The light of the soul: Neruda, the white raven, the black cat
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Pietro Corsi
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 pro-
tagondist 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. Addi-
tionally, 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 pen-
sion. 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 refer-
ce 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 Heath-
row 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. When-
ever 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 per-
fume!” 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 experi-
ence, 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 light of the soul

Pietro Corsi

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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 chiaroscuros 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.
On the sunburned face
where the Indian blood predominated
as in a beautiful terracotta amphora
(her) white teeth were revealed
In a full and generous smile
that illuminated the whole room.

Though living very comfortably in that world, or perhaps for that very reason, I often feel, deep in my chest, a certain call that comes from my roots still deep-set in the distant Mediterranean lands. In other words, as if they claimed those very waters to survive and not dry up. The claim doesn’t take long to become a strong desire and that desire, in turn, is quick to send visions that transport me to an adulthood interrupted the day I decided to set forth on the roads of the world.

I return to my hometown whenever I hear that call; indeed, to tell the truth, whenever I can. When I am in Europe on business, I don’t hesitate to break my journey for a visit, short as it may be. Even now. Even now that I’m here, in this airport that represents the navel of the
world, awaiting the departure of a plane that will take me to Rome instead of elsewhere, perhaps back to Vancouver where my wife and children are waiting for me.

Shirley, my wife, was born in a village once known as Queen Charlotte, today Queen Charlotte City, on Graham Island, part of a group of hundreds of islets that together form the Queen Charlotte Islands. She is a beautiful woman; a truly exquisite woman, if I may say so. From her Scandinavian father she inherited her luminous eyes, as clear as sunlight, and her beautiful hair, the color of an ear of wheat; from her mother she received a strong and firm character that makes her very much a woman of our times. She knows what she does, and knows what she says. Even when she doesn’t say anything but, like me, she gestures.

Her father, Arnie, arrived in those far lands while following, fascinated, the adventures of the salmon that from the fresh waters of the British Columbia rivers throw themselves into the ocean, only to return, along the same path, to multiply in a sensual celebration of life. He was obsessed with that noble fish that brightened the tables of the world with its tender flesh, as pink as the petals of a delicate flower. Having studied its every movement over the various seasons, without realizing it, he had espoused the beliefs of the local Haida Indians for whom salmon is life. He decided, therefore, to become a fisherman. He captured the fish up and down the channels formed by those islets as they tried, with bold resolve, to reach their rivers. He cleaned them, smoked them and distributed them to the markets of British Columbia, obtaining a profit that allowed him to live comfortably on the island that for him had become home and a sublime refuge. He now rests in the cemetery in Queen Charlotte City. They keep him company many of the Haida who in life had been his fishing companions.

Shirley’s mother, one hundred percent Haida, short and pleasingly plump, in her youth had been a beautiful woman. Her name is Ozhiinelii, but to both Shirley and me she is Neli, pronounced with the Latin “i”. Now old and wrinkled, a widow, she prefers to stay on the island where she has lived all her life. She says she feels out of place anywhere else, and she hates the big city. Like her people, she has great respect for animals. For the raven, however, she has a particular fondness. In one of the enchanting Haida legends, that ugly bird with broad, powerful wings had lived in the land of the spirits since before the creation of the world, before there was light. It was not any other crow, a common black crow. It was white, sported a proud, royal bearing and represented purity itself. One day it flew away from the land of the spirits, carrying a boulder in its beak, a piece of that enchanted land. When it decided to drop it, the boulder fell in the middle of the immense ocean and became large, always larger and larger. Thus was born the world as we know it today.

Like her ancestors, Neli believes that after death she can choose to be reincarnated as the animal of her preference. While thinking of life, she hopes to be reincarnated as a raven. Not as a common black raven, however, but rather a white one, like the one that had lived in the land of the spirits before the world of humans, and that in more recent times had reappeared on Graham Island, in the vicinity of Port Clements, at the estuary of the Yakoun River, not far from Queen Charlotte City. Her ancestors,
she used to say, had worshipped the white raven as the spirit and, indeed, the conscience itself of the Haida people.

