

*from*  
SCATTERED WAYS

Alonso Quesada

*Translated by Dan Eltringham*

These poems form part of a larger project to translate the entirety of *Scattered Ways*, a long poem of over one hundred pages. An earlier version of the first stanza of *Peaceful Ways of the Memory* VI was published in *Wretched Strangers: Borders Movement Homes*, ed. by JT Welsch and Ágnes Lehóczky (Norwich: Boiler House Press, 2018), and the entirety of II and VI from *Peaceful Ways of the Memory* appeared in *Poetry Wales* in 2019.

## Translator's Preface

Alonso Quesada's *Scattered Ways* (1944), written between 1915-1923 in Las Palmas, Gran Canaria, is a forgotten classic of social crisis and solipsistic melancholy in the vein of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and Hope Mirrlees' *Paris: A Poem* (1919). Unlike these canonical works, however, Quesada's long poem describes not the alienation of life in a great metropolis, but a more muted anguish felt at the margins of European modernity. This self-consciously developed island mentality is punningly invoked in the title to his prose collection *Insulario*: the condition of the islander is equated by Quesada with its near-synonym, the isolation of the solipsistic self. *Scattered Ways* gives voice to these ideas in a detached yet deeply-felt *vers libre*.

Rafael Romero Quesada (1886-1925), who wrote under the pen name Alonso Quesada, was a Spanish poet, dramatist, fiction writer and journalist from Las Palmas, Gran Canaria. Along with his friends Saulo Torón and Tomás Morales, he was one of the major figures of Canarian modernism (in Spanish, *postmodernismo*). Apart from a trip to Madrid in 1918, Quesada barely left Las Palmas. Perhaps because of this, he never achieved much recognition beyond the ambit of Canarian letters. He left most of his work uncollected at his early death from tuberculosis, selections of which have been posthumously published through Canarian cultural institutions between 1944-1988. Yet despite his peripheral position, Quesada's was also a richly cosmopolitan literary world sustained by correspondence with major Spanish writers of the day, foremost among them Juan Ramón Jiménez, whose 1914

children's classic *Platero y yo* (Platero and I) is invoked in section VI of *Peaceful Ways of the Memory*, translated below in full.

After the early death of his father, Quesada was forced to take up journalism and clerical work in order to support his family. Like Eliot, he worked as a banker, first for the Banco de España, then for two British banks, Elder Dempster and the Bank of British West Africa. Indeed, his relationship with the British has been characterised by Lázaro Santana as one of 'attraction-repulsion': he was at once drawn to and repelled by what he saw as the British temperament's measured reserve, tempered by a grossly pragmatic materialism. This affectionate yet censorious duality can be seen clearly in *Peaceful Ways of the Memory* VI, included here, and throughout his work; as a bank clerk he saw clearly that the power of money, and of exchange rates, was a political sticking point in the articulation of regional identity (see: 'Regionalismo al fin', *Insulario*). One could say that Quesada's cautious and ironic, yet lyrical and emotionally attuned writing speaks from one insularity to another, from the colonial margins of 'Europe' to the equally 'insular' British Isles.

Later, Quesada worked for the Port Authority in Las Palmas, and in his last years in a bookshop. The banal demands of work frustrated him, as did the distance between his literary dreams and the quotidian realities of his compromised, 'insular' existence. Quesada's life was marked by financial worry, and his evocation of quotidian precarity resonates powerfully with the concerns of the present. The dictates of the pocket-watch, of work-time, are balanced against muffled bells that always seem to be

stuck at ‘burning midday’ (*Painful Ways*, VI). The obscure recurrent symbolism of a mushroom seems to index both the world of commerce and meaningless toil that belongs to ‘men of cane and fungus’ (*Painful Ways*, VI), and the incipient mental disturbance that it causes. Only, it seems, when snuggled amongst the shelves of a library (*Painful Ways* XIII), in his literary community of long-dead writers, is the poet able to make temporary peace with the world.

Quesada was also engaged in the intellectual currents of interwar Europe. The phrase ‘el conocido caso/de cerebración inconsciente’ (‘The well-known case of unconscious/reflection’, *Painful Ways*, XIII) seems to evidence reading of Freud. Elsewhere, contemporary references to Buddhism, Spiritualism and Theosophy feed into European writers’ interest in the afterlife, the transmigration of the soul, and reincarnation in the body of animals. When, in *Peaceful Ways of the Memory* VI, his dead friend Juan – reincarnated as an ass – ‘came by to say hi’, sticks its snout in the poet’s ear and proffers comically sage wisdom about the afterlife, the voice shifts to a warmly affectionate tone. But always there is an undertow of sadness, drawn from the frustrations of menial work. ‘I used to admire men of feigned/honesty, who sat at desks’, says Juan-the-ass, who has transcended those troubles and advises the poetic speaker to do likewise.

