



Raul Bopp

Cobra Norato

a nheengatu
from the left bank
of Amazonas

translated by Daniels



*Illustrations by
Oswaldo Goeldi (woodcuts)
Poty Lazzarotto
Flávio de Carvalho (back; cover of first edition, 1931)*

*this
translation
is dedicated to
Lucia Sá & Gordon Brotherston
Nathaniel Tarn & Janet Rodney
and all my friends in Brazil
especially Claudio Daniel
in friendship
gratitude and
solidarity forever
na obra refulgente
do Yaguareté Celeste*





Preface after Câmara Cascudo

Near the village of Cachoeirí on the banks of a little river called Claro that runs between the rivers Amazonas and Trombetas, a young woman got pregnant while she was bathing and gave birth to twin black snakes. A Tapuya woman baptized them Honorato and Maria, and let them wriggle away into the river because she knew they couldn't live on land.

They grew up free, twisting their black bodies in the sun, diving through the rippling waters, hissing and huffing while they played. The people called them Cobra Norato and Maria Caninana.

Cobra Norato was strong and good. He never hurt anyone. Sometimes he visited the old Tapuya woman in her thatched hut in Cachoeirí. He would swim to the steep bank and wait for night to fall. When the stars came out and the aracuã stopped singing, Honorato dragged his enormous body over the rustling sand.

He came gliding to the surface, and slithered up the bank. He shook himself all over and made his scales glitter in the moonlight. He shed the monstrous snakeskin. He became a handsome young man dressed all in white. He went to eat dinner and sleep in the thatched hut that belonged to the Tapuya woman who raised him as her own. The snake body stayed behind, stretched out on the riverbank. Right at dawn, just before the last rooster crows, he wriggled back into the motionless body. The snake shuddered and dived in the river.

He saved many people from drowning. He helped people find their way home when they got lost in their canoes. He fought off big, fierce fish. Because of him, the big catfish from the river Trombetas had to leave after a fight lasting three days and nights.

Maria Caninana was mean and violent. She overturned canoes and killed people who fell overboard. She attacked people while they were hunting for mussels. She hurt the little fish. She never even visited the old Tapuya woman who lived in Cachoeirí.

In the port city of Obidos, in the state of Pará, there lived an enchanted serpent who slept hidden in the earth, with its head under Saint Anna's altar in the Church of Our Lady. The serpent's tail is at the bottom of the river. If the serpent ever wakes, the Church will collapse. Maria Caninana bit the serpent because she wanted to see it happen. The serpent didn't wake up, but it did twitch. The earth shook, from the marketplace all the way to Obidos Cathedral. Finally, Cobra Norato killed Maria Caninana because she was so wicked. And he went on alone, swimming through quiet rivers.

When folks gathered together to make cassava meal, which is an important food for all the people of Brazil, Cobra Norato came out of the snakeskin when the aracuã stopped singing. He stood up, all dressed in white, and went to dance and flirt with the young women, talk with the young men and sit with the old people, who loved him for his gentle manners and kindness. Everybody had a wonderful time. Afterwards, they heard the sound of a huge snake diving. It was dawn. Cobra Norato had gone back to follow his destiny.

Once a year, Cobra Norato invited a friend, male or female, to break his enchantment. His friend would go to the edge of the river and find the snake fast asleep on a sandy bank, with its mouth open and its big, sharp fangs gleaming like silver in the dark. If Norato's friend poured three drops of mother's milk into the snake's mouth and cut the snake's head with unused steel, the snake would shut its mouth and the wound would ooze three drops of blood and Honorato would become a man for the rest of his life. The snake body would be burnt.

Nobody would be hurt. Someone just needed to be brave enough to do it. Everybody loved Honorato, and they felt sorry for him, so a lot of people went to him with unused steel and little containers of mother's milk. But when they saw the snake sleeping on the bank, it was so big and so ugly it frightened them, even though it was fast asleep. Even the old Tapuya woman from Cachoeirí went, but she was too afraid. Cobra Norato kept swimming and hissing through the big water, from the Amazonas to the Trombetas, coming and going, always hoping that one day he would be released from his enchantment.

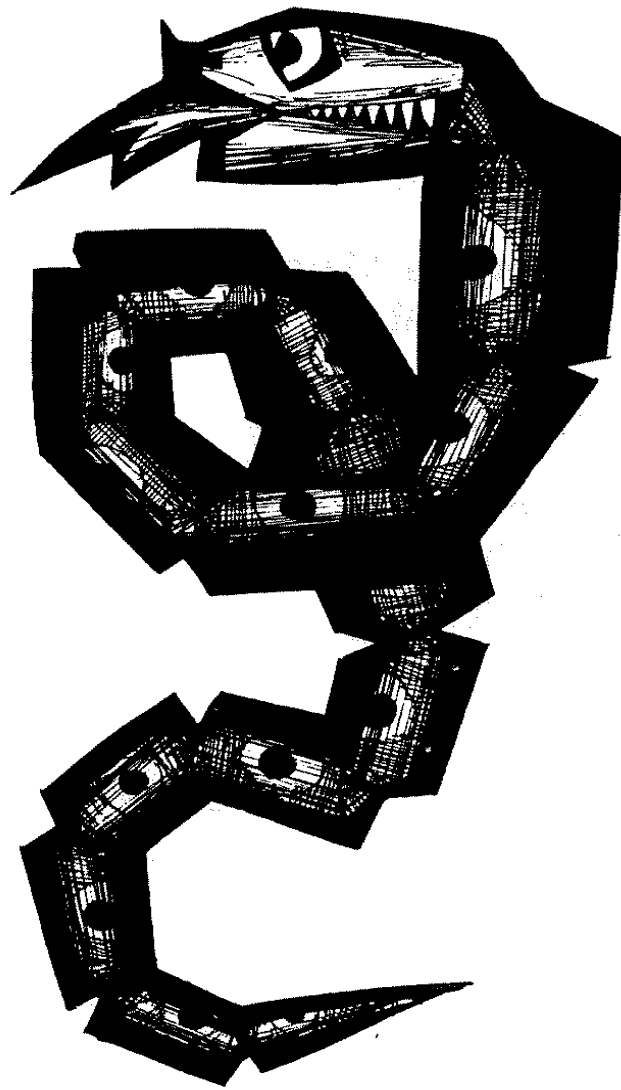
Once, at the time of year when the people gather together to make cassava meal, Cobra Norato swam up the river Tocantins. He came out of the water at Cameté. He left the body on the riverbank and went to dance, drink and talk with his friends.

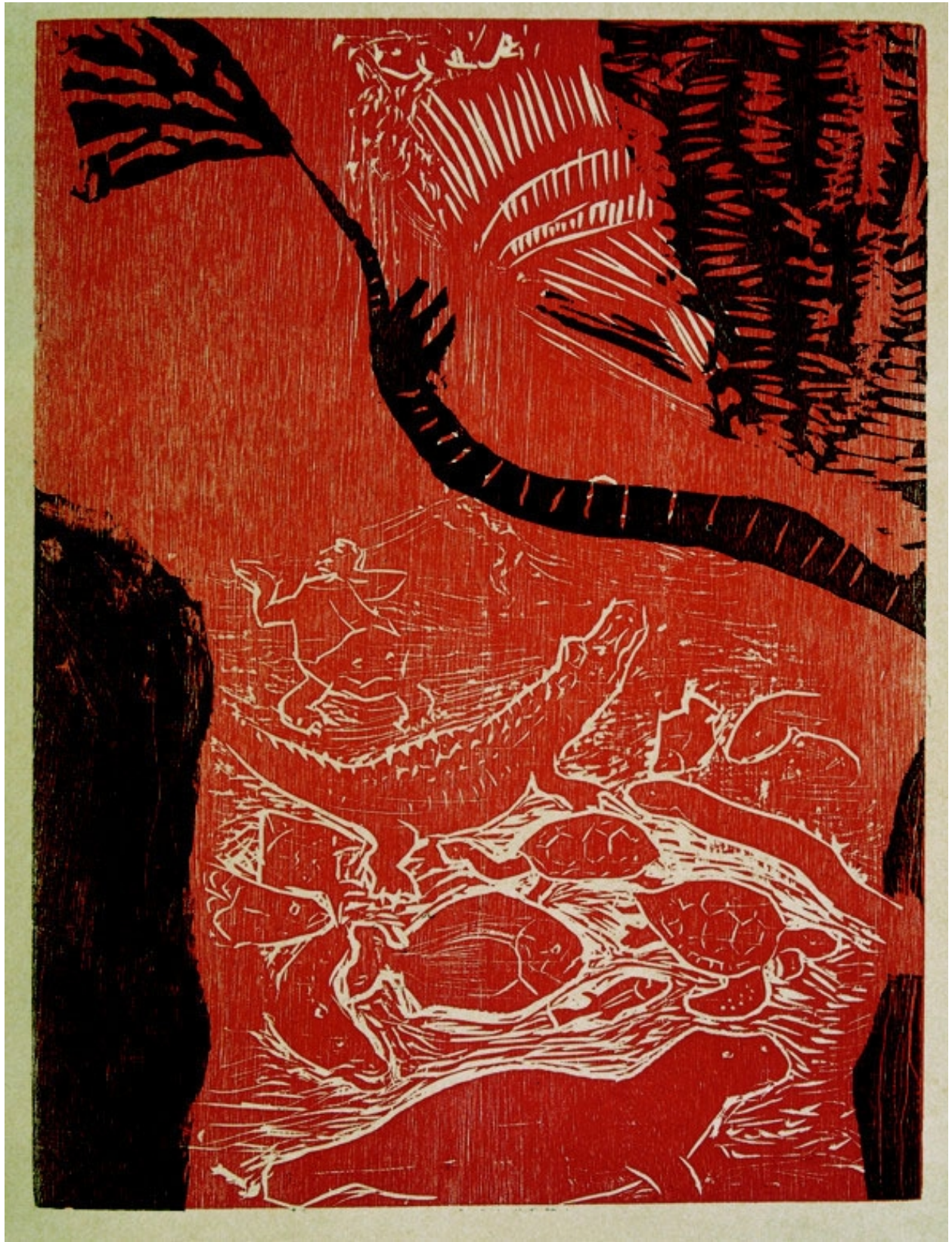
He met a soldier, and asked him to take away the enchantment. The soldier went with a little jar of mother's milk and a steel axe that had never been used. He saw the snake stretched out, fast asleep with its mouth wide open. He dropped the milk into the snake's mouth and hit it with the ax, right on top of its head. The blood welled up. The snake shook a few times and stopped moving. Honorato wriggled out of the snake and gave a weary sigh. He burned the snake he'd lived in for so many years. The ashes rose into the air. Honorato stayed a man until he died, so many years later, in the city of Cameté, in Pará.

