

*Tall Stories: On poetical and non poetical prose and rhythms in fieldwork notes,
July 2003, Colombia*

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For Jimmie Durham
A Postscript to our Discussion on Rage in Berlin

(Apologies to Homer and his Iliad)

I

What leaps to mind is the urgency
Starbursts of leaden shot
Captions
Promissory notes to one day make the transition
From notes to non-notes
But that day never comes

Coated with that thin film of despair
that the more one writes about something in one's notebook
the more it disappears

In my line of work
A diabolic problem exists with its own whiplash rhythm
A spin-off from the exotic
Meaning that the banality of horror exists
Side by side with its wide-eyed attraction

Which is actually only half the problem
The other being muckraking
Exposing oppression
Black-rimmed suffering

Yet it is a fact
An all too easily insulated fact
That for millennia, I guess
People have been able to hold this suffering of others
On the far side of consciousness

'About suffering The Old Masters were never wrong,' said Auden,
'How well, they understood
Its human position; how it takes place
While someone else is eating or opening a window or just walking dully along;
How, when the aged are reverently, passionately waiting
For the miraculous birth, there always must be
Children who did not specially want it to happen, skating
On a pond at the edge of the wood'

And if that's not enough
There's the problem of joining art with revolution
Or more modestly put
With doing good, battling evil
Wooing the gods with something other than sacrifice
Namely facts, impressions, stories, and fragments
thereof

But don't they say, 'Great Pan is dead?'
Where are the gods now?
To whom do we write our notes, our poems?

II

In this respect, I would like to think there are two sorts
of poets
Those who point at suffering and cry and make you feel bad
As their way of feeling good
Or at least better

And those who laugh, sadly, it is true, from within,
Masters of irony
Being on the receiving end
Bad teeth, rickets, and all
Assymetric in the face of world history
Without any clear sense of how to proceed

Now here's a poem penned in 1964 by Jimmie Durham who
happens to be Cherokee

And once lived a couple of blocks from this bookstore
When he represented The American Indian Movement in the UN

But will never return to America

Like a dead Comanche pony
It bites the dust
Its dry tongue dragging in the sand
And its eyes staring holes in the sky.
The sole is torn, worn from miles
Of work.
Who places these mateless, forlorn
Shoes in deserts?
Who throws single shoes from
Windows of cars to deserted shoulders
Of highways?
In honour of history and its marches let us
Have a closet museum of dropped and discarded
Shoes

On the page opposite is another of his poems
This one called "Object."

It must have been an odd object to begin with
Now the ghosts of its uses
Whisper around my head, tickle the tips
Of my fingers. Weeds
Reclaim with quick silence the beams, pillars,
Doorways. Places change, and a small object
Stands defiant in its placelessness.
Durable because it contains intensely meanings
Which it can no longer pour out.

Something lost to time because it is so full of it
In this American past

III

My fieldwork notes can be like that shoe in the desert
Biting the dust
What Genet, another outsider, said about words being images
Lost in the desert
And it is to the desert we must go to see them

Six hours crossing the desert on foot
The fierce wind on the ridges
Littered with fossils and volcanic rocks
Twisted and black
With a silver can of marijuana brownies made by Mercedes
The servant dressed in black in Bogota

Black lines on the red sand wind screaming
Giant X-rays
A horse, a dinosaur, but no Jimmie shoe
Now and again a fine spray of rain would catch your face
We were walking in clouds

Alvaro in city shoes round red face, no socks, big tummy,
and bloodshot eyes
Leading the way
Whenever asked a question he would begin his answer
'*Eso tiene miles de años . . .*'

Squinting I see Grandiloquent Language squeezed in the
margin:
*In this petrified desert of mountains and fossils
In the eye of the storm of the prehistorical
apocalypse
We are dumb witnesses to the birth trauma of the world*

With two bodyguards half a mile behind
Protecting
Reconnoitering
Heavy back-packs
guns under their shirts
God knows what's in them back-packs
Infra-red glasses for night vision
Get the jump on the Apocalypse
Maybe

At the airport weeks back way in the jungle
Accidentally looking over a shoulder
I saw they had to register
A bunch of well-worn collapsible black sub-machine guns and
ammo clips
Lying on the desk with a fat cop behind
Imagine!
Flying unarmed!

