

# Small Hours of the Night



by Roque Dalton

*Liberated from  
capitalist control  
to educate the masses  
by  
Socialist Stories*

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**THE WINDOW IN MY FACE**

## STUDY WITH A LITTLE TEDIUM

*Clov: He's crying.*

*Hamm: Then he's living.*

*Endgame by Beckett*

Fifteen years old and I cry every night.

I know there's nothing special about this,  
that there are better things in this world  
to tell you about in my singing voice.

Even so I drank wine for the first time today  
and stayed in my room naked, so I could take in the afternoon  
carved into small pieces  
by the clock.

Thinking alone hurts. There's no one to hit, no one  
to pardon and mercifully let off the hook.  
Only you and your face. You and your face  
of a phony saint.

The scar no one has ever seen comes into view,  
the grimace we hide every day,  
the face I've never been able to bury, it will make us cry and  
break down completely  
on the day the good people know everything  
and even the birds deny us love and a song.

Fifteen years of being tired  
and I cry every night just to make believe I'm alive.

Maybe none of you understands what I'm talking about.

It's my first wine talking not me  
while the skin weighing me down swallows the shade.

[JG]

## THE CRAZY ONES

Names have never sat well with us crazy ones.

All the others  
wear their names like a new suit of clothes,  
when they make new friends they babble their names,  
they're in a rush to print them on tiny white cards  
that pass from hand to hand,  
filled with the joy of innocent things.

And what happiness they radiate, those Alfredos and Antonios,  
those hard-luck Juans and silent Sergios,  
those Alejandros rank with the musk of the sea!

All those names flowing out of the same throat  
that calls them out like proud flags on a battlefield,  
names still kicking around on earth making noise  
even after they've gone off with their bones into the shadows.

But the crazy ones, O Lord, the crazies  
who suffocate from forgetting so much,  
we poor crazy cats get even our laughter mixed up  
and our happiness fills with tears,  
how are we going to get anywhere dragging our names along,  
looking out for them,  
polishing them like miniature silver animals,  
seeing with these eyes that even dreams can't control,  
that don't get lost in the dust that flatters and hates us?

We mad ones just can't hope to have anyone name us  
but we'll forget about this too...

[JG]



## TIME FOR ASHES

September draws to a close. It's time to tell you  
how hard it has been not to die.

This afternoon, for instance,  
in my gray hands I hold  
beautiful books I don't understand,  
I can't sing even if the rain has stopped  
and the memory of the first dog I loved  
as a boy hits me out of the blue.

From the time you left yesterday  
even the music is damp and cold.

When I die,  
they'll remember only my obvious joy each morning,  
my flag that hasn't the right to collapse,  
the hard facts I passed around at the fireside,  
the fist I made unanimous  
with the stone cry hope demanded.

It's cold without you. When I die,  
when I die  
they'll say, meaning well,  
that I didn't know how to shed tears.

It's raining again now.  
It has never been so late at a quarter to seven  
as it is today.

I have this wild itch to laugh  
or kill myself.  
[HSM]

## HATING LOVE

I don't believe in angels  
but the moon is now dead for me.  
The last glass of wine is gone  
before the thirst I'm suffering from.  
The blue grass lost its way  
running away from your sails.

The butterfly setting her color  
on fire was made of ashes.  
The morning fires off  
dewdrops and silent birds.  
I feel ashamed of being naked  
and as vulnerable as a child.

Without your hands my heart  
is the enemy in my chest.

[HSM]

## MONDAY

Six o'clock in the morning  
screaming its way out of the clock: once more  
the cathedral of light will bring its wall down  
on my itinerant heart  
resting just now.

I hate giving up the bed covers as much as I hate any bourgeois.

It's not because of the cold, there isn't any.  
Not that I'm afraid of the eye lurking  
where the street lamp  
crucified the darkness  
last night.

It's not even because of you  
or your sex exploding in my hands,  
your exposed grotto  
dying a minute ago in the water.

It's  
—oh hesitation  
a shattered blue year had coming to it—  
just that feeling as old as my left fist  
or my longed-for understanding of birds:  
the eye close to my shoulder, never even pleading,  
the hand near my face I lift like a new stone,  
life asking me for  
the little energy I admit in myself.

What I say is I should have come  
—not into the world of puppets, silk sewing baskets,  
coarse bottles of gin that are like hospitals for thirst,  
not into the world you offer me or the one I offer you,  
fragile bread, field  
for the butter knife—

I should have come, let me say it again,  
like a naked fire  
to the dry forest where I'm terrified without crying out,  
like a rush of water that's hard on the helpless sand,  
like a tree that asks the sleeping earth for blood,  
a complaint of pregnancy against evasion,  
against the tear that never comes  
and overpowering despair...

But early on  
I came just as I am,  
with hands that can bleed,  
with fear,  
with love,  
with four Mondays to each month.  
And I believe  
that if it weren't for this heart,  
this throbbing musical planet,  
by now I'd have gone off to try and die.  
In spite of everything,  
I wouldn't want to forget how to laugh...  
[HSM]

## MY HORSE

I owned a horse  
more beautiful and nimble than the light.

Stamping, he was like a wave of blood.  
A tiny storm with eyes.  
An untamed mountain on perfectly molded legs.

My horse was born dead one day  
and the shock on my face put the winds to flight...  
[HSM]

# LISTEN

*The first thing you have to do is shout,  
throwing all that bad stuff into the air ...*

Listen, all of you,  
those of you who receive my word like a blessing to ward off the  
night.

Listen, listen  
even during a future outrage when they'll give you a bloody  
head and smashed-up legs  
breaking your horizon between the stones that never sold out  
or gave a machete a rough swing  
against water or footsteps.

Listen,  
you over there,  
those I insulted with the most obvious truth,  
those I gave handouts with arrogance,  
those I loved with my flags and my fingernails,  
those I wounded with my rambling love,  
those of whom I knew only  
their secret code,  
their share of my air and my enemy.

Listen,  
women,  
girls I almost deflowered with this voice I had to steal,  
sweet figures with which they painted heaven for me,  
lovers,  
rivers of meat someone dammed up in order to slake my thirst,  
eyes that hemmed in the night I asked for,  
little noses, hands with fingers kept away from the fire,  
lips, armpits like the black roses  
that hid before asking if anyone wanted them,  
feet of a ballerina  
where my expatriate heart ended up dying.

Listen,  
listen,

hard friends who scorned the tenderness  
of my unending childhood,  
sons, grandfathers of alcohol and transitive dawns,  
evil builders  
of the desperation traveling inside of watches;  
knives I shied away from,  
grapes, milk and honey I'd hoped to obtain  
like someone who kisses the sugar's soul,  
pirates ransacking the tears of the fugitives,  
crazy ones, crazy and dear, lovers of flowers and vices,  
of the eyes of their child who was never born,  
of the small velvet bear whose ears they wanted to kiss;  
proud enemies I wanted to love;  
mother,  
mother who was a shout away from my impetuous shipwrecks,  
mother, my mother mother,  
the one beautiful shadow  
capable of hating every inch of him who rightly  
*shut the window in my face;*  
listen,  
listen,  
hear my final shout,  
the unrestrained accent of my hardest rivers,  
the vibrant banner  
mine alone and closest to my heart...

[JG]

# POEMS-IN-LAW TO LISA

*Let's go! Let's go! I'm wounded...*

—César Vallejo

## I

Lisa:

from the moment I started loving you  
I've hated my Professor of Civil Law.

How can I concentrate on Supply and Demand  
that look to me like the windows of a jail,  
on the Theory of Motives that makes me think of a tunnel  
full of red crickets and frustrated roots that never see the sun,  
on mortgages sick with TB,  
on the registry  
of aggressive real estate?

Can I think about all this, I mean,  
if right in front of my anguish I have your enormous eyes  
as uncomplicated

and dark as a pond late at night,  
your voice as fresh as tomorrow's dawn,  
—ah, my fugitive—whose musical fragrance  
I save on the fingers of my right hand?  
Lisa, transparent  
daughter of the air:  
the morning sun in the meadow asks me for  
your nakedness,  
my hands going down from the flower of the water  
to save your blood  
from the green arteries of the grass.

And I, poor slave of this century,  
an unfinished servant of boredom and blood,  
I'm writing you, loving you, while everyone discusses  
One Party Non-Negotiated Arrangements.



Ah, Lisa, Lisa, I'm  
completely broken up.

## II

Poor guy, my dearest,  
here alone with my terror among the Legal Codes,  
here with my law books, poor jail bait  
denying heaven among fat guys  
who actually believe in rhinoceroses,  
always thinking that we'll find a bar  
where if we throw out the tables  
there'll be enough room for the dawn and you in front of my eyes.  
Poor me,  
poor fool,  
a Marxist and I'm eating my nails:  
I love the soft hooks in the sand,  
the words of the sea and the innocence of the gulls;  
I detest the Banks,  
B-complex injections,  
the nighttime cruelty of the motorcyclists  
hurling their heavy bricks at the angel of dreams,  
I'm in bad shape, my love,  
me a poor kid who never carved his name on a tree,  
of whom everyone these days is demanding  
that he read Jellinek with a smile  
and get into bed naked with Customs and Tariffs,  
and swear before the wind that the judge is superior to the assassin.

Ah Lisa, Lisa,  
I'm a terrible wreck.  
[JG, HSM]

## DREAM FAR AWAY FROM TIME

There was a time  
when I knew a lot about the dead.

Whenever I stopped to face the night  
in the last streets my sorrow  
could bear,  
I would make out their voices clearly,  
hailing me through my country's mist  
and reminding me over and over  
that some day I'd have to throw in my lot  
with the infinite ice of bodies that were lost.

I knew how the dead whirled around  
shaking their terrifying crystal manes,  
wearing the ivy's battle dress,  
eager to use their sacred animal selves  
they had saved up from this life.

God was someone dead I couldn't understand.

Learning how to die,  
that's what life was.

Now  
after new hymns, new oceans of tears,  
after new eyes present behind the numbers,  
from steady, cruel, never-ending bonfires,  
from silent houses  
where husbands love their naked brides,  
from the dead body in the hospital  
solid friend unmoved by my question,  
from winters that bleed ahead of time,  
from churches that grow on and on

over the initials of the slave, I  
know  
that  
the  
dead  
raised  
their  
flag

and left us, miserable sons of oblivion,  
to the life we still have to build,  
country, sea or cosmic life,  
cleansed of the old obstacles  
(of darkness or special silences)  
and of its solemn images  
and secret outcries  
hidden in the trees.

The dead are dead.  
They've stayed behind.  
Dead.  
[HSM]

## VERNACULAR ELEGY FOR FRANCISCO SORTO

*Francisco Sorto is a common criminal in El Salvador's Central Penitentiary who's gone crazy on account of four years of incarceration in wretched cell No. 9. Crazy as he is, he strolls silently among the prisoners and in the afternoons, when he sees the swallows and the parakeets from the prison patio, he sings—with watery eyes and a voice bereft of rhythm—old songs of Carlos Gardel's...*

For nine years Francisco Sorto  
has been a prisoner.

He killed because he had to kill  
because he had to be terrible and hard  
in his barren countryside where no one ever speaks of bread  
in his countryside parched parched parched  
where the dust falls solitary upon blind laughter  
and the illiterate brain  
shouts its burned music and its boundless weeping.

Francisco Sorto has  
nine eyes of confinement.

Nine shouts for light where the centuries dance  
like little children.

Nine “nineteen hundred and so many” frights.

Nine years scratching his lice-infested heart,  
nine years of scaring himself  
with a curse on the tip of his teeth.

Nine black tears of silence and of cold.

Nine tall lieutenants  
who make us weep  
laughing after they fire their pistols into the air,

talking about rivers, fresh timber on the banks,  
of fields that don't even have a stone wall  
where you can sleep with your belly to the stars.

Nine years, dammit,  
nine years disguised as blows to the head  
while you're tied up;  
nine years, nine,  
nine years that can't be crammed into the mouth of the world,  
nine years of which it could be said  
that they are only seventy-eight thousand  
eight hundred and forty hours  
if you knew anything about school desks and figures.

Beautiful Francisco Sorto  
with his monkey face  
clean  
like the damp earth that hears the sound of our feet.  
Francisco Sorto all alone  
in the middle of eight hundred prisoners.  
Francisco Sorto without visitors on Sundays.  
Francisco Sorto curing his wounds  
with the excrement of hens.  
Francisco Sorto four years in darkness  
handcuffed, four very hard years in solitary.  
Francisco Sorto,  
how great  
and marvelous, how great a man you are,  
that even now you haven't forgotten how to sing!  
[JG]

## MINOR CHORUS OF THE FIFTH CELL

*(It's getting darker. They still haven't taken  
the guitars down from the walls.  
A cup of coffee, a cigarette.)*

Once again they've closed the cell door.  
It's closed...closed.  
Closed, closed, closed.

Will we get out this month?  
Ah, that's what you call luck!  
A month,  
a month between your hand and hope!

I who have to wait a spell  
of fourteen years, what else can I tell you,  
I who am going to leave when I'm fifty,  
I remember nothing about rivers anymore,  
I who can't remember to remember anything,  
I who don't even know any songs, nor want to,  
I who wouldn't even know how to walk in the street,  
I who am serving five years on my second offense,  
I who because of that pale-faced fat juror now stand here whistling,  
fist on my jaw and heart on my back,  
I who because the D.A. never saw my mother  
blind the poor woman from crying for me and I innocent  
nearly without blame  
for the necessities of his vulture's career,  
I on account of poverty eternal and complete,  
I on account of being an idiot, a good man,  
I because I had to teach the world a lesson,  
I because I said it was so,  
I because I spit my refusal in the dust,  
I because I spit,  
I because  
I 'cause  
I

and the door  
and the closed door  
and the door of the cell is closed,  
closed, closed, closed,  
closed,  
closed...  
[JG]

# THE INJURED PARTY'S TURN



## THE DECISION

(Juárez and Balderas, 9:30 P.M.)

And though the heart may not be the spirited creature we had hoped  
it will do to passionately take in love and the knives all around us.  
The whole immense city sees itself a prisoner on this corner  
that's like an enormous eye  
opening to where infinity begs an end to man's thirst for going too far.

I've already recovered my flashing sign:  
I deny ecstasy and exalt the bitter serenities  
with a tight smile and an old clean suit I swear I'll accept all  
the deaths I have coming  
but not those of the women with watery eyes I left sunk deep in silence  
their hands—salty with tears—touching their souls that I'd  
trampled with my elegant hooves.

Everything was decided long seconds ago—ah my reckless  
adventure falls down in life so stubbornly—  
so that warm friendships are no longer necessary,  
season of tenderness in this twelve-hour nocturnal year.

Just the same—my desires betray me!—my smile escapes  
towards those sweet efforts like a young green dove and once again  
you can call me poor brother shattered comrade wretch  
grateful like a dog for his nightly bread.

Ah, but what of death: hurl—what does it matter—the deepest lures  
even throw life over afterwards, if you want, like an avalanche  
to accept is to be and I accepted it all  
everything  
even the one word you don't want to say for fear of a deadly  
complicity in its obstinate warmth.

[JG]

## ISLAND ON THE FIFTH FLOOR

It's not the heat, no.

I've had no alcohol that can explain this fever.

From my window I see people passing  
like curious spiders lost in the smoke.

The smoke.

Out of the tall chimneys it wraps itself around everything.

If it weren't for the smoke I might go out to look for a woman,  
a glass of water, something  
still living off the world's diminishing freshness.

My childhood

also remained on the other side of the smoke.

[JG]

# STORM

*A tremendous wind is blowing.  
It's only a small hole in my chest  
But a tremendous wind is blowing through it...*  
Henri Michaux

## I

(10:00 p.m.)

Another glassful of dust  
from the earth's ashes  
let a lamp come up from the belly of the sea  
a teardrop for my throat today  
another echo quenching its thirst  
in my blood because it has to

Let's kneel and shed tears for the hidden dead  
let's seek justice for those everyone passes up

Outside the rain shakes out its dull draperies  
the cold is black grass growing over the sidewalks

## II

(11:30)

One day I felt cold but no one noticed me.

Only my tiniest pore was alert.

The ice wanted to tell me something.  
Tender words, I'm sure. It didn't have time to.

The heat's greedy arms to the rescue!  
How sickening—rats, god, mother, how sickening!

And from then on, the ice has been my enemy...

III  
(1:00 a.m.)

Deep hair  
hands like spiders in search of its deepness  
I'll stay here away from the rain  
with my last solitary drink.

When the day ends  
—each of these days—  
loneliness tries to take over even my shadow.

I can hear an angel's cough  
an angel's baby cough.

Someone has lighted the candles they had forgotten all about.  
[HSM]

## STILLBORN PARABLE

The beetle who loves to quarry dung  
and work on filth like a goldsmith  
doesn't want to put up with the mint.

Nor will any of you accept my truth.

And you don't even know your refusal strangles your eyes  
and cuts off all the air  
you had coming.

It's okay. Everyone will join the fighting in his own way.  
As for those who are naked, that's their business!  
[HSM]

## THE BAD EXAMPLE

They made me choose between selling out and the wall  
and it was a wall of knives.

And since I couldn't help getting cut up  
son of the worst plague they said to me  
he doesn't love his blood  
refuses to keep it in  
and unties the knots of his veins.

Outraged all the mothers in the city wouldn't weep  
that day not even for the slit throats of the onions.

I hope at least the little children will come unto me.  
[HSM]

## BECAUSE I SPOKE OUT

The last hired mourner went off  
to look for comfort among fools.

(I could stand naked in this huge town square  
lit up by the phosphorescences of the stillness  
and there would be no intruders to stare at me.

Oh this desertion is deadly  
it makes its own chill sprout from the flames.)

I hope someone will come to hear me again  
and weep with me to the end.

Maybe then I'll be strong enough to make the truth less bitter.  
[HSM]

## I SEE

I think they've lied to us enough.

Now I have the key to the hieroglyph  
pain gave me between fits of a drunk's laughter  
lungers from a jailer and glares from a rabid dog  
without a heart.

This much I also know: it will be difficult to make men accept  
this nakedness someone who possesses the light reverts to  
hard to convince them that so far all the laughs were turned against  
them  
and that all the hands held out to them had cruel nails.

(It's a little chilly but it's better that way  
now that the mortal fires  
the flushed faces in the middle of the orgy  
the feverish myth invented by the wine settled in your blood  
and spider webs clinging to the tongue have all disappeared.)

I'm going to strip some of the last veils off right now.

And I'll be the one  
to take care of the wounds.

[HSM]



# INSOMNIA

The sky is a huge lake the lake  
is a small sky

(In this sanitarium you can even hear the stones scream  
the pines like long fingers sticking out of the grave  
receive solid shadows from the moon  
smoky black or granite shadows

I'd like to return to El Salvador  
but I don't know if it's a country dreamed of  
nothing but wishful thinking  
born of the green fire of my illness.)

Insomnia is a red or violet net  
a bottomless well  
not even daybreak can see the end of  
a flaming crucifix  
that never burns out

Was that a bell far off  
or my heart?

Once again it's four  
in the morning.