Neli still dresses like the people of her islands: moccasins and leggings and a tunic over which she often wears a blanket woven with cedar bark and goat hair, the classic Chilkat blanket with, on the back, designed by hand, classical figures of the Haida culture. Hers has assorted figures all around it and, in the center, a large white raven with a hard, strong and prominent beak open upward as if ready to caw, ready to speak.

This is only right. It’s right that Neli continues to be tied to her ancient traditions. However, what I don’t find right is that her daughter should also dress like her. Not at home. At home Shirley loves to dress like all women her age. But she does it whenever she goes to visit her mother in Queen Charlotte City and often even when we go to some party or other. From a suitcase hidden under the bed she takes out her Haida costume, complete with leggings, moccasins and her own Chilkat blanket decorated with designs different from those on her mother’s; she wears them and transforms herself into a native princess.

I forgive her such eccentricities because I see her truly happy, so dressed, like a princess, and because she has given me the gift of two beautiful champions that one day could turn into my Canadian roots. The boy, Johnnie, 20, is small and thin like me, and like me with dark Mediterranean skin; Sophie, the girl, 26, is blonde like her mother, tall like her Scandinavian grandfather. My wife likes to remind me of them every time I think about my hometown.

“Like me and your children,” she says, trying to be persuasive with a sweetness that confuses me, “you no longer belong to that world.” And she indicates, gesticulating, with her right hand closed and the thumb pointed back, behind her. “Your world is this,” she says, and with her index finger she points to a precise spot, right there at her feet, before concluding with: “Your world is us,” at the same time placing her hand on her chest and repeating: “Us.”

I do not respond because I carry my world inside and only I can understand it. My world is the world that she points to with her thumb back, but it is also the world that she points to with her index finger, there, at her feet, in the land where we live. Only I can understand it, certainly not she, who has Haida blood in her veins and was born, like her mother, like her mother’s parents, like her mother’s ancestors, on Queen Charlotte Island.

Even Johnnie and Sophie are unable to understand it because, heck, they too have Haida blood. And yet, they are everything to me. When they were small, in the weekend evenings I would sit with them around the hearth, as my grandfather used to do with me, and tell them stories. They were, mostly, stories invented of the moment. Yet I often found myself telling them legends of the Haida culture as I myself had heard them, that is, as Shirley or her mother, had told them to me.

I can’t help thinking, when I’m alone, as now, that if Johnnie and Sophie were to decide to settle down and give me some grandchildren, then maybe they, the grandchildren that is, would provide the certainty that this is my world, my new roots. Grow up, I tell them, settle down. Give me a grandchild. I would be happy with only one, just one. Call him Al like me, if you wish, but don’t call him Alberto, the Italian name. Al would be quite okay,
just like that, without the rest. Maybe even Albert would do, even Albert without the ending “o” would be okay, like that, the English way.

Most of the time, I get no reaction from them! When they do respond, I get answers like this. From Johnnie: “Women are silly; they are empty inside.” Without realizing that in saying so, he is insulting his mother and sister. He is a silly idiot! The other, Sophie, she says that she is a woman and a woman marries only for love; and since love is supposed to be eternal and eternity is an infinite thing, she doesn’t quite know if she can rush towards that infinite thing, towards eternal love.

In short, the fruits of this cross of my Mediterranean blood and my wife’s Haida blood would like to make me understand, each in his or her own way, that they are allergic to marriage. Without realizing that by so doing, by so saying, they insult both me and their mother, if only because we got married in the eyes of both God and the law.

Young people of today. They are not like me. They are not like my ancestors who have had roots in the same town for over five hundred years. They are not even like their mother’s ancestors, faithful to the ancient Haida traditions. If they were, Johnnie would be a salmon fisherman like his grandfather, and like his grandmother’s ancestors, and Sophie would be a princess like her mother occasionally wearing the clothing used by her people. But no. They are not even able to think of a companion, if only to give me the gift of roots, of my new roots in a country that has welcomed me with open arms, the country where they were born.

I only have one bag with me. An old suitcase on wheels that over the years has been around the world a few times. I pick it up and start walking down the Fiumicino customs hall. Experience tells me to move towards the exit, head held high and natural, without bravado, so that I won’t be disturbed by the customs officers. It always works. In fact, they don’t even look at me and I head straight out, onto the street.

