

The light
of the soul:
Neruda,
the white
raven, the
black cat

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P i e t r o C o r s i



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Beginning with seductive thoughts contained in Pablo Neruda's *memorias*, and brooding over the ancient legends of the Haida people of British Columbia (*the white raven*) and Italian superstitions (*the black cat*), the protagonist of this extraordinary story transports us, with transparent sensibility, into the world of Canadian immigration post-World War II. On the one hand, there is the narrative of the memory never wiped out from the mind of the protagonist who returns home to Italy and, with love, sees his old hometown as it once was, listening to the footfalls of the people and to the street noises no longer there. Additionally, there is the narrative related to the suffering caused by migration for many of the human beings who have lived it. Their stories are unknown or little known because, in silence, each one of them bears his or her own tale, his or her own tragedy. Like the protagonist, who hangs precariously between his real world, the world of his birth, and the Haida world of his wife inhabited by legends as old as time; and like the hunter who, after a few years of living in Canada, returns home to enjoy the fruits of a pension. On his return he realizes that the reality that awaits him is no longer *his* reality. In a moment of despair, and conscious of the fact that he will no longer be able to find the light (the clarity) of his soul, he goes off into the woods, which had been his hunting ground, to remove every trace of his life with a shotgun blast directed at the head.

*... to the memory of Peppino Tozzi
who in life dreamed of being born
or reborn
into a world of pious legends*

*I believe a man should live
in his own country
and I think that deracination
of human beings
leads to frustration
in one way or another obstructing
the light of the soul.*

— Pablo Neruda (*Memoirs*)

*The saws cutting the huge logs
ground out their shrill lament all day long.
First you heard the deep underground thud
of the felled tree.
Every five or ten minutes the ground shuddered
like a drum in the dark.*

Peacefully alone in this London airport that has been gradually transformed into a labyrinth where everything can be found for sale. A bazaar. A supermarket of the *duty free* and everything else. Because everything can be found in this huge market. There are people of all races and colors. People rushing to and fro and people who wait, patiently reading a book or a newspaper, or dozing, or sipping water from the neck of innocent plastic bottles.

And then, of course, there is *me*. Alone, as I was saying. Peacefully alone in this sea of Babel. Thinking about my never forgotten village that I will once again see this afternoon, about Vancouver where I live with my wife and children and about Queen Charlotte, the enchanted land of my mother-in-law with its legends, especially the

legends of the raven, the flower of life for my wife and children.

For those who travel by plane from one continent to another, Heathrow is the most prominent point of reference in the world. I always pass through here, whenever my final destination is any of the capitals of Europe. Heathrow first, then a jump to the continent. Returning to Vancouver from anywhere in Europe, it's always Heathrow first, then the jump across the Atlantic Ocean.

As the sales director for a British Columbia wood company, I am constantly flying through the skies of the world. Always in motion. And always alone. Like now, as I wait for a flight to Fiumicino. I like my work because it often takes me over the rooftops of the world, with the clouds as a carpet beneath my feet.

Not too many people can say that they love their work. As the old saying goes, the grass is always greener on the other side of the fence; another's work is always more appealing than your own. Not for me. If this wasn't my job, I would have to invent it.

I love my work because I love wood in all of its forms. From its birth, a beautiful and elegantly formed tree, to when it's cut, to when it's processed and eventually used for this or that. Wood is a pliable, living material. Human, almost. It hides scents that are unique in the world; you just have to know how to find them. My grandfather, who was a carpenter by profession, always told me that. Whenever I visited him in his shop down the street from my house, I found him covered from head to toe in a dust that gleamed, as if it held tiny bits of gold. Never failed to make me sneeze. He would smear my nose with the golden dust

released from his wood and he would say: "Smell, smell that; smell this lovely perfume."

Sniffing, I would close my eyes and lose myself in the forests of the world. In those immense forests I would see curls form under my grandfather's plane that, sliding light like air, caressed the wood planks. When the curls fell to the ground, I would bend down on my bare knees and collect them up to take home and show my mother with squeals of joy. I would tell her: "Look, look, mamma, grandfather's curls; smell, mamma, smell this lovely perfume!" She would look at my jewels pretending to smell them, to admire them with her large eyes, brown like my forests, but would turn up her nose.

Now I find myself in the forests of Alaska and British Columbia and I tell myself: "You are a lucky man, Alberto Bennato; you are a lucky man because you have the job you always dreamed of, a job that married you just as you married it."

