

VIRGILIO PIÑERA

LA ISLA EN PESO
THE WHOLE ISLAND

TRANSLATED BY MARK WEISS

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Introduction

Best known for his plays and fiction,¹ Virgilio Piñera (1912–1979) has become in the past two decades a totemic figure for younger Cuban poets, despite the relative paucity of his poetic production. As he said himself, “I have always considered myself a casual poet.”²

Piñera was written out of history and refused the right to publish or leave the island, like so many others in the dark decade of the 1970s, and he owes his current status perhaps as much to that repression and his legendary if sometimes exaggerated resistance to the powerful,³ and to his open homosexuality, as to his irreverent humor and his embrace of everyday event and the language and culture of the streets.

‘La isla en peso’ occupies a pivotal place in Piñera’s work. First published in 1943, it responds to a particular moment in Cuba’s cultural history. For several years Piñera had been a member of a group of young writers that had formed around a series of short-lived journals and the seminal figure of José Lezama Lima, originator of what came to be called the *neobarroco*. This culminated in the founding, in 1944, of the profoundly influential journal *Orígenes*, after which its core group of contributors have ever since been known. Whatever their differences, they remain “*la generación de Orígenes*.” The journal was to continue, under the editorship of Lezama and the critic and translator José Rodríguez Feo, until 1956.

The fifteen surviving poems of Piñera’s that predate ‘La isla en peso’ are very much in the dense, ornate, grammatically-contorted, allusive manner of the *neobarroco*. It was a bad fit, and Piñera broke with it in ‘La isla en peso.’ It wasn’t all that he broke with—the poem is something of a manifesto (as it continues to be for many of Cuba’s poets since the 1980s), a blast in a public argument within the group that was to last for twenty-five years.

Some of the terms of the argument were set forth in objections to the poem from within the group. The fullest exposition of its criticisms fell to Cintio Vitier. He mentions the poem's vulgarity—pre-Revolutionary Cuba was socially very conservative—but goes on to a more profound criticism, that the poem denies the existence of anything beyond the surface of things, “cleansed of all shadings, interior or intimacy . . . its true subject is not . . . a kind of international Kafkaesque surrealism, but precisely what more immediately and simply captures our attention: a mute disconnected nature, mute physically and physiologically: an all-embracing autonomous, empty and external . . . A world without *telos*, without participation. An earthbound soul, within whose ambit can prosper only an attitude, elevated to monstrousness by pride, which incarnates the negation of all feeling and intimate dialogue: irony. . . . What's expressed here is that in this country we are living with a degree of loss of energy such that two men who pass in the street, a wedding, a copulation, or a woman ironing are equivalent and cancel each other out, retaining neither resonance nor a place in any hierarchy, become nothing more than phenomena, illuminated by the terrible rhetorical light of an empty theater, disconnected fragments that neither sustain nor suggest a greater and invisible organic form. As Piñera has expressed it . . . in ‘La isla en peso,’ “My people, too young to know how to create order! . . . Like light or childhood you still don't have a face.” . . . [This is] a state of being impenetrable to intimacy, compassion or intelligence, [vulnerable] only to the attack of a strange and endless emptiness.”⁴

Vitier goes on to say that Piñera's poem “is a perfect mirror of our current spiritual reality,” which he contrasts to the lost example of Martí.

The poem, and Vitier's attack on it, come a scant forty years after Cuba's achievement of the limited independence allowed it by the United States, in a period of intense corruption, during which Havana was beginning to become a virtual Mafia fiefdom. Fifty-odd years before, in the buildup towards Cuba's final

War of Independence, Martí had initiated a discussion of *cubanidad*, what it means to be Cuban, echoes of which can still be heard. For Vitier, as for most of the *Orígenes* group, that discussion intersected with an enduring sense of Cuban exceptionalism, to which was enlisted Catholic doctrine. As here, Vitier was the group's spokesman. He responded to 'La isla en peso' as a part of that discussion, a challenge to everything to which the group subscribed, and he was right. Piñera, secular and skeptic, had drawn a line, and a bit more: he had denied not only the semi-mystical understanding of *cubanidad* of his fellow *origenistas*, but also the possibility of any national self-definition. Although he continued to publish in *Orígenes*, he participated from a distance, spending much of the journal's remaining years in Buenos Aires.

There were also personal issues behind this. Piñera seems to have been most comfortable at the margins, and he would have been resistant to inclusion in any circumscribed *cubanidad*. I imagine him, if asked, echoing Groucho Marx: "I would not join any club that would have someone like me for a member."

The Text

'La isla en peso' was self-published as a limited edition chapbook in 1943. A revised version appeared in Piñera's collected poems, *La vida entera* (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1968). I have followed that version rather than the version in the complete poems (see note 2), which differs only in three what I take to be typographical errors. The pun, or perhaps plausible typo, *auropeo* for *europeo*, was introduced in *La vida entera*. Absent other authority I have retained it.

