

POEMAS
de Carlos Drummond de Andrade

Translated by
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IN SEARCH OF POETRY

Don't make verses from events.
In the presence of poetry there is no creation or death.
Before it life is a static sun
Giving off neither heat nor light.
Affinities, anniversaries, personal incidents don't matter.
Don't make poetry with your body,
This fine, complete, comfortable body so adverse to lyrical
[effusions.
Your drop of bile, your grimace of pleasure or pain in the dark
Don't matter.
Don't reveal your feelings:
They partake of the dubious and take the long view.
What you think and feel is, still, not poetry.

Don't celebrate your home town, leave it in peace.
Poetry is not the motion of machinery or the secret of households.
It is not the music heard in passing, the murmur of the sea on
[shoreline streets.

Poetry is not nature
And not men in society.
Rain and night, weariness and hope mean nothing to it.
Poetry (don't take the poetry out of things)
Is an ellision of subject and object.

Don't dramatize, make invocations or apostrophes.
Don't waste time in lying
Or boring yourself.
Your marble yacht, your diamond shoe,
Your mazurkas and abuses, your family skeletons
Vanish in the curve of time, are good for nothing.

Don't restore your buried melancholic childhood.
Don't oscillate between looking-glass and dissipating memory.
Whatever has dissipated was not poetry,
Whatever has broken was not crystal.

Mutely penetrate the kingdom of words
As there are some poems waiting to be written.
They are in a state of paralysis but without despair –
Only calm and freshness on the unbroken surface.
There they are, mute and alone, in the state of a dictionary.
Live with your poems before you describe them,
Be patient if they are obscure, calm if they provoke you.
Wait for each one to happen
And finish it with your power of word and of silence.
Don't force the poem to unyoke itself from limbo,
Don't pick up the poem you have dropped.

Don't coax the poem along. Accept it
As it will accept its own final form
Concentrated in space.

Come closer and contemplate the words.
Each one has a thousand secret faces under the neutral face
And asks you, not caring about the answer,
Bad or worse, that you give it:
Did you bring the key?

Take notice:
Barren of rhyme or reason
The words take refuge in the night,
When yet damp and steeped in sleep
They roll in a turbulent river and are turned into scorn.

(1945)

OUR TIME

I

This is a time of splintering,
a time of split men.

In vain do we riff through volumes,
travel and enrich ourselves.
The awaited hour dissolves into dust.
Men ask for meat. Fire. Shoes.
The laws are not enough. Irises do not bloom
from law. My name is tumult and is written
in stone.

I visit the facts but no not find you.
Where do you hide, precarious synthesis,
pawn-broker of my sleep, lamp
lighted asleep on the porch?
Small certainties of borrowing, no kiss
rises to my shoulder to tell me
of the city of men who are whole.

I grow quiet, I wait, I decipher.
Things might improve.
Things are so strong!

But I am not things and I rebel.
I have in me words seeking a channel.
They are hoarse and rough,
perturbed, energetic,
compressed so long
they have lost their meaning,
want only to explode.

II

This is a time of boundaries,
a time of people cut off.
Of armless nomadic hands,

detached obscene gestures.
The childhood street has moved.
And the red dress
red
covers love's nakedness
In the open, in the valley,
Obscure symbols multiply.
War, truth, flowers?
From the mobilized Platonic laboratories
Comes a draught that singes the faces
And dissipates, on the beach, the words.

Darkness extends but does not eliminate
the succedaneum of the star in our hands.
How parts of us shine! Our nails,
rings, pearls, cigarettes, flashlights,
our more intimate parts,
throbbings, graspings,
and the night air is what is strictly necessary
to continue, and we continue.

III

And we continue. It is a time for crutches,
a time for talkative dead
and old paralytic women nostalgic for the ball,
but it is still time to live and tell.
Some stories have not been lost.
I know this house well –
go in to the right, go up to the left,
the large room gives on to terrible bedrooms,
like the one of the burial that didn't happen,
of the body forgotten on the table,
it gives on to the breakfast room of tart fruit,
to the bright central garden, to the water
that drips and secretes
the incest, the blessing, the departure,
it gives on to the closed cells that contain:
paper, crimes, coins?