IV

He tells me:
This is the only safe place for him in Colombia
Because the desert makes it impossible for the guerrilla to
operate

His parents would never pay a kidnapper
The bodyguards are only a deterrent
That if the big guys want you
They will get you
But not the delicuentes

I want the army to pursue if I get kidnapped
Even if it means I will be killed

What I couldn't stand is torture
No way let my family enter into negotiations
And receive a finger or an ear in the mail

We never pay kidnappers
Never

It's worse for the family imagining what's happening
Than for the person kidnapped
Five people in that family have been kidnapped
Some of them killed

In the city he lives in a house
Each room embodies a different century
19th, 18th, 17th, that's pretty much it,
no whitemen before that
With his servants all in black
The bodyguards on the ready
Alert
Dozing like mastiffs

And he says he hasn't a clue whom his neighbors are
'It's like an island,' my companion says later
And this is his prison
This wondrous house
A stage-set
With its layers of centuries one inside the other
Glass interiors
Exotic gardens
Fountains
And the cement-filled cupboard artwork by a famous
Colombian artist
Whom he does not know
Tú sabes Miguel
Como estamos en Colombia.
Aislados

V

We go to a town in the forest
Where it never stops raining

And you never stop sweating
At night with the lights the rain is like white steel
The guerrilla control the dark river sweeping past
And the forest too
Ten minutes radius is all you've got
Creepy

Sarajevo
Vietnam
What did Auden say?
And music everywhere

But nothing can cover over Domingo's invincible voice
Neither the music nor the tempest
As he tells me and the story-telling Paisa
A man of considerable girth and gaiety
Owner of the Club Nautico
And his smiling wife cooking up a storm
Of the *para* mutilations

Up there far away in the forest in a village called
Buenavista
Which means "nice view"
First they castrated the man said to be a guerrilla
informant
Threw salt on the wound
Cut his throat
Buenavista

Paramilitaries in the village
Guerrilla surrounding the village
Launched a kitchen gas cylinder from a mortar
They call such a bomb a *pipeta*
Full of explosive, nails, screws, etc.,
Sometimes human shit too, I have heard
So as to infect the jagged wounds
Now that does not happen in *The Iliad*
No sir!
War has changed

With the first *pipeta*
The villagers fled into the church
Then another *pipeta* was launched
Direct hit on the church
Took out everyone
All 120
Quick mass grave
And out of there.

So the man with the bodyguards wants to film
Domingo from Buenavista
Singing his eulogies
Which is why I am here too
All the boys together
Iliad Redux
Telling the story of the story

Folk Wisdom

And all that

It is very dark in the Club Náutico
A cop with a gallil on his shoulder is in a tight clench
with a black woman in a corner
Rubbing her cunt
Thunder and lightning in sheets

Across the dark river we see lights
Guerrilla zone

The bodyguards take care of everything
Stake the place out
Sit by the door
Pulling their T-shirts down over their guns
Go out to buy cigarettes
Light your cigarette
Get your drinks
Pay the taxis
Carry the heavy equipment
Pay for everything
Watch everything
In walkie-talkie contact with each other
And with who else?
They are an extension of yourself, the mother of all
mothers
You surrender

In the semi-darkness
The albino Vicente is dancing *Vallenato* with a very dark
girl
With a winning smile and straight hair drawn tight back
Tight clench, barely moving, knees only
'*Mueven mas las orejas,*' whispers Alex the bodyguard
Subtle slow incredibly erotic
'You're moving too fast,' she tells me when I dance with her

For the moment this is Our Space
Rearrange the tables
Watch the rain on the river
Take the precious freedom
Yet another cell, yet another island

Obligado comes from *ombligo* meaning the belly button
When a baby is born the parents may apply a special
medicine there
We are talking about boys here
If the medicine is from a humming bird
Women will find him irresistible to fuck and he will die
from fucking
If from plantain, he will be a great worker
If from a certain snake, he will be slippery, impossible to
hold
Not even by 100 opponents all acting simultaneously

It's a long list, concludes Domingo

But I think: didn't do much good when they launched the

pipeta
Now that's a surly comment!

