



Chilean

# Snapshots

C. John Holcombe

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# CHILEAN SNAPSHOTS

## Introduction

It will help to have something more than the usual stereotypes of the country.

Chile is that long, thin country on the western seaboard of south America: 4506 km from north to south and 180 km in average width. Of its 16 million inhabitants, a third live in Santiago. The land is one of contrasts: empty deserts in the north, pleasant agricultural land in the centre and a mountainous region of forests and glaciers in the south. The main industries are mining, forestry, fisheries and farming. The Chileans are known as the English of south America: for their reserve, for efficient and honest conduct of business, and for a mother tongue they have made their own. The country is becoming more cosmopolitan, especially in Santiago,

but English is not widely spoken, and the south of the country has long-established German communities.

The Portuguese navigator Ferdinand Magellan called briefly at Chiloë Island in 1520, and Diego de Almagro, one of Pizarro's captains, led an expedition into Chile for gold in 1535, but the first real contact with Europeans came with Pedro de Valdivia, another of Pizarro's officers, who partly colonized the country, founding settlements at Santiago in 1541, Concepción in 1550, and Valdivia in 1552. At that time, the northern part of the country was occupied by Quechua tribes who had been conquered by the Incas, and the southern part by the Araucanians, who fiercely resisted European incursions and began a series of wars that lasted into the late nineteenth century.

Chile was initially a captaincy general dependent upon the viceroyalty of Peru, becoming an independent division only in 1778. The country developed slowly as there were few natural resources: the population was 100,000 in the mid sixteenth century and one million by 1830. The Central Valley was farmed in large haciendas by Creoles (Europeans born in the country) and the townsfolk engaged in trade, but intermarriage produced the mestiza or mixed race that makes up most of the present population.

In 1810 Chile announced its independence from Spain, and Bernardo O'Higgins proclaimed absolute independence in 1818, but the country did not expel all royalist forces until 1826. O'Higgins ruled with dictatorial powers until deposed in 1823, when a period of turmoil followed. Order was imposed by the conservative government of General Joaquín Prieto, aided by Diego Portales, who reorganized the administration and helped draft a new constitution in 1833, which invested immense powers in the executive. Liberal groups made abortive efforts to remove the Conservatives from power in 1835, 1851, and 1859, though the Conservative administrations were responsible for railroads, schools, mines and accelerated immigration. There were brief wars with neighbours—with Bolivia and Peru in 1836, and with Argentina from 1843.

Constitutional reform appeared in 1861, and liberal elements also furthered public welfare, roads, railways, postal and mining projects. Four years later, the country became embroiled in the Spanish-Peruvian war, which continued sporadically until 1869. The valuable nitrate deposits of the Atacama Desert led to a further war with Peru and Bolivia, from which Chile emerged victorious with added territories in 1883, some land disputes only being settled in 1928. Conservative forces allied with the Catholic Church organized a revolt against the Liberal Government of José Manuel Balmaceda, seizing the rich nitrate deposits of the north and the Chilean fleet. Valparaíso and Santiago fell to the

rebels, and the war cost 10,000 lives. Balmaceda committed suicide, and Admiral Montt became president, ushering in a period of reconstruction but also demands for greater participation in government.

Chile was neutral in the First World War, but strife developed between liberal and conservative elements. The Liberals gained power with Arturo Alessandri's election in 1920 but were unable to institute reforms. A military coup d'état then attempted to drive through reforms but this was overthrown a year later in 1925, by another military coup, which introduced electoral reforms, reduced the power of Congress, and separated Church from State. Alessandri resumed power, though only intermittently between rival administrations and coups, but did serve an uninterrupted five years to 1938. Liberal governments followed, but land reform was hampered by the 1939 earthquake, which killed 28,000 people, and the political tensions between pro-Allies and pro-Axis parties during the Second World War. President Ríos brought Chile into the war for the Allies in 1944, while the Communist Party grew in strength.

Three communists were brought into the 1946 government of Videla, but the radical-communist coalition lasted only six months. In 1947, relations with the USSR were severed, the Communist Party outlawed

and some hundreds of Communists incarcerated under the Law for the Defence of Democracy. A military revolt led by former President Ibáñez was put down, but social unrest was frequent in the following years, and 1951 saw strikes in most sectors of the economy. Popular dissatisfaction with political parties led to the election of General Ibáñez in 1952, but he could not cope with the economic and social problems. In 1958 Jorge Alessandri headed a Conservative-Liberal coalition to encourage free enterprise and foreign investment. Despite opposition from the now legalized Communist Party and the newly formed Christian Democratic Party, he proposed a ten-year plan of tax reforms, building projects, and agrarian reform. These were only partially successful, and the country suffered massive loss of life in the earthquake and associated tidal waves of 1960. The centrist Christian Democrat party was elected in 1964, but Eduardo Frei's partial nationalisation of the copper industry and limited land reform antagonized both left and conservative elements.

It was against this widespread dissatisfaction with the political process that the communist Salvador Allende came to power as head of a left-wing coalition in the 1970 presidential election. Against widespread opposition, he swiftly moved the country towards a Marxist state, nationalising banks, industries, farms, transport and communications. The experiment was a spectacular failure: business life came to a halt, many lost

their livelihoods, shortages appeared in many commodities and services, and private citizens armed themselves while left-wing nationals and foreign mercenaries trained in farms and factories. The American administration that had first sought rapprochement, tried to undermine Allende's administration, but the September 1973 coup was a Chilean answer to a Chilean tragedy. With the country bankrupt and on the verge of civil war, General Augusto Pinochet headed a military junta that seized power in a bloody coup, and put democracy on hold for sixteen years. Allende committed suicide. Political parties were banned, and some thousands of left-wing agitators and sympathizers were incarcerated, tortured or disappeared. Many more fled abroad, crossing the thousands returning to Chile after the Allende years.

Such was the despair and hatred generated by the Allende regime that the military were hailed as the saviours of Chile, and the Pinochet administration, for all its excesses (and they were grievous), was able to lay the foundations for country's current economic system, settling the age-old land question by allowing farms to charge fair prices for their products. The free market reforms were not smoothly implemented, however, and there was great distress in 1975 and 1982 when world-wide recession led to a fall in copper price and high unemployment. Strikes and bombings followed, which were put down brutally, the CIA supplying money and training for counter-insurgency throughout this period

of right-wing government in Latin America. A referendum in 1980 legalized the regime until 1989, and Pinochet began another eight-year term as president. By 1988, however, the spectre of a return to the chaos of the Allende and pre-Allende years had receded, and 55% voted against a continuation of military rule. Pinochet stepped down, assumed immunity from human rights actions, and the country cautiously returned to parliamentary democracy.

Since 1989 the country has been governed by left-of-centre coalitions. Foreign investment has flooded into the country, but social reform has been slower. The country needs better schools, hospitals and employment legislation, particularly in rural areas, and the gap between rich and poor continues to increase. The current President, Michelle Bachelet, has not dealt effectively with transportation and education issues, but human rights abuses of the Pinochet years are being investigated and some perpetrators have been brought to justice. Socially and politically, the country remains deeply polarized, but few in Chile want a return to the trauma of the Allende years and their immediate aftermath.

# The Poems

## 1. Conquistadors

Theirs was the fortune they made themselves,  
fought for in the swamps, forests, terraces, mountains  
cities and temples. What did it matter if the Church  
admonished or was wary? With a hand in or  
not, men died the same. Charles on his distant,  
splenetic throne was stunned by the riches, the stories  
told of the cities, the plumed warriors, the mountain  
Indians who worked on the slopes half lost to air.

Why should he worry what was done for Spain?  
He would send his advisers and if they ameliorated  
a little the circumstances, the Inca king  
should be bloodied the same and wear the yoke  
as a ridiculous puppet whose blank eyes stared  
at white peaks and selvas, with nowhere to go.  
No, their gods were not helping, but indeed were  
day by day dropping into golden blocks. It was

just as predicted and the showy procession  
to the southlands returned with their thousands dead.  
At the legendary treasures men shook their heads,  
smiled at the simpletons and sent them on.

## 2. Coming of Man

He came once or came twice: imponderable  
the impedimenta of the cave-floor siftings  
or the shadows of the hunted on painted walls,  
the rare shaped obsidian of the forest.  
Were they then happy, foraging on with  
their litters of families and tree-high gods?  
Long poles of the evening cross the clearings,  
a muttering in the earth that the path is lost.

Just who they were they would never know from  
the rain-soaked and shellfish-gathering people  
who greeted the sailors but had nothing to say  
of their eons-long journey through the stifled forests.  
Some were welcoming, more were hostile, but most  
accepted their masters in a plantation system.  
Even the Araucanos, a war-like race  
had their tribes, the customs, established fiefs.

No, to go back is to no beginnings,  
to a world of conjecture and untied threads:  
a matted resilience in a sullen people  
not even comfortable but trooping, passing on.

### 3. European Inheritance

Not inevitable but more God's word:  
throughout the citadels it was only rock  
that the Incas ruled and their feathered nobles  
raised dust in the air as their forebears had.  
Beyond that there was nothing: no inscriptions,  
the customs crude as the very sculptures,  
flat like a child's, carved out in scribbles: a word  
might have saved them though the Church said not,

seeing how dangerous the whole thing was,  
and Manco revolted. Remember: it was  
at best a bewilderment, an ignorance in  
the dark eyes, the smiles, the treading quietness  
of gesture in the acquiescence which  
one never knew in the trails so narrow  
a knife could reach out from the undergrowth  
or a man slip into the deep ravines and  
falling so soundless be lost for good.

Yes, they were treacherous, needed whippings  
and burdens to work them and even then,  
they were apt to undo the heavy halter  
and lie there in terror till the breath went out.

#### 4. The Incas

All too many in the lines of mountains,  
on the seashore, in the forests. Conjecture  
the bloodlines, the bones, the tiny fragments  
of the languages spoken in this the last  
emboldened empires before the Spanish with  
temples and observatories and a corvée system  
on bridges and track ways and terraced slopes  
that climbed to the mist line and then was lost.

The nobles had arm-bands, high plumes of feathers  
traded by the hunters in the lowland forests,  
wore gold with impunity, had a certain swagger.  
But beyond that not much: a thinness that soaked  
into wall and hill on the altiplano:  
the mountains loomed up, the cats-paw of stars  
were troubled by darkness, and for all the splendour  
what they preserved was in strings of beads.

Gone into the first time, a listing of sky  
when sunlight broke through and their sacred places  
blazed with the certainty though the night sky told  
them to be peaceful, accepting and bow their heads.