[HSM]

# THE DISCIPLE

from *La Noche*

Hieronymus Bosch must have been the only sane man  
in the street cars in the wet city's speeding traffic  
Oh son of a father who doesn't acknowledge you  
a pig wallowing in the mud no temporary guest  
but brother kinsman  
mulling over the origins of his decay

Of course neither would Ezra Pound with his stuttering syntax  
false madman without the madman's bitter gall or the thin drool  
of firing-squad victims who don't know why they should repent  
and don't talk back to me brother of the lowest cur  
nor would Ezra Pound switch off the water for good  
if you lit up the thirst you've stashed away so long

Now for the slow drink  
you've craved like the night

The dark wine in this alabaster goblet  
tastes like deep words words oh so deep  
rescued by a mouthful of the swollen wind  
Aída, Roberto, José  
haven't written to me—they've left me on my own—  
only Radomiro keeps on giving me the same old song that he drinks  
that Johann Sebastian Bach keeps putting on  
as much weight as one of those whorehouse madams  
knifed to death on the first hostile dawn

I've insulted you enough—rotten shadow—  
you've learned much over the years  
without digging into anyone else's pockets

I'm sleepy now  
Get out of here!  
[HSM]

## THE TROPICS

Noon strikes  
like the shattering of the clay pigeons  
in the breasts of the white doves as they fall.

It's just that here everything burns:  
the grass underneath your feet,  
the leaves in your face, on your hands,  
the water in the well that wanted to be blind.

How can anyone think of making love in this fire?

Just the same we even delight in our thirst.

(Give me your hands and some shade,  
but a shade gentle and cold, a darkness so thick  
even the fireflies have been driven out.)

Panting,  
your face tumbles downward, sinking into the moss,  
my heart.

Move your side of burning coals away from me, naked one...  
[JG]

## NAKED WOMAN

I love your nakedness  
because naked you absorb me with your pores  
like the water when I sink between its walls.

Your nakedness destroys limits with its heat,  
it opens every entrance so that I may know you  
it takes me by the hand like a lost child  
who in you lets his age and his questions come to rest.

I breathe your skin and absorb it, salty and sweet,  
until it becomes my universe, credo that feeds me,  
the aromatic lamp I raise blinded  
when my desires bark at me in the dark.

When you strip for me with your eyes closed  
you fit into a glass that rests on my tongue,  
you fit into my hands like bread I'm hungry for,  
you fit beneath my body more exactly than its shadow.

The day you die I will bury you naked  
so that your entrance into the earth may be clean,  
so I may kiss your skin on the roads  
and braid your loose hair in every river.

The day you die I'll bury you naked  
just as you were born again between my thighs.

[JG]

## MARÍA TECÚN

Story-book days when you loved me without asking questions  
made the city take on the appearance of a toy  
when I left you at night I'd walk home with a light heart  
through sawdust streets in toy Bethlehems.

In the cheerless trembling mirror of mudholes  
I'd stare at my face next to the moon's  
and looked for your kisses to stop them from lighting up  
the dreams of birds lost in my pillow.

Clay cops and tin roosters laughed at me quietly  
winking their still eyes at one another who knows how  
and even sleepers green with envy gossiped in their rooms as I went by  
telling me you were the Christ Child's girl.

With moss rooted up from Los Chorros de Colón's headwaters  
the gardens of the dream with their green freshness waited for me  
but your warm fingertips had been a knife-thrust so deep  
the tamale vendor washed his enormous naked eyes at dawn  
in my eyes' two little gourd cups filled with blood.

Through the tissue paper trees dressed from the heart of the blue  
I'd spend the day listening to a band of old archangels  
whose cotton hair started new rivers in the wind.

I found you near the twilight later on  
—with its tall tree of fire actually in flames—  
and in your hands I licked the breadfruit's rind.

Around us flower-cheeked puppets were swilling down  
beers of pollen mixed with smoke.

Oh but a few months later you decided to grow up  
and with an ugly grown-up look you went away:  
since then the city has gone back to its normal size  
and in its black stone streets people slap my soul  
a sad little boy's who would still like to play.

[HSM]

# THE ART OF POETRY

*To Raúl Castellanos*

Anguish exists.

Man uses his old disasters like a mirror.

An hour or so after dusk  
the man picks up the painful remnants of his day  
and worried sick he puts them right next to his heart  
he sweats like a TB patient fighting for his life  
and sinks into his deep lonely rooms.  
There buried in his thoughts he smokes  
he'd like to invent ruinous cobwebs on the ceiling  
he hates the flower's fresh look  
he withdraws into his own asphyxiating skin  
he looks at his coarse feet  
he thinks his bed's his grave day after day  
he doesn't have a penny to his name  
he's hungry  
and breaks into sobs.

But men all other men  
bare their chests to the sun without a care  
or to the killings in the streets  
they lift the faces of the loaves out of the ovens  
like a generous banner against hunger  
they laugh with children until even the air hurts  
they cram tiny footsteps into the wombs of blessed women  
they split open like fruit rocks obstinate in their solemnity  
they sing naked into the inviting glass of water  
they joke with the sea taking it by the horns playfully  
they build houses of light in the song-filled wilderness  
they get drunk like God everywhere  
they set their fists against despair  
their avenging fires against crime

their love with its interminable roots  
against hatred's vicious scythe.

Yes, anguish exists.

Like despair  
crime  
or hate.

Who should the poet's voice be for?  
[HSM]



## MADRIGAL

She was more beautiful than a Czechoslovak factory  
when one thinks of her  
after being tortured for four hours  
in the brightest and newly aired rooms  
at the Headquarters of the National Guard.  
[JG]

# WORDS IN FRONT OF THE SEA

*for Roberto Fernández Retamar*

## I

Belly of the storm and of salt  
universe of fish refuge of foam  
bearer of the sky we contemplate from the sand  
on sudden afternoons when we pay honor to suicide:

you have countless eyes and stinging fingers  
like the greenest frozen rats  
against us the shoeless the fleeced  
against us who have yet to take the final plunge  
bold and fearful we come to you  
as to the edge of a bolt of lightning

Spill your heavy curls into the ships  
swallow the bodies of the traveling ballerinas  
trample the dark beaches on the other sides of the world  
leave us in peace with our daily invalid conch

O sea let cosmic love flow between us  
until we go down into the depths  
scattered along the roads of the cindery stars

## II

(Remembering Yeats)

I will get up, helmsman, and go to sea with you,  
to its phosphorescent nuptials stolen from the night's depths.

(In his garden of drowned flowers  
the last lighthouse keeper dances in secret,  
proud of the salty rocks along the shore.)

I will go with you, unforgettable helmsman,  
where fragrance of the dark shows its huge iodine hole.

(Inside its immense coral reef the delicate splinter  
that scraped the eye of the last giant tortoise raises its fragments.)

Let's go, sweet-terrered helmsman,  
let the ocean be our unending epitaph,  
our widest route,  
rough carpet full of stars for an indecisive soul.

(Shiny aluminum dolphin...)

[JG]

## THE SIXTH COMMANDMENT

The naked theologians have gone down to the beach  
and there's been a scattered surge of terror from the crabs.

(The sea is an old mother sleeping  
who wants to know nothing about the rapacious games  
of young people. She goes on sleeping.)

The naked theologians toss around a huge white ball  
that, when it bounces, looks like a dead fat man  
escaped from an eagle's claws.

The little flowers of the sand crunch  
the theologians step along like sergeants  
but when the sun, red and ice-cold,  
slips out of the ocean's pocket  
the theologians will receive Holy Communion  
each with his eyes on a deep hole of mist  
of aromatic mist  
visited only by the blue birds  
of peace.

[HSM]

## WHAT A CRAZY MAN SAID TO ME

You told me your father was a tiny sea.

That the angels were dumb little creatures  
yet do much harm at night with fingernails like comet's tails.

You told me the rain is shipwrecked against your house  
and your angry sisters castrate the almond trees.

You told me thirsty people are our greatest hope.

That whistling in the park is to confess we are powerless  
to retrieve the wine of words we own as children.

You told me the fat woman was a stranger  
and that's why you loathed everything she said with her back.

You told me it was better not to go into the street  
because it's stupid to cause victims when you reach a certain age.

You told me there's something they call the light  
it's impossible to describe with your hands.

You told me the trees are not our biggest enemies  
and I shouldn't believe anything they talk about on the other  
side of the bars.

[HSM]

## MEGALOMANIA

Frederick II was emperor of the high-and-mighty Germans and yet  
he was excommunicated by the Pope  
because he made the study of medicine a requisite for doctors  
before they could prescribe infusions for a fee  
or cut off flesh from a person's flesh.

Miguel Servet was excommunicated shortly before  
they reduced him to ashes:  
they say this was to speed it up for him  
to go on discussing the advanced sciences in restful eternity.

Martin Luther believed God the Father's divine liver acted up  
whenever he looked through the clouds and saw fat priests  
running around  
city neighborhoods getting rich from the sale of indulgences  
paid in hardcash.  
He was thrown out of the Church for defending God's liver.

Thin, puny, with wary eye and down-trodden look,  
I'd have to perform marvelous actions like theirs  
to be also thrown out of the Church  
and save my artless vanity forever.  
[HSM]

## THE POPE

Grandfather with cheeks like puffy clouds  
let fireflies protect your nakedness in its public shell.

Do you know that in the bars they would like to hear you swear  
and see you skillfully knife-fight for a woman, nothing barred?

No. You don't know it. Nothing human means anything to you  
except your magnificent capacity to look down your nose.

Come along come ride with us in dust-choked buses  
walk through the crumbling neighborhoods  
visit the pawnshops shaken by the specter of prison and hunger  
light the cigarette of the man shivering in the cold  
smile in the hospitals filled with running sores  
put your arms warmly around those widows  
still moist with memories of morgues  
granddaddy with all your paste jewelry show compassion just once  
without letting the news agencies find out  
show compassion next to the loneliness of the many  
show compassion before dying and going to that heaven  
consisting of glass and cotton founded by barefoot fishermen  
by madmen by angry carpenters  
by farmers with callused hands and tunics smelly with sweat.  
[HSM]

## OLD WOMAN WITH SMALL BOY

Frightened hunched over  
looking for the last secrets of life  
in the ground she walks on  
infinitely tired of not being able  
to even make an effort  
all her spirit dimmed by the teasing of the light  
with nothing to forget and everything present  
weighing her down more each day  
and she blaming her jitters on the earthquake

but he's all dolled up in his spotless sailor suit  
absolutely taken with the birds flying past  
[HSM]



## ANOTHER DEAD WOMAN

My boyhood was a lustrous orange  
its fresh gold singled out by birds  
by your desires singled out  
from the room and its musty smell  
filled with knickknacks and shadows  
where a huge sour cat was king

But you were old so old  
and I was scared of your skin  
and your drooping lip with its lilac smear

And see? you're dead now  
and I'm starting to sprout gray hairs  
[HSM]

# CÉSAR VALLEJO

This dead body bursting into flower  
—good breeding  
raises its knife-edge—  
this body not yet introduced to me  
better than when it lived yields to death itself  
it waves its petals to the seeds of love

This dead body who would have imagined it  
defending its cup of storms  
visited by blind circus butterflies  
its huge pores dead  
its old smokes dead from his sitting there  
with only its dead-looking roots alive  
prompt with the word it keeps to itself  
its eternal slippery hand still trembling

This dead body that contradicts me  
growing shoulder to shoulder with the language  
of a just calamity that crackles

This dead body of dry water  
this critically ill  
dead body whose bones are guests  
comes in runs its fingers over its flags  
interrogates its interrogators  
this body gives with all its heart the only thing it owns  
it wept it comes back and goes away weeping

Somewhere in the world his tombstone breathes  
under the solemn weight of the name he gave life to  
one day he said things that will always last  
the world is much heavier since his death  
[HSM]

## VANITY

Mine would be a great death

My sins would glow like ancient jewels  
with the delicious iridescence of venom

Aromas of all kinds would flower from my grave  
teenage versions of my greatest joys  
my secret words of sorrow

Maybe someone will say that I was loyal or good  
but only you will remember  
the way I looked into your eyes  
[PP]

## SMALL HOURS OF THE NIGHT

When you know I'm dead don't say my name  
because then death and peace would have to wait.

Your voice, the bell of your five senses, would form  
the thin beam of light my mist would be looking for.

When you know I'm dead, say other words.  
Say flower, bee, teardrop, bread, storm.

Don't let your lips find my eleven letters.  
I'm sleepy, I've loved, I've earned silence.

Don't say my name when you know I'm dead:  
I would come out of the dark ground for your voice.

Don't say my name, don't say my name.  
When you know I'm dead don't say my name.  
[HSM]

## THE BUREAUCRATS

The bureaucrats swim in a stormy sea of boredom.

Behind their hideous yawns they're the first to murder tenderness  
they end up with sick livers and die clutching the telephone  
their yellow eyes pinned to the clock.

They have exquisite handwriting and buy themselves neckties  
they suffer strokes when they find out that their daughters masturbate  
they owe their tailor bill they're barflies  
they read the Reader's Digest and Neruda's love poems  
they attend the Italian opera they bless themselves  
they sign strong anti-Communist manifestos  
adultery is their undoing they commit suicide without pride  
they profess faith in sports and are ashamed  
terribly ashamed  
that their father was a carpenter  
[HSM]

## MARIANO THE MUSICIAN HAS DIED

There are no birds now where the piano sat waiting  
only shapeless memories of a tremor without a name.

Now the dust is falling  
never finding the ebony statue in its path.

The garden gate doesn't open anymore.

At times I wonder if the houses  
we leave to die  
don't suffer as much as widows do.

At least when someone has sung or  
made sweet music in them  
as Mariano did...

[JG]

## EPITAPH

He showed up on a day like many others  
it's anyone's guess

At first he'd drink his wine slowly  
in the last bar on that dark beach  
pronouncing the names of shellfish  
in a way that always drew a laugh  
and singing strange ballads none of the poor drunks  
could make heads or tails of

Eventually he just hung around  
sweaty and very red under the beating sun  
he married a common whore—a good woman he felt sorry for—  
starting a long circle of silence

His eyes and his memory filled with his native Ireland Phillips  
O'Mannion  
dropped dead in the street yesterday stiff hands crossed on his chest

without saying a word  
not alarming anyone  
like someone paying cut-rate for his life

When he was lowered into the ground the ropes snapped  
and when the coffin hit bottom the cheap pine lid flew off  
His woman—no makeup on her lips—  
threw the first handful of dirt right in his face  
[HSM]

## TERRIBLE THING

My tears, even my tears  
have hardened.

I who believed in everything.  
In everyone.

I who asked only for a little tenderness  
which costs nothing  
but heart.

It's late now  
and tenderness is no longer enough.

I've had a taste of gunpowder.  
[JG]



## I WANTED

I wanted to talk about life and all its song-filled  
corners I wanted to merge in a torrent of words  
dreams and names and what's never printed  
in newspapers the sorrows of the lonely man  
surprised by the twists of the rain  
I wanted to rescue the naked parables of lovers and lay them  
at the foot of a child's game  
working his sweet everyday destruction  
I wanted to pronounce the people's words  
the sounds of their anguish  
point out to you where their hearts limp a little  
make him who only deserves to be shot in the back  
understand to tell you about my own countries  
acquaint you with exile with the great  
migrations that opened up all the roads in the world  
about the love still dragged along them  
along the ditches  
to tell you about trains  
about the friend who killed himself with another's knife  
about mankind's history ripped apart  
by blindness by the myth of the reefs  
about the century my three sons will see end  
about the bird's language and the raging foam  
of the great quadruped's stampede  
and I wanted to tell you about the Revolution  
about Cuba and the Soviet Union  
and about the girl I love because of her eyes  
with their tiny storms  
and about your lives full of daybreaks still to come  
and about people asking : Who saw it? Who told you that?  
How can it be done? I got here  
before you did  
and about all the things in nature  
and about the heart and what it witnesses

about the last fingerprint before Armageddon  
about the tiny creatures and about tenderness  
yes, I wanted to tell you all about it recount  
all the stories I know and all that were told to me  
or that I learned by living in sorrow's big house  
and the things other poets before me said  
and that it was good for you to know about.

And I haven't been able to give you more—poetry's  
closed door—  
than my own headless corpse in the sand.

Mexico-Havana-San Salvador-Prague: 1961-1965

[DU]

# THE SEA

# THE SEA

*For Tati, Meri and Margarita, with whom I rode a wave...*

## I

There are great stones in your tempestuous darkness  
huge rocks their dates washed by your shadow  
your darkness swallows down even the daylight  
left creaking in the cold that comes off the air  
and never dares to enter you

Ah Ocean where the hopeless ones can sleep  
lulled by your unrelenting detonations  
vertiginous alphabet watery landscape that crash into the seawalls  
the gulls and the fish-spray are your springtime  
your fury is a green pyramid  
your weather the resurrection of the intensest fire  
the best token of you would be a snail  
going across the desert with the steps of a child

(I always loved those quaint villages  
that look stolen from the hands of the sea  
little houses next to the beach  
notorious port towns drunk on saltpeter  
hamlets in the fog full of coral forms  
far-flung cities humbled by the storms  
villages of blind fishermen beneath an oil-burning lighthouse  
factories hiding in the mangroves with a long knife

Valparaiso like an immense frozen waterfall  
Manta Puna ports of Ecuador that denied me their leaves  
Buenaventura aromatic like unwashed genitals  
Panama its eyes punched out by corruption  
Cartagena forever waiting for hungry pirates  
Willemstadt shipwrecked in the oil kingdoms  
Tenerife and its sweet cup of wine  
Barcelona yawning between the carabinieri and the Banks

Naples beautifully tumescent  
Genoa Leningrad Sochi La Guaira Buenos Aires  
Montevideo like a pearl  
Puerto Limón Corinto  
Acajutla on a slow beach in my country  
everyone watching himself in the solemn mirror the dolphins plow  
splitting up an infinity of emerald glitter  
with a quick blade

## II

*"...salt for the sacrifices..."*

García Lorca

If night rescues its phosphorescent dome  
and your monsters lost beneath the lightning shrivel up  
the fish running loose are ten quick children  
who deep down ripen the anthem of the scales

When a parade of golden sea horses passes by  
the oxygen dead on top of the minerals  
muddies the green water with its nasty wound  
while the ancient rite of the octopi goes on and on

Salt for the sacrifices corrosive proximity  
light without gnawing fire a scalding liquid  
ancient pale blood with its furious current  
where the drowned men relive their fevers

The sea the sea buries its salty news  
and silently devours the solar glare  
lifting its face its scar to the heavens  
the sea falls shattered into the arms of the abyss

On the docks the smell of rotting fish  
and beaten algae deceives us  
the sea isn't a corpse it's a battered dream  
a mobile labyrinth where the stars tremble

## ESTUARY

Today you came down from the black mountain  
without your lamp once again.

(You come to me clandestine, like a sweet fugitive  
slipping past the town's inquisitive glances  
the old women's jealousy as they collapse in the heat  
the shouts of the children trying to grab hold of your freshness.)

Naked in the gentle darkness we stayed watching each other  
remembering the old days always reborn in the blood  
we were more tender than ever making love  
full of small talk like never before  
all our senses open like a flower into the sun.

Awake before dawn  
I see the shape of your body  
still held by the pillow.

I've gone out to wash myself in last evening's rainwater  
forgetting to sing to the seagulls  
as I do every day...

