

**LITERATURA LITERATURE****BRAZIL POEMS (1985-1986)****George Monteiro**

In 1969-70, for a period of eighteen months, we lived in São, Paulo, Brazil. During those eighteen months I taught at the Universidade de São Paulo. It was not until fifteen years later, in 1985, that I returned to Brazil for a week or so to lecture in various places. The next year I returned for a second week, this time mainly to participate in an Emily Dickinson conference in Salvador, Bahia, marking the 100th anniversary of the death of the American poet. I also lectured a bit elsewhere. On both trips, rather than keep a journal or notes, I wrote some verse. The twenty-two poems written in those years are published here for the first time.

*1985*

1.

**At the Pergola**

I eat funny in restaurants  
when I am alone. This  
time, in Bahía is no  
exception. I eat through  
the *couvert* as if it were  
the main course. And  
it's only green olives,  
bits of carrot, a small  
basket of bread medallions.  
Buttering as I go, I polish

it off, and the three women  
drinking their drafts  
in pilsner glasses are  
amused and laugh at me.  
But when the *frango a  
passarinho* comes, it is  
somehow all worth it,  
and my dander quiets  
down. After all, they're  
only exercising their  
liberty I think, and even  
Jefferson thought that  
the preservation of liberty  
called for the spilling  
of patriotic blood every  
generation or so (or words  
to that effect). The three  
women reach into purses,  
and because they have 'em,  
light up—seriatim.

(Salvador, June 20, 1985)

2.

### **São Paulo**

No time has passed.  
The talk is the same,  
though lovers have  
married, children  
have sprung, life  
has had its way.  
A death or two,  
more retirements,  
defections and  
departures. And  
returns, including  
mine, who only  
yesterday, it seems,  
was and was not  
of this place.

(São Paulo, June 26,  
1985)

3.

### **Conversation**

When Paulo ran into Jorge  
on the street in São Paulo,  
neither of them had yet  
hosted the big one. Odd,  
then, that on this street in  
São Paulo, at midnight,  
Paulo should tell me that  
what he and Jorge talked  
about that time was chest  
pains—what they did and  
did not signify or portend.  
The two never met again.

(São Paulo, June 26, 1985)

4.

### **I Would Sing Bahia**

Dan Hoffman, my old teach,  
haunts me in Bahia, a place  
where he's never been. It's his  
mention of Kerry K. that does  
it. A weirdo, this K., at loose  
ends, out of focus, with a talent  
for organization and, I hear, follow-  
through. Something of a local  
favorite among Americans, I gather,  
planting gringo poems in north-  
eastern Brazilian soil not other-  
wise up for grabs. He translates  
Cabral de Melo Neto, it's said,  
to pay for his supper, his habit.

(São Paulo, June 26, 1985)

5.

**Silva, Artist**

"For the *primitivo* there are no adjectives. There are only nouns. To me grass is green. That's it. I'm a *primitivo*." Featured in *Veja*, as he was just last week, this paragon of pride, lays his ninth muse, he says. Thus he makes love, at one remove, to himself.

(São Paulo, June 27, 1985)

6.

**São Paulo Metrô**

They're quiet, for Brazilians, on this mid-day Thursday at the outset of winter. No smiles anywhere, some read newspapers, others cast an eye about, but most just think, I surmise, about things. The technology is right up to date and the riders take it in stride, so to speak. These are not the *Brasileiros* we know. The train goes above ground now. It passes by the city's *Casa de Detenção*. Scattered around are left-over bits and pieces. What's new, I cannot imagine.

(São Paulo, June 27, 1985)

7.

### **You Can't Go Home Again**

Not true. Completely at home am I, this Friday morning, in Congonhas. The waiting rooms are new (and overflowing with voyagers) but the center holds its old place. I know no one here, even as I never did in those old days when I took the *ponte aérea* to Rio. Just announced: "Flight 472 to Brasília now projected for a full hour's delay." Why not? It's a good thing I'm at home here among strangers, an easy prey, it turns out, for a resident pickpocket. Now that's new.

(São Paulo, June 28, 1985)

8.

### ***Correção Monetária***

If just a case of local indexing, I know not. If he was the one (and he must have been), he apologized after I, myself, having bumped into him, had *pedido desculpas*, to which he countered, *não, sou eu que devo pedir desculpas*. Moments later I found *cruzeiros* sticking out of my pocket. *Só no Brasil*, as they say. But they are wrong.

(Brasília, June 28, 1985)

9.

