

## Once Upon an Overtime

On the fifth of June, in the year 1994 (by current reckoning), in a large room in the small city called Cedar Falls, Iowa, I listen to Isabel Allende tell stories about telling stories. *Once upon a time*, she says, pausing—the room turns silent, still—and then: *You see the power of the storyteller....*



*Storytelling and lovemaking are the same*, says Isabel Allende: *they both require stresslessness, a sacred space*. (“Fictions are dangerous,” says Salman Rushdie, in *The Wizard of Oz*; “In fiction’s grip, we may mortgage our homes, sell our children, to have whatever it is we crave.... Like men dying in a blizzard, we lie down in the snow to sleep.”) So why do Spain, Portugal, and Latin America turn Canadians into storytellers? Does it have anything to do with passion, or more to do with the national love affair with cost accounting? Is it the narrative of History imprinted in our infant past? (*In fourteen hundred and ninety-two, Columbus sailed...*)—what colour did we expect from the ocean back then, in our collective grade-school days? the solid steel-grey of Atlantic fogbank or Pacific rim? or the blood-red, wine-dark prism of adventure, mystery, romance? Ferdinand and Isabella, Luis de Camoens and King Philip’s Armada, Magellan on a quest for Empire, da Gama, Maximilian, Prince Henry the Navigator, Bolivar, O’Higgins, Balboa (lost by Keats and stranded on a Panamanian shore). Perhaps it was the adventure itself that coloured the

arctic mind with tropical expectations, the Boys'-Own world of dauntless difference—*Felipe thought quickly, knowing the anaconda coiled around his companion would shortly press from him his whole life's breath: there remained but a fraction of a moment—he must decide where to strike the scaly reptile, and around him the Amazon seemed alive with...*



Statistics: the 1991 Canadian census reports that, out of a population of 27 million, .9% claim a Spanish ethnic heritage, .3% claim a Portuguese ethnic heritage, and another .3% claim Latin American origins. The earliest arrivals were Portuguese sailors, fishing for cod on the Grand Banks; the last group is made up primarily of Chileans and Salvadoreans, emigrating north as political refugees, becoming exiles, émigrés, telling their life stories as footnotes to authoritarian history. In their lifetimes, say the recent storytellers, they grew up with the generals, they grew up when the Americans invaded, they grew up when they lost the rest of their families to the guerillas in the high plateau, the soldiers in the streets. Theirs are serious stories. They recount documentaries of victimization and terror. They also make magic realism real: *When the soldiers rode out of the cornstalks, they found only the old cabinetmaker, for all the other villagers had heard the green parrot two nights earlier tell them to leave, the random rain was coming, and famine, and the generals would offer them bread but only in exchange for the virgin-of-the-second-stone...* Latin America is a world divided by the generals, the exiles say, though united by the way its artists tell their tales.... But who can reliably foretell the future?



*No-one expects the Spanish Inquisition...* Disruption. Caught off guard. The element of surprise. Interruption marks the fragmentary mode, in art as in life. The Cisco Kid meets Colombian gold. So when North American TV news runs narratives of experience, does anyone anticipate more than the usual *sierra, siesta, señorita* clichés—the big hat and smile, the gold braid and moustache, the poncho, bolero, and toreador? Yes, lots of people do. So if the semiotic range of Carmen Miranda's hats no longer constitutes the true extent of Canadian *knowledge* about hispanic realities, why do the stereotypes persist? (*Don't cry for me, Evita...*) This is, of course, the premise of Guillermo Verdecchia's witty and achingly personal 1993 play *Fronteras*

*Americanas/American borders.* The Latin American experience in North America, says Verdecchia, “is provisional, atado con alambre”—always running up against La Bamba and *Cielito Lindo*, Speedy Gonzalez, the Alamo, and the TV drug wars. But Savonarola’s apocalyptic expectations are not the only guide to the future. Love matters, too, and celebration. Verdecchia’s narrator (knowing his home is *On* the border, not *Inside* it, yet) can none the less *choose* to make Canada his home—“where I work...where I make the most sense, in this Noah’s ark of a nation”—and say *Let the dancing begin!*



