

## The Restorers of Chiloé

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This series of poems addresses the restoration of religious statues in churches on 21 islands of the remote archipelago of Chiloé, off the coast of southern Chile. From 2007 to 2017, a group of art restoration students, led by Juan Alfonso Valdebenito, worked as volunteers over the summers, repairing the lovingly carved wooden images of Jesus, Mary and various Catholic saints. Although sixteen of the churches had been declared World Heritage Sites because of their architecture, their religious statues, some of them a century old, had been neglected.

During Colonial time, since there were not enough priests to serve all the scattered population of Chiloé, the traveling priest appointed a *fiscal* to represent him in each major town, serving as a religious and legal authority. This position still exists to this day, although with less power than in Colonial times. The man who was serving as *fiscal* at the time of the restoration collaborated closely with the art specialists, along with several other villagers. Even though none of the members of the restoration team was religious, these poems speak of the tenderness and respect that they demonstrated, in their dealings with both the religious statues and their devotees, the islanders.

The saints of Chiloé were beautifully photographed by the Chilean photographer Mariana Mathews in 2008, as can be appreciated at the digital museum Castillo de Niebla: <https://www.museodeniebla.gob.cl/sitio/Contenido/Galerias/36142:Santos-silentes-objetos-de-la-escuela-Santeria-de-Chiloe>

1. The table is ready to receive the patient saints: scalpeldrilllargeandsmallpaintbrusheschiselbalsam wood solvents.

The professor and Boquita are always arguing, but their hands move in synchrony: "I'll hold the light, you fill it in." Boquita, the restorer, wants to finish up quickly here, so she can go visit Saint John. He's the one with his lips partly open, so you can make out his moist buccal cavity.

1. La mesa está lista para recibir a los santos pacientes: bistoritaladro pincesbrochasformónmadera de balsa solventes.

El maestro y Boquita discuten todo el tiempo pero sus manos se mueven en sincronía "yo te alumbró, tú rellenas". Boquita, la restauradora, quiere terminar rápido aquí para ir a visitar a San Juan. Ese, que tiene la boca entreabierta por donde deja entrever su húmeda cavidad.

2. The lady who keeps the chapel keys has told us that the dressed virgin without a face is Our Lady of Grace. She herself dropped her on the floor face-first, while cleaning her. She doesn't have a face and she holds her hands up in the air. With her yellow dress and her long lace skirts, she is sitting down. She also has pearl earrings in what is left of an ear lobe.

*(I have hidden my face. I wanted it to break/shatter against the floor... I could no longer bear the expression of desire. A while back I also did away with my hands. No touching. Just stumps up near the shoulders, so that I won't. So that I won't ever, when I'm alone.)*

2. La señora que guarda las llaves de la capilla nos ha dicho que la virgen vestida y sin rostro es nuestra señora de Gracia. A ella misma, cuando estaba limpiando, se le cayó de frente contra el suelo. No tiene rostro y permanece con las manos levantadas. Con su traje amarillo y las enaguas de encaje, está sentada. También tiene pendientes de perlas en lo que queda de un lóbulo de su oreja.

*(He escondido mi cara. Yo quise que se rompa/estrelle contra el suelo... ya no podía con la expresión del deseo. Hacía tiempo también acabé con mis manos. Nada de tocar. Sólo muñones que ya van cerca de los hombros para que no. Para que jamás cuando estoy sola)*

3. The team takes into consideration that restoring doesn't mean returning the image to its original state; you respect the patina. The materials have their own history; they're imbued with the passing of time and also of prayers, stacked up on top of one another. You cover up the crack but the repair is honest, obvious. The lacunae (like the lost face of the Virgin) are reconstructed in fine screen, elaborating a version of the missing face, as far as we can speculate.

Critical intervention involves seeing time, realizing that everything is destined to disappear. Not glossing over that truth. The only lasting thing is death. The goal is to keep matter together through these elaborate tricks, so we can preserve the saints for the next generation. To keep dragging into the future the image the ancient ones loved.

None of the team is religious.