Daniel Eltringham, July 2019.

*from*  
PAINFUL WAYS

## I

(*Solitary Street.*  
*Dusk.*)

Drunken shade. Yesterday's friend.  
 City street; a brusque blow  
 of gloaming gold  
 dives to the depths  
 of the blue mountain.

The memory sprouts from my calm forgetfulness  
 like the point of a star stitch, red.

The friend dragged his chain-like arms  
 along the walls of the houses. It was  
 as though he was stealing in silently.  
 He didn't say *so long* since his mouth was  
 studded with bitterness and rage...

He's the friend who never says  
*goodbye*, who forgets everything,  
 who rakes through remembrance  
 as though looking for a coin  
 in a broken pocket.

His line's ragged blood  
 tugs at him by his disdainful lip.  
 I felt his diffuse silence brush,  
 timidly, across my engrossed heart.

His belated gaze  
 was as a leaden horizon.  
 But he dunked his eyes for a moment  
 in the waters of his heart...!

Close by the night came down. But  
there was a slip of night between the pair  
and a little old love. Yet friendship  
didn't spy the venerable hand at rest.

He turned down the street, was filled with street  
and with dark doorways like wolves' mouths.  
He dragged himself laboriously along  
the pavement, a sob bodied forth.  
He left smells of mendicant scents,  
an aroma of crazed blood  
that piles up the hours and drinks them up  
with the infinite thirst  
of one whose time has not yet come...

## III

*(Winter night. The lamps  
have gone out. Narrow passageways.)*

Is it the true and weighty hour?  
It can't still be that dread hour!  
But those shaded silhouettes that pass by?  
That shiver of ice is the hour...!

What do you feel...?

Within the dark quiet of a bell,  
I feel earth close around me;  
but through the soil I hear  
the rumour of harsh words.  
And my pupils have stayed open  
and go on labouring the light...!

## VI

*(Commercial street. African  
midday.)*

At once I felt an infinite weariness...  
It seemed that streets were fanning out from my heart,  
straight streets of a grey, slow city.  
I felt a timid murmur deep in my soul;  
the streets were hauling in my heart.  
And those dusty voices, those urban tremors  
emitted by men of cane and fungus,  
bitterly stirring a sliver of conscience,  
were keeping the pain alive.

My useless life was a shabby street:  
stony hills, weeds between stones,  
like former joys...A pile  
of debris at a crossroads...!  
Muffled indolence of midday bells!  
And that work of men made sleepy  
by the sun's beams that bind their hands.  
Such the image of burning midday.

The street junk  
came towards my penurious heart,  
those vulgar things without meaning  
of one who sticks a hand in a pocket  
or one who checks a watch by reflex.  
All the timepieces of the street were inside  
myself and my heart was  
as a pocket with hands  
replete with sweat and boredom.

The street, dirty, like rusty lead,  
touched the limit of my soul.  
The men fled slowly along it  
bearing the time with them  
and loaning me a tragic space of worth.  
Nothing!  
It was all in service of Nothingness  
again! (Exegesis  
of creative  
thought.)  
...But always Death, the boredom above.  
And death? Perhaps a greater monotony.  
Everything goes on like any old street  
and men die too,  
as do I...  
They will die once more!  
To die is the new way of keeping on!

## IX

*(City street.  
Desolate tread.)*

A Jesuit passes me by.  
 He gives me a sharp look and splits.  
 Does he know me? It doesn't matter.  
 I am the great local foe.  
 The unhearing enemy who won't greet  
 the bishop. The embodiment of impiety.  
 A dumb corollary  
 of liberal pedantry.  
 Demagogue, like the barber on the corner,  
 splendid atheist.  
 Bloodthirsty, like a Persian;  
 A union-man, like a Catalan...  
 And so  
 my fame  
 is straight-forward.  
 In this province of the further shore  
 it's easy  
 to get known:  
 not greeting the bishop  
 and leaving one's hat on  
 when his Divine Majesty crosses one's path.

We must struggle. One evening, a lawyer  
 says: that fool stirs up the evil  
 inside, when I see him  
 go by.  
 The memory of him pierces me  
 like a drill from the crown to the breast.