The advent of Google frees me of the need to explain every reference. Here are a few. Latin plant names correspond to plants indigenous to Cuba, as do two of the three in Spanish, "Lágrimas de Job, lágrimas de Júpiter, lágrimas de amor." I assume that the third is Piñera's coinage. The *areítō* was a ceremonial dance of the

Siboney, Cuba's aboriginal people, who were virtually wiped out, along with most details of their culture, by the early sixteenth century. *Náñigos* are members of a secret Afro/Cuban religious society. The *tres* is a kind of guitar native to Cuba. The *claves* (two syllables) are the sticks used to keep time in Cuban music. The *guiro* is a gourd, used as a musical instrument. Yara was the site of Cuba's 1868 declaration of independence from Spain. "Cancer" refers to the Tropic of Cancer as well as to the disease. The Spanish names of fruits and plants with no common English name have been retained.

Notes

¹ Mark Schafer has translated two volumes of Piñera's fiction, *Cold Tales* (Hygiene, CO: Eridanos Press, 1988) and *René's Flesh* (New York: Marsilio Publishers, 1995). Margaret Carson's translation of the play *Electra Garrigó* appears in *Stages of Conflict: A Reader of Latin American Theatre and Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2007).

² *La isla en peso*, ed. Antón Arrufat (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1998), p.17. Named for the poem, this is Piñera's complete poetry, as far as we know. His manuscripts were confiscated by the government immediately after his death and returned subsequently to the family. Rumors, with no apparent foundation, persist that still other works remain in the government's secret archives. Well over half of Piñera's poetry, products of his last bitter decade, appear for the first time in this volume.

³ For Piñera's questioning of the limits of intellectual and artistic freedom during the "Meeting of Cuban Artists and Intellectuals with Fidel Castro" on June 16th, 1961, and the two subsequent Mondays, see *Encuentro de la Cultura Cubana* 33 (2008), pp.163–164. Castro's response, in his *Palabras a los intelectuales* (Havana:

Departamento de Ediciones de la Biblioteca Nacional “José Martí”, 1991), p.6: “. . . within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, nothing. . . . I think this is sufficiently clear. What rights do writers and artists have, whether or not they are revolutionaries? Within the Revolution, everything; against the Revolution, no rights at all.”

⁴ “Virgilio Piñera: *Poesía y Prosa*,” *Orígenes* 5 (April 1945), pp.45–46. It’s perhaps revealing of relationships within the group that this article is followed immediately by an (unrelated) article by Piñera.

La isla en peso

La maldita circunstancia del agua por todas partes
me obliga a sentarme en la mesa del café.
Si no pensara que el agua me rodea como un cáncer
hubiera podido dormir a pierna suelta.
Mientras los muchachos se despojaban de sus ropas para nadar
doce personas morían en un cuarto por compresión.
Cuando a la madrugada la pordiosera resbala en el agua
en el preciso momento en que se lava uno de sus pezones,
me acostumbro al hedor del puerto,
me acostumbro a la misma mujer que invariablemente masturba,
noche a noche, al soldado de guardia en medio del sueño de los peces.
Una taza de café no puede alejar mi idea fija,
en otro tiempo yo vivía adánicamente.
¿Qué trajo la metamorfosis?

La eterna miseria que es el acto de recordar.
Si tú pudieras formar de nuevo aquellas combinaciones,
devolviéndome el país sin el agua,
me la bebería toda para escupir al cielo.
Pero he visto la música detenida en las caderas,
he visto a las negras bailando con vasos de ron en sus cabezas.
Hay que saltar del lecho con la firme convicción
de que tus dientes han crecido,
de que tu corazón te saldrá por la boca.
Aún flota en los arrecifes el uniforme del marinero ahogado.

The Whole Island

The curse of being completely surrounded by water
condemns me to this café table.

If I didn't think that water encircled me like a cancer
I'd sleep in peace.

In the time that it takes the boys to strip for swimming
twelve people have died of the bends.

When at dawn the woman who begs in the streets slides into the water,
precisely when she's washing a nipple,

I resign myself to the stench of the harbor,
to her jacking off the sentry every night
while the fish sleep. A cup of coffee won't dispel the fantasy
that once I lived in edenic innocence.

What caused the change?

The eternal misery of memory.

If a few things were different
and the country came back to me waterless,
I'd gulp down that misery to spit back at the sky.

But I have seen music lingering in the hips,
seen black women dance balancing glasses of rum on their heads.

It makes you want to jump out of bed convinced that your teeth have grown,
that at any moment your heart will leap from your mouth.

The uniform of the drowned sailor still floats on the reef.

It makes you want to jump out of bed and find the main vein of the sea and bleed
it dry.

Hay que saltar del lecho y buscar la vena mayor del mar para desangrarlo.
Me he puesto a pescar esponjas frenéticamente,
esos seres milagrosos que pueden desalojar hasta la última gota de agua
y vivir secamente.

Esta noche he llorado al conocer a una anciana
que ha vivido ciento ocho años rodeada de agua por todas partes.

Hay que morder, hay que gritar, hay que arañar.

He dado las últimas instrucciones.

El perfume de la piña puede detener a un pájaro.