All along this river, all through the state of Pará, all over Brazil, everybody knows the story of Cobra Norato. People in canoes are always pulling up their oars, pointing to a little cove, or a place on the banks, and they say, "Cobra Norato used to hang out right there, every day . . ."



Cobra Norato





I

One of these days
I'm gonna live in the land of the Unending

I keep walking walking
I'm shuffling into the belly of the woods biting roots

And now
I'll make a potion from a tajá flower
and send for Cobra Norato

— I want to tell you a story
Let's walk around on those low-cut islands, ok?
Make believe there's moonlight

Night comes in tame
Stars talk together low
I'm making like I'll wrap a ribbon round its neck
and strangle the Snake



Alright

Now I'll slip into stretchy silk skin
and go out in the world

I'm going to visit queen Luzia
I want to marry her daughter
— Then first you have to turn off your eyes
Sleep runs down heavy lids
A muddy ground steals the strength of my steps

II

Now the ciphered jungle begins

Shadow hid the trees
Thick-lipped toads peer out of dark

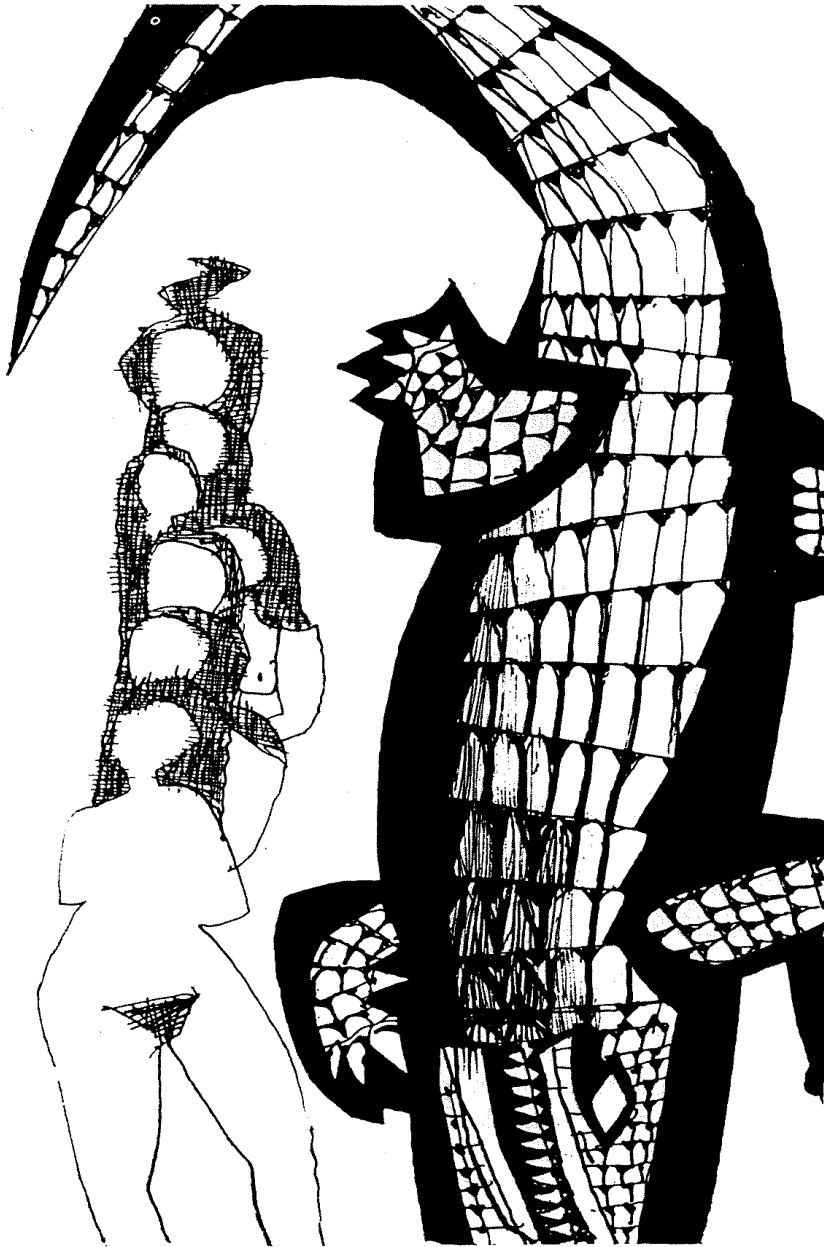
Here a piece of jungle's really getting it
Baby trees all squat in a puddle
A late water thread licks mud

— I want to see queen Luzia's daughter!

Now rivers are drowned
drinking the way
Water stumbles through swamps
sinking sinking
Up ahead water
kept the trail to queen Luzia's island

— Yeah right now
I'll see queen Luzia's daughter

But first you have to go through seven doors
See seven women with depopulated wombs
guarded by a jacaré



— But I just need see queen Luzia's daughter

You have to hand over your shadow to the Beast of the Deep
You have to cast a spell when the moon is new
You have to drink three drops of blood

— Ah only if it comes from queen Luzia's daughter!

The immense jungle has insomnia

Sleepy trees yawn
Ai the night's gone dry Riverwater got broken

I gotta get outta here

I split adrift deep of the woods
where old pregnant trees doze

Everywhere they call to me
— Where you goin Cobra Norato?
I have three pretty young trees here They're all yours

— I can't
Today I'm gonna sleep with queen Luzia's daughter

III

I keep going fast I'm bruising sand
Beggar-tick scratched me
Fat stems play sink-in-the-mud
Rivulets go "psst"

Let me by cause I have far to go

Tiririca bushes clog the path

— Ai Forest-father!
Who put the evil eye on me
and bent my trail on the ground?
Now I got my eyes all wilted
from so much looking for queen Luzia's daughter

The rest of the night curls around me

Now the bottom drops out of the land
A soft belly-button puddle swallows me

Well, where am I gonna go
now that my blood's all aching
for queen Luzia's daughter and her witchy ways?

IV

This is the bad-breath forest
giving birth to snakes

Scrawny rivers at forced labor
Rippled current peels
gooey banks

Toothless roots gum the muck

In a long hard waterlogged march
a puddle swallows creek-water

It stinks
The wind moved somewhere else

A hiss frightens the trees
Silence gets a bruise
Up ahead some dry wood falls:
Pum

A scream crosses the jungle
Other voices come

The river got choked in a ravine

I'm being spied on by a frog frog
There's people-smell here
— Who are you?

— I'm Cobra Norato
I'm gonna go out with queen Luzia's daughter

V

Here's the school for trees
They're studying geometry

— You are blind from birth You must obey the river

— Ai ai! We're slaves of the river!

— You are sentenced to work forever and ever
Your task is to make leaves to cover the forest
— Ai ai! We're slaves of the river!

