

## MARTIN FIERRO THE GAUCHO \*

1

Here I come to sing to the beat of my guitar:  
because a man who is kept from sleep by an uncommon sorrow  
comforts himself with singing, like a solitary bird.

I beg the saints in heaven to help my thoughts:  
I beg them here and now as I start to sing my story  
that they refresh my memory and make my understanding clear.

Come, saints with your miracles, come all of you to my aid,  
because my tongue is twisting and my sight growing dim—  
I beg my God to help me at this hard time.

I have seen many singers whose fame was well won,  
and after they've achieved it they can't keep it up --  
it's as if they'd tired in the trial runs\* without ever starting the race.

But where another criollo\* goes Martin Fierro will go too:  
there's nothing sets him back, even ghosts don't scare him --  
and since everybody sings I want to sing also.

Singing I'll die, singing they'll bury me,  
and singing I'll arrive at the Eternal Father's feet --  
out of my mother's womb I came into this world to sing.

Let me not be tongue-tied nor words fail me:  
singing carves my fame, and once I set myself to sing  
they'll find me singing, even though the earth should open up.

I'll sit down in a hollow to sing a story --  
I make the grass-blades shiver as if it was a wind that blew:  
my thoughts go playing there with all the cards in the pack.\*

I'm no educated singer, but if I start to sing  
there's nothing to make me stop and I'll grow old singing --  
the verses go spouting from me like water from a spring.

With the guitar in my hand even flies don't come near me:  
no one sets his foot on me, and when I sing full from my heart  
I make the top string moan and the low string cry.

I'm the bull in my own herd and a braver bull in the next one;  
I always thought I was pretty good, and if anyone else wants to try me  
let them come out and sing and we'll see who comes off worst.

I don't move off the track even though they're out cutting throats:.\*  
with the soft, I am soft, and I am hard with the hard,  
and in a time of peril, no one has seen me hesitate.

In danger -- by Christ! my heart swells wide:  
since the whole earth's a battlefield and no one need be surprised at that,  
anyone who holds himself a man stands his ground, no matter where.

I am a gaucho, and take this from me as my tongue explains it to you:  
for me the earth is a small place and could be bigger yet --  
the snake does not bite me nor the sun burn my brow.

I was born as a fish is born at the bottom of the sea;  
no one can take from me what I was given by God --  
what I brought into the world I shall take from the world with me.

It is my glory to live as free as a bird in the sky:  
I make no nest on this ground where there's so much to be suffered,  
and no one follows me when I take to flight again.

In love I have no one to come to me with quarrels:  
like those beautiful birds that go hopping from branch to branch  
I make my bed in the clover and the stars cover me.

And whoever may be listening to the tale of my sorrows --  
know that I never fight nor kill except when it has to be done,  
and that only injustice threw me into so much adversity.

And listen to the story told by a gaucho who's hunted by the law;  
who's been a father and husband hard-working and willing --  
and in spite of that, people take him to be a criminal.

#### NOTES to I.1.

TITLE] *Gaucha*] Historically, as a social class, *gaucho* means the countrymen who were born and lived on the pampa plain, originally descendants of Spanish settlers with the more approachable of the native Indians from the north of the country. In earlier times they lived off the herds of wild cattle and horses introduced by the settlers, selling hides etc.; later as the land became more controlled, by working on the *estancias* (ranches). *Gaucha* in common speech is more a description of the characteristics evolved from this way of life: horsemanship and skill in dealing with cattle, courage and total self-reliance in their isolated primitive life. As fighters the gauchos were typically fierce, following their own laws of honour and chosen leaders; hence they were a considerable force during the nineteenth-century struggles for power in the land -- the dictatorship of Rosas (1835-52) was founded on their loyalty to him. To city people *gaucho* was often a synonym for barbarism, but with time the less violent aspects of gauchos prevailed in popular imagination, and by extension *gaucho* comes to be a description of anything strong and simple, well-done or well-made. A *gauchada* in modern Argentine slang means the action of a friend, doing a favour. There are diverse theories of the origin of the name; one being from *guacho*, orphan (see note to I.11.7).

I.1.4] *trial runs*] Local horse-racing was a big event in gaucho life (see II.11). There may also be a reference here to earlier writers on "gaucho" themes who were disheartened by the disapproval of literary circles in the city.

I.1.5] *criollo* ("criOZHo")] native Spanish-American. It comes to mean true countryman, as opposed to immigrants (*gringos*) and Europeanised city-men. (See I/12/12, II/12/18 etc)

I.1.8] *cards in the pack*] Literally "Coins, Cups, and Clubs" (suits from the originally European card pack).

I.1.12] *cutting throats*] Prisoners and wounded were commonly killed off after a battle. Throat-cutting was the preferred method with gauchos as with Indians. There is a horrifying account of this in W.H.Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago* (chapter 8). (See also I.3.54)

No one speak of sorrows to me because I live sorrowing;  
and nobody should give himself airs even though he's got a foot in the stirrup --  
even the gaucho with most sense often finds himself left on foot.

You gather experience in life, enough to lend and give away,  
if you have to go through with it between tears and suffering --  
because nothing teaches you so much as to suffer and cry.

Man comes blind into the world with hope tugging him on,  
and within a few steps, misfortunes have caught him and beat him down....

*La pucha* --\* the hard lessons Time with its changes brings!

I have known this land when the working-man lived in it  
and had his little cabin and his children and his wife...  
It was a delight to see the way he spent his days.

Then... when the morning star was shining in the blessed sky,  
and the crowing of the cocks told us that day was near,  
a gaucho would make his way to the kitchen... it was a joy.

And sitting beside the fire waiting for day to come,  
he'd suck at the bitter *mate*\* till he was glowing warm,  
while his girl was sleeping tucked up in his poncho.\*

And just as soon as the dawn started to turn red,  
and the birds to sing and the hens come down off their perch,  
it was time to get going, each man to his work.

One would be tying on his spurs, someone else go out singing;  
one choose a supple sheepskin, one a lasso, someone else a whip –  
and the whinneying horses calling them from the hitching rail.

The one whose job was horse-breaking\* headed for the corral,  
where the beast was waiting, snorting fit to burst –  
wild and wicked as they come\* and tearing itself to bits.