Los once mulatos se disputaban el fruto,
los once mulatos fálicos murieron en la orilla de la playa.

He dado las últimas instrucciones.

Todos nos hemos desnudado.

Llegué cuando daban un vaso de aguardiente a la virgen bárbara,
cuando regaban ron por el suelo y los pies parecían lanzas,
justamente cuando un cuerpo en el lecho podría parecer impudico,
justamente en el momento en que nadie cree en Dios.

Los primeros acordes y la antigüedad de este mundo:
hieráticamente una negra y una blanca y el líquido al saltar.

Para ponerme triste me huelo debajo de los brazos.

Es en este país donde no hay animales salvajes.

Pienso en los caballos de los conquistadores cubriendo a las yeguas,
pienso en el desconocido son del areito
desaparecido para toda la eternidad,
ciertamente debo esforzarme a fin de poner en claro
el primer contacto carnal en este país, y el primer muerto.

I have fished frantically for sponges,
miraculous creatures that can expel the last drop of water
and survive completely dry.

Tonight I wept when I met an old woman
who has lived a hundred eight years completely surrounded by water.
It makes you want to bite, scream, scratch.

I have made my will.

The scent of pineapple can stop a bird.

Eleven *mulatos* fought over its fruit,
Eleven phallic *mulatos* died at the edge of the beach.

I have made my will.

We have all stripped naked.

I came in when they were giving a glass of aguardiente to the barbarous virgin,
when they were sprinkling rum on the ground and feet were like spears,
just when a body in bed could seem shameless,
at the moment when no one believes in God.

The first chords and the antiquity of this world:
a black woman and a white woman and the liquid leaping hieratically.

To sadden myself I smell my underarms.

In this country where there are no wild animals.

I think of the conquistadors' stallions mounting their mares,
I think of the forever lost sound of the *areito*,

I need to try to make sense of the first carnal contact in this country, and the first
death.

Everyone gets serious when the drum begins the dance.
The european merely reads Cartesian meditations.

Todos se ponen serios cuando el timbal abre la danza.
Solamente el europeo leía las meditaciones cartesianas.
El baile y la isla rodeada de agua por todas partes:
plumas de flamencos, espinas de pargo, ramos de albahaca, semillas de aguacate.
La nueva solemnidad de esta isla.
¡País mío, tan joven, no sabes definir!

¿Quien puede reír sobre esta roca fúnebre de los sacrificios de gallos?
Los dulces ñáñigos bajan sus puñales acompañadamente.
Como una guanábana un corazón puede ser traspasado sin cometer crimen,
sin embargo el bello aire se aleja de los palmares.
Una mano en el *tres* puede traer todo el siniestro color de los caimitos
más lustrosos que un espejo en el relente,
sin embargo el bello aire se aleja de los palmares.
Si hundieras los dedos en su pulpa creerías en la música.
Mi madre fue picada por un alacrán cuando estaba embarazada.

¿Quién puede reír sobre esta roca de los sacrificios de gallos?
¿Quién se tiene a sí mismo cuando las claves chocan?
¿Quién desdeña ahogarse en la indefinible llamarada del flamboyán?
La sangre adolescente bebemos en las pulidas jícaras.
Ahora no pasa un tigre sino su descripción.

Las blancas dentaduras perforando la noche,
y también los famélicos dientes de los chinos esperando el desayuno
después de la doctrina cristiana.
Todavía puede esta gente salvarse del cielo,

The dance and the island completely surrounded by water:
flamingo feathers, spines of snappers, sprigs of basil, seeds of avocados.
This island's new solemnity.
My country, too young to define yourself!

Who could make light of this funereal stone for the sacrifice of roosters?
Rhythmically the daggers of the sweet ñáñigos descend.
A heart can be pierced without crime as if piercing a guanábana,
but the beautiful air drifts away from the palm groves anyway.
A hand on the *tres* can wear all the sinister stains of caimitos
more lustrous than a mirror in sunlight,
but the beautiful air drifts away from the palm groves anyway.
If you sank your fingers in its flesh you would believe in the music.
My mother was stung by a scorpion when she was pregnant.

Who could make light of this stone for the sacrifice of roosters?
Who can hold back when the *claves* collide?
Who refuses to drown himself in the indescribable blaze of the flame tree?
We drink the blood of adolescents from polished gourds.
Now in place of a tiger its description passes.

White teeth piercing the night,
and also the ravenous teeth of Chinese men waiting for breakfast
after Christian doctrine.
They can still be saved from heaven,
Deftly the maidens pull their penises
in time to the hymns.

pues al compás de los himnos las doncellas agitan diestramente
los falos de los hombres.

La impetuosa ola invade el extenso salón de las genuflexiones.

Nadie piensa en implorar, en dar gracias, en agradecer, en testimoniar.

La santidad se desinfla en una carcajada.

Sean los caóticos símbolos del amor los primeros objetos que palpe,
afortunadamente desconocemos la voluptuosidad y la caricia francesa,
desconocemos el perfecto gozador y la mujer pulpo,

desconocemos los espejos estratégicos,

no sabemos llevar la sífilis con la reposada elegancia de un cisne,

desconocemos que muy pronto vamos a practicar estas mortales elegancias.