It's from these forests that the wood reaches, in its raw state, the plants of my company: fir and mountain spruce, Canadian pine with evergreen needles, red and yellow cedar, alder with a broad canopy formed of large oval-shaped leaves from which a precious wood is derived, much sought after especially for use in construction. The trees are cut down by armies of lumberjacks, strong, tough men like war machines who enter the immense forests and move like squirrels. Guided by their experience, to prevent the forests from choking, the men select the trees according to their age. They squiggle mysterious marks on the bark, and then return to throw the trees down like matchsticks, one after another. Stripped of their

branches and roots, the logs are made to slide into the cold waters of the sea, to be conveyed to their destination with the help of specially crafted barges.

One after the other, like long aquatic trains, the powerful boats coast gently over green waters until they arrive at the processing plant. Still alive, finally free of the constraints that keep them together for the duration of the journey, which can take up to several days depending on route and currents, the logs are systematically processed by skilled machine operators who use state-of-the-art equipment to transform them and give them a new life. The product is, mostly, selected wood used for construction and for industrial applications of all kinds.

Not to waste any of the precious materials, it was recently decided that production rejects would be reduced to pulp to make paper products. Sophisticated modern machinery, heir of the old Fourdrinier invented between France and England in the early 1800s, processes the pulp. This is how we also produce paper used in books and journals, exported all over the world. This has become my area, my niche within that prominent company that is the glory and honor of not just Vancouver but all of British Columbia, perhaps even all of Canada.

Yes, I am happy with my job. Happy with Vancouver too. Happy with British Columbia, with its waters that travel a long way to lick the feet of the distant forests of Queen Charlotte Sound and mythical Alaska. In short, happy with everything. Nothing to moan about. I do miss, though, my grandfather's curls, the dust that powdered his face, the dust that gave me a healthy sneeze whenever I went to visit him in his workshop.

I'm no longer that young man who left Italy with a thirst to experience the world. Those who know me like to say—whether they genuinely mean it or whether it's just to flatter me is another matter—that my true age is revealed only if one takes the time to examine me closely. The first wrinkles around the eyes and mouth, like long soft threads of cotton, a few white hairs sprinkled in the thicket at my temples, the watery, tired eyes. I can say it, because those eyes are mine. And because I know that I am fast approaching the age of sixty.

I am not short, although I often think I am. But I am not tall either. I am, rather, like the people who inhabit the lands that overlook the mythology of the world that I have left behind: small-boned and frail, like those dolls made of the argillaceous clay that abounds in the countryside to make the lives of farmers more difficult.

*Distance and a deep silence
separated me from my world,
and I could not bring myself to enter
wholeheartedly
the alien world around me.*

During this trip I had the good fortune to visit clients in Madrid. I say good fortune, because I was able to take some time to wander through the corridors of that beautiful city and once again enjoy the Plaza Mayor, the Puerta del Sol and the Gran Via. Not, however, before a visit to the Parque del Buen Retiro and the Prado Museum to give my greetings to the great painter of the Spanish Renaissance known by the name that recalls both the man—the artist—and his origin: El Greco.

Now I am here, in this sad London airport. Alone. Peacefully alone awaiting a British Airways Airbus that will take me to Fiumicino, the Rome airport built in the early 60s to accommodate a new generation of aircraft. Since then, Fiumicino continues to live in the dust as it undergoes renovations always intended to accommodate

new generations of jets and international passengers. These international passengers visit Rome because it is the eternal City of the eternal Pope and the late Roman Empire; Bernini's city that gave hospitality to Michelangelo; the city that preserves age-old mysteries and the treasures of the world.

As for me, I am about to hop from Heathrow to Fiumicino so as not to lose the taste of the eternal inherited from the Bennato dynasty. The surname has been found in the registers of my hometown since the first half of the 15th century. It was then written with the second "n" capitalized but not spaced from the first, BenNato, perhaps in memory of a difficult childbirth or because the father of the newly born was unknown. Only I, so far as I know, only I dared to break the tradition begun by my ancestors and set out in search for the El Dorado that the *new* world would have deigned to reveal to me.

After a long but untroubled ramble that saw me catapulted first to Montreal, then New York and finally to the sunny beaches of Mexico, in the first half of the 70s I landed in Vancouver and set up house there. In those days, the charming town reminded me a lot of the Italian province whose memory had followed me for years.

*The hills and the sea's abundance
gave the city a pattern, making it uniform,
not like barracks,
but with the variety of spring,
its clashing colors, its resonant bustle.*

The city is surrounded by a vast expanse of ocean waters tinted by a blue of different tonalities that change according to the seasons and the time of day or night. Always blue, however. Unlike the waters of the Adriatic Sea that I had left behind: a sweet and tranquil sea, the cradle of my infancy. It's not even like the warm waters of the tropical seas that had enchanted me and chained me to their golden beaches, beaches that reminded me of the El Dorado that I was looking for. Those of British Columbia are beautiful cold waters that ever so gently go lapping at the white rocky beaches and the luminous forests, bringing along the gift of life.

