music on its invisible lianas. After walking up hill, I pause at my door to view the mountain covered by velvet in shades between red and lilac. I look at it as my daughters pedal their bicycles down the block. My house is on the summit: from here my gaze wanders between airplanes that leave their trail with the ink of clouds which settles over chimneys. And so, before intending to write one word, I think of the sky which is writing me. Inside, winter firewood fills the living room and gold-leaf paintings: it smells on onion and parsley, of mountain fruit and red wine from sacred valleys. The window divides its silence between the door and the street's slow air, and the other ashen door foreshadows the clay we shall become, as we now feel an inner light feeding us, though black clouds may darken the window.

[A.S.]

The House of the Soul

When you keep vigil from on high we celebrate the resurrection of the Verb, the Spirit speaks us through its eyes. The heavens are a ball of light and the mark of wax burns golf-leaved fingers. When the night fills with torches the poems is a sudden flash that flies with angels and lavender. Century's end and the shepherd's house returns in flames, without blemish it kisses the butterfly of the soul and dances. The sky alliterates itself and desire floats on the waxen glances. There are voices in the flames, words to make them live from the beginning of the last supper. With our candles high we celebrate the light of the celestial globe, the inexplicable joy, the darkness that dies.

[N.H.]

Cassandra's Iguana

For Cassandra Iris

I sense that you miss the vastness of the desert. You aren't happy, even when my daughter places you in the tree of our patio so that you feel at home. In your gaze I see dunes and a gray moon flying over sand. At times I think of setting you free, but I don't want to see my little daughter sad. I always remember how you escaped from your tank, and how I later found you meditating on top of my computer; surprised, you looked at my lit words and listened to the quena flutes playing on my Quazar tape player. I see your leaden eyes in my own, and I think of the desert: the dunes attract me, their curves are feminine, each line is the brush stroke of a sacred language alive for centuries under the sun. And so it is as well with the world, language, the poem I no longer wish to write. I don't know if I'll buy you a bigger tank, one with long branches, or if I'll set you free one of these days. I think that you would die in that human zoo; besides, no one would give you fresh lettuce, warmth. I would like to fly into the forest of your dream, leave this prison of silence, and enter your leaden eyes to dance in the desert, where one day we'll dance naked beside a warm dune.

[A.S.]

Lilac Rain

The day starts with memory. In the windowsill one can still feel the old dust of these lands, the fear of deciding whether the sea is blue inside a text, or the rain on roofs is lilac. No one is given knowledge of his fate. Snow covers the city, and all is white and radiant. Nothing else must matter; the shade dissolves at my windowsill. Everything passes through these borders and this page of air teeters over the burnt surface.

[A.S.]

Letter Glow

Don't run away for you'll break the rungs and leave me flightless in the blue pool. Look, the sea is just sea and its sky perishes in the urn of nighttime. Don't go, I'm still moved by the antique sounds of the dresser, the drum and the brusque sunless days. We won't be alone again together shivering in the fallen snow. Consider the sand and the looking glass that mirrors us watching ourselves in the water. Read the signs that flow along the way the air goes, the sweat of my body when I search groping for the key to this prison cell, so I can fly through the darkened city, in the lusterless snow, through the dirt that bellows in the rain, the muck that urges me to write in these Colorado Mountains.

[N.H.]

Crow in the Desert

Here, there's the little happiness that life casts my way. The sun and sand caked on my jovial beak. Because of this, on the many sunny days we get here I go out flying, just as right now I'm writing this from up on high, without thinking about a thing, lost in the heavens, without worrying about the shade of the slanting chair or the torn mirrors of the house. This is how I go flying, without despair for the sky full of dirt, with the sole syllable that you let fall on my wings.

[A.S.]

El Paso

For Karla Ortiz

Here, there's a backward bridge and a river that doesn't talk. Some skeptics talk of the gerunds and geraniums that soar across the river. They don't understand because they've never seen the sea or the lanterns that the moon flashes by the beach. Beneath the bridge there's a city that makes no noise and on the other side, towers steaming with their metal. What a contrast: the gerunds and geraniums cover my interior patio, and outside the gems of the city lie in wait, that Indian village that sprouts up with the pilgrims that cross that waterless hell.

[A.S.]

