Three poems of Rizal seem to have one common theme. That theme might inappropriately be described as “homesickness.” Inappropriately, however, because homesickness is not really the right word. It is not so much longing for home, but a feeling of dislocation, of not belonging, of not being “at home” anywhere—even when one does go back to one’s original home. Perhaps a more accurate word would be homelessness—although that also has nuances that the poems may not include.

The first poem to express this theme is “Flores de Heidelberg” written in April 1886. The second is the “Song of Maria Clara” in Chapter 23 of the Noli me tangere. That novel, begun in Spain and continued in Paris, was completed in a German village in 1886 and printed in Berlin in 1887. The third poem, of uncertain date, is “Canto del viajero”—song of the traveller.

The Heidelberg Flowers

Having completed several months of internship in an internationally known eye clinic in Paris, Rizal decided to further specialize in retinal cases under the tutelage of a German ophthalmologist who had written a treatise on the subject. April 1886 found him in Heidelberg. It was his first visit to Germany and his knowledge of German was probably still imperfect. Waking up early one morning he took a walk along a path beside the River Nekar. It was early spring and flowers had sprung up along the path, but the river was still frozen. The sun had just risen over a nearby hill.
The poet noted that the flowers were different from those in the Philippines. What a pity that his mother and sisters in Calamba, who loved flowers, could not see them! But why not? He could pluck the flowers, press the petals within the pages of a book, and next time he wrote home he could enclose them in his letter so that those at home could see what German flowers looked like. And by the way, what time would it be now in the Philippines? Here in Heidelberg it was sunrise; in Calamba it would be noon; the sun would be “at its zenith.” Addressing the flowers the poet says:

“Go, then, lovely flowers, go to my country. And when you get there, tell all those whom I love about me…”

But, a disturbing thought comes to the poet. “But, alas, flowers! My dear ones will see you but they will not smell you. Your petals will preserve their colors, but not their fragrance!”

Then the poet reflects:

Is that not part of the human condition—the condition common to all earthly things? You can transport the body but not the soul. The soul of the flower is its fragrance—and that, you cannot transport: “Because the aroma is the soul: and it will not abandon the sky whose light it saw at birth; neither will it ever forget it.”

Que aroma es alma, y no abandon a el cielo cuya luz viera en su nacer, ni olvida.

A Song By the lakeside

The Song of Maria Clara is one of the passages in the Noli me tangere in which the printed edition of Berlin (1887), supervised by Rizal himself, differs from his original manuscript. In the manuscript, there are what might be called intercalated lines between the stanzas of the song. Rizal himself must have felt that those intercalated lines did not really improve the poem but rather detracted from its strength. So, in the printed edition he omitted them. (the recent English translation by Dona Maria Soledad Lacson vda. de Locsin—Bookmark, Manila 1996—is made from the manuscript and includes the intercalated lines of the song.)
The Song is sung by Maria Clara during a picnic by the Lake of Ba-i. It is a pleasant occasion and the song seems carefree at first, but (as we shall see) it ends on a somber note, prelude to tragic things that happen in the novel.

"Sweet are the hours in one's own native land, sings Maria Clara, "where everything that the sun shines upon is friendly. Life-giving is the breeze that blows in the fields; death itself is sweet, and love more tender."

Dulces las horas en la propia patria
donde es amigo cuanto alumbrá el sol;
vida es la brisa que en sus campos vuela,
grata la muerte, y mas tierno el amor.

The second stanza speaks of the sweetness of a mother's love. But it is in the third stanza that the ominous note is sounded. The stanza contains two ideas, both dealing with death, physical in one case, metaphorical in the other. The first speaks of death undergone for the sake of one's native land. "Sweet it is to die for one's own land, where all is friendly that the sun shines upon."

Dulce es la muerte por la propia patria
donde es amigo cuanto alumbrá el sol.

Those two lines speak of physical death—painful indeed and tragic, but "sweet" if suffered for the sake of the homeland.

The other idea speaks of a different kind of death, a metaphorical one and not at all sweet. The breeze that previously had been described as "life-giving" is now considered deadly. The "vida es la brisa" of the first stanza becomes "muerte es la brisa" in the third:

Muerte es la brisa para quien no tiene
una patria, una madre y un amor.

"Death is the breeze for one who has no homeland, no mother, no loved one."

Dry Leaf

It is in the Canto del viajero—the traveller's song—that this theme of homelessness is most explicitly and most fully expressed. The poem
begins by comparing the traveller to a leaf that falls from a tree in au-
tumn:

Hoja seca que vuela indecisa y arrebata violente turbión: así vive en la tierra el viajero, sin norte, sin alma, sin patria ni amor.

“A dry leaf floats undecided in the air, and a violent wind blows it away. Thus does a traveller live on earth: with no direction, no soul, no homeland and no loved one.”