3. El equipo considera que restaurar no significa volver al estado inicial; la pátina se respeta, los materiales tienen su historia, están cargados por el transcurso del tiempo y también de las oraciones puestas una encima de la otra. Se recubre la grieta pero la sanación es honesta, está en evidencia. Las lagunas (como la cara perdida de la virgen) se reconstruyen en fino tramado elaborando una versión del rostro volado, un rostro que es especulación.

Intervención crítica es ver el tiempo, darse cuenta de que todo está destinado a desaparecer. No escamotear esa verdad. Lo único perdurable es la muerte. El esfuerzo es sostener unida la materia con estos trucos elaborados para guardarlos hasta la generación siguiente. Ir arrastrando la imagen que amaron los antiguos.

Ninguno del equipo tiene fe.

4. Doña Encarnación has come from the center of the island of Mechuque to see her patron saint, who is to be restored. She has arrived barefoot. It will be a brief visit, but she needs to pay her respects; she has walked several hours and brings, wrapped in a handkerchief, a handful of coins. She thinks that she can already see the little lost face of the saint, she says.

None of the team is religious.

4. Doña Encarnación ha llegado desde el interior de la isla Mechuque para ver su patrona, que será restaurada. Ha venido descalza. Será una visita corta, pero necesita presentar sus respetos; ha caminado varias horas y trae, envueltas en un pañuelo un puñado de monedas. Dice que ya le parece ver la carita perdida de la santa.

Ninguno del equipo tiene fe.

5. Gustavo remembers the restoration of Saint Michael Archangel. "I did the whole demon myself. The devil is Spanish and is in the church of Nercón. With his imposing horns and his twisted face, he is naive. I didn't have any records or images of the devil, so I made it by looking at myself in a mirror."

*(I'm like an impossible animal made of wood. A thick body poured out onto the floor, crushed by the warrior's feet. My fragile lower limbs stick out, flapping uselessly, because they couldn't hold up this monstrosity anyway)*

5. Gustavo rememora la restauración del San Miguel arcángel. "El demonio lo hice entero. El diablo es español y está en la iglesia de Nercón, con sus cuernos imponentes y el rostro torcido, es ingenuo. Yo no tenía registro ni imagen del diablo, así es que lo hice mirándome en un espejo"

*(soy como un animal imposible de madera. Un cuerpo grueso derramado sobre el suelo, aplastado por los pies del guerrero; las frágiles extremidades salen aleteando inútiles porque no podrían, de todos modos, sostener este armatoste)*

6. Our Lady of Grace from Tac has a tiny head towering over a pile of clothing. Skirt after skirt explode below the restraint of the public costume. Skirts in contact with the incarnation and the blush of wood.

*(Gustavo spoke to San Francisco, telling him about the skirts, while he polished his fingers and the saint flashed a gleam from his glass eyes; his lips got wet—I saw it myself—since he had them partly open.)*

6. La virgen de Gracia de Tac tiene una cabeza minúscula encubierta sobre un montón de ropas. Enagua tras enagua estallan bajo la contención del traje público. Enaguas en contacto con la encarnación y el rubor de la madera.

*(Gustavo le habló al San Francisco, le dijo lo de las enaguas mientras pulía sus dedos y el santo lanzó un destello desde sus ojos de vidrio; los labios se humedecieron – yo lo vi – como los tenía entreabiertos)*

7. He came here because he remembered the first saint he ever saw. She had half of her dress unveiling her left shoulder and the soft curve of her back, revealing her majestic calves. He thinks about that, his hand resting on his leg while he runs fine sandpaper over her. Next will come the heel, the slender foot and the calf, which have been separated from the rest of the extremities. No wood-boring insect has ever dared to attack matter incarnate.

But we have to cover up the Virgin, because the faithful won't want to see her naked, with her hands on her wooden legs and that lost look of a madwoman, her eyes popping out from all that she has seen.