And so you see, one goes along  
without struggle,  
peacefully,  
like an ancient attorney  
and yet one is fighting without knowing it  
with an astral advocate.  
The years pass by. One hasn't come to anything.  
One dies, always the same,  
after puffing on  
one's pipe  
like an old sea-dog  
at the sea's edge.  
And their struggle is over.  
Which?  
A shadow's struggle  
with a possibility...  
Pride. The month dies  
and one has no money. What matter?  
But buy a book...one...  
Mr Montaigne's *Essays*.  
And meanwhile life sobs...  
We are on our way to the city  
flicking through the book,  
like just another human number.  
But the obstetrical doctor  
or the specialist of the intestinal tract  
crosses the cranial shade  
with the mushroom of his approval.  
He looks and – how vain! – exclaims  
from the depths of his hospital-science.  
And one goes peacefully along  
unsuspecting, reading one's book.  
And afterwards that cold, dark thing arrives,

which the sublime poet  
don Polidoro María Bernard  
calls the Intruder,  
and one inflates once more  
with a lividly theatrical conceit...  
And that is the unsuspected pride  
of our earthly magnificence.  
The clinic's psychic eye  
never fails.  
And later...scavengers  
and skeletal end.  
The dullness of provincial history  
has passed over our life.  
But the woodworm of grey similitude  
gnaws its way right to the bottom of the bone-stack.  
And those blunt bones  
wage vain war on the earth.  
Ah! If they could drill down into the earth  
infinite times more  
than a heavenly bolt  
until they come upon  
the deepest pit  
of the only lonely core.

## XI

*(African wind. Deep susurration  
of shaken solitude. The height of the arid way.)*

Ah, the sky lowers  
like a tombstone!  
My captive heart casts itself off  
and rings, my soul inside...

Is that man in the road  
offering me his hand?  
Is it that he sees, as I do, the infinite peril?  
Is it that his heaven is high and he is lifting me up there?  
I shut my eyes. Is the hand guiding me  
through a narrow and implausible passageway?  
Do my shoulders not graze the darkened walls?  
Is this silence...?

Heaven lifts itself up.  
Once more across the earth  
the old blue opens up...  
The thing is that I *was* the space  
and I didn't know how...!

## XIII

*(A winter day. Library refuge.  
A sharp and silly song.)*

It rains. I am snuggled  
among the shelves of the library.  
The well-known case of unconscious  
reflection steals over me.  
In my hand, Diogenes;  
in my mind, my neighbour  
the doctor's mushroom.  
—What will become of this mushroom in the rain?  
My heart trembles at the premonition  
of the hard drops falling  
on the mushroom's cap...  
Will it be this way—I wonder—  
the first moment of madness?  
A few crystal drops falling  
implacably on a mushroom-brain...?  
Why am I holding this book  
Which mentions Ninón of Lenclos?  
I've bought it now,  
a moment ago,  
along with Plato's Republic  
and a comedy by Sir James Barrie  
—Mary-Rose—  
I have the book in my hand  
and I say: —Why doesn't the doctor  
forget the mushroom  
if the mushroom is a black and curved  
hand that grips from the head  
to the heart...?

A man with a mushroom  
 is hung in the air.  
 The mushroom-hand lifts him up  
 as though he were a rabbit  
 held up by a hunter.

I go back to browsing the books.  
 Ninón's book  
 makes me smile. Ninón was a philosopher  
 of Love.

I can see her, old, out-of-time,  
 conservative and drowsy.  
 The medic's mushroom  
 has the same slanted  
 binding and curvature  
 as that of mademoiselle of Lenclos...

It rains. It seems as though  
 the hours have arrayed themselves  
 upright like the books,  
 with the spines facing out.  
 I'm amongst the hours and the books.  
 I snuggle into the books  
 as though they were a core of love.  
 My thought is its own bookshelf.  
 One book here—Tolstoy—  
 Shakespeare there. At once  
 my soul comes apart—Hugo—  
 and lifts—Verlaine—Today  
 is a coarse day.  
 The day of nothingness. (Anniversary  
 of Creation.)  
 The black and slippery shape

of the mushroom has everything. Pain.  
But an empty pain, timid, stupid,  
flighty...  
I clasp my hands like a school boy  
declaiming:  
I let loose a dramatic sigh  
and a curse.  
And then, with that domestic vulgarity  
with which one scoops up the loose threads of a ball  
of cotton,  
I place my hand to my chest  
on the side of the heart.  
My heart, well-trained,  
like a sparrow, comes closer.  
My hands quicken, seize  
and launch it, like the cotton ball,  
off the balcony.  
In the street it bounces  
off the mushroom of the doctor  
coming in.

*from*  
PEACEFUL WAYS OF THE MEMORY

## I

*(Beach. A grey Monday.  
Daybreak.)*

An October dawn.  
The beach reflects  
the rainbow's  
vain charm.  
That childish, timid rain,  
wishing to avoid winter  
—still caressed by the sun's last rays—  
has fallen from the sky.  
All of the breaking day  
is drawn from a strange old purity.  
With the brilliance of allegory  
the rainbow cast  
its enormous silk stomach over  
the bitter storm cloud binding the day.  
The sea is like a dream of morning  
—such is its vague and intimate peace—  
like that brief, white dream  
of an office worker  
who longs to sleep forever,  
a dream epilogue  
before the sacrilegious ablution.