### III

A ship  
filled with tedium  
a ship full of groups of silent people  
disentangled from the jaws of the sargasso at a deadly crawl.  
At the prow we cut through the great wall of air  
and are silent, thinking about the country  
where we left love trembling in its primal loneliness.  
The books are soggy with seasalt  
and from here the water is an immense deserted square.  
So much hierarchy in its battered loneliness!  
Its shivering nakedness like a black stone  
that languishes on the horizon in the wind's arms!

## ESTUARY

The swimmers have finished their early morning laps. I'm not in on it.  
I open the window only  
so the great iodine rose will come to you  
the most far-flung and violent rose  
that grows everywhere and everywhere leaves its touch

When I see you naked loving each other under the light sheet  
—glance trembling beneath closed eyelids—  
I know that it's not only this world on the edge of the sea  
this keen smell of burning salt  
that makes me face up to damp yearnings.

I should never have let her slip away.

I regret it more on certain Sundays like this Sunday the eleventh  
when at last my presence means nothing to you  
and you copulate slowly  
furiously beneath the light sheet  
trembling glance under closed eyelids.

## IV

The day the father fish prolongs his punishment in the air  
the day he risks his life in the lethal air  
leftover sea-flowers imprisoned on his last scale  
leftover pale yellow algae  
survivors of I don't know what plunge  
the day my wound lingers on the edge of the sea  
away from its widespread aggression away from its volatile  
little teeth  
the day the swamp is my horizon  
and the rose of the wind bends over drunk  
you can't  
you can't help thinking of the labyrinths we owe  
the deep secrets that confuse our hearts.

And the exorcisms don't fit inside the emptiness full  
of unease in the middle of an overwhelming dampness  
every question sinks to the marrow of the bones  
and stays there like the seasons of a luckless year.

Not even all the footsteps could rebel  
our thirst falls asleep on us against the dark  
and only the nudity of the doves haunts  
the ear that confesses it's had enough of being beaten.

(How we'd love to solve the clues or even the whisper  
so sure of itself in its subterranean privacy  
but what key what bolt shall we kiss  
that won't betray us to the guard's face?  
How bitterly are we to take the only chance we have left  
without letting us slip on the treacherous shoots  
pushing up through the ashes once more?)

The sea and the moment are for now indecipherable.

Let's drink  
let's have a shot of this bad rum  
and get on up the beach  
this beach whose sand is a chunk of marble slowly falling apart  
and get ready to live up to the dream that draws near.

May 1962

[JG]



# THE TESTIMONIES

# JUAN CUNJAMA, SORCERER

## I

My old skin  
snake skin  
my skin with its pale hair  
holding up under waves of rain  
my laughing knife-wound my knees  
so solemn in their decrepitude  
showing through these rags

Loved but chaste my body  
kept a good distance away  
from the woman caught in summer's claws  
my foot the winner my hoof fool-proof  
against the thorns on far-off trails

My grime my proud  
loathing for the days of man  
my arm and my staff sticking out  
like two long-dried-up rivers  
my bones put together with ashes and spit  
my veins the fire in them snuffed out  
my despair with its yellow teeth  
in a last-ditch fight against a laughing mask

My love the forgotten  
look of the sulking boy  
my manly fear  
my courage of a frightened man  
the weariness that makes me  
walk on

## II

The devil and god one and the same,  
the wings of the dead  
make a single terrified sound

All things are the same man has only  
to arouse slow powers from their sleep  
and take over the deep secrets of life

I know what I'm telling you  
all I need is the chemistry  
of black prayer to honor your footsteps  
for you I blend the scattered voice of herbs  
in vials never reached by the sun  
I am the only free man  
the only one without masters  
under my roof of unlit flowers  
I sleep in a coffin of red pine  
and I won't die this will be my death  
one more dream an awakening  
simply put off for another time

My body and its wondrous glass  
between it and the white worm  
while hand in hand with Tlaloc  
the real me walks in each raindrop  
over the trees and the sea

[HSM]

# OVERLOOK

That is a horizon that makes one say:

“I carry the weight of magnificence,  
the red plumes of pride  
stolen from the nest of fire itself.”

That makes one say:

“I am enormous and beautiful,  
satisfied with what I can do  
like the poorest man  
like the most wretched among men.”

That makes one say:

“I fear nothing except cowardice,  
nothing, except love, brings tears to my eyes.”

Near Cuernavaca

[JG]

# THE DESERT

*To Roberto Carías Delgado*

The hot wind whistles its nails  
packed with dust my dear compadre  
it whistles around the black Sonora train  
and there's no other dust as close to the heart of beaten stones  
as the one I'm telling you about.

When the train whistles it's not answering anyone  
it calls together the blind desert snakes  
and if it's an hour when the sun beats down hard as hell  
the whole landscape cries out for your skeleton  
it asks for the rush of your veins over its coals.

Only the dead horse is master here  
but when it watches us pass compadre  
when it sees us pass hiccuping in the Sonora train  
he imagines we're his dead riders  
he asks for us as a moist prize  
against the fury of the drought.

What can we do compadre  
just like God says.  
[HSM]

# RITE FOR THE BIRTH OF A FLOWER ON THE GREAT PYRAMID

*For Rosa María*

I'm leaving you this little mouthful of water  
on your summit Pyramid of the Sun  
to help you against the noon fire  
the punishment of the blazing sun you've suffered for ages

Everyone tramples you and brings you dust  
they pound on your huge swollen stone with their feet  
they scratch and piss on you in ground-up languages  
but who remembers that freshness was your finest ritual

So I'm bringing you this little mouthful of water  
the river and I set it down on your brow  
to make you smile and pronounce a flower  
[HSM]

## THE DEER

It has the loveliest eyes on earth, so much like Lisa's. A perfect animal, with a skittish frame smooth as silk. No matter what others may claim, it lives only on water and butterflies and when it's alone it can fly. Its ears came from the head of a serpent delicately emptied out and covered with orchids' petals. Its horns from coral and moss. Its hooves from a tiny bit of night and some ferocity. When it is still very young, it's like a foolish little god and quite touching. In the magic of its youth it is prophetic and arouses sexual desire. In its old age it is wise and makes you drop your eyes. The deer has a woman smell and when upset gives off a sweet body sweat; if this is saved while it's still warm, it's a sure cure against the rabies of wild animals.

[HSM]

## PINE

The green monk lifts its austere presence through the fog but whistles at night like a tormented soul. Far off, you can hear the woodcutters' monotonous thumping.

[HSM]



## HOMAGE TO SAGE

The leaves of sage that, when wrapped around hot ash are the best bet against a bellyache, contain many magical properties, extremely well documented. Steeped in alcohol they release, when exposed to the full moon, a black liquid that the witch doctors of Izalco use to saturate tobacco. Upon smoking this, there follows a dream of vision and rejuvenation. The powdered form of the sage leaf dried in the sun, taken by sniffing, endows a powerful cruelty and steadies vision. Tiger murderers, especially the youth—it's worth pointing out here—, use it frequently. This same powder, used in various mixes, restores virginity, makes the just man invisible to his enemies, allows understanding of bird language and in general of the tree-dwelling animals, cures fright, cautions night travelers against zones overrun by the flower of drowsiness, protects against the praying mantis, the tarantula and the poisonous lizard, and cures nausea.

[RN]

## RELATIVE

I remember it as if it had just happened. He was sitting in his wheel chair rolling his bloodshot, no-good eye as if the lids were slowly and sweetly chewing on it. He had stopped putting on weight long ago. He was going through—physically, I mean—a process of gradual deterioration. Withdrawing into the shell of grime on his stomach. Every part of him—his upper legs, his chest, even his head—seemed to lean, almost sink toward the center of his belly hidden away by layers of dirty clothes. It was then that Leona, his old lover, knocked at the door of our house. It happened at or about seven o'clock on a morning so hot that the recently awakened rooms tasted of smoke. I myself let her in, happy to start the day by opening a door. Leona said: "Where's...?" When she stood before my grandfather, he glanced at her with his good eye and slavered a little. Then he glared at me with such hatred, the likes of which I had never felt before. Because I was next to Leona—who was breathing heavily and looking at him with boundless love from the endless depth of her hunchback—with my broad naked torso that resembled, according to Peggy, the upper half of that exciting God statue hanging in the huge display window of the Paris-Vulcan store. My grandfather started talking: "If I were..." And died.

[DU]

# MINOR HELLS

## MY COUNTRY'S FAR AWAY

Far from this world, far  
from the natural order of words;  
far,  
twelve thousand kilometers  
from where iron is man's home growing  
like a rare flower in love with the clouds;

far from the chrysanthemum, from the albatross' smooth wing,  
the dark walls that curse the cold;

so very far , where midnight is lived in  
and we are prompted by the typewriter's excellent voice;

far from where hope is already left behind,  
from where weeping is stillborn or murders itself  
before the trash can suffocate it;

far from where birds hate,  
from where foul-smelling wolves speak to you of love and offer you  
an ivory couch;

far from where gardens scar their own beauty  
with knives given them by smoke;

far,  
far,  
far from where the air is a huge gray bottle;

from where everybody offers rude soap bubbles  
and perverse angels drink with cheeky children  
all they can of the poison of apostasy against all the dawns;

far from the backbites of the masks;  
far from where naked women don't blind you with the light of their  
flesh;

far from the consolation of the vomits;  
far from the carnality of the pantomime,  
from the hangover of unfounded curses;

far, terribly far

from where silk monsters race through the streets,  
from where broken forests tremble and run away,  
from where each key has a door waiting for it without sleep;  
from where the music of gold sprouts blindly  
and the unfettered hounds of the cobalt bark;

far, unconditionally far

from where the martyr is stoned to death by mockery  
and the saint is a tongue-tied clown.

[RN]

## FORGETTING

Last night I dreamed that someone told me: your love is dead.

Your love, the girl you loved when you were young,  
has died.

In a cold city in the South  
where the parks are one huge dewdrop,  
at the hour when the fog is still virgin  
and the city turns its back  
on the gaze of desperate souls.

And she died—they told me—without saying your name.

[JC]

## MIDDLE AGE

Gone are the years of your hot-blooded ways.  
Gone are the years in which you would pronounce  
certain words with contempt:  
cypresses, escape, melancholy, for instance.

You bring your thirst before the mirror  
and you're covered with thorns hurled at you:  
certainty may smell bad,  
you are at last the lonely knight  
that you dreaded being, whom you kept at bay  
with a little bit of mockery.

Priestly and silent, perhaps,  
less given to tears, tougher,  
like the good Bread of God the longer  
it's out of the oven.

[JC]

## LEAVES

Fallen leaves  
silent blades aggressive in a delicate way  
it isn't autumn who defeats you.

You devour earth  
you turn your golden bodies into birds  
you burn the mouth of the snow  
that soon will die, smoking and dribbling.

We believe we trample you  
and really you're the ones who support  
our humble stature.

That's why we hate you as much as our heroes:  
year after year we have you burned.

And yet, what a huge insult spring means to us!  
[JC]



# PASSING THE FACTORY

(Mexico, 1961)

While skin trembles under rough shirts  
in the nocturnal patio bloodied by a strike  
all the ferocity in the world burns in a cigarette  
and love, the survivor of storm-driven memories,  
is a bird lost in the ocean.

Wind whips the eyebrows of old men  
used to watching the struggle for bread  
while misery thickens the cobwebs  
in their sleepless little rooms nearby.

And I am ashamed of being the lonely man  
who simply continues on his way at night  
until a moment ago appreciating the quiet  
around him and planning to visit Chapultepec  
tomorrow Sunday morning.

[PP]

## NOW YOU SEE WHY...

Now you see why out of everything you wished for  
in those college conversations  
you ended becoming an exile's great love

you who were going to travel with the jet-set  
to Europe on what you inherited  
from three or four honorable old men  
you in a stretch-limousine wearing scented furs  
you in large silver bracelets  
but above all you with the most glorious eyes  
in the entire city  
asleep now  
in the arms of this poor lonely man.

I see the shiny little cross on your chest  
my photo of Marx on the wall  
and think that despite everything life is sweet.  
[PP]

## WHEN DEATH

(Mexico, 1962)

When death with its birds  
of black foam sprouts from my skin  
when my bones question the air  
about its rains and its tides  
and roots lift their lonely rituals  
from my drooping eye  
when I'm the one whose place was taken  
on the roads the only one not there  
to round off the number of footsteps for the day  
in your silver body my drowned out words  
will still cheer the ripe harvest on.

Travelers in the same cult of love  
doggedly we killed oblivion off.

[HSM]

## TIED DOWN TO THE SEA

Surrounded by the dirty foam, beneath  
the gathered flotsam,  
in the middle of the river's forced gifts,  
in the middle of its impulsive cruelties,  
in the middle of its raw phosphorescences  
just hatched with the moon's consent,  
face to face with this stretch of immensity  
from reverberating iron dock Number Seven,  
making great show of the hunger that hangs from my fishing pole,  
I see your name.

The water is like oblivion, always there;  
the decaying aromas  
are little more than needles swallowed in my self-absorption.  
I, this hunger and your face,  
the indolent sea and the things floating in it,  
such is the landscape.

Tuesday, midnight, October?

(When I was a child I wanted to escape  
from this sea to the sea in a swift white sailboat.  
But the coast isn't the ocean, the coast  
has strong nails, claws that grasp you forever  
bequeathing you love and misery [love!],  
a piece of fabric to fight over, to cover one's bones,  
dregs of wine, a number in line  
waiting each day for a petal of mist.

Guilt is born along the coast and there it becomes a dream.)

Tuesday, midnight, October, my desperation's  
final year—has the poor little thing  
been so cautious up until now?

Your face lingers in my guilty dream  
wearing out these bitter surroundings.

Come, flower born of the cold, stay with me  
until very late,  
lend me your blindness.

[JG]

## I REMEMBER WHEN I'D TALK OF LISA

One day I was walking through the streets of Vienna  
poor like that summer like just another big suitcase  
up to Prince Eugene Street  
on the learned cobblestones under the advertisements  
shoulder to shoulder next to the display windows  
showing up in Europe like a clod of earth from far away  
that some excited tourist brought home  
on his last pilgrimage

Tchaikovsky stirred my soul like a heroic feat  
(apparently he was a comfort-loving fool)  
and in every chaste door I felt there lurked  
something capable of whipping up the flags of my lust

The only thing that now reconciles me with that bitter day  
is the memory of an old beggar who watched me pass by  
as if I were a naked little boy  
and who just moments before had caught me  
saying your name out loud  
[JC]

## A DEAD GIRL IN THE OCEAN

Because you had returned the ethereal body of that girl to me  
intact in the dampness  
of her death, deep like the slumber of seashells,  
and because you weren't sorry for me and my mortal bewilderment  
—waterspout in an eye wounded by the old search—  
I was the one left out of it, the one with no right to tears.

Now it's late for all that.

What was my crime except love?  
And where did she die  
except in the waters of my love?

The almond trees injured by the winter's high tides  
know my grieving because they fell in it again and again.  
They are the green mirrors,  
the green comforts of my distress.

The rest of you,  
count this lack of wisdom among my deficits of love.

Let my steps, ocean, head towards you,  
owner of my dead girl.

[JG]

## MEMORY

They were like that those afternoons of our first youth  
listening to Las Hojas Muertas My Foolish Heart  
or Sin Palabras in the Hotel del Puerto  
and you had a simple name  
that rang clear when whispered  
and I believed in the gods of my ancestors  
and I told you sweet lies  
about life in far away places I'd visited.

Saturday nights  
we walked for hours on the damp sand  
barefoot hand in hand in a deep silence  
only broken by the fishermen in their lighted boats  
wishing us happiness in shouts.

After that we would return to Billy's cabin  
and drink brandy by the fire  
sitting on the small Lurçat rug  
and later I'd kiss the hair you had let down  
and start tracing your body with these knowing hands  
that never trembled before love or the battle.

Your nakedness flared in the tiny night of the room  
and the firelight between the wooden things  
under the lamp failed  
like a curious flower the one with all the gifts  
always filling me with amazement  
and inviting me to new discoveries.

And your breath and my breath were neighboring rivers  
and your skin and mine two dominions without borders  
and me in you like the storm touching the volcano's root  
and you for me like narrows rained on  
for the first light.



Then comes the moment when you are only sea  
only sea with its fishes and salts  
for my thirst with its coral-red secrets  
and I drink you in with the generosity of someone grown small  
once more the riddle of all waters together  
in the small hole opened in the sand by the little boy.

Ah love now it's the hour a few years later  
when your face starts to become faint  
and step by step my memory becomes more empty of you.

Such a small name you had and it was in a song  
popular then.

[RN]

# THE PRODIGAL SON

## Part XVIII

Once again the deep abyss, the old  
customs! What shall we do, then, with our laughter,  
with our freedom,  
with our morals based on anger?

You talk to me about the spirit—an old Sunday theme—,  
you're lovely and I assume you have a truth for the basis of your  
beliefs  
(I can't take my eyes off that squashed insect  
and its stomach that ends in a sticky yellow liquid).

Haven't you noticed how boring hope can be?

The main thing is to make a decision:  
the murderer's, the person's who dares to be himself at last,  
the savior's or the hero's.

You can't spend all your life returning,  
especially to the shithole you have for a country,  
to the sad mess into which they've turned your parents' home,  
only because you're eager to see or bring us words of solace.

Here every sign of pity is cruel unless it sparks off a fire.  
Every sign of maturity must prove its capacity for destruction.

And don't expect too much. A drowning man  
doesn't ask where the first boat going by is headed for.

But above everything else, there's impatience pure and simple.

Moreover, I warn you to watch your rebellious spirit.  
It's the best form of courage  
but it can also release rotten sentiments.

We mustn't talk like this anymore. At this point, it would be hard to come up with a joke or cheer up.

In each side we carry so many dead ones  
and so many demons under the skin  
that the most serious moment in our life  
is when we do our best to laugh.

What's more, our holding on so hard to love is incredible!

The fact is, we've let them cheat us and are so defenseless now  
that we can't even make a distinction between our highest duties.  
We want to save the lost traveler, the wild beast and the  
mountain all at the same time.

In any case,  
the efficacy of our beliefs today  
(certain gods, ourselves, certain furtive acts, certain hates)  
depends absolutely on how fresh they are.  
But youth is a savior. The day when the world  
has lived enough to be young,  
we'll be able to spend our time caring for our children  
or being jealous in matters of the flesh.

In the meantime let's not be content to wait.

We've said things that are too serious  
for us to just sit here pleading patiently for a verdict.

We're not alone.  
[HSM]

## GERMAN-AMERICAN HOTEL

Is this, then, the way to forget disorder?

Because breaking free of you of your gardens punished  
by the hot sand (always passing through)  
is like opening the tap of a pipe that's gone dead  
to tease out the last sip of water  
before starting to take a walk over fire.

My poor country ay my poor cavern:  
you cost me many beasts wounded with exhaustion  
too many naked times visited by fear  
(after all saying "two lilies" "long decorum"  
"putrid matter of violins" "Hegel's barrel"  
doesn't wound your lips):  
sweet shepherdess of killers  
condemned to be green and happy!

They turn on the light downstairs they startle me  
but your laughter of a cat who is queen in grandfather's house  
can still be heard  
silence is not your only culture broth I know it now  
the near-sleep haunted by drawn out howls also is  
for it you send me angels and snakes  
salty mist rising from my tears  
voices that speak out like cylinders of gold.

Does even your smell of Lazaretto have to grow like a  
mushroom at my side?

