As if poems were the earth’s dreams. Sometimes it appears that poems are this: the earth’s dreams. I lived seventeen years under Pinochet’s dictatorship, and imagining these poems occupying landscapes was my intimate form of resistance, of not giving up, of not dying in the midst of abuse and confinement. When faced with the horror, we had to respond with art that was stronger and more vast than the pain and damage inflicted on us. I believe this is what I thought in 1975, a year and a half after the military coup. It was then that a few soldiers subjected me to one of those typical abuses in which they are experts. I recalled the well-known evangelical phrase: if someone strikes your right cheek, turn the other to him. So I burned my left cheek. Completely alone, I enclosed myself in a bathroom and burned it with a red-hot branding iron.

Purgatory began with that laceration. It was my first book and was published four years later, in 1979. Almost at the same time, I envisioned poems drawing themselves in the sky. Three years later, when a few of those poems were written over New York City (the photographs are in my second book, Anteparadise), I thought that what had begun in utmost solitude and anguish had to conclude one day with the prospect of happiness. It’s difficult for me to comment on my own work, but I feel that Purgatory represents a certain image of what pain can generate, of its desperation, but also, I hope, of its beauty.

It seemed to me then that the great imprints of human passion, of our suffering, as well as a strange perpetuity and survival, are reflected in the landscape. None of the poetic forms I knew, nothing, could help me express this. From there, I think, emerged the need to use other registers, such as mathematics (I was finishing my studies in engineering when the
A coup d’état occurred in Chile, studies I was unable to complete because of my arrest) or visual forms or documents. It has also occurred to me that everything I’ve done either well or inadequately since is an extension of *Purgatory* zones, as if the book were written to represent a memory.

I had to learn to speak again from total wreckage, almost from madness, so that I could still say something to someone. I think that *Purgatory* is evidence of that wreckage and of that learning. Writing this book was my private form of resurrection. An example of this process can be found in a psychiatric report to which I added “I love you I love you infinitely.” Yes, this is what it means: to be able to say something to someone else, even from the most profound place of humiliation and shame. Almost thirty years later, I imagined a poem written over the great cliffs facing the Pacific and felt surprised to be alive, surprised that so much time had passed and that I could see the ocean.

*Purgatory* is not much more than this. In a more benign world, art would no longer be necessary, because each particle of life, every human emotion, would be in itself a poem, the vastest of symphonies, a mural of skies, the cordilleras, the Pacific, the seashores and deserts. Then, between poetry and love, we would not require the mediation of words.

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