In those days the town center was formed of buildings that, while not extending beyond a dozen storeys, sported an imposing architecture as if to say they had always been

there, even if that was not the case. The city, in fact, has blossomed only in recent times. Even the Hotel Vancouver, the most imposing building built in the late 30s, is not that tall. The impression of greatness is given by the imposing verdigris dome that rises above it, a thirsty lawn always ready to absorb the rain as well as the sun.

During the summer months it often rains, as if its duty is to keep the city streets clean. When it doesn't, the city is flooded by a sun that upon rising always remembers to be gay and cheerful. In winter the day announces itself with a mist that doesn't take long to tint itself an antique white. Between the fissures it leaves on the head of the passersby, friendly shadows peek in, like in the *chiaroscuro* of Caravaggio's paintings. It slowly fades away, replaced by a drizzle light as only a caress can be.

Sunny days never fail to brighten the city streets. On these rare occasions the city flaunts a deeper, livelier green and the surrounding mountains, part of the Rocky Mountains that rise from British Columbia to fade away in New Mexico, love to dress with a white glow.

At all times of day and night people walk the broad downtown avenues with an orderly step that gives the impression of being rhythmical, like the notes of a Bolero. This sense of order is perhaps because of the precision itself with which everyone does his or her own thing, without fear and without haste.

In the center, as in the suburbs, the houses at first may appear Spartan. Dignified and stately, with green and well-manicured yards, they give the impression of an immense and magnificent park. One has the feeling that they are just an accent, a point of reference to interrupt the monotony

of the green that in summer turns into various shades of emerald under the light of the sun and, in winter, when wet with rain, sends crystal reflections up in the sky.

My house is not one of those. Hidden among the elegant streets downtown, it is squeezed between trendy restaurants and businesses and antique shops where old objects are brought in only to come out looking like new. From there it is easy for me to reach my company's offices, located in a complex that, overlooking an inlet, also include the processing plants.

Epilogue

A bewildered traveler a tired hunter a white raven queen charlotte island a boat on a lake a black cat a suffering soul a chilkat blanket

blanket a white raven imprinted on a chilkat blanket that an old haida woman wears on her bent back have I dreamed I am I dreaming a white raven a tormented soul I wake up

have I dreamed forehead beaded with drops of sweat a light wet veil drips on my face on my neck it is not a cold veil it is not a hot veil it is there just there a veil there I stop to think have I dreamed am I dreaming a bewildered traveler a tired hunter a white raven

it is not a cold veil it is not a hot veil it is there just there a veil there I stop to think have I dreamed am I dreaming a bewildered traveler a tired hunter a white raven

Acknowledgements

This voyage of my memory, within my memory, began some years ago in the course of a conversation/confession with Professor Peppino Tozzi, himself the son of migration. My thanks go first to him, who has accompanied me in this journey even after his last, brave, lonely trip that removed him from the affection of his family and from all who loved him. I also owe a debt of thanks to Pablo Neruda. The profound and mysterious thoughts of this universal poet, his words as a man and a gentleman have illuminated the path I choose to take, bringing light to my soul, as I hope it will bring light to the soul of the masses of emigrants around the world. Finally, I have to say thanks to my friend Loreta Giannetti, the first reader of the first pages of this story, who graciously has found the right words to suggest essential changes without which this tale would have shattered like a vase without flowers.

Selected parts of this work, structured as short stories, have so far received favorable consensus: first prize Onlus City of Forlì and AICW (Association of Italian-Canadian Writers); second prize Cossèria Italia Mia 2011; honorable mention at the Policoro Pierides Literary Prize. The

complete work was awarded the second prize at the 2011 International Literary Competition “City of Martinsicuro,” *for the capacity of dealing with a current and delicate issue such as (...) returning to one’s homeland, bringing to the surface the marks left in the lives and thoughts of those who lived and suffered as emigrants. The author manages to accompany the reader on an emotional journey where faces, sounds, smells, popular beliefs, memories and feelings intertwine, creating a deeply evocative story.* The English translation was a semifinalist at the 2013 Leapfrog Press Fiction Contest.

The notes at the beginning of each chapter are from Pablo Neruda’s *Memoirs*, in the English translation by Hardy St. Martin, published by Farrar, Straus and Giroux.

About The Author

Pietro Corsi is the author of *Winter in Montreal* (FG Bressani Prize), *Halifax: the other door to America* (special mention Piedicastello Literary Prize; honorable mention Pratola Peligna International Emigration Literary Prize), *Omicidio in un paese di cacciatori* (Parchi Letterari prize, section dedicated to Francesco Jovine), *Raven's daughter* (Martinsicuro Book Festival prize, published in a bilingual edition), and other fiction and non-fiction books, the latest of which is *L'amapola della Sierra Madre*. He lives between California, Mexico and Italy: following the sun, as he likes to say.