You break down shutters and darken tunnels looking for  
climates for me to hide in you behead  
mile after mile stripped bare only  
for snowy nights you corrupt  
each quiet summit and how small you grow!

I'm sorry but I'll go on walking  
embroidering my flight smiling like every evil I've done  
I'll fly  
I'll go off to Russia to die to come back to life  
or simply to hear two concerts like drums (two)  
I'll row very hard on my false passport  
drunk with cheap wines singing  
some spiteful nostalgic song  
I'll go off to forget the idiot I am  
unfeeling a blind man who hardly bothers to warn about an  
avalanche.

When will you tell the difference between roses and guns?  
When will you learn not to go into a crazy dance at wakes?  
And not to pinch girls while the extermination is being planned?  
And not to pamper your sweet make-believe enemies  
like dogs you keep safe from disease with a collar of lemons?

(Some day you'll have to spank your soul you nut  
after calling it an idiot's soul:  
"Lovely soul of an idiot put your butt here.")

In the meantime you should be cautious:  
all you have to do is weep to find yourself acting the prophet  
and  
it's so uncomfortable to fill your pockets with proverbs!

After all  
the smell of the old mud has been the concern of unconquered kings  
who'd still be howling if they hadn't drowned in triviality.

Beware, then, of repentance, as Eliot would say.)

Now they've turned off the light  
it's time someone (the Mute, for instance) came up to ask me  
for the rent.

“Why does honesty tremble and, like an assassin,  
try to dodge the reproaches of its immortal condition?”

I'll have to tell you goodbye hour after hour  
until the word is branded as if with fire on my tongue  
and I can say no other word:  
only then will I be able to grant myself pardon with enough petals.

Ah you magic slaughterhouse that haunts me:  
smile you say to me angrily  
taking down your scepter for scourging hearts  
your jade harps and gourds and monster's manes:  
we were only the ones who spun the pacts  
with the screw-up who used to lurk around the best tomb  
and now we're the ones who could testify  
but we have now stolen the tavern's glitter.

Virgin clouds: go ahead vomit on our shame!  
Even the abysses blushed and asked for their sackcloth of ashes!

Horselaughs okay scoff scoff: that's how the mascots sashay  
in civilization's grand circus.  
But look there's a dwarf next to the exit  
with a pistol and a pardon:  
they'll accuse you of deserving a prince's booty.

Dignitary  
—they'll say—  
where did you put your cut of the profits?

Hang on to the scarlet fury  
mention that memorable color to them and fatten the chain  
(because you're the worst: a malicious suicide.)

They're banging at the door now only mutes  
make an uproar like that.  
Besides, they're charging me for breaking the toilet's float ball:  
I drank a lot last night and patience wasn't spread around equally.

My revenge is to point out the dust the rat  
shit and the noise all the insects make  
(they escape like devils from neighboring rooms  
and their chronic stench of marihuana). Good night.

Ah your meadows where the color of tea would not be appreciated  
mystic riches that burn one without wounding  
mistress of everything and of my dismissal:  
adiós has one more letter than love  
that's why it defeats love without making fun of it  
uncommon pity in that well  
an order with wings of water  
of titles of cunning perfect one you become a criminal.

That's why I'm leaving:  
my mount was already more than I needed.

Who's talking then? Who am I talking to?  
Has someone come with his dirtiest look to make me shut up?

Let my only fault be a certain lack of interest in language  
a stunted thorn of music among screeches:  
I know that reconciliation would also be devoured  
by pale birds called up to be fierce (your only show of love).

Shadow: your age rejuvenates precious stones in me  
it returns the most polluted river to its pristine state.  
Shadow: just for me win back  
your motherly face.

Since loneliness has two big strings and the soul of a spider  
I belong to it and am not to abandon it  
for any face that's part of the crowd.

Don't let anyone say my joy is like the lamb's:  
it is but only because I don't like to wipe away the world's sins  
to renew peace without knowing my final name.

What a bad run of luck!  
That's why I'm leaving. (I think.)

And for you (the other woman) (body like a doe's about to  
escape, etc.)

I'll say that I worship your secret tears  
your grief that would have made warmongers tremble.

You're me myself since then:  
to kiss you I need only kiss the hand that touched your pleasures  
(of course sometimes it turns into a fist on me  
and I pretend to hate you by biting it.)

That park? I hate places  
from now on my door will only open for certain circumstances  
for everything that only creates rambling abstractions  
for fear of tripping up.  
The same thing goes for the sonata  
and the song titled "Ansiedad"  
a black man who's now dead used to sing softly.

Don't you people worry  
there are other uncivil accounts I must settle  
including one for having saved certain lives  
and proclaiming that only necessity is evil.

Oh animal wallowing among sociologies  
obsessed by sex: it's your turn.  
Do you dance? Confess? Dare? Mix with the worms?  
(Gung-ho tours of duty are epic feats Sweaty would say  
and death an indigestion of final points: simple rhetoric.)

(Excess: that's the prime mover.)  
(But then there would be too many hymns.)

(If waking up before starting to slander were worthwhile  
no one would say you weren't right.)



(Ha! No doubt being brilliant is a sacred right  
don't apologize for it.)

That's why I'm going  
far away  
with a taste of hate in my mouth.

(And figuring out short jail terms—to put it another way—  
is simply to insist on that pride of yours.)

(Okay: it makes you turn pale  
it suits you more or less like fevers.)

(But this will leave thirty countries to account for  
while behind you someone has the look of a dead man.)

(Laughing is your fecund sacrilege as a reprobate  
—delightful restraint “the discipline of setbacks”—)

(In photographs you have a wet look  
like someone who gets up from a piano left out in the open  
gambling away ecstasies at poker.  
It's just a figure of speech.)

(Gold bullets for killing at dawn  
visions of iron objects  
creepy things hurt so bad they give off smoke  
and become the fruit that envy bears.)

(How weird of you: choosing between Russia and solitude. Hallelujah.)

After all:

Confessing is one of the vices I've satisfied the least I can't help it:

I

the one about to disappear give up  
for example  
my supply of profiles

my privilege of giving a name  
to something that was only going to be a question  
I'm giving you up (vegetation and lava) you (flesh forever with me)  
I'm giving up the merciful curse  
my great thirst for bitter gall  
my hunger for minor fainting spells  
I give up my giving up things  
I mean I give up eating myself starting with my feet  
I mean I'm devouring myself  
I existed  
(I'm just sleepy).

Mexico City, the night of April 9, 1965

[HSM & JC]

# TAVERN AND OTHER PLACES

## ***I. THE COUNTRY***

## LATIN AMERICA

The poet face to face with the moon  
smokes his exhilarating daisy  
drinks his share of another's words  
flies with sable's-hair brushes of dew  
scratches his fiddle like a pederast.

Until he smashes up his kisser  
on the rough wall of a barracks.

[JC]

## 27 YEARS

It's a serious thing  
to be twenty-seven  
really it's  
one of the heaviest,  
friends from my drowned childhood  
are dying all around me,  
I'm starting to  
think I'm not going  
to live forever.  
[JG]

# FEAR

*To Julio Cortázar*

A solitary angel on the tip of a pin  
hears someone taking a piss.

[JC]

## SOLDIER'S REST

The dead are growing more restless each day.

They were easy to handle before:  
we gave them a starched collar a flower  
we showered them with praise on a long honor list:  
we buried them in a National Plot  
among noble shades  
under monstrous slabs of marble.

The dead man signed up with the hope of being remembered:  
he joined the ranks once more  
and marched to the beat of our time-honored music.

But wait a second:  
the dead  
have changed since then.

They're sarcastic now  
they ask questions.

I think they've caught on  
that they outnumber us more every day.  
[HSM]



## THE CAPTAIN

The captain in his hammock the captain  
asleep beneath the animal noises of the night  
his guitar strung up on the wall  
his pistol set beside his bottle  
waiting for the battle like a hot date  
the captain the captain  
—he should know—  
in the same darkness as those he hunts down.  
[JG]

## IN A FIT OF ANGER

O country of mine you do not exist  
except as my deformed shadow  
a word coined by my enemy

Once I believed that you were simply very small  
not big enough to encompass both  
a North and a South  
but now I know that you don't exist  
I never hear your name on a mother's lips  
it seems that nobody needs you

This makes me happy  
even if I wind up in the madhouse  
because it proves that I invented a country

I am a little god at your expense

(What I mean is: my being an expatriate  
makes you an ex-patria)  
[PP]

## THE NATIONAL SOUL

Dismembered country, you slip  
into my hours like a little poisoned pill.  
Who are you, crawling with masters  
like a bitch scratching herself on the trees  
she pisses on? Who put up with your symbols  
and your gestures—a girl's smelling of mahogany—  
knowing you had been stripped by the rapist's drool?  
Is there anyone who isn't fed up with your smallness?  
Anyone you can still get to honor and watch over you?  
What do they call you now that, ripped to shreds,  
you're the whole future in its last gasps in the mud?  
Who are you  
but this numbered monkey with a gun, shepherd  
of keys and hatred, flashing the light in my face?  
I've had enough of you, my sleeping-beauty  
mother stinking up the night with your jails:  
I'm being eaten up inside now by my work,  
this stalking that turns the good son into a deserter,  
the young dude into someone dead from lack of sleep  
and the nice kid into a hungry mugger.

Central Prison, October 1960

[HSM]

## THE LAW ENFORCER

I'm old  
as old as your hope  
it makes me laugh

I carried a saber (but yearned for a machine gun)  
among Fernando VII's volunteers  
a little liquor was enough—was it in 1842?—  
to make me beat to death  
a college kid

I executed a guy named Farabundo Martí and Gerardo Barrios  
—it happened just a few days ago—  
and I cheered Cuaumichín  
when he ordered that Fidelina Raymundo be tortured

I was going to write the National Guard anthem  
around the time of the Communist leader Francisco Morazán  
there was a lot of killing to be done

And I'm still fairly young  
hard to get along with when I'm in a beating mood

Blood of your blood make up my age and my memory

I'm from over there, guys,  
don't blame me.<sup>5</sup>

[DU]

## THE SURE HAND OF GOD

*General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, El Salvador's former President, was savagely killed yesterday by his own chauffeur and man-servant. The murder took place at the Honduran farm where the elderly ex-ruler was living out a peaceful exile. According to sources, he was about to have lunch when the chauffeur stabbed him repeatedly for still unknown reasons. Security forces in both countries are seeking the killer...*

(from the Salvadoran Wire Service)

After all my poor little General  
today I'm sure I should have thought twice about it  
after all you just don't stop being a Christian  
but once in a while the brute in you comes out and you let  
liquor guide you  
he knew what was happening after I stabbed him  
five or six times  
and after the tenth he let out an old man's fart  
and slumped to one side of his armchair  
he always claimed nobody understood him  
and that he'd die like Napoleon one of his heroes  
I lifted his face out of the soup  
and stabbed him five more times  
truth was he was a brave man  
the tears running out of his eyes  
came from squeezing them so hard to hold back his desire to howl  
What made him spit at me this morning?  
I respected him 'cause he could be so macho  
he always cursed the way women carried on  
I think I stabbed him one more time  
when he was President he wasn't much of a screamer  
the softer he spoke the more the Generals trembled  
and the Bishop who was always whispering something  
would go off to take a leak  
it wasn't for nothing that he sent a picture to General Somoza  
Nicaragua's President

where he my dear General Martínez appeared  
sitting on a basket full of eggs  
I think  
he wanted to show Somoza that he could be both brave and careful  
'cause what he then wanted most dammit  
was not to crack even one egg  
what I never understood was that occult stuff  
I'd be in stitches when he started to talk in his strange double talk  
so much for the occult I thought  
God forgive me  
well I saw how he stared in my eyes while I searched through his  
pockets  
he only had on him fifteen shitty lempiras  
the house keys two half-dirty handkerchiefs  
and a few letters he'd received from his grandchildren in San Salvador  
that started off Darling Granpa  
he must've taken his sweet time to die  
'cause they were half-hearted stabs  
now when I think about it I get a bit ticked off  
but I gave it to him gently  
'cause I thought that's how an old man should be killed  
even if he was such a famous and thickheaded man  
as my General used to be  
others would have been more aggressive  
would've stabbed him  
as if they really wanted to kill him  
but first crunching his bones with the knife handle  
not me  
if he hadn't spit at me  
I wouldn't have felt the urge to kill him  
he'd still be there walking up and down with the hose  
in the garden  
just a grumpy little old man  
nothing but a sour fruit rind  
but  
others  
oh mother of my soul

what they'd have done to make him pay  
even if it were just a bit of what he owed  
others  
free of charge  
I repeat  
would've given it to him really hard  
he had some thirty thousand dead to his credit  
piled high as a volcano you can imagine  
sure—to get that many he had a lot of help  
he wasn't the only one  
adding them to the heap  
he had lots of help  
God will never forgive them  
what might happen is that God will take his time  
or he'll just forget about them altogether  
letting the Devil fuck them up all by himself  
and that way Our Lord won't be responsible  
for all that eye-for-an-eye butchery  
which won't keep blood from staining the hands  
as someone once said  
it's true  
and moreover  
there are others much worse than my General  
a lot more worse  
who are still alive in El Salvador  
with their tails still up in the air  
enough crimes were committed for each of us to have two  
the broken down the beaten the starving  
those locked up for the hell of it and there were many  
and those who fled for their lives: What do you think?  
and all the misery in the world: Doesn't that also count?  
Of course it counts  
since when you confess your sins  
even the leers count  
my General used to say that money had never dirtied his hands  
blood yes but money never  
I don't know about those things

only a doctor  
can talk in terms of fifty colones or more in my village  
when I searched him I said I only found fifteen lempiras  
who knows what he did with the millions  
that the U.S. lent him  
his Invisible Doctors  
and his Gallery of Souls weren't much help to him  
the knife in my hand went swish-swish  
like when you pierce a sack of salt  
with a cutupito thorn  
sure all this talk isn't necessary  
Why now, the parrot asked,  
if the hawk already has me in his claws?  
I think the whole world can go to hell  
because I didn't have such an easy time of it  
in my hour of need  
no one came to help me  
I had all the National Guard  
and the Police Dept. after me  
and a few stool pigeons from the General Staff  
and all the patrol cars from Oriente Province  
as if I had knifed  
the Savior of the World  
God forgive me  
out of a thief's simple rage  
I did what many others should have done  
out of their need to save their honor  
or for the good of the country more than thirty years ago  
I'm not asking for a standing ovation  
but I don't think I've done the worst thing  
that's ever been done in this country  
the curse of being poor also fucks things up  
it's not as if a Barracks Commander  
had shot him dead  
they've even had the nerve to say that I  
had no business in this pie  
but now that I've bitten off more than I can chew



I should know that the deceased  
was at one time the President of El Salvador  
and that is like a bath of gold  
that sticks to you for the rest of your life  
to touch him  
well  
it was like touching a tiger's balls  
forget the slaughter  
that he led in his good old days  
after all  
that could happen to any President  
even to my colonel who is now at the helm  
now more than ever  
things are heating up  
since it looks like the Communists  
can never finish off dying  
but maybe we'd better cut the talk right here  
I don't want to end up talking politics  
to a bunch of old  
pockmarks  
as he used to say  
'cause I don't notice those things  
actually I'd better hold my tongue  
so that my General can go on  
resting in peace  
if they'll let him  
wherever God has put him away  
God after all  
is the only one who hands out the blows and the rewards  
I commend myself to Him  
and to the Most Holy Virgin of Guadalupe  
here where I am  
completely screwed over  
for the time being  
in Ahuachapán Prison  
[DU]

## II. THE COUNTRY

### *The Foreigners*

*All the Olympians: a thing never known again.*

Yeats

*Let an honorable English family live for two years  
in El Salvador and you'll have English crows to  
dig out anyone's eyes.*

W.D. (Winnall Dalton)

## SIR THOMAS

In this sunlight  
I look like the raw belly of a fetus:  
as skinny as the horizon on bare hills,  
down on my knees reaching out for a cloud,  
full of its color dampened by someone else's spit.

This country is a steel thorn.  
I don't think it exists except in my drunken mind,  
certainly no one in England has ever heard of it.

Ah whirlwind full of poisonous snakes,  
noontime that lasts a century!

To get to the solemn nighttime alive  
with a permanent halo,  
to be stabbed in the heart  
by twelve drunken peasants,  
to go down into a countryside of wild beasts  
just to prepare one cup of coffee,  
all that is absolutely natural around here!

If only a man could hold on to his religion!  
[JG]

## SAMANTHA

With the lead paint of beauty  
spilling out of my eyes,  
I know that my life  
bustles about  
in its magnificent confusion.

To travel with blows falling on you,  
to sidestep the beaten travelers,  
waking up to steal

the last crumbs of bread soaked in blood:  
that is what happiness is,  
a kind of pickpocket's confession...

In this sun I think to myself:  
"I'm one of Tolstoy's mad virgins  
who hops along from one spot to the next  
so she won't step on the snakes dying from the cold."  
[JG]

## MATTHEW

The tropics, an unending fatigue.

The roses in the mountains smell of salt,  
just like the bad water we drink in the ports.

And those beetles that smash against the wall,  
they look like some monstrous creature's black eggs!

The Mosela wine slowly goes bad,  
the Dutch beer grows a nasty green film,  
and my best shirts won't last a year.

The exotic novel  
is a ghost running through Europe.  
[JG]

## THE BISHOP

The men of this country are just like their dawns:  
they always die too soon  
and they are much given to adoring false idols.

A wounded race.  
The rainy season is our only consolation.  
[JG]

## LADY ANN

The gentry are a sad lot here:  
who has ever heard anyone talk about  
these greasy princes,  
near-blacks with huge feet that can't be broken in,  
as religious as a street walker,  
wastrels!

I dreamt that I was hatching eagle's eggs  
but these horrid vultures have come along  
to sniff under my skirts  
with beaks like knives.

[HSM]

## THE FIRSTBORN

I on the other hand weep for my soul:  
it becomes full of smoke when I drink alone:  
the debris of my soul are betrayed by their master  
all for the testimonies of this unceasing machine.  
And all that,  
while the yellow ashes of my ancestors  
are excruciatingly slow as they fall on my shoulders.

We don't know what we've lost, O fellow believers,  
in this business about Cain's mark; but  
it has to be the law or prayer, absolutely.

I ought to speak of the fog in an unwavering tone,  
to make a brief account of our interior lives  
(in spite of  
and very far above those men who devour  
cold cuts reeking of grease,  
men too clumsy to kill  
or to take the first step in a night of love).

Ah tiniest, bothersome city dangling from my window  
like a hanged man!

I'd give almost anything for half an hour  
in Chelsea's worst dive (in 1952, preferably):  
the gin makes the urinals stink to high heaven,  
the old whores cluck among themselves like outraged duchesses  
and yet you can point your finger and talk all morning long about  
chivalry!

What's more I see that morning is now taking over the world  
and I've spoken its miserable name:  
the little left of the old shadows is what I treasure.  
Shouldn't we also have peace  
so we can build a wall around my territory?

Because I don't have a big share in this business.

Perhaps I may yet survive this war and find refuge  
and even the winners  
will pay for my advice:  
Natural History has some cases like it,  
among the insects for example:  
a circumstance that everyone fears would do  
—when even errors are simply the feints  
of a crushing desperation—  
brilliance moves quickly to the front  
and your ramblings become a pleasing music,  
hope for us to start dancing once again.

