

## Poems of Alfredo Fressia

Translated by Mario Licón Cabrera\*

Alfredo Fressia (Montevideo, Uruguay, 1948), poet, translator and essayist. Fressia has published over 20 collections of poetry and his work has been translated into French, German, English, Italian and Portuguese. He was awarded the National Poetry Prize of the Ministry of Education and Culture, and the Morosoli Award for his achievement in poetry. Fressia was a teacher of literature and French in Montevideo until 1976 when he was dismissed from his position by the dictatorship and forced into exile in São Paulo, where he still lives and teaches. Since the end of the dictatorship in 1985 he has regularly spent part of each year in Montevideo. In 2018 Fressia was declared an “Illustrious Citizen” of Montevideo.

Alfredo Fressia, according to Brazilian poet Dirceu Villa, “owns that peculiar and rare happiness: the notable intimacy of his voice with poetry, that allows us to recognize ourselves in his verses...in Fressia’s writing there’s a wisdom of knowing oneself, a *nosce te ipsum* that goes beyond confessional speech to question us directly. It’s a poetry that fully inhabits places, losses, temperaments, and opens dialogues with the voices of the living and the dead.”

\*Mario Licón Cabrera is a Mexican-Australian poet based in Sydney. These poems were taken from *Susurrosur*, a personal anthology by Alfredo Fressia published by Valparaíso México in 2016.

## 21st of March 1976

I

Nobody wanted this evicted  
song.

It wasn't me who wanted it  
exiled.

21st of March, another season  
no one wanted,  
in vain the men screamed,  
they don't want it  
no one wanted this evicted  
border,  
no one this autumn day  
gone underground.

II

But this solitude, the day  
21st of March, the four meters  
21st of March, the four walls.  
But autumn and this solitude of the world  
on the 21st of March, and that lonely ailment  
the 21st of March. A man is exiled  
to his loneliness as a man the 21st of March.

III

But the autumn today  
but the autumn.  
Autumn evicted  
from all previous  
autumns.  
Filthy autumn  
expelled from its own 21st of March.  
Autumn alone and in ashes.  
But the autumn decreed today.  
But the autumn of silences.  
But the autumn.

## Sea wind

That's fine, the wind won. Now let's say  
that I've walked through Montevideo  
and in dreams I arrive today at Jackson Street  
corner Durazno, the gate is blind.

A gate without a door for Alfredo to get in,  
and open to the sky the corridor, waits for me  
the dampness of a room where I can see  
death combing her dolls.

My bones get jammed one inside the other  
like fragile memories, names  
to recognize, to measure if they're phantoms  
Roque and Esther, Graciela, Juan or Jorge.

That's fine, the wind won (it always wins),  
there will be no more questions about *Ubi sunt*.  
A seagull squawks, it's lost,  
and I don't know yet if I'm a shadow or a man

## Nocturne of São João Avenue

A silent transvestite leaning against a post  
is less sad than São João Avenue at dawn,  
when the venereal north-easterly fog reclines against  
the empty alien walls, and women  
wait, and the drunk waits for his shadow  
fallen on the road. The hour when the cats  
sink on their question-mark tails with no answers  
and sailors have sung and now wait and look at each other  
waiting for their song, waiting to listen to it  
and all languages are incomprehensible  
like the wind waiting for itself  
listening to its old wail of broken windows.

In the anonymous room barely lit up  
by the outside neon, the lovers  
are puppets of time: they listen to  
night's violent caresses, put their arms  
round each other's back soft as a disheveled bed.  
The wind gets trapped in the Avenue of acrid smells.  
and the lovers fall asleep to the neon's rhythm, untethered,  
bottled-up, night among the posts.

