

from The Art of Resurrection

Hernán Rivera Letelier | Translated by Jeremy Osner from Spanish (Chile)

Hernán Rivera Letelier is the author of a dozen books, including short stories and poetry, but he is best known for his novels that focus on the stories of the saltpeter miners who made their living in the Atacama desert of Northern Chile. He was born and raised in the mining towns of Algorta and Antofagasta, before leaving to travel throughout South America. Upon his return to the region, he took a job at a mine, finishing his degree in night school.

Letelier's most beloved novel is *La reina Isabel cantaba rancheras*, which received the National Book Award of Chile in 1994. He has received numerous other pres-

tigious awards, including being named Chevalier of the Order of Arts and Literature by the French Ministry of Culture, and the 2010 Premio Alfaguara for *El arte de la resurrección*.

By omitting a few passages of the first chapter of Rivera Letelier's novel, I have attempted to form a fully self-contained short story—while maintaining the clarity and charisma of Rivera Letelier's voice—the story of one of the miracles performed by Domingo Zárate Vega. Zárate Vega, the Christ of Elqui, lived the life of a wandering holy man in mid-20th century Chile. He traveled the length of the country many times, preaching the

imminent end of days to the crowds of the faithful who came to hear his sermons. He has cast a long shadow on modern Chilean literature; including in Nicanor Parra's *Sermons and Preachings of the Christ of Elqui* (1997), which has been published in translation by both Sandra Reyes and Edith Grossman.

Original text: Hernán Rivera Letelier, *El arte de la resurrección*.
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El arte de la resurrección

La pequeña plaza de piedra parecía flotar en la reverberación del mediodía ardiente cuando el Cristo de Elqui, de rodillas en el suelo, el rostro alzado hacia lo alto—las crenchas de su pelo negreando bajo el sol atacameño—, se sintió caer en un estado de éxtasis. No era para menos: acababa de resucitar a un muerto.

De los años que llevaba predicando sus axiomas, consejos y sanos pensamientos en bien de la Humanidad—y anunciando de pasadita que el día del Juicio Final estaba a las puertas, arrepentíos, pecadores, antes de que sea demasiado tarde—, era la primera vez que vivía un suceso de magnitud tan sublime. Y había acontecido en el clima árido del desierto de Atacama, más exactamente en el erial de una plaza de oficina salitrera, el lugar menos aparente para un milagro. Y, por si fuera poco, el muerto se llamaba Lázaro.

Era cierto que en todo este tiempo de peregrinar los caminos y senderos de la patria había sanado a muchas personas de muchos males y dolencias, y hasta había levantado de su lecho putrefacto a más de algún moribundo desahuciado por la ciencia médica. Requerido a su paso por enjambres de enfermos de toda índole y pelaje—sin contar la fauna de ciegos, paralíticos, deformes y mutilados que le traían en andas, o que llegaban a la rastra en pos de un milagro—, él los ungía y bendecía sin distingo de credo, religión o clase social. Y si por medio de su imposición de manos, o de una receta de remedios caseros a base de yerbas medicinales—que también las daba—, el Padre Eterno tenía a bien restablecerle la salud a alguno de estos pobres desdichados, ¡aleluya, hermano!, y si no, ¡aleluya también! Quién era él para aprobar o desaprobado la santa voluntad del Omnipotente. . . .

The Art of Resurrection

The small stone plaza floated in the midday heat; the Christ of Elqui, kneeling on the ground, his gaze thrown back on high, the part in his hair dark under the Atacaman sun, felt himself falling into an ecstasy. It was nothing less significant than this: he had brought it to pass, had restored to life a dead man.

In all these years of carrying his teachings through the land, preaching his axioms, counsels, guidance for Humanity—of declaring in passing that *the Day of Judgment is at hand, repent, sinner, before it is too late*—this was the first time he had ever experienced a success of such sublime profundity. And it had taken place in the dry, dry desert of Atacama. More precisely, in the wasteland of a *salitrera*, a saltpeter mining camp, the least likely setting for a miracle. And to top it off, the dead man had been named Lazarus.

It was without doubt that, in all this time of wandering the roadways, the pathways of his country, he had rid many people of many evils, many sorrows, had even raised up more than one man from his deathbed, men who had already given up hope and been abandoned by medical science. He was sought after by swarms of the sick of all descriptions, of all qualities—not even counting the hordes of blind people, of paralytics, of the deformed and the mutilated who followed after him, who came before him seeking miracles—he anointed them and blessed them all without regard for their creed, religion, or social caste. And whether it was because of his laying on of hands or the home remedies and herbal unguents which he also applied—if the Holy Father saw fit to restore to health many of these poor souls, hallelujah, brother! And if not, hallelujah as well. Who was he to judge, to find

wanting the blessed will of The Omnipotent?

But to restore a dead man to life, this was something else. This was a higher art. And that is what he said to the miners who arrived, carrying the cadaver of their comrade, just at the moment when he was most full of grace, preaching before the people on the diabolical influence of the modern world on the spirit of even devout Catholics, believers in God and the Blessed Virgin Mother.

