



ARTS ILLUSTRATED



Sculpture and text by Riyas Komu

Q&A

A Tempest of Recurrence

Latin American poet Raúl Zurita, the first artist of the Kochi Muziris Biennale 2016, talks to us about the debilitating pain of conflict and the liberating force of poetry

PRAVEENA SHIVRAM

On September 11, 1973, 23-year-old Raúl Zurita was one of the thousands of people who were arrested and detained as a result of General Augusto Pinochet's military coup against Chile's democratically elected Salvador Allende government. Zurita found himself detained inside a ship for six weeks with 800 other prisoners. A notebook of poems he carried with him was mistaken for words written in code and when it was confirmed they were indeed poems, it was thrown out into the sea. And Zurita, the suddenly disillusioned poet, who also carried the defiance of hope and knew, intrinsically, the inherent power of recurrence, memorised every single word he had written in that book. One-and-a-half-years later, after another encounter with soldiers who mistook him for a beggar because of how he looked, the words Zurita had memorised in that ship would come back to him. 'I had been imprisoned in the galleys of the Maipo, I was communist, I was twenty-five years old, I was an unpublished poet, and I was alone. It didn't go beyond a few blows, but I couldn't stand it. I remembered that phrase from the Gospels that talks about turning the other cheek. So I closed myself in a bathroom and burned my cheek with a knife that I heated up until it was red. After hours the poems that I had memorised when they arrested me came to me and I

began to write,' he said in an interview with Nathalie Handal in 2013.

This physicality of conflict that brands itself with impunity on the body is what informs the physicality of the words one finds in Zurita's poetry, and, somehow, in that journey between the body and the mind, and the mind and the page, the words come alive like Christmas lights – all at once and then as short little blinks, reminding us of the space (and silence) between the words. 'What will never reach the words, what will never have an expression of themselves, constitutes the basis, the support of any speech. That unspeakable silence, could never be said, is what we can call the hell of all poetry. The Art gives depth and emotion to the facts, which the facts never have by themselves,' wrote Zurita over an e-mail interview we conducted. His responses were in Spanish, and right there, as we went through the process of translation and having that translation checked by Zurita, he showed us the paradox of the 'word' and therefore, of the 'poem'.

Documentary filmmaker Anand Patwardhan often credits one of his biggest cinematic influences to be the film *Battle of Chile* by Patricio Guzman. The film documents the politically volatile year of 1973 in Chilean political history, and Patwardhan writes

on his website that 'Like that masterpiece of historical reconstruction, Gilo Pontecorvo's *The Battle of Algiers* a film it was probably named after, *The Battle of Chile* takes us chapter by inexorable chapter to its denouement but with a distinction that sets it apart. It is not a fictional recreation but a living record of a people as they were in a world we may never see again and revives the memory of a hope we are fortunate to be able to feel again.'² This then, to me, perfectly captures the soul of Zurita's poems that are always more than the sum of all the individual words that make up his poems, because they live in us as a 'record' of a world that bridges the gap of distance with an intense familiarity. Zurita's poems are like the waves on a full moon night that wash over you, again and again, with abandon, with fury, with power, leaving you drenched with images you can't shake off and imagery that seep into your skin like water. You are left chilled to the bone, and, yet, magnificently refreshed, wondering what it is about the poet or his poetry (if it is ever possible to delineate between the two) that resonates with the whirlpool of long-held memories swirling inexorably both inside and outside of us. It is as much a triumph of recurrence as it is its failing, and you carry both, perhaps like Zurita carries his words, with conscious gentleness and unconscious tenacity.