— You must drown man in shadow
The forest is man's enemy
— Ai ai! We're slaves of the river!

I push through thick walls
I hear these little cries help-me-help-me
They're really giving it to the birds

— If you do not know your lesson you must be trees
— Ai ai ai ai . . .

— What are you doing up there?

— I have to announce the moon
when it comes up behind the woods

— What about you?
— I have to wake up the stars
on St. John's night

— You?
— My job's telling time deep in the forest

Tiúg . . . Tiúg . . . Tiúg . . .
Twi. Twi-twi.

VI

I'm going by the edges of a swamp
Viscous plasma comes unsewn
and overflows mud-hemmed banks

I go pushing through thick bendy walls
I fall into a bottom in the swollen
scared haunted forest

You can hear whistles and whack-whack-whack
They're soldering sawing sawing
Looks kind of like they're manufacturing earth . . .
Ué! They *are* manufacturing earth

Big wide ebb-mudholes wheeze
The old rotten scaffolding melts
Mudflats are re-written
Piled forest spills out on the ground

Disordered voices run
They bellow: *You can't!*
— They talking to me?

I go under leafy arcades
Incognito bushes ask:
— It really day already?
Light splotches open holes in high treetops

Godmother trees
spent the night weaving leaves in secret
Little windy-wind blew tickles through the branches
Took apart undeciphered writings

VII

Ai! I'm in a rush gotta go
I push through bamboo
— Where am I?

Idiot-branched trees eye me
Deceased waters wait their time to rot

I slide through a maze
with pregnant trees sitting in the dark
Hungry roots bite the ground

Dirty jacarandas raise their skirts
like gouts of drippy mud

Long-legged açáis
move slow leaves in heavy air
like spiderlegs sticking out on a branch

Miritis open big sluggish fans

A lonely frog calls rain

In the bottom
a speeding blade scores the woods
Baby thunder grunted: *Here I am*

From far away
thunder comes with his thick grumbly voice
A piece of the sky opens
Thick walls come pounding down in the dark
Little trees dream storm

Shadow comes slow and slowly eating bloated horizons

VIII

Rain pounds down
rinsing vegetation

Wind lays waste leafy trees
with their arms in the air
The big wood shudders

Black clouds pile up
Squatting monsters
stick a lid on thick-lipped horizons

Palms hold up the sky

Tiriricas get all in a tizzy
Little saracuras go peep peep peep

Howler whips out a prayer over there

Lagoons burst wide open

Creeping water claws into trunks
Dry branches roll on the ground

Puddle gets pregnant
With the on-and-on of tiny little plants from the spate

Stranded trees beg help me help
I'm-just-fine strangler figs hug

The sky shuts its face

It's raining . . . raining . . . raining . . .

IX

Ai I'm so lost
in a bottom in the startled unfinished forest

I got crammed in a mud uterus
The air lost its breath

A spoiled smell spreads
Mussels party in the mire

Behind bogged-down trunks
I hear the squeal of a raccoon

Looks like someone's coming in this no-way-out darkness

— Olelé. Who's there?
— I'm the Skinnybutt Armadillo

— Armadillo, old pal,
so good of you to come
I need you to show me the way out of this rotten gullet

— So grab onto my tail
I'll pull you out



X

Now

I want to borrow a river so I can take a bath
For three days and nights I want to sleep the sleep
of the squirrel called Acutipuru

— Wait for me, ok?

Cause I'm gonna tell you something

XI

I wake up

The moon rose with circles under her eyes
Silence aches in the woods

The stars opened up
The big waters curled up with sleep

Tired night stood still

Ai partner!

I want to hear some lazy music
to stretch out in my blood,
music to taste like the moon
and the body of queen Luzia's daughter

music to make me hear once more
the conversation of rivers
who carry the pathway's plea
and voices come from far away
thrashed by ai ai ai

I crossed the Shakey-Shakey

stayed over at Bigworm's house
left my shadow with the Beast of the Deep
all for the sake of queen Luzia's daughter

I brought smelly potions
and caladium bark
Rosemallow with four leaf clover
and henweed root
But nothing came out right . . .

I have a little blues
the kind that makes folks hurt a little
and messes with your blood real slow

*Ai partner
Don't make a sound
cause queen
LuZIA's daughter
might still be sleeping*

*Ai where can she be
cause all I want is
to see her eyes wet with green
her body stretched out on marsh grass*

*Maybe she's far away . . .
And I'll become a rover so I
can get all mushy
with queen LuZIA's daughter*

Ai don't make a sound . . .

XII

Daybreak comes fidgeting through the woods

It's getting light
The skies give a great big stretch

The horizons roll up like sleeves

Up high on a cumandá
Mary-it's-day starts to sing

Sleepy roots wake up

Little river goes to school
He's learning geography

Squatting trees
wash unbrushed branches in the current

Gulls measure the sky

Green-scribbled horizons call me

— Partner
let's go to Jaguar Lake
We gotta make tracks
before low tide comes

This river is our street
Ow that pirixi grass
Row Row on this side
I want to stay right here
stretched out on this pirixi grass
I'm going to invite the night
to stay for a little while

XIII

Baby sun cub
growing glad and greasy

Restless little trees
suck light running down leaves

— Hands off Don't push!

Jungle wombs yell:
— Fill me!

Hidden rivers of dubious descent
go swimming and changing and they
swim away muttering into the woods

Chunks of fallen land
go off to homestead upriver
in a geography under construction

Riverbank saba trees dream journeys
elastic cities on the move
melt in the current

Sun dyes the landscape
Up ahead there
swim trees with sunken lips
They move long annoyed branches

XIV

Midday
in a laggard sky

A boatbill's cry
breaks through the woods

Long hard gummy marches coagulate
stretched out in the sun to dry
Puddle wrinkles up
like a tired ovary

Lone tiger-heron
drinking silence

Far away
behind a line of smashed forest
horizons stretch out

The sun pinches the lake's blue skin

By the marsh grass
sleep armored saurians

— Think I'll take a dip to cool my body down
Yell if I take too long

The water's soft and soft like a girl's leg, partner!

XV

Sky so blue
little white crane flew and flew . . .
She thought the lake was up above

Sulky weather loads me down Light aches in my eyes
Sun's like a little mirror

Voices dissolve

Big lonesome bird scratches the potbellied landscape

XVI

— Is the sea far, partner?
— Yeah
Ten leagues of jungle and then ten more
— So let's go

It's beginning to get dark
Evening stretches its red wing

Clumps of membeca grass
write long shadows on used sands

A tinamou startles

In the bottom the unanswered
weary cry of a crab-hawk

Daylight draws into itself
slow slow

— My eyes are gonna get clogged with darkness
— Bye-bye mallard!
— Bye pintail crane!

Colors go out Horizons sink
in a slow shipwreck

Night runs aground with a shipment of stars

XVII

The forest comes going along
— Open up cause I'm coming in!

Roots move with mired legs



Full-bellied waters give
a big stretch in marshes

Toothless puddle chews a mud cud

Uei! There's a little river full
of runaway orphan waters going by here
— Ai glu-glu-glu
Don't say nothin to nobody
If the sun shows up he'll swallow me

— So send for the rain, partner

All these cries and echoes hiding out
Feeling bad not enough air
Hungry hunchback trees chew and crack
while their unstuffed bellies growl

Whew partner
I'm hungry too
— So let me blow on your belly

This lagoon has a fever It swelled up The water stood still

— Ai, I was an unmarried river
I came drinking my way
but the jungle clogged me up
Now I have an aching uterus ai ai

Lost in the middle of the mangrove
the lonesome cry of a
seriquara quara quara

XVIII

Think I'll stretch out on this paturá
listen to noises from the edge of the woods
feel night all inhabited by stars

Think maybe one
of the ones with silver strands
saw the shiny trail of queen Luzia's daughter?

Distant rumbles dissolve
in a bottom in the anonymous jungle

I feel the pulse of the land
that rhythmic pounding

Vast silences answer back and forth . . .

XIX

Ocean rumped
by elastic horizons
spent all night insomniac
muttering his monologue

Road-weary waves arrive
and unload mountains

Sea-slices dissolve in sand
Seems like there's no bottom to space . . .

— Where's all this water come from, partner?

