

When the War Is Over

by LISA MADSEN DE RUBILAR

*When this war is over
we'll drink the blood of all the words,
the thread the labyrinth of these countries
the stack of illusions we had at twenty ...
When this war is over
I'll cross my ankles and wrists
in the garret aghast with bones,
... and once again I'll call myself
a citizen of that inexact country.*

Afterwards, when it's all over, what becomes of the exiles who find safe haven in Canada for a season? What becomes of these happily-ever-after people who can return to citizenship in their own countries after years of living as strangers near the top of the globe?

The answer, of course, is not an answer, but a multiplicity of moments lived out by the thousands of individual people who go home. But when one of these individuals is a poet, his answer (and even more, his questions) speak for everyone who has lived in exile — or everyone who goes home to what can never again be simply, unequivocally “home.” For everyone who never made it into exile; for the ones who never return.

On a warm spring day in Chile, amid the impermeable chill of Santiago's National Library, I read Naín Nómez's book *Identity and Exile: Chilean Poets in Canada*. I couldn't check it out, so I sat in a hard wooden chair and read for several hours. Thirty feet of echoing air lay between me and the dusty skylights; the walls were lined with the grimly carved beards and empty eyes of Homer, Demosthenes, Napoleon. The chill deepened as I read from

Nómez's book that “many exiles were swallowed whole and destroyed by the change in their lives.” That the bitterness of repression and the trauma of exile became for them “an obsessive food,” a bitter bile regurgitated again and again.

When I met Naín Nómez in person, the setting was different: a sunny spot in the University of Santiago coffee shop. Nómez, who spent twelve years in Canada after the 1973 coup that put dictator Augusto Pinochet in power, ordered me an orange soda. He was sipping a miniature cup of espresso, and his eyes and beard were alive and kind.

“Were you swallowed and destroyed by exile?” I asked.

“You have to choose,” he said. “It is inevitable that one continues for a time chained to nostalgia. But there comes a moment when you decide to integrate yourself or to remain in the past.”

Nómez chose involvement, both in anti-Pinochet activities and in Canada's literary scene. Along with other Chilean poets in exile, including Jorge Etcheverry and Leandro Urbina, he travelled throughout Canada participating in bilingual readings. He travelled to Greece and Morocco where writers from all over the world read aloud in their own languages under an open night sky and where he met Jorge Luis Borges, Rafael Albertá and Leopold Senghor. He obtained a master's degree from Queen's University and a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto in Latin American Literature. He won the University of Alberta's Spanish writing competition and was a finalist for the “Casa de las Américas” prize. Twice, he travelled back to Chile to do research for his dissertation on Vanguard poet Pablo

de Rokha, asking friends each time to see if his name was on the "wanted" lists in the airport. And he wrote poetry. Much of it sad.

*When this war is over
we swear we'll feel like running, fleeing
from obscurity, pushing away this dog
that lies on our lapels and oppresses our
breathing,
falling to our knees spitting holy earth
and mule trains of stars between our eyelids,
moistening our temples to stop the fever
from dilating our world, starting a dialogue
without clenching our teeth,
just letting life fall like a leaf
from our tired feet.*

Nómez never wore army fatigues or lobbed a grenade. "But we did feel we were at war," he says. "There were never two equal forces ranged against each other, but we felt that the dictatorship was at war with us. Whenever we returned, we felt in danger."

But, on this bright morning as jacaranda trees rained flowers in the shape of purple trumpets outside, Nómez was quick to assure me that he did not "have it very bad." I thought of the song by Cuban singer Silvio Rodríguez: "I am a happy man; and on this day I must ask the dead forgiveness for my happiness."

Nómez did not have it bad because he was not one of those tortured, shipped off in the night to Chile's northern deserts or southern islands, or made to "disappear," as the Chileans call the clandestine executions that were carried out against intellectuals, suspected Communists, labour leaders, or anyone else who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Only days before Nómez and I sat drinking orange soda and espresso in a sunny university coffee shop, yet another group of shallowly buried bones from the long era of dictatorship turned up near Temuco.

"I didn't have it very bad," Nómez repeats. "After the coup, the University of Chile fired everyone, but I went on working [part-time] at the University of Santiago. I was taken to prison one night; they interrogated me; but then they took me back home. We never knew from one day to the next what would happen to us."

Nómez began to look for a means of escape. The physical danger was real, but the intellectual suffocation was just as intolerable. When a friend helped

him get a scholarship to study at Carleton University in Ottawa, he left his country, his language, his youth behind. Overnight, he and his wife and young son Sebastian became exiles in Canada.