## 5. First Settlers

The campfires saw them only partly home:  
a haze in the evening, smoke across lands  
not fragrant with memories, or admitting  
Indian in the settlement and only later  
in caves, in tumuli, in the scattered grass  
thick with impedimenta of a vanished people.  
For the most part, nothing: a high, dark forest  
or shaded with palms, a tremulous place

that was thick with the gods, their clap of  
wings, a jewelled flash and then a waiting  
as the air above yawned up between the  
canopies of trees that looked from above  
as did the mountains and the rivers in  
their white and tasselled and endlessly sounding  
cataracts that ground the hard blocks to pebbles,  
brilliant and erratic in the lowlands that

swung far from the homestead and even were  
shifting away from them further, as were  
the seasons of hunting or of planting yams, a  
country to be wondered at and not contained.

## 6. Volcanoes

It is the mountainousness of the thick effusions of lava and lahar and plumes of dust out of this vent or another. The spouts shift on playing through a surface that could be porous in that the stab-wounds go deep, continuing far into the mantle and can't be staunched. So whatever you notice in the towering cliffs of layer is a lesion only briefly stopped.

Yes, they are beautiful, and in their gloating surfaces of a flower-head white they speak of fragility, an inverted cone of petals close-painted about the heart. Do not suppose so. From a distance of miles from the crater the explorer crosses a holocaust of cindered and torn-up earth, trees, if they're standing, as black-charred posts.

And that is the point:, the land holds on to something renewing, to which it returns blessed with the seasons, while the shifting rock murmurs to itself and reshuffles the pack.

## 7. First Communists

Each to his needs, and those needs were known:  
to worship, not the sun god, but his passage through  
the peoples in their festivals, in their labouring strokes  
on their high fields, in the mines, on the mountain roads,  
in their corvées at the bridges, in manoeuvres for war.  
The world was an emptiness with many gods. So  
said the priesthood, which was evident too  
in the blockades of darkness where no one went.

Yet each had his wants. They were a quiet people,  
content for the most part with what was given,  
with a period of toiling as there was for resting. All  
had of the harvest and fruits and bore their children  
much as they had done before the Incas came.  
All had an apportionment of the sun and rain,  
and took their dreams with them when they died. True  
the fields they tilled in they did not inherit  
but the high god himself had his days and vistas

when loosed to the far time, between earth and sky,  
and the sunlight broke through and their sacred shrines  
that blazed with a certainty at each fall of day  
told them to be peaceful and accept their plight.

## 8. Almagro

Resolve, ride hard and never look back  
to the villages huddled on the wind-tilled soil  
not to the dark Meseta or Extremadura  
that had only hunger for younger sons.  
Pig-farmers, illiterates, small wood hovels,  
and nothing to come back to should the Conquest fail:  
but it wouldn't: the sun blazed before them  
and gold was for grasping beyond each hill.

Later, much later on the skylines, standing  
with the hard wind about them and its hurt  
enlarging the eyes, they would think of that promise.  
Almagro marched south into the Copiapó  
valley where cold froze the bodies in thousands  
upon thousands: continuing, he met the  
Auracianians, was defeated, moved back north  
across the Atacama where the last few died.

Of course they were Indians. A courteous man,  
generous and good-hearted, indeed Christian,  
but surely he said with the quarrels, deceptions  
and his own public death: what an accursed land!

## 9. Gonzalo Calvo de Barrientos

He was not the first, Diego de Almagro,  
that was Gonzalo the Bald of Barrientos:  
a disgraced soldier of fortune. With Pizarro  
his ears had been lopped, but to the Indians  
proof of his strangeness as holding court  
with caftan and spear they did his bidding:  
a bearded ruffian but to Almagro  
a godsend of course when he came south.

Like speaks to like and in these unfathomable  
lands on the large edge of silence, when over  
the hills could come the bristling feathers,  
the power of their cavalry and their white-skin status  
were never assured, or that stout-hearted men  
would not fall in the end and the thrown spear pierce  
through breastplate and courage and unblessed hands  
tear at the standard and the high gold cross.

A rout was what the Church would never risk  
and Barrientos in time slips out of the story:  
a portent of trouble in a violent time but, too,  
the first novelty figure: a mongrel race.

## 10. The Church

That past was horrific but beyond their care.  
Whatever the injustice, the encomenderos came  
with labour to work them: not very willing hands  
but also not Africans who were truly slaves.  
What was the alternative? The native peoples  
released from the Incas found overlords  
much more demanding and steeled with sword,  
whipping and a sermon to enlarge their claim.

The needs were many, to send something home,  
and not as Peru where there was only metal,  
or the odd jewel turned up from faraway  
shrines in the forest where no one went.  
The south was more open, and it would yield  
oats, maize and potatoes: not a smiling land  
but part-owned by farm-hands who were as children  
in marriage and giving: a mestizo strain.

All based on land-grants, inequalities  
the conquerors imposed and the Crown accepted.  
Settlement was needed and the good church fathers  
signed the cross over what they could not change.

## 11. Subject Peoples

Whatever one said, they were a subject people  
and, if smiling at times, their glistening skins  
exuded an odour and uncouth oil. Yes,  
they could be strong, certainly, but yet more lazy.  
Where were their God- lands? They wouldn't say.  
Asked for their laws they would shake their heads.  
Even when the Bible was unlocked, how pitifully  
their language would attend to its ornate word.

It was all in the far-time, the time before  
the breastplated warriors had come with their tubes  
their horses and their light-skinned companions. They  
were neither welcome nor yet unwelcome: no,  
it wasn't what they thought of, if out in  
the forest they saw them: they rutted like men  
and the women urinated secretly, oddly, but  
they bore their children and were built the same.

They worked the mines and they died in thousands,  
exhausted by haulage, diet, the new diseases;  
in the high ground, the isthmus, the riverine swamps  
the hope was still westward and the land was blessed.

## 12. Indian Wars

The land was elemental and the pain they took from heat and sickness and chafing metal, was returned with delicacy, and they never scrupled to increase the torment or to bypass the end: In knout, racking or gelding: the strappo'd body would howl in its anguish, an animal sound from a blood-shroud of carcass with all bones smashed.

In turn the Indians brought the same frenzied mutilation to the foreign skins, were apt to go further and living Valdivia was rumoured immured into molten gold. Pain was the arbiter, was always sought for in this high-lifted continent of strange, domed heads, and even the Mayas, ritually emasculated, would dance through the roar of hosing blood.

It was needed, expected, and quite young children who jeered at the horror and the tortured limbs learned that in pain, from the priests, sans penis and feathers, they were as children and needed hope.

### 13. Wandering Continents

From the first it was different and if the  
continent and distantly looked left behind  
then the promontory into a proto-Pacific  
made itself springboard from unbroken sea: true,  
half round the world would go the circuit  
to arrival, half-drowned, on the Australian shores,  
yet even today there's a bristling air  
in looking beyond what was somehow lost.

The depths say nothing; they are hardly studied.  
Beneath the cappings of volcanic cones  
the pieces are broken, their contiguous  
pieces have a fortune and yet no past.  
The copper and the iron are the comminution,  
of continents assembled and dispersed again:  
Pangea, Gondwanaland: it doesn't matter  
when even the ice floes soon drift apart.

Broken and unbroken throughout the conquests when  
the big cats moved slowly through the isthmus forests,  
when after came man with his feathered pretensions  
and Spain on the Incas rebuilt its past.

## 14. Animal Friends

It was home half and not: among the plants and the animals that were near enough to be akin to their memories the scientists found in the rocks or caves or in the thin topsoil bones of an enormous land-based sloth, the sharp claws and teeth of marsupial tigers and beak, claws and feathers of six-foot birds, clearly predatory and built to run

faster than man could or his fleeter neighbours. Yes, it was upsetting: that these things could tear strong skin to pieces and maybe would. But man was not with them the scientists said. No, he came later when the ice sheets melted into a habitat changed and the temperate climate urged him to settle and at last grow crops in a land of his asking that time forgot.

But had it? Continually the volcanoes spewed in violence their ashy blankets and the land shook and the loosed stones cast long shadows of a conquest about to start.

## 15. First Settlers

What they had come for they would survive  
however the land fought them or the yearly frost  
fell that much earlier or not at all.

Far from the cordon of the Christian west  
they had women to think of and men to feed.  
Not slaves for the most part but by them kept  
working and laughing, the undressed women  
who followed them closely even out of bed.

More so the animals that they brought out west,  
the milk cows and the horses not kept as stud  
but simply for working. If the city  
folk could call them wassos they didn't care.  
Round their small fields or on the great plains south  
the air was their freedom and it plumped up trees,  
the brooks with their gravels and the churchyard grass  
with the stones and the crosses that looked to home.

But feast days were different and in their riding  
each held the reins loosely and with a filigree switch  
of the crop brought the animal to gesture, high  
stepping, like their Spanish, with a foreign note.

## 16. Struggle with the Indians

Always there was the south, the Auricianian  
country with its ceasefires and new incursions:  
the Indians are vanquished but attack in force.  
Homes are destroyed yet the peace moves mount.  
Long consultations. Each side retires.  
The Jesuits make converts and pacification  
is the method preferred until Philip IV  
renews the offensive and more blood flows.

What were these people with their simple ways  
answering to their chieftains and not to God?  
They hunted and fished, collected fruits,  
kept a few animals and grew potatoes.  
These were the greatest of the Indian fighters  
and spilt more blood than the wild Cheyenne:  
even the Sioux in their assembled thousands  
never routed the armies as this fierce clan.

They were broken at last, 1861;  
the country was occupied and a slow absorption  
began through schooling and the Spanish tongue  
which speaks, though they use it, of barbaric times.

## 17. Ploughs to the Fields

Whatever their forebears or the unnecessary resistance from the Auracianians these people were docile and if not assiduous could be settled, improved and brought to God. How did they get there? was not theirs to answer though all around there were sounds of the forest in the land of the dreamtime and even animals had a semaphore, it seemed, though they could not speak.

Yes, it might be well, said the first inhabitants, smiling as though to make light of the matter, to listen to the wind and the slow clouds rising know the immemorial in the river's voice, but just as they pleased: it was a foreign place a peninsular to nothing hemmed in by clouds sea and mountains that no one wanted or even owned by the animals, and they were strange.

Yet still around them though retreating back as the forests were cleared and imported cattle brought rhythms to fields, those fields returned miracles of husbandry that wasn't theirs.

