

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.