

ALIBIS

By

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Literary History

When the first
poet sang
it was
in a scale only
whales could lift
from steepest floors.
The scale oozed
fingers of rain
from ears of the deaf and
stillborn; the scale
rippled over
swamps of cyanide where
submerged tigers
hunted red elephants
in their hottest dreams.
It was a scale
the woman heard when
the pit of a plum
petrified
in her womb; it was
in the key of wind
after silence gels,
and sentries fall
asleep by their spears.
It was the sound
of shock absorbers
silently pumping
over unpaved roads,
or a morning so
dark it stabs
your eyes, or the
bar after broken

bottles have been swept.
The first poet sang
in a scale that
had to be
whispered so
that an egg
was heard
cracking.

Hart Crane In The Islands

Rum bottle on the mahogany desk. All day, the rhythm, like calibrated pistons pumping, as the Victrola blasted Ravel's *Bolero*, while the white curtains rippled from the window facing a plantain grove. In his reveries, the salt of a sailor still stung his lips, as his tongue licked for that taste, the dark phallus in a rocking hammock, tears, and teeth; while composing, the rigging of metaphors pulled palms and flotillas, the parlors of Ohio, and the smoke and lachrymae of the Americas into his blue estuary.

Mornings spent on the sundazzled shore. Afternoons peeling mangos in an esplanade beneath the green shade of trees; and then, slowly, the colors of the aquatic dusk. There was a lover, a cane-cutter tart with liquor & sweat, and bonfires on the sands. At night, he would correct sheaves containing *Voyages* and *The Bridge*, then sleep like a Faust cleansed of all knowledge-lust, shadows of birds passing across his face with the softness a boy feels as he sobs against his mother's apron. And for the first time his body felt as if it was weightless, as the sea opened her dark drapes, revealing her bones.

Intersections

Like dust smoking over a dirt road Chihuahua town, as the bus slows down at
the stop, letting on a woman with pointed breasts, and black hair streaked
blue with sun;
like the concrete arches raising the Hollywood freeway alongside palm trees
pumping
like pistons, the shrub-dun hills dotted with houses the glaze of bubblegum,
and the sea only miles away;
like a car starting in the dead of the night;
like the beggar's plucked guitar string, and his voice that shatters the
crystal buttons
holding the moon's dress in one piece;
like the oil drenched finger of silence sealing these syllables:
there is always a bridge
connecting the pitch of an egg cracked with a nail being hammered,
the barren woman with the flooded arroyo,
the hot coffee sipped in a diner with the black spit of the vinegarroon,
there is always a bridge, there is always a bridge, as
the border between north and south is pliable,
like water.

Labor

The old man was always crimped as he held the reins. His burro hauled a cart with splashing buckets of pig slop. He would stop at the corner of each block, and then yell out for the grandmothers abandoned by men now trotting on ghost horses, and the younger pregnant women to usher him into their back patios where they kept the plastic buckets filled with left-over oatmeal, stale bread and tortillas, soft tomatoes and chilies, pork fat coagulated and scooped from frying pans, and hardened rice and beans. Every block, a few women would flap out onto the sidewalk in their slippers, or a retired worker would whistle for the old man's attention. Then the pig slop collector would wake up his burro with a *¡Ya!*, and pour the bile-yellow concoctions into the buckets in his cart.

Watching this from my Saturday morning porch, I would always think of the butcher section in the *mercado*: fish tanks were filled with fried pork skins or tripe. Behind the brilliant counter windows revealing trays of steak, *carnitas*, and cow tongues colored the gray of a faded violet, the white-teeth'd women would smile as they wrapped the meat for customers. Flies circled. Caged canaries flapped their wings wildly. And there was always the stench of blood drying in the heat, like the odor of stale beer and unwashed crotch.

What the old man poured into buckets and sought out block after block was the source—the enzyme itself—for workers with rough hands and mothers giving milk. The seed for many meals, and the juice that quenches thirst. But it was the burro, and not the old man, that I would study, and still remember: a creature with two mud-puddles for eyes, its body like a dirty coat matted on a stick. Its fur would twinge from gnats, and from the leather belt used to speed up its trot. Under some sky in a further desert there must be a dune awaiting the step of its hooves. May the burro, that laborer, sink in the sand and be swallowed, before the vultures circle above.