## 18. Iglesia de San Francisco

Here you go back into the huge boulders  
in the walls, the colonnades and to dark  
flarings of saints under the all-enclosing  
varnish of the half-lit Colonial Museum.  
This was the Convent that you must pay  
to visit, and what little remains is set  
out properly, with helpful notes, and if  
not friendly, the staff, they attempt an English

as the friars themselves will have tried  
what to them was limited with local folk,  
saying again how the Word brought far  
to a dusty country with inverted seasons  
was theirs if they seized it and believed.  
The flock nodded, sang, had children  
in ignorance, in transience of  
a world to be endured and not enjoyed.

So, when you come out into the sunlight and  
have things shuffling towards you with hands  
held out, you think of a sanctimonious  
obedience to vows that were spotlessly kept.

## 19. Southern Forests

The more they went south into the high pine hills, slipped on their footholds, chopping to the skyline there was a thickness about it: a dropping of darkness like an enormous silence. However they might meet it on the slippery floor and treading more quietly, the shiny leaves not so much fell as infested the journey, spoke of deception and disquiet continuing

into the laughter of rock at the streamside fall, the effervescence of moss on the forest boulder, the ecstasy of the fern, which, as it shook its spores down into a filigree, had an exact pattern of quietness that went on still further than uncluttered birdcall through the unforced clearings: not solitary at all but a stinging stillness  
In the wind as it sped into the evening light.

A skin it seemed to their stentorian being almost a closing membrane which, wherever they went, even to the cold or temperate pastures, would hold and uncannily drag them on.

## 20. Icecaps of the South

Far in the south it grew more strange: huge  
hillsides sloped down into sunless gulfs  
as the hapless had put it but here still true.  
A vast land, brooding, with slivers of ice  
that grew the more stacked and impenetrable  
the southward they went: a mountainous waste  
of whiteness beneath ever lowering skies,  
as though the past now was leaving, and in its place

was only the implacable and the bitterly  
hostile to staying. Yes, in the summer, in the  
harsh brief summer of breezes and brilliance  
in sky, trees and water the blue flared up  
held them amazed that such a flowerless stretch  
could be warm and beautiful, that headland to  
headland the land went on: mute,  
self-contained and indifferent to them.

Then the shadows at midday, and more in the sun  
that steamed on wet ground, and there was still  
an ice coating to trees, under stones, and all  
that looked at them wanly and bade them go.

## 21. Returning North

This they never forgot as they filed back north quietly past Indians to the more friendly hills. The backbone of mountains went with them, and in the scatter cones, eruptions and in the fluted siftings of whiteness said that what they were seeing was not theirs for the holding or to hold for long, but only as the blue in the deep inserts of ice that kept to itself and could not opened.

To be remembered as well in the implacable laws they enacted — which were always broken: it was not the hardship they shared but only the incompleteness in striving that made them real. Here in these strong lands they were forever losing their fields in the spring time to the melt water rush. They never looked back, though the mountains trembled and the ordinances of God were rudely strewn.

This was their calling and the green Atlantic, angry with its seabirds and its homewarding clouds, lifted them at evening from the patchwork pastures to a cross they could pray to: a half-forgiving place.

## 22. Peruvian Connection

In Lima was the wealth and the embossed title:  
What was there south but rough farming land?  
And that not in plenty: a mostly upland country  
that thinned the way south after sand-dune deserts  
splayed over cliffs into the sun-split sea: nothing  
for days, weeks after but poor stands of timber  
thickening to cloud lands and cloud-capped forests.  
Nothing would grow there, and Araucanians  
who guarded carefully, killed all who came.

Peru with its mountainsides pockmarked with  
workings for metal, where the haulage ways led  
into dust-choked passage ways, mercury poisonings:  
innumerable, in their thousands, no record kept,  
but shackled and dragged as their tribesmen fell  
into rock fall or winze under towering stopes:  
yes, it was harsh, but Peru had riches  
as then unknown in the miserable south.

Even Ambrosia O'Higgins, the itinerant  
peddler who rose to Viceroy of Peru  
would send to the southlands the son  
who was then inflammatory but had no use.

### 23. Colonial Period

Neither noticed by King or Spanish court  
it was not the choice if you wanted clout  
or wealth in abundance or gaudy title.  
Nothing was certain in this Chilean place.  
Far to the north the coastline was barren;  
sea crashing idly on lidless cliffs:  
far to the south the way was worse:  
clouded, uninhabitable, hanging ice.

What you did with the in-between had  
been done to exhaustion: the soil was thin,  
unprodigal of riches. Even when ample  
it called for Indians, the inquilino system:  
tied to the land and not wishing better.  
Feast days and Sabbath were what they had,  
as did immigrants for resting over:  
all of them hoping to just make out.

An outpost of the empire that Spain would lose,  
staring at the Pacific while days wore late,  
and high feathers plumed in the Mexican lands  
were gold: here distant, a different place.

## 24. Trees

All was imported: saint's days with their names brawling in the evening, clothes fit to distinguish them. Even the trees they brought down from the mountains or out of the impetuous ravines, with the winds smelling of eucalyptids, for all that they were beautiful, with local names— huilli, boldo-boldu — they set aside, and planted oak.

Ordinary, and to their minds most necessary when the sun at evening sank further from them, and the small, frail constellations cavorted oddly, and the Araucanian pine with scaly leaves and chimney-brush of plumage, speed of growth all hurt them, and there were many others.

The trees were their choosing, to remember them: long after children were in foreign graves the maple and the oak would drop their leaves, in the Springtime, true, but gazing home.

## 25. Marsupials

They are small creatures and self-effacing,  
the chinchilla, guanaca, marmoset, and  
even the round-eyed monita de monte can  
look more befuddled than balanced by tail.

All are marsupials, as is the deer,  
Pudú, and the fox, the zorro chilote, once  
hunted for its furs but now protected.  
So, much the variety beneath a look

they are tardy to show us, not  
given to mysteries if themselves the most:  
why the ill-favoured should strike it good.  
Something to do with their hardship makes  
them the English of the Latins, sticklers  
for form and good manners, getting on  
with neighbours, knowing their place without  
the untoward fawning or deference.

So are the heartlands, without extremes,  
and in their temperance of expectation  
so unlike the Peruvians or Argentines with  
their abundant riches and bankrupt state.

## 26. Maritime Powers

Given the Auracanian and beset by sea,  
despite the risks there was the hard Horn passage:  
many were lost there; even the courageous  
told of mountains of water, the weltering cliffs, how  
a world hung in darkness, numbing confusions  
of bubbles, sea-rush, hard weight of water  
which tore at the body, an eternity when  
hands and the tendons must still hold out.

Afterwards there was nothing but something  
deep in their sinews and the burred skin raw:  
and hands still clenched that couldn't hold brandy  
but trembled more violently as they thought  
of their comrades hung out in the heavy rigging.  
Their fingers were broken yet generally  
it took hours of sawing or hacking till the  
bodies were free and could be rolled away.

Into nothing: no words, memorials but  
a dark splash that echoed in their minds so  
that later by years, in far fields at evening  
they heard it, locked up, in its hopelessness.

## 27. La Casa Colorada

A record or ceremonial from that past,  
one of the few things standing that nonetheless  
contrives to look ordinary, just as it was: an  
uninspiring, squat, colonial building.  
The red walls were painted afterwards and  
later came the gallery and a small museum  
of how Santiago looked in the eighteenth century:  
which was not all that good it seems to say.

Yet, for a moment you can hear the tap of  
shoe leather entrancing the paving stones,  
the soft swish of lace and horses neighing as  
bridles are adjusted and the bustle brings  
the whole conjuration out of coloured drawings.  
Was life that bad? Not in the capital which  
was retired, sleepy, with only the rattle  
of carriages to the Governor's to mark the days.

How would it have ended if Spain had won  
back the colonies and moved them on?  
A little more ignorance and apathy but  
not the revolutions and the killing fields.

## 28. To the New World

This is a strange country, and you must be careful not to confuse how the sun flares out on the far mountains or exults on the rivers with the large brilliance of trees that are here brought to uproar, shouting hoarse into the shadows, yet, if you watch, will later unleaf into the Ur-lands of evening, at one with but sad at the smell of dust.

Hosannas are not as they seem, and the fashioning of bridles or lace for tourists, or the vast Church festivals or the open air concerts are made as expected and every place has its plaza de armas, where perambulating children under the palm trees know the names of the warriors, the conquistadors quiet on their plinths that are set in granite.

Walk round at evening. When light drains away you will stand on the earth and know how hard it is, and feel stamped on the soul the recusant nights when the Cross would go forward, with all to lose.

## 29. Terremotos

Chile's great architect, the one constructor  
whose work will outlast all current fads.  
Ceaselessly over the bridal couples the  
land is raised up and then is levelled flat.  
So with Chilenos and their constitution:  
all power to the president and then the law.  
Congress appoints and will disappoint:  
the hard rock of sense is the people still,

who shift, are won over, but with troubled eyes  
stare at one another as the newscasts play  
a gallery of intrigue and fictitious rant,  
outlandish wickedness at the other side.  
They go over, form parties and militiamen  
bristle in courage the others lack:  
endless is the pattern men trace in shapes  
till the kaleidoscope twists and the old is back.

Sinful and self-seeking, O Lord hear us!  
the pastors weigh in and the Pope withdraws  
authority to their reasons as power directs  
and the Church itself after each upheaval.

### 30. Bernardo O'Higgins

What can you say? Illegitimate,  
impatient to progress and make a name,  
the son of a peddler who became a Viceroy,  
and sent him to London to finish schooling,  
which he did, in a fashion, and was sent to the  
south, far out of mischief to a Chilean farm,  
made it to Congress and then, as soldier,  
collected an army with a mission.

The Spaniards won Managua, took the country back.  
O'Higgins went to Mendoza, returned  
with the army of San Martín, fought with  
bravery at Chacabuco, took the battle.  
What of his confederate? He stepped aside  
and the small-time farmer became Dictator:  
In a plebiscite later, 1818,  
a country was free and he wouldn't listen.

The gentry he upset with his distribution  
of land and taxes. He sailed for Peru,  
there to await, for twenty long years,  
the call to its creator, which never came.

### 31. Always the Land

You must be careful how the land flaunts  
itself in the evening, when the far hills  
with their tufted irritations of trees and  
heat-rashes of bushes seem the most  
corrosive and accommodating: the rivers  
flat in their spreads of gravel, their moving  
not accentuated, though they do grind  
irreparably on into the underside

of the generations who wait at the  
spent well, the pollarded willow, at  
the crucifix pinned to the adobe wall.  
No, if there was greed it should not  
have made silver on the sword blade  
delicacy in the stoop water or blood-let  
on the hard stones that hold up the  
walls: nothing more and not their choice.