In the midst of that curious crowd, the Christ of Elqui was not silent. On the contrary: broiling in his purple taffeta cape under the sun, he turned toward the dead man. His face looked absent, almost translucent, like someone who is looking at a mirage in the desert. He seemed to be struggling with a deep-seated psychic dilemma. After an instant that seemed an eternity, with a histrionic wave he looked away from the dead man, raised both arms above his head, and opened his mouth to speak, bearing infinite pain in the inflections of his voice:

—I am sorry, my brothers, but I can do nothing; the sublime art of resurrection belongs exclusively to God the Father.

But the miners had not come to hear rejection, rejection wrapped up in the cellophane of pretty phrases. Surrounding him, their wiry beards almost touching him, they pleaded, they demanded, they begged him in the name of God Most Holy, Oh Lord Christ, to at least try it. That it will cost him nothing to try. That all he needs to do is place his blessed hands over the body of their friend—as they have seen him do for the infirm among them all these days—and to recite a few Hail Marys or an Our Father. Or whatever he might find to say. He must know better than them which things one must say to the ancient one on high to convince him. And who knows, perhaps God in his moment will understand and take pity on their comrade, the best among strong working men, who has left in this vale of tears a widow, still young, and a crowd of seven little kids, imagine it, Oh Lord, seven children, fully seven, all still quite young.

—This poor kid, Lazarus, his body here with us—cried one of them, turning to the deceased, laying his arms in a cross over his chest—you could say he is a countryman of yours, sir, for just like you, as we have read of

you, he was born in a village of Coquimbo province.

The Christ of Elqui lifted his gaze to the eastern sky. For a moment, he appeared fascinated by a far-off flock of birds flying in slow circles above the gravel plain, flying over the dusty cement of the salitrera. Pulling at his bushy beard, thinking and rethinking what he was going to say, he finally spoke in an apologetic tone:

—We all know where we were born, my brothers, but not where our bones will lie buried.

One of the sunburned men, the biggest among them, with a thick birthmark crossing under the handlebar mustache on his face, who bore all the markings of being the foreman of the group—the others called him Gutiérrez the Fox—ceremoniously removed his hat. Pleading in an anxious tone, with his crafty eyes, his fox eyes:

—This poor boy Lazarus, Master, here where you see him—he was more than just a good Christian, he was an exemplary husband, a caring father, one of those sons who loves his mother more than anything on this Earth. He was the only solace for her old age; he brought her up here from the south to live with him.

And these were the key words. The man who honored his father and honored, above all, his mother, the “queen and sovereign of the household,” as he himself had preached and published in his pamphlets, such a man was worthy of a long life, of many days on Earth. And indeed, the man was named Lazarus. How could this be other than a signal from God?

He approached the body that lay before him. Gazed on it for a while, standing. The dead man was wearing a filthy work shirt that reeked of sweat, jeans patched on the sides with canvas flour sacks, and double-soled boots. The skin of his face, weathered by the sun and by the dusty desert wind, resembled the parched geography of the *pampas*. He was roughly forty-five years old, with a dark complexion, rough hair, and a short stature; the unmistakable *pampino* type, a type he met every day in the salitreras where he was fully at home. These many years he had travelled the camps preaching the good word, and long before the Celestial Father carried his dear mother away to heaven, when he was still a young lad, he had worked as a miner for a few years.

As he knelt down beside the body, the Christ of Elqui noticed the stench of drink was strong on it—the dead man had downed perhaps a few bottles of spoiled wine, or of the poisonous *aguardiente* that some of the low-class *pulperías* made from denatured alcohol; these wretched miners were pretty far gone. But what of it, that's how the pampinos are. They are patient men and they put up with a lot; their backs and their courage are strong. One should not judge harshly the moments of weakness, of luxury, that the precarious pleasure of drunkenness affords them. The Holy Father understood well that liquor—and if one did not have liquor, English cologne—allowed them more easily to bear the tedium, the criminal loneliness of these infernal locales; inebriation made more tolerable their pitiless exploitation, the insatiable greed of their foreign employers.

The Christ of Elqui had been in Los Dones for a few days. Its residents had been supporting him, good Samaritans, particularly the women, who would invite him every day to eat with them or to take tea. Him and his two apostles with him, two men out of work who had

sworn their devotion to him in Taltal. Two men in rags who had not yet learned even to cross themselves despite having been with him longer than a month, who ate like they had chilblains, smoked as if they were before a firing squad, and would sooner take a slug of liquor than flagellate themselves.

For his part he must serve as a light for the world, he did not drink or smoke. A glass of wine at lunch, as directed in his teachings, was sufficient. He hardly touched his food, *for among my sins, of which I certainly have many, my brothers, I have never reckoned gluttony*. Indeed, at times, simply because he would not think about it, he went for days without eating. He was not only frugal in regards to eating, but in order not to be too much of a burden on whatever household afforded him shelter, he often just slept on one of the rough wooden benches, the simple furniture that the workers used, or stretched out on the floor like a dog, on the clean tiles of the pampino houses. He always tried to make whole the families that welcomed him, anointing their injuries, leaving a word of counsel or a few pamphlets with them—his maxims,

his clear thoughts on the true path for humanity. And, of course, his recipes for herbal remedies for every class of ailment, certainly those.