Los cuerpos en la misteriosa llovizna tropical,

en la llovizna diurna, en la llovizna nocturna, siempre en la llovizna,

los cuerpos abriendo sus millones de ojos,

los cuerpos, dominados por la luz, se repliegan

ante el asesinato de la piel,

los cuerpos, devorando oleadas de luz, revientan como girasoles de fuego

encima de las aguas estáticas,

los cuerpos, en las aguas, como carbones apagados derivan hacia el mar.

Es la confusión, es el terror, es la abundancia,

es la virginidad que comienza a perderse.

Los mangos podridos en el lecho del río ofuscan mi razón,

y escalo el árbol más alto para caer como un fruto.

Nada podría detener este cuerpo destinado a los cascos de los caballos,

turbadoramente cogido entre la poesía y el sol.

The violent wave invades the wide hall of genuflections.
No one thinks to beg, thank, be grateful, testify.
Sanctity collapses in a gale of laughter.
Although love's chaotic symbols are the first things touched,
we have the luck to be ignorant of voluptuousness or cunnilingus,
the perfect lover and the octopus woman,
the strategic mirrors,
we don't know how to bear syphilis with a swan-like grace,
unaware that soon enough we'll acquire these fatal refinements.

Bodies in the mysterious tropical drizzle,
in the daily drizzle, the nightly drizzle, always the drizzle,
bodies opening their millions of eyes,
bodies, ruled by light, retreat
before the slaying of skin,
bodies, devouring waves of light, return like sunflowers of flame
at the crest of ecstatic waters,
bodies, afloat, drift seawards like extinguished embers.

It's confusion, terror, abundance,
The imminent loss of virginity.
Rotten mangoes in the riverbed dazzle thought,
and I scale the highest tree to fall like a piece of fruit.
There's no restraining this body destined for the hooves of horses,
caught crazily between poetry and sun.

Escolto bravamente el corazón traspasado,
clavo el estilete más agudo en la nuca de los durmientes.
El trópico salta y su chorro invade mi cabeza
pegada duramente contra la costra de la noche.
La piedad original de las auríferas arenas
ahoga sonoramente las yeguas españolas,
la tromba desordena las crines más oblicuas.

No puedo mirar con estos ojos dilatados.
Nadie sabe mirar, contemplar, desnudar un cuerpo.
Es la espantosa confusión de una mano en lo verde,
los estranguladores viajando en la franjas del iris.
No sabría poblar de miradas el solitario curso del amor.

Me detengo en ciertas palabras tradicionales:
el aguacero, la siesta, el cañaveral, el tabaco,
con simple ademán, apenas si onomatopéicamente,
titánicamente paso por encima de su música,
y digo: el agua, el mediodía, el azúcar, el humo.

Yo combino:
el aguacero pega en el lomo de los caballos,
la siesta atada a la cola de un caballo,
el cañaveral devorando a los caballos,
los caballos perdiéndose sigilosamente
en la tenebrosa emanación del tabaco,
el último gesto de los siboneyes mientras el humo pasa por la horquilla

Bravely I escort the pierced heart,
stab the sharpest stiletto into the sleepers'necks.
The tropic erupts and its flow invades my head
pinned fast to the crust of night.
The original piety of gold-bearing sands
resoundingly drowns the Spanish mares,
the whirlwind disorders the best-kept manes.

I can't see through these dilated eyes.
No one knows how to watch, to study, to strip a body.
It's the dreadful confusion of a hand in the greenery,
stranglers traveling at the edge of sight.
We didn't know how to fill the lonely course of love with glances.

I linger over a few old words:
downpour, siesta, cane field, tobacco,
with a simple gesture, scarcely if onomatopoetically,
majestically I step through the crest of their music,
intoning: water, noon, sugar, smoke.

And I combine them:
the downpour sticks to the backs of horses,
siesta binds a horse's tail,
the cane field devouring horses
horses stray stealthily
into the shadowy emanation of tobacco,
final gesture of the Siboneys, smoke passing through the pitchfork's tines

como la carreta de la muerte,
el último ademán de los siboneyes,
y cavo esta tierra para encontrar los ídolos y hacerme una historia.

Los pueblos y sus historias en boca de todo el pueblo.

De pronto, el galeón cargado de oro se mete en la boca
de uno de los narradores,
y Cadmo, desdentado, se pone a tocar el bongó.
La vieja tristeza de Cadmo y su perdido prestigio:
en una isla tropical los últimos glóbulos rojos de un dragón
tiñen con imperial dignidad el manto de una decadencia.

Las historias eternas frente a la historia de una vez del sol,
las eternas historias de estas tierras paridoras de bufones y cotorras,
las eternas historias de los negros que fueron,
y de los blancos que no fueron,
o al revés o como os parezca mejor,
las eternas historias blancas, negras, amarillas, rojas, azules
—toda la gama cromática reventando encima de mi cabeza en llamas—,
la eterna historia de la cínica sonrisa del europeo
llegado para apretar las tetas de mi madre.