Antipodeans and only as a dream, an  
unfathomable madness in an interlude to  
be made life on such shores, among such peoples  
deaf to those distantly calling home.

### 32. Early Settlers

Look at the old photographs, at the dusty yard, the unsmoothed palings, the trees shambolic and there is poverty in the thin, pinched look to the fabrics, the furniture, all local, with only the Tilley lamp so out of place, being imported, at a cost, a fortune that only the paterfamilias was allowed to light it.

As are the clothes, the manners are washed and rewashed for Sunday church-going but left otherwise to brawl with the rags of other children making out in the town and eucalyptids and maize fields opposite that slowly all through the summer rose in rustling avenues of tasselled and heavy-drooping choclo cobs.

Their recompense, which could be weighed day by day walking as their father had through the long lines of women with their mouths open and smelling of hay and sun.

### 33. The Land Between

A hard life for fishermen, and they have it still  
in the islands of Chiloë and inlets south.  
For eight months a year the cold squalls down  
from mountain top canyons to gravelled beaches,  
Throws them in postures as the salt water trees  
bend to a shadow of perpetual evening:  
pines and canelo and the undeciduous  
berberis packed with its useless seeds.

Perhaps it's the cold brine that keep alive  
the still-water fish with those cavernous eyes,  
wide and unblinking at the depth of water  
that carries them past off the rocky coast  
of Puntas Arenas to Antofagusta, as  
one with the headstrong Humboldt current  
welling with plankton from Antarctic deeps  
and sprat for which seabirds squall and dive.

A land in-between the ice flow and desert,  
cone-topped mountains and the gelid depths  
not mild in the end but a still-wary balance  
of finding a foothold in the landfalls south.

### 34. El Desierto

What can we say of this untouchable  
continuance of nothing into itself?  
The rocks have a stillness, an inertness  
untroubled by condor or passing fox,  
Specks so small as to have no presence,  
blood clots on the retina we cannot see:  
vicuña will leave their delicate footprints  
to curl and lift in the passing wind.

Even the earth here, when broken open  
has glittering absence: stores of micas,  
of flat-bladed feldspars, dog-tooth quartz  
polished by the wind but with innumerable pittings  
sealed in the sun-burst to one wide glare  
of haze and no wind in the midday heat.  
A hardness that is passing where even clouds  
throw hieroglyphics of shadows abruptly lost.

A land of vague lightness where the heat-rush  
of shrubs and small cacti with their maddened arms  
reach up as the clouds should, but in their absence  
seem detonations and thinly above their roots.

### 35. Early Republic

First, you will remember, it was a different place.  
In the Constitution what freedom? And as for  
deference to authority or any such notion —  
that did not reach to containing power. . . Of course  
there were difficulties, and indeed at first,  
many would have wanted the Spanish back.  
Murders, lootings, fierce exactions, the wild west  
of Mexico or Arizona but without the glamour.

No glamour at all. A lawless country, riven  
by factions and wars, and most near starving. The south  
was in uproar: it was bandit country,  
the north was distant but famished, and in its nitrates  
that lured the men on into the desert air  
there was nothing but the absence you still breathe in  
as out of the plane you see the neat enclosures  
of school and the houses and the playing fields.

Then it was different: the visitor attractions,  
likewise the museums with the artist's impression,  
show life on the brink of extinction: brutal, but  
in the end a home, they said, to all who came.

### 36. Diego Portales Palazuelos 1830-37

Anarchy for twenty years, ten governments, a civil war and the murderous Pincheira brothers in the far south, where even Santiago a modest place of quiet souls witnesses a murder most nights: yes, embers out of Boston or Paris still make a fire of the tinderbox the Spaniards left.

And then there is Diego Portales, not a politician but a businessman dealing in tobacco and becoming by degrees minister for foreigners and war and for the navy: a calm, sharp-featured man who drove the state to impose patriotism, the will of Congress by whatever means, whatever cost.

The Liberals hated him and more the legislation he remodelled. On the eve of war they murdered him, and yet that war they won and the country prospered.

### 37. Our Animal Friends

So that whatever it was, was what they'd lost  
and continuing further into suburban towns  
settled with saints and their Spanish names  
a heritage cut down in the rich stands of timber,  
the shaping to stumps and posts and adobe walls.  
And further, moreover, in the parks and zoos  
built the more thoughtfully with appropriate funding,  
that how we construct is how we are,

it was all set in steel and they would not hear  
leaves in their folding and the fine roots shift,  
and never indeed the suspiration  
of earth after rain in their polished ears.  
That was outlawed and even Humboldt's creatures  
had structure to be noted in the marmoset,  
in great tails of plumage from the paraquet  
the tracks of the cougar in the hungry south.

As for the animals they were as vitreous  
blurs on the cornea as was the southern ice.  
Silent to them were the wind-topped grasses  
rattling on the pampasses spreading south.

### 38. Authoritarian Government 1837-79

At least for the present, which is what men  
crave: security and so a cabinet  
elected by the President, each successor  
chosen by him, and the candidates,  
those who had business to stand at  
all for Congress got the nod or look.  
It was not democratic but even the Church  
reformed its message and fell in line.

An ordered country: the administration  
faced down rebellion, a war with Spain.  
Look at street names, the Metro stations:  
Montt, Perez, Santa María: these  
schoolchildren learn and the city remembers  
with plaques and memorials as though their wills  
ossified into the elegant streets and  
were never more than what one man wanted.

Valparaíso was battered by Spanish cannon,  
The country starved but did not submit:  
one man, one centre, one administration:  
a lot was in prospect, but still it worked.

### 39. Talking

Like relatives collected at a society wedding  
that know each other vaguely, speak a tongue  
of common memories, of disastrous aunts,  
an uncle bankrupted or who went to Spain.  
Such is their patrimony, but as soon as back  
they will pick over each lapse of dress, foible  
of breeding, blatant inanity — anything  
which shows them of course as the superior branch.

So do the Chileans with a use of Spanish  
totally bewildering and so admired  
throughout the sub-continent for its rich  
idiomatic stews of expression, the flavoured wit,  
the bawdiness of satire in the cheaper papers —  
at least till the Junta closed them down —  
but still in the streets they can blanch a Peruvian  
face white with disregard for what is said.

The most Italian of their race, a chattering bunch  
of laughing ventriloquists they hold spellbound  
themselves and their audience while all the while  
understanding, very often, not a word of it.

#### 40. Pacific War 1879-1884

Who now remembers as the flags  
waver at the flagstaff and the uniforms  
slowly wheel round in lines to a military beat,  
ordered and neat as a musical toy.

A long time ago; they were out on water  
or high in the Andes where no one goes.  
dates are legendary, what children learn,  
we live in amity with our neighbours.

Legendary also is the fearful cost;  
troops in confusion; the loss through cold;  
Lima taken but no surrender, the rag,  
tag and bobtail of all the forces that  
captured, retreated and held no ground.  
So the nitrates and the secret treaties  
Bolivia required, would not rescind though  
it cost them a coastline and then a future.

The music falls silent. The ex-conscripts stand  
silent, to attention and for a moment are  
one with the regiment and will not talk  
much to their families on the bus ride back.

#### 41. Folklorico

Wars went and they came, and how they suffered  
in the hard lands of Spain, in the sweltering cities  
of Granada and Seville, the southern barrios  
that gave them a start but not work to do.  
Some had small fields but mostly nothing: on  
the patrimony of nobles they couldn't count.  
They came in their thousands throughout the century  
diffident but hopeful, making out.

Where were their customs and their bouree dances,  
their sabot clod-hopping, the wailing pipe?  
Here they were poor but still the faction  
that ruled the rough Indians with homespun caftans,  
and made the striped costumes that they bought  
circumspectly, so that the candle dance,  
in whirling handkerchiefs, in clapping hands,  
was always on sufferance of what was on them.

Only the Auracianians and Bolivian Indians  
who danced the more riotously had within  
them a terminal illness and no dependents  
to spend all their money in one wild night.

#### 42. Santiago University District: Dieciocho

You can still see them, with their fine  
and to our thinking, somewhat overdone  
scrolls and wreaths on pillared doorways,  
the fine arch of stairways, and the fan of glass.  
So then the wealth of the old regime, the  
shipping fleets, farms, and the businesses,  
even an emporium: one built  
a new Alhambra from his copper mine.

Well and why not? The sons went on  
from Madrid to Buenos Aires. The girls  
brought back from Paris were even prettier:  
birth though unequal made wealth for all.  
Perhaps they believed that though ever  
more conscious how unfortunate were the  
distinctions and clothes and the changing  
nuances on their swarthy skins.

They danced into the century cautiously  
knowing from the inside how unreal it was —  
as now, much later, on the Dieciocho  
the palaces fill with computer games.

### 43. The Summertime Women

With the warmth of themselves they take  
on the summer in trails of perfume through  
an air that is afterwards deliquescent  
with a quietness in the small feet that knock  
the pavements. All have their passing, periods,  
of convocations, low-backed absurdities, and  
a lift of hair that in the wind rolls back  
along these streets as a tuft of grass.

You must be satisfied with what is here,  
the intoxication of the sunlight, the  
half flutter in the eyelids and a certainty  
of marble in the immobile gaze.

All have their seasons, are no more imagined  
than the Parisians that Tissot painted,  
or did Titian or Veronese who wrapped  
the matter up with their thread of gold.

You may say the eyes breed their own  
affections, that all the summertime of warming  
skin and slacks and scant underwear have  
their separate missions should they want it so.

#### 44. Old Buildings Providencia

As so often, these dear old buildings off  
Providencia with their projecting balconies,  
with doors graciously open in the evenings, speak  
of the receptions they have hosted, the exuberant  
manner of women frequenting them who  
were so light-headed and beautiful that  
even a snub to the President could be overlooked.

Paid or unpaid they never worked, never  
did one useful thing. Even their own parties  
they hardly attended but left guests to wander,  
accost the odd waiter, yes, it didn't matter:  
feathered and brainless, they were loved to bits:  
a party without them just didn't count. Even  
old men who play the market, live in clubs,  
say with a slow smile how it was different then.

Was it a dream or self-delusion? They were  
silly, of course, and selfish — yet how many  
in clearing out a dead husband's things will come  
upon a cork or name or one high-heeled shoe?

45. The Poet in Town: 1886

If he came steerage he soon made up  
for that: whistled and sauntered out with  
the radiant Gabriela, silky and  
wistful about the gills, a preening  
Rosario, a wandering Ilsa, and a svelte  
Helen stepping out carefully through her  
slender shape. All of them he undid  
particularly and deliberately, and took to drink.

