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NEW COLLEGE OF CALIFORNIA (SF)

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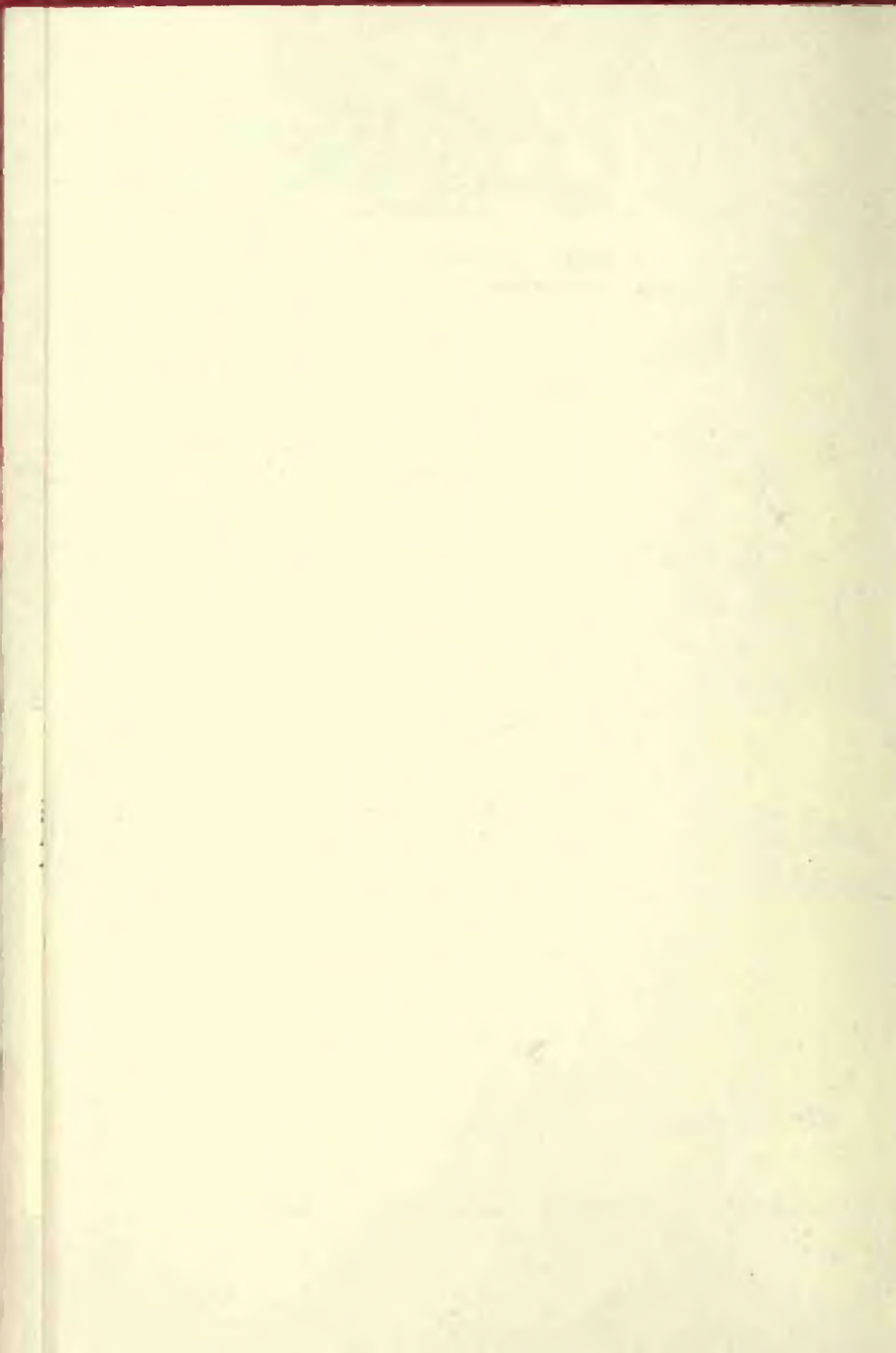
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POEMS

Also by Nicanor Parra

Poems and Antipoems

Nicanor Parra
EMERGENCY
POEMS

Translated by Miller Williams

A New Directions Book

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Some of these poems first appeared in *Atlantic Monthly*—and *Doors and Mirrors*, Carpentier and Brof, eds. Grossman, 1972.

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INTRODUCTION

From the first publication of his work in English, Nicanor Parra has taught us—has forced us—to come to poetry with new eyes. More than that, he has made us look with new eyes at all the things of this world: airplanes and pencils, crankshafts and flies and pianos. He has redefined the poem in such a way as only a few have done. And in doing so he has redefined the world in which the poem is written and the hand that writes it. Aristotle was not more challenged by Hume, nor Aquinas by Calvin.

When Parra's lines seem disconnected, it is because they are connected in a supralogical way in which we are not accustomed to seeing things. When the conventions of cause-and-result seem to be outraged, they are.