*There is no reason to try to deal with so much
sadness.
Not in the mountains of constitución, not on the
burning sidewalks
of san cristóbal, not in the dance halls of san
clemente
where a drink of chicha went through you like
love's sword,
not even in the bark of the birch tree in cañete
where I carved your name, forgetting it not
three days later,
could I cross the deceptive threshold
of this time that swallows up my poems,
incapable as they are of bearing witness to the
ghostly combat
of this battle lost in advance . . .*

That Nómez's youth prepared him for poetry would seem improbable. He was born in 1944 in the provincial town of Talca in south-central Chile, his father a railroad man, "like Neruda's." Although his parents offered "absolutely no encouragement" in literary matters, by age fourteen Nómez had published his first poem in Talca's newspaper, *La Mañana*. "I am of lower-class extraction," Nómez admits, not with the casual boastfulness of North Americans who love to tell how they lifted themselves up by their bootstraps, but with a certain amount of Spanish chagrin. "I went to a commercial secondary school and studied to be a bookkeeper." (Even greater chagrin.) "But when my father died, I felt free to study what I liked: philosophy.

He became a student at the University of Chile. "The atmosphere in the capital those years (the late sixties) was very rich. We formed a group that is known as 'The School of Santiago.' We decided that our aesthetic reality was urban, and we wanted to return to a Vanguard-type poetry," which contrasted with the pastoral poetry and "anti-poetry" that was then in vogue.

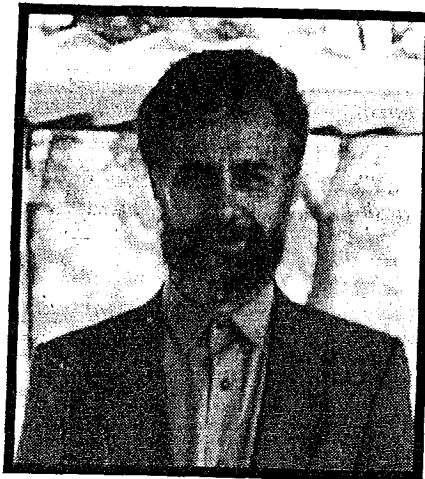
Nómez's "School of Santiago" has a recognized place in Chile's literary development, although the upstart poets were snubbed by the established poets and critics of the time. "We were friends with the editor of [the literary journal] *Orpheus*, and we put together a special issue called "33 Key Names in

Chilean Poetry." It included all of the well-known names in our literature, but we also included ourselves in the anthology — like good young people."

The criticism from high places was immediate and scathing. And before the group could prove themselves through independent publication, they were silenced by the coup.

"I was just about to publish a book of poems through (the national press) Quimantu when the coup took place and everything went under."

Nómez did not publish his first book of poems until *Histories del Reino Vigilado* (*Stories of a Guarded Kingdom*) came out in Canada in 1981. This book was followed by *Paises Como Puentes Levadizos* in 1985 and its English translation *Burning Bridges* in 1986.



*No sooner have you begun than you realize you
can't do it,
there is no history beyond the flayings,
the painted faces in the mist,
the rancid mustaches of cliché;
you realize that you can't describe the buried
ones,
that you can't save them, that the words "why"
and
"who," that the word "when" won't be heard
anyway,
those words are useless both as an excuse and
a lament,
— a school of metaphors in the sea of the
tongue —
you realize that memory is concave, convex,
reversible,
that precisely this pain at three in the morning
amid shining boots and fading hair
will never be a poem or an intellectual talis-
man,
but rather, the pure, whitening matter of the
instant
as it opens up to death.*

By 1985, Nómez had completed his doctoral degree, and had been offered teaching positions at more than one Canadian university. Yet he chose to return to Chile where Pinochet was still in power and

where he had no assurance of permanent employment. Why?

"We had to return then, or we knew we never would. My son Sebastian, who was two when we arrived in Canada, was now fourteen years old. My other son, Francisco, was two years old. We wanted them to grow up in their own country."

Back in Chile, with a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, Nómez finished editing the autobiography of Pablo de Rokha from the poet's journals, which had never before been published. Then he went to work for a radio project sponsored by Ceneca, a Chilean foundation.

"I didn't know anything about radio, but I became an expert. We travelled up and down the country teaching people —

Mapuches (Chile's indigenous people) and human rights activists — to produce radio programs."

Eventually, as the 1989 plebiscite approached that would replace Pinochet with civilian president Patricio Aylwin, Nómez was offered a position at the University of Santiago. He had come full circle.

