

Valdivia



PUENTE CALLE CALLE — VALDIVIA (CHILE)

N.º 11

Valdivia

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Author's Introduction

VALDIVIA is eight-hundred kilometers to the south of Santiago, in a region with a great abundance of water: in its wide and deep rivers, its huge lakes, and from the rain that stops falling only a few weeks a year. The city is close to the coast, connected to the sea by large rivers, like the Cruces River and the Valdivia River (called Calle-Calle as it passes through the city). Historically speaking, the city has been a bloody site, due to both the battles between the Mapuche and the Spanish, and the arrival of the colonists who at times favored an environment similar to the North American old west. To top it off, in 1960 the city was devastated by the worst earthquake in the history of humanity, which resulted in thousands of deaths, both from the destruction of buildings and from the tsunami and the overflowing of the river. In some areas, the waters rose to the third floor of the houses.

The south of the country is characterized by a rich mythology, unusual in comparison to other regions of Chile, and Valdivia is no exception. Unlike other places in Chile, the "ancient people" of Valdivia speak of mythological beings as if they truly existed. The Valdivians talk as if they are going to find these mythological characters around the corner. Some of these legendary characters are the Tué-tué, a lineage of witches who transform into birds (while maintaining their human faces) in order to go out into the night and ask people for things, or threaten people with death. It's also said that each time the circus comes to Valdivia, the rain doesn't stop, and a tragedy takes place. Once, walking through a street in the city center, a friend showed me a house that, according to legend, would often burn down completely, but the next day it would return to its normal state; the woman who lived in the house was a witch, it is said, thus she did not appear to be affected by the flames because they were part of her natural infernal environment. Another character is "the widow," who lost her children and husband in the tsunami during the 1960 earthquake and she is always looking for them at night ... and if you look into her eyes, you will die. "El Canelos" is a ship that sank in this same tsunami; it was a cargo boat that also carried people through the rivers, to the nearby islands, and to the Spanish forts. It would circle the Teja Island, which is a piece of land that is still part of the city although it's surrounded by rivers. It's said that El Canelos appears some nights in the river, with its crew of ghosts. And really, I think this is a version of another famous Chilean legend: El Caleuche, the ghost boat of Chiloé. And of course, there are many other legends disguised in this one.

My own mythologies live inside my memory. The constant rustling of the trees outside my house, and the pounding of the rain and wind would loosen my imagination. When I began to write *Valdivia* everything was all mixed together, and so I created a portrait of those mixed-up memories, which included elements of reality, of my imagination, and of mythology, all extracted from a vision seen through the eyes of a child.

And for me, it was especially important that this transposition also related to the reality that the country was experiencing at that time: the military dictatorship, the persecution of thousands of Chileans, the violence, the torture. All of this occurred in an environment inhabited by ghosts, by mythological beings that came directly from the inferno, who would do evil for the sake of evil. In the same way that mythological birds transformed into men, men in real life transformed into beasts who exercised their brutality over a "motherland" that suffered direct terror.

We know that every book is political. But I did not know this when I started and finished *Valdivia*. Over time, I discovered that there are things in this book that I did not know were there, but there they are. I am there, yes. Valdivia is, too, but Chile is there as well, and the emblem of Chile is violence. The country's motto is "By reason or by force." And almost always it ends up being "by force." It is a tragic country, where legends exist because there is always something dark and evil creating them somewhere.

I'd love to talk much more about Chile, a topic that fascinates me. Perhaps filmmaker Raul Ruiz was right in saying "The only issue for Chileans is Chile." Or, as poet Enrique Linh writes, "I never left horrific Chile / ... / I never left anything."

—Galo Ghigliotto, Summer 2016

Valdivia

for my mother and children
my beginning and my end

1

Chunks of ice from another planet because it's blue petroleum
dark calypso fake squishy ice like molars made of gel
frozen inside in a rectangular plastic vacuum
packed with light grey letters 3M blue + calypso + gel
+ 30 cm of rectangular bag vacuum packed and sleeping
like a sweet friendly little cushion over my mother's
bruised violet face Carmen my wet nurse
washing her eyes with her tears death rattles draw
bubbles of blood

2

they say there was a flood of blood she
was leaning back
at the foot of a couch in Carmen's arms
on the floor where red i tried to walk towards her
 slipping in her blood
in the salt that fell on my shoes that were so heavy
they say this i don't remember
i only remember they say this and maybe
i remember something when they do it but i would prefer not to
i would prefer not to
i would prefer

3

on the Pedro de Valdivia bridge
two cars collide
we went flying through the windshield
my mother and i falling 40 meters
into the Calle-Calle river that runs
slowly beneath us
over us suddenly
and two men are still up on the bridge
stretching their arms with their fists clenched
i die
she dies
while their horns collide
i die
she dies
how easily the demons infiltrate the day

4

the violent climate reeks
worse than a pasture of rotten eyes
bursting beneath the sun
my mother watches me from behind a cracked cheekbone
her skin is not jade
the furrows of blood are beautiful
they branch out of her
like rhizomes extending through the air that surrounds her
and they connect the walls
of a room that stops being square

i am tempted to kill them all
i am the most premature murderer in the city of Valdivia

5

my father's figure as if clipped from a photograph
from the hallway of a house a nice house
in a good neighborhood it was super important
to keep up appearances
for the neighbors all doctors like the dentist
who let me figure out the christmas farce
the night he dressed up as santa claus with his apron on under
and his hands smelling like dental anesthetic