Excerpts from the interview translated by the Institute of Spanish Studies, New Delhi

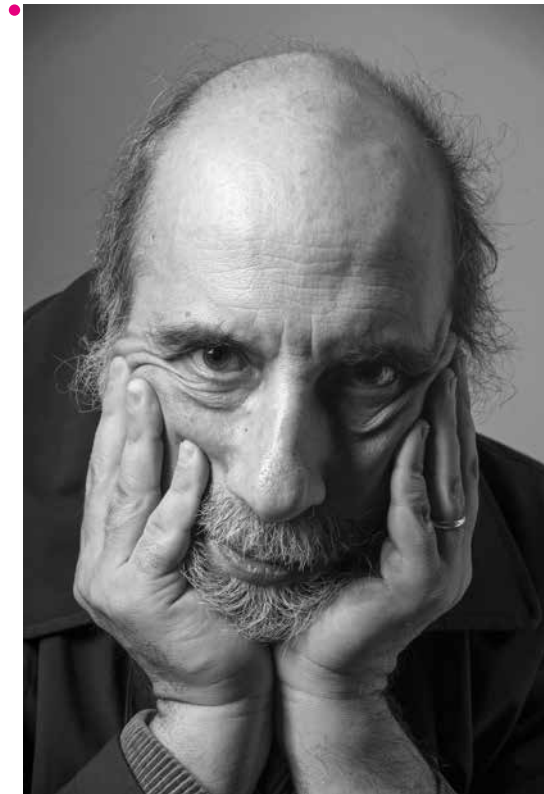
When it comes to poetry – or any form of creative expression – do you find the memory of an experience – harrowing or otherwise – more potent than the moment of experience itself?

Anyone who has ever experienced an extreme feeling of pain or anxiety knows that heart and also knows that there are things that will never have access to the language and can never reach the threshold of words, because expressing means at least to hear the echo of the same voice that responds. Since suffering has no answer, it is only an incredible assent, and whoever manages to say at least what is happening to himself is someone who, even on the edge of precariousness, has already chosen to live.

But anyone who has had an absolute experience of love, of that infinite encounter with the other, knows as well that whatever is said at that moment – the perpetual I love you or I adore you – is absolutely useless and extra, like the excrescences of an unfortunate condition of communication where we have not been happy and where the thirty thousand years in which we have been exchanging grunts, gestures, words about the earth, is revealed just as the history of misunderstanding. At the same time, all that exceeds the entire language forever, the love that infuriates us, that destroys us, is what we can call the paradise of all poetry. Between the two extremes we have the purgatory of words. Experience itself is unnarratable.

Language, words, context are constantly in a state of flux; they move in and out of us and sometimes we can ride along with them and sometimes we cannot. Do you, then, believe that poetry that "is older than writing, older than the book, older than the Internet" becomes crucial to how we navigate the recesses of our inner destiny and outer realities?

Poetry is the foundation of our existence. We are children of death and poetry, our humanity is born the moment death is discovered. When something, still unnamed, discovers that the stars we are looking at will



Pastoral

Chile interior es un desierto
 sus llanuras se han secado
 y sus ríos están más secos
 que las piedras
 No hay un camino que conduzca
 por estos caminos
 y solo los ríos
 parecen estar en todos partes
 Ah no hay solo los ríos
 sus brazos
 ¡las rocas se desmenuzan al viento!

Raúl Zurita

Raúl Zurita, Photograph by Jorge Brantmayer



The poem *The New Life* skywritten over New York, June 2, 1982. Part of the book *Anteparadise, A Bilingual edition*, Published by University of California Press. Photograph by Ana María López

continue to be and we will no longer look at them. Then, death is discovered. The first response to the exceedingly incomprehensible and vast fact that we are going to die is the poem. With the poem, language begins.

You have said often that you only stayed six weeks in prison but that moment has never left you. But this perspective in retrospection is like delayed hope. Do you think poetry is something that can mitigate that sense of delayed hope, especially when living in times of conflict?

Poetry is the hope of what doesn't have hope; it is the possibility of what doesn't have any possibility. It is love for those who lack love. The incident is the blind fact. It does not have a past and a future. If we survive the incident, if we are alive in this minute, you, I, the whole universe, it is because we have survived the incidents.

With CADA (Collectivo Acciones de Arte), and political art in public spaces, there seems to have been a gradual shift in how you approach art. You have said before that with CADA you wanted 'to place in opposition the limitless violence of crime and the limitless violence of beauty, the extreme violence of power and the extreme violence of art, the violence of terror and the even stronger violence of all our poems'. During the years of CADA, were you ever afraid that this impassioned journey of change could leave you exhausted?

