

3 Poems from Pablo Neruda's 1950 Canto General translated by Jack Schmitt

### **Standard Oil Co.**

When the drill bored down toward the stony fissures  
and plunged its implacable intestine  
into the subterranean estates,  
and dead years, eyes of the ages,  
imprisoned plants' roots  
and scaly systems  
became strata of water,  
fire shot up through the tubes  
transformed into cold liquid,  
in the customs house of the heights,  
issuing from its world of sinister depth,  
it encountered a pale engineer  
and a title deed.

However entangled the petroleum's arteries may be,  
however the layers may change their silent site  
and move their sovereignty amid the earth's bowels,  
when the fountain gushes its paraffin foliage,  
Standard Oil arrived beforehand  
with its checks and its guns,  
with its governments and its prisoners.

Their obese emperors from New York  
are suave smiling assassins  
who buy silk, nylon, cigars  
petty tyrants and dictators.

They buy countries, people, seas, police, county councils,  
distant regions where the poor hoard their corn  
like misers their gold:  
Standard Oil awakens them,  
clothes them in uniforms, designates  
which brother is the enemy.  
the Paraguayan fights its war,  
and the Bolivian wastes away  
in the jungle with its machine gun.

A President assassinated for a drop of petroleum,  
a million-acre mortgage,  
a swift execution on a morning mortal with light, petrified,  
a new prison camp for subversives,  
in Patagonia, a betrayal, scattered shots  
beneath a petroliferous moon,  
a subtle change of ministers  
in the capital, a whisper  
like an oil tide,  
and zap, you'll see  
how Standard Oil's letters shine above the clouds,  
above the seas, in your home,  
illuminating their dominions.

## **Anaconda Mining Co.**

Name of a coiled snake,  
insatiable gullet, green monster,  
in the clustered heights,  
in my country's rarefied  
saddle, beneath the moon  
of hardness--excavator--  
you open the mineral's  
lunar craters, the galleries  
of virgin copper, sheathed  
in its granite sands.

In Chuquicamata's eternal  
night, in the heights,  
I've seen the sacrificial fire burn,  
the profuse crackling  
of the cyclops that devoured  
the Chileans' hands, weight  
and waist, coiling them  
beneath its copper vertebrae,  
draining their warm blood,  
crushing their skeletons  
and spitting them out in the  
desolate desert wastelands.

Air resounds in the heights  
of starry Chuquicamata.  
The galleries annihilate  
the planet's resistance  
with man's little hands,  
the gorges' sulphuric bird  
trembles, the metal's  
iron cold mutinies  
with its sullen scars,  
and when the horns blast  
the earth swallows a procession  
of minuscule men who descend  
to the crater's mandibles.

They're tiny captains,  
my nephews, my children,  
and when they pour the ingots  
toward the seas, wipe  
their brows and return shuddering  
to the uttermost chill,  
the great serpent eats them up,  
reduces them, crushes them,  
covers them with malignant spittle,  
casts them out to the roads,  
murders them with police,  
sets them to rot in Pisagua,  
imprisons them, spits on them,  
buys a treacherous president  
who insults and persecutes them,  
kills them with hunger on the plains

of the sandy immensity.

And on the infernal slopes  
there's cross after twisted cross,  
the only kindling scattered  
by the tree of mining.

### **United Fruit Co.**

When the trumpet sounded  
everything was prepared on earth,  
and Jehovah gave the world  
to Coca-Cola Inc., Anaconda,  
Ford Motors, and other corporations.  
The United Fruit Company  
reserved for itself the most juicy  
piece, the central coast of my world,  
the delicate waist of America.  
It rebaptized these countries  
Banana Republics,  
and over the sleeping dead,  
over the unquiet heroes  
who won greatness,  
liberty, and banners,  
it established an opera buffa:  
it abolished free will,  
gave out imperial crowns,  
encouraged envy, attracted  
the dictatorship of flies:  
Trujillo flies, Tachos flies  
Carias flies, Martinez flies,  
Ubico flies, flies sticky with  
submissive blood and marmalade,  
drunken flies that buzz over  
the tombs of the people,  
circus flies, wise flies  
expert at tyranny.  
With the bloodthirsty flies  
came the Fruit Company,  
amassed coffee and fruit  
in ships which put to sea like  
overloaded trays with the treasures  
from our sunken lands.  
Meanwhile the Indians fall  
into the sugared depths of the  
harbors and are buried in the  
morning mists;  
a corpse rolls, a thing without  
name, a discarded number,  
a bunch of rotten fruit  
thrown on the garbage heap.