

Petrina Barson

## ***Cacique Dos***

*for Alvar Nuñez Cabeza de Vaca, who explored the Rio Paraguay in 1543-4*

Remembering all this I have the feeling, the sense  
of Paraguay: the sudden delapidation  
as we left Argentina and its sleek stores behind;  
canvas stalls sprouting from muddy roads -  
weighed down by their crop of oddments:  
onions toothpicks radios some beaming plastic toys.  
On the bus to Asunción, worlds scoot past  
our steamed-up windows: men sitting on rainy porches,  
a pink donkey tethered to a tree, a rooster running,  
washing spread out on a hedge.

What would you have made of this tatty place:  
the legacy of Irala and his long line of swindlers -  
or of all the gold that wasn't there?  
I think you'd feel at home here - *Guaraní* faces  
eyeing you from beneath basket-loads of *Chipá*.  
I can see you stepping carefully along the disastrous  
pavement, between the daily pot-holes of corruption.  
I looked for you in Asunción, found only Irala  
embracing a *Guaraní* on the cathedral wall -  
no sign of the knife in his other hand.

Approaching the port along a street lined with oranges  
we stuck out like watermelons: too big, too groomed,  
too rich, too much luggage. We walked the plank  
onto the Cacique Dos and felt already launched - well before  
the horn sounded and the tide of hawkers fell away.  
You left Asunción with twenty brigantines,  
one hundred canoes, and an army of *Guaraní* -  
metal plates on their foreheads bouncing the sunlight  
between them. We had lightning, and herons fishing -  
their white wings stirring the pink air.

For a few hours we managed our awkwardness with sleep  
then surfaced to face the gleaming river and the challenge  
of passing time in Spanish. Made ourselves busy with our books -  
made ourselves an oddity amongst these still-rooted people  
who let the hours pass like the *Camalote* plant  
that drifts by the boat in little islands. Eventually  
curiosity brought us Alicia - sixteen and just married  
and wanting to be girly with me about hair and husbands;  
and Martin - who nursed our Spanish through comparisons  
of wages and genocides and the price of bread.

At night we sat on the prow with Martin, drank *mate*  
talked philosophy, crawled across the language bridge  
until exhaustion had us watching the stars in silence.  
Sat entranced as the boat became a catalyst for flashes  
of river life: as swinging lamps hailed us, or the search-light  
teased out a man and his row-boat from the darkened banks.  
Watched as a sweet-faced woman climbed aboard his little ferry,  
held out her arms as a baby bundle was passed down to her,  
then sat still beyond silence as he rowed her to the shore.  
Wondered about her life amongst the waiting chickens  
and about all the lives we are abandoned to.

You were the second chief of that unruly tribe  
of Spaniards who wanted riches and the services of women  
more than the brotherhood of man. You were on Garcia's trail  
and I on yours - both looking for a kind of gold  
both chasing someone whose traces are unreliable stories  
in unreliable mouths. Garcia led you to near-starvation  
at Los Reyes, and while the Arianicosies shot arrows  
at your misery, last hopes dissolved in the deadly glares  
of your men. You led me into the wide arms of the river  
and a plunge without ripples into quiet and distant eyes.