Pah! Maybe I'll drink less tomorrow.  
[JG]

SIR THOMAS

"The horizon is the least useful thing in all Creation,"  
—so my grandfather would say, masking the financial mess—  
"One step forward and the whole thing's shot."

And just like that, our toughest experiences  
are destined to stink like a rag  
in the city's oversized trash bins.  
But we would accept death tranquilly  
before even the slightest contempt for our little contribution.  
Why is there another life  
closer to us than dreams!

In the hours before vespers they set on fire the sons I never cared to  
name,  
they spit on my daughters without raping them  
(as you would only treat maids who give off a stench  
when we lift their skirts with a riding whip),  
and knocked over my wine bottles with the swing of an axe  
until the earth produced fruit the color of blood.

It could be that I'm stretching things a bit right now,  
dreams are so beautiful!  
But the important thing is the crisis  
that my bruised soul faces at breakfast time.

World: Collapse!  
[JG]

MATTHEW

(Psalm.)

By contradiction blessed, we're all-powerful, my love.  
My opposite self welcomes you, this is how wings let us fly:  
this daily tension, then, is a rare happiness that grows and grows.  
My sorrow does nothing but shed light on you, a lamp for your  
celebration.

In your silence humanity sings with fervor  
and distance makes our bridges take on fragrances.  
If you don't listen, the need to seek out your hands comes over me.  
If you don't see me, I must insist on becoming a sun.  
When you don't touch me, I break into song.

Because you love another, I can face those who are sorrowful.  
And because I also love another, you're my resurrection.  
Are we like the stone recently hurled?  
Yes. And like the river that runs on and on, and knows itself.  
You are like the driving force that makes the trees bear fruit.  
Let us give thanks that, even being together, we don't feel complete:  
this makes us look outward, as through a window.  
Let's enjoy each other down to our smallest wounds:  
it will allow us to despise the scar,  
to give the best corner of memory to grief  
and to full sanity, action.  
Let's express the affirmation the other holds in doubt.  
Let's expect from the other what we don't expect him to expect from  
us.  
Love becomes a diamond because it had the chance to become ashes.  
You make me become like you.  
Wanting to hurt me, you get through to me  
and my betrayal is your new reward.  
You, who are myself.  
[HSM]

## SIR THOMAS

From out of the eyes of the stag pasturing  
in the garden of the madhouse,  
from the anise root  
that the water's sweet erosion has stripped bare,  
from the days when the children  
were taking their first steps toward embarrassment,  
you come forward, oh terrible love,  
as if brought to life by someone long dead  
laughing forever on the throne of his vengeance.

I left my sword stuck clean through Charlie's throat.  
It was a sunny day in Scotland  
where the air smelled like a VD clinic.  
I'll never own a better horse.



But now  
I'm at the age where everything  
becomes a question  
and I don't know if it's only because of my memory  
or simply the rediscovery of my umbilical cord,  
when the air, full of rosy words,  
suddenly hits us on the tender part of the shoulder,  
in spite of our clothing, made from the tightest threads.

Samantha goes on about planting birches  
fertilizing them with strawberry ice-cream,  
while she pulls a perfect banana from her jewelry box.  
Everything is possible in a country like this  
that has, among other things, the funniest name in the world:  
anyone would say it's an ideal name for a hospital or a tugboat.

I remember my father saying that with a Bible  
and a bottomless pint of Dublin's black stout  
he would go on being a Christian even in Hell.  
God forbid that I should cheapen his memory  
but this New World is an aquarium full of fish  
that can't be carved on the altars.

Ah, the old duties of manhood....  
[JG]

## MATTHEW

The snoring of the virgins asleep in the second class car  
slips in even here, in my genteel cave:  
they are dreaming of lascivious dwarfs  
or of great embarrassments in cheap money deals.  
Poor me. I, who mortified my senses to such a degree,  
have a herd of swine guarding my new house from prowlers!

Around here even the gardener would feel like a king  
with his ass a little sore.

Last night the scent from the moist roses  
made me vomit until I bled.

[JG]

## SAMANTHA

(Letter.)

My brother, my love:  
I really must link spite  
to the stories going around about my public life:  
“I too have reason to hate this family of savages  
disguised as cherubs—I may say later on—,  
I too am the victim  
delivered in a holocaust for their convenience:  
social classes, cold magmas, sketches of real  
or imaginary panthers,  
your golden labyrinths are now stage sets to capture grief,  
unspeakable illness whose symptoms you hide behind.”

Night is the best time  
for these microscopic plans.  
Day is a great old movie  
full of moral lessons,  
with strangers who recognize each other  
and start arguing in code,  
mostly in ciphers piled up on pale white hands.

In our old home in Chelsea  
no shame could resist a whole evening in my room  
(especially after turning on the gas):  
I can be caustic without undermining tradition  
and death during a temporary peace  
is a prize relatively easy to flaunt.

The public show of cynicism quickly turns grotesque:  
the soul of a slave, cowardice,  
everything helps.

You might say: it's been so many years since we were real lords and  
ladies!

Tomorrow, so soon old and apathetic...  
[HSM]

LADY ANN

(On matrimony.)

Society's blind heaven:  
a man and a woman touch each other's eyelids  
as they start making comparisons between their bodies  
and the rest of the natural world.

But night falls swiftly  
and they must leave the field.  
They enter the luminous house by the kitchen door  
each one swearing secretly to him or herself  
that the venom of each will defeat the other's.

And so the centuries pass, from one to the next.  
[JG]

THE FIRSTBORN

Being afraid isn't the worst possible thing.

Fear can be studied like an insect  
or like a heap of dung  
poking around in it  
with a small stick.

The worst thing is to hang on to the bitter weight of the ballast  
the sailors throw to the bottom of the sea,  
to great applause.  
[JG]

### *III. THE COUNTRY*

*Poems From The Last Prison*

## PRISON AGAIN

Prison again, black fruit.

Out in the streets and in the rooms of men, right now someone's complaining about love, making music or reading the news about a battle fought under Asia's night. In the rivers, fish are singing their wonder about the sea, an impossible dream, too good to be true. (I'm talking of those fish called Lily-Black, but actually blue, from whose spines violent quick-moving men extract perfumes that last a long time.)

And the least object sunk or nailed down anywhere is less a prisoner than I.

(Of course, having a pencil stub and paper—and poetry—proves that some hollow universal concept conceived to be written in capitals—Truth, God, the Unknown—took hold of me one happy day, and also that, falling into this dark pit, I have simply fallen into the hands of opportunity so as to lay it out properly before mankind.)

And yet I'd rather go for a pleasant walk in the country.  
Even without a dog.)

September 9

[HSM]

## PREPARING THE NEXT HOUR

I wish I didn't have to think about my fate. Somehow  
I associate it with forgotten tapestries of shame and majesty  
on which an unfeeling face  
(like Haile Selassie's)  
would do its best to brand me for eternity. Only the absurd  
cold air in this saucepan country of mine applauds  
till it touches one's heart at a time like this. Oh assault,  
oh words I'll never say the same way again,  
place for returning grandfathers to receive their pickings.

This morning the guard brought me only leftovers  
—he doesn't know what suffering is, poor guy—  
that, together with the fog, have given the day its name.

They're dead lumps of salt from some dead shellfish,  
tortillas I fell on with the old fury  
that has no other warm places left to humiliate,  
scraps of rice as tough as three superb standard bearers  
busy pardoning the lives of lambs and crude logics.

The wall is covered with dates I carry in me sobbing,  
pieces of final, naked fatigue that scream out and are worse  
witnesses of something not even my tears would erase  
(terror?).

I've prayed (I am Faust), I've kissed my hands,  
and like an old man making his breath bounce off  
a cold corner of his cell I've said to myself:  
"poor neglected thing, poor thing,  
with most of your death left in your care,  
while somewhere in the world someone strips down beautiful  
weapons  
or sings songs of rebellion their wives prefer to jewels,  
you listen to honey-sweet marimbas

after you've been spit on by a despot from the provinces,  
you hear the rustling of your toenails  
growing against the leather of your shoe,  
you smell bad (I'll talk more about this somewhere else),  
you look for a sign that will mean "you'll live"  
even on a butterfly or in a flock of storm-clouds..."

Strict hallelujah, well shouted to the impossible stars,  
how beautifully anger suddenly comes on:  
huge blade-edge, you mean so much to my soul,  
tribute to those sacrificed without beautiful endings,  
anger, anger, oh lovely mother, just source of thirst,  
you've come...

In the patio, far from here, the sunlight  
must be like a white female cat. But am I ready  
to show my face the next time they bring water?  
Yes. I'll ask for a cigarette.

September 13

[HSM]

## INDEPENDENCE DAY

Today is Independence Day: I woke up half rotted away on the floor — it was wet and hurt me like the mouth of a dead coyote — with the heady gasses of the anthems all around me.

September 15

[HSM]



## SUMMER

I feel the sunburns  
("I'm a port far away from here")  
of the growing summer:  
the reptile's venoms ripen  
its secret law,  
the blood of things  
weighs heavily.  
The guards talk about women,  
they oil their dark pistols,  
they sing...

I  
begin to crawl with lice.

September 18

[JC]

## YOUR COMPANY

When night falls and a warm  
form of peace comes to me,  
your memory is harvest bread<sup>6</sup>, mystic thread,  
for my quiet hands  
to give my heart fair warning

Someone might say: what's the foam,  
the dust, to the blind man far away?

But it's loneliness for you that fills my nights  
and doesn't leave me alone, about to die.

That's what we, the silent many, are like...  
[HSM]

## I SMELL BAD

I smell like the color of mourning on days  
when the price of flowers would make anyone sick  
when the poor man dies high and dry  
trusting that the rain will come down soon.

I smell like the news of a disaster so small  
it's been able to keep the corpses to itself  
I smell like an old disorder turned article of faith  
its huge flame honored with a Ph.D. in respect.

I smell like far from the sea I'm not defending myself  
I have to die of something on account of this bad smell  
I smell like a small wake as I was saying  
like the paleness of a shadow like a dead house.

I smell like sweating iron like dust set out  
to rinse in the moon's light  
like a bone left behind close to the labyrinth  
under the early morning smokes.

I smell like an animal only I know  
lying passed out on the velvet cloth  
I smell like the sketch of a dying child  
like an eternity no one would go looking for.

I smell like when it's too late for anything.

September 20

[HSM]

## BAD NEWS ON A SCRAP OF NEWSPAPER

Nowadays when my friends die  
only their names die.

How can I hope, down in this rotten hole,  
to take in more than the newsprint,  
the sheen of delicate black letters,  
arrows deep into personal memories?

Only those who live outside the prisons  
can honor the corpses, wash off  
the grief for their dead ones with embraces,  
scratch up the grave with fingernail and tears.

Not those of us in jail: we just whistle  
to let the sound play down the news.

[HSM]

## PERMISSION TO WASH UP

I never understood what a labyrinth was  
until, face to face with my own features,  
I searched the mirror  
I use to wash the dirt off and groom myself.

Because here we're more than what we were  
near the tip of the airborne and fine sun:  
dressed up in blood, prison bars and walls;  
the darling sons of mildew, bad smells and rats.  
[HSM]

## SOME LONGINGS

This proud suffering is a callused privilege,  
don't laugh.

I, who have loved till I was thirsty for water, dirty light;  
I, who have forgotten names but not the damp walls,  
would die fighting now for an angel's comforting word,  
for a catchy tune from a melancholy bat,  
for the magic bread thrown to me by a sorcerer  
passing off as a drunken inmate in the next cell...

October 14

[HSM]

The guards are divided into several groups. For instance, those who throw stones at rabbits as they scramble out of the garden with daisies in their mouths. Those who go hopping past my cell, shouting local words and looking at the rain's foam inside their watches. And those who piss while they wake me up, at the crack of dawn, with the light from their lanterns licking my face, and growl at me that it's even colder today. 357, who used to be shepherd and musician, doesn't belong to any of these groups and is now a cop only because of an act of revenge that's not clear at all; they'll discharge him (number 357, I mean) at the end of this month. Just because one night he sneaked off to go sleep with his wife till nine in the morning, something strictly against regulations. Several days ago 357 gave me a cigarette. Yesterday, watching me munch on an anise herb's leaf (I had managed to pull it over to the bars with a hooked stick I fixed), he asked me about Cuba. And today he suggested that maybe I could write a short poem about the Chimaltenango mountains for him to have as a keepsake after they kill me.

[HSM]

## ***SIX PROSE POEMS***



## THE MORNING I MET MY FATHER

*...that father  
I have nothing to say about, from  
whom I took little more than a  
way of tilting my head.*

*Aragon*

I guess I would be some three years old, maybe a little less. I'm sitting there on the cool tile floor in my pajamas because I'm a little sick to the stomach, playing with a woman's hairpin, killing ants and burying them beneath the little dirt I pulled out from the seams between the tiles. In back there's a patio with trees and flowering plants and the morning air is clean and bright, with an unforgettable fragrance that has come back to me several times in various parts of the world, with different emotions, depending on the mess I find myself in. I see Fidelia, La Pille, cleaning the pictures on the wall, with a dry rag; a reproduction of the Angelus, landscapes and still-lives printed on paper and bought at the Goldtree Liebes department store. La Pille was already old, with her head less gray than a few years later, but gray all the same, very gray, wearing her face of a man patiently, her face more masculine in the huge windows of her nose than anywhere else, except for the little peak her upper lip formed on its highest part. There's a knock at the door, and La Pille goes over to open it, leaving the duster on a small table, cleaning the dirt from her hands on her big dark apron. She opens the door to the next room that faces the street and I hear the strange voice of a man asking for my mother, and then La Pille laughs to herself and invokes the Blessed San Cayetano before answering that my mother is working with Doctor Cepeda Magaña on an emergency cerebral trepanation, but come in please would you like anything even a small cup of coffee please excuse the mess the house is in you can see the kid even if it's only for a short while and if he'd like her to she could even run in the car to look for María at the Polyclinic right now after all if the patient is going to die he'll die with or without the special nurse. At that very moment a damn ant bites me on the finger and I let out a roar like someone asking for attention without even shaking the bug off as I already obviously knew how to do (scraping the

bug with my nails and crushing it against my finger or on the floor). Someone picks me up by the arm and lifts me off the ground, looks me over, asking me what happened and I answer by showing my throbbing finger that the ant is still biting furiously, turning its little ass up toward the ceiling. Then I realize that it was La Pille who picked me up and after pulling the ant off, shows me—as they would a chicken that's on sale or a suckling pig—to the man she was speaking to and who has come in here so calm that I am immediately impressed. All I'm doing is keeping my eyes open, while Fidelia holds me out further, offering me up to be kissed. The man does just that, and scratches the side of my face with his blue cheek; I throw myself back looking for La Pille's neck, so I can hang on and hide my face. She says that the man is my father and I ought to kiss him, but instead I act dumb and decide to hang there like a silk worm frightened by its first look at the world. I feel a man slap my rear end gently, he runs a hand through my hair, the pretty blond hair I had at that age and that my mother hoped would distinguish me as a superior being in the midst of the great mass of Salvadorans with dark or kinky hair; and then he takes off my right sock, stripping my foot and holding it between his enormous strong hands, he squeezes it without hurting me, actually I feel warm tickles that tell me that this gentleman isn't as grouchy as all the other grown-ups who aren't my mama or La Pille. They start to talk about things I don't understand. The one who gets the most in is La Pille, oscillating between explosive happiness and tears of humiliation, the gentleman responding only with short words or grunts, and a little later says he has to go. La Pille puts me on the sofa and I sit there quietly with a long face. He smokes and thinks, spilling the ash from his cigarette onto the floor. He comes over to me again, stroking his fingers over my face before he heads back to the street behind Fidelia, who, after many my-God-bless-you's said fervently and the loud noise of the door shutting, comes back to me happier than ever, rattling things off like a machine gun and showing me a very white envelope from which she pulls out a big wad of bills she begins to count, wetting her fingers with spit, exactly as mama would say one never ought to do. In the street a car hurries away with a groan.

[JG]

# *HISTORY*

*Written in Prague*

## THE YOUNG PEOPLE

*"...alarming beings like new species that live  
in a space next to ours, spying on our autonomy  
and our superiority."*

We didn't hear much talk about the century  
yet the sun finds us standing in the middle of it.

We quickly forgot the stink of gunpowder  
in our childhood days,  
the dry tastes of hunger, the acres of cold, and so on.

History is right now:  
we're waiting for our girl  
beside the railing of Vaslavski Namiesti  
when experience is already in the University and the libraries  
and Prague's best chickens  
on the Palace Hotel's grill.

Someone brings up dialectics  
and all we hear is a loud argument in favor of labyrinths  
asking us to forget Ariadne and her savior threads.  
They hand us the future and we're fighting it off  
like a bat beating us in the face.

We don't want to be pathetic creatures  
but we feel old and sick each morning.  
Our poets are our teachers:  
"I am man, nothing will stop me  
if I break with the old life stuck in its pose."  
[DU]

## A NOT EXACTLY OPTIMISTIC TRAGEDY

Oranges from Cuba in Na Prikope! I don't know why they reminded me of the sweet face of our Rumanian comrade, hear me out, the face of our comrade-functionary-of-the-Rumanian-Communist-Party who attends classes at the Editorial Academy of the International Review (Problems in Peace and Socialism, if you prefer). In the gloomy corridors of the building on Thakurova (which in Czech means, "Rabindranath Tagore Street"), her face like a small Cuban orange, her eyes of a nice young girl and nose of a prince, have become the things I most wanted to see each day. We never exchanged a word (in spite of everything, even though she walked into my office one day to hand me a bulletin) and now all is lost because her advanced, although elegant and hard to detect, pregnancy makes it clear that she married some time ago. Yesterday I leaned out of the window to take a look at the cherry trees on the nearby hillside, and with the help of the sun and an especially high branch I saw that a wild mass of deer antlers had grown out of the head of my shadow. All this is very hard for a soldier of the Revolution.

[JG]

## SPRINGTIME IN JEVANI

Androgynous colors, a true Patagonia of colors that jump out at you, a haven from doubt, impervious to the greatest avariciousness, savage yet organized, to be gobbled down in the same way a Japanese neo-symphony is, listened to with your face towards the sun that has just awakened you after the very longest night of love.

The little songbirds aren't afraid of Oswaldo Barreto or me, possibly because they confused us with two workers from one of the sausage factories in Prague. In fact they whistle municipal band waltzes all around our heads, making us ashamed (a shameful shame) for the songs of the magpies and our greenjays, for the talkative uproar of our flocks of parakeets and the earsplitting cry of the hawk suffering through the cold season.

"Beer doesn't go down well at six in the morning," Ingra says to us after bringing us the steaming mugs. This place is, well, a dangerous spot. Enough to make one say at the hour of twilight (even if it's too early to think about it, taking every precaution into account): "Life has been, in general, beautiful." To be specific, it was yesterday, after talking about modern literature's excessively sexual content, that we visited a hog farm. Veterinarians in white aprons checked on the gigantic pink beasts with halfway decent stethoscopes—they were in fact moving—while demanding that we not speak in loud voices. Before entering we had covered our faces with gauze muzzles so that our own germs wouldn't be left behind in that spotless barn. We were told that the barn was even located a good distance from both the highway and the railroad tracks, since each unusual noise scared the pigs terribly, making them lose weight and even bringing on fatal heart attacks. I never saw pigs that looked more like sons of bitches than those.

