

Daniel Borzutzky

Translation of Raúl Zurita's "The Country of Planks" - NEA Website

## PRISIÓN ESTADIO CHILE

*No era ése nuestro país, gritaban  
nuestras sombras pasando entre  
las aguas abiertas del Pacífico*

Son las viejas prisiones chilenas nos gritábamos mirando  
el país de tablas surgir entre los espumeantes paredones  
del Pacífico largo entero clavado cortándonos el paso

*Y el mar dejó de ser el mar y el cielo dejó de ser el cielo*

*Y las cumbres eran las puntas de las clavadas estacas*

*Y las llanuras soplaban colándose entre los listones y  
el viento no era el viento ni el aire el aire*

Donde de todo lo que fue ahora eran sólo entarugados  
paisajes clavados unos con otros como aserruchadas  
montañas mostrando arriba las empalizadas del cielo

*Y nuestras mejillas parecían un desmoronado cielo*

*Así se nos derrumbó el horizonte y los paisajes eran  
sólo escombros entre esos tabiques*

*Donde hasta el rajado océano gritaba mirando los  
desmoronados escombros de esas vistas*

Cuando entramos por el corredor de las abiertas aguas y  
arrastrándonos vimos los cuarteles de tablas atravesados  
entre los dos paredones del Pacífico y al fondo las gradas  
rotas del estadio Chile blanqueándose bajo la nieve como  
una gigantesca cordillera de palo aprisionando el horizonte

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Daniel Borzutzky's books of poetry and fiction include *In the Murmurs of the Rotten Carcass Economy* (Nightboat, forthcoming), *The Book of Interfering Bodies* (Nightboat, 2011), *The Ecstasy of Capitulation* (BlazeVox, 2007), and *Arbitrary Tales* (Ravenna Press, 2005). His poetry translations include Raúl Zurita's *Song for his Disappeared Love* (Action Books, 2010) and Jaime Luis Huenún's *Port Trakl* (Action Books, 2008), among others. His writing has been anthologized in *Telephone Books Anthology of English-to-English Translations of Shakespeare Sonnets*; *La Alteración del Silencio: Poesía Norteamericana Reciente*; *Malditos Latinos Malditos Sudacas: Poesía Iberoamericana Made in USA*; *Seriously Funny: Poems About Love, God, War, Art, Sex, Madness, and Everything Else*; *A Best of Fence: The First Nine Years*; and *The City Visible: Chicago Poetry for the New Century*. His writing has been translated into Spanish, French, Bulgarian, and Turkish and has been recognized by grants from the PEN American Center and the National Endowment for the Arts. He lives in Chicago and teaches at Wilbur Wright College of the City Colleges of Chicago.

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**Note to David: This is both the author's bio and the translator's statement-he did not wish to separate them.**

"The Country of Planks" is a section from a 700-page book named *Zurita*, published in Chile in 2011, and each poem is titled with the name of a prison that operated during the 17-year dictatorship of Chilean General Augusto Pinochet. Zurita knew from firsthand experience what it was like to be imprisoned under the dictatorship. He was arrested on September 11, 1973, the morning of the coup d'etat. He had been a student at the time at the Universidad Santa Maria in Valparaiso, Chile, where he was pursuing a degree in engineering. After his arrest he spent the next six weeks on a prison ship, deprived of communication with his family. In an interview I conducted with Zurita in 2009, he described the ship as holding 800 prisoners in a space that could only contain 100. The experience of the coup, Zurita has stated, has defined all that he would come to write. In this same interview he told me that during the years of the dictatorship he felt as if he needed to write "a poetry that was as powerful as the pain being delivered by the state." I believe that this powerfulness also applies to the writing that Zurita has produced after the coup; the writing that animates and reflects upon Chile's contentious transition from dictatorship to democracy.

Included here is Zurita's poem to Chile Stadium, a sports facility in Santiago that was transformed by the dictatorship into a detention center. Chile Stadium has since been renamed Victor Jara Stadium in homage to the great Chilean folk singer who was arrested on the day after the 1973 coup, and whose body was later discovered tossed near a railroad track. Only a few months ago, at the end of 2012, it was announced that a Chilean judge charged eight retired army officers with Victor Jara's murder in 1973. One of those officers currently lives in Florida.

As in much of his poetry, Zurita's work here addresses the way that governments have often used nature to inspire a sense of national unity, and he is reclaiming it, or reconfiguring it to reflect what he takes to be the realities of a dying nation. Rather than being something that forms national identity, in Zurita's "The Country of Planks," nature absorbs identities. The shame of the political has been absorbed by the natural. The blood and the bodies of the disappeared, now scattered throughout the landscape, have become part of the homeland, the Chilean soil. This is the rhetoric of Zurita's natural depictions as they are tied to national identities. It's a rhetoric of shame, of loss, of unspeakable and unquantifiable violence.