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Tribute: In Memoriam Iván Argüelles

Iván Argüelles (1939-2024) was a brilliantly innovative Mexican-American poet who worked at the intersection of surrealism and the classical and mystical traditions of both East and West. His many publications since 1970 include his books of poetry *“That” Goddess*; *Madonna Septet*; *Comedy, Divine, The*; *FIAT LUX*; *Orphic Cantos*; *Fragments from a Gone World*; and *Twilight Cantos*. His most recent collection was *The Unfinished Breath*, published in two volumes in 2023.

He received the 1989 William Carlos Williams Award for *Looking for Mary Lou* and, in 2010 an award from the Before Columbus Foundation for *The Death of Stalin*; he also received a lifetime achievement award from that foundation in 2013. A retired librarian, he resided in Berkeley, California. He was the identical twin of New Age Prophet José Argüelles, who died in 2011.

Iván Argüelles passed away, after a long illness, in April 2024.

As a tribute to a great poet, a friend, and a contributor to *Caveat Lector*, we are publishing the last poem he sent to me (in March of this year), and a poem by Jack Foley commemorating his passing.

—Christopher Bernard

Iván Argüelles

Fattening Frogs for Snakes

the corpse's name was McDermott
dressed in a white shirt suit and tie
just like they were this anonymous
hot summer afternoon after the rites
went and sat on the terraced hill
behind the hospital where they were
born to meditate upon death all
a-sweat in formal gear musing upon
the imponderable the gilded tomb
the ethereal silence what it was and
was not the immense imperial sky
endless azure cloudless odor of grass
leaning west noise like tinker toys
from afar car horns brakes asphalt
whatever remains of the moment
only a year older why was he dead ?
ultimately will everything burn to a crisp ?
turn the mind if possible to other
matters rhythm 'n blues song titles
how evening needs no preparation
about the alcohol to be consumed
hidden contents of bottles and letters
a Latin structure to syntax the air
itself layers of invisible archaeology
resounding with unseen inscriptions
taken from the Parthenon in a dream
whittled a small omicron out of bark
smelled the distant diesel fumes traffic
all heading for hell and the corpse
fresh in its timber box the outline of
destiny a blur father was a sports coach
burly ill-mannered no nonsense Jack
of a guy snickered thinking of his gravity
an incapacity to fly to levitate to raise
a thought to the gods who took him away
sun slowly setting over a parchment
called time and getting up slightly
drunk wend the passage home trees
and a holy remoteness to everything
Fattening frogs for snakes

03-19-24

Jack Foley

FOR IVÁN

“He had a very difficult life which he accepted. The steady soft glow of your friendship for him was a balm and your understanding insightful and frequent reviews were a gift to the community.”

—Malcolm Margolin

isn't it just like you to die a las cinco de la tarde!
Bang ! Bang ! la vida la pinche vida, hombre !
and the deserts rolling
like futile seas towards Las Vegas and points east
“You're not American, you're an Indian.”
I met you something like forty years ago.
I knew Marilla from Park School
and I had told her that I knew Ishmael Reed a little:
“Oh. Ivan”—not Iván in those days—“would like to meet him.”
And so it began. You gave me a book, I wrote you back.
“What you wrote was closer to what I think I'm doing than anything else I've seen. You say you write poetry. Listen. I'm doing a reading at Larry Blake's. Why don't you read with me. If your poetry is half as good as your criticism, I'm sure you'll be fine.” and so it began and so it began.
I was completely unknown. had done no readings except for one that Iván attended at CCAC. there, Adelle and I did one of the choral pieces I was writing:
that the hummingbird's wings are of a remarkable rapidity he had noted often—nothing could be done—the shift of his breathing—
and hearing it you grew excited. then the reading at Larry Blake's. I wanted to write something special for it—something elegant & long—and as I wrote it bit by bit I phoned you and read you what I'd done.
“Is it all right?”
“Yes, yes, it is. Keep it coming.” your beautiful voice assured me. I was amazed. no one, literally no one had ever even liked my verse. yet I had continued, if no one else was subject to its power, at least I was.
and then there was Iván. we were a great success at Larry Blake's. someone had made a poster and there we were. a young woman came up to me afterwards and singled out the long, special poem I had written, “Sweeney Adrift.”
“What a poem!” she kept repeating. “What a poem!”
Nancy Peters and Phillip Lamantia were there to hear Iván but they heard Adelle and me as well.
“Something original,” said Nancy about my choral piece.
“welcome to the house of failure,” I had written in “Sweeney Adrift,”
“see these are the structural bases of the house
its beams and arteries
its artificial light its hands its vast appendices

who is
not here?
the range of things
delights us welcome welcome
see there is the door it opens for us
welcome”
yes.
suddenly that door of poetry opened
and it was all Iván’s doing.
everything I have ever done
was in that moment
which I shared
with a man
who would be my lifelong
friend.
dear man,
do you remember our many
times in Saul’s Restaurant and Jewish Delicatessen
in Berkeley?
“Are you going to say it again?” you asked.
“Yes, I am,” I answered.
and when the waitress served me
my matzoh ball soup, I asked her, deadpan,
as I did every time a waitress
served me such soup,
“And what do they do
with the rest of the Matzoh?”
“ARGH,” said Iván.
will you tell me in a dream
if there is matzoh ball soup
in Poet Heaven?
our times together
flood over me,
there was so much
and so much richness
in them.
“Do you want to hear a poem?” you asked.
“Of course,” I answered
and you read me
something beautiful.
“THIS IS DEDICATED TO THE ONE I LOVE
on earth to say there are couples that don’t match
and flames of equidistant breath their smoke release
the sign is higher than summer and the cipher
cannot be discerned all sites and directions weathered
and grasses of twilight lift weary shadows to a god
whose nature is as unknown as death and what’s
to sacrifice if not the soul’s plagiarized copy afloat
in clouds where sleep is buried and poetry too
descant and folio of vast unremembered lines
your lines will be remembered
and because of you perhaps some of mine as well

and perhaps our friendship.
goodbye, my loving, wonderful friend.
I'll go to Saul's and order matzoh ball soup
and I will say, as I always do,
"What do they do
with the rest of the Matzoh?"
and I will hear your laughter
and your moan
and I will know
some things survive
even the dark, dark hand
of Death.

Iván Argüelles, January 24, 1939 – April 28, 2024 (at 5:05 p.m.)