They're living hams, with horrid little blue veins everywhere, insolent beasts who look exactly like Monseigneur Francisco Castro Ramírez, an exceptionally arrogant Bishop in my country's eastern province. Oswaldo Barreto—suddenly, without letting me in on it—let out the loudest howl that I can remember hearing in the last five years. Anarchy broke out—as an Honduran novelist would

say—above all because the pigs started to show symptoms of anxiety that quickly turned into a kind of collective asthma attack. The veterinarians were mortified, running all over the place, and our guide, shaking, absolutely furious, said to Oswaldo, “Silence is the rule around here.” “I shout all the time,” he answered, “I’m Venezuelan.” “In Rome do as the Romans do,” the guide recited the cliché in a friendly way but without relaxing. “When you folks come to Venezuela, we don’t force you to shout,” Barreto lectured him, completely unruffled, before I could hustle him out of the place. I almost threw up from laughing. Like that time I saw the store sign in Santiago, Chile, “Zorobabel Galeno, Tailor,” even though I can no longer remember nor understand what was funny about it. Nevertheless, Oswaldo paid for his crime; last night he dreamed he was back in the fourth year of secondary school taking a final in trigonometry without knowing how to pronounce the word hypotenuse. He later woke up in a cold sweat just before daylight and he got me up as well to go out for a short walk in search of a beer.

It was then that I decided to talk about springtime.

The time of the year when even soccer players break into flower, as everyone knows.

And the time of year when Czechoslovakia is transformed into an idyllic command to go swimming among trout or to go out looking for mushrooms or naked girls in the sun that the pine trees filter to the ground.

Tomorrow we’ll go back to Prague with our faces tanned by that sun.

Oswaldo Barreto and I have got to leave this part of the world as quickly as possible, lest we start having children with Zdenas and Janas and get fat from the size of the steaks and the extra cottony peaches and strawberries with cream, and forget that someone is dying badly in our ancestral home and has asked for us to come without delay.

But just the same, Long Live the Springtime!  
[JG]

## THE SOCIAL BEING DETERMINES SOCIAL CONSCIENCE

The bells of autumn make the first snow difficult.

As if the bell ringer were the devil  
old straw doll committed to the flames forever.

Sadness brings on a cough  
and if you don't watch out, darling, life  
will turn into a day in Little Orphan Annie's life  
a crying jag among a bunch of fat characters.

Anyhow, working in a socialist country  
and not earning enough to buy a pair of gloves or a scarf  
makes me love fundamental metaphysics  
wish for its lilac violin to take me back  
to the beach where you can have your fill  
of flowers through your belly button.

Ay it's just that I'm a hack  
in the smallest Communist Party in the world  
one that will try to carry out its revolution without thousands killed  
because the chances for the country's agriculture would be ruined  
by the graves.

To make things worse  
now you won't give me the little I still have coming  
you've every right to say "I don't want to, not yet"  
but I feel cold now  
and I notice the hole left by my country  
in my chest where it would caress me at one time.

I hate your sky-blue dress  
your undies so full of tricky strings  
everything that hides your sweet little blushing butt



the white stone of your breasts  
shaped for the mouth of big little boys  
your belly that's the patio where I play with lead soldiers  
in the eyes of a perfectly invented sun.

Going out at this hour  
washes away all the sins of the world  
besides away from your eyes for me there's no cure  
for the sight of so many dead birds  
—that's something they never say when winter starts—:  
I'm as much a near-fascist as Kafka.

Tomorrow the march toward Communism will be one day  
shorter cheer up  
winter will pull down one more day  
in the middle of a very healthy fog  
more than one son of a bitch  
will go on laughing at the things they say about Che Guevara  
and in supermarkets  
fat old women will fall into quiet line  
to buy yogurt and lots of preserves.

Latin America is a gorgeous anaconda  
thrashing its teeth with its tail  
and you don't know the first thing about politics  
but the story's going around that it has a heart  
the problem's how to show tenderness to the waterfalls  
or let serenity walk naked  
over a carpet of giant parasites  
to drive the concept of green from glasses with creme de menthe  
and assign it to the major part of the rainbow  
made up of wild parrots.

On a day not like this one  
thirty years ago  
I made my mother a mother  
on a day like this thirty years ago

the speakers at the Seventh Congress  
of the International were making their speeches:  
I'll soon need glasses  
and rub-downs to work off this pot  
because at this point my figure doesn't command respect  
it doesn't go with the story of my famous break out of jail.

Oh golden vision whose name  
I can't write down here  
the cold has borne fruit in my life:  
above all it's given me this longing for you that's political cowardice  
and important neglect  
of the scowl I've received instructions  
to always keep up.

Let me snuggle up in the divine oven  
only witches are out there spurring their brooms over the rooftops  
all covered with soot and so indifferent  
to my culture of humus and slimy crags  
(I'm not trying to give you another lecture on nature in the tropics  
I want to stay here and sleep with you  
make love seven or eight times  
till you can't lift your limp arm off the floor  
and in bed a world of zinc damaged by acid  
is the climate handed down by happy guilt).

Then I'd sing you a Mexican song  
changing the lyrics to cheer you up  
I'd accept you without the usual jokes  
that Sholoyov deserved the Nobel Prize  
and that there are crucial differences between Soviet poetry  
and chewing gum.

(Critical identification with the real world  
must go a step further than just scratching your head  
and saying the right word for "cunt" in any language  
—you can't hear this

because it's just supposed to be what I'm thinking  
a convention much in demand nowadays in poetry  
as well as in the psychological novel—. But let's go on.)

I don't think I should hand you all this goo about childhood  
the wild egg at the end of the corridor in my life  
instead I should go through the motions of taking leave  
search around for my raincoat  
crush the last pack of cigarettes  
and look as wretched as can be.

The sea's arm is more powerful than the wing of a dove  
we're scared stiff swimming in it  
but it doesn't help us to fly:  
the most down-and-out majesties tremble  
when poets fall out of windows, like Caupolicán.  
(These are what they call a superfluous sayings.)

I recall now that the bells served to open this chat  
but they're useless against your silence and contempt  
the bellringer ain't the devil  
he's an ass who smells like a sweaty old geezer  
and has to go around like me with his salary long overdue  
(tomorrow we have another day of Conference  
and there's still a good hour's streetcar ride to my room).

Tonight we had no cognac just grapes that were too sweet  
(the social being plays ping-pong with one's conscience  
especially in winter).

[HSM]

## IN CASE OF DOUBT

Karl Marx  
awe-struck before a butterfly.

Is that  
some kind of confession?

The Secretary General of the Central Committee  
sticks his thumb up his nose.

Is this,  
on the other hand,  
chock-full of human beauty?

This nice-looking kid  
(recently kicked out of our ranks, but  
still nice-looking)  
gets a bullet in the eye  
and vultures the world over  
ask permission to enter the city.

Oh butterflies to strike one dumb!  
Ah the offices of the Revolution!

As for me I'll get me a gun.  
[RN]

## I

## The Beginning

We met in St. Jacob's, one afternoon in October. An English organist, Simon Preston, to be exact, had just finished playing Bach's Overture for the Chorale "Kommheiliger Geist". The girl, a tall firmly built blonde, was right in front of me. As climax to one of the many silent waves produced by the crush of people, my lips collided roughly with her bare neck (that day she was wearing her hair up in a way that doesn't do much for her). She spun around to show me all the fury per square millimeter anyone can possibly see in two turquoise-blue eyes. My terror must have been so obvious and of such Eisensteinian quality that it drew a little bit of milk and honey (metaphysical sweets, in other words) from that small mouth suddenly full of indignation; but the girl's face quickly changed and melted into the most inviting expression full of pity and sympathy I had ever seen. And then, trembling a little (in a way I'm taking the liberty of recommending to all who in the future happen to be in a similar trance), I kissed her on the cheek respectfully and then, with a sense of triumph, on the lips. By then the organist was putting to flight—in a very glorious disarray for such a famous choir of angels—the subordinate orders of the heavenly Kingdom: he was throwing us, from on high, Liszt's Fantasy and Fugue on the theme "Ad nos, ad salutarem undam" like a lifeline into the pit of those condemned to death. What's more, a blind man who was near felt around for our bodies and, in dignified and gentle approval, patted us lightly on the shoulder: he had heard the tiny sound of our lips as they separated. A fat old woman, on the other hand, made the most of my absorption to sink her elbow dangerously close to my liver. Someone near us gave off a strong smell of rancid garlic. María (I didn't know then that it was her name) pressed herself against me, rested her face on my

chest and closed her eyes. That's how we listened to Bossi's Symphonic Study. We were married that same night after I'd used all my pull in the Party's ranks to obtain a waiver from all the usual delays and requirements. But that night she still slept at the home of her parents, who found the news hard to believe. I wrote a poem filled with hallelujahs, hosannas, and so on.

## II

### WRITTEN ON A NAPKIN

I raise my glass, comrades,  
and first off I'd like you to forgive me  
for crossing the doors of emotion  
without permission or good manners:  
our brother from a far-off country,  
the daughter so close to our heart, the apple of our eye,  
are founding a noble house on a firm rock.  
Comrades, communists both,  
they've heeded the sudden call of the heart.  
Like work and peace, comrades,  
joy is also revolutionary.  
A wedding of red flowers,  
three cheers for them!  
Lots of love for each other!  
Forever loyal and mutually supportive,  
they'll give us lovely children  
(I say this with apologies)  
who will stand out on every May 1.  
Because from now on  
they're each one comrade  
multiplied by two.  
This, we might say,  
is the practical side of romance.  
Let us eat and drink, comrades.

### III

#### REFLECTION IN FRONT OF THE MIRROR

Foreigner:

You've made your heart run too fast  
without relieving it of the burden of your habits.

She wasn't exactly a virgin  
but you can swear that she hasn't played the field too much:  
nevertheless,  
make a careful note of this sentence  
before your eyes:  
the next time you get drunk  
don't shout at her  
that your suspicions crown her  
queen of whores.

Remember this well:  
you love her very much.

### IV

#### THE PASSING YEARS

SHE (on a Tuesday):

Sadness doesn't meet your needs anymore:  
except to make you spit into the waste basket,  
cry over the last drop of your precious bottle of gin  
and remind yourself not to go to that crummy movie house in  
Holesovice again  
where Zdena waits for you with her nose as cold as a dog's.  
Nowadays you get up very late,  
in the mirror your tongue looks white and bitter,  
and those famous Hitlerian goose-steps  
don't help your heart beat faster in the morning.

It's typical of youth like yours,  
much too long, I'd say.  
And forgetting is not the torture you imagined:  
it's just a flimsy yellow veil  
falling, of its own weight, on the aquarium with the orchids.  
You'll grow old in the ordinary way,  
you'll fight with your children over the thickest piece of the family  
steak  
and to add excitement to your life  
you'll need some Saturdays with Beethoven and Bach.  
That's the glory promised in the Bible.

Every 500 years a man is born who's an exception to the rule.  
The rest is a question of your pride, wishful thinking.

I:

A pretty good attempt to accuse me  
of seeing Zdena.  
Stupidity and lack of sleep  
are the only things that bring on old age.  
Okay. With my irritating brilliance  
and my jumping out of bed at noon  
I plan to keep young for another thirty years.  
Then I'll fall apart (out of respect for my kids)  
and my epitaph will be phony but kind:  
"Between the ages of 26 and 27,  
a stage that lasted most of his life,  
he was the most intelligent man in the world.  
Then he got married."

SHE (on Thursday):

Socialism? It's not bad at all:  
even the poorest among us  
have toasters,  
television, French stockings,  
good shoes, quality saucepans,  
clothes not so long ago the rage in Paris,



paid vacations, refrigerator,  
very serious dreams about a small car  
for this coming spring,  
trips to the office of Foreign Tourism  
that are nothing to laugh at.  
The only bad thing is that it's all better  
in West Germany.  
Haven't you heard about mix masters,  
LSD chiclets,  
powdered wine,  
condoms in OP-art designs?  
Like every proletarian poet  
you have the right to make a fool of yourself  
but don't ask  
someone who takes off her clothes for you with so much love  
to live on large doses of morality  
served in glasses of Political Economy...

I:

Do you know I could ask for a divorce  
—brilliant idea—  
on the grounds of ideological incompatibility?

SHE:

Don't be scared of words.  
Come right out with it: for mental cruelty.  
I realize that bringing up those things  
I take advantage of a mentality like yours  
that believes only in passion.

I:

Some day I'll drag you off to my country,  
the comic cosmos,  
the anachronistic microcosm,  
where Cain and Abel  
still kick each other under the table.  
That will be my endless revenge,

the final chapter of this war of love:  
your proud Czech tits  
drying up among the unappeasable volcanoes.

Of course  
to do this we'd have to make a revolution first,  
and I, well,  
what I mean is,  
my doctor...

## V

### LETTER

Hybernia Hotel, Prague

The wounds you cause are in good health. In other words, their mortal quality remains fresh. On their own, with no need for gangrene or its aftereffects to set in. Do you deserve special credit for this? No more than does the work-shy field hand casting the seed in someone else's land, that's been fertilized for years: he'll never appreciate the fact that, to be born, the powerful tree banked only on a throw of his. Of course, you know I love you. This knowledge is your best weapon and, no doubt about it, you're a brilliant fencer. A sharp aggressiveness, the criminal thrust all the way in, that must first of all stick to the purity of line. But that's not all. If it were, this type of grievance (lamentation, if you want to call it that) would show me up as bitterly hypersensitive, a refined scientific master of the mechanisms of frustration or an idle fool. The worst part is what's behind this: the national arrogance issuing from your pores to dictate each word said, perhaps innocently, by your lips. What a shitty world then, dammit, the one seen from your angle! Naturally, you people are the sole owners of superior qualities and are dramatic, tormented and diabolic. At best, we can try to be funny and pleasing. You and your friends are straight out of Kafka, I and my shadows live in the world of comic books. We aren't capable of certain kinds of climax, not even of a climax of depression. On the other hand, you classify, measure,

weigh and study us. In fact, we don't understand you (you say this in a tone of voice in which I for the first time catch certain shades of meaning I considered at odds with each other: a naive dread of possibly offending, a smug contempt, simple ignorance, etc..., a generous etcetera). The smile with which you never stop repeating "d'you know what I mean?" is always about to "turn into dust and shit". What has become of life, the life in the middle of which we met one October afternoon in St. Jacob's? I can no longer answer you with dignity. And this letter is the beginning of my goodbye, a goodbye that wants more than anything in the world to be civilized and friendly.

[HSM]

## 50TH ANNIVERSARY

A man steps out into his backyard patio  
(where the harsh autumn wind never blows)

in one hand he holds a shot of aguardiente  
with the other he gently smooths his hair

here he turned gray from hunger  
and grayer on that day as a hero  
among thousands of heroes

here a faint nausea

the prints of one whose young fingers touched greatness  
fear

immense joy

all-powerful wisdom

In the depths of the sky shines a star  
called hope

he raises his glass  
and drinks

[PP]

## TAVERN

(Conversatorio)<sup>6</sup>

*Written, like the rest of this section, in Prague between 1966 and 1967, "Tavern" is the record of conversations heard by chance between young Czechoslovakians, Western Europeans and a smaller number of Latin Americans, while drinking beer in U Fleku, the well-known tavern in Prague. All the author did was put the material together and give it a little formal structure to make it into a kind of poem-object based, in turn, on a kind of undercover sociological study. None of the opinions found in the poem can be attributed to the author alone and that's the reason they are arranged here without any particular order as regards their truthfulness or their moral or political worth. The author does not attempt to offer solutions to the problems that issue from the very nature of such forms of thought in a socialist society. This attempt may possibly be found in the series of political events that took place in the socialist countries of Central Europe in recent months.*

*This poem is dedicated to those who saw it develop and grow: Régis Debray, Elizabeth Burgos, Saverio Tutino, Alicia Eguren, Aurelio Alonso, José Manuel Fortuny and Hugo Azcuy.*

*The old poets and the new poets too  
have aged an awful lot in the past year:  
after all, sunsets are so terribly boring now  
and disasters, a horse of another color.*

*In streets I'm getting to know by heart  
countless bodies are making the eternal music of footsteps  
—a sound, let's face it, poetry can never recreate.  
So why all the fuss?  
So that its dusty echo can pile up  
in this, once the courtyard of kings!*

*Don't talk to me about mystery, night owls,  
you lovers of golden olden days  
for whom the world, it seems, has got to stop now and then:  
Has anybody solved the one about the navel?*

He's not saying that to be gross,  
and I'm not trying to call attention to his dubious taste,  
but did anybody ever really solve the mystery  
of that charming little hole?  
The way out, much more important  
than playing two-sided politics to survive,  
load of so much energy stored  
in its knot turned inside out?

A DONKEY'S DROOLY DITHYRAMB, HALF-ASSED  
GEOMETRY: OBLIVION IS PRACTICALLY THE ONLY SOURCE OF PERFECTION.  
AND REPOSE, THE WORST KIND OF ELEGY.

*We'd be better off with a round of beer,  
a voice loud with nostalgia  
calling out for the sea breeze,  
a cautious reference to Lucy's tits,  
a savage gesture to wipe out any wrong show of respect  
around us.*

HURRAH! WE CLAMOR FOR A HOMELAND OF SALUTING INFANTRY,  
A COUNTRY SUMPTUOUS AND PURE AS THE GLASS OF MILK  
A SCHOOLGIRL JUDGES HER AWFUL COMPLEXION BY:  
NO COMPLICATIONS, A CLEAN CONSCIENCE, DUTY  
TO OUR INNOCENT RACE ALONE.

I TELL YOU HE'S CRAZY: YOU CAN TRUST HIM.

*Astrologers are fakes.  
Excuse me: I meant astronomers.*

YOU ARE EXCUSED FOR NOW, HOLY DUMB OX, CALM DOWN.

*Anyway, the times are a-changin',  
that's a solid fact, like birdseed:  
when I was a Catholic (before 1959) sex was a joke  
and hang-ups about the scientific spirit  
spoiled everything for me.*

*Not all its failures were delightful accidents  
in the good old chemistry lab,  
defeats of my talent in favor of the solenoid,  
mix-ups over the function of Santorini's risorius muscle.*

**INDEED, I PREDICT SERIOUS UPROARS OVER AESTHETICS:  
BEFORE THE BEGGED-FOR GOULASH  
THERE SHALL BE MANY RESOUNDING WORDS:  
BUTTERFISH, THE GOLDEN ORIOLE'S BRILLIANCE,  
ETCETERA.**

*I insist: I don't recall a better round  
than right after the Spiritual Exercises  
or better chicks than those we made after 11 o'clock Mass.*

**I WAS BORN A SOCIALIST:  
IF WE ADD TO THIS THE TIMES I READ JOYCE ON THE SLY,  
MY RIGHT TO TELL YOU THE FOLLOWING REMARK IS CLEAR AS DAY:  
YOU REPEAT  
IDEAS THAT ARE MUCH TOO STALE.  
THE SALVATION OF SOULS, HERALDRY:  
YAWNING IS SOMETHING VERY ELEGANT.**

*Well: that's something else: the taxicab is a great institution,  
the only difference between it and summer is the sun and other herbs;  
personally, I have great respect for it, in spite of  
slight differences.*

**GOOD FAMILY MEN OF THE WORLD, UNITE!  
YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR NOT  
WANTING TO!**

*Temperament is another crucial invention:  
I like it better than calling cards  
because it's noble like ice-cubes in an English club,  
so much more pleasant when there's a storm brewing in the street.*

Oh Lucy, why don't you list me  
among the insects you love?  
All you have to do is drive a pin  
big enough for me through my neck  
and mount me among your chrysalises  
with a cute little white label: Saturday.  
The warm air between your clothes and your tender years  
is the ointment I've picked, O mistaken pain,  
because rings of invisible smoke appear in your eyes  
as if you'd suddenly confessed to being the daughter  
of some forbidden cult.  
Eternal pilgrim that wisdom has wistfully abandoned  
I pursue your truth, beautiful and false.