But the battle continues.

*When this war is over
(when it's over?)
we'll start asking
whether we really lived in concrete cantons
whether, like natural gentlemen, we really
inhabited the moment for a long time,
and why we used so many bullets and shut off
our desire
with metaphysics, and finally why,
with that naiveté that made us famous
we called ourselves seers, masters of the
mystical,
strictly rhythmic, showoffs,
deluded.*

"When This War Is Over" has many meanings, Nómez says. "One is always at war with something. One is always struggling."

His marriage, which had survived the years of Canadian exile, ended after he and his family returned to Chile. He has since remarried. His son

Sebastian, now twenty-one, is too restless to pursue a college degree in Chile. He wants to return to Canada. And although Nómez's latest book of poems, *El Fuego Va Borrando* (*The Fire Goes on Erasing*), received enthusiastic reviews when it came out in 1989, his poetry cannot be found in any downtown Santiago bookstore. Critic Mesa Seco commented that poetry by Nómez "takes powerful flight, a burning and whirling word" that "bursts literary forms like a pomegranate." Another critic, Grinor Rojo, called for "attentive" reading of his verses. Yet bookstores stock only the poet's scholarly works on de Rokha and criticism.

Nómez feels that, in a sense, his exile is not over. The influential and powerful Santiago publication *El Mercurio* has ignored his work completely, perhaps, Nómez believes, because he called one of its critics to task for emphasizing "anti-poetry" at the expense of parallel rivers of poetic development. Or perhaps because he was gone too long. He missed out on too much in his own country. There is more than one way to disappear.

*In the last analysis, the only almost real thing
is that our keen temerity
has been gradually wiped out in library shelves
and prefaces to proposals,
leaving us with this time gnawed to the bone
and these questions that will hang in midair
for a long time to come.*

The exile is over, but questions remain for Naín Nómez. *Why did I live and others die? How could such violence engulf for so long my people? What would I have been had not exile made me something different than what I was?*

The questions are omnipresent, but Nómez affirms that because he can ask those questions at all, the years in exile mean something.

"Despite everything, going away was good for me," he says. "In the early seventies, my vision of the world was very narrow. [In Canada] I had so many opportunities that I would never have had in Chile. I met many people. I travelled many places. At that time, Chile was completely shut into itself."

So, although it was not exactly free choice that brought Nómez to Canada, he is grateful for the years he spent in North America, and he is admiring of the country that took him in. With its Ministry of Multiculturalism, grants for ethnic studies, and magazines on a variety of ethnic themes, Nómez believes

Canada "has an attitude towards foreign immigrants that is nearly unique in all the world."

Yet in a poem titled "Canadian Poets," wrath mingles with sorrow as he reflects on his foster home:

*It's true, Canadian poets!...
any dominion,
any reserve
(as you well know)
has a landlord, exists
without a future, not of itself,
but founded on the exile of others...*

*Canadian poets!
We, the displaced people of the highlands,
people of olive skin,
xenophobes of language, the stateless,
funereal-faced, guffawing
or really dying,
we walk one step at a time,
looking backward, it's true,
maybe petrified;
and other histories
are written without us;
and the river flows, the tide rises,
the wind blows tarries disappears behind cliffs
without us, without these, without those;
the filament of time ripens in the mirrors,
burns the locks, bursts through the walls of the
cities
without us:
the ancient statues of salt,
the rusty nails of the master beam.*

*But — and I think this is about all I have
to say —
we understand about the search:
the centre, being expelled,
the history of grey, ruined peoples,
the loss of memory
is the same as yours.*

Naín Nómez was never fully at home during his twelve years in Canada. Nor will he ever again be completely at home in Chile. He lives the paradox that is the cornerstone of exile: Chile as the "horrendous country we never wanted to leave"; Canada forever the strange land where "cracks are closed up with great blocks of cement / and you sink into a lan-

guage in which beauty is something exotic." Yet this very dilemma creates the imbalance, the outsider view — the vision of things as new, unaccountable, mysterious, horrifying — that gives a poet a voice, and a reason for speaking. Nafn Nómez only hopes he will be equal to the task.

*Of all the time
that I have tried to keep under lock and key in
my papers...
though we know the minutes shatter and no
glue will mend them
and still from that sand falling, from that
blaze catching fire*

*I wonder, about this life, watered down and
whitening
if what is left will serve to answer this call
to begin to fit together these stones, these
buried transparencies
if what is left of us will be enough
to take upon our shoulders the enormous sun
of the future
that awaits us
as after a long voyage.*