El horroroso paseo circular,
el tenebroso juego de los pies sobre la arena circular,
el envenado movimiento del talón que rehúye el abanico del erizo,
los siniestros manglares, como un cinturón canceroso,

like the cart of death,
final gesture of the Siboneys,
and I dig in this earth for idols and make for myself a history.

Peoples and their histories in the mouths of all the people.

Suddenly, the gold-laden galleon enters the mouth
of one of the storytellers,
and Cadmus, toothless, begins to play the bongo.
The ancient sadness of Cadmus and his lost status:
on a tropical island the last red drops of a dragon's blood
stain the cloak of decadence with imperial dignity.

Eternal histories or the history of a day beneath the sun,
eternal histories of these lands that bring forth buffoons and blowhards,
eternal histories of blacks who were
and whites who weren't,
or the other way around or any way at all,
endless white, black, yellow, red, blue histories,
—the whole chromatic spectrum bursting into flames above me—
the endless history of the cynical smile of the European
who had come to squeeze my mother's teats.

The horrific circular walk,
the shadowy play of feet on the circle of sand,
the poisonous movement of a heel avoiding the urchin's spine,
the sinister mangroves, like a cancerous belt,

dan la vuelta a la isla,
los manglares y la fétida arena
aprietan los riñones de los moradores de la isla.

Sólo se eleva un flamenco absolutamente.

¡Nadie puede salir, nadie puede salir!
La vida del embudo y encima la nata de la rabia.
Nadie puede salir:
el tiburón más diminuto rehusaría transportar un cuerpo intacto.
Nadie puede salir:
una uva caleta en la frente de la criolla
que se abanica lánguida en una mecedora,
y “nadie puede salir” termina espantosamente en el choque de las claves.

Cada hombre comiendo fragmentos de la isla,
cada hombre devorando los frutos, las piedras y el excremento nutridor,
cada hombre mordiendo el sitio dejado por su sombra,
cada hombre lanzando dentelladas en el vacío donde el sol se acostumbra,
cada hombre, abriendo su boca como una cisterna, embalsa el agua
del mar, pero como el caballo del barón de Munchausen
la arroja patéticamente por su cuarto trasero,
cada hombre en el rencoroso trabajo de recortar
los bordes de la isla más bella del mundo,
cada hombre tratando de echar a andar a la bestia cruzada de cocuyos.

force the island back,
mangroves and fetid sand
squeeze the kidneys of the island's people.

Only a flamingo rises aloft.

There's no way out! There's no way out!

Life in a funnel crusted with rage.

There's no way out:

the smallest shark would refuse to carry an intact body.

There's no way out:

a grape moored to the face of the creole

languidly fanning herself in a rocking-chair

and "there's no way out" comes to a terrifying end in the crash of the *claves*.

Each man eating pieces of the island,
each man devouring its fruit, stones, and nutritious excrement,
each man biting the space left by his shadow,
each man tearing with his teeth at the void where the sun expects to be,
each man, his mouth like a cistern, dams up the sea's water
but pathetically, like Münchhausen's horse,
spews it from its hindquarters,
each man in the rancorous labor of trimming
the edges of the world's most beautiful island,
each man trying to drive the beast that's a cross
between beast and fireflies.

Pero la bestia es perezosa como un bello macho
y terca como una hembra primitiva.
Verdad es que la bestia atraviesa diariamente los cuatro momentos caóticos,
los cuatro momentos en que se la puede contemplar
—con la cabeza metida entre sus patas—escrutando el horizonte con ojo atroz,
los cuatro momentos en que se abre el cáncer:
madrugada, mediodía, crepúsculo y noche.

Las primeras gotas de una lluvia áspera golpean su espalda
hasta que la piel toma la resonancia de dos maracas pulsadas diestramente.
En este momento, como una sábana o como un pabellón de tregua, podría
desplegarse un agradable misterio,
pero la avalancha de verdes lujuriosos ahoga los mojados sones,
y la monotonía invade el envolvente túnel de las hojas.

El rastro luminoso de un sueño mal parido,
un carnaval que empieza con el canto del gallo,
la neblina cubriendo con su helado disfraz el escándalo de la sabana,
cada palma derramándose insolente en un verde juego de aguas,
perforan, con un triángulo incandescente, el pecho de los primeros aguadores,
y la columna de agua lanza sus vapores a la cara del sol cosida por un gallo.
Es la hora terrible.

Los devoradores de neblina se evaporan
hacia la parte más baja de la ciénaga,
y un caimán los pasa dulcemente a ojo.
Es la hora terrible.

La última salida de la luz de Yara
empuja los caballos contra el fango.

But the beast is as lazy as a beautiful stallion
and stubborn as a primitive mare.
Each day it passes through the four chaotic moments,
the four moments in which it can study itself
—its head between its paws—searching the horizon with a cruel eye,
the four moments when cancer opens: daybreak, noon, dusk, and night.