XX

Big tide starts today

The sea's getting ready
to take in fresh waters
under contract with the moon

— Let's head off to Bailique
We could watch pororooca come in

Mangrove asked to borrow some land
wants to build gooey embankments

Famished roots fight

Mud-starched water
slow-skids on smooth muck

Marshes filled with philodendrons
open into flooded clearings
Barefoot roots sink into puddles

Twiggy thickets bind the path
— Hurry, partner
We gotta get there before the moon

This low coast came down with a summer
River shrank Water pulled back
Split-lipped wind gnaws banks

Long-faced mangrove
comes along a long way with us

XXI

Punctual night
Full moon blinks on, pororoca snores

come come coming like a bloated wave
rolling and pumping
water in a jumble

Big waves threaten frightened banks

A piece of ocean changed place

Smaller islands vanish
under the potbellied wave
razing vegetation

The mangrove hangs back
holds up the sky with upraised arms

Little jungles go away
The water gets all weepy and hugs the woods

Broken trees crack guts out

Pororoa brings back land It ran away from home
carried by the current

XXII

Puddled landscape
Dense moonlight tames the waters
Trees look like swollen birds

Convoys of matted plants
come back upriver slow to build new islands
in a silent engineering

The water's tail sinks down
Goes resting under the moon
on Seriacca Point

— Let's use the force of the flood
— So grab on to this raft

High Tide Low Tide
Waters fall Waters rise
The Heart by water
Also has a low tide

— That jungle pulp's pulling at my eye
— So steer us there, partner

XXIII

Big night . . .

Cute little salt marsh by the water

Today there's a sky never to finish
Stretches all the way down to the bottom of things

It'd be good if I could shove horizons
see lands with lowcut jungles
on a night dressed up in the moon
and bunches of stars

— I'm all mussangular

Inside the forest of nickle-plated trees
silence said *cuckoo*

Crickets give a warning
They answer farther on

Sore-throat frogs study aloud
Sky seems like grand scale geometry

— There's so much folks don't understand, partner

— What's out there behind the stars?

XXIV

— Partner, I'm hungry now
Should we go to Putirum and steal some cassava meal?

— Is Putirum very far?
— Just a little bit more
My brother-in-law Jabuti knows the way
— Well let's go then

We're off to Putirum
Putirum Putirum
We're off to steal tapioca
Putirum Putirum

Big ole house where they make cassava meal

Women chewing pipes
work the graters

— Tell us a story, Joanie Brownpenny
— What about?



— Anything you want
— I'll tell a story about Boto
Putirum Putirum

Love rained down
Sprinkled rainy rain

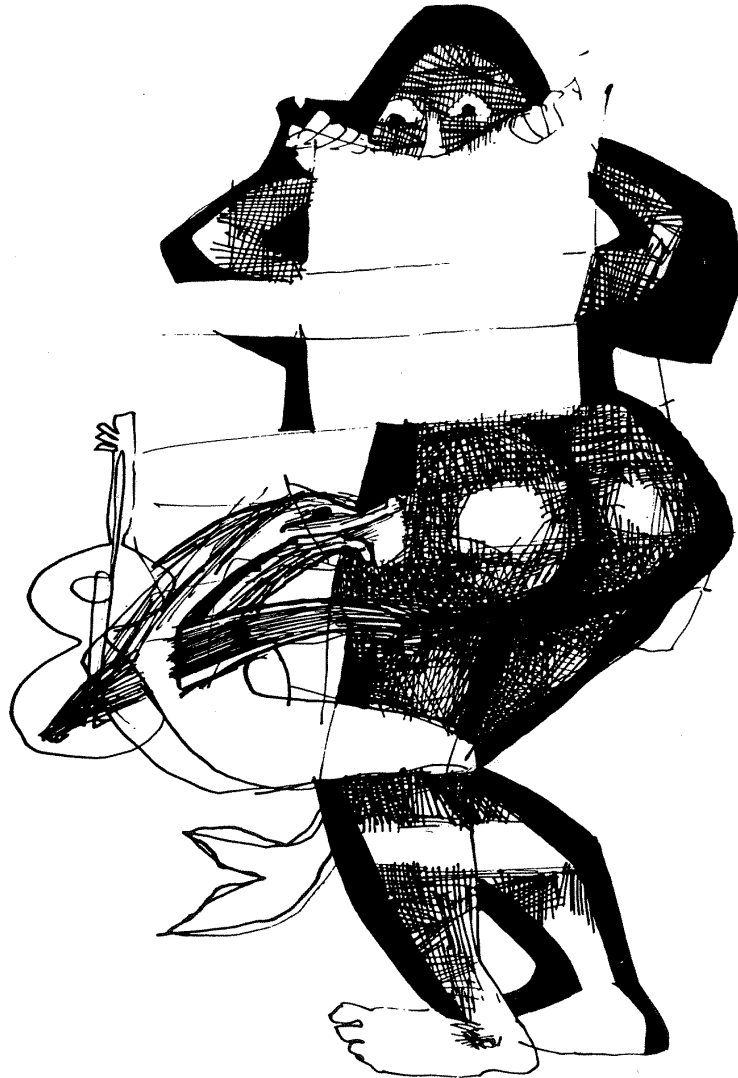
Little sister I was washing clothes
when Boto grabbed me

— Hey Joanie Brownpenny
was Boto ugly or what?
Oh . . . he was a blond kid, little sister
a guitar player . . . Dang . . .

He grabbed me by the waist
— Then what happened?

— Hey, folks!
Look at the tapioca bubbling in the boilers

— Girl, Boto has no shame!
Putirum Putirum



XXV

Party looks lively, partner

— Wanna turn into folks and go in?

— Let's go

— Hi there

— Evenin

— No, they don't know me here

They'll ask

— Who's that guy?

— Well, if you're good folks you can come on in

— So I'll ask if I can

sing out a poem for the lady of the house:

Angelim with your tiny little leaf
how'd you get so sad?

Tarumã

It was because the wind didn't bring me
news of the one who's gone

Tarumã

Titi flowers fade so fast
on the creek-bank

Tarumã

You leave no name in sand
The wind takes your tracks

Tarumã

Play another chorinho on the viola, partner

— Try a sip of burning cachaça bro it'll give you strength

— Let's dance

Longleaf tajá with your leaves so long
don't whistle so close to me

Tajá

When night falls on the sierra
I'm afraid she'll leave

Tajá

She already has night in her
but-you-forgot-me-now eyes
Tajá

Ai Sierra Goodbye-Maria
don't take my sweetheart there
Tajá

Tajá you bring bad omens
don't whistle so close to me
Tajá

— Move your old body
Lock legs with the girl, partner

— Shake Now cross
— To the other side
— To the right now
— Change it up now

I'll drink hot broth
Tico-tico's come back now
I was in the forest cutting firewood
Urumutum Urumutum

Woodpeck-a-pecker pecks and pecks
like my heart was pecking too
Woodpeck-a-pecker pecks all night long
Urumutum Urumutum

— These eats are really really good
— Pass that bowl of cassava meal over here
Peppers put fire in your mouth
— Unclog your throat with some cassava brew
Urumutum urumutum

— Check it out, partner
That girl's all eyes for you



— Already time to go
Warm your body with some cachaça
cause we still gotta cover ground

— Let's go!
— Hey partner listen here
while I whisper in your ear
Joanie Brownpenny wants to come too

— No way, man, it's much too late
Bring some flog-dog weeds
and let's go grab the body lying out there

XXVI

Pretty night
Looks glazed

Little sororoca palms sleep on the riverbank
Naked trees take a bath

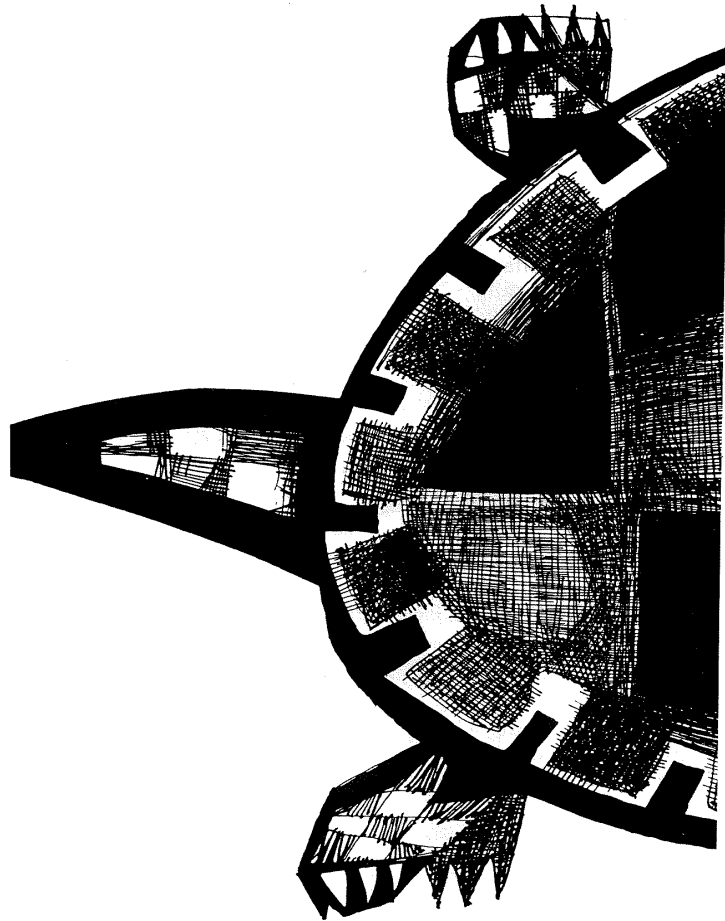
Jacarés on vacation
chew stars that melt down inside the water

Among clumps of tall grass
a sussuarana slinks in silk slippers

Little wind combs an embaúba's leaves

The landscape frays into a background

Brother-in-law Jabuti takes a fork
— Say hi to Miz Jabuti for me!