And there the skilful gaucho, soon as he'd got a rein on the colt,  
would settle the leathers on his back and mount him straight away...  
A man shows, in this life, the craft God gave to him.

And plunging around the clearing, the brute would tear itself up  
while the man was playing him with the round spurs, on his shoulders  
and he'd rush out squirming with the leathers squeaking loud.

Ah, what times they were! you felt proud to see how a man could ride.  
When a gaucho really knew his job, even if the colt went right over backward,  
not one of them wouldn't land on his feet with the halter-rein in his hand.

And while some were breaking-in, others went out on the land  
and rounded up the cattle and got together the horse-herds –  
and like that, without noticing, they'd pass the day, enjoying themselves.

And as night fell, you'd see them together again in the kitchen,  
with the fire well alight and a hundred things to talk over –  
they'd be happy, chatting together till after the evening meal.

And with your belly well filled it was a fine thing  
to go to sleep the way things should be, in the arms of love –  
and so to next day, to begin the work from the day before.

I remember--- ah, that was good! how the gauchos went around,

always cheerful and well mounted and willing for work...  
But these days--- curse it! you don't see them, they're so beaten down.

Even the poorest gaucho had a string of matching horses,  
he could always find some amusement, people were ready for anything....  
Looking out across the land you'd see nothing but cattle and sky.\*

When the branding-time came round that was work to warm you up!  
What a crowd! lassoing the running steers and quick to hold and throw them....  
What a time that was! in those days for sure you'd see some champions.

You couldn't call that work, it was more like a party –  
and after a good throw when you'd managed it skilfully,  
the boss used to call you over to give you a swig of liquor,

because the great jug of booze\* always lived there under the cart,  
and anyone who wasn't shy, when he saw the open spout  
would take a hold on it fearlessly as an orphan calf to the teat.

And the games that would get going when we were all of us together!  
We were always ready for it, as at times like those  
a lot of neighbours would turn up to help out the regular hands.

For the womenfolk, those were days full of hurry and bustling  
to get the cooking done and serve the people properly...  
And so like this, we gauchos always lived in grand style.

In would come the meat roast in the skin and the tasty stew,  
cooked maize well ground, pies and wine of the best...  
But it has been the will of fate that all these things should come to an end.

A gaucho'd live in his home country as safe as anything,  
but now -- it's a crime! things have got to be so twisted  
that a poor man wears out his life running from the authorities.

Because if you set foot in your house and the Mayor finds out about it,  
he'll hunt you like a beast even if it makes your wife miscarry....  
But there's no time that won't come to an end nor a rope that won't break sometime.

And you can give yourself up for dead right away, if the Mayor catches you,  
because he'll come down on you there and then, with a flogging --  
and then if a gaucho puts up a fight they call him a hard case.

They'll bruise your back with beating and break your head open for you,  
and then without any more ado, bleeding as you are and all,  
they lash your elbows together and head you for the stocks.

That's where your misfortunes start, and that's where the dance begins –  
because now there's no saving you, and whether you like or not  
they send you off to the frontier,\* or sling you into a regiment.

That was the way my troubles began, the same as many another's.  
If you like, I'll tell you... in more verses, what I've gone through.  
Once you're done for, you can't be saved, not even by the holy saints.

I.2.3] *la pucha!*] common euphemism for *puta* (whore)

I.2.6] *mate*] (two syllables) a strong green tea made in a small gourd or pot (a *mate*) and sucked through a perforated mouthpiece (*bombilla*). A stimulant and essential vitamin source for meat-eaters.

*his girl!*] *china*, meaning indian woman, affectionately extended to any *criolla* country girl. Legal marriage was uncommon.

*poncho*] made of two strips of cloth sewn with a space for the head, generally striped and fringed, essential equipment as a cloak, blanket, or in fighting. See I.7.18; I.9.19-30, etc.

I.2.9] *horse-breaking*] the gaucho method was to dominate and exhaust the horse by force and good balance. A good *domador* was immensely respected. See II.10 for the alternative method with the indians.

*wicked as they come*] literally, "worse than your grandmother".

I.2.17] *nothing but cattle and sky*] the flat treeless pampa, technically the plain of rich soil extending 300 miles inland and to the south of Buenos Aires city (the "dry pampa", more barren and less flat, extends beyond this, towards Patagonia in the south and the Andes mountains in the west). This was before its division with fences and more plantations.

I.2.19] *liquor*] *caNa*, cane-liquor. *Jug of booze* in the next verse, in the original a pun replacing *damajuana* (demijohn) with *mamajuana* (*mamar*= get drunk).

I.2.23] *roast in the skin*] a delicacy. Meat was roasted on an upright spit leaning over an open fire.

I.2.25] *Mayor*] the civil authority in country districts, under the Judge. *Mayor*, *Judge*, and *Commandant* (of the militia) are virtually interchangeable in the poem as representatives of corrupt authority.

I.2.28] *frontier*] frontier forts against the land still occupied by indians, manned by recruited soldiers.

### 3

In my part of the land, at one time, I had children, cattle, and a wife;  
but my sufferings began, they pitched me out to the frontier –  
and when I got back, what was I to find! a ruin, and nothing more.

I lived peacefully in my cabin like a bird in its nest,  
my beloved children were growing up there at my side....  
When you're unhappy, all that's left you is to mourn for good things that are lost.

What I enjoyed, in a country store\* when there was most of a crowd  
was to warm myself up a bit -- because when I've had a drink  
the verses come from inside of me like water from a waterfall.

One day, there I was singing in the middle of a big party,  
and the Justice of the Peace\* thought he'd make the most of the occasion –  
he appeared on the scene, and there and then he had the whole crowd rounded up.

The ones who knew best got away and managed to escape:  
I didn't want to run off -- I'm a quiet one, and there was no reason –  
I stayed there quite calmly and so I let myself get caught.

There was a gringo\* with a barrel-organ and a monkey that danced  
who was making us laugh when the round-up came to him --  
a huge fellow he was, and ugly! you should have seen how he cried.

Even an Englishman ditch-digger\* who'd said in the last war  
that he wouldn't do the service because he came from *Inca-la-perra* –  
he had to escape as well and take cover in the hills.\*

Not even the people looking on were spared from this bumper catch;  
the singer was yoked together with the gringo who had the monkey –  
only one, as a favour, the storeman's wife got to save.