POETS EAT TOO MUCH ROTTING ANGEL MEAT  
AND IF I STAY AWAY FROM THEM, ONE DAY SOMEONE WILL  
SAY I WAS RIGHT:  
FOR ME CHURCHILL, THE GREAT SMOKE-SUCKER OF THE CENTURY,  
A SOCCER STAR LIKE PELÉ  
A SHEPHERD OF SOULS,  
A LADY JUDGE,  
SOMEONE WHOSE AXIS DOESN'T HAVE A SMILE LIKE A CORKSCREW.

In dreams I grow tall in your soul, my love,  
and spring does not depend on winter's running away:  
my cowardly nature is always chasing after some solution  
and on the date set for your bloodletting  
it will make sure the night falls in clouds  
and all knives have sunk to the bottom of the sea.

HAVING AN AXIS IN LIFE IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING IN THE  
WORLD,  
THE WORLD HAS ITS OWN AND THAT PROVES IT:  
AH, POOR ROLY-POLY, WHERE WOULD IT BE WITHOUT ONE!

I THOUGHT MY HEART HAD JUST STOPPED!



LETTERS THAT HAVE BEEN READ,  
JEWELS THAT DAMAGE YOUR POCKETS,  
THE DOCTORAL OWL'S PISSINGS ON THE TOADSTOOLS OF  
DRUNKENNESS,  
GET OUT OF HERE!

*On the walls, frescoes with forgotten dates  
are brilliant self-advertisements in praise of beer,  
unbreakable morale observing us from underneath the dust (I repeat)  
like men's money in a snail's house!*

I pick lice from your soul, darling, and from my daydreams  
the fickle eggs of lice surface  
like the most abject soap bubbles made with a hypodermic needle.  
Wonderful: I think  
I've lost track of things:  
all doors collapse  
and the noble vision of your bed grows brighter all the time.

LIFE NOWADAYS LEAVES A WAY OUT FOR SAINTS ONLY  
ESPECIALLY FOR SAINTS TURNED GIGOLOS  
WHO ANNOUNCE THEMSELVES WITH VILE TRUMPETS  
WHILE THEY STRING TOGETHER FORTY-SEVEN WILD PARTIES.  
(THAT'S HOW THE BIGGEST MUSICAL GROUPS ARE PUT TOGETHER:  
A MATTER OF UBIQUITY, ELEMENTARY.)

*Do your duty to your conscience now  
(same as saying: "your obsessions")  
say that thinking in the shower about Communism is healthy  
—and refreshing, at least in the tropics—.*  
*Or pass sentence with all the gall of your young years:  
if the Party had a sense of humor  
I swear that starting tomorrow  
I would spend my time kissing every coffin I could  
and giving the crowns of thorns the final touch.*

WHY YOU'RE GETTING THE PARTY MIXED UP  
WITH ANDRE BRETON!

*But where's your tender spot?*

## NOW YOU'RE GETTING THE PARTY MIXED UP WITH MY GRANDMA EULALIA!

THE THING IS, WE SHOULD REALLY TAKE  
THESE COMFORTING TRIPS INTO OURSELVES MORE OFTEN,  
TO GROW BALSAM FORESTS STRONG ENOUGH  
TO DILUTE OUR FUNERAL BREATH WITHOUT HARM,  
GIVING THE OLD BONE A CHANCE TO BLOSSOM.

*Don't look for another road, you nut,  
when heroic times are over in a country that has made its revolution,  
revolutionary conduct  
is very close to this beautiful cynicism  
with such exquisite foundations:  
words, words, words.  
Without a chance to end up with callused hands,  
of course,  
or a callused heart, or brain.*

I'M ORPHEUS. AND ACCORDING TO THE RULES OF THE GAME  
THERE'S NO OTHER WAY FOR ME BUT DOWN;  
THE FUTURE WE ARE SWEATING OUT IS NOT OURS,  
IT'S LIKE THE CHARMER'S SNAKE  
WHEN SOMEONE TALKS OF PEACE MAKING MUCH BETTER USE OF  
THE SUN  
THAN THE REST OF THE WORLD,  
AMONG THE HOLY MYTHS OF PENTHOUSE MAGAZINE.

SMOKING CLAW, BARBED  
TONGUE,  
EYE LIKE A TRAP,  
DEVOURING AIRS,  
TRIUMPHANT SOUNDS:  
WHAT COLOR IS THERE LEFT?  
WHAT COLOR IS NEEDED TO END  
MONOTONY'S VERTIGO?

*We'd better have another round of beer,  
a calm homesick voice  
urging speed and at the same time  
pointing out Lucy doing a slow dance.*

*Hey: why don't you really drop dead?  
Hey: why don't we make a blood pact,  
a real one, really?*

OUR UNFRIENDLY SCOWL IS OUR UNIFORM,  
TOUGH LITTLE RICH KIDS WITH SPECIAL DICTION!

IN CUBA IT WON'T BE LIKE THAT!  
IN LATIN AMERICA IT CAN'T BE LIKE THAT!  
NOWHERE ELSE IN THE WORLD ARE THERE  
ANY PUMAS  
NOR DOES THE SUN GIVE OFF A ROSY SHADE  
OR ANGER FLUTTER LIKE A GREEN FLAG,  
THAT'S WHY.

Everything would be so simple  
if a man did not insist  
on discussing his battle with good and evil:  
potassium chlorate, sulfuric acid and gasoline:  
thou art full of grace in thy fragile bottle,  
the lords fall with thee  
(be it not said with bazookas in the hour  
of bazookas),  
blessed art thou,  
blessed is the fruit of thy flame:  
for the problem is not to set the sea on fire.

*Okay, but John XXIV's way is still open. (Don't exaggerate.)  
I'm not exaggerating: courage is only half of life,  
the other half is tactics.*

NOW, KEEP THIS TO YOURSELF: REMEMBER:  
WHEN YOU HEARD ABOUT THE ORIENTAL SECT  
WHOSE MEMBERS CUT OFF THEIR OWN  
LITTLE FINGER  
YOU DIDN'T UNDERSTAND THAT, LIKE ALL THE OTHERS,  
THIS CHALLENGE WAS AIMED AT US:  
IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO SAY THEY'RE IMBECILES  
I SWEAR THAT IF YOU SHOULD CUT OFF YOUR FINGER  
BETTER THAN ME  
I'D BE YOUR SERVANT FOR FOURTEEN YEARS  
AND YOU COULD TAKE OVER  
MY BEST PROVERBS.

SENECA, THAT SPANISH MASOCHIST.

POETS ARE COWARDS WHEN THEY'RE NOT IDIOTS,  
THAT'S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH ME.  
THEY'RE ALL WRITING NOVELS NOW  
BECAUSE NOBODY CAN STAND SONNETS,  
THEY WRITE ABOUT MARIHUANA  
AND OTHER LESS FUZZY DOUBTFUL TOPICS  
BECAUSE NOBODY WANTS TO KNOW ABOUT THE FUTURE ANYMORE.  
AND THEY'RE IMPRESSIONABLE:  
IF WE START CHOPPING OFF FINGERS  
THOUSANDS OF POETIC NOSES  
WOULD BE LEFT WITHOUT THEIR OLD PRIVATE DIDDLER.

LET'S NOT TALK ABOUT POLITICS ANYMORE.

*Okay: beets rot in the fields for lack of farm hands.*

*Okay: let's think of suicide with the brains of sexual organs*

*Okay: spring watches us from the tip of the best tulip.*

*Okay: your ideal country would be a forest of yellow marble*

*monuments.*

Politics are taken up at the risk of life  
or else you don't talk about it. Of course  
you can take them up without risking

your life  
but we figured that this was only in the enemy camp.  
Or so it should be:  
if I didn't louse up when I bought the calendar  
we're now in 1966.

ATTENTION, EMPTY-HEADED CHORUS, LET MY LITTLE FINGER BE  
YOUR STAR OF BETHLEHEM:

"CATALINA GAVE HER HEART TO A SOLDIER  
WHO'S NOW FIGHTING ON THE BORDER...."

*Irony about socialism seems to be  
good for the digestion here,  
but I swear that in my country  
you have to get your supper first.*

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT: HE'S A COWARD:  
ONLY CYNICISM WILL MAKE US FREE, I REPEAT,  
QUOTING IDEAS OF YOURS.

*This conversation could fit into a poem.*

WHAT FOR? DO YOU THINK YOU'D SCARE ANYBODY?

*No. The only people who still get scared  
are the Boy Scout masters.  
and only when it comes to some Central American snakes  
called tepalcúas.*

*I said this because  
any blasphemy  
reveals its high moral sense  
if they back it up with an aesthetic.*

NOT ONLY THAT, THERE'S THE PROBLEM OF SYNTAX,  
YOU HAVE TO TAKE A STAND.

*Here's Sartre dragged along by his hair like a sedative:  
"To name things is to denounce them."*

THE PROBLEM IS WHAT TO BE:  
THE CANCER OR THE CANCER VICTIM.

Lucy and the two of us in a trunk  
still savagely butchered  
(right, it's better that way, I think).  
Lucy deserves everything  
and without your friendship I couldn't get through to her.

*You see now how war is not the biggest waste:  
when the fourth part of a grenade  
splits open your belly  
must you love the rest of it  
that killed the nearest enemy?  
I mean, I wanted to ask something better: I believe  
I'm already stoned.*

AH, CENTAUR:  
WHAT ADVANTAGES ARE YOURS  
WHEN YOU MEET THE LONE HUNTER FACE TO FACE:  
HE LEFT HIS HUNTING LICENSE AT HOME  
AND YOU ARE BUT A LEGEND  
TO MAKE CHILDREN SHIVER WITH DELIGHT IN THE  
MOONLIGHT

POTATOES ARE GOING UP TWELVE PERCENT,  
CLOTHES ARE GOING UP EIGHT PERCENT,  
STREETCAR FARES TWENTY,  
NERUDA IS GOING UP EIGHTEEN PERCENT.

WHISPERS IN DARK CORNERS,  
REPROACHES FROM THE GOYAESQUE LIGHT.

SOLITUDE IS INSTINCT'S MOST REFINED  
TECHNIQUE.

*Hell no, solitude's when  
the sherry keg is empty.*

Solitude is when you live in Tegucigalpa.

*Solitude's when you hear the whole gang do a sing-along.*

LOOK, SOLITUDE IS A VERY USEFUL LIE. I HAVE SPOKEN.

*BLOODSTAINS ON THE FLAG,  
FLAGSTAINS ON THE SKY,  
SKYSTAINS ON THE EYE LATER ON  
YOU'LL HAVE TO DREDGE WITH THE CORNER OF YOUR  
HANDKERCHIEF.*

Lucy: you smell like some of my country's hot dishes,  
I really mean it,

without any coarse insinuations in mind:

there comes a moment when food calls

and if you haven't had just enough wine

it tastes more bitter the better it is, you have to admit.

Lucy: is it possible that you didn't read my letter?

Listen: it can't be, but it is:

*O Honey Baby Feelin' Mighty Low.*

I bet you won't dance to that, Lucy,

tempting spellbound onlookers to smack

that sweet ass of yours with the flat of their hands.

*DROOL OF GOD,*

*WATER BUFFALO,*

*STORM BUFFALO:*

*THE HEART ALSO HAS ITS LITTLE TRICKS:*

*THE BEST OF THESE IS NOT TO BRING UP CHILDHOOD*

*OR SIGH FOR THE CROW*

*AS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL AND FREEST ANIMAL IN*

*CREATION.*

*Eat, gobble down your potato  
and say that's only eighty percent:  
it's raining in Viet Nam  
and nobody brings up the subject of hygrometry.*

*Watch out for snakes in caves, little cowboy,  
or for poison thorns:  
not for your uncle's cancer or your grandfather's rheumatism  
or the chronic headache of the one who brought you into the world.  
Small pale demons are brothers of the poet  
who will make up felicitous odes to your miserable death.*

Shouldn't we have another round of beer?

CHILDREN'S BOOKS ARE THE LAST CENTURY'S BEST LITERATURE:  
DOSTOYEVSKY IS A KIND OF WALT DISNEY  
WHO RELIED ONLY ON A MIRROR.  
HE DIDN'T SET IT UP ON A ROAD  
BUT IN FRONT OF THE GAPING MOUTH  
OF THOSE WHO'D JUST VOMITED THEIR SOUL.  
NOWADAYS HE'D COLLECT STAMPS AND CATS  
AND IT WOULD KEEP RAINING IN VIET NAM,  
ON THE HUGE NAPALM PYRES.

*Does that mean: "insofar as we make  
adult literature  
it will stop raining on the immense napalm pyres,"  
or have you stumbled onto the rugged terrain of the terrible  
Chinese line?*

Laugh, winter's going to be colder.  
Fry, hell's going to be hotter.

I SOLVED THE PROBLEM OF ETERNITY ONCE AND FOR ALL.  
THEOLOGIANs ARE AN AWFUL BUNCH OF FREAKS:  
THE ANSWER TO THE PROBLEM OF ETERNITY  
IS A MATTER OF ASKING OVER AND OVER: AND THEN WHAT?



EACH WORD IS ITS MORTAL OPPOSITE  
LIKE MANDRAKE THE MAGICIAN IN A WORLD  
OF MIRRORS.

Lucy, cover up those knees.

NO: I'M NOT IN LOVE WITH THE CHINESE.

INTRODUCING THE PRUNING KNIFE INTO THE GARDEN OF OPEN FLOWERS  
IS NOT MY STYLE.

NOR THE THING ABOUT THE ERECTION

BEING PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

AND THAT PEACE IS ONLY WONDERFUL IN BED.

THEY'RE SUCH FOOLS: PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE

IS NOT REVISIONISM OR MR. JOHNSON,

THE KU KLUX KLAN, THE ARMS RACE

OR THE TORTURE METHODS OF LATIN AMERICAN GOVERNMENTS:

PUBLIC ENEMY NUMBER ONE IS THE SMOG.

Shepherdess of panthers:

your name will be written in lights.

GET YOUR HAND OFF ME!

ACE OF GOLD: YOU CAN BURN ALL THE OTHER CARDS.

*Are you trying to make me say that literature is no good?*

IDIOT: DO YOU THINK WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT BIBLES WITH STEEL COVERS  
STOPPING .45-CALIBER BULLETS IS JUST A COCK-AND-BULL STORY?

*What time is it? The night has a discouraging color today:*

*Deep down we're all very conservative:*

*we talk about revolutions and are proud right away  
to think that we'll surely die.*

*Prudence won't make you immortal, comrade,  
and everyone knows that suicide cures the suicide....*

*My God, oh, my God:*

*why don't You take over the World Revolution?*

*Except for the Polish bishops, everyone  
would be all for it.*

**I AM GOING TO DO SOMETHING NOBODY CAN  
DO FOR ME: TAKE A PISS.**

ANYBODY CAN MAKE A FLUFFY EGGPLANT PUREE  
WITH THE BOOKS OF THE YOUNG MARX,  
WHAT'S HARD IS TO PRESERVE THEM AS THEY ARE,  
I MEAN,  
LIKE ALARMING ANTHILLS.

**SLEEP  
OUGHT NOT TO MAKE ME FORGET MY DREAMS:  
WALKING CHEERFULLY ON THE EQUATOR'S TIGHTROPE,  
GOING BACK HOME DISGUISED AS A GREEK MERCHANT.**

OF COURSE, TOBACCO IS ALSO A BIG ENEMY  
LIKE THOSE PILLS THAT MAKE PREGNANT WOMEN HAPPY:  
AND THE CUBAN EDITION OF PROUST, THAT FADED LITTLE VIOLET,  
CONTRIBUTES NOTHING TO THE QUESTION OF LUNG CANCER  
BUT NEITHER HAVE CONDOMS BEEN GOOD FOR ANYTHING  
BETTER THAN POP-ART COLLAGES.

*You shouldn't be such a fathead:  
any straightforward question can topple you:  
give me the names of all the countries in Africa, that black market.*

AS BROTHERS IN THE SAVAGE ANALYSIS,  
WE'RE OH SO INDESTRUCTIBLE:  
IF ONLY EVERY TOM, DICK AND HARRY DIDN'T INSIST ON  
MAKING THINGS CLEAR!

**WHY DON'T WE TALK ABOUT COSMIC WORLD POETS,  
ABOUT THE EQUATION MARCO POLO STANDS FOR,  
ABOUT THE ORDER OF THE ALPHABET IN SHANGHAI?**

*The one sure thing I can tell you  
is that the guerrilla  
is becoming the only pure organization  
in the world of men.*

*All the others show signs of going bad.*

*The Catholic Church started to give off a stink  
when the catacombs were opened to the tourist trade  
and to the shabbiest two-bit whores  
over ten centuries ago:*

*if Christ went into the Vatican today  
a gas mask is the first thing he'd ask for.*

*The French Revolution was a Roquefort cheese from the start.*

*The international Communist movement has been weighing the value of  
Stalin's big shit.*

WHAT ARE YOU LOOKING FOR? A PUNCH IN THE NOSE?

*I'm not trying to say that we the young  
are angels of decorum:*

*we've learned fast*

*and we're also good sons of bitches,*

*the difference is that we enjoy these idle moments.*

YOU HAVE TO HAVE A BIT OF MORALE,

DON'T ANYONE HAVE ANY DOUBTS ABOUT IT.

MORALE IS SOMETHING TREMENDOUS

WHEN YOU DON'T FEEL LIKE DOING ANYTHING.

Bring out your bugle, baby doll,

let the world hear your purest intentions

and among other things they'll ruin the night of my dreams.

*No, I said that what just crossed my mind  
would take me at least an hour to tell.*

*Art is something that makes us happy:*

*when Othello strangles Desdemona*

*he makes us, himself and Desdemona happy.*

*What's more, the actors earn a whopping salary  
and everybody knows Shakespeare didn't suffer while he was  
writing the scene.*

No, no: art is a language  
(socialist realism tried to be Esperanto:  
that was Madame Trepat, Bertha Trepat's thing).  
The classic is a stupid dictatorship:  
all those centuries to end up at Ingres' violin  
(the technique that adorable atom bomb has given us  
didn't stop at Ambrosio's shotgun,  
let that be a lesson to art).  
Lucy: your indifference is bomb-proof.

*We communists ought to know finances:  
making converts among millionaires  
would at least let each neighborhood cell  
have a piano, Dresden lithographs, and a vacuum cleaner.*

LOBSTERS ARE IN FROM HAVANA, A WHOLE  
SHIPLOAD.

