

## FROM A NOTEBOOK

The year was 1961 or perhaps early '62. Kennedy held the White House and Cuba was a problem. The first detachments of the Peace Corps had gone off, to Sierra Leone and Colombia I believe, and I was in Colombia, too, in a classroom with Professor Cuello.

I had arrived in Colombia for less idealistic reasons than the Peace Corps. But I knew no better direction, so with three other new graduates, I found myself teaching in an "Inter-American School" with a director who, having felt stranded there the year before, had called in reinforcements. Gabriel García Márquez would soon call international attention to our adopted city as the model for Macondo's swelling to a capital of banana enterprise. That enterprise had crested, leaving shambles in its wake, and García Márquez was off in the US South, reading Faulkner and planning his novel.

Our school was a doubtful enterprise itself and we made hardly a ripple in the stream of Colombia's on-going, often painful endeavors. Drug trafficking was enough in its infancy that we heard nothing of it. We found a small pleasure in contraband scotch, and in having the means, even at our slight salary but with a 10/1 ratio of pesos to dollars, to have "our own contrabandista" learn the path to our door. We didn't think of ourselves as colonialists, but we were, in an inattentive way, enjoying gin and tonics at the tourist hotel, or a night downtown for under ten dollars.

Mr. Jarvis, was no model educator, but he had a few ideals, among them taking advantage of the linguistic variety of our school—German, French, Dutch, Swiss-German, Portuguese, Spanish, and English—and multiplying opportunities for us all. To that end, he had arranged for Professor Cuello, whose name I think I just retrieved from deep memory as I started these pages, to sit with us for an afternoon or so each week and introduce us to the treasures of his tongue.

Our professor made the rounds of several schools to secure a small living for himself. He had studied at Salamanca, and he taught religion to the children in our school, which ran then from the first through the eighth grade. Twice a week, he would address several gatherings of our students then bus off to another school on his rounds, teaching Colombian history or Spanish grammar elsewhere. Rarely in a hurry, he seemed pleased to sit with us and crack the window on the Spanish poetry that he loved.

Our building stood on cement pillars so the sudden washes of the rainy season could rush beneath it. Sand pocked the louvered windows all through

the windy season, whereas during the other season, the rainy one, the wash came early each afternoon, cracking the humidity and flooding the arroyos—cars and children had been known to be carried off—before the sky cleared and the iguana returned to his sunny patch of backyard cement wall. Unused lumber, a pile of sand, and a mixer for making more wall stood near him and remained there, as silent as he, through the entire two years of my stay. Vultures were the most prominent birds, gloomy kites floating above the playground, waiting for one of us, or for one of the children, to succumb to the heat of those days, or just hoping, perhaps, that the iguana would finally tumble from his perch. *Gallinazos* they're called in Colombia, big sky roosters; you can find them in García Márquez.

It was much as if, were my role reversed with Professor Cuello, I had begun with Spenser and moved on to Donne. I remember trudging through some *Coplas* of Jorge Manrique but failed to rise to their moral concerns. I remember better a lesson the Colombian third grade teacher whispered to me, a ditty in Spanish the burden of which was that I should “plant a tree, raise a son, and write a book.” I had the wit to ask, “What about a daughter?” but I think I missed her joke of planting a tree.

I remember also Professor Cuello's fine story of Frey Luis de Leon's being hauled away by the Inquisition, imprisoned for five years, then returning to his classroom where students on wooden benches heard him intone, “As we were saying yesterday,” as he strode to the front of the hall. In Latin, naturally. I sought out those benches years later when I made my own way to Salamanca and found them so narrow and rough-hewn that they were sure to hold a class's attention by their discomfort. But what really held my attention those Barranquilla afternoons was the “Serranilla de la Finojosa” by the Marqués de Santillana.