They formed up a troop of recruits with the men they'd caught at the dance;  
they mixed us in with some others that they'd grabbed as well....  
Even devils didn't think up the things you see going on here.

The Judge had taken against me the last time we had to vote.\*

I'd played it stubborn and I didn't go near him that day --  
and he said I was working for the ones in the *proposition*.\*

And that's how I suffered the punishment for someone else's sins, maybe.  
Voting lists may be bad or good, I always keep out of sight --  
I'm a gaucho through and through and these things don't satisfy me.

As they sent us off, they made us more promises than at an altar.  
The Judge came and made us speeches, and told us many times,  
"In six months' time, boys, they'll be going out to relieve you".

I took a classy dark roan --\* a real winner he was, the brute!  
With him in Ayacucho\* I won more money than there's holy water --  
a gaucho always needs a good horse to get him a bit of credit.\*

And without any more ado I loaded up with the gear I had:  
saddle-rugs, poncho, everything there was in the house, I took the lot --  
I left my girl that day with hardly a shirt to her back.

There wasn't a strap missing, I staked all I had, that time:  
halter, tether, and leading-rein, lasso, bolas, and hobbles....  
People seeing me so poor today won't believe all this, maybe!\*

And so, with my dark roan tossing his head I made for the frontier.  
I tell you, you ought to see the place they call a fort --  
I wouldn't even envy a mouse who had to live in that hole.

Of all the wretched men who were there they hadn't let one go free.  
The older ones grumbled, but when one made a complaint  
straight away they staked him out\* and that was the end of that.

At the evening roll-call the Chief showed us his hand,  
saying, "Anyone who deserts will get five hundred straight.  
We won't pull any punches -- he'll find he'd be better dead."

They didn't give arms to anyone because the whole lot there were  
were being kept by the Colonel (so he said on that occasion)  
so as to hand them out on the day if an invasion came.

At first they left us to laze around and grow fat,  
but afterwards -- I daren't tell you the things that happened next.  
Curse it! they treated us the way you treat criminals.

Because they'd go hitting you with their swords, on your back --  
even though you weren't doing anything it was bad as in Palermo,\*  
they'd give you such a time in the stocks that it would leave you sick.

And as for indians\* and army service -- there wasn't even a barracks there.  
The Colonel would send us out to go and work in his fields,  
and we left the cattle on their own for the heathens to carry off.

The first thing I did was sow wheat, then I made a corral;  
I cut adobe for a wall, made hurdles, cut straw....  
*la pucha!* how you work and they don't even throw you a cent.\*

And the worst of all that mess is that if you start to get your back up,  
they come down on you like lead... Who'd put up with a hell like that!  
If that's serving the Government I don't care for the way they do it.

For more than a year they kept us at this hard labour;  
and the indians, you may be sure, came in whenever they liked –  
as nobody went after them they were never in any hurry.

Sometimes, when the look-out patrol came back from the plain, they'd say  
that we ought to be on the alert, the indians were moving in,  
because they'd found some tracks or the carcass of a mare.\*

Only then the order would go out for us to form a line,  
and we'd turn up at the fort bareback, even two aback,  
unarmed -- half a dozen poor beggars going out just to get scared.

And now the fuss began, all for show, naturally,  
of them teaching army drill to the crowd of gaucho recruits,  
with an instructor, a... fool who'd never learnt his job.

Then they'd give out the arms to defend the fortifications,  
which consisted of pikes and old swords tied together with strips of hide --  
the firearms I don't count because there was no ammunition.

(And one of the sergeants, when he was drunk, told me they did have some,  
but that they used to sell it for hunting ostriches --  
so that was how they went day and night blasting away at the birds.)

And when the indians went off with whatever they'd looted,  
we'd set out in a great hurry chasing after them –  
if they didn't take more with them it's because they hadn't found it.

And there truly you see misfortune and tears and sufferings.  
No one asks the indians for mercy -- where they break in  
they'll steal and kill all they come across and burn down the settlements.

Even the poor little angels aren't saved from their fury --  
old men, boys and children, they kill them all in the same way --  
an indian fixes everything with his spear and a yell.

Your flesh shakes to see them, their manes flying in the wind,  
reins in their left hand and spear in the right –  
they break through wherever they turn, as there's no spear-thrust goes wide.

They ride tremendous distances from deep inside the desert,  
and so they arrive half dead of hunger and thirst and fatigue --  
but an indian's like the ant that stays awake night and day.

He knows how to handle the bolas\* as no one else can handle them –  
as his enemy moves away he'll sling off a loose ball,  
and if it reaches him it won't leave him alive.

And an indian is tough as a tortoise, to finish off –  
if you do get to spill his guts it won't even worry him,  
he'll stuff them back in a moment, hunch down and gallop away.

They used to plunder as they pleased and then went off scot-free.  
They took the captive women with them, and we were told that sometimes  
poor women, they used to cut the skin off their feet, alive.

Curse it, if your heart didn't break seeing so many crimes!  
Not even able to gallop we'd follow them far behind --  
and how could we have caught up with them on those broken-down old nags!

After two or three more days we would turn back to the fort  
with our horses dropping by the road -- and so that someone could sell it,  
we'd round up the cattle they'd left straggling behind.

Once, out of the many times when we rushed out uselessly,  
the indians landed on us with such a raid and a spear-attack  
that from that time onwards people lost their nerve.

They'd been hiding in ambush, behind some higher ground.  
You should have seen your friend Fierro flinching as if he was soft!  
They shot out like popcorn the moment a cow-bell rang.

Although there were a good many of them we took our stand where were.  
In a moment we formed up the few men that we had --  
and they charged us in a line beating their mouths with their hands.

They came on in a stampede that made the ground shake....  
I'm not lame when there's fighting to be done, but I was in a sweat  
because I was riding a half-wild horse that I'd caught in the hills.

What a yelling, what a racket! what a rate they moved at!  
The whole of that indian band landed on us howling --  
*pucha!* they scattered us like a herd of wild mares.

And the mounts those heathens had! like a flash, they were so fast.  
They clashed into us, and then in the confusion  
take one -- leave one -- they picked us off with their spears.

Anyone who gets lanced by them is not likely to recover....  
Finally, to make the story short, we got out of those hills  
like a flock of pigeons flying away from hawks.