## **The emigrants**

*We address:*

Our history doesn't pass through the damp  
Galicia of our mothers and father doesn't know  
his alcoholic Lombardy. The days  
got exiled in their order of departure  
and the lines in our hands were never our own.  
The bay where our poor mother gave birth to us  
facing the sea the better to teach us abandonment  
still rises over our eyes and the past  
has been plotting the future forever,  
a geography of dust with no language.  
The quantities of grief don't repent  
nor is ours the return-to-sender mail of shadows  
hidden in the pictures that erase  
our face from the planet

## Digital image

*To Jean-Frances , In Memoriam*

In the last picture  
I kiss your head, as enormous  
as an elephant's  
(now your head doesn't exist any more).  
We're in the solitude of a savannah  
(not the Paris of our youth).  
We're smiling, even with our eyes.  
My chin is stuck to your skull  
and your mouth closes to breathe  
through the tracheotomy.  
We don't wait for anything now, we roar at the flash,  
splendid like pride  
on the edge of the abyss  
(My mortal mouth keeps sliding  
over the skin of your skull).  
Love was an art made from dust and bones  
like our carvings made from ivory.  
Today I only have this narrative poem  
(that points its shotgun at memories  
and doesn't shorten my wait).

## **Journal of a hunt**

It lasted an entire night. We sailed  
far beyond the columns, far beyond the forest  
where a goddess smiles and the stars  
without memory pointed up to the Lunarian. I stole  
the petals from carnivorous  
plants from the Garden of Earthly Delights.  
I crouch above the hatchway, thread vegetable necklaces  
for the short-lived throats of the crew.

My agile fingers  
follow the sinuous line of the Elzevir:  
These are Babylon's rivers, they flow upward  
in search of oblivion and always return  
proud as a planet. Sometimes I stop  
at the imperial hanging gardens, and practice  
death in my final falconry tournaments.

The centaur sharpened my teeth and fingernails. I have  
the greed of thirteen full moons, and of the voyage I remember only  
a few sunken navigation charts, deep-sea  
hunting and the sailors singing.

## Montevideo, the Coquette

You have to be careful if you talk about Montevideo because it's a city of grief. In Montevideo you always suffer a bit more than in the rest of the world.

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Montevideo is a city crowded with dreams. That's why nobody takes care of it. And also, you can't be in Montevideo and be there at the same time. In Montevideo we dream of different countries or impossible loves or new fates. When you're in Montevideo and you're almost in Montevideo, you enter a state of danger, and then you listen to tangos.

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On Saturdays, in Montevideo, you can hear candombes. With discretion.

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Children think Montevideo is beautiful, with its hill and its fortress, and say that they were born there around the month of January many, many, many years ago.

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The sea on each side of the peninsula: Montevideo's duplicity.

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All of us Montevideanos know what it's like to walk along General Flores at dawn. That's why no one does it. It's an item of revealed knowledge with no testimony because if anyone should testify they'd have nothing to tell.

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At a café in Montevideo I was introduced to a couple, a man and a woman who must have been about forty-five years old. They sat at my table and we chatted. They said that the heat that day wasn't normal, that it must rain. I said yes, it will rain for sure and it would be nice to see the rain. They asked me where I lived and told me they had made a trip around Brazil and that the beaches were very beautiful. And, for them, Buenos Aires was similar to Paris. Then we talked again about the desire for rain the next day, that it would be very nice to see the rain, for sure. It was very late when they left.

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Paris is always in the morning, with white flowers from Boulogne and roses. In Lima and Prague the afternoon is always red, like burning. In Buenos Aires it's summer night with jasmine perfume. When in Rio it's daybreak –celestial glory—in São Paulo it's seven in the morning and the wind shivers. In Montevideo it's always siesta time and one yawns and digests. It's nice and hot, unbelievable.

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Montevideo was an advanced military post on the Río de la Plata and was born nameless: Monte VI from East to West. San Felipe had fallen asleep and Santiago was badly frightened. Then Montevideo knew tedium and war –unspeakable--. And never had peace and quiet again.

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I was in Montevideo and dreamed of a very beautiful city. There were marble buildings and palaces and bronze gates and casinos with splendid women and jewels. Everybody drank champagne, and I didn't harm anyone.