Busca animoso doquiera la dicha, y la dicha se aleja fugaz; vana sombra que Burla su anhelo; por ella el viajero se lanza a la mar.

“He looks everywhere for happiness, but happiness eludes him like a shadow that mocks his desire. Yet it is to seek it that he sets out on the sea.”

Impedido por mano invisible vagará de confín a confín; los recuerdos le harán compañía de seres queridos, de un día feliz.

“He goes from place to place, but an invisible hand blocks him. All he has to keep him company are his memories—of loved ones and of a happy day.”

Una tumba quizá en el desierto hallará, dulce asilo de paz; de su patria y del mundo olvidado descansará tranquilo, tras tanto penar.

“At last he will find peace—in a tomb in a desert. Forgotten by his country, by the world, he will rest peacefully, all his sufferings left behind.”

Y le envidian al triste viajero cuando cruza la tierra veloz! Ay, no saben que dentro del alma existe un vacío de falta el amor.
"And yet, people envy the traveller! They envy his ability to go easily from place to place. Ah, they don't know that in his soul is a vacuum, an absence of love."

Volverá el peregrino a su patria
y a sus lares tel vez volverá:
y hallará por doquier nieve y ruina,
amores perdidos, sepulcros no más.

"Eventually the traveller will go back to his homeland, revisiting the home of his youth. What will he find there? Snow and ruin, lost loves, and tombs."

The Poem's Date

That last quoted stanza gives rise to a question: When was this poem written? The editors of the collected poems assign it to the years 1884 or 1885. That would mean that it was written by Rizal while he was a student in Madrid, only two or three years after leaving the Philippines, and before his first return in 1887. The context of the poem makes that dating improbable. It seems to have been written after that first homecoming. The *Noli me tangere* had just been published and copies of it had filtered into the Philippines and a storm had arisen over it. The friars were calling for a condemnation of the book and punishment for the author. The governor, displeased but less bloodthirsty, decided on a compromise. Rizal would not be imprisoned but a Spanish officer would be assigned to guard him, following him wherever he went. It was Rizal's own family who begged him to leave for abroad again. He was not safe here, they said, and they themselves were not safe. So he left again for abroad, unwelcome in his own homeland. Would that he the background for the line in the penultimate stanza (which we shall presently see): "extranjero en su propio pais"—a stranger in his own country?

If so, the poem must have been written after that first unsatisfactory homecoming, sometime in 1888 perhaps. But it may have been written even later than that, possibly in 1890 or 1891, after his family had been evicted from their house and lands by the Dominican friars who claimed ownership of the land. Their tenants and their families (some 300 persons) were evicted with them. Rizal's brother Paciano and
his brothers-in-law were sent to various places of exile, and the rest of
the family sought refuge in Hong Kong. Had Rizal gone home to
Calamba just then, he would have found, not indeed “snow”, but cer-
tainly “ruin, lost loves, tombs.”

*The Ultimate Homelessness*

But let us go on to the last two stanzas of the “Canto del viajero.”

Ve, viajero! prosigue tu senda,
extranjero en tu propio pais!
dea a otros que canten amores,
los otros que gocen; tu vuelve a partir.

“Go, traveller. Continue on your way, a stranger in your homeland.
Leave to others to sing of love; leave rejoicing to them. As for you, go
again away.”

Ve, viajero, no vuelvas al retro,
que no hay llanto que sigue el adiós;
ve, viajero, y ahoga tu pena,
que el mundo se burla de ajeno dolor.

“Go, traveller, don’t look back: for no lament followed when you said
goodbye. Go traveller, suppress your grief, for the world only laughs at
another’s pain.”

It is a sad poem, even a bitter one. This is not the song of a traveller
homesick for home and longing to see his dear ones. It is not, for in-
stance, like the Irish exile’s lament:

Erin, my country, though sad and forsaken,
In dreams I revisit thy sea-beaten shore:
But alas, in far foreign lands I awaken,
And sigh for the friends who can see me no more.

Much less is it like Dante’s traveller who, at twilight upon hearing a dis-
tant church bell, melts with love for those he has left behind:

Era gia l’ora che volge il disio
ai naviganti, e intenerisce il core
lo di ch’han detto ai dolci amici addio,
e che lo nuovo peregrin d’amore
punge, se ode squilla di lontano
che paia lo giorno pianger che si more.

- Purgatorio, 8

Rizal’s is a different kind of traveller, one who has no home anywhere—not even if he were to return to the home of his childhood.

When the traveller leaves home, he cannot go back. He will find no home anywhere else. Yet he does not forget his own home.

That is what gives depth to those last two lines of the poem on the Heidelberg flowers:

Que aroma es alma; y no abandona el cielo
Cuya luz viera en su nacer, ni olvida.

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