You have to admire the skill of the way they handle a spear.  
They never give up a chase and they pressed close after us --  
we were in such a hurry we could have jumped over the horses' ears.

And just to add to the fun at the height of this danger,  
up came an indian frothing at the mouth with his spear in his hand,  
yelling out, *Christian finish! Spear go in up to feather!\**

He rushed at me screaming stretched flat along the horse's ribs,  
brandishing over his arm a lance long as a lasso --  
one false move, and that devil will have me off with a swing of the shaft.

If I lose my head or hesitate I won't escape, that's certain.



I've always been pretty tough, but on that occasion  
my heart was bumping like the throat of a toad.

God forgive that savage the way he wanted to get me....  
I got out my Three Maries\* and led him on, dodging round --  
*pucha!* if I hadn't had bolas he'd have had my guts that day.

He was the son of a chieftain according to what I found out --  
the truth of the matter was he had me very worried indeed --  
till finally, with a bolas-swing I got him down off his horse.

I threw myself off right away and stood on his shoulder-blades.  
He started making faces and trying to hide his throat --  
but I performed the holy deed of stretching him out cold.\*

There he stayed as a landmark and I jumped on his horse.  
I made off fast from the indians as if they caught me, it meant death --  
and in the end I escaped from them by the skin of my teeth.\*

#### NOTES to I.3

I.3.3] *country store*] *pulperia*, the centre of social activity in country settlements.

I.3.4] *Justice of the Peace*] or Judge – see note at I.2.26.

I.3.6] *gringo*] a foreigner, in Argentina at that time an immigrant, often Italian, also British (including Irish).

I.3.7] *ditch-digger*] ditches were for draining, or on boundaries instead of fencing. (There was an abandoned scheme for a great ditch to defend the frontier.)

*Inca-la-perra*] *Inglaterra*=England; *perra*=bitch. A common type of joke with an unfamiliar word deliberately mispronounced to make it incongruous or suggestive. Other examples at I.5.9; II.16.2, etc.

*hills*] the typical pampa is dead flat until its more "desert" outskirts are reached (see note at I.2.17). There is a small range of hills at Tandil, about 200 miles south of Buenos Aires.

I.3.10] *had to vote*] voting is obligatory in Argentine elections.

*proposition*] humorous mistaken word, as at II.24.4, etc.

I.3.13] *dark roan*] literally, *moro* ("Moor"). Technically, black with a few white hairs giving purple lights to the coat. Dark-coloured horses were highly prized; Viscacha's horse was a *moro* (II.14.3) and the indian's (II.10.3) "a black without a mark". See also note at II.13.2.

*Ayacucho*] a town in Buenos Aires province.

*a bit of credit*] i.e. to bet on.

I.3.15] *bolas*] see note at verse 36 below.

*seeing me so poor*] a gaucho's harness and equipment were the sign of his wealth.

I.3.17] *staked him out*] see I.5.13 for a description of this punishment.

I.3.18] *pull any punches*] literally, "make him smoke strong tobacco".

I.3.21] *Palermo*] residence of the tyrant Rosas (ruled 1835-52) on the outskirts of Buenos Aires.

I.3.22] *indians*] the "indians" in *Martin Fierro* are the Pampa indians, one of several nomadic tribes originating with the Araucanas of Chile, that spread eastwards as the horses and cattle abandoned by the first Spanish explorers multiplied into wild herds. They adopted the horse and lived almost entirely on near-raw meat and blood (details in this canto and in Part II, cantos 2-10, are accurate). Other Amerindian populations with more knowledge of agriculture, etc. (more "civilised") were in the north-west (on the fringes of the former Inca empire), cruelly exploited by the Spanish, and the Guaranies in the north-east (from what became Paraguay), who mingled with settlers after the Jesuit settlements were abandoned. The Pampa indians were never "civilised" and the government was never strong enough to contain them. They encroached increasingly until the expeditions under General Rocas in 1879 and 1883 they were exterminated; survivors were forcibly resettled. (See II.15.12.) A classic first-hand account, near-contemporary with the poem, is *Excursion to the Ranquele Indians* by Lucio V. Mansilla, published in 1870.

I.3.23] *cent*] *real*, a small coin.

I.3.26] *carcass*] the indians habitually ate horse-meat.

I.3.36] *bolas*] or *boleadoras*, originally an indian weapon, adopted by gauchos. 3 (sometimes 2) balls of stone covered with leather are attached to joined plaited ropes; one (generally shorter) held in the hand, the others whirled and sent flying. For the *bolas* in action, see verses 52-53, and II.9.5-31.

I.3.49] *feather*] i.e. the tuft of feathers behind the spear-head.

I.3.52] *Three Maries*] the three balls of the *bolas* (from the name for the stars in Orion's Belt – see I.9.11).

I.3.54] *stretching him out cold*] literally, "making him stretch out his muzzle" (see also I.9.42).

I.3.55] *by the skin of my teeth*] literally, "with the string still round my leg".

I'll carry on with this story though it's too long by half ...  
 Just imagine, if you can, how I'd be on my guard  
 after I'd saved my skin from a danger cruel as that one

I won't be telling you about our pay, because that kept well out of sight.  
 At times we'd reach the state of howling from poverty –  
 the cash never got to us that we were hoping for.

And we went around so filthy it was horrible to look at us.  
 I swear to you, it hurt you to see those men, by Christ!  
 I've never seen worse poverty in all my bitch of a life.

I hadn't even a shirt nor anything that was like one –  
 the only use my rags were in the end, was to light the fire...  
 There's no plague like an army fort to teach a man to endure.

Poncho, saddle-rugs, harness, my clothes, the coins off my belt,\*  
 I tell you, the whole lot got left one by one, in the barrack-store ...  
 The rats and the poverty had got me half crazed by now.

Only one rough blanket was all that was left to me.  
 I'd acquired it playing *taba*,\* and that just served to cover me ...  
 The lice that got in there wouldn't leave -- not even with a free pardon.

And on top of that, even my dark roan slipped from out of my hands.  
 I'm not a fool, but I tell you, brother ... the Commandant came up one day,  
 saying he wanted him, "to teach him how to eat grain."\*

So imagine, anyone, the state your friend here was in:  
 on foot with his navel showing, poor and naked and worn out --  
 they couldn't have treated me worse even as a punishment.