The poetry has moved and expanded as the imagination behind it has since the publication of *Poems and Antipoems*. Those who are familiar with Parra's work will find the humor more sharply honed and darker, the anger closer to the surface and sometimes breaking through, the language tighter, the compassion deeper and the statements more political—or anyway more social.

Some of the satirical poems are as good as anything Parra has done, and those who recognize them for what they are will recognize also that taken on their own terms they stand with the best poems of social satire from any time.

Still, it would be a mistake to look inside these poems for confirmation of a reader's own political certitudes. Parra is not a pamphleteer; he is a poet. If he does seem to be a particular political animal in one line, he will turn around and bite the same animal in the next. What he does say consistently and clearly is that this is not the world we think it is, that we are walking on the edge of a precipice with our eyes closed. He says that we might open our eyes and see the precipice, where it is, and even each other.

It has been suggested in a recent essay that the antipoem, or whatever one decides to call what Parra writes, did not originate with Parra, since all of the elements—dark humor, disjointed logic, flatness of tone, directness of statement, suspicion of many of the stock poetical devices—were already in evidence in the work of one poet or another, one element here and one there, and that all Parra did was to bring them together. This seems a petty sort of pursuit, the throwing down of a

glove in the back stacks of some library where graduate students might be arguing such points of literary history. Let it be enough to suggest here that what we usually call genius is the genius of assimilation, and that if this doesn't seem sensible, we had as well say that Edison did not invent the electric light, since all the elements—glass, metal, electricity—were all in use already, in one place or another.

Enough of that. What Nicanor Parra has given us is the poetry Nicanor Parra writes—and in this case, that poetry as I have translated it. Certainly all that I am saying depends upon the rightness of the translations. There is nothing to say to this except that the translations are here, and those who read both languages will know when the failure is great and when it is small. There is no success in translation. I have tried to be faithful both to Parra and to English, and to leave myself out of it as much as possible. I have tried to write what Parra would have written, if English were his language. We have been good friends for a long time; now and then I can get inside his mind. I have tried to stay there for the past few weeks.

Part of what is remarkable about Nicanor Parra's poetry is the sense it carries of the common, the everyday. We look at it and we almost say, "Hell, anybody could have written that; these are just simple statements." But we know that no one else could have written them—that's how simple they are.

MILLER WILLIAMS

A special thanks to Patricio Lertzundi, a generous and patient man, who did much to make this book possible.—MW

EMERGENCY
POEMS

ADVERTENCIAS

Se prohíbe rezar, estornudar
Escupir, elogiar, arrodillarse
Venerar, aullar, expectorar.

En este recinto se prohíbe dormir
Inocular, hablar, excomulgar
Armonizar, huir, interceptar.

Estrictamente se prohíbe correr.

Se prohíbe fumar y fornicar.

WARNINGS

No praying allowed, no sneezing.
No spitting, eulogizing, kneeling
Worshipping, howling, expectorating.

No sleeping permitted in this precinct
No inoculating, talking, excommunicating
Harmonizing, escaping, catching.

Running is absolutely forbidden.

No smoking. No fucking.

COMO LES IBA DICIENDO

número uno en todo
no ha habido no hay no habrá
sujeto de mayor potencia sexual que yo
una vez hice eyacular diecisiete veces consecutivas
a una empleada doméstica

yo soy el descubridor de Gabriela Mistral
antes de mí no se tenía idea de poesía
soy deportista: recorro los cien metros planos
en un abrir y cerrar de ojos

han de saber que yo introduje el cine sonoro en Chile
en cierto sentido podría decirse
que yo soy el primer obispo de este país
el primer fabricante de sombreros
el primer individuo que sospechó
la posibilidad de los vuelos espaciales

yo le dije al Che Guevara que Bolivia nó
le expliqué con lujo de detalles
y le advertí que arriesgaba su vida

de haberme hecho caso
no le hubiera ocurrido lo que le ocurrió
¿Recuerdan ustedes lo que le ocurrió al Ché Guevara
en Bolivia?
imbécil me decían en el colegio
pero yo era el primer alumno del curso
tal como ustedes me ven
joven-buenmozo-inteligente
genial diría yo
—irresistible—
con una berga de padre y señor mío
que las colegialas adivinan de lejos
a pesar de que yo trato de disimular al máximo.

AS I WAS SAYING

number one in everything
there has not been is not will not be
a man of greater sexual prowess than I
once I got a baby-sitter-
to come seventeen consecutive times.

I am the discoverer of Gabriela Mistral
before me nobody knew what poetry was all about
I'm an athlete: I run the hundred meters
in the blink of an eye

as everyone knows I brought talking pictures to Chile
in a certain sense you could say
I'm the first bishop of this country
the first manufacturer of hats
the first person to see the possibility
of space travel

I told Che Guevara "Bolivia, No"
I laid it out for him in full detail
I warned him his life would be in danger

if he had listened to me
what happened to him would not have happened
remember what happened to Che Guevara
in Bolivia?
they used to call me an imbecile in college
but I was the best student in the class
I was just as you see me now
young—good looking—intelligent
a genius I would say
irresistible
with a dong long as a donkey's
schoolgirls can sense the size a block away
in spite of the fact I do my best to disguise it.