*(The chisel penetrates, it feels good. Look how it sinks in. Come here, Gustavo, bring a lead pencil and mark me here, on my foot)*

7. Vino aquí porque se acuerda de la primera santa que vio. Estaba con la mitad del vestido descubriendo el hombro izquierdo y la suave curva de la espalda dejando ver unas corvas majestuosas. Piensa en eso, la mano sobre su pierna mientras le pasa una lija fina. Luego será el talón, el delgado pie y la pantorrilla que han sido separados del resto de la extremidad. Ningún xilófago ha osado acometer sobre la materia encarnada

Pero hay que cubrir a la virgen porque los fieles no querrán verla desnuda, con las manos sobre sus piernas de madera y esa mirada perdida de loca, ojos desorbitados por tanto que ha visto.

*(Traspasa el formón, es rico. Mira cómo se hunde. Ven Gustavo, ven con un lápiz de mina y márcame aquí, en el pie)*

8. Before leaving the diocese, the *fiscal* lost his mind. He managed to tie the hands of the Nazarene Christ, forcing the arms back until they were wrapped around a tree trunk, and sprinkling him with a spray of red paint. Divine blood, portrayed like this, frightened the children. The community dismissed him, with the priest's approval; because of his mistakes he couldn't go on being *fiscal*.

8. El fiscal, antes de abandonar la diócesis, perdió el juicio. Alcanzó a amarrar las manos del Cristo nazareno, forzó los brazos hasta rodear con ellos un tronco tras la espalda y le roció una lluvia de pintura roja. Así la sangre divina asustó a los niños. Lo destituyó la comunidad en acuerdo con el cura, por sus faltas no podía seguir siendo fiscal.

9. Our Lady of Grace has been integrated into the restorers' circle, sitting upright, while her clothes are sanitized. Wrapped in her cape, she turns her gaze to the hands of Gustavo, who is concentrating now on the tiny fingers of the cherub, who only has a stump, with none of her digits complete. Now they will be made of larch wood.

Our Lady of Grace casts a shadow over Boquita, the youngest member of the team. Her hair moves, brushing against her cape. "The Nazarene's nose has been broken," says Boquita, "I need to make it a little smaller."

And Our Lady of Grace, with her orange feet, presides over the colloquium of healing.

Her eyes gone astray, majestic and severe, her thin lips puckered into a gesture of disapproval.

9. La virgen de Gracia se ha integrado al corro de los restauradores, sentada y erguida, mientras su ropa es sanitizada. Está envuelta en su capa y dirige la mirada a las manos de Gustavo que, ahora, ha debido concentrarse en los minúsculos dedos del querubín quien sólo tiene un muñón, sin ninguna de las falanges completa. Ahora serán de alerce.

La virgen de Gracia le da sombra a Boquita, la más joven del equipo. Su cabello se mueve y roza la capa. "La nariz del nazareno ha sido quebrada" dice Boquita, "deberé rebajarla un poco".

Y la señora de Gracia, con sus pies anaranjados preside el coloquio de la sanación.

Los ojos extraviados, majestuosa y severa, los pequeños labios fruncidos en un gesto de censura.

10. All night long Gustavo has been pushing a dowel over the saint's thumb. Then he completed the operation, carving the thumb out of firetree wood, molding the articulations with so much precision that he has given the whole hand new life. Shortly afterward, Gustavo lost his thumb; his own thumb was cut clean off in one slice.

10. Gustavo ha empujado toda la noche un tarugo sobre el dedo pulgar de la santa. Después, ha completado la operación labrando el dedo de ciruelillo hasta moldear articulaciones con tanta precisión que ha dado vida a la mano completa. Gustavo perdió el pulgar poco después; su propio dedo salió limpio en un corte.

11. The professor has placed Our Lady of Grace at the entrance to the church, with the door open, to let the repaired fracture in her neck dry. When she arrived she was wearing a child's first communion dress, and the patron insisted on dressing her more elegantly, but that required airing out the whole area. She was only wearing her slip when the wind came up, a sudden thunderstorm which lashed the ruined linen.