And so the months passed by and the next year came,  
 and likewise, everything went on just as it did before –  
 all done on purpose, seemingly, to drive the men there mad.

We gauchos weren't allowed to do anything of our own  
 except to go out at dawn when no indians were around,  
 to hunt with bolas in the open country and ride the Government horses lame.

And we'd turn up at the camp with our mounts done in,  
 but sometimes pretty well provided with feathers,\* and a few hides,  
 that we'd trade in right there with the keeper of the store.

The man who kept the store was a friend of the Chief.  
 He gave us mate and tobacco in exchange for the ostrich-feathers --  
 even a glint of silver, if you'd brought him a hide.

All his stock was a few bottles and some barrels with nothing in them,  
 and yet he'd be selling people anything they required --  
 some of them believed it was the Quartermaster's store he had there.

He never went short of a thing, that crafty trader, curse him!

and as for greed, he'd swallow anything, just like an ostrich –  
the men used to call it the Store Where Anything Goes.\*

Although it's fair that the man who's selling should bite off a bit for himself,  
he stretched the point so far that with those four bottles he had  
he loaded up whole carts-full of feathers and horse-hair and skins.

3\_

He had us all noted down with more reckonings than a rosary,  
when they announced a payment or an Advance they were going to give out,  
but the Lord knows who the fox was ate that up at the Paymaster's.

Because I never saw it come, and a good many days after that,  
in the same store-house, they gave a *credit* –  
which people accepted, very pleased to get this small amount.

Some of them took out their clothes which they'd got there in pawn,  
others gave up the money for debts which were overdue ...  
When the party was done, the store-keeper was left with the whole heap.

I leant back against a post giving them time to pay,  
and putting a good face on it I was acting dumb,  
waiting for them to call me to collect my dole.

But I might just as well have stayed there stuck to that post for ever.  
It was almost evening-prayer time and nobody called me ...  
Things were looking murky, and I began to feel uneasy.

To get rid of my hunger pains I saw the Major, and went up to him.  
I started edging up to him, and pretending to be shy I said,  
"Maybe tomorrow... they'll finish paying us?"

"What d'you mean, tomorrow!" he answered back right away.  
"The payment's finished now, trust you to be a greedy brute!"  
I gave a laugh and said, "I... haven't even had a cent."

He opened his eyes so wide they nearly fell off his face,  
and right there he said again staring fit to eat me up,  
"So what do you expect to get if you haven't got on the list!"

"This is a fine way to make a mess of things," I said to myself privately,  
"It's two years I've been here and I've seen not a cent so far.  
I get into all the fighting but I don't get onto the list!"

I could see it was a tricky case, and didn't want to wait any longer.  
It's as well to live peaceably with whoever's in command of us –  
and so, retreating backwards, I started to move away.

The Commandant heard all about it and called for me next day,  
telling me that he wanted to get things straightened out --  
that this wasn't like Rosas's time,\* no one was left owing these days.

He called the Corporal and the Sergeant and the inquiry began –  
whether I'd come to the camp at this time, or the other,  
and whether I'd come on a colt of my own, or a government horse, or a wild one.

And it was all a lot of fuss about nothing, and play-acting.  
I could see it was all a trick for them to get fat on my purse -  
but if I'd gone to the Colonel they'd make me complain at the stakes.

The sons of bitches – I hope their greed will split them down the seams.  
Not even a bit of tobacco do they give the poor recruit,  
and he's skinny as a mountain deer,\* they keep him so underfed.

But what could I do against them, like an ostrich-chick in the wilds!  
All I could do was give up for dead so as not to be worse off still ...  
So I acted sleepy in front of them, though I'm pretty well wide awake.

NOTES to I.4

I.4.5] *coins off my belt*] or "buttons" of silver or gold, the gaucho's money reserve. (See also I.7.3, II.22.6.)

I.4.6] *taba*] a dice game, using a cow's knuckle-bone.

I.4.7] *to eat grain*] i.e. a high-class diet.

I.4.11] *feathers*] i.e. ostrich feathers.

I.4.14] *Where Anything Goes*] literally, "the store of Virtue".

I.4.16] *reckonings*] *cuentas*, meaning both "beads" and "accounts".

I.4.26] *Rosas's time*] The recent dictator, famed for rough justice. (See Introduction, and I.3.21.)

I.4.29] *mountain deer*] *guanaco*.

5

I was getting hopeless, waiting for an opportunity  
when the indians would raid us, so that in the confusion  
I could turn outlaw on them and go back to my home.

You couldn't call that service nor defending the frontier,  
it was more like a nest of rats where the strongest one plays the cat –  
it was like gambling with a loaded dice.

Everything there works the wrong way round, soldiers turn into labourers,  
and go round the settlements out on loan for work –  
they join them up again to fight when the indian robbers break in.

In this merry-go-round, I've seen many officers who owned land,  
with plenty of work-hands and herds of cattle and sheep –  
I may not be educated but I've seen some ugly deals.

And I take it they're not interested in getting things put straight --  
if it was for that, the officer even though he stays there in charge,  
would need no more than his poncho and sword, and his horse and his duty.

And so, then, when I saw there was no curing that disease,  
and that if I stayed there I'd maybe find my grave,  
I thought the safest thing would be to make a move.

And then on top of it all, one night what a staking-out they gave me!  
They nearly pulled me out of joint all because of a little quarrel --  
curse it, they stretched me out just like a fresh hide!

I never shall forget how it happened to me that time.  
One night, I was coming in to the fort when one of the regulars,

On duty, who was fairly drunk -- failed to recognise me.

He was a gringo who talked so thick no one understood what he said.  
Lord knows where he can have come from! he wasn't Christian, probably,  
as the only thing he said was he was a *Pap-oli-tano*.\*

He was on sentry-duty, and on account of the drink he'd had  
he couldn't see me too well and that was all there was to it --  
the fool got a fright about nothing and I was left to pay the bill.\*

When he saw me coming he called out *Who dere!*  
*I dare*, I answered -- *Ands oop!* he screamed at me --  
and I said, very quietly, *And the soup's what you'll end in!*\*

Just then -- Christ save me! I heard the gun-catch click.  
I ducked, and that moment the brute let off a shot at me --  
being drunk, he fired without aiming, or I wouldn't be telling the tale.

