

*"All journeys have secret destinations  
of which the traveler is unaware."*

*-Martin Buber*

At 13, when times were hard,  
I begged my father for a Spanish book,  
an imperative from some secret place,  
unrelated to the nuns' treachy tribute  
to Franco, the Caudillo,  
or Duplessis, our own tiny dictator,  
who worshipped the Iberian from afar.

One quiet day, on a quiet shore,  
the Spanish book sang to me  
in the velvet tones of exotic flowers,  
vibrating pink and purple notes,  
wafting heady aromas that spoke of  
southern breezes. Bewitched,  
my mouth shaped melodious words,  
sounded lyrical cadences,  
grappled with *disappeared* pronouns,  
capricious prepositions,  
the pitfalls of the subjunctive.

Inexorable, the linguistic quest ended  
in Buenos Aires. The Spanish book and I  
addressed the people and the culture,  
puzzled over the incongruities  
of a language deep-rooted in logic,  
harmonious architecture,  
voicing, too often, unreason.

The true journey had just begun.

—+ **JACQUELINE BOROWICK** | Hotel Astoria  
(Part 2 of The Spanish Book)

Hangs a modest shingle  
on Avenida de Mayo midway  
between Congress at one end  
and Casa Rosada\* at the other,  
a staging-post for salesmen,  
the odd tourist with skinny pockets.

Mercedes leads me to room 203,  
a nun's cell,  
opens the French windows onto  
the improvised theatre of the street,  
the flow of black and yellow taxicabs.

Eight square feet of private space  
to wage my solitary campaign.  
Eight square feet to contain my grief.

From my windows,  
a crescendo of muffled sounds.  
Old-age pensioners march with banners  
*Justicia para los jubilados* \*,  
head toward the presidential palace,  
treading ancient pavements and stones,  
the repository of Argentine discontent.

On Thursday in Plaza de Mayo,  
a lesson in courage—  
the Mothers, elderly now,  
handkerchiefs tied under the chin,  
*Disappeared* faces on placards,  
move in a circle of reproach  
to Authorities brought to their knees  
by the spectacle of mother-love.

\* Casa Rosada: The Pink House, presidential palace

\* Justicia para los jubilados: Justice for old-age pensioners

—+ **JACQUELINE BOROWICK** | The Nosegay  
(Part 3 of The Spanish Book)

‘Café doble por favor’  
I sit at the outdoor table  
waiting on the periphery  
of the elegant Porteños,  
the jacaranda blossoms  
empurpling Buenos Aires.

A touch on my arm,  
a butterfly’s grace.  
The lawyer Hafez holds out  
a nosegay from a peddler  
on Avenida de Mayo.

‘Don’t worry, Doña.  
The Court of Appeals will set  
your Clarita free.’

I bring the flowers to my face  
bury my fear  
in the sweet scent of jasmine.

—† **JACQUELINE BOROWICK** | The Road to Ezeiza  
(Part 4 of The Spanish Book)

Seven train stops from Buenos Aires.  
Ancient seats spill guts.  
November springtime whizzes by.

A blind man led by a child stands  
at the rear of the car, sings a Milonga \*  
while the boy moves down the aisle,  
metal applause clinking in his cup.  
They leave at the first stop. A new  
salesman climbs on board, peddles  
bath towels and hairbrushes.  
*Una toalla, por favor.*  
I hand him five pesos.

At each village  
vendors replace one another:  
pens, photograph albums, holy images,  
jewellery, fruit, bottled water, songs.  
From the railway platforms,  
emaciated dogs absorb a patch of shade,  
forlorn houses line a dirt road.

The train judders to its final destination.  
Ezeiza.  
The taxi driver looks up, startled,  
when I say  
*la carcel de mujeres\**.  
Buildings sprawl along a rutted path,  
yellow paint flaking,  
derelict like railway dogs.  
I surrender passport, handbag, jewellery,  
belt, submit to a strip-search.

Doors clank behind me as I am led down  
to the barren chapel to wait,  
towel and fruit offerings in hand.  
Mosquitoes chant an unholy chorus  
over dark puddles of stagnant water.

A grey-uniformed guard ushers her in,  
dark-gold hair down to her waist,  
still radiant in religious certainty.

I take my daughter in my arms.

\*Milonga: melancholy Argentinian song from the River Plate area

\*la carcel de mujeres: the women's prison