

**A SELECTION FROM THE SPANISH SECTION OF HIS NEW
COLLECTION OF POEMS THE LOST DISCOVERERS**

James Nolan

EL CENTRO

Afternoon in Barcelona, time to show you
the street of revolving typewriters,
onion corner and fish stall alley,
the zombie canyons of pinball
and the wide avenues of lost women
where anguish is made into catfood,
the small pleasures and great disappointments
of the boulevard life, the house where I live
with its seven balconies baring their teeth
in a snakey oasis of palm fronds and catcalls.

Best to drip absinthe through the holes
in the evening until it sweetens the air
and drugs us as heavy as hyacinths,
then throw all of the soup spoons
from the balconies at washerwomen
snapping their garters in the plaza
and at slick, boozing Andalusian boys
clapping flamenco home from the bars.

We must wait until the café shutters
crash down with millennial thunder,
until the beginning of everything final,
until the good Catalans have sat down
in their pantries to count the garbanzos,
until the 4 AM wisk of the twig brooms
sweeps leftover night from the cobblestones
back into morning, then we can lie here
gathering silence thick as the honey from hives.

THE COUP

23 February 1981

Fat uniformed janitors with falangist jowls
jolted from a forty year snooze by the buzzing
of a persistent fly, hijack my Whitman class:

“There has been a *golpe de estado*.

Everything is normal again.

Everyone go home.”

SWAT. *Todos al suelo*. Hit the floor,

clear the streets, bolt the door,
back into the basement. A metal box
of death certificates flips open,
sepia nightmares flood the plazas:
red carnations thrown across a shroud,
grandfather cowering among the cobwebs.
“*Mi hijo*, there is nothing left but
pig bread, *nada más que pan de cerdo*.

Franco resurrected on the wings of sirens!
How quickly this neon lie blinks out.
Ghost boots stomp up the back stairs
as poets and senators pack suitcases.
Blood rushes backward through the veins,
drunken *guardia civiles* mug the light,
close down the hard-won day. Spain hits the floor.
“This is all there is or ever was, *hijo mío*,
dry stones in the long night of his face.”

Midnight, in the stamp-sized milkshop downstairs,
we huddle like canaries in their covered cage
around a staticky transistor radio: *Boletín Madrid*.
The anarchist milkman raises his baggy pantleg
to show me the scar tissue of the Civil War,
in one hand gripping a club from under the counter
as if, toothless, he would limp onto Las Ramblas
to put to rest at last the demons from his past.
In every kitchen and café
all night the war is fought,

the Spanish heart a minefield
of bones ready to explode.
Does this night ever end?

The emblem of the King rises
like a cardboard communion wafer.
Dawn is televised, a suspicious
cathode glow permeates the air,
seeping over rooftops to become
this saved day. Rose vendors return
to their kiosks but the sun,
only foreigners believe it.

WHO WOULD HAVE THOUGHT

that these bare trunks of vine
twisted like the centuries
around the spear-headed spikes
of an iron fence under the balcony
would, within a week, break open
into purple clusters of wisteria
as though the Spanish Inquisition,
repenting of its inexhaustable
winter, were serving summer grapes
on the tines of a fork: this
is what humbles me, bucking

in harness, trying too hard, this
is what sends the proclamations
clattering to the floor: the dancer,
rehearsing for years, breaks her foot
in front of the cathedral on the way
to the performance while the skinniest,
the most unlikely girl spirals down
the stairs next door in a walk
that is the work of wings.

ANDALUSIA, I WANT TO KISS

your lips, slightly parted,
drawn on with a pencil

red as sausages,
as your roses,
Andalusia, I want
your mouth,
not the mothy mouth
of the mound of bones
paraded through streets
in jeweled aquariums,
not the twisted mummy
mouths of your saints
nor the flaking paint
of those monsters
of remorse, the lips
of scraggly madonnas
crawling across
the museum walls,
the pale larvae
of ancestral spiders,
but your pimienta mouth
your loud moto mouth
buzzing through
the Sunday festival,
its hoarse cinnamon,
its defiant garlic
gathering the tempestuous
light like pollen
and Andalusia, I want
to relieve you of your tight
black stockings
but that will be later,
after I get you down
off your motorbike
and into my arms.

THE LOST DISCOVERERS

The luggage plops unmercifully
onto the platform. Then slippers
shuffle down linoleum pension halls.
I am waltzing through a shop
of stopped grandfather clocks,
sidling along the narrow streets,

a seed fallen between stone cracks
fermenting in the filtered sunlight
of the Barrio Gótico. No wonder
the bread always rises and the wine
tastes so good. No wonder Columbus
left here to discover a new world:

to be always peering out
at some else's bedsheets
dripping in the Mediterranean air.
Much better with sails luffing
in the dragon-whipped winds,
to slip quietly, bravely

over the rim of the known.

When the trees along Las Ramblas
are trimmed back, Columbus ascends
on his bronze pedestal to take charge,
to gesture over the jostlings
of backpapers, sailors, lunatics,
dealers, lovers and whores.

With a map in one hand he points
not to the Americas but to India.
The lemming crowd follows anyway
until they reach the port waters
where they turn to walk back up
because this is what is left to do

after all the worlds have been explored,
the natives christened, the forests felled:
stroll between the poison air of the plaza
and the sludge of the port under a statue
of Columbus pointing in the wrong direction,
away from himself, over there, to the gold.