Needless to say, at the sound of the shot the wasps' nest started buzzing.  
Out came the officers, and so the fun began --  
the gringo stayed at his post and I went to the staking-ground.

They stretched me on the earth between four bayonets.  
The Major came along, fairly stinking, and started screaming out,  
"I'll teach you, you devil, to go around claiming pay!"

They tied four girth straps to my hands and my heels;  
I put up with their hauling without letting out a squeak,  
and all through the night I cursed that gringo, till I wore him out.

I don't know why the Government sends us, out here to the frontier,  
these gringos that don't even know how to handle a horse --  
when they send a gringo, you'd think it was some kind of a wild animal.

They do nothing but make more work -- they can't even put a saddle on.  
They're no use even for cutting up carcasses, and I've often seen  
that even when the steers were down they wouldn't go up to them.

And their worships spend their time clucking away, noses together,  
till one of the recruits comes along to serve them with their roast meat --  
and then it's true, they're so dainty they look like rich men's sons.

If it's hot, they're no good for anything, if it freezes, they're all shivering.  
Unless you offer it, they don't smoke so as not to pay for tobacco --  
and when they do get hold of a wad of it they steal it off each other.

When it rains they huddle up like a dog, when it hears thunder --  
the devil! all they're good for is to live like women --  
and they've no scruples at taking ponchos which don't belong to them.

As look-outs, they're good as blind -- in fact there's nothing they do know --  
there's not one of them can learn, seeing something cross the skyline,  
to tell if it's a bunch of ostriches, or a man on a horse, or a cow.

If they go out chasing the raiders, after a lot of fuss

they all get sore legs in a minute and start to drop behind like wreckage ...  
Dealing with them is like putting eggs to hatch under a cat.

NOTES to I.5

I.5.4] *merry-go-round*] in the original, *milonga* – one of many dance-names used ironically (e.g. see I.11.10).

I.5.7] *curse it!*] *ahijuna!* = "whoreson", contraction of *ay hijo de una [puta]*, but no attempt has been made to translate consistently. Curses in the original poem generally have a letter changed as a euphemism.

I.5.8] *one of the regulars*] soldiers engaged for a fixed time were often immigrants, and had advantages over the gaucho recruits.

I.5.9] *Pap-oli-tano*] i.e. *napolitano*, from Naples, as were many immigrants (see I.3.7 and II.23.1).

I.5.10] *I was left to pay the bill*] literally, "I was the turkey at the wedding feast" – i.e. came off worst.

I.5.11] *and the soup's* etc.] untranslatable puns on the gringo's pidgin-Spanish. In the original the sentry says *quen vivore* instead of *quien vive* ("who goes there"), which Fierro turns to *que viboras* ("what snakes"); and then *hargarto* for *haga alto* ("halt") which Fierro makes into *largarto* ("lizard", i.e. coward).

6

Now we're just coming to the saddest part of the story,  
even though the whole of my life is nothing but a chain of troubles –  
every unhappy soul is glad to sing of its sufferings.

About that time they started rounding up horses,  
and collecting the recruits and keeping them inside the fort  
ready for an expedition to take the indians by surprise.

They informed us that we'd go without taking carts or baggage  
to attack the savages right in their own camp –  
and when we got back they'd pay us and discharge the gaucho force.

And that for this expedition we'd got this to look forward to:  
very shortly there was coming (according to what the Chief said)  
a Minister or Lord knows what who they called *Don Gander*.\*

He was going to join together all the army and the regiments,  
and he'd bring some cannons, with a lot of grooves like the stripes on mattress ticking --\*  
*pucha*... there was no end to the talk that went on about it.

But the kind of fox I am won't be caught by these sort of tricks.  
Whether this Gander comes or goes doesn't matter much to an outlaw ...  
I left some *ticking* behind me too -- drawn in the store-keeper's books.

I've never been caught sleeping, I'm always ready and quick to act:  
I am a man, Christ save me! that nothing has turned to a coward,  
and I've always fallen on my feet\* from the dangers I've been in.

I've earned my living by my work ever since I was a child,  
and though I've always stayed low down and don't know what it means to rise high --  
too much of suffering, curse it! can tire us out, as well.

For all I'm ignorant, I can tell that I don't count in the world.  
I can act like a hare or a hound according to the times –  
but the men who rule us should play their part and care for us a bit, also.

One night, when the Chief and the Justice of the Peace

were cracking a bottle together over a game of cards,  
I wouldn't wait any longer -- I took a horse and faded from sight.

For me the land's all flowers as soon as I feel I'm free:  
wherever my fancy takes me I can turn my steps right there --  
even in the dark I find my way wherever I want, for sure.

I get in and out of danger and disasters don't scare me,  
I don't give way at the first attack, and I never was a fool --  
I can find my way as well as a pig, and I soon turned up at my home.

I was returning after three years of suffering so much for nothing,  
a deserter, naked and penniless, in search of a better life --  
and like an armadillo\* I headed straight for my den.

I found not a trace of my cabin: there was only the empty shell.\*  
Christ! if that weren't a sight to bring sorrow to your heart...  
I swore at that moment to be pitiless as a wild beast.

Is there anyone who'd not feel the same with so much to bear!  
I can tell you that I burst out into tears, like a woman --  
ah God, but I was left sadder than Holy Thursday!

All there was to be heard was the mewing of a cat that had survived.  
Poor beast, it had been sheltering nearby, in a viscacha~hole --\*  
it came up as if it knew that I had come back home.

When I went, I left the cattle which were all that I owned --  
according to what the Judge promised we should have come back soon afterwards,  
and the wife, until then, was to look after the property.

Later, a neighbour told me the land had been claimed from them,  
they had sold the cattle to pay off the rent,  
and Lord knows what other stories -- but it had all gone to ruin.

The boys, poor little things, among so many troubles,  
had taken service as work-hands -- but how were they going to work  
when they were like young pigeons not yet finished feathering!

They must be wandering somewhere, enduring our cruel fate --  
they've told me that the eldest would never leave his brother --  
maybe some christian soul will take them in, out of pity.

And my poor wife, God knows what she must have suffered!  
They tell me that she flew off with some kind of a sparrow-hawk --  
no doubt to find the bread that I was not there to give her.