*And since we're talking about it, let me ask:  
the days  
that all add up to now: the centuries  
of sweet overindulgence,  
the millennia of forced joyfulness:  
aren't they a kind of obscene promise  
made by someone who knows our weak spot?*

HAVING FAITH IS THE BEST KIND OF DARING  
AND DARING IS SOMETHING VERY BEAUTIFUL.

BUT HUMANITY IS A CONCEPT FOR ONANISTS.  
THERE CAN BE NO HEROES  
WHEN THE STORM BURSTS  
IN A DARK SEA OF SHIT.

IMMORTALITY COULD BE VERY SMALL  
TINY, IN FACT.

*BLIND APES WITH MOUTHS HANKERING FOR  
LIFE'S WASTED BREAST IS WHAT WE ARE.  
WE ASK FOR THE MILK OF CONSCIENCE  
AND THEY ONLY POINT OUT ITS STEEP PRICE,  
AS UNATTAINABLE AS ILL-FATED LOVE  
BETWEEN BROTHER AND SISTER.*

DON'T EXAGGERATE.

I'M NOT EXAGGERATING. I COULD ALWAYS HAVE SAID:  
THIS IS MARVELOUS, TOPS, TERRIFIC,  
BUT I DON'T LIKE IT  
(WHICH IS MARVELOUS, TOPS, TERRIFIC).

*THAT'S LOOKING AT THINGS IN TIME,  
THE PROBLEM IS THAT TO ME ONLY FURY IS PEACE.*

*I don't want to be the Guardian-Angel-with-Smart-Armpits  
but you happen to have the oldest complex:  
that of the Glorious  
Builder of the Great Pyramid.  
You've contributed your grain of sand  
and now you want free beers for the rest of your life  
—and even demand a proper ceremony to go with it.*

RIGHT NOW SOMEONE IS DYING FOR YOUR  
CAUSE.

*We'd better have another round of beer  
in this golden hour of chaos,  
a trembling homesick voice  
calling out for the barroom Mass.*

Lucy: we'd have a great future:  
when I'm around you my feelings are just so mel-low.

THE PROBLEM IS YOU'VE GOT TO SMELL WHAT'S IN THE AIR:  
GENIUS IS A MATTER OF HAVING NOSTRILS FOR SNIFFING  
AT THE CROSSROADS OF HISTORY.

PUT ON WEIGHT AND STOP BUGGING ME,  
DOCTOR.

GINSBERG THE POET WENT TO BED WITH FOURTEEN BOYS  
IN PRAGUE ONE NIGHT.

*That guy's not a queer poet,  
he's a sword shallower at a sideshow  
—and gee I'd always liked "Howl" so much.*

STRANGERS IN OVERALLS, YOU GILD  
WITH SACRILEGE THE TIGHTROPES OF THE NUNS.

*Okay: all that's left is to talk Zen Buddhism,  
it's in now.*

RIGHT: ZEN BUDDHISM IS A WONDERFUL EXPERIENCE,  
IF AND WHEN IT GRADUALLY LEADS YOU TO TERRORISM.

*Oh c'mon, stop pointing your pedantic finger!*

BUT THAT'S WORSE THAN ANARCHISM,  
I'M ONLY CATCHING ON NOW,  
I MEAN, WHAT YOU SAID A LITTLE WHILE AGO ABOUT GUERRILLA  
FIGHTERS.  
FIGHTING FOR WHAT KIND OF WORLD?

AH, LOST SOUL:  
JUST AS BLASPHEMY IS AN ENDORSEMENT OF GOD,  
ANARCHISM BEARS OUT AN ORDER THAT IS DYING  
OF LAUGHTER.  
TO CHOOSE BETWEEN POSSIBLE WORLDS: NOW THAT'S  
THE DIVINE PUNISHMENT.

I'm afraid to sleep alone  
with that book of Trotsky's on the night table:  
it's frightening like a lamp,  
like an ice cube  
in the spirit of an old man with a cold.

THE MARK OF THE REBEL SHINES ON HIS BUTT:  
THE PROBLEM OF INNOCENCE.  
ARE WE, THEN, SOMETHING MORE THAN CHILDREN?

*WE SHOULD START PRAYING, DON'T YOU THINK?  
LOVE: A MATTER OF LUBRICANTS.*

SETTING BOMBS OFF IN THE NIGHT OF IDIOTS,  
THE WORK OF "OUTSIDERS," SURE MASTERS  
OF THE KINGDOM OF HEAVEN.

Lucy, you've broken my heart,  
you've left my face forever resting in my hands.

*Oh country still in diapers!  
Oh sons of Man, yoked to the treadmill,  
smiling and red in the face!  
There's just about enough money left  
for the last round of beer....*

My God, oh, my God,  
couldn't You be the one to spend the night with her?

U Fleku, Prague, 1966

[HSM & JC]

**LOVE HITS ME HARDER THAN SPRINGTIME**



## LOVE

Love is my other country  
the primary one  
not the one I'm proud of  
the one I suffer

[JC]

## ZDENA

You're like Antigone, or maybe not,  
maybe that's nothing more than a pompous way of getting a fix on  
you.

In any event, like Hemingway's women more fit to be the girlfriend  
of an Air France pilot.

What are you doing anyway, hanging out with a wretched poet  
even if you aren't the-great-love-of-his-life,  
you don't really know him,  
although you must have heard them say  
he's good company?

He could tell you that naked you frighten him,  
that before possessing you he has to ask himself, like Manuel Galich:  
"Is this mine?"

And that he loves you only  
when the mocking voice of his God says to him:  
"Yes, and get going, you idiot."

He's the one who thinks that nowadays Malraux  
is a second-rate writer,  
that Sartre's not bad,  
and that Durrell has wilted in the hands of enemy agents.

And forget it,  
the poet will never buy you necklaces:  
he'll put runs in many pairs of your stockings, that's for sure,  
he'll make you wear the clothes you like least,  
he'll even insult you and hit you  
and then later make you help  
pull him out of his remorse.

Ay, girl,  
you were surely meant for another,

someone somewhere committed a tremendous error:  
the poet can't help  
but give himself over to happiness  
calling you (just because) "My splendid beast"  
making room for you in his pathetic culture  
like the big ugly night birds opening their nest  
to the bird of paradise.

May, 1965

[JG]

## WHAT'S MISSING

*"...as a person, the other has become  
a necessity for him..."*

Marx

"The classics are interesting:"  
my blasphemy, yesterday, after seeing *Romeo and Juliet*.

Today our ration of salad tomatoes increased  
and some huge Swiss chard made it to market.

Plenty of bread, enough eggs, rice and beans  
as boring as waterfalls.

Shortages make you kind of hungry mentally and  
a lot more physically, Fats Flores used to say.

But with hake and a couple of steaks  
we'll finish off the week.

What I really miss most in Cuba  
is you.

[DU]

## 35 YEARS

### I

But chastity, smelly old hag, shriveled up snake,  
guest we'll have to pass up and whom we'll confuse with death,  
is a sentence somebody has to serve after all.

Tomorrow is Friday.  
Thous shalt not tempt thy Lord.

### II

In the smoke of this eternally young day and age  
death is one of love's faces.

What's there for me before you now but the bafflement of kings,  
the gestures of learning what to do before the swelling river,  
the smudges left when I fell flat on my face  
into the ashes?

Youth itself goes down the drain  
and sadness trots on like a mule.

[HSM]

## SUNDAY MORNING

I pick at the guitar naked  
in front of the open mirror.

A summer of marked cards  
wears on me more than alcohol  
more than the throbbing of these temples  
that make their peace with discipline.

Oh Red culture, a predicted  
horizon, sponges  
to minimize the coming days!

Naked Miriam washes  
her hair  
and the weather returns to mid-August, underwater month.

I smashed that theatrical monocle  
because this room is too small.

I'm thinking and go on thinking.

[RN]

# SEEING YOU NAKED

*For María del Carmen*

Minuscule fish of the imagination  
naked candies lost  
on the stairway to heaven  
rough pearls  
grandmothers half-opened  
salty cucumbers at daybreak  
wisdom transformed  
How can I enter you  
oh collection of herbs and things  
put together with the pretext  
of a woman's name  
and a way of describing  
the girl of whom I always dreamed?  
[JG]

DATE

*For C, in memoriam*

Your naked spirit is eternity  
let me say it straight out  
because it wasn't only water but it will always be thirst  
because it had been the danger and the reward  
the question answered for the salt strewn over all the beaches  
of the world.

I touched it and it covered me in shadow and light  
it broke my wisdom into tiny pieces to be scattered over the roads  
it made me bear golden sons and enemies shipwrecked in the ivy  
it gave me a new name that echoed like a powerful blow  
by the spell-breaking sorcerer on the unyielding door.

Still, I know that you'll soon escape from the grave  
and dig a tiny channel to the sea  
(to the spot where brotherly thistles  
tremble for a future gone bad)  
and you'll rise like the beautiful sunrise for those drunks  
who forgot their catechism and their filth  
on the street corners of the final night.

Rest until then:  
without letting tranquility find out  
take on a wild animal's strength  
and on the burned spine of the autumn leaf  
jot down for me the hour  
and the name of the beach.

[JG]



**A SLIGHTLY REPELLENT BOOK**

## **THERAPEUTICS**

**The writers prepared a deadly book  
for the Honorable President of the Republic.**

**The President of the Republic inspects  
his dagger collection and quotes Pythagoras.**

**The Honorable President of the Republic  
needs a crowbar to get the business at hand going.**

**The writers have lice.**

**The Honorable President of the Republic wants  
to kill the lice crawling on the writers  
by stabbing them.**

**The writers flee to a foreign country:  
their shaven heads gleam in the moonlight  
used to cross the border.**

**[JC]**

## SAUDADE<sup>7</sup>

Things life has given me  
rain-proof horses  
often laughing  
at my frequent colds

Also a way of being a communist  
that the day it becomes the fashion  
either one of two things—  
but I'd better bite my tongue

Also a heart that goes a little too far.

And a girl who no doubt  
must have given it a second thought

On the other hand life took all my poems  
written on a kite almost like a meteor  
and it also carried off my old clown's outfit  
my dumb-friend smell  
my smile that makes people feel like crying  
and even a little hungry

So  
you'd all better get out of my way  
[HSM]

## EPITAPH

He planted his garden with a bayonette  
was cunning and sweet as a con man  
his wisdom came to life above all with wine  
while the harder he pushed the more luck he had in a  
cold-shouldering world  
but still his life wavered between hushed insults and resignation

During a week of strikes I made love with his wife 37 times  
it was cold outside  
and from the start there was no doubt the cops would come

That gut appeared as suddenly as a cough  
the gray hairs came on a bit more discreetly  
little tufts every ten thousand kilometers

This epitaph was the only thing he still had coming to him.  
[RN]

## TENSE CONVERSATION

What would you do if your worst enemies  
were infinitely better  
than you?

That wouldn't be anything. The problem comes  
when your best friends  
are worse than you.

The worst thing is to have only enemies.

No. The worst thing is to have only friends.

But, who is the enemy?  
You or your enemies?

See you later,  
friend.

[JG]

## TRICK

When I went to see him in his coffin  
I wasn't quite drunk yet  
he had a very odd look  
with his face knotted up as if death were hurting him  
his lips pressed together as if he were being brave  
or perhaps it was simply the embalmer's work  
in trying to cover those big teeth of his  
with which he made pianos look inferior  
and so I went home with Rogelio Paris  
and I downed half a bottle of rum in one swig  
something deadly in my actual training condition  
Aida was furious and worst of all  
Nicolás and Carlos Rafael and the Commandant  
watched me show up after several months  
of creative retirement from the world of culture  
absolutely drunk like before in the old days  
I was supposed to already be engaged  
in the struggle somewhere in America  
but even the deceased would have understood  
that it wasn't just another brief parenthesis  
in this long and anti-heroic wait  
that has cost me several good friends  
among other losses  
he'd have understood my sudden wish  
to attend without being there that backsliding  
petit-bourgeois farewell  
made even worse by my not wanting to be saddened  
by the symbolic death of this symbolic black  
his music for two was like a hymn  
during our more intense years  
a starting point definitely marking an era  
more than just any blood pact  
or more than *the* blood pact  
1962 1963

years of personal experience the dead man didn't know  
he went through in the background playing the piano  
while we made plans decisions and made love  
we drank the foam of our joyous rage  
we did creative work and were almost ashamed of it  
we made mistakes and were sad about this  
and of course the victories so important to us  
followed later  
we even had time to throw a kind of gardenia on the dead man  
("I love this old black guy who sends up  
flares of music from pianos  
shepherd of yellow herons  
breeding tenderness like a demon child")  
slightly tacky like all gardenias  
especially that bit about yellow herons  
borrowed from a set of red velvet drapes  
backdrop for Bola when he sang at the Monseigneur  
in short I pulled off my trick  
I attended Bola's wake without being there or growing sad  
I guess I did some silly things and got in the way  
of intellectuals and friends  
all I recall are a few friendly faces  
but when I finally realized that Bola was dead  
everything was now absolutely a thing of the past  
a cultural news item an event for anniversaries  
and I'm glad I didn't turn sad  
at the wake of someone who used to fill everything  
*with fun and good lovin'*

[DU]

## NO, I WASN'T ALWAYS THIS UGLY

The truth is my nose got broken  
by Lizano the Costa Rican who hit me with a brick  
because I said it was obvious there was a penalty  
and he yelled no and no and no  
I'll never turn my back on a Costa Rican soccer player again  
Father Achaerandio nearly died of fright  
because when it was over there was more blood than on an Aztec altar  
later Quique Soler hit me right in the eye  
he threw his rock with the most perfect aim you can imagine  
of course we were only trying to imitate the taking of Okinawa  
but it shattered my retina  
I had to spend one month lying absolutely still (at eleven years old!)  
I went to Dr. Quevedo in Guatemala and also saw Dr.  
Bickford who was wearing a red wig  
that's why I sometimes squint  
and coming out of a movie I look like a drug addict waiting for a fix  
the other reason is that I was hit by the bottle of rum  
María Elena's husband threw at me  
really I wasn't trying to get fresh  
but every husband is a trip  
and if we take into account his thinking I was an Argentine diplomat  
we'd have to thank God  
the other time was in Prague and was never solved  
four punks jumped me in a dark alley  
two blocks from the Ministry of Defense  
and four from Police Headquarters  
it was the night before the Party Congress started  
so someone said it was a protest against the Convention  
(in the hospital I met two other delegates  
who'd gotten out of their respective assaults  
with more bones than ever)  
someone else said that the CIA wanted to make me pay for my  
jailbreak  
others that it was really a show of anti-Latin American racism



and a few more that it was simply the universal desire to steal  
Comrade Soboloff dropped by to ask me  
if it wasn't because I'd touched the ass of a woman walking with  
someone else

and then he went off to the Interior Ministry to protest  
on behalf of the Soviets  
in the end nothing turned up  
and giving thanks to God once again  
I kept on as plaintiff right up to the end  
in a criminal investigation in Kafka's homeland  
in any case (and that's why I keep going on about it now)  
I ended up with  
my Inferior Maxiliar smashed to bits  
a severe cerebral concussion  
a month and a half in the hospital and  
another two months washing down my meals even the beefsteak  
was purée

the last time I was in Cuba  
I was coming down a hillside in the rain  
with an M-52 in my hands  
all of a sudden a bull came charging out of nowhere  
my legs got tangled up in the underbrush and I started to fall  
the bull went right by me but as he was a big lazy brute  
he didn't bother to come back to finish me off  
it wasn't necessary in any case because  
as I've been telling you I fell on top of the rifle  
and it didn't know any better than to bounce back, like a  
revolution in Africa  
it broke my zygomatic arch into three pieces  
(very important for the aesthetic resolution of the cheeks)  
That explains at least part of my problem.

[JG]

# TOADSTOOLS

*I dedicate this poem to Ernesto Cardenal, about a problem of ours,  
in other words, of Catholics and Communists...*

*“...the forms of petit-bourgeois thought—whether religious, aesthetic or political—are more latent and ubiquitous than toadstools, and more equivocal than syphilis, named by doctors ‘the great imitator’... “*

J. Longman

(In a private letter to the author.)

## VIII

In my last jail I prayed on two different occasions. Inconsistent, I  
know,  
in a middle-aged Communist but true all the same.  
What will go on puzzling me for the rest of my life  
is not that personal concession to fear but something I'd call  
the chance happening of extraordinary things. The first,  
everybody knows, was when the earthquake split open the wall of  
my  
cell. The second was when I was told they'd kill me the next day  
and smear  
the red ghost with all the shit allowed within the limits of the law.  
A guard let me have a Bible for a quarter of an hour: I opened it  
at random, venturing on a kind of painful game: and the first thing  
I read was this: "He was led like a sheep to the slaughter;  
and like a lamb dumb before his shearer, so opened he not his  
mouth. In his humiliation  
his judgment was taken away: and who shall declare his generation?  
For his life is taken away from the earth."  
As a miracle, let it pass, Father, but you can't deny  
that this was really a dirty trick.

[HSM]

## IX

I admit that my poetry is not what it used to be, the kind  
Father Landarech  
liked so much. Good old Corky would insist on convincing  
everyone that his pet black sheep was the most important lyric poet  
in the history of our country's literature. This earned him the hatred  
of Hugo Lindo and other Catholic Salvadoran poets, it earned him  
my conviction that he was nothing but a sentimental man  
and it earned him the sympathies of some of my best drunken sprees.  
I distinctly remember, for instance,  
that I mailed him the first love poem I wrote in Cuba.  
Eraclio Zepeda and I had been drinking all night and before the first  
light  
we went together to wait for the post office in Vedado  
to open. It took quite an effort on my part  
because Eraclio Zepeda was in love with the same girl  
(on a level that excluded any idea of share and share alike,  
as we'd done sometimes) and I had to make two hand-written  
originals of the poem  
under his slightly inquisitorial eye.  
This attempt to humor him cost me almost thirty beers  
and the worst part is that I never knew  
if Landarech ever got to read the poem or if it went the way  
of seventy-five percent of my mail to El Salvador, I mean  
straight to the Army's Secret Service files.  
The poem went more or less like this:  
"And there was no moonlight, no golden sands/and all the  
day's dead fires/  
had been forgotten./I'd been all alone waiting for you/waiting  
for you since  
the world's first day./I remember the awe of the huge animals/  
and the damp awakening of the plants/on the morning the sea-foam  
announced you./I remember the first storm escaping between the  
cliffs/

and the first time I pronounced your name./Oh you who are always  
banned from my hours/  
from my lonely centuries/and from all the centuries of all the men/  
who prepared the way for our meeting./Oh belated heroine of my  
long wait!/  
And suddenly I saw you./Like someone from a race of men cleansed  
of all sin/  
your perfumes floated/like a garland around your head./  
The Light's shimmering testimony/in the middle of the night,/  
you were as sweet as the sword of little boy-warriors/  
asleep at daybreak under the dew on harvest days./  
Oh, adulation of my fevered brain,/love, you have made me a  
victim of love,/  
may the little shoots of the new branch/be with you./  
The solitude of the desert tormented me/but now my bed will  
be filled with power./  
Oh delightful death of the search!"/

You may say it's charming, Father, but the part about "Oh  
belated heroine of my long wait" is something I wouldn't write again  
even if I had to do it just to get that girl into bed with me.

[HSM]