The first drops of a coarse rain strike its back
until the skin takes on the sharp resonance of maracas.
At this moment an agreeable mystery
could be unfurled, like a sheet or a flag of truce,
but the avalanche of luxuriant greens drowns out the wet sounds,
and boredom invades the enveloping tunnel of leaves.

The luminous face of a badly born dream,
a carnival that begins with the song of a rooster,
mist covering the scandal of the savannah with its icy disguise,
each palm proudly cascading in a green jet of water,
pierce, with an incandescent triangle, the breasts of the first water vendors,
and the column of water hurls its vapors at the sun's face sewn by a rooster.
It's the terrible hour.
The devourers of mist evaporate
swampwards,
and an alligator gives them a sweet once-over.
It's the terrible hour.
The final gleam of Yara's light
forces the horses into the mud.

Es la hora terrible.

Como un bólido la espantosa gallina cae,
y todo el mundo toma su café.

¿Pero qué puede el sol en un pueblo tan triste?

Las faenas del día se enroscan al cuello de los hombres
mientras la leche cae desesperadamente.

¿Qué puede el sol en un pueblo tan triste?

Con un lujo mortal los macheteros abren grandes claros en el monte,
la tristísima iguana salta barrocamente en un caño de sangre,
los macheteros, introduciendo cargas de claridad, se van ensombreciendo
hasta adquirir el tinte de un subterráneo egipcio.

¿Quién puede esperar clemencia en esta hora?

Confusamente un pueblo escapa de su propia piel
adormeciéndose con la claridad,
la fulminante droga que puede iniciar un sueño mortal
en los bellos ojos de hombres y mujeres,
en los inmensos y tenebrosos ojos de estas gentes
por los cuales la piel entra a no sé qué extraños ritos.

La piel, en esta hora, se extiende como un arrecife
y muerde su propia limitación,
la piel se pone a gritar como una loca, como una puerca cebada,
la piel trata de tapar su claridad con pencas de palma,
con yaguas traídas distraídamente por el viento,
la piel se tapa furiosamente con cotorras y pitahayas,

It's the terrible hour.
Like a meteor the horrific hen falls
and everyone drinks his coffee.

But what can the sun do in this benighted town?
The day's work coils around men's necks
while milk falls desperately.
What can the sun do in this benighted town?
With murderous determination the cane cutters clear swaths of brush,
the grieving iguana leaps baroquely in a spout of blood,
the cane cutters, bringing shiploads of light, will darken to the tint
of an Egyptian tunnel.
Who could hope for clemency at such an hour?

In confusion a people escape their skin
dozing off with the light,
the explosive drug that can bring a fatal dream
to the beautiful eyes of men and women,
their immense and shadowy eyes
through which skin enters into whatever strange rites.

Skin at this hour stretches out like a reef
and bites its own borders,
skin takes to screaming like a madwoman, like a fat sow,
skin tries to cover its light with palm leaves,
with fronds carried carelessly by the wind,
in a fury skin covers itself with parrots and pitahayas,

absurdamente se tapa con sombrías hojas de tabaco
y con restos de leyendas tenebrosas,
y cuando la piel no es sino una bola oscura,
la espantosa gallina pone un huevo blanquísmo.

¡Hay que tapar! ¡Hay que tapar!
Pero la claridad avanzada, invade
perversamente, oblicuamente, perpendicularmente,
la claridad es una enorme ventosa que chupa la sombra,
y las manos van lentamente hacia los ojos.

Los secretos más inconfesables son dichos:
la claridad mueve las lenguas,
la claridad mueve los brazos,
la claridad se precipita sobre un frutero de guayabas,
la claridad se precipita sobre los negros y los blancos,
la claridad se golpea a sí misma,
va de uno a otro lado convulsivamente,
empieza a estallar, a reventar, a rajarse,
la claridad empieza el alumbramiento más horroroso,
la claridad empieza a parir claridad.
Son las doce del día.

Todo un pueblo puede morir de luz como morir de peste.
Al mediodía el monte se puebla de hamacas invisibles,
y, echados, los hombres semejan hojas a la deriva sobre aguas metálicas.
En esta hora nadie sabría pronunciar el nombre más querido,

absurdly it covers itself with somber tobacco leaves
and the remains of shadowy legends,
and when skin has become but a dark ball,
the horrific hen brings forth a white egg.

Cover it! Cover it!
But the light advances, invades
perversely, obliquely, perpendicularly,
the light is an enormous vent that sucks the shadow,
and you slowly raise your hands to shield your eyes.

The least confessable secrets are spoken:
light moves tongues,
light moves arms,
light throws itself on the guava vendor,
light throws itself on blacks and whites,
light strikes itself,
rushes convulsively from side to side,
begins to explode, to burst, to split apart,
light begins the most horrific illumination,
light begins to give birth to light.
It's noon.