Octavio Paz Addresses Marie-Jo

Listen to me as one does the evening rain:

I have tried to image streets, tamarind
trees, the garden of my youth, the wind & its dominion, all
in the white mirror of a page.

Do not move; unbutton your blouse, let fall
your skirt which is wheat the wind combs; that
is our world.

I have choked on politics, watched
money rasp, ashes up chimneys, and sat
in the white atrium of silence.

Do not speak; undo your hair, let fall
your dress which is water tempting the moon; that
is our only parliament.

The calendar has turned full
circle, fusing the gods of water & smoke.
But I am with you as a draft of syllables,
an echo that knocks, and fades, and I am
indifferent to the dying world because here
I sleep without you.

Without you, dark orchard,
tree of my blood, blade of noon.
Two birds took flight in your eyes:
the one without wings, the other on fire.

Jean Toomer Down South

Pine needles on the ground bent beneath his shoes, as he walked into woods with their rumors of Juju men; the cane-juice made him dizzy. Sharecroppers from their cabins discerned his color from the chalk and brittle songs of the white folk, yet they saw his plum neck-ties, and heard the punctuated beat of the city in his speech. Jean had passed for white in New York: skin the color of bleached-dry corn husk, and hair combed straight. Each evening, the sawmill would close, and the sweetness of lumber saturated the coolness. Then the young women would sit on their porches awaiting their lovers; women, dusky and humming, with rounded thighs and breasts full of nightwebbed rivers. They were like afternoons that push away the sun. The men drank, and by coal heaters, grandfathers narrated the Diaspora of time, bumper crops, girls who ripened too quickly, and the knife-fights. Once, while sitting on the steps of his lodging, Jean heard a man singing far off:

*There's basement with a window where the light's all brown;
there's a basement with a window where the light's all brown,--
sometimes I sit there all night when I feel like I'm gonna drown.*

The new journals from New York became wind in fields of tins and rats rattling bones. Where the nymphs had abandoned London, where Helen was a ghost on the pavements of Manhattan, Jean felt the flowers in his blood blossom, and heard the spirituals, tasted the wet air at dawn, and the region was like a brown nipple at the mouth of that poet.

*There's a basement light with a window...
cause a man can't never drown...*

And one twilight, while walking back from the woods, he saw men huddled round a bonfire by the sawmill. Fermented cane in a bottle, faces all his color, yet lit up by red firelight. They noticed him, and invited him to a drink: the city boy who spent his time writing. Yet there was never a poem he wrote about that hour, while he spat and gossiped work and women with names like Karintha. For a while, he belonged; and like his companions, he would swig at the bottle, shake his head then guffaw, tasting the smoke in the liquor, and all the while savoring it.

Prioritizing

The force that through the green fuse...

--Dylan Thomas

Apart from the smell of curdled milk and wilted lettuce, you visit the public market of this border town for its fried pork-skin the color of crystallized urine; jalapenos and tomatoes piled on pink towels beside stalls frying tripe; and the sharp-teeth'd teenagers, and matrons in brown shawls, passing from shade into sunlight and into shadow. You, too, turn left into half-light where the blueness of cows' stomachs on a platter scratches at your throat as you stumble through flies. And instead of purchasing dried beef or writing of rattlesnake-skin boots, or kiosks, you stop to sketch words when you spot a rooster, rusty with carrot-colored streaks, beak bent, beneath the corrugated-iron counter of a stall, tar stains, burnt *Pacifico* cigarettes, a cockroach's husk, yet the rooster blinking, its days spent with one leg tied by green wire, while radios clang the cowbells of *cumbias*, pedestrians brush past you,-- and that wire, though adulterated, the greenest.