*Moza tan hermosa  
non vi en la frontera,  
como una vaquera  
de la Finojosa. . . .*

A couple of those “f's” have changed to “h,” making it “hermosa” and “Hinojosa,” as I found once on a map. Related to the pastourelle of medieval French convention, the serranilla is a poem composed in short lines permitting a knight or gentleman to dally with a pretty country girl. The poem is not

so innocent as to be without irony, especially when the woman gets the better of the knight. But the poem sounds innocent with its tripping meter and its two-syllable rhymes. *Frontera*, *vaquera* (“cowgirl” or “shepherdess”), *moza* (“young, single, domestic worker”), *fermosa* (“pretty”), and *Finojosa* are typical of the run of the poem. A touch of Dr. Seuss dampens its dignity. Nevertheless it stuck with me, and years later I realized that with hardly any effort, except to have said it over many times in wonder, I had it all but memorized. It held and had perhaps colonized a corner of my mind, for it breathes a serenity that no amount of the far-fetched can compromise.

*Faciendo la vía  
del Calatraveño  
a Santa Maria,  
vencido del sueño,  
por tierra fragosa  
perdí la carrera  
do vi la vaquera  
de la Finojosa.*

Passing from one place to another over variations in landscape as slight but noticeable as moving back and forth from abab to abba quatrains, a knight conquered by sleepiness, loses his way and sees the cowgirl of Finojosa. On a fragrant plane of “roses and flowers,” she guards livestock with other workers, all of whom she outshines since no spring flowers could be as lovely as she. The subjunctive turns, as the two approach each other, are ravishing for their deflection of the obvious—that each one recognizes, quite precisely, the nature and the role of the other. When they finally speak, he, slyly, asks of her as if she did not stand before him. “Where is the cowgirl of Finojosa?” And she, in parallel third person, as coyly replies. “She knows well what you want but desires no love; nor does she expect any.” And that, with its implied “so there!” brings the poem to a close. I cannot count the number of times that poem has risen to mind, “for no rhyme or reason” as an old saying goes.

We were within months also of the Cuban Missile Crisis during which I sat close to my short wave radio, seeking news in English, and wondering, among other uncharitable thoughts, just where I might find myself a few mornings later were English suddenly of no concern whatever. In that notion lay a quite particular lesson in the *gallinazos* of colonial experience coming home to roost.

New Colombian friends had a joke about the US. They likened us and our foreign policy to the *gallinazo*, first because we pulled our worldly wages from the ass end of the colonized, and then also because of an available pun by which the same word signifies the excrement of hens, which by metaphoric extension, and so by a kind of street poetry, meant cowards. I'd be lucky to become the shoeshine boy to whom I could still afford to condescend, and lucky to find in that toehold any rhyme or reason whatever.

Another old saying could add, "There's more truth than poetry in that." But touches of poetry asserted themselves too, even in the rhymes and rhythm of the "Serranilla." So perhaps you'll forgive my dedicating these few pages to distant afternoons in sunny Barranquilla, to a *profesor andante* from Salamanca, and to verses, suspect to some, that I have cherished. "Serranilla de la Finojosa" is a poem that I have long intended to translate, and here, perhaps, I have, with no better place to put it.

## SERRANILLA OF BARRANQUILLA

*a translation of "Serranilla de la Finojosa"  
by Marqués de Santillana (1398-1458)*

No barmaid so well-assayed  
Had I found in poesia,  
As Blanda, the sadly arrayed  
Sweetheart of Barranquilla.

Finding my way  
From college to after  
In a city betrayed  
By the edge of its laughter,  
She was melopoeia,  
A song's lovely burden,  
Though surely no virgen,  
Not Blanda of Barranquilla.

In a shaded courtyard  
Strewn with small tables,

With doors leading darkward  
As a few bucks enabled,  
We were the cavalleria  
And she our trainer,  
Long night the retainer  
Of Blanda of Barranquilla.

Not even first roses  
Could have been so composed  
Nor so fresh in their poses  
Against all I'd supposed  
Though they sang Ave Maria  
As in crinolines faded,  
With a few drinks aided,  
Blanda danced Barranquilla.

I tried not to stare  
At her beauty surprising,  
Being somewhat aware  
Of sentiments rising,  
But as if offering spiraea  
I ventured before her,  
And as if I adored her  
Asked of Blanda of Barranquilla.

And then with a smile,  
"Welcome stranger," she replied,  
"I understand well  
Just what you've implied.  
But she has no idea  
Of love and knows where  
You're drifting—nowhere  
Near Blanda of Barranquilla."

—D.H.