QUE HORA ES

Cuando el enfermo grave
Se recupera por algunos segundos
Y pregunta la hora a los deudos
—Reunidos como por arte de magia
Alrededor de su lecho de muerte—
En un tonito que hace poner los pelos de punta

Quiere decir que algo marcha mal
Quiere decir que algo marcha mal
Quiere decir que algo marcha mal.

WHAT TIME IS IT

When a gravely ill man
comes around for a few seconds
And asks his relatives what time it is
—Gathered as if by magic
Around the deathbed—
In a voice that sets their hair on end

It means something is wrong
It means something is wrong
It means something is wrong.

DISCURSO DEL BUEN LADRON

Acuérdate de mí cuando estés en tu reino
Nómbreme Presidente del Senado
Nómbreme Director del Presupuesto
Nómbreme Contralor General de la República.

Acuérdate de la corona de espinas
Hazme Cónsul de Chile en Estocolmo
Nómbreme Director de Ferrocarriles
Nómbreme Comandante en Jefe del Ejército.

Acepto cualquier cargo
Conservador de Bienes Raíces
Director General de Bibliotecas
Director de Correos y Telégrafos.

Jefe de Vialidad
Visitador de Parques y Jardines
Intendente de la Provincia de Ñuble.

Nómbreme Director del Zoológico.

Gloria al Padre

Gloria al Hijo

Gloria al Espíritu Santo

Nómbreme Embajador en cualquier parte

Nómbreme Capitán del Colo-Colo
Nómbreme si te place
Presidente del Cuerpo de Bomberos.

Hazme Rector del Liceo de Ancud.

En el peor de los casos
Nómbreme Director del Cementerio.

THE DISCOURSE OF THE GOOD THIEF

Remember me when thou comest into thy Kingdom
Appoint me President of the Senate
Appoint me Director of the Budget
Appoint me Attorney General of the Republic.

Remember the crown of thorns
Make me Chilean Consul in Stockholm
Appoint me Superintendent of Railroads
Appoint me Commander-in-Chief of the Army.

I'll take anything at all
Administrator of Trustee Territories
Director General of Libraries
Head of the Telegraph and Postal Services.

Head of the Highway Department
Supervisor of Gardens and Parks
Governor of the Province of Ñuble. (1)

Put me in as Director of the Zoo.

Blessed be the Name of the Father
 And of the Son
 And of the Holy Spirit
Put me in as Ambassador to any place

Appoint me Captain of the Colo-Colo Team
Put me in if it pleases you
As President of the Fire-Fighters Union.

Make me Principal of the High School in Ancud. (2)

If it comes down to it
Put me in as Superintendent of Graveyards.

- (1) Province where the poet was born.
(2) Small town in Chile's deep south.

INFLACION

Alza del pan origina nueva alza del pan
Alza de los arriendos
Provoca instantáneamente la duplicación de los cánones
Alza de las prendas de vestir
Origina alza de las prendas de vestir.
Inexorablemente
Giramos en un círculo vicioso.
Dentro de la jaula hay alimento.
Poco, pero hay.
Fuera de ella sólo se ven enormes extensiones de libertad.

INFLATION

Bread goes up so bread goes up again
Rents go up
This brings an instant doubling of all rents
The cost of clothes goes up
So the cost of clothes goes up again.
Inexorably
We're caught in a vicious circle.
In the cage there is food.
Not much, but there is food.
Outside are only great stretches of freedom.

LA SITUACION SE TORNA DELICADA

Basta mirar el sol
a través de un vidrio ahumado
para ver que la cosa va mal:
¿o les parece a ustedes que va bien?

Yo propongo volver
a los coches tirados por caballos
al avión a vapor
a los televisores de piedra.

Los antiguos tenían razón:
hay que volver a cocinar a leña.

THE SITUATION IS GETTING DELICATE

You only have to look at the sun
through a smoked glass
to know things are bad:
or maybe you think everything is fine.

I say we ought to go back
to cars pulled by horses
to steam-driven planes
to TV sets cut from stone.

The old folks were right:
We have to go back and cook with wood again.

LA CRUZ

Tarde o temprano llegaré sollozando
a los brazos abiertos de la cruz.

Más temprano que tarde caeré
de rodillas a los pies de la cruz.

Tengo que resistirme
para no desposarme con la cruz:
¿ven cómo ella me tiende los brazos?

No será hoy
 mañana
 ni pasado
mañana
 pero será lo que tiene que ser.

Por ahora la cruz es un avión
una mujer con las piernas abiertas.

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