My life as an artist is my life as a human being, and I can't do anything else but permanently oppose the violence of the poetry against the violence of the world. Beauty is violent, it can't be but violent, it must oppose against all the horror of the world, the hope of life, the hope of a new day. It must oppose the horror of the mother whose son has just been crushed by bombs with the not less violent horror of choosing life. The violence of beauty is that it prevents humanity from collectively choosing suicide. It is what makes us stay alive, despite everything that is there telling us that better we had been born dead.

Nature plays a significant part in your poetry, but I was curious about how

intrinsically it is bound to how you envision your words. Writing in the sky, over the desert sand is such a deeply impactful process – for you as an artist and for those who witnessed it then and continue to do so through your books – that I wonder if when poetry and nature come together in a rebellion of change, does art attain immortality?

I would like to unite art with the world. Unite our small portion of blood, nerves, flesh, tears, with the wonderful and terrifying immensity of the universe which we are witnesses of. Writing poems in the sky or in the deserts is nothing but a small, tiny gesture of my impotence for not being that sky I look at, for not being that infinite that is there. But we are human beings just because we are not that infinite, we are human beings because we are not that immortality, we are human beings because without that infinite and without that immortality we would not live a second.

We live in a world today where we are inundated with words – text messages, social media, advertisements. How do you then think poetry retains its own sense of identity? More importantly, do you think the survival of poetry is crucial to how we shape our individual sense of self?

Poetry is sentenced to survive. It was born with the human and it will live until the last human being contemplates the last sunset. Poetry is the word that we did not say in the trillions of messages; it is the news that we did not read amidst the infinite bombardment of news; it is the advertisement that we do not get to see in the ocean of advertisements. That word we did not say, that unread news, that unseen advertisement, is exactly what keeps us alive.

The world of words also means people are also constantly writing, and constantly trying to wrestle with the onslaught of information coming their way, most times with little success. For you, as a poet, how do you filter the information coming your way? What I mean here is, how do you keep the potency of the written word alive despite its many badly cloned manifestations out there?

We live in the age of agony of the language and the absolute triumph of language of the capital, that is, the language of advertising where no word says what it is saying, no sentence names what it is naming, no word names what it is naming. We speak thus in the midst of collapsed languages, of words whose meanings agonise as if they could no longer bear all the violence that history has loaded on them. The collapse of language and languages is the failure of our union with what is named, or to say it otherwise, it is the infernal failure of love. Poetry is the most fragile art because the agony of language and words is its own agony, but at the same time it is the most powerful art because it is the only one that can account for the magnitude of that loss and can raise new meanings from that great duel. It is something infinitely superior to our forces, but what else can art be but something infinitely superior to our strengths?

In retrospect, do you think poetry chose you or you chose poetry? And how does this choice reflect on your own transformation as an artist?

I did not want to be a poet; I wanted to be an engineer. Poetry was for me a desperate act of resistance. I was under a dictatorship and I desperately needed a job to support my children, and I did not find it. Imagining poems written in the sky and on the deserts was the way I had to not go mad, to not give up. Only later I realised that what I had not chosen was my life.

And, finally, what do you think it is about poetry that manages to transcend the limiting boundaries of language and culture, of adaptations and translations, of geography and history?

It is the only one that finally counts.

#1
From 'Paradise in Zurita: An Interview with Raúl Zurita' by Nathalie Handal, translated from Spanish by David Shook for the Prairie Schooner. <http://prairieschooner.unl.edu/excerpt/paradise-zurita-interview-ra%C3%BAI-zurita>

#2
From Anand Patwardhan's article titled 'Battle of Chile' for Dox Magazine, August 2003, also published on his website. http://patwardhan.com/?page_id=718



The words *ni pena ni miedo* (nor pain nor fear) written on the Atacama Desert, 1993. Photograph by Guy Wenborne

The words *ni pena ni miedo* (nor pain nor fear) written on the Atacama Desert, 1993. Photograph by the Chilean Air Force

All Images Courtesy of the artist.

അകത്താരപ്പുറത്താർ
ശോകസ്തംഭം വരും

Who is inside
Who is outside
Await the pillarstop
of repentance