VI

Two years before
Upriver from the dark mangrove swamps
In the darkened village
Lilia once told me how scared
She was of the guerrilla
They were new then
Coming down the *cordillera*
With a huge dog
Bearing their wounded
Demanding canoes

In their camp
In the mountains
It is cold at night
A beautiful woman fighter
Told her they have to sleep five together
For warmth but even so shiver all night

They want recruits
Buena materia here they are saying
Strong, adroit, boys and girls
And the young are fascinated

The guerrilla assemble the people
Telling them to get ready for the next Viet Nam
Someone asked about peace
This is your peace
They replied
Firing in the air three times
Everything seems to come in threes
Even in revolution

In the high cordillera above Buga
Before the *paras* got in there
The army would go once a year
Take two peasants
Beat the shit out of them
Take them down to Buga
Saying they were *guerrilleros*
Other times they would kill them
And dress the corpses as *guerrilleros*

The peasants up there hated the state
The only way they could help us they would say
Would be to *desarticular* the *paras* from the army

They come up as *paras*
Go down as army
Taking off the armband of the AUC

Two tactics the *paras* have:
Power-saw people alive

Or disappear them in mass graves

VII

In those days the country was unlivable
And outside middle and upper class areas of the cities
Still is and getting worse (2010)
Este es un país donde la vida y la muerte están pegados
Most killing, however, is of young people by young people
In gangs in slums

In those days even small things became an ordeal
Like trying to post a letter in Bogota
No stamps available not even at the central post office
Outside the store stand ten people
Patiently waiting to use the one telephone
Must have been the last one in Colombia
Together with the last stamp

Someone told me the guerrilla not only use *carrobombas*
Meaning car-bombs
But also *perrobombas*
Meaning dog-bombs

They must have gotten the idea from the swarm of private
security guards
Whose dogs pull at the leash
Eager for a malefactor's leg or two
Man's best friend

A woman comes running through the plaza screaming
'The guerrilla! The guerrilla'
Others start to run, me too
Stop to talk to Rubiel
Panic over
The shutters rumble down on the soda fountain
The SUV is driven into the lottery owner's store
Bicycles sprint past
The students from the *colegio* are dismissed
Passing brandy in a plastic cup
At night the streets are absolutely quiet

An anthropologist
So I am told
Immersed in the precolombian statues in the south
Those megaliths
In San Augustin in Huila
Home of the guerrilla
Huge teeth
Cavernous eyes
Now naked and defenseless
Domesticated in grassy parkland
Immobilized from history
Let alone the past

Effigies of effigies
Some like clowns

Others ogres
They look slightly ridiculous
Glaring at the heavy silence of the sun-filled mountains
With that acrid smell at noon
Whose name I could I never get to know
No matter how often I asked

Acrid like gunpowder or burnt bones
Measure of another time
Maybe they are hungry
For something?

A helicopter thumps in the sky
To take the anthropologist
To read Tarot cards
For the president and his wife
He is the lover of the president
I am told
And so it goes

On the outskirts of the small city of Bucaramanga
Where I am right now
A person belonging to Claudia Escobar Isabel Perez column
of the ELN guerrilla
Was executed
After a trial by the ELN
For trying to desert

The newspaper *Vanguardia Liberal* published this story today
Tough stuff
I mean
Bad enough to shoot impulsively out of malice or anger
But to be shot dead after they give you a trial!
A mini-state already!
Measured violence
A great way to gain loyalty
If you try to leave, we'll kill you

Been that way a long, long, time

The name of the group is that of a woman guerrilla
Who was shot in combat and buried in a small town named
Tunde (I think)
The ELN put a plaque on her grave
Announcing that anyone disfiguring would be . . .
Of course
Shot
The army came and dynamited the grave

Then the guerrilla tried to shoot out the police
But as the police rarely engage the guerrilla
(Would you, on that salary?)
Nothing happened
What a let-down

The army arrested the police as accomplices
The guerrilla replaced the plaque
The army blew it up again

Here the field note stops

The Catholic priest in a small town outside of Bucaramanga
Told me of the colonel who was shot dead by his own
bodyguard
Who had been in the guerrilla

It happened like this:
The guerrilla organized a protest march of peasants
The colonel and other officers sat on a platform
The priest had a flat tire and arrived late
The crowd was getting angry
Mocking the priest
'Corocito!' they yelled, 'Corocito! Hijoeputa! Hijoeputa!'
Then they started at the bodyguard:
Traitor! they yelled, 'Guerrillero traicionero!'
He got mad
Grabbed his machine gun and shot all the officers in the
back right there
Then the police opened fire
Blindly
As they say
On the crowd killing fifty people
The field note stops here

VIII

Funny, the rustling these pages acquire
Once they have been written on
The unwritten pages purr like a cat
When you let them run through your fingers
But the written-on pages crackle like fire and a soft breeze

The older they are
The closer you get to page One
The stronger the crackling
The softer the breeze

The End