An intimate of the President, the  
bordellos knew him as a ranting and  
obnoxious fellow slow to pay.  
Newspapers he founded failed  
and as a journalist he was indisposed  
for weeks, and all the functionaries, the  
government lackeys he was one of,  
though hating it, soon shunned his office.

A genuine delicacy when sober turned  
to truculence with time, thought he still wrote,  
marvellously and unforgettably of the  
eyes of swans and his tender heart.

#### 46. President Balmaceda 1886-91

Famed for its oratory, the silvered voice extended a future advanced and secure — that the nitrate earnings be wrought into schools, docks, government buildings: the country be made into a modern state. As for the Church, Congress, the vested interests of those who opposed him: he shut them out: the press was his and he packed the courts.

Strong times need strong hands, moreover vision. This that he sought: out of conquest and the despoliation, a Church corrupt though speaking peace and the Indians under more duress, something would come to flame forever, a foothold down the centuries, a further way: new health, new taxes, and sanitation.

Congress said no: he ruled by force. Months of bloodshed, the main cities sacked, José Balmaceda would quietly take a pistol, and then his life.

#### 47. El Metro: Santiago

Smoothly the names roll past: Salvador,  
Montt, Valdivia. Appropriate and yet  
each is the present as though excavation  
of the plain earth itself could welcome history.  
Above the gravels of the swift Mapucho:  
below, half-decayed, the volcanic rock.  
The train runs through both in a concrete lining,  
singing and whistling on rubber wheels.

Singing of what? Not the affections  
of wind for the grass on mountain slopes.  
No, an odd sound: sombre, infectious,  
a filleted pop-tune that is almost lost  
into the nothingness that is not a quietness,  
indeed is precipitant and acrid, of  
fire and explosions, black and imperative,  
as the train cars jostle and straighten out.

The gestures, the blood, the political factions  
that drag their strong gut through the world above  
are for a moment made sensate with winking  
lights, and nothing to think of until we stop.

#### 48. Estación Central

The fountains splash happily beneath stout palms and inside it is lofty: the spotless floors shimmer and reflect an arch that opens to factories and the blue-starched sky. So was their future, when the age of steam pushed them through mountains and defiles, past dust of old carriages and rogue estates overcharging for relays and mouldy hay.

What they would build now would be dwarfed in the dignity of its working men. However despised, the stiff salt sweat was the one way certain that plate and girder be locked in place and the crimes of a continent be overcome. Centuries of the sweatshop would be settled, once and for all in an Inca code said Neruda senior who travelled the lines.

Today that is past; the ideologies were not forged of steel but in a different place. With silver the gods were placated and silently the rails turn southwards to the summer heat.

#### 49. Parliamentary Rule 1891-1914

What had worked so well did not now work and Congress therefore reigned in their powers. Presidents were still elected but underneath felt their influence still fall the further from them. Of course in the ceremonials, still it prospered, with the nitrate and copper and silver to keep the country sound.

More than that, there was hope abroad in schools and palaces, gracious buildings that lined the avenues and made the streets more like boulevards than things commercial. Even the Escuela Normal of old Chillán flaunted a pillared frontage: yes, the old aristocracy and new businessmen merge with financiers in a new elite: poor immigrants made up the middle class.

A world at once new and also modelled on Europe and its intellectual life: who could have foreseen the conflagration that underlay such a shifting social plan?

## 50. Nitrate Worker's Strike 1925

You can see them as they stare, dishevelled  
and disheartened in the threadbare photos  
a peseta a dozen in the left-wing tracts.  
It is true, and the dust that was in their lungs  
wore through in the end to the shabby lies.  
Locked into conflict, their picks struck sparks on  
a surface no more yielding than were or could  
be the owners of mines or the falling price.

First it was the nitrate that had won this land  
of wind-scorched emptiness and numbing cold.  
Extremes of penury but a good deal better  
than stuck as migrants on the minifundios:  
increasingly they worked till the Great War struck.  
Blockaded, the Germans bought no nitrates  
but fashioned their own, and the whole world followed:  
the price fell, the mines closed, the families starved.

Of course they agitated, and held assemblies,  
threatened violence as the law locked them out.  
They were shot in their hundreds, mere desperate men  
but martyrs to the socialists, who would not forget.

## 51. Due South

How dark it was going south into the first  
scrublands and then mounting to the forests  
with their scatter of settlement and the  
road getting muddier, the people uncouth.  
Yet these were his children and under God:  
his duty, as taking their catechisms  
late into the evening when the taper flared,  
but still it was profitless, lackey work.

We are consumed even as the wood  
shavings were curled and made thin ash.  
Perhaps his grace the bishop reflected  
on that in his seminary lectures: he  
didn't come south, not to this parish  
where even in winter he must make the journey  
a long way out for the sacraments: yes,  
good man, they would call him, always that.

But the flock itself, who snored in his sermons,  
were abusive at land rights, got their children  
as greasily as the lowlands bred their pigs? How  
long would the Lord keep His servant here?

## 52. Lost Vistas

This they held to, when the ship that brought them  
returned and was lost into the level water;  
a thin trail of smoke to the horizon to ask them  
why was this journey: a question mark  
they did not attend to, though the awful daring of  
what they had done could unnerve the heart,  
wake them at night to recount their plans at  
the cost of this absence and how strange it was.

Their world would go on but somehow without them;  
perhaps they'd be thought of, yet not for long.  
The land they had come from, which was not an Eden,  
now had its angels and a flaming sword;  
yet something was sat in the fields and in the  
haciendas that were mournful and in the showers  
of silver upon silver in the eucalyptid groves:  
Christ would reward them for a faith retained.

So sombrely at evening, when the sun in splendour  
rerobed their fields with its softer light, they  
would lock their hands, kneel, brother to brother,  
and pray to hold back the perpetual tears.

### 53. The Thirties

Europe with its riots, strikes and internecine warfare kept its castles: the new world, such as Chile, took to socialism and for fifty years the agitators talked and formed a hundred parties, each with dreams but of no consistency as the quiet countryside waited on them and yet grew poorer.

Frei carved out land from the large estates in the Central Valley but gave few titles. Those resettled were on state-run farms that were not efficient and were divided still further and further but they didn't care, these parties of the centre and centre-left. Prices were fixed, the cities thrived, the politicians also, that special breed.

Allende was inevitable and his hot-heads shouted only what had been said before: all power to the President, Balmaceda's words: politics is the answer, not finding out.

## 54. The Missions

The graves are in the hillside and the small wood chapels are not so frequented. TV has come to valleys through repeater stations. But the chapels are bright, welcoming, make a tourist stop and perhaps much more. The visitors stand at the plain wood table, look at the neat, pressed linen, read the inscription: I am the way, the truth and the light —

and go on out thinking of some childhood task their mother imposed, or a maiden aunt who was not devout but at whose end there were candles and flowers, and the padre spoke of our duties on a path that each one takes known but to God, without our choosing or knowing its purpose until we look regretfully back or not even that. Which

was true: they nodded but could not forget the eyes that looked beseeching as the end drew nigh, beyond the small room and town and the ordinary lives to the mountains, the forests and the angry sky.

## 55. Central Valley

A land of many colours, prodigal and not to be accountable for the look of the low-built farmhouses and straggle of sheds along roads that lead nowhere but to padlocked gates, poplars, the eucalyptids aglitter in the wind and the smell of maize, homely in the small plots with a family to make over also as their forbears did.

The high sailing contentment of the clouds do not hang on these fields: it is patch and mend, and little enough to renew a wall, reline the pump. Autumn reddens the odd leaf as in old allotments and Spring, when it comes, is never much more than the cumulus on the far hills rising and reddening far in the dark.

The children will go to school, marry, reassume a hegemony their fathers had, and fathers before them back to times when someone had foresight and had make good.

## 56. Temuco

Always it had been but fallow land with its  
crops put out fearful of the sudden frost  
of rain that wouldn't come or in wrong amounts  
and mountains to shield them but still a wall.  
What could you say of their adobe farms  
with their wooden roofs and a lean-to shed,  
a trough for the cattle, a calf-nibbled poplar:  
not much but a passing but entirely theirs?

Water is piped now and the house on bricks  
trembles with its roof that picks up the sound  
of tremors that are distant although the  
radio tells of misfortune or what is past.  
No, it's not that, but upside-down seasons,  
the precariousness of a living through  
the rough fields and pastures, where the picky cattle  
graze among boulders and warring streams.

Through local elections grass grows the same,  
beef goes to market, their sons leave school  
with odd notions perhaps which they gradually lose  
in the heartlands of having a measure of choice.

## 57. Communist Party

Some joined but most did not, conscious  
of the step they were taking, that the  
law allowed for their assembly but  
not the disrespectful to better folk.

Now you cannot walk over the  
culverts and small bridges in the summer  
without thinking of the tears and  
the blood soaked into the very brick.

A suppurating, dead place where the  
feet walk with their strides as shadow  
reaches up to meet them through the news  
papers and the cheap dress fabrics, the  
times of those announcements and of  
wedding prints in the paths not taken  
or taken elsewhere edged with  
with indignation black, yet called

upon to hand out leaflets, to put their  
names to declarations while all the  
while, stilled on the far side, are the  
innocents silent in the summer heat.

## 58. Calles London and Paris

What went wrong? Behind the dependably heavy walls of the monastery which survived, along with its church, the '47 quake – 1647: but God shows us His favour, and would we please make an offering or visit the museum with its silver plate and paintings: most interesting – the streets have the solid respectability of

those in Europe or the States. Neoclassical, Moorish, Romantic-Gothic put together by local men with their unlocal plans. It doesn't last that long: a block or two and we come back again to the jumble of flats, shops, factories and filling stations: flatulent and untidy but necessary in a city swollen yearly with the out-of-work.

What happened to the Arts and Crafts Movement, houses worthy of working men? It happened and passed and now these buildings are banks and hotels for foreign guests.

## 59. The Intelligentsia

How far away that real world was, though  
they dreamed of it and read assiduously  
of the towns and cities and the café talk  
of Greene, and Motherlandt and Stephan George.  
And always there were the classics, met at  
school, and loved and continued with, though  
why they could not say, and would not now  
in these half-lit catacombs of libería.

How sad this is, these alleyways of mildewing  
stacks in half a dozen tongues of the latest,  
not to be discounted literature. Here  
is a book on China, immensely learned, full  
of novel insights, yet the communists  
won, improbably, and all those interviews,  
research, typesetting, printing and reviewing  
came to naught, as though they had never been.