And the whole time it's night
with all this wide open sky and so many stars and
we go bruising roads way farther on

XXVII

Shaman working up ahead

In the dark to a corner of a farmhouse
Shaman whistles long *fiu . . . fiu . . .*
calling the woods

— Woods! I want my jaguar My rattle calls you

Jaguar came Lept Entered Shaman's body
— I want cachaça I want smoke I want a copycat dance

I don't like fire

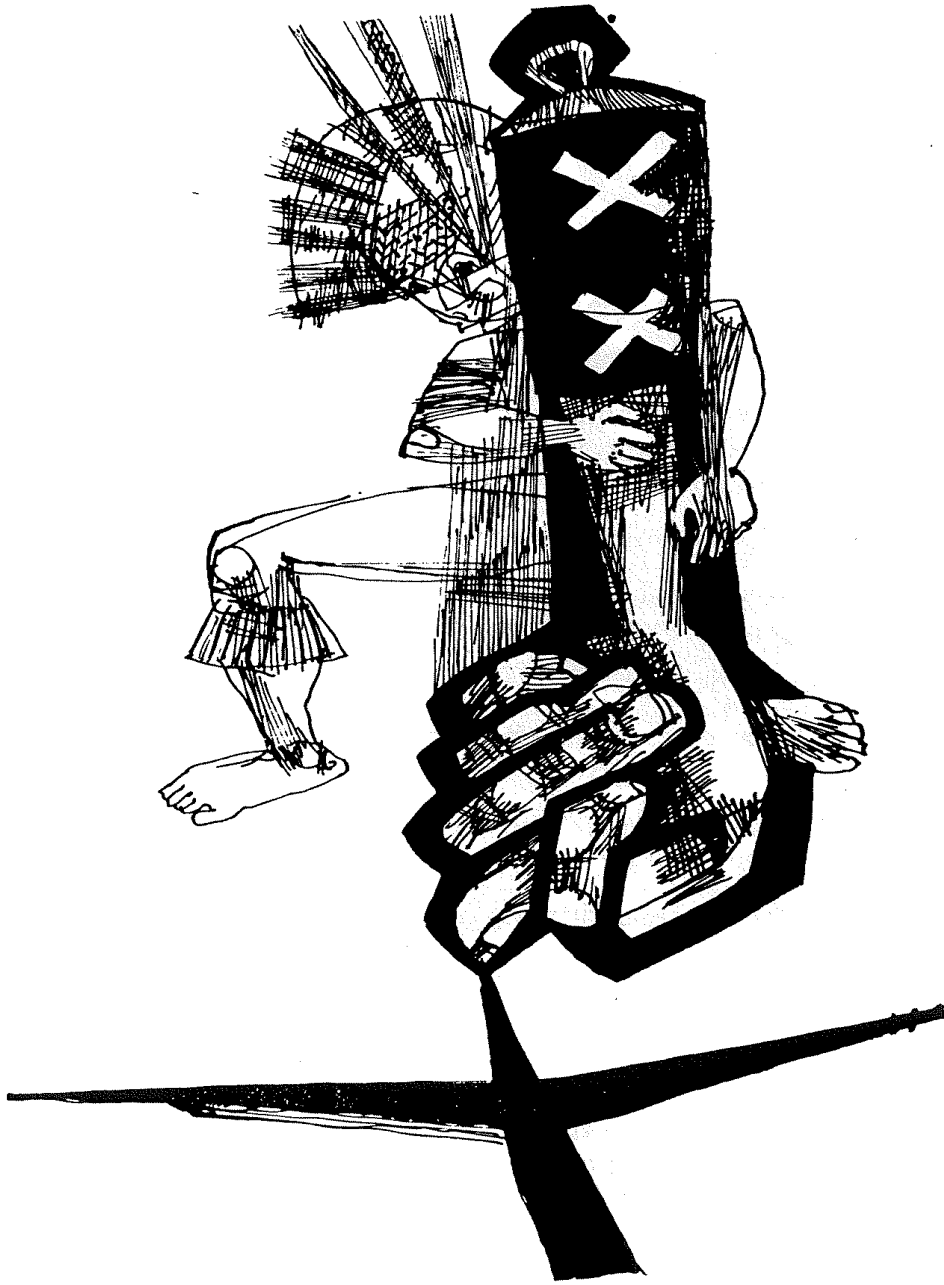
Master Paricá calls all the people
sick with swellbelly fever and fallen breastbone

— Only lake Mother knows how to cure it
— King Vulture's the one who knows all about dropsy

Shaman makes a blessing to keep spells away

He smokes and spreads
mucurana fumes
verbena with cipó-titica
tonka pods

Then he picks up a figa de Angola
scratches a cross in the ground
sweeps away the body's bewitchment with ema feathers



The last caruana asks for cachaça wants a copycat dance
— I want more tobacco

— Partner, you feel like a little smoke?

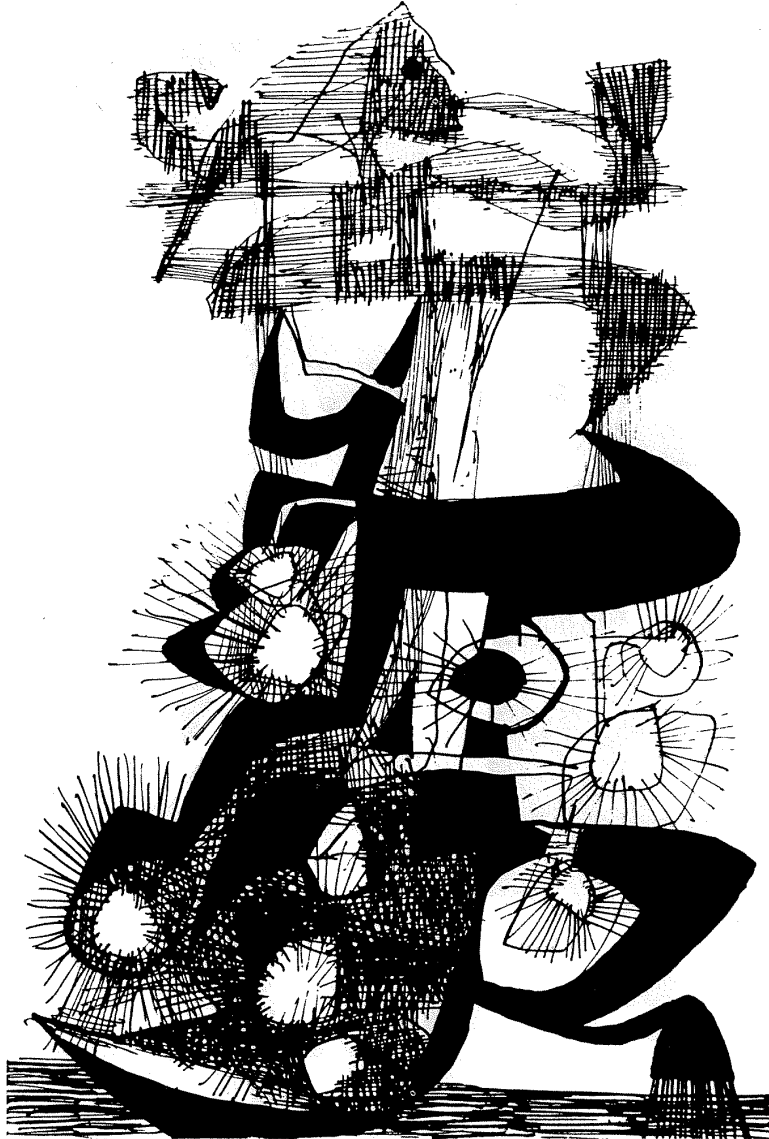
Shaman gets dizzy Squatted Went off Disappeared
whistling so low *fiu . . . fiu . . . fiu . . .*