Lord Byron, At 29, Witnesses His First Beheading

The thief had pissed his rags, and ripped out his nails by clawing at the cell door and walls. Manicured, Byron had been carousing: “tooling” and drinking. Now bloated, he was on his regimen of soda water and bread. The priest and half-naked executioner found out that the thief’s neck was too large for the aperture, and so an assistant held him down by the hair. Barking Latin over the man’s cries, the priest flayed the air with holy water. Starved, Byron shook as he stared through an opera-glass, at the guillotine and thief. A rattle, and the blade shimmied down. The head was lopped off close to the ears; blood splashed on the wood, a red miasmas plopped from the skull. Byron could admit to being left hot and thirsty, yet later attended other executions with indifference. However, in Greece, while aiding against the Turks, bones sweating fever, and a cloud encroaching his light, Byron saw that condemned man who perhaps had not committed any greater aberrations than he. And he whispered a line for that man gazing at the planks,—a matter witnessed by the boy who wiped Byron’s brow with a wet cloth, emptied his bed-pan, and could speak demotic Greek, but not English.

*Memento**Au detour d'une sentier, une charogne...**---Charles Baudelaire*

Carrion of dog by a dirt pile and dried tree: littered bottles, meat-scrap, yellowed newspaper the color of jaundiced skin stretched over ribs. Traffic ten yards away, noon sun blinding,--a desert day in which air was packed to the seams with heat.

I'd seen other dogs bloated with eyes the color of halibut scales, or fur-strips of coyote whiskered with skid marks and oil on asphalt, yet this was once the perennial border dog: trotting or limping with pendulant testicles or teats, fur the dun of coffee muddied with cream and ash,-- those beasts no one feeds and yet they continue breeding, sniffing out for one another in fallen adobe houses, behind brick walls plastered with wrestling and beer ads, and lap gutter water with black tongues, nip fangs at coagulated lard smeared on burrito wrappers.

It had been dead for months: no fur, but soap-smooth hide, tar-colored, and which could be snapped like a pencil, and mandible-pick'd clean, as ants and cockroaches milled through a cavernous aperture in what was once the beast's belly. Organs a sponge-mass stewing in weeds. And trickling through this aspic, the marrowless vertebrae, each descending disk the yellow of piano keys in a mahogany parlor stinking of mildew.

A gaseous up-thrust of flies jarred my concentration, and my throat itched at my tongue. Yet I gazed on, coughed phlegm from the odor, like cow stalls moist with beetles, huge wheels of cheese beaded with grease, or breath and damp cotton on a humid bus. A single drop of cold sweat scurried down my back, and quickly warmed when it reached the base of my spine, as my skin absorbed its salt.

This pause on my way to a friend's house took only a minute, yet I now chop it into paragraphs, like a butcher who partitions vast sides of a pig or cow into protein which white teeth will later shred. Because this is my compost for tomorrow, words mushrooming in the miasma, just as my own marrow and sperm diluted in the July heat, while ants crawled between my legs, and a tree cast its shadow on a plot awaiting me.

*And We Wait**Genesis 3:24*

...and the sword crackles in the cobalt evening, like the blue whorls of breath He exhales at the hour when ferns shiver and water clenches its fingers into a fist...

and the flaming sword guards the way to the Tree of Life, and we await the trespassing man who, after wandering the argent fields of the moon, might find his way here, reachable only by sleep or metaphor...

and we are many, so many, that when I look to my side I see a chain of cherubim, their wings the only light in this darkened garden, abandoned like an 18th century farmhouse overtaken by the forest, these groves where at times we hear the serpent hiss, overripe plums fall with a thump on loam, while a vagrant hound howls and scratches claws on the steel gate...

and we wait, as stupid as squid for the harvester who would never find his way here, or even hope to, knowing that death would shrivel into a rat's turd in a kitchen drawer, just by biting into those blue plums the size of a lamb's heart... death would dry up, would be dead itself....

But when the poem is edged up against the shovel, the clod breaks, and a word sprouts in the darkness and is the shadow that lovers feel beneath one another's skin, the seed they crack beneath their teeth, the first water breaking through bruised dams of blood...

because the poem strives for an inch after death, not to bypass it; who would want to eat from the Tree of Life, denying the milk of the word?

So we wait, whiskers having never breached our parchment-thin skin, saccharine water in our veins, wings combustible as paper lanterns, and, like sponges or fruit-flies regurgitating sucrose on an orange pulp, we are not inoculated with the slightest grain of poetry; even worse, we are deathless.