29/6/85

What is so rare as a day in  
June in Brasília's winter?  
A blue sky with puffs of  
aerobic clouds standing in  
place? It's pleasant here,  
with *Corpo* (Drummond's  
latest) to savor, a glass of  
orange juice at hand, sing-  
ing silently, solitary, as my  
hostess attends to her man-  
icure somewhere upstairs,  
away from my busy scene.

(Brasilia, June 29, 1985)

10.

**Copacabana**

In this, the most famous beach  
in the most famous city in a  
country that counts people as  
its most important wealth when  
reckoning its GNP, distances  
are marked off in lengths—  
*postos*—six of them. Every-  
where the sands are speckled  
with lovers, who sit on benches,  
one leg draped over the other's  
leg, who lie around sans towel  
or blanket, or free-stand up  
against a marker. Stanchions  
will support those in need.

(Rio de Janeiro, July 6, 1985)

1986

1.

### **Breakfast in My Room**

I slice my already trimmed  
orange horizontally. The  
pineapple center I carve away,  
and push to the side of the  
plate. I now have six edible  
pieces of pineapple to go  
with my orange.

(Brasília, Nov. 16, 1986)

2.

### **Night Watch in Brasília**

It would not do for him.  
to die while I am here.  
It would not do for him  
or for me. After all, I'm  
only a third of the way  
through his two volumes  
of the *Poesias Reunidas*.

It's not time to gather up  
this writer of chronicles,  
shaper of the sharp poem,  
winner of the honor refused,  
and the uncrowned laureate.  
Let the Academy rot, let  
those uppity Swedes ply  
their busy trade year.

It doesn't serve Drummond  
to cozy up to empty honors.  
There's a stone in his heart,

a knife in his path. Still if  
his time has come, let it be  
time for an *honoris causa*,  
conferred by the God he  
knows does not exist.

(Brasília, Nov. 17, 1986)

3.

### **Dining Alone in Brasília**

They're pushing the buffet,  
and the waiter nit-picks  
his zit in the mirror when  
there's a lull in the crowd.  
I send back the *couvert*.  
It's optional, and yesterday  
I didn't touch it. They  
bring the whisky in its  
bottle and pour it before  
you. Very few takers  
for set-ups. Just a rock,  
two rocks, on the side.

(Brasilia, Nov. 18, 1986)

4.

### **Rainy Night in Brasília**

My lecture over, I  
walk away from the  
hotel to get my supper.  
The third restaurant  
I come to fetches me  
forward to check out  
its posted prices. It  
isn't bad enough that  
it is written out against  
a dark background, but  
the list is placed directly



below a dripping air  
conditioner. I am  
annoyed. Of course  
I go in. Inside men  
men outnumber the  
women, excluding  
the waiters and bar-  
keep, ten to one.  
Actually there's  
only one woman  
in the joint. The  
waiters wear bow-  
ties and work in  
teams. They look  
permanent, not  
looking to go away  
(or at most, to do  
so only some day  
far off). So unlike  
in this are the young  
waiters in New York,  
for instance, who all  
look as if on the spur  
of the moment they've  
decided to pitch in  
while waiting for  
the nasty weather  
outside to clear up.  
Bad weather, any-  
where near the  
Panela de Barro,  
is, I guess, *verboten*.  
Time now to go back  
in rain that doesn't fall.

(Brasília, Nov. 19, 1986)

5.

### **Movies in My Room**

I knew it right away.

The minute I saw  
the genial candy-  
maker trying to fore-  
play Deneuve, I knew.  
He was me I would be  
when I became him.  
But he wasn't the only  
one, of course. Only  
the cigar and the missing  
teeth in his twisted mouth  
kept the Gaelic Brendan  
from becoming me or  
even himself. In middle  
age I see this Frenchman  
and this Irishman in the  
single portly figure in  
my bathroom mirror. I've  
learned not to need G.E.,  
by the way, when I work  
at my morning shave.

(Rio de Janeiro, Nov. 20,  
1986)

6.

### **The Other Hemisphere**

Dear Preceptor—

The word—said—  
lives, and my word—  
said here, in this place—  
lives still—a century  
to the year when my  
head was first turned  
away from the things  
of this world—  
Against evanescence—  
to last long—to bear  
the spirit of the body,  
to hear my letters echo

in the blues and reds  
of Brazil—where the  
sun arcs across Northern  
skies—Themselves go  
out—I said—speaking  
of poets whose words  
do not yet have the  
breath to expire—

As for me—I  
breathe—I breathe  
the air of Bahia—  
Mr. Higginson—I  
thought you would  
like—to know—

Your Scholar

(Salvador, Nov. 25, 1986)

7.