*Two to tango, two to tangle, two to...* Rafael Barreto-Rivera, writing about Puerto Rico, distinguishes mordantly between Canada and sex. Malcolm Lowry characterizes Mexico’s “Cuahnahuac” as hell and British Columbia’s “Eridanus” as paradise. Yolande Villemaire writes Latin America into her differentiation between paradise and reality. Louis Dudek, analyzing the opposition between the two “primitive faiths” of Cortés and Moctezuma, sees South America as a “tornado”: but adds that you can see Canada afresh from a tornado’s perspective: “It is most quiet/where it is most violent./ That’s why we appear so good.” (All these writers appear in Hugh Hazelton and Gary Geddes’s anthology *Compañeros*, along with examples of the work of several Latin American writers who have made Canada—some just for a short time—their chosen home: among them, Urbina, Urbanyi, Etcheverry, Nómez, Mallet, Vallejo, Lavergne.) Canadian writers’ perceptions of hispanic realities generally link day and night, the beautiful and the damned, love and war. Beausoleil meets Borges, Livesay meets Lorca, Wayman meets Neruda, Hodgins meets García Márquez (“It’s the same coast”), Thomas meets love and separation (“the more little mummy in the world”), Purdy meets Castro, Leonard Cohen meets the last tourist in Havana, travel meets the TV news. Does everyone know each other here?



*Like water for chocolate.* Similes for answers. With conditions. As though the world needed name tags. As though the party was always in the house next door. As though the word “Hispanic” were not a cultural generality, taking meaning from the particulars of lived life: Don Juan and Saint Theresa of Avila, Birney’s bland tourists and the gauchos in Francis Bond Head’s *Rough Notes Taken During Some Rapid Journeys Across the Pampas* (an 1826

Argentinian travel “classic,” according to John Walker, writing in Alistair Hennessy’s *The Land that England Lost*). Borges’ labyrinths, MacLennan’s Jerome Martell in the Spanish Civil War, the Andean peasants of Chilean-born Frederick Niven’s *Triumph*, Diego Rivera’s murals, and Villa Lobos making music in Ralph Gustafson’s *Tracks in the Snow*. Death, love, and aspiration. Likeness in dissimilarity. Galiano and Valdez sailing off the edge of “Vancouver’s Island.” Eli Mandel observes “ancient bondage” and the “madwomen of the Plaza de Mayo”; Dennis Gruending remarks on poverty and urban decay; Pat Lane notices “unborn things”; Brian Brett dreams of a nightmare Argentina; George Woodcock and Ronald Wright record the lives of the Inca and Maya and society’s dealings in civil power. Richler, Sagaris, Sternberg. *Witness, witness, witness*: it is an imperative, not a noun.



Because of *the Disappeared*: the grammar of relationship—in silence as in speech. Katharine Beeman, in *Direct and Devious Ways*, specifies a subject and a motivation: “Spain, the poets’ war./ Nicaragua, the poets’/ revolution.” In the Barcelona zoo, she adds, “we learned/ we can all die/ sooner than later/ that dead men on leave/ make love at night/ lest morning never come.” In politics, as in words: Elias Letelier-Ruz, translated by Ken Norris in *Silence/Silencio*, reiterates a single theme: *I am witness to ...—to what? fire, violence, hatred, flood*. And so? Alfonso Quijada Urias’ last story in *The Better to See You* ends with a reason for writing: “If I’m alive today, it’s a total miracle. Maybe. Possibly. To tell the story.”



How? Passionately, eloquently, matter-of-factly, desperately, earnestly, calmly, *quixotically*. Listeners mostly know reality; they know when they hear it told them blunt with grief. They also know they’re listening to some old familiar truths when fantasy gossips at a gold corner on a summer twilight. *Maria Consuela tells of her second cousin’s oldest friend’s daughter—the one they call Carmen Bianca—one day she took a bent hairpin from the back of her head and used it to try to catch a fish for dinner, and hooked instead the crimson conjuror who lives at the bottom of the sea and who before her eyes turned giant sharks into hay wagons and six white eels into uniformed soldiers, and then, she says, and then—How does this story end?* w.n.