So, before the eyes of those who were anticipating bearing firsthand witness to a miracle, the Christ of Elqui, still kneeling on the ground, wiped the perspiration from his forehead, adjusted his taffeta cape, and rolled up the cuffs of his tunic. With a theatrical, studied movement he placed one hand on the forehead of the corpse and raised the other up to the heavens, holding up his palo santo crucifix; his face to the sun, he began to pray unto God most high, his voice clear and strong—should it be Your blessed, Your holy will, Oh Eternal Father, Father Most High, Holy Father, make all your power manifest, in the name of Your infinite mercy, return unto life Your son, Lazarus, lengthen his days here on Earth, for on the testimony of these present, his comrades, this man was a fine person, a good Christian, one who has hewn close to his sacred duties, has earned his bread from the sweat of his brow, has loved his wife and his children, above all, Oh Divine Father, he has honored and protected his sainted mother.

It was December, the middle of the month, and the day's air was thin. The white sun crackled, hot on the zinc walls. But stronger than the weather was the intrigue, the anticipation; nobody left his spot.

While the Christ of Elqui spoke, partially in a foreign idiom, for he possessed the gift of tongues, a supernatural silence fell over the world. No one was listening to the buzz of engines, the squeak of pulleys, to the noise of pistons in the factory; no one heard the revolutionary Mexican ballads emerging from a Victrola at the end of the plaza. At this instant, the Christ of Elqui, in prayer, his face turned to heaven, was the central point of the universe.

Suddenly, those who were foremost in the crowd of people, primarily housewives with their shopping bags stitched together from flour sacks, started in amazement. They could not believe what they were seeing: the dead man had twitched a finger. At least that's what it looked like to many of them, and they shouted:

—His finger has moved! A miracle! A miracle!

The Christ of Elqui felt his heart leap. Without ceasing

his prayer, he opened an eye and looked across at the hands of the deceased, interlaced upon his breast. He felt as if someone had pulled him up off the floor by his long, tangled, Nazarene locks. It was true! The dead man's hands were moving! What he had dreamed of through all these years of preaching his gospel, preaching in his worshipped mother's memory, had come to pass.

He has revived a dead man! Hallelujah! Praise be to the King of Kings!

As the man opened his eyes and sat up infinitely slowly from the ground, as he looked about himself stupidly, the women wept and beat their breasts and cried miracle! miracle! And it was enough for him to notice the shine in the revived man's eyes to figure out that this look was not precisely that of a man freshly returned from the sulfurous abyss of death. He caught on to the joke just a moment before this Lazarus, who could not restrain himself a second longer, rose up with a spring and gave way to full-voiced laughter, leaning against his buddies for support.

The Christ of Elqui, still holding his crucifix on high,

remained in ecstasy for a few interminable seconds. It seemed as if he had turned to stone. He opened and closed his eyes as if trying to frighten away with his eyelids the impious reality of the moment; and at last he reacted in anger, his pride wounded. His face flushed with rage, and he ranted against these damned pharisees who had come to mock the sacred teachings of God. He untied the hempen rope that he used as a belt and brandished it at them. The workers, still laughing, fled the scene, vanishing between the garbage bins and the clothes lines of the neighboring alley, on their way to keep on drinking somewhere else.

The preacher sat down, trying to recover his breath, on one of the stone benches. His dark eyes shone with fury. Resentment was strong in his soul; the tunic and the cape's taffeta mortified his flesh like a hair shirt. He threw himself back against the bench, his gaze lost on some invisible point in the air. He began meticulously to pick his nose, alternating between his index finger and pinkie with a beatific expression on his face, an unconscious habit in his moments of greatest spiritual anxiety.

After a few minutes of this—of having drunk from the “bitter chalice of misery,” as he referred to this class of buffoonery—he was constantly the victim of these types of japes—still digging about in his nostrils, the Christ of Elqui woke with a start, as at the touch of an angel.

Seated there on the bench, he looked all around him as if reassuring himself of where he was. He wiped the snot from his fingers in the pleats of his tunic and, turning suddenly, he began to walk toward the other end of the plaza where the music was coming from (and now it could be heard clearly), the Mexican ballad recounting the feats of Siete Leguas, dearest horse of Pancho Villa.

“Let's go have a drink,” he called to his apostles from the middle of the street.

They followed him, surprised. In his sermons and moral teachings he was always recommending they avoid spirits... but he reassured them. They would not be getting drunk, just trying to get over that scene, getting a belly full of liquor to soothe the damned toothache that was returning. Before he passed through the doorway he turned to his apostles, raised an admonitory finger and

warned, as if seeking to comfort himself, in a stern voice:

—Never forget, the nail which sticks out, my brothers, always runs the risk of a sharp blow from the hammer.