My first breath of air is heavy, dense with smoke and dust. The air of home. I take the escalator to the upper floors and proceed directly to the train station. I find it bare and quiet, four empty tracks awaiting their shuttles.

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I purchase tickets for the Termini Station as well as for my hometown station. In the bar, across from the ticket office, the first espresso since I left Vancouver is waiting for me. There, in Vancouver, I can always enjoy a good espresso. But nowhere else. Not in England, not in Norway,
not in Finland. Not even in the United States. No espresso can ever compare with those that are freshly squeezed, with proverbial passion, by the expert hand of an Italian barista.

I do not have to wait long for the Leonardo da Vinci shuttle. It arrives punctually on the fifty-third minute of every hour only to leave, always punctually, on the seventh minute of the next hour. The Termini Station is a teeming mass of people, rushing and sweaty, panting; people who, like me, drag a suitcase behind and people who push a cart and people who, on the other hand, run about with a newspaper folded in their hand, like a club.

Young African women stand out in the swarm, like flowers out of season. Beautiful, with round faces and prominent eyes, strong and fleshy lips, multicolored clothing with long skirts covering them to the ground and colorful scarves around their heads, they too run here and there, some in pairs and others with a child in their arms or led by the hand.

I check the electronic screen for the Freccia del Biferno. It’s scheduled to leave at 11:15. If it departs on time, it will hit my hometown before 15:30. The departure is announced as on time, but with no mention of the track. That number appears only a few minutes ahead of departure, so it’s always a race to reach it.

I buy a newspaper before going back to the electronic screen. As they change, numbers and letters emit a loud, clanking noise. Seeing that the magic number is not coming up, my neighbors shake their heads. They look at me, they look at each other. Not a single word is spoken. There is only a gesture of impatience, a wrinkling of the nose: a grimace that says it all.

After another crackle, the highly anticipated announcement of the departure track of the Freccia arrives. Number 14. The three cars are already in place, patiently awaiting their impatient passengers. Each car is taken by storm. I myself am forced to run, breathlessly. After wrestling with the others who, like me, have been waiting, I manage to get in and find the first class section. It’s nearly empty. I settle in without rush.
The train whistled cheerfully,  
Darkening the countryside and the station  
With giant plumes of smoke.

The train speeds past deserted stations, leaving behind a clanking rattle. I try to turn the pages of a book that I bought in Madrid, Confieso que he vivido, Pablo Neruda’s memoirs. I have read many of the Chilean’s works, all in the language of the poet that never fails in his intent to enchant the reader. He has enchanted me too, especially with his poems on love, of love. In his memoirs, Neruda manages to also be a skillful maestro. As with poetry, perhaps even more than with poetry, with his narrative he reveals an exquisite musicality.

Like me, or rather, certainly even more, Neruda has lived his life often getting lost in the streets of the world: as a diplomatic, reluctant cultural messenger of his government, as a romantic vagabond, and then also as an exile when his government demanded from him a loyalty that went against his political ideals. He was therefore personally familiar with the joys of the world as well as with the bitterness that was the undesirable fruit of his eternal wanderings.
sounds of nature, as when I am on Queen Charlotte Island: the music of silence, always perceptible at this late hour of the evening when the step is light and the heart heavy.

The notes of the hidden music are cadenced by Neruda’s words: the deracination of human beings leads to frustration that in one way or another obstruct the light of the soul. I carry on me, and inside of me, the superstitions still alive among the people of my hometown: the black cat, the dark shadows of the cursed woods, the disconsolate words of the son of the emigrant hunter. But the memory of the white raven of Haida legends is also with me.

Alone, quietly alone as always in the solitude that every man carries within, like an unforgettable relic, I am going to the convent to wash my conscience. And to try to discover, within the severity of those ancient walls, the secret of a new life beyond death under the protective wings of my mother-in-law’s 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 Forli and AICW (Association of Italian-Canadian Writers); second prize Cosseria Italia Mia 2011; honorable mention at the Policoro Pierides Literary Prize. The
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.