Then
he hires the woods to make magic

XXVIII

Forest's getting bigger

Scarecrow monsters move
scribble weird shadows on the ground



Trees in crows let loose ghosts
with there-they-go faces

Moonlight softens the sleepy woods

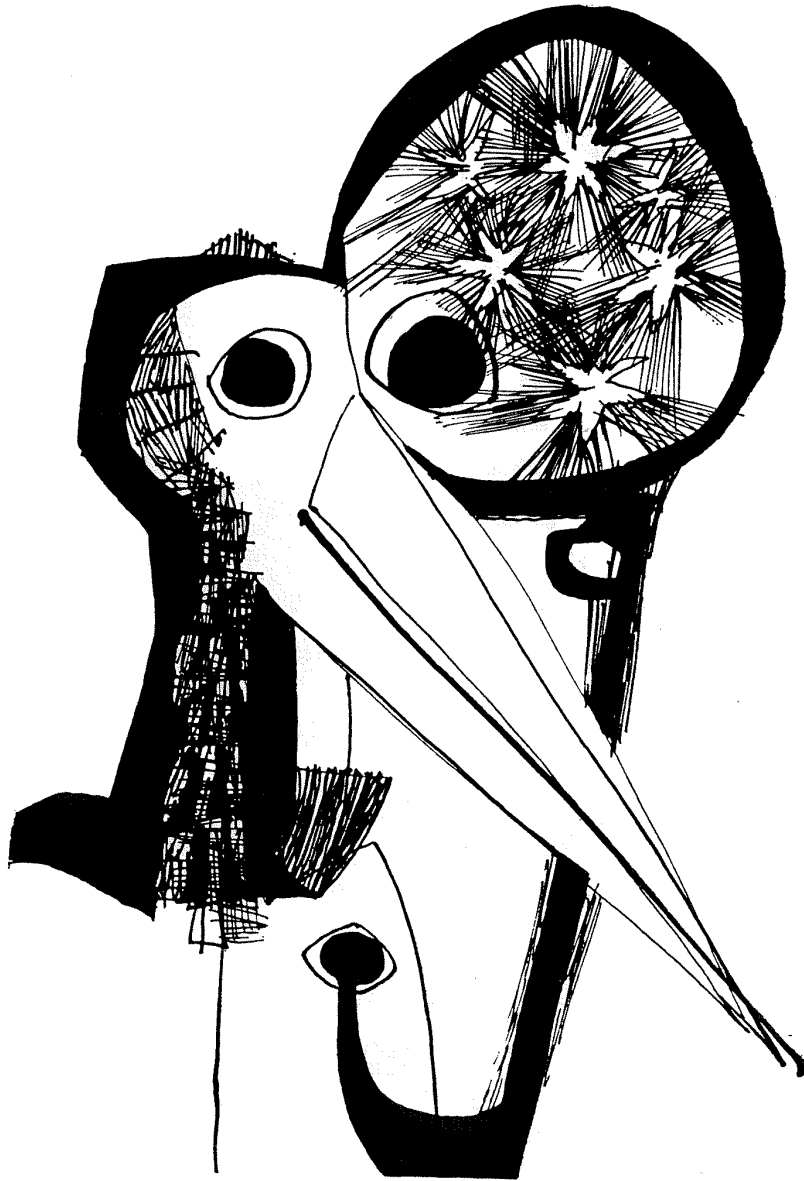
Up ahead
silence marches on with a band of musicians

Ventriloquist forest's playing city

Cubic shrubs move
under kapok arcades

Ringed palm trees wave

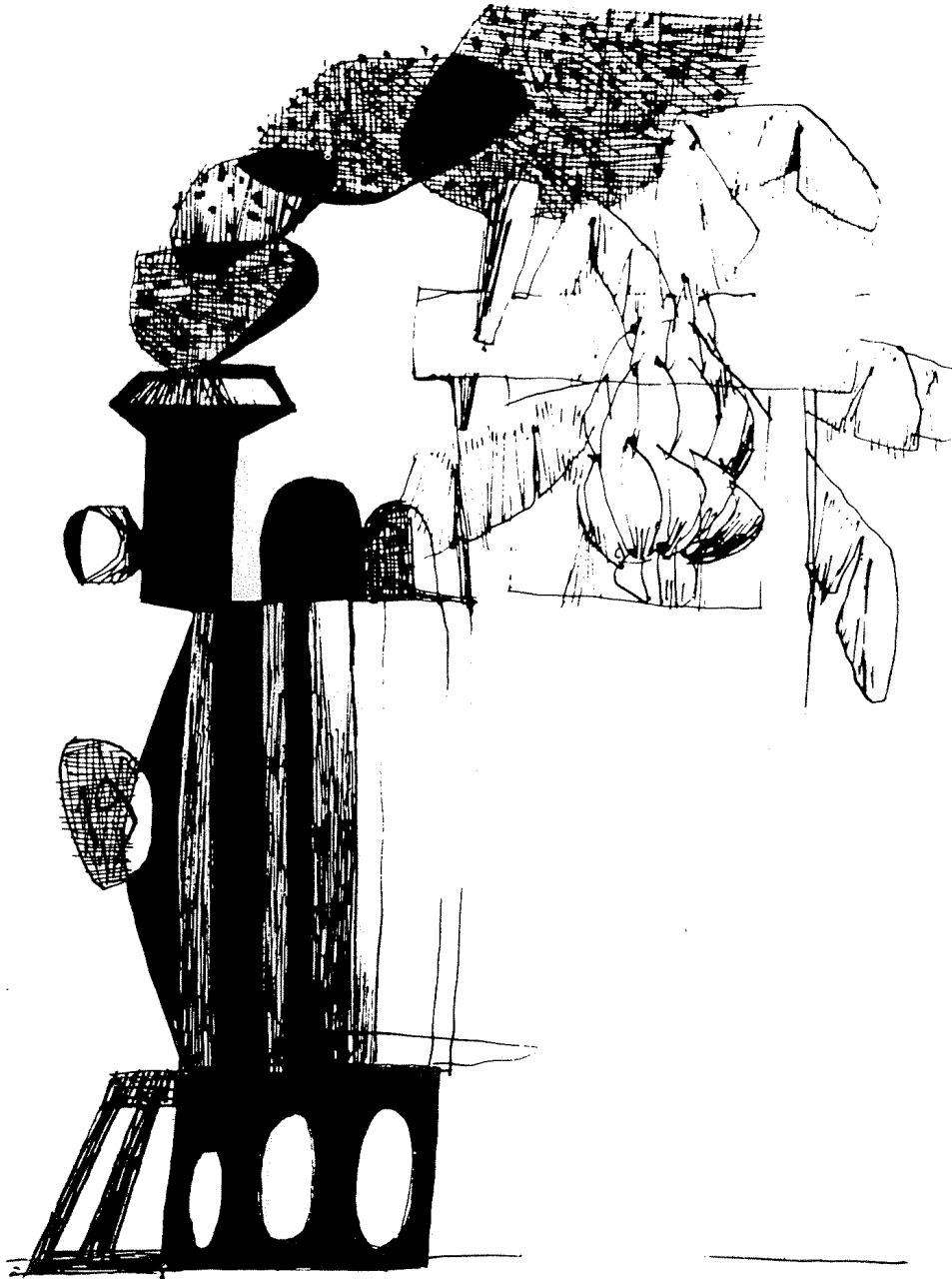
Monocled storks flirt with myopic stars
Johnny Polk pinches trees



King-of-cups and his escort go by down below
Canaranas bow

Anonymous noises from far away

— Who's that coming?
— That's a train coming:
Little Smokey-Mary in a hurry hurry hurry



The woods wake up

Vines talk trash high in the branches
They come undone in little giggles

One tree telegraphs another:
psi psi psi

Smuggled voices disembark

Toads spell out the laws of the jungle

High up above
a finch plays flute

The river stretches out

The woods play along behind

Distances fray
into blots of fog

— There's a boat coming, partner!

Lantern-fly whistles
A tree waves goodbye from the top of a bough

XXIX

Listen, partner
That's no boat It's the Great Snake

— But the silver hull? The sails bulging in the wind?

That's the Great Snake
He shows up when the full moon comes
He comes looking for a girl who never knew a man

The apparition goes rising
off to Macapá

In this silence of frightened waters
seems like I still hear a sob breaking in the night

— Poor little girl
I wonder what's her name?
If only I could go to the wedding

— Great Snake's wedding calls down nothing but bad times, partner



Imagin de Virgile de Goussier - Reimpression de la Revue de la Vieillesse

We gotta cast a deadman spell

Ué! So let's go
Werewolfs at a party in the cemetery

XXX

— Open up, wind
cause I'm giving you a burnt penny
I need to get through quick
before the moon sinks into the woods

— So go on through, grandson

Pereré Pereré Pereré
I need to reach the long sierra

— Hey, pops, hey Shaman-duck
pull the woods aside
cause I gotta get through

I'm bringing a ring and a gold comb
for Great Snake's fiancée

— What else you got?
— Cachaça
— Then leave a little and I'll let you through

A pitiro-pitiro sings deep the woods
Silence didn't answer

Striped Cuckoo's coming
— It'd be good if you could leave a clump of smoke for the curupira, partner

We're coming to Slide Point

Aracuã keeps guard
The girls are going to take a bath in the sinkhole
What a pity we gotta fly, partner
Otherwise we could go peek cause they smell so sweet
— Forge ahead, man, it's late

— Slow down
oh man, this hard ground hurts ow ow

— We got a hand's breadth of moon up there

— Slow down
oh man, this hard ground hurts ow ow

— If the long-eyed witch wakes up
she'll cast a wicked spell

— Slow down
oh man, this hard ground hurts ow ow

— Hurry up, partner
I just saw Windy Sierra
on the other side of the moonlight

Great Snake's lands
begin just past the big swamp

— Ai partner
I need to loosen a few
breaths the air clogged

So just wait a little
I'll go get a potion
to bend the evil eye

I hear cat soul mew in the woods
When Tincuã cuckoos it's a bad omen . . .