My heart, which hardly matters  
in the sentimental  
thread of things,  
felt, still, the faint pull  
of a seafaring longing  
and an almost metaphysical temptation.

But at once it stuck  
so sad and bewildered  
for the last days came back  
as memories of lonely hours  
before this bygone beach...  
And then it was as a strange shadow  
among the vague and languid clarity.  
Was it the memory?...My way, then,  
held yet greater pain, and more solitude?

## II

*(Clear day. Hearth.  
Yesterday's feelings  
come flooding in.)*

The old majordomo,  
 Juan, from Guayedra,  
 has stopped by to bring us  
 the golden grapes from his vineyard...  
 The young girls  
 have sat him down at the family table  
 and the old man has told us of childhood again  
 about which the memory is hardly clear.  
 On his forehead, like a quiet old field,  
 he bears eighty years of country piety;  
 and still he knows, as though it were yesterday, our ways,  
 which his loyal hand led for a thousand hours.  
 And he says, peacefully,  
 like a muffled midday bell,  
 warm and hazy,  
 that one distant afternoon,  
 along the Mountain way  
 to the shrine,  
 the earth roared like a hurt god  
 and the little man – me – all the lasses  
 we trembled in dread, except  
 the sea-eyed sister, the littlest,  
 her who places the sweet hands  
 of the dead mother on my shoulder.  
 The old man rakes over it all,  
 the better buried  
 the better reborn to his recollection, and says:

“This is Paulina, I remember her now  
since she is near to you. I cared for her  
for her four golden years...My grandson  
was as brown as the wheat-bread  
that sustained the strength of a tree at home...  
He lost himself, my grandson, in the wide vale  
of Silence...Every hour you'd say:  
Tomorrow this fine lad  
will be my handsome man.  
Don't you remember? Eight years! Eight years  
of loving without knowing that death is not peace little  
girl...!”

The old man counts. And since the day is short  
and night approaches and he is old  
he slumbers in the old wooden armchair  
the place of dead grandfathers.  
In the distant fields  
the golden sun spreads out.  
Later, it takes shelter among  
Paulina's locks. The peasant companion  
spied our whole childhood in a dream.  
And the girl, in his forehead's furrows,  
plants her seed-kisses...

## VI

*(Memories criss-cross  
the clear way. Far-off day.)*

My great friend the ass  
 who carries my other friend's coal  
 the coalman of the Square, stopped  
 one day before the door of the English office  
 where I kneaded my hypothetical bread.  
 The memory is so clear and so funny  
 that it fills my way with tenderness.  
 The ass raised its snout,  
 gallant and sacred, like a tiara,  
 and let loose a bray  
 that came in through the Counter  
 and smashed into the *Private office*  
 against a stucco wall.  
 The tasteless show-offs  
 whose menial task it is  
 to shrink the gilt pounds  
 —those pounds  
 so brave and free—  
 down to the diminished coin  
 of another country (downtrodden and bust),  
 upon hearing the bray they laughed,  
 like restive workshop girls.

The ass, oh, Francis Jammes!  
 over his back  
 he bore the coal  
 more softly  
 than I carry

this minor hurt to my soul.  
 He was the famous colour of *Platero*  
 but he had a strange dusty  
 blackness in his mouth  
 from chewing for so long  
 on the patience of his coal...  
 And that ass was  
 my sweet companion Juan, the deceased.  
 His previous dwelling came by to say hi.  
 I approached the door and looked that faithful ass  
 eye-to-eye; an antient gaze  
 and a new and mysterious liveliness  
 that bathed his head in a strange clarity.  
 And yet in life poor Juan possessed  
 not even a regular mediocrity.  
 Now, though, he nearly  
 partakes of Nirvana's infinite peace.  
 The ass poked his snout in my ear  
 and exclaimed with his veracious voice, already far-off:  
 "But are you the same? How lucky!  
 Human abnegation,  
 the eternal prize, the improvement of the stock.  
 I find myself pretty happy and enjoying  
 an unsuspected psychic agility.  
 Wait, as I do, for the ways  
 dwell only in the soul.  
 I used to admire men of feigned  
 honesty, who sat at desks.  
 And so I rose so sweetly that  
 now the fatal journey was like  
 a child's dream. Death is nothing.  
 Wait there, my friend,  
 night or dawn,

but without lonely ways  
nor painful yearnings.  
Come, like me, along a straight path  
to the invisible ladder.  
I will tell you the secret  
in a word  
that is all science:  
endure forever. Endure and endure...”

## XIII

*(Return from the village.  
The last of the desolate night.)*

Yell in my head  
you're bouncing mad  
between the solid walls  
of my cursed skull,  
what is that mysterious hand  
that suddenly smothers  
the invisible mouth  
and drowns you  
with strange thoughts,  
and dissolves you, yell,  
in a sea of silent sounds...?