Brookings Hall

For Randolph Pope and Maria Inés Lagos

Through the city fly the torches: water shadows wilt the gold and the outline of honeysuckle is your hair climbing the wall, a voice diffused in ink. My wayward syllables float through this city, dazed looking for their own resonant chamber among these towers, these muses in tight skirts and high boots who bundled me on frigid days. Today passion sparks from flames and words burn: seated across from a wall of bricks my voice looks over the city, better dressed now in autumn. The sun pauses on a tower: this time its reflection wilts the leaves red. I write on the trees the sign of the arch that watches over the river and fields of wine. My torches still float through this city, our cups empty, my voice dissolved in your skin and your warm chiming.

[N.H.]

The Parrot

Uselessly, the parrot searches throughout the garden
for the happy soul of my dog
but what it finds is a cat hidden
in the weeds.

[A.S.]

The Sky Which Writes Me

White sky without dust or memory. Sky which cleanses the vision of the bird nailed on the sand. Sky of seaweed and rock in the mold; air of no flower, breeze from no tree where the poem or the diary of death are not penned. Sky of mine which quickly hushes the sound of the bird on sand. Sky of mine which doesn't write its vision of the bird or sand, but of the mold and the seaweed that turns the already-dissolved mirror green.

[A.S.]

This poem sets out without you up the Snowy Peak

The pines flew away, the voice of the hills rumbles, and you write, watching the snow fall, burning over the leaves.

Today you are happy. And I am happy now that I have a harp and I gaze at the white peak that tells me to write the mountain. All is whiteness, and I listen. Hear the mountain and the sky that touches it. I know you don't see me, yet you follow me through my room. Shadows touch me and I sleep. Sleep brings ocean air, and I fly away to live without you on the snowy Peak. The blanket covers half my body while the drum compels me to dance, though you don't notice. And when at last the snow disappears, the sun warms and you hear my drum of sand in your ears: the sun that falls to savor you outside of me, in the landscape of a burning, reckless tongue.

[R.S]

The garden of the Gods

Look at the moon, its reflection on the reddened stones, and those black birds worrying the stone.

Look at the red snow that flows from the stone, the burnished gold of the tired meadow.

The horizon, those girls taking pictures of the stone and the mountain climbers who ascend to the peak. Look at the gothic city, its reddening tones, the cadmium that ascends with the birds to fly over the gardens, in this celestial air that intones the rhapsody of the gods.

Bright moon that sees me passing slowly among the stones; forming the poem in open air, looking for some reason to leave a few words like leaves scattered over the fields.

The white moon of night and down there the lights of the city, those stars that descend to sit with you at dawn.

Look how I write the poem at the foot of the snow-covered hill against a celestial backdrop; unburdened, I write on this stone the red sky that I bring forth.

[R.S]

The Other Window

You get tired of being alone and delirious, with your window in the middle of the street, amidst the snow that drags its whiteness through the forgotten alleys. You get tired of going out looking for the same woman, the one with hair down to her ankles.

Perhaps in this consists the art of solitude: to write the island repeatedly with its lilac sky and the slenderness of the beacon that spills its light over our restless hair.

Perhaps it is only this: a compass without memory for the season to come.

«In luring us into these magical prose poems, Miguel Angel Zapata transports us to realms of his own devising, unheard of places where we find ourselves amazed and delightfully disoriented»

Billy Collins

«When I read Miguel-Angel Zapata's poems, I feel as if transported to some desert isle of the mind where the waves celebrate the sea, the swimmers are laved in the surf, and the air itself is reckless with desire. *A Sparrow in the House of Seven Patios* is as smart as it is sensual. Viva Zapata!»

David Lehman

Miguel Angel Zapata often works within the genre of the prose poem, and through these pieces he convinces us that this literary form elevates non-poetical writing in an extraordinary way. Undoubtedly, he raises that aesthetic to its highest possibilities when the speaker submerges himself in the profundities of the human interior, as though such a journey

were the most natural activity in the world. The delightful, the intimate, the outrageous, thanks to maz , engenders a living thing within the very essence of prose. His words give rise to a varied bestiary, in which even a little lapdog possesses a soul. Thus, in addition to making us ponder prose poetry as though for the first time, Zapata inspires in us an infinite wonder.

Carlos Germán Belli

«Miguel Angel Zapata is perhaps the most innovative poet of his generation in Peru, and one of the most influential new voices in Latin America»

Isaac Goldemberg

A SPARROW IN THE HOUSE OF SEVEN PATIOS

Se terminó de imprimir en noviembre del 2004

en los talleres de *Gráficos S.R.L.*

Galicia 190, Urb. Higuera - Surco Teléfono: 273 2055

Lima - Perú