O tell, old mammy, journalist, poet, small urban historian,
deaf mute, depository of my feebleness, do not hold back.
Tell, girl locked in memory, old cripple, cockroaches of
the archives, creaking doors, solitude and disgust,
enigmatic people and things, tell, dust-cover of dismantled
pianos, tell, old seals of the emperor, sets of broken china,
tell, bones on the street, fragments of newspaper, eye-lets
on the dressmaker's floor, black arm-bands, doves, roving
hounds, hunted animals, tell.

All is more difficult after you grow silent. . .
And many of you have never bared your souls.

IV

It is a time of half silence,
of ice-cold mouth and murmur,
insinuations, warnings on the corner.
A time of five senses in one. The spy dines with us.

It is a time of drab curtains,
of a neutral sky, politics
in the apple, the saint, the orgasm,
love and unlove, mild
anger, gin and tonic,
made-up eyes,
glass teeth,
grotesque twisted tongue.
This we call: sway.

In the alley,
merely a wall,
on it the police.
In the sky of propaganda
birds announce
the glory.
In the bedroom,
derision ad three dirty collars.

Listen to the formidable hour of noon
 in the city. The offices empty in an instant.
 Mouths suck up a river of meat, vegetables and nutritious pies.
 The tray of silvery fish swiftly leaps from the sea.
 The subterraneans of hunger weep broth,
 watery dog-eyes in the window devour your bone.
 Eat, mechanical arm, nourish yourself, paper hand,
 it is time for food,
 later it will be time for love.

Slowly the offices recover and business, indecisive shape,
 [evolves.

The splendid piece of business weaves into the traffic.
 Multitudes that cross it don't see. It is colorless and odorless.
 It is disguised on the streetcar, behind the southern breeze,
 It appears in the sand, on the telephone, in air battle,
 It takes over your soul
 and gets a percentage.

Listen to the shabby hour of return.
 Man after man, woman, child, man,
 clothes, cigarette, hat, clothes, clothes, clothes,
 man, man, woman, man, woman, clothes, man,
 think they are waiting for something,
 and become dumb, trickle away step by step, sit down,
 last serfs of the business, they imagine going home,
 it now being night, between rubbed out walls,
 in a presumed city, they imagine

Listen to the wee hours of compensation, reading, recourse to
 [the cassino, walk on the beach,
 the body beside the body, stretched out at last,
 stripped of its pants and the distressful thought of a slave,
 listen to the body groan, entwine, ebb,
 wander in remote objects and, buried painlessly beneath them,
 trust itself to the all-that-matters
 of sleep.

Listen to the horrible employment of the day
in every country of human speech,
the falsifying of the words dropping in newspapers,
the unreal world of the notaries where property is
[flowered cake,
with the banks smoothly milling the neck of the sugar,
the constellation of ants and usurers,
the bad poetry, the bad novel,
the fragile who surrender to the protection of the cockatrice,
the ugly man, of deadly ugliness,
boating in a sinistre Saturday twilight.

VI

In the family basements,
orchids and options
of purchase and divorce.
Electric pregnancy
no longer occasions swooning.
Allergic children
exchanged, made over.
Relentless war
is waged on the cockroaches.
Stories are told
by correspondence.
The table gathers
a glass, a knife,
and the bed devours
your loneliness.
Honor is vindicated
and the inheritance of the cattle.

VII

Or it is not vindicated and it is the same.
There are solutions, there are salves, for every hour and pain.
There are strong salves, pains of class,
of bloody wrath and placid face. And there are the faintest
of salves, mean trodden pains,
wounds no government will authorize,

which, nevertheless, hurt,
unbriable melancholy,
wrath, failure, disgust
with this old hat, the muddy street, the State.
Is there weeping in the theater,
on the stage, among the public, in the loges?
Above all there is weeping in the theater,
already late and confused,
it dims the lights, is lost in the linoleum, will
go digging in the warehouses, in the colonial alleys where
[nocturnal rats prow],
will water the waving corn in ripening fields,
and dry out in the sun, in a bitter pool.
And within the weeping my scoffing face,
my mocking and scornful eye,
my total repugnance at your declining lyricism
that pollutes the very essence of diamonds.

VIII

The poet
refuses all responsibility
in the march of the capitalist world
and with his words, intuitions, symbols and other weapons
promises to help destroy it
like a rock-quarry, a forest,
a worm.

(1945)

ANDRADE, Carlos Drummond. *Procura da poesia. Nosso tempo.* In: -, *A rosa do povo*. Rio de Janeiro: José Olympio, 1945.