

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 over-
flowing 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, my-
self, 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.

(Brasília, 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)