### **Guy Domville in São Paulo**

The only person in São Paulo  
(excepting myself) who has  
read *Guy Domville* (and likes  
it) handed over, in re-gift,

the poems of Antonio Nobre.  
The copy was old, slightly  
worn, one that (to this day)  
the recipient has not read.

The giver liked to dress up  
in women's clothing, cruise  
the *bairro*, and visit the bar  
on the corner where I first

met him and where I saw  
him last. Proud, in flight,  
appreciative, facing with  
little less than supercilious

care, he stood his ground,  
even when his friend, the  
lawyer, dressed in basic  
black, walking with the

use of a stick, and who  
was about to marry well,  
chastised him for wasting  
his gift on a dumb gringo.

(Rio de Janeiro, Nov. 30, 1986)

8.

### *O estrangeiro*

*Não sei de onde você é.*  
Neither do I, kid, though I told  
you that that was where I was  
from. It's a new perspective  
you give me. I'm a stranger in  
your land, but while I'm here  
I'm a stranger to my own. Did  
I not leave my own native land  
for strange and foreign parts?  
Am I not now to the folks back  
where I come from a stranger?  
Yet, you, shoeshine boy (12  
years old or so you claim) have  
set me straight. You know just  
where you are. And it is not the  
*estrangeiro*, no matter how I feel,  
who is at home here, a stranger  
there, and, thanks to *pas de deux*,  
it's all turned around. I should've  
let you gouge me, as you tried to,  
*moleque*. It wasn't all that much,  
after all, to pay for the tuition,  
even if, as your buddy told me,  
you'd only throw it away on *video*.

(Rio de Janeiro, Nov. 20, 1986)

9.

*Amigos da onça*

Although he does not look like my Godfather, he *has* entitled his book *Andorinha, Andorinha*. Now that channels my Godfather's nickname.

A sticking point is that Joe Silva wrote nary a word, as far as I know, and the Brazilian poet was not known for doing the village atheist—or did he? Let's

hope that in a discriminating Heaven that swallows up all kinds of poets and other non-believers, eating the raw, José and Manny are bosom buddies, settling down

for long pulls at some red or white in the comfortable reading salon of a posh club or, better still, one like the Clube Juventude Lusitana—as homey, but not a whit more.

(Pan Am Flight 202, Rio to NYC, Dec, 1, 1986)

10.

**From the Eleventh Floor**

They do look like the crowded figures of a primitive's busy painting, except that these figures don't imply movement—they move. I'm talking about the masses on Copacabana beach on a Sunday. It's primitive,

the thorough tanning for those  
who don't, from my point of view,  
need it, the walking sellers of *mate*  
and cooked shrimp, the volley ball  
and beach-sand soccer—all this,  
viewed from a ship, against that  
perfect curve of buildings window-  
ing out to the stretching-out ocean.  
The *favelados* in houses punched  
precariously into a backdrop of  
mountains will not move. "They  
have the best view in town," a  
Carioca tells a stranger. I, who  
have never seen anything out of  
the eyes of a Carioca, believe it.

(Pan Am Flight 202, Rio to NYC,  
Dec. 1, 1986)

11.

### Twins

In the womb twins  
fare more privately  
than these air pilgrims  
seated side-by-side  
in a 747. They do not  
talk, nor do they annoy  
by scratching for space  
or claiming privilege.  
Sneezing and *catarro*  
belong to those out of  
the natal sac, free now  
of a mother's share  
of amniotic fluids.

(Pan Am 202, J.F.K.,  
NYC, Dec. 1, 1986)

12.

## Winter Color

It's a day for winter  
color, bluish blues  
in superficial light.  
The sky moderately  
high, sponged here  
and there, at times  
fluffed. The train  
whistles distantly  
to the passengers.  
There's no ice on  
the standing water.  
The stripped trees  
stand like the  
deserted cars of  
Far Rockaway.  
Blue tarps cover  
the landed boats.  
So much stands  
in wait; memories  
shimmer down in  
the unseasoned  
season. Hunters  
stand back-to-back  
so as not to shoot  
each other. Orange  
over denim. Ball  
hawks at work  
wave from the  
edge of small  
ponds. Carved  
stones plot out  
what's permanent  
in a rolling yard.  
Here, too, is pink  
of prime, not rust  
on steel stacked  
along the tracks.

(Burrillville, R. I.,  
Dec. 26, 1986)