Light, like a plague, can kill a people.
At noon the brush is filled with invisible hammocks,
men, stretched out, are like leaves on metallic water.
At this hour no one could say the beloved's name

ni levantar una mano para acariciar un seno;
en esta hora del cáncer un extranjero llegado de playas remotas
preguntaría inútilmente qué proyectos tenemos
o cuántos hombres mueren de enfermedades tropicales en esta isla.
Nadie lo escucharía: las palmas de las manos vueltas hacia arriba,
los oídos obturados por el tapón de la somnolencia,
los poros tapiados con la cera de un fastidio elegante
y de la mortal deglución de las glorias pasadas.

¿Dónde encontrar en este cielo sin nubes el trueno
cuyo estampido raje, de arriba a abajo, el tímpano de los durmientes?
¿Qué concha paleolítica reventaría con su bronco cuerno
el tímpano de los durmientes?
Los hombres-conchas, los hombres-macaos, los hombres-túneles.
¡Pueblo mío, tan joven, no sabes ordenar!
¡Pueblo mío, divinamente retórico, no sabes relatar!
Como la luz o la infancia aún no tienes un rostro.

De pronto el mediodía se pone en marcha,
se pone en marcha dentro de sí mismo,
el mediodía estático se mueve, se balancea,
el mediodía empieza a elevarse flatulentamente,
sus costuras amenazan reventar,
el mediodía sin cultura, sin gravedad, sin tragedia,
el mediodía orinando hacia arriba,
orinando en sentido inverso a la gran orinada
de Gargantúa en las torres de Notre Dame,

or raise a hand to caress a breast;
at this hour of cancer a stranger come from distant shores
would ask pointlessly what plans we have
or how many men die of tropical diseases on this island.
No one would hear him: their palms turned upwards,
ears plugged by the cork of drowsiness,
pores blocked by the wax of an elegant boredom
and the fatal ingestion of faded glories.

Where in this cloudless sky is the crack of thunder
that splits the sleepers' eardrums?
What paleolithic shell would burst with its wild horn the sleepers' eardrums?
Shell-men, hermit-crab-men, tunnel-men.
My people, too young to know how to create order!
My people, divinely rhetorical, too young to know how to tell your story!
Like light or childhood you still don't have a face.

Suddenly noon gets under way,
gets under way within itself,
motionless noon moves, sways,
floats upwards like a fart,
its seams about to burst,
noon without culture, gravity, tragedy,
noon pissing upwards
reversing the great piss
of Gargantua on the towers of Notre Dame,

y todas esas historias, leídas por un isleño que no sabe
lo que es un cosmos resuelto.

Pero el mediodía se resuelve en crepúsculo y el mundo se perfila.
A la luz del crepúsculo una hoja de yagrumo ordena su terciopelo,
su color plateado del envés es el primer espejo.
La bestia lo mira con su ojo atroz.
En este trance la pupila se dilata, se extiende
hasta aprehender la hoja.
Entonces la bestia recorre con su ojo las formas sembradas en su lomo
y los hombres tirados contra su pecho.
Es la hora única para mirar la realidad en esta tierra.

No una mujer y un hombre frente a frente,
sino el contorno de una mujer y un hombre frente a frente,
entran ingrávidos en el amor,
de tal modo que Newton huye avergonzado.

Una guinea chilla para indicar el angelus:
abrus precatorious, anona myristica, anona palustris.

Una letanía vegetal sin trasmundo se eleva
frente a los arcos floridos del amor:
Eugenia aromática, eugenia fragrans, eugenia plicatula.
El paraíso y el infierno estallan y sólo queda la tierra:
Ficus religiosa, ficus nitida, ficus suffocans.

and all those stories, read by an islander who doesn't know
a defined cosmos.

But noon resolves into twilight and the world takes shape.
In twilight a yagrumo leaf arranges its velvet,
its silver underside the first mirror.
The beast sees it with its awful eye.
And at that moment its eye dilates, spreads
until it grasps the leaf.
Then the beast scans with his eye the forms strewn across its back
and the men thrown against its chest.
On this earth it's the only hour in which to see reality.

Not woman and man face to face,
but their silhouettes, face to face,
enter, to Newton's embarrassment,
weightlessly into love.

The shriek of a hen announces angelus:
abrus precatorious, anona myristica, anona palustris.

A vegetal litany with no hereafter rises
before the flowery arches of love:
Eugenia aromatica, eugenia fragrans, eugenia plicatula.
Paradise and Hell explode and all that's left is Earth:
Ficus religiosa, ficus nitida, ficus suffocans.

La tierra produciendo por los siglos de los siglos:
Panicum colonum, panicum sanguinale, panicum maximum.
El recuerdo de una poesía natural, no codificada, me viene a los labios:
Arbol de poeta, árbol del amor, árbol del seso.

Una poesía exclusivamente de la boca como la saliva:
Flor de calentura, flor de cera, flor de la Y.

Una poesía microscópica:
Lágrimas de Job, lágrimas de Júpiter, lágrimas de amor.