XXXI

Here's Boiúna's front door

There's a swamp down there
Cururu's on guard

I go down through the deepest parts of the cave
in a darkness made for hiding

The hollow ground booms
Silence can't get out

Swole-mouth pits here
— Where's this come out?
— Comes out in Pott's Belly

Ai fear's already itching my belly

Up ahead
on a long hard haunted journey
goes a canoe filled with skeletons

Hey in this Spyhole
you can see Great Snake's fiancée

Partner! I'm shaking in my boots
I can't breathe at all



You know who that girl is down there
. . . naked like a little flower?
— It's queen Luzia's daughter!

— So run away with her fast
Don't waste time, partner
Great Snake woke up

— Bullfrog's making noise
— Ai Four Winds help me
I need strength to get away
Great Snake's coming and coming and looking to catch me

Now I gotcha Now I gotcha

— Serra Ronca rolls on below
— Shut it all down behind me

Put up three thorny mudwalls
ouricuri smoke
— Throw ashes behind me, man,
we gotta make tracks

Now I gotcha Now I gotcha

Brother-in-law Tamaquaré,
Great Snake's coming-coming
Go that way Make it look like my tracks
Make believe you're me
Take my armpit smell to shaman-duck's house

Turn aside fast
cause back there Boiúna's coming
like a stony thunderstorm

Comes kneading the forest

Uei!
He went by tearing up the path

Little trees got twisted necks
Others rolled around crushed roots up

The horizon went flat

Wind ran ran
biting the tip of his tail

Up ahead Shaman-duck sent him the wrong way

— You see Cobra Norato with a girl?
— He went to Belém He went to get married

Great Snake bellowed straight to Belém

Shook long and hard

Went through the drainpipe right into the Cathedral
and wound up with his head stuck under Our Lady's feet



XXII

— OK, partner, now
I'm going back to the Unending

I'm going to the high lands
where the sierra mounts up
where rivers of clear water run
through mulungu thickets

I want to bring my girl
I want to stay right here with her
in a house to live in
with a tiny little blue door
painted with a crayon

I want to feel how warm she is
when she cuddles up next to me
and I want to cuddle her right back
and we're gonna be so good together

I want to stay in the shade of the woods
and listen to the horned owl
and water that sings for us
when we stretch out nearby

And when we're lying around waiting
for night to come again
I'll tell her stories and
we'll write our names in the sand
for the wind to come play with and erase

XXXIII

OK then, partner
Go your way now

Look for my godmother Malaria
tell her I'm about to get married
tell her I'm giving my fiancée
a summer dress made of flowers

I want a hammock woven
out of sweet-smelling grasses
and a tiny tiny carpet
made of irapuru feathers

And all along the way
invite people to the big celebration

I'm gonna throw a party
for seven suns and seven moons



Bring Jeanie Brownpenny Shaman-duck and Boi-Queixume
And don't forget the Xicos, Maria-Pitanga and Johnny Tender and

Augusto Meyer Tarsila Tatizinha
I want folks from Belém and Porto Alegre and São Paulo

— See you soon, partner
I'll be here waiting for you all
past the sierras of the Unending



Translator's Notes

This epic poem — or sequence of micro-epics —, indisputably the masterpiece of *poesia antropológica*, is an anthem of *brasilidade*. It is based on folk tales, generally about the anaconda. It is impossible to overstate its importance in Brazilian literature. Carlos Drummond de Andrade called it “the most Brazilian poem, ever”. Bopp revised the poem obsessively. My translation is based on Bopp’s final version published in *Poesia Completa de Raul Bopp* (EdUSP/José Olympio, São Paulo, 1998). A translation of the first edition will follow in the (hopefully) not-too-distant future. *Preface after Câmara Cascudo* was added by me.

There are many references to macumba and/or candomblé rituals; supernatural entities abound; while these matters do interest me greatly, I am hardly an adept. My ignorance has led inevitably to failure in more than one section of this poem.

In Portuguese, “cobra” simply means “snake”. I thought it best to leave the title untranslated because all other options sounded wrong to me. I also translated literally many of the names of flora and fauna in a probably vain attempt at transmitting some of the flavor of Bopp’s Portuguese.

One of the major difficulties in translating *Cobra Norato* lies in its diminutives (e.g., “estorzinho”, a noun based on the verb “estar”: “a-little-being-for-a-while”), which often gives the poem a sweet, childlike tenderness (Bopp began the poem as a children’s book). Another is Bopp’s constant shifting between the colloquial and the “high poetic”. Yet another is the welter of Amazonian names of places, plants, animals and entities. I admit my utter failure, but hope that my half-measures at least point to the lovely qualities of Raul Bopp’s great masterpiece and, in any event, I’ll never stop revising this translation.

Words ending in “u” and “m” are always stressed on the last syllable. “A” with a tilde (ã) is always stressed and nasalized. “M” and “n” always nasalize the preceding vowel. All other words are accented on the next-to-last syllable unless a diacritical mark is present elsewhere in the word.; “nh” is pronounced like Spanish “ñ”, but it is generally nasalized.

In the late 90’s, the marvelous poet Claudio Daniel sent me a copy of the poem, which set me on my way back to Infinity. Lucia Sá found me there, looked over my work and not only made many, many valuable suggestions, but also saved me from more than a few howling blunders. I can’t possibly thank her enough and all remaining errors are my own, especially when intentional. Such are the perils. I finished this translation in very large part because of my friends Ken Bullock Chris Chen, Susan Maxwell and Joel Nickels; and, as always, my dear father David, my mother Sara, my sister Rita, *na Terra sem Mal*.

— Chris Daniels, 2008

Glossary

Açaí — Tree (*Euterpe oleracea*).

Angelim — Tree (*Hymenolobium petraeum*).

Aracuã — Bird (*Ortalis*).

Augusto Meyer — BR modernist poet, critic, essayist; friend of Bopp’s.

Beast of the Deep — Great Snake.

Boi-Queixume — “Lamentation-Ox”; reference to the Bumba-Meu-Boi festival?

Boiúna — Great Snake.

Boto — River dolphin.

Cachaça — Liquor made from sugar cane, very much like white lightning.

Canarana — West Indian marsh grass (*Hymenachne amplexicaulis*).

Caruana — Benign supernatural entity inhabiting river bottoms; invoked to free people from spells and illness.

Chorinho — *Chôro* is a popular, and very prevalent, improvisatory musical genre developed in late 19th-century Brazilian dance halls and jam sessions. It is my understanding that a *chorinho* is a *chôro* with lyrics.

Cipó-titica — Fibrous vine (*Heteropsis flexuosa*). Used in furniture, etc.

Cumandá — Chigo seed (*Campsiandra comosa*).

Curupira — Supernatural entity; wild human boy with red hair, green teeth and feet that face backwards to confuse trackers. He protects the forest from the destructive actions of humans. He leaves in peace those who hunt for food but becomes infuriated when people hunt for pleasure alone. He lays traps to confuse casual hunters so that they become eternally lost in the forest.

Cururu — toad or vine.

Bigworm — Minhocão, Big Earthworm. Benign serpentine entity living in riverbottoms?

Emá — (*rhea americana*) large, ostrich-like bird.

Embaúba — tree (*Cecropia palmata*, *Cecropia peltata*, *Cecropia obtusifolia*).

Figa de Angola — amulet; fist with thumb between index and middle fingers.

Irapuru — Uirapuru. Musical wren (*Cyphorhinus aradus*).

Jabuti — Land tortoise. Legendary trickster, long-lived and persistent. Invited guest at the great celestial party. National symbol of a people most lovely.

Jacaré — from Tupi *yaka'ré*, common name for crocodilian reptiles.

Jeanie Brownpenny — Joanhina Vintém, a kind of metaphorized femme fatale.

Johnny Polk — João Cutuca. *Cutucar* means *to poke*. This proper name is unknown to me. A simple joke, perhaps.

Johnny Tender — João Ternura, an allusion to a novel by Anibal Machado? Definitely an incarnation or avatar of the Brazilian people.