*(I've created my own wounds. I'm the one who has filled my head with holes. The wind can't topple the weight of my framework.*

*The wind wails and gathers strength, but it won't be able to lift me up and undo all that burdens me)*

11. El maestro ha puesto a la virgen de Gracia a la entrada de la iglesia con la puerta abierta para secar la recién reparada fractura del cuello. Cuando llegó traía puesto el vestido de primera comunión de una niña y la patrona insistió en abrigoarla más pero la operación exigía airear toda la zona. Estaba en enaguas cuando empezó el viento, un repentino temporal que azotó el estropeado lino.

*(He provocado mis propias heridas. Soy yo, la que ha llenado de agujeros mi cabeza. El viento no puede con el peso de mi armazón.*

*El viento ulula y junta fuerzas pero no podrá elevarme y deshacer todo esto que me agobia)*

12. Boquita says that Metahue was in the worst shape, since there is no water at all left on the island. Each of them had to wash up every morning with only a glassful. She remembers happily how she happened upon a wooden basin full of rain water.

Boquita says that they shouldn't rotate the mission again, because of the water.

12. Dice Boquita que lo peor fue Metahue porque en toda la isla ya no queda agua. Tenían que lavarse en las mañanas con el contenido de un vaso cada uno. Ella recuerda con tanta alegría cómo encontró, por casualidad, un cuenco de madera con agua de lluvia.

Dice Boquita que la misión circular otra vez no, por el agua.

13. Gustavo will no longer work on the hands of Our Lady of Grace. He has finished the middle finger with great feeling. He sat down on a bench in the church, in the sunlight, just him and the delicate hand. From afar you could see how he takes it and caresses it, holding it up against the light. The chisel moves up and down over the delicate piece of hazelnut wood.

Boquita will be the one to remove spurious debris from the Virgin's face. All the crackle will be preserved as is; only the largest cracks will be repaired.

13. Gustavo ya no trabajará con las manos de la virgen de Gracia. Ha terminado el dedo medio con un esfuerzo conmovido. Se sentó en un banco de la iglesia, al sol, sólo él y la mano finísima. Desde lejos se ve cómo la toma y acaricia; la levanta y coloca contra la luz. El bisturí baja y sube en el delgado trozo de avellano.

Boquita será quien remueva restos espurios del rostro de la virgen, todo el craquelado se conservará igual, sólo las grietas mayores serán reparadas.

14. Boquita and the professor chat while putting away the equipment. She will return to a convent in Santiago, where she will also work with images. But she doesn't like it there because—even though she doesn't see them—she knows there are very elderly nuns, many of them mad. She knows it because they sometimes run down the hallways screaming. Boquita would rather repair damage here, where the saints live, where the colorful necklaces and new shoes that the saints wear, have cost the islanders sleepless nights.

14. Boquita y el maestro conversan mientras guardan el instrumental. Ella volverá a un convento en Santiago, a trabajar también con imágenes pero no le gusta porque —aunque no las ve— sabe que hay monjas ancianas, muchas de ellas locas. Lo sabe porque a veces corren por los pasillos gritando. Boquita prefiere reparar daños acá, donde los santos viven; donde los collares colorinches y zapatos nuevos que llevan los santos, han costado desvelos a los isleños.

15. Boquita is raising her voice to the priest. She tells him that the image repaired on her previous mission had a loose finger; that she found it missing ears and a neck, covered in cobwebs. The torso had perforations made by insects; so did the head. We blocked the orifices, she says severely, but it has to be monitored regularly, because the insects reappear. We made plaster and reinstated it chromatically, she insists. Luckily we had the other hand; when we cleaned the wound, we found carpenter's glue. She has all her fingers now; we made them out of cypress wood.

None of the team is religious.

15. Boquita le habla golpeado al cura. Le dice que la imagen reparada en misión anterior, tenía un dedo desprendido; que la encontró sin orejas y sin cuello, con telarañas. El torso tenía perforaciones hechas por insectos, también la cabeza. Obturamos los orificios, dice severa, pero tiene que haber control periódico porque los organismos reaparecen. Hicimos un estuco y reintegramos cromáticamente, insiste. Por suerte teníamos la otra mano, al limpiar la herida, nos encontramos cola carpintera. Está con sus deditos ahora, los hicimos de ciprés.

Ninguno del equipo tiene fe.