Is that how we all go, into irrelevancies?  
Old men who prattle as the bright day  
burns on but somewhere else, men with no  
sense, imperial and ignorant.

## 60. Industrial Education

Here they stand, not sit, and are  
segregated at each bench. The  
task, always the same, is invigilated  
strictly by pairs walking under the  
low, unlit and leaking roof. No  
one leaves his place, looks at his  
neighbour, speaks, can go to the  
lavatory except on pain of instant

dismissal, which they know, and seems  
is continued along these almost air-  
less streets, lean-to buildings, tenements  
that, leprous with lime and trees pollarded,  
waste nothing in their tidy yards,  
unloading bays, stained with the dark  
shadows that fall from warehouses patrolled  
continually by lanky, disappointed men.

Now they sit in backyards, by fountains in parks,  
amazed by progress but not part of it,  
a hazard to children and to girls slipping  
backward into time's still darkening lens.

## 61. Club Hipo: Santiago

An indulgence, a left over from  
the whips, carriages and wickerwork,  
and leather saturated as the flanks  
of a new-groomed filly, her long mane  
knotted and her head impatient for  
the pen of a Forain or Degas to  
capture her instinctive and high-  
stepping disdain for the other folk.

So Santiago at the races, as  
it was and still is as we go on toiling  
along the service track of stables, gated  
yards, water-tanks and accoutrements  
of an existence superfluous, hopeless  
to make a case for, except on class  
and money as ever though here it is  
too obvious to make a point of showing.

Walking later that evening, we watch  
a jockey sit a young girl, perhaps his  
daughter, into the saddle and have the animal  
fastidiously step out into the dark.

## 62. New Departments in Providencia

Imperially benign to the hotpotch of  
gardens and houses they replace — indeed,  
cut right through as do the ocean liners  
crowded with tourists who come ashore  
to haggle in markets or see the sights —  
the blocks float on over the twenties flotsam  
of the foreign legations, the Dutch and English,  
who built their decencies on far connections.

Keen to fit in they learnt a Spanish that  
was different — slang, swallowed vowels —  
and were friendly, and not only in foreign  
clubs but often more Chilean than natives themselves.  
But a last part escaped them. The hot blood  
thought them accountable for falling trade,  
for lockouts and strikes, as though the emptying  
business was a weather bell for the dismal north.

Not good reading, certainly, and they would  
head for the golf course, redo their gardens.  
But the parties were a success, always,  
which these windows reflect in their one-way glass.

### 63. Homecoming: Chillán

We all know them: towns we couldn't live in,  
being not so much cramping but  
composed of small lives in tenements, up  
seeding railway tracks. The streets seem as they  
were, the station tidier, perhaps, and the  
punctually unpunctual bus has been  
replaced: new fares, destinations:  
small things we note, which don't know us.

So it is that the melancholy autumn  
days are not so plangent here, but draw on  
the plain to purl to plain: things knitted up  
as needed: not smart, not comfortable, a  
reproach to the solitary one, a young man, a  
girl cleverer or prettier than the rest who  
writes her Christmas cards to maiden aunts,  
hardly to be acknowledged — except that days,

months, years later on some cleaning bout  
out of the tissue paper will come that expensive  
and dangerous, off-the-shoulder dress they walked  
their room all night with once, and never wore.

## 64. Tobalaba

Spindly and belatedly planted the young maples look as unconvincing as in architectural models does painted sponge. Indeed the whole place looks assembled: the blocks fall vertically in cartons of concrete, glass or chrome, and the office-signs even seem provisional, tacky, that in a few short hours they will pass, change, be forgotten.

And those out shopping in the convenience stores, haggling over prices, are cut-outs also it seems of the same closed kind. They came in the sixties when the high-rise flats were chic and expensive and the windows looked out on a place happily termed the world's most unhealthy capital and where infant mortality was a nine-year wonder.

That has changed, as it has all over the world, and yet in this one place the concrete is as dreary as in inner Asia city planner and bureaucrat made as one.

## 65. Father of the Country 1970

Not a man of the people but intelligentsia  
who cleaned himself after shaking hands,  
a lover of women and whose private farm,  
not requisitioned, trained guerrillas.  
Not perverted by hot-head logic but  
that logic itself, which laid its plans  
deeply through others and fazed the law.  
Large farms were taken and then the small.

Similarly the businesses, each requisitioned  
by a little known statute brought about  
by the very emergency they had created.  
Wholly illegal, the law courts judged;  
wholly irrelevant the Government said.  
Law was a bourgeois institution and  
the farms once seized were for the common  
good. So the food laws: in the famine

created only the faithful should get  
relief. Even the hardened were appalled  
at this: the father of the country divide his  
children into fervent Marxists and the rest.

## 66. Sunday Book market: El Centro, Santiago

Abuela stops a moment. The buxom palisade of lace and beads settles and is relaxed again. “You put that down, child.” This was the very time where trusting in no one she went and gave herself to what was urged and wanted. And the tantrums, and complications. “Will you put that down.” The sun shines hotly and there is happiness through the long street where the two drift in and out of shadow from the tall buildings.

Life is various. “Grandma, you didn't dress like that, did you?” How confident the plump, small breasts are in the knitted top and jostle together as they move from the stalls of fashion plates to now the foreign titles: ‘Manners and Etiquette for the Modern Miss.’

Fifteen. She remembers her own anatomy, beautiful and over-burdened melons, and then that old returning song of roses, which her lover would unwrap and treasure, one by one.

## 67. Agrarian Revolution

Pinochet, the fascist monster, would be honest and honourable in his narrow way: a fact the West would try to pervert and succeed indeed as the image worked.

What of the farms, the large haciendas? A few still persisted but most had gone by division of family and Frei's own laws, and what was left were the well-maintained

of a few score hectares with a hand or two to work with the owner's, and more at harvest. Worst were the poor, the small tenant farmers, sharecroppers who were holding on to old ways and old ignorance and miseries that were self-inflicted but had nowhere to go. These were the future the Party decided: give them the land, in plots, but do not award

improvement loans or education: make them collectives with a commissar to ensure right thinking and as for work, first must come attitude and party talk.

## 68. Criticism and Fall 1973

Of course there was grumbling but these were workmen, no more and not entitled to criticise their Moscow lords — what did they think, they could pick and choose? The party had suffered, and grievously: debarred from standing if not imprisoned. God knew the injustices, although he was a nonsense they would remove

in time, as with everything, though of that there wasn't much. They had to act and not be squeamish of law, Congress and any sense of property laws. Knock down, rebuild: the scales would fall with a little adjustment to the new arrangements. Those who did not could be dealt with later: they had weapons aplenty and training started.

All that had happen with Balmaceda hung on the order, everyone ready when an obscure little general with some service chums beat them to battle and the tanks rolled in.

## 69. Military Coup: 1973

Fierce, short and most unpleasant.  
Allende died at the Moneda, hundreds followed.  
The killings continued over months in not  
such numbers reported in the outside press but  
needless and unnoticed as Chile sang  
in a landscape of ruins: businesses broken,  
farms made over to training grounds and,  
if requisitioned, were mostly costly failures.

None as envisaged or wanted or barely  
working: a country in crisis and facing war.  
The intelligentsia went abroad to weave new  
stories of what in truth they hadn't created  
while the country at home had draconian laws:  
arrest, censorship, a ban of parties.  
What the left intended was now in force but  
of course by the military, who made it stick.

Dark days and hard days: the country struggled.  
Much that went on was not reported. Real  
or imagined the bodies turned up, with  
always the material to nurture hate.

## 70. Émigrés

Those who went abroad, the vast majority  
to political systems unlike what they had promoted  
with a brimstone rhetoric for their own good folk.  
Yes, a few tried the Soviets, but didn't stay.  
The first thing essential was to raise the flag,  
recruit the credulous, exaggerate crimes,  
paint the junta in the blackest colours:  
repeatedly they thundered and the world obeyed.

A victory of sorts, and it soothed the smart  
of defeat and gave them a role to play. So what  
if the country didn't want them: they didn't care.  
Their policies were useless: that would change.  
Commerce was bankrupt: they should level flat  
and build from the basics in a brotherhood  
their very actions ensured had shrivelled up.  
Hate was the legacy and that hate survived.

That their followers were tortured or disappeared  
was regrettable but made good press,  
was indeed essential, as the junta knew.  
Brutality continued: our political class.

## 71. Military Junta 1973-88

However contentious the years look  
to fixed opinion from the outside, the iron  
rule welded the country to one working plan,  
and one that locked the politician out.

Yes, there were abuses, and banshee howls  
from countries with democracies even worse.  
The Left in particular was at odds  
with business concepts that actually worked.

The cost was repression, interrogations  
and torture at times to get at cells  
of Marxists, guerrillas and of saboteurs  
who were real, determined, but not the threat  
imagined by the military, who nonetheless  
intercepted real plans of assassination.  
Long years, hard years: investment dried up:  
commodities plummeted and stayed depressed.

Who suffered the worst? The middle classes: the  
teachers, intelligentsia. The new Chile born  
was harder, more cautious and built its structures  
on a past fragmented and still at war.

## 72. Hot Days

After hot days, and in sequence, when the last trophies of leaves are lifted up into the pale blue porcellaneous canopy beneath a checker work of shadows shaped as it were after the dark-eyed and pheromone beauty of the evening, high-decked and stepping about these streets, there come then the

February holidays: the umber bodies in their open whites, in flaring pinks in camisoles and tops and knickers of shopping malls and smart boutiques. Now the city can sense itself and prance about on days that stand akimbo of the legs and have the neon signs lock into the usual inflammatory entanglements.

Yet there still come the curtain-calls which you can hear long afterwards, walking in the colonnaded quietness of a body rumbustious and not at peace.

### 73. Assassinations 1974-6

Given such rope they hung themselves  
in defiance, moreover, of world opinion which  
if hypocritical and blind to truth  
at least had clout when it came to loans.  
All three the junta had cause to hate,  
part of the mayhem and were still weaving  
intrigues and plots with socialist powers  
to get the catastrophe to reignite.

Prats had joined Allende to extend his sway,  
Letelier had served him in the States,  
Leighton had brought the Democrats over  
and continued with communists from aboard.  
All were culpable to a junta pledged  
to root out the cause of the terrible years.  
All to the world were innocent men  
to be made true martyrs by a fascist state.

Two bombings, one shooting: the press  
was astonished and then appalled. Who  
were these generals that aped great powers?  
Another detonation across the world.

