

Six Poems*

LUÍS MIGUEL NAVA

Translators: Alexis Levitin and Ricardo Vasconcelos

Two Rivers

The body split in two, both parts
locked
tight together, I move on
with a double heart, as though
in a single boat, drifting down two rivers.

The Dark

The dark begins to break apart our
flesh, like snow
falling from the sky
bathed in blood

or a stone that, tumbling
into a lake, were to open it
ring after ring, with some
already beyond the water, in the realm of life,

someone
in the middle of the countryside
clasps a heater close

* The original poems in Portuguese are included in the collection *Poesia*, edited by Ricardo Vasconcelos, Assírio & Alvim, 2020.

while I, who for clothing
carry nothing but a neckerchief
cover my head with it in order not to die,

here no one fails to know
that lakes begin to freeze starting from the shore
and man starting from his heart,

that light
rises from the void
and all that remains to us is just

a sun we cannot trust
in a derelict sky

darkness wraps itself around
our bones, one might say
that death itself
serves us here for skin, as it does for bats.

—

Memory

That's how memory is. Wherever I find myself, it opens a hole, digs into the earth, which makes my walking more difficult, at the same time that it accentuates that strangeness of me feeling that I am myself to a point that not even my hands, no matter how much they might dig, would manage to get there. Granite, shale, cement, there's nothing it does not reach because of them — sometimes that disturbing thing occurs where, in a building, it feels as though memory has reached the ground floor or another even further down, which is so insidious that, if someone come from there were to say to me that he noticed nothing, I would be astonished. But it is in the flesh that everything is reflected with the greatest intensity—memory opens a furrow through it, scattering itself upon the surface with all that the earth behind it bears, until it mixes with one's saliva, till—utterly

subterranean—it is what serves it as a crown, what we call, alluding to the ocean, the breaking of the waves. What memory has carried always surfaces on the skin, just as, after tumbling in the waves, wreckage comes to rest upon the beach.

A Nail

He was hammering with care a nail into the wall, when he sensed that, like water from a pipe that may have burst, the future could come spurting forth suddenly from the whitewashed wall, a substance crystalline in appearance, but in whose core the shapes of the present would all dissolve, as if, along with their outline, they were to lose as well their meaning, and a sun that through a striking chronological accident were to drift away, even the least bit, from the present to the future, that sun would then empty itself into the sky, leaving in its wake an enormous scar.

Flesh

Flesh, pierced by as many and as varied sentiments as the various solutions into which it might be submerged, pierced by a sun which, after first proving impenetrable, it would end up allowing to flow through it like a kind of cinema to which suddenly it opened itself, flesh, a pure projection of a splendid time whose consistence for a moment would be its own, time that would banish the sun above it, without things growing dark, since it itself would gleam, flesh that through that wound would sink to sleep and rise at dawn, so that whoever seeing it now—bent like that over the spirit—would imagine it, in brotherhood with a lightning flash, among images for which it would be as much the screen as the very root.

Tempest

His self had shattered so badly that his very name became a wound, through which his flesh festered. From the lost bright mornings of childhood, of which now only a few tatters remained tangled in his roots, a radiance was sometimes released, a desperate appeal to reality, tearing him to shreds, from eyes to ears.

Whoever had conceived his bones, the goal of making them flower was now in sight. The skin, the sky, the stage set for glory, all would blossom now from them. All of this, however, was nothing more than struggling images, images attacked by memories in conflict with the present, or even with the past, where they seemed to be rooted, and which, constantly being chipped away at the edges, would allow forgetting to act upon them as a kind of sulfuric acid.

Each time it invaded him, the deluge of memory rose within to such a level of consciousness that his very bones, ceasing to be fixed and stable points to which he could cling, came, broken to pieces, floating to the surface of the stormy waters, mixing with entrails from which only the soul seemed not yet to have departed, as if swelling and preserving them amid the fat and tumult of memories.

LUÍS MIGUEL NAVA'S *Poesia* consists of four completed collections, *Where Nakedness*, *Pounding Surf*, *Beneath My Entrails*, *Sky*, and *Volcano*, published between 1979 and 1994, and eighty pages of posthumous publications, many of which brought out in 2020, twenty-five years after the young poet's shocking death. Nava's poetry relies on a fearless visceral depiction of the body, accompanying surging seas of memory and desire. His work, well-known in Portugal, has also appeared in French and Spanish translations. His undaunted examination of the role of eros in the human condition seems most reminiscent of the American writer Paul Bowles and the painter of torment, Francis Bacon. Poems drawn from his forthcoming collection in English have been accepted by *Beltway Poetry Quarterly*, *Birmingham Poetry Review*, *Bitter Oleander*, *Dodge*, *Gávea-Brown*, *Hollins Critic*, *Los Angeles Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *Metaforologia*, *Metamorphoses*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Offing*, *Osiris*, *Plume*, *Poet Lore*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Rosebud*, and *Spoon River Poetry Review*.

ALEXIS LEVITIN has published forty-seven books in translation, including Clarice Lispector's *Soulstorm* and Eugénio de Andrade's *Forbidden Words*, both from New Directions. His translations have appeared in well over two hundred magazines, including *American Poetry Review*, *Agni*, *Delos*, *Epoch*, *Kenyon Review*, *Massachusetts Review*, *New England Review*, *New Letters*, *New York Times*, *Partisan Review*, and *Prairie Schooner*. Recent translations from Portugal include Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen's *Exemplary Tales* (Tagus Press, 2015) and Rosa Alice Branco's *Cattle of the Lord* (Milkweed Editions, 2016). Translations from Brazil include five collections of poetry by Salgado Maranhão. Levitin has served as a Fulbright Lecturer at the Universities of Oporto and Coimbra, Portugal, The Catholic University in Guayaquil, Ecuador, and the Federal University of Santa Catarina, in Brazil and has held translation residencies at the Banff Center, Canada, The European Translators Collegium in Straelen, Germany (twice), and the Rockefeller Foundation Study Center in Bellagio, Italy.

RICARDO VASCONCELOS is a Professor of Portuguese at San Diego State University. He was a 2020–21 Fulbright U.S. Scholar. His scholarly work on modern and contemporary Portuguese literature, focusing on Mário de Sá-Carneiro, Fernando Pessoa, Eça de Queirós, Luís Miguel Nava, among others, has been published in several countries. His work in textual scholarship includes a series of critical editions of Mário de Sá-Carneiro, and in 2017 he published a bibliographic and critical study comparing Herman Melville and Eça de Queirós, *José Matias/Bartleby*. He is the author of *Campo de Relâmpagos — Leituras do Excesso na Poesia de Luís Miguel Nava* [*Lightning Field — Readings of Excess in the Poetry of Luís Miguel Nava*], the first book dedicated to the poetry of Nava. In 2020, he brought forth a long-awaited critical edition of Luís Miguel Nava's *Poesia*, with Assírio & Alvim, from which he and Alexis Levitin have produced an American co-translation.