Maria-Pitanga — *Pitanga* is the Surinam (or Brazilian) Cherry. This proper name is unknown to me.

Mary-it's-day — bird. Yellow-bellied Elaenia.

Master Paricá — hallucinogen. Derived from pods of **Anadenanthera peregrina?**

Membeca — Water paspalum (*Paspalum repens*, *Paspalum fluitans*).

Miriti — Aguaje Palm, Buriti Palm, Brazilian Needle Palm, Mosquito Palm (*Mauritia flexuosa*, *Astrocaryum buriti*, *Trithrinax schizophylla*).

Mucurana — unknown to me, perhaps vegetal; herb?

Mulungu — Flowering tree (*Erythrina mulungu*).

Mussangular — (I'm all mussangular: *Estou de mussangulá*). “Another thesis: *Mussangulá*. A spiritual position that condenses problems of personality in a surrealist adaptation. A state of acceptance; an obscure, subconscious, magical and pre-logical instinct that renounces a clear comprehension of things. A kind of philosophical sloth, a specifically Brazilian propensity to loaf: “*Estou de mussangulá*.” The word entered our idiom to signify a defense of the spirit unwilling to be boxed in by precepts. Therefore, against all that is coherent, syllogistic, geometric, cartesian. Anthropophagy adopted it in order to accommodate, on obscure bases, its theoretical impasses and its incoherent and even sketchy ideas that escape agreement and are difficult to adjust to verbal formations. No need to understand. All you have to do is feel . . . *mussangularly*.” [Bopp, *Movimentos Modernistas no Brasil*, Rio de Janeiro, 1966, pp. 83-84]

Nheengatu — from Tupi *nheega'tu* “good language”; lingua franca developed out of Tupinambá and spoken all along the Amazon Valley (Houaiss Dictionary of the Portuguese Language).

Ouricuri — type of palm tree?

Paturá — kind of grass?

Pereré — Saci-pereré. One-legged, pipe-smoking, masculine, elf-like prankster entity with holes in the palms of his hands. Wears a magical red cap allowing him to appear and disappear at his pleasure, usually in the middle of a dust devil. Merely annoying in most parts of Brazil, in some parts considered dangerous and malevolent. Grants wishes to anyone who steals his magic cap or traps him in a bottle or under a sieve.

Pirixi grass — *Iresine portulacoides*.

Pitiro-pitiro — bird? insect?

Pororoca — from Tupi *poro'roka*, *roar*; *great noise*; *pororoca* is a tidal bore up to 4 meters high that travels up Rio Amazonas and its tributaries. It occurs at the mouth of the river where its water meets the Atlantic Ocean. The phenomenon is best seen in February and March, where waves up to 4 meters high and rolling for up to 35 minutes have been observed.

Pott's Belly — *goela de Panela*, wordplay, “pot's gullet”, perhaps a place name.

Saracura — Slaty-breasted Wood-rail (*Aramides saracura*).

Seriquara — bird? Variant of *saracura*?

Serra Ronca — ridge in NE Brazil? *Roncar* means *to drone*, *to snore*, *to grunt* (as a pig) and, colloquially, *to boast*.

Shakey-Shakey — “Atravassei o Treme-Treme”; ritual, according to Giovanni Pontiero. There is a type of grass called “treme-treme”; waterlogged ground?

Smokey-Mary — *Maria-fumaça*: locomotive.

Socó-boi — Rufescent Tiger-Heron (*Tigrisoma lineatum*).

Sussuarana — a kind of jaguar (puma).

Tajá — Blue Taro, Blue Tannia (*Xanthosoma violaceum*), *Caladium*, Angelwings, Heart of Jesus (*Caladium bicolor*).

Tamaquaré — Tree or shrub (*Clusiaceae*); lizard (*Enyalius*), most likely.

Tarsila — Tarsila do Amaral: very famous (and very great) modernist painter.

Tarumã — *vitex*.

Tatizinha — Beatriz Azevedo de Mello, nicknamed Tati, first wife of Vinicius de Moraes.

Tico-tico — Rufous-collared Sparrow (*Zonotrichia capensis*).

Tincuã (Tincõã) — Squirrel Cuckoo (*Piaya cayana*).

Tiririca — *Cyperus rotundus*.

Urumutum — nocturnal curassow (*Nothocrax urumutum*).

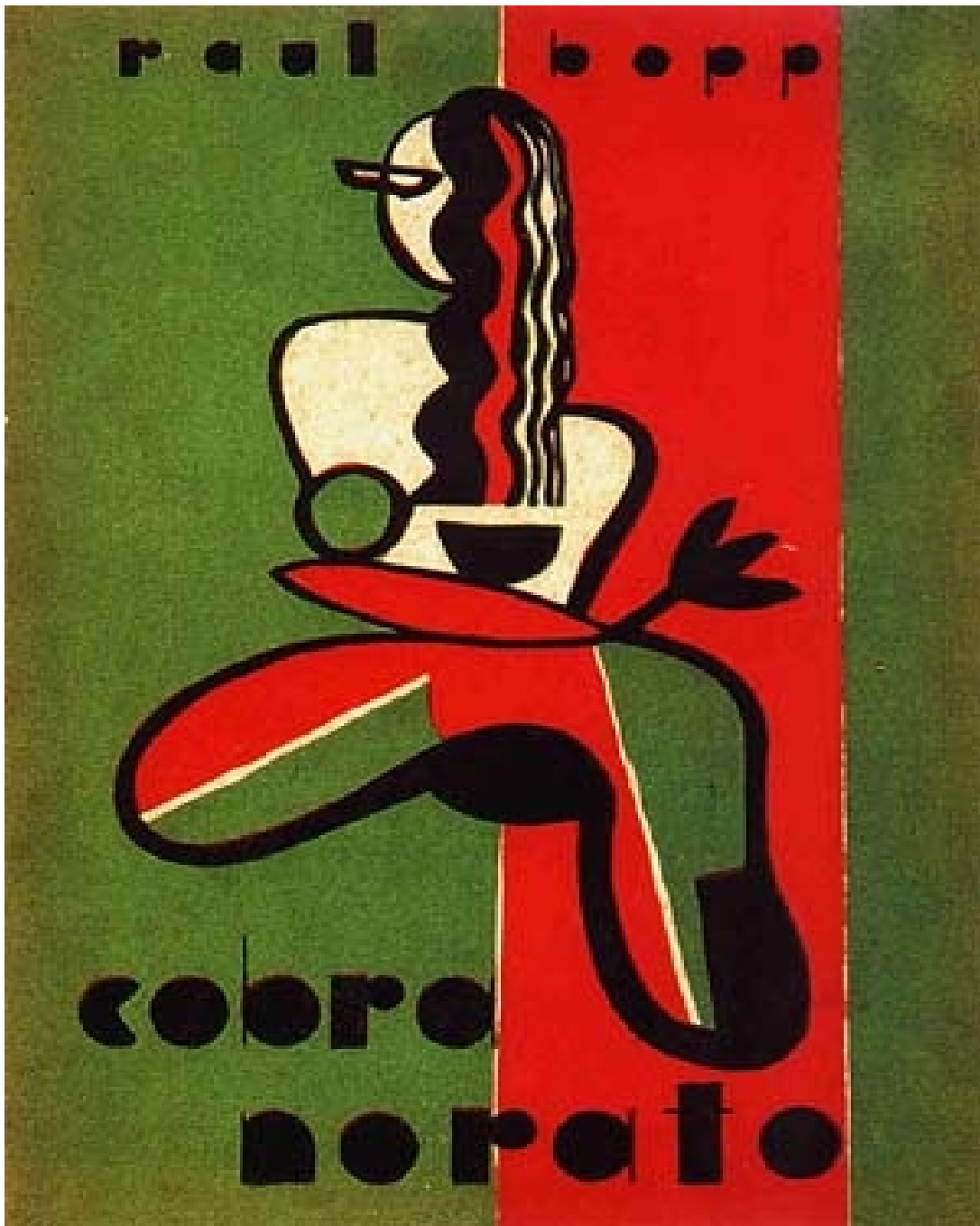
Viola — any one of several guitar-like instruments, some with doubled strings.

Os Xicos — The Chicos? Unknown to me.





Raul Bopp was born in Tupanciretã, Rio Grande do Sul, on August 4, 1898. After graduating law school he worked as a journalist in Porto Alegre and São Paulo, painted doors in Cuiabá, Mato Grosso, was a bookstore cashier in Buenos Aires, a civil servant and finally, diplomat in Kobe, Yokohama, Los Angeles, Zurich, Barcelona, Lisboa and Ciudad de Guatemala. Raul Bopp was nomadic from an early age; no one ever seemed to know exactly where he was, even after he was married with children.



**TRANSLATION FIGHTS
CULTURAL NARCISSISM**