

## Peruvian Journeys

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I

### On an indifferent street in South America

He was standing in front of the railway station studying the clock. Before he looked he already knew the time, although it wasn't important. But the clock, the clock was important. It was the one in the poem. Ginsberg's, *To an Old Poet in Peru*.

I kiss you on your fat cheek (once more tomorrow  
Under the stupendous Disaguaderos clock)

A friend in San Francisco had sent him a copy. 'You're there, so go see it. Take pictures. Report back'

It wasn't much to see. Not so stupendous. Just a rather shabby Victorian clock on the front of the British built station. And, Ginsberg had got the name wrong. It was Desamparados. But he took the picture anyway.

In the poem the streets were quiet. You could hear the soft anisetto voice, smell the 'death of spiders' on the sidewalk. Now, it was impossible to see the sidewalk. The streets had been taken over by the poor from the countryside. He had to thread his way through the rumbling, shifting crowds of *ambulantes* who seemed to own the grimy, urine rivuletted Lima sidewalks. Squatting, they waited behind a few pair of shoelaces, half a dozen bars of soap, or a handful of pencils. A woman wearing a faded handwoven *manta*, a thick black braid hanging down her back from under her bowler hat, rearranged stacks of colored plastic dishes. Next to her, a dirty-faced child, thin brown hands waving away the flies from a tray of runny pastries. College tee shirts - BOSTON U., UCLA, TEXAS A&M - wire hangers, folding knives from China, bundles of herbs, wooden matches in boxes with pictures of llamas on them, all carefully displayed on the afternoon sidewalk,

spaces marked out in the dense forest of slowly passing legs. From between small white teeth two young girls' laughter curled upwards. It's delicate song was immediately swallowed in the clash of more urgent hungry voices which rose and hung suspended together with the smells of roasted meat, overripe fruit and closely packed dust-hot bodies. Brightly painted buses, fat-sided, overfilled, roared by, spewing their clouds of black exhaust over the shoelaces, the pencils, the soap.

He stopped to look at a display of belt buckles. Neat rows of brass plated faces of Tupac Amaru and Che Guevara, stared up at him from a yellow plastic sheet on the ground. People pressed against him trying to pass on the narrow sidewalk. Behind the man selling the buckles was an empty shop. In the window he saw his reflection. It was insubstantial there in the crowded Lima street, like the shade and the ghost of the two poets.

Before I go to my death in an airplane crash  
in North America (long ago)  
And you go to your heart attack on an indifferent  
street in South America

## II

### **Floating on the Surface.**

The room was on the second floor at the back of the hotel and overlooked the low flat roofs of the city. On the roof immediately opposite a woman was taking the day's washing from a line. She raised her brown fleshy arms above her head in a delicate dancer's movement as she took down each article of clothing. Bending from the waist she put them in a wicker basket at her feet. On the adjacent roof a tethered German shepherd strained at the end of its rope, raising up on its hind legs to bark at three small black vultures, which had settled unconcernedly on a parapet out of the dog's reach. In the distance, the snow covered peak of a dead volcano.

He went onto the narrow balcony outside his window. From here he could see the main plaza. It was just after sunset and in the relative cool of the early evening many people had come out to promenade. There were men and woman arm in arm, children chasing each other between the boles of the tall ornamental palms, groups of young boys, hair neatly combed, parading for the young girls. On one corner an ice cream seller was dispensing white packets from his bicycle mounted freezer. Shopkeepers stood in open doorways or sat on chairs out on the sidewalk. An old man, apparently blind, perched on the edge of a park bench playing a guitar. A small dark boy dressed in rags accompanied him on a wooden flute. They played a sad lament from the distant sierra and passers-by dropped coins into the boy's upturned straw hat.

He knew these evening scenes were illusions, illusions of distance, of the half light. Up close, under the sun you could smell the reality, taste the hot dust.

He left the balcony and walked back into the room. On the small table by the bed was a glass of water. It reminded him how thirsty he was. He reached for the glass, but then stopped. He bent to look more closely at it. On the top of the water floated dozens of small insects. Some were still alive, limbs moving, trying to escape. But, the water held them firmly. He picked up the glass, carried it across the room and emptied it into the sink.

### III

#### **The Hotel Comercio**

As he entered her, felt himself slide deep into her, she said softly, 'Don't worry, I'm three months pregnant.'

He hadn't been worried. He'd only known her a few days. He tried to ignore what she had said. Tried to, but couldn't.

Suddenly he saw his own body as if he had just come into the room.

It was there raised above her on the bed. It was lying on the floor, motionless. It was being washed in a tin bath. It was propped up against the side of a stone wall in a vineyard. It was on a barbershop floor under a bloody sheet.

He stopped, withdrew.

'Please don't.'

'I'm sorry, I really am.'

'I do want you. So much.'

Her hand moved up his thigh to caress him.

'I'm sorry.'

'Is it because of the baby?

'No. Not that.'

'Because it's someone else's baby?'

'No. No.... At least I don't think so. It's more about me.'

'Oh.'

He rolled off her and lay on his back, pulling the sheet across both their bodies. He lit a cigarette and watched the smoke rise slowly in the still air.

'I never said I loved you.'

'No, you never did.'

'And, I don't. I don't love you.'

'I know. It's not important.'

'I could never love you.'

'Please, you musn't cry.'

'Of course, you're right. I musn't cry.'

She touched him with her fingers, drawing them lightly down his arm, watching him.

- finally staring straight ahead in surprise  
& recollection into the mirror of  
the Hotel Comercio room.