Pero la noche se cierra sobre la poesía y las formas se esfuman.
En esta isla lo primero que la noche hace es despertar el olfato:
Todas las aletas de todas las narices azotan el aire
buscando una flor invisible;
la noche se pone a moler millares de pétalos,
la noche se cruza de paralelos y meridianos de olor,
los cuerpos se encuentran en el olor,
se reconocen en este olor único que nuestra noche sabe provocar;
el olor lleva la batuta de las cosas que pasan por la noche,
el olor entra en el baile, se aprieta contra el güiro,
el olor sale por la boca de los instrumentos musicales,
se posa en el pie de los bailadores,
el corro de los presentes devora cantidades de olor,
abre la puerta y las parejas se suman a la noche.

Earth bringing forth for centuries of centuries:
Panicum colonum, panicum sanguinale, panicum maximum.
The memory of a natural, uncoded poetry comes to my lips:
Tree of the poet, tree of love, tree of mind.

A poetry completely of the mouth, like saliva:
milkweed, wax flower, moon flower.

A microscopic poetry:
Job's tears, Jupiter's tears, Love's tears.

But the night closes over poetry and shapes disappear.
This island night's first action is the awakening of scent:
All nostrils of all noses sweep the air,
searching for an invisible flower;
night takes to grinding millions of petals,
night travels the latitudes and longitudes of scent,
bodies meet by scent,
recognize each other by the unique scent that our night knows to bring forth;
night calls the tune for things that pass through the night,
scent enters the dance, squeezes against the *güiro*,
scent rushes forth from the mouths of instruments,
it perches on the dancer's foot,
all present devour stores of scent,
open the door and couples join the night.

La noche es un mango, es una piña, es un jazmín,
la noche es un árbol frente a otro árbol sin mover sus ramas,
la noche es un insulto perfumado en la mejilla de la bestia;
una noche esterilizada, una noche sin almas en pena,
sin memoria, sin historia, una noche antillana;
una noche interrumpida por el europeo,
el inevitable personaje de paso que deja su cagada ilustre,
a lo sumo, quinientos años, un suspiro en el rodar de la noche antillana,
una excrecencia vencida por el olor de la noche antillana.

No importa que sea una procesión, una conga,
una comparsa, un desfile.

La noche invade con su olor y todos quieren copular.
El olor sabe arrancar las máscaras de la civilización,
sabe que el hombre y la mujer se encontrarán sin falta en el platanal.
¡Musa paradisíaca, ampara a los amantes!

No hay que ganar el cielo para gozarlo,
dos cuerpos en el platanal valen tanto como la primera pareja,
la odiosa pareja que sirvió para marcar la separación.
¡Musa paradisíaca, ampara a los amantes!

No queremos potencias celestiales sino presencias terrestres,
que la tierra nos ampare, que nos ampare el deseo,
felizmente no llevamos el cielo en la masa de la sangre,
sólo sentimos su realidad física
por la comunicación de la lluvia al golpear nuestras cabezas.

Night is a mango, a pineapple, a jasmine,
night is a tree facing another tree without moving its limbs,
night is a perfumed insult to the cheek of the beast;
a sterilized night, a night without souls in pain,
or memory, or history, an Antillean night;
a night interrupted by the European,
the inevitable eminent visitor who leaves a load of his illustrious shit behind him,
here a mere 500 years, the faintest sigh in the grand procession of Antillean night,
excrescence overcome by the scent of Antillean night.

Whether march, conga,
band, parade
night invades with its scent and everyone wants to copulate.
That scent can tear away the masks of civilization,
it knows that man and woman will surely meet beneath the plantains.
Protect these lovers, Muse of Paradise!

You don't have to win heaven to enjoy it,
two bodies beneath the plantains are worth as much as the primal pair,
that odious pair who marked the separation.
Protect these lovers, Muse of Paradise!

We want not heavenly powers but earthly presences,
that the earth may protect us, that desire may protect us,
happily we don't carry heaven in the dough of blood,
but feel instead its physical reality
through the communication of rain striking our heads.

Bajo la lluvia, bajo el olor, bajo todo lo que es una realidad,
un pueblo se hace y se deshace dejando los testimonios:
un velorio, un guateque, una mano, un crimen,
revueltos, confundidos, fundidos en la resaca perpetua,
haciendo leves saludos, enseñando los dientes, golpeando sus riñones,
un pueblo desciende resuelto en enormes postas de abono,
sintiendo cómo el agua lo rodea por todas partes,
más abajo, más abajo, y el mar picando en sus espaldas;
un pueblo permanece junto a su bestia en la hora de partir,
aullando en el mar, devorando frutas, sacrificando animales,
siempre más abajo, hasta saber el peso de su isla;
el peso de una isla en el amor de un pueblo.

(1943)

Beneath rain, beneath scent, beneath everything that is a reality,
a people makes and unmakes itself leaving testimonies:
a wake, a party, a hand, a crime,
mixed up, confused, fused in the perpetual hangover,
meeting casually, showing their teeth, beating their kidneys,
a people descend determined in enormous piles of dung,
feeling that water completely surrounds them,
lower, lower, and the sea stinging their backs;
a people stay next to their beast at the hour of departure,
howling at the sea, devouring fruit, sacrificing animals,
always lower, until they know the whole weight of their island;
the weight of an island in its people's love.

(1943)