

S I M O N C A R N E L L

A Grave in 1940

You can always get what you don't want,
a stitch in time pays the piper. Or does it?
That's what you liked about "sayings":
the fact that their near-miss quality,
twisted or misquoted, landed you in the fire
that will utterly consume the world...
Or could at any rate be quite amusing.
I laugh with you at your latest, mother
—an open and shut malaprop case
of *the crock calling the kettle smutty*.
Your only reading is puzzle books
and non-cryptic crosswords in the *Mirror*.
In casual conversation you tell me that
your own mother lies in an unmarked grave.

The Peruvian Stamp

Hit by a wall of aftershave not incense, entering a cathedral
full of uniformed officers.

★

A single alpaca in a tiny corral at the poolside; soft scarves of
(fake) "baby alpaca".

★

The orderly has no change, for the *Quechua*-speaker with the child with a burnt face.

★

Black-painted American cars taxi-ing to Callao, in the *Sacred Heart of Jesus* fleet.

★

The ruined adobe city of *Chan Chan*; a coast-road overhung by netted walls of sand.

★

Painted on a towering dirt-cliff: PAÍS CON FUTURO, its shanty-town of footnotes.

★

Coca tea for altitude; a gold gem-inlaid crab-god; a necklace of human-headed spiders.

★

Silver *milagros* of a burning rose-fringed heart. A shouldered ton of dressed *Virgen*.

★

Two sets of pale blue stamps: one of actual fish, stirrup-jar marine gods on the other.

★

An obvious agent in an anti-Government demonstration? "Do you want *cocain*?"

★

The convent is a city within a city. Of three occupied cells, one is given over to *cuy*.

★

Gazelle-like vicuñas join herds of tame camelids before heading back off into the blue.

★

Santas in hotpants. A co-operative of blind street singers. The plant that mimics a stone.

★

You pack a schoolchild's plastic set-square which doubles as a stencil-map of Peru.

The Molten Flute

for Roberto Segre

The bees in the vine on the terrace
 have dissolved their nets of sound.
 Below us on the island of Tino
 the beam from the lighthouse
 casts in the Gulf—as down an avenue
 of rosemary bushes the year's last few
 fireflies lightning bugs or *lucciole*
 traffic their lanterns.

Dante saw in these
 intermittent particles of light
 trapped souls—clouds of them on a plain
 (and Bishop, the bubbles in champagne)—
 beneath the marble caves you've shown
 the doorway to the boarded unsafe church
 where a shot partisan lay untouched

and decomposed in your eye
of a child, your path to the spiders' nests...

I've eaten in the Anarchist café,
seen the civic statue of a regicide—
and the bronze weathered plaque with its
trident-speared octopus:
tentacular Fascism trodden under
by a heroically muscular fisherman.
You must have hoarded instead
an image of the melted flute
prised from the black wreckage
of your Jewish father's burnt house
—the thing itself kept
a while and then thrown away—
the memory on a fifty year fuse
which detonates watching the fireflies.
And the distant lighthouse in the Gulf.

An Afterlife

A coin in the fixed binoculars
brings closer, but blurs, a tanker out at sea.
The rows of memorial benches
in this retirement town
have plaques engraved like pet tags
or cheap trophies. For nothing,
you can sit and watch the light depart
through another's dead eyes.