It often happens that someone needs what someone else has too much of:  
If she hadn't a penny left but a swarm of children,  
what else could she do, poor woman, so as not to starve to death!

Maybe I'll not see you again love of my heart!  
God grant you his protection since he didn't give it to me --  
and from this place now I send my blessing on my sons.

They'll be wandering motherless like babes from the orphanage --  
already left without a father -- that's how fate has abandoned them,

with no one to protect them, nor even a dog to bark at them.

Poor little creatures, maybe they've no place to shelter in,  
nor a roof to stand under nor a corner to creep into,  
nor a shirt to put on them, nor a poncho to cover themselves.

And people will see them suffer without pitying them, maybe –  
it could be that sometime, though they see they're shivering,  
they'll push them out from the fireside to get them out of the way.

And when they find they're chased away as you chase off a dog,  
Martin Fierro's sons will go with their tails between their legs,  
in search of kinder souls or to hide somewhere in the hills.

But I'll ask for my turn to throw in this game, as well.  
I owe nothing to anyone, I ask no quarter nor give it --  
and no one from this day on will catch me in the noose.

I acted quietly at first and now I'll live outside the law.  
This is the sad state I'm in although I've been so deeply wronged --  
I was born and grew up on the land,\* but I know the world by now.

I know its tricks by now, I know its crooked ways,  
I know how they fix the game and twist and handle it –  
I will undo this tangled knot even if it costs me my life.

And you'd better put up with it, if you don't care to get mixed up in this dirty business,  
or if not, clear out of it\* or emigrate to another land –  
but I live like a wild cat\* after they've stolen its young.

Though many think that a gaucho feels no more pain than a worn-out horse,  
you won't find one of them who's not bowed down by sorrows....  
But a man must not weaken while there's blood left in his veins.

#### NOTES to I.6

I.6.4] *Don Gander*] Martin de Gainza (*gansa*=goose) was Minister of War in Sarmiento's government, 1863-74.

I.6.5] *grooves*] i.e. riflings.

*mattress ticking*] thick striped material used to cover mattresses.

I.6.7] *fallen on my feet*] as when horse-taming (see I.2.9)

I.6.13] *armadillo*] *peludo*, the commonest term for the animal (there are several varieties).

I.6.14] *empty shell*] *tapera* (a ruin) is said to derive from indian words meaning "gone away".

I.6.16] *viscacha-hole*] *viscachas* (hare-sized rodents) live in warrens like rabbits – a danger to riders and cattle (see II.30. )

I.6.29] *on the land*] literally, "on an estancia".

I.6.31] *clear out of it*] literally, "pull your hat down", i.e. to run away (see II 14.14).

*wild cat*] *tigre*, here and elsewhere, probably refers to the various kinds of jaguar (*leon* to the puma).

I found I was the wild card in the game not knowing where to go –  
and then they said I was a vagrant\* and started hounding me.

Troubles never grow smaller, they grow bigger, bit by bit –  
and so it was, I soon found myself forced to keep on running away.

I had neither wife nor home and I was a deserter besides:  
I had no decent clothes at all, and not a single coin on my belt.



I thought that I might find my poor sons again --  
and I went round from one place to another without enough even to smoke.

One day -- worse luck -- I discovered there was a party somewhere nearby,  
and half hopelessly I went there to see the dance.

I found so many friends joining in the dancing  
that from happiness at being with them I got quite drunk, that night.

That time as never before the drink made me want a fight --  
and I started it with a black man,\* who'd brought a black girl riding behind him.

When I saw the darky girl arriving with her nose in the air,  
I said to her tipsily, "Just look who's *mooving* in!" \*

The black girl understood what I'd meant and straight off she answered back --  
looking at me as if I was a dog -- "It's your mother who was the *cow*!"

And she went in to the dance, very haughty, with her dress in a train like a fox's brush,\*  
making her teeth flash white just like popcorn.

"Pretty black girl" said I, "a nice mattress... you'd make for me ..."  
and then I started humming this catchy little rhyme:

"God made the white men, Saint Peter made the brown,  
and the Devil made the black ones for coal to keep the hell-fires goin' "

The darky'd been getting his temper up ever since we were outside --  
his eyes were blazing like lamps in the dark.

I could see he was sore at me -- I went up and said to him quick  
"Maybe you're a bit *fuzzy*... in the head but there's no need to get annoyed!" \*

He pranced about in his big boots, and feeling very sure of himself,  
"It's you who's the *fuzzy* one you dirty gaucho," he said.

And he went for me like a shot, as if he was looking for the best place to split me --  
and I obliged him with a crack from the pot of gin.

Right away Sooty started squealing, louder than a little pig --  
and pulling out his knife he rushed at me yelling.

I gave a jump and cleared a space, saying to all around  
Let me deal with this bull please, gentlemen -- I was born alone, that's how I'll die."

After he'd been hit, the black man had wrapped his poncho round his arm,\*  
and he said "You'll soon find out if it's alone or in company!"

And while he was tucking up his clothes I took off my spurs,\*  
as I suspected this character might not be led too easily.

There's nothing like danger to wake you up if you're drunk --  
even your sight gets clear however much you've swallowed.

The black man rushed at me as if he wanted to eat me up --  
he aimed two strokes at me straight off and I fended both of them.

I had a long knife with an S-guard with a blade of pure steel.\*  
I struck at him -- he dodged it -- and the darky came on blind.

And I dealt him one with the flat of my knife right between the horns,  
and sent him along the ground squirming just like a squib.

The fuzz on his head turned red with the blood from the wound --  
and he came on again, furious as a wild cat with cubs.

He sent his knife flashing right past my eyes --  
and with the point of it he cut me on one cheek.\*

The blood boiled in my veins and I closed in on the darky --  
letting him have it cut and thrust to leave one devil less in the world.

Finally, in one attack I lifted him on the knife --  
and I threw him against the fence like a sack of old bones.

He kicked a few times and then he gave his last gasp --\*  
the death throes of that black man is a thing I'll not forget.

At this point, up came the black girl with her eyes red as chille,  
and poor thing, there she started howling like a she-wolf.

I'd have liked to give her a whack to see if it'd shut her up --  
but on second thoughts I realized it wouldn't do just then,  
and I decided not to beat her out of respect for the deceased.