#### 74. A Nation of Enemies

Nothing can be done now that neither side  
will give an inch and the blood-stained past  
is washed of all truth and must be newly written.  
Nothing will content them that ended short  
of the final victory, the consummation  
of all who have struggled and left their teeth, blood  
finger nails, testicles and bone pulled from sockets  
far out from landfall or in shallow graves.

That cost was fearsome as were the gendarmes shot,  
the businesses looted, and the farms destroyed.  
Both sides that had weapons and would have manned  
the barricades erected at every corner  
in the high streets, workshops, in the fashionable suburbs:  
a cataclysm in the making that would have shown  
how fierce are the hatreds that ignorance feeds  
and how long or forever its restitution.

Dante they remembered put such people in hell.  
That recourse was not needed, it was hell itself  
to think of fathers or children, shootings and beatings,  
and the families who grieve, perhaps always will.

## 75. Monetarism 1973-81

But the Junta worked, all of them,  
shut up days, weeks sometimes in the  
house of admirals, a life together,  
a cruise that lengthened on for ever.  
The country awaited, was in tatters, its  
businesses bled dry, bankrupted  
or staffed with the idle, with ideologues  
in truth or the usual social trimmers.

All changed. Businesses were handed back,  
farms from collectives. The truckers' unions  
and miners resumed work. It was not  
easy, uncontentious, or without its cost:  
Allende's troops fought on — in the  
mines, countryside, the grey cordones  
that ring the capital with desperate streets:  
murders, shootings, and illegal courts,

The balance shifted. Their grip increased.  
The runaway inflation simmered down and  
food appeared on counters and a wary,  
half-weary doggedness in each new face.

## 76. Collapse 1975

Starting as a small wave washing  
over the great producing nations and their  
dependencies there came the oil price hike,  
the fall in confidence, and the slow,  
remorseless withdrawal of funds, profit  
taking and a battening down of hatches by  
the moneyed rich across the world.

In Chile worst of all. Unemployment rose:  
one in five of Santiago were on the  
streets or begged or had what little  
constituted savings day by day drawn down.  
They lived on bread and pulses but nothing  
was too demeaning while their children  
waited, and all the while, inexorably,  
the prices rose in fuel, power and food.

So that when finally the subsidy  
on bread was cut and jobs shed in Government  
services, schools, universities, agencies  
in their hundreds, the junta's work had started.

## 77. Church Militant

At once reactionary and progressive  
the out-of-town priests in their parochial  
duties deferred to Rome in doctrine but  
took their precept from the outraged poor —  
of which there were many in the faveolas,  
farms, rustbelts, ports and factories.  
They favoured Allende although his  
party aimed to suppress them, would have done.

Come the Junta, and they documented  
the tortures, disappearances, imprisonments,  
which was courageous and was just. True,  
they may have erred, colluded, aided the guilty,  
believed the stories and not double-checked,  
but that was Christ's way, had not the poor  
made the first church which had indeed  
suffered the persecution they reported.

His holiness saw further and sent directives.  
“Obedience and poverty, I would remind  
you, bind us to our Saviour's teaching  
and render to Caesar what is his.”

## 78. The Contract

She hardly listens. An older sister  
picks at the document, stirs her coffee.  
The first party, done up fragrantly  
in skimpy top, no jewellery and a skirt  
at least an inch too short and showing  
a smooth and endless cataract of legs,  
turns as the small sunflower does his way:  
petulant sixteen, and strikingly pretty.

He does the talking and talking stressing  
the advantages, his growing list of  
bureaus and clients at her feet. She looks at  
them: the toenails immaculate  
and white. Like the fingernails he'd noted, the  
aloof containment in the face, the smile  
about the eyes and the exuberant and  
wounding magnificence of the mouth.

All imaginary. She will walk on out  
as did the others, but for a moment there  
is the sudden thunderclap of bulbs flashing  
and contracts arriving at him from across the world.

## 79. Summer Cafes

And this is the best time, the trees with their sheathed limbs in shadow, their iridescent branches laden with buxom sunlight, as though that substance, whatever it might be, photons or fierce particles, were the molasses of a last burst of cascading leaves in this Summertime world of cafes, long esplanades of brightness through the falling interludes of maples, awnings and brilliant talk.

Do not be deceived. The ice creams, cakes and coffees and the conversation closing on a sale or purchase lingered over at Flabella are underwritten by the past crops brooding in the fields, by the leaf tops smouldering in the sunset, coruscations of bamboos imported, as all are imported into this emptiness of plains and small rivers with the pines, braying jacaranda and eucalyptids

weeping in their Gondwanaland of red pastures, of gauche soils and immensities of sand singing in the air, and the out-station pueblos fallow at evening behind their mud-brick walls.

## 80. Get Together: El Condos

The wine cools, the candles are lit, and across  
the lawns from the swimming pool, under a  
breeze-filled canopy, the guests collect.  
Flamingos from their school together,  
this one has a brother in finance,  
and she a cousin as a high court judge:  
contacts known but not abused,  
or even called on much when things go wrong.

Well-travelled, they speak English, French  
or whatever, are not quick to judge. Often  
amusing, the Government they read like  
a balance sheet, judge the impact on  
schooling and the new corruption, the  
efficiencies expected of the mining sector,  
what to expect when next the Congress meets,  
of the football season and its transfers.

For the alternatives try the shabbier quarters  
of Independencia, the sweat-shop factories,  
where men sit in vests, quote Marx, and  
stare more greedily as the lights go out.

## 81. Business

Indomitable and uninteresting, the writers of small business contracts, insurance premiums: with the patience of thick-soled shoes they collect the refusals that are always offered. A gust of wind resettles pigeons, and they like them are squabbling and importunate. In their one pressed suit they sit on walls consulting notes, their holdalls packed.

Spring they find easiest, long after Christmas, holidays and the start of school. But even that is a continuing and if accustomed to it, as indeed they are, still practise a sheer meekness to make you revise that look and your requirements. Yes, you are locked into them and they to those small red notebooks that they never lose.

The which you will see at the rich attorneys, in the glittering offices of new tycoons, an implacable kindness that takes your measure — to smile and call the junior in.

## 82. The Agendas of Providence: new Santiago

Stooping under the trees, the melancholy parades  
of high buildings, the glitter town, distinctly  
perpendicular in these lost evenings of white  
flares on windows, we find the neon lights winking  
on a bodywork pressed, a waxed shine in the rain  
of a brilliantine health throbbing with the heavy  
overhead cam engines and their intricately fluttering  
and clattering of valves in steel-lined ventricles.

Angels by the Mapocho, imported hopes  
tinted by the glass and luxurious leather.  
All that was uprooted in the Junta years  
is shed as is paper of the left-wing tracts.  
The future roars outward and slowly the metal  
bends into modernity or into spray-shop paint.  
The trees will continue but from the leaves is absent  
except in the colours any incendiary future.

That is all past, and the chauffeured bodies  
are wrapped in the good life of department stores.  
The stones keep their distance and the towers of concrete  
rise more imperially into the rain-dark sky.

### 83. It Will Change

It will change, as they all do: the western slums are cleared by the new housing, each appears modest and necessary, an improvement certainly when the old remember the tap outside, the long wooden shacks that were never comfortable, and cramped in summer, here even the lucky ones in their high-rise flats had lino peeling and the light-bulbs out.

Yes, it will change and all their close possessions that they saved for, indeed walked miles to get, will be relinquished, shed heirlooms becoming the unwanted in spare rooms and bric-a-brac and outright junk. These are the memories of the generations that in their small ways, if distracted at times, tried to fare forward to better days.

Part of the inestimable sadness of having the years fall into washbasins, chemical toilets. All was wonder and was made by hands, bin-lined at last and dumped out back.

## 84. Outer Industrial Zone of Santiago

The light glints and goes out across the poplar-  
and factory-dotted plain where a range  
of mountains trolleys to close the view eastward  
and insist this was wanted, and here we are.  
The train picks up speed and rattles across  
a metalled carriageway with lighted signs  
that flash on south at intersections and make  
a virtue of being contemporary and at the wheel.

Around us, the walls of a concrete obtuseness  
take us from the station and in the gaps occasionally  
show a flatland of garden plots and steep-roofed buildings  
sintering under the sun, their corrugations  
folding, like those of factories and odd metal works,  
into views from the fortresses of apartment blocks  
that rise out of a landscape as at Nagasaki  
where only the very largest of blocks survived.

These are the iron cordons, Allende's grip  
on the rich that he could plunder, while all  
about are the hopes new made and the faces that shine  
through tiers of shuttering into high-rise glass.

## 85. Santiago Buses

A roar in the engines and they're off, each  
from its stop or change of lights to do  
battle with the taxis or the crass rush of  
pedestrians who think the road their own.  
Theirs is the power where power counts and  
for all the proposals — and more will come —  
shaking their heads at the noise, the pollution,  
the frequent smashes, and the many killed.

Nothing will be done, for all the talk.  
The slide-rule boys will make a case, get  
money perhaps for yet more work, and the  
World Bank no doubt give loans, in  
time, at the usual rates, if it likes  
the place. Yes, but these guzzling monsters  
with their rattling fenders and oil-stained guards  
belong to a world that has not yet passed.

To what was scrimp and mend, not instant  
credit, things getting worse, much, much  
worse. All around are the glittering fountains  
and peoples as shadows on sheets of glass.

## 86. A Small Party in Nuñoa

The children are in bed, or all but  
one, the drinks set out, the table laid, but  
our hostess is distracted, though she laughs  
as we chatter and have a pleasant evening,  
Behind her expenses and the bills mount,  
though salaries are checked and always  
apportioned: schooling, college, apprenticeship:  
nothing below but a drop in class.

It might be England in the thirties, with its  
sense of community and inequalities  
habitual as was the atrocious weather.  
War was the leveller, and the last years here  
have an air of an earthquake about to happen.  
The poor are not hungry or much abused, at  
least by the standards of the other times,

but the tide is far out, and even the banks  
have taken to lending for a future life.  
The maid is to marry, she says: a child  
being someone and something to stay her own.

## 87. The Pacific

Emphatically not to be turned about by  
even the largest of tankers from its  
cartilaginous twisting of chilling currents,  
the Pacific is what it will be and never thinks.  
More than that it's harder than they'd imagine,  
weltering out colour in the confusion of  
of shapes, of bubbles, of sheered blocks of ice,  
the flotillas of silence from the hoar-frost south.

Walking the beaches of a summer morning  
in a wholeness of contour and with their colours  
whorled into waves folding with a soothing splash,  
frolicsome and obvious in petticoat charms,  
you may therefore be tempted to think of holiday  
brochures, of sea, sand and kiddies, of friendly staff,  
of hotels on the headlands, of cove after cove,  
innocent and wholesome while summer lasts.

Yet the real facts are different if you follow  
the cold black Humboldt back into the bleakness  
of winter in the continual wilderness  
of a continent shimmering with itself.

## 88. El Golf: New Santiago

Gracious old places when they got there  
with lawns, catalpas and elaborate gates.  
The links kept up — the club house looked down  
far to the centre and the factory belts —  
but not historic and so the ticket when  
new investment wanted a place to party.  
Not a month passes without something thrown up:  
offices and apartments: all of them filled.

Bland and secure the banks sit with their  
digital manoeuvrings of sums offshore.  
We trust it is well, and, with a junta gone,  
a nation of enemies will now behave.  
Perhaps it is so. A new social class  
has stuck to consuming and to trips abroad.  
Florida is their favourite, with its funky  
world of toys the children can bring to school.

Vast windows look outward, and the high  
wall of the Andes seems to fall away  
into coruscating sunshine, a high-octane  
flash of energy that is fit to burst.

## 89. Continuing with the Andes

Always the mountains, striking in the clear air,  
and water tumbling down with early morning  
in the boulders and with a complacent sound  
emptying into rock pools — and a hard ricochet  
of menace bandied about between the locked  
silicates of the rock, to be erupted,  
they had thought, into far-glittering fragments  
of the days and nights that are on the plains.

So strange then the water, the carrier with  
its distant and fizzy sobriety of snowfalls, its  
suspensions of rain, the ever more threatening  
white-outs of mists on the sloping fields: much  
was seen but not said and even the farms  
with their Lombardy poplars corroded by white  
could not speak at the time of the sonic boom  
that sometime would take their breath away.

No, that was this time. Now even the minimal  
reflection of snow-caps and splendour can be  
thrown off as whole with the blue chunks of sky  
glinting if yawning into the gravel spreads.

## 90. Adventure Holidays

Rough tracks, rocks, fields, and fjords:  
made for it. A fixed-wing flies them down;  
they hire a jeep, check tires, press south  
across the backbone of the southern Andes  
to tranquil repetitions, fractal and twinkling of  
scatterlands of forests, lakes and rivers:  
a land not friendly somehow but with  
always a hardness poking through.

Sometimes it seems sinking, as though  
above them the whole globe tilted and  
pushed them down into floods of calving  
glaciers and ice flows and spouting whales.  
A chill came at evening and the nights were  
sprinkled with the stars that hung there eerily  
and frostily as if in premonition  
the land they had left would cut them off.

Nonsense, of course, yet it persisted  
in making the land seem a luxury ship  
that ploughed on southward, clinker-built, while  
champagne was served and the orchestra played.

## 91. Vicuña

Fast as eye-flash across in this psoriasis  
of pools and haze over salar flats,  
these dots of sienna in the surrounding  
landscape of buff and burnt out pinks,  
improbably, however, their favourite stance  
is to lean at you, long-faced under their sentinel  
ears, benevolent and wondering — one more  
thing wrong with what they ruminate on

with a delicately-cradled old world care,  
still grinding jaws laterally as camels do —  
to which they're related, of course, at removes.  
Curmudgeonly and not gregarious,  
they have dots for eyes that can pick you out  
against the circuit of tourists and towering sky:  
perhaps there's a secret in the unfathomably black  
but probably not much as they turn away.

Rough, their coat is underneath so soft  
and fine an Inca princess took one to bed  
once and reported the sensation as  
far less vexatious than her first.

## 92. New Roads: The Way South

A place of storms, inkblots of darkness, perpetual grey,  
trees draw from the wind-blast and their scattering leaves  
point back from the shoreline as shining needles.

A place of all seasons and yet always winter  
with the fire creaking in the swinging lantern,  
no light to read by and the wind filling  
the head with its darkness and flare and, yes,  
even immigrant Germans drew a line at this.

Yet money was waiting. There were logging camps,  
fishing stations on islands, pine-walled places  
where the salmon in their rainbowed leap  
reflected the rawness: the hanging valleys,  
the glaciers in the highlands that still went calving  
on to the shoreline and always still further south  
there arose the black-hearted Humboldt current  
with its plankton and its glittering shoals of fish.

That has all changed. The road cuts through  
a silver in summer with a pale grey ribbon  
of tarmac now shimmers and relentless  
stays level as mirage in the morning light.

### 93. Traffic

What one notices are the wheels turning  
and encumbering the road with their motions  
while above, swept back in a shockwave of  
warm metal, rumbustious and beautiful,  
sun alive on the windows and in the shine  
on sleek carapaces and in the palpitating  
fenders, that they collect and attend to  
the red-amber-green of their personal gods.

Do not suppose they have come but  
on assignation, as butterflies collect for  
their long flight home. A whirring in the  
antennae, not sensed but acknowledged in  
the far reach of wing beat, the tiring weight  
that pulled them still onward, the settle  
of sunlight that like an unconscious force  
brings them home safe with hooded agendas.

Denizens of the desert, of the deep mine  
undertakings of Remeral or Rio Blanco,  
they repeat in their fabric the indurate nature  
of time behind silence in the empty places.

94. Shopgirls: Avenida del Septiembre Once.

Immaculate in their panelled tunics that barely hide the legs made matronly by too much standing and now thrusting them through the midday moving caravels of part-time shoppers, the casual “I’m meeting someone or other maybe later when I’ve got the time to spare”, as they have not and in pairs, always in pairs, like old

best friends, they fall upon the women’s departments and the small boutiques. “What do you think of this, Carola? Is I think it is a bit too blatant? Yes, we’ll take the shoes.” And the things undone or not and the rowdy camaraderie of old school days that never left them hold them over as the shapes revive.

So go lunch-hours. Only at nightfall on late buses back, the lights subdued, men sleeping, a woman knitting, do they open the bags to take out purchases and smile.

95. Viña del Mar: Chile on the Beach

Given the apparatus of happiness, the  
warm rotundity of skin, snub nipples  
pressed into the fat bounty of a  
wet bikini or a wind-filled top, when  
hair is disorder and the tousled shape  
is thrown off like a bird into the sun  
startled by something in earnest and more  
compliant than ever goddess the Greeks

saw in the body, the figures extend with  
shadows, hieroglyphics of darkness  
and, still more, desire. All in the mind  
and therefore dangerous when nothing is  
here but strong sunlight, blue water, a body's  
somnia and the waves pattering across  
the shore and millennia to Aegean marbles and  
beliefs without sense and which therefore hold.

All are things in motion and unmixed with evening  
or occasions or reproach, and still statuesque —  
such violence in speech, though, and an ignorance  
as to stun the Greek thinkers had they listened.

96. New Year: El Condes, Santiago

Our host idles at the wheel. The year is two hours old: balloon-hung groups, cars tooting and drunk couples samba-ing through the streets. He smiles but doesn't say a word. Me, I have the Devil at my ear, jabbering: "Look at that one! Imagine her! With half the city's beautiful at large you're going home?" "Please, I have to. Go away."

"Just the one night", he continues. "There's Maria Eugenia: adorable, so pretty. Ilsa with her a trumpet flare of body." "I had noticed." "Then it must be Sophie: heavy and demanding, hard to start, but once going and you mesh the gears. . . You want that world?" "We all do." "Even for a last night here?" "That certainly",

I say, but think, all the way back, of what we know of women, by instinct or frail experience, and see, in the cars everywhere, a laughter of arms and bodices in doors pulled shut.

## 97. Another Gone.

In the hard north, yes, with its minatory winters and souls scrubbed spotless in dissecting talk. But surely not here when all about is only an echo of the weather — its warmth, its friendliness, the double weave of delight in the seasons and the indolence of summer frocks and holidays and extended shopping trips.

Here should be different, without undo check, living in the lavishness of each new morning in the office and then to wine-cooled lunches with a wife beautiful in the shapeliness of a neat new number. And not appearances, to be factually one of the get-aheads, the laughing classes at the wheel of opportunity, sunglasses on.

They go one by one: abruptly, silently. Troubles in the marriage or money are whispered at funerals before friends slam doors and take the freeway, radio on.

## 98. Harvest Home

Plenty in the stiff sheaths of wheat, in  
bushels of marrows and in the blotched  
clouds still pinafores that with a soft  
mirroring of their features rise happily  
to meet you in the wind warm as they  
idle after school for a date too obvious  
to ever happen, the year and equally clearly  
has come to stasis and is at peace.

Time to hedge and ditch, to oil the wheels  
on old carts and sort out contracts  
with locals or chance the market, when  
the cold and the getting up at all hours  
with the bones growing inveterately  
closer to the land they are part of, which  
goes on dreaming all the same is  
fully and compendiously forgotten.

Now there will be dancing and occasion  
to uncork a good wine and go visiting in a  
fine new dress before the frosts and rain  
come with the bank calling in the loan.

## 99. Sound in the City

With so many round here born among  
the mountains, each city block of sound travels  
rumbling after them to have the hard,  
dense ground back, and even the buses, and  
the heavy transport and the sharp car hoot  
do not so much deafen the senses but  
reach to the root, as they have to: the whole land here  
should it ever be tested will not bear weight.

Listen to the Mapocho and you will hear them  
talking, the soldiers, the conquistadors,  
a harshness stamping the syllables, as was  
the cross from the first on the glittering coins.  
Yes, this was their mark, encrusting and durable,  
made more refulgent than their Saviour's name,  
a token if ever was wanted of the continuing  
blows beneath cladding of the iron soul.

So they continue in the grey cordones,  
in the buffeting of winds and the grind of gears  
all is wadded with the past and even the walls  
of glass reflect mines, and the holding, still towering hills.

## 100. Going Home

In the end then to return is to find  
again the beliefs that drew them to this  
extraordinary place, why the enormously  
wealthy if impetuous Pedro de Valdivia  
would leave his bones, earthly possessions  
and gold he had won in the Peruvian conquest,  
in making a stockade by the Mapocho River,  
walls and some farms and a primitive church.

Not much in the end but men going forward,  
living their days out as best they can. The  
sprawl and rough stones that made the Plaza  
de Armas, with its parade ground, cathedral  
and municipal buildings are just as they were.  
Safe in its concrete flows the Mapocho River,  
There the hill of the Santa Lucia and above  
it the high wall that starts the Andes range.

All just the same: he would know these places,  
water his horse under the eucalyptid stands  
and hear in the wind through the water grass  
the advice to go onward will all his men.