I cleaned my knife on the grass, I untied my colt,  
I mounted slowly, and went off at a jog trot, towards the low lands.

Later I heard that in the end they didn't even give him a wake --  
and they buried him wrapped up in a hide without even saying a prayer.

And ever since that time, they say, in the still of the night  
there appears a ghostly glimmer\* as if from a suffering soul.

And sometimes I think what I'll do so that he won't suffer so long,  
is take his bones out from that place and stick them into the burial-ground.

#### NOTES to I.7.

I.7.1] *vagrant*] under vagrancy laws men could be punished or conscripted unless they could prove employment -- hence many abuses (see I.8.11-16, II.27.26).

I.7.7] *a black man*] descendants of freed slaves were numerous in the River Plate countries at the time of the poem; later, for uncertain reasons, in Argentina they virtually disappeared.

I.7.8] *moo-ving in* etc] examples of untranslatable "hidden word" jokes (or insults): in the original *vaca* (cow) hidden in *va cayendo gente* (people arriving). Another in verses 14-15.

I.7.14-15] *fuzzy* etc] the "hidden word" insult here is *porrudo* (fuzzy-haired) in *por rudo que...* (however rough...).

I.7.19] *round his arm*] i.e. as a shield.

I.7.20] *I took off my spurs*] so they wouldn't tangle in his loose pants. Gaucho clothes consisted of shirt, long loose pants, over these the *chiripa*, a cloth looped under the legs and tied with a sash, and of course the poncho. Loose clothes could be a danger when fighting (see I.9.19, II.9.11).

I.7.23] *pure steel*] gauchos knives were long, often made from broken swords, hence the value of a true blade.

I.7.26] *cut me on one cheek*] an unforgivable offence. Fierro uses it to excuse himself in II.11.[1605].

I.7.29] *his last gasp*] literally, "sang for the slaughter-house". Fierro later tells his sons, "Blood that is spilt will never / be forgotten, till the day you die" (II.32.25).

I.7.30] *like a she-wolf*] poetic licence -- probably inherited European imagery as with "lion", "eagle" etc. (There are no wolves in South America. *Lobo* also means "seal" or "sealion", which there are, but this seems less likely.)

I.7.33] *a ghostly light*] *luz mala* -- will o' the wisp or marsh gas, source of many superstitions.

Another time, I was in an eating-house having an afternoon drink,  
when a gaucho turned up, a famous boaster as a fighter, and for acting tough.

When he got there, he rode his horse right up under the porch --\*  
and I stayed by the counter without saying anything.

He was the bully of that neighbourhood, and no one stood up to him  
because he had influence with his worship the Commandant.\*

And as he was protected he went around full of airs,  
and anyone who was badly off he'd sweep out of his way.

Poor man -- he must have thought to himself that he'd got life and to spare --  
no one would have said that Death was lying in wait for him.

But that's what happens in the world, that's how this sad life is --  
both the good luck and the bad are hidden for all of us.

He threw himself off, and as he came in he gave a shove to a Basque\* who was there,  
and pushed a half-bottle at me saying, "Have a drink, brother-in-law --"  
"It's on your sister's side, then," I answered -- "I'm not worried about mine."

"Ha, gaucho," he replied, "whereabouts can you be from --  
maybe there's a grave looking out for you -- you must have a tough skin --  
but there's no calf that's going to bleat anywhere this bull roars!"

And we were at each other already, because that man wasn't slow --  
but as I don't lose my head and I'm pretty quick off the mark,  
I left him showing his guts from a back-stroke with my knife.

And as I wasn't in favour with the law thereabouts,  
as soon as I saw him kicking and the store-keeper started yelling,  
I went straight out to the hitching-rail trying to look innocent.

I mounted, and trusting to God made for another district --  
because a gaucho they call a vagrant can have no place of his own,  
so he lives from one trouble to the next lamenting what he has lost.

He's always on the run, always poor and hounded:  
he has neither a hole nor a nest as if there was a curse on him....  
To be a gaucho ... God damn it, to be a gaucho is a crime.

He's like the Government post-horses, one leaves him, another takes him on --  
and there's no end to this sport -- since he was a child, he's like  
a young tree growing without shelter on a hill.

They splash the christening-water on a child born in the wilds --  
"Find yourself a mother to look after you!" says the priest, and turns him loose,  
and he starts out to cross the world like a donkey with its burden.

And he grows up like an unshorn sheep living out in the cold winds,  
while his father's in the ranks serving the Government --  
even though he's shivering in winter no one helps nor shelters him.

If they catch him enjoying himself they call him a drunk,  
and he's a "bad character" if they find him at a dance --  
if he puts up a fight, he's doing wrong, and if he doesn't, he's... done for.

He has no children and no wife, no friends, and no one to protect him:  
since everyone's his master and no one's on his side  
he lives like an ox -- and what's the fate of an ox when it can't plough?\*

His home is the wild grassland, his shelter is the desert plain;  
and when he's half starving if he lassoes a yearling calf  
they hound him close as a lawsuit because he's a "gaucho thief".

And if one day they strike at him and turn him belly-up,  
there's not a pitying soul who'll say a prayer for him --  
they'll throw him into a hole maybe, like a stray dog.

He makes no money in peace-time and he's the first to go to war;  
if he goes wrong, they don't forgive him as they don't know how to forgive --  
because the only use a gaucho is in this land, is to vote.

It's for him there are prison cells, the cruel gaols are made for him;  
nothing's right that comes out of his mouth even though he's got every right --  
because the rights of poor men are like bells made of wood.

Put up with it, and you're an ignorant fool -- if you don't, you're a hard case.  
Go on -- beat him, lash him! that's all he's good for....  
For anyone born a gaucho this is his cursed fate.

So come on fate -- let's go together since together we were born:  
and as we live together and can never separate,  
I'll use my knife to clear the path we have to take.

#### NOTES to I.8

I.8.2] *under the porch*] insulting behaviour, as if he owned the place (horses were tied to the hitching-rail).

I.8.3] *the Commandant*] i.e. of the local militia, in charge of recruiting men and horses.

I.8.7] *a Basque*] Basques formed a considerable number of immigrants (see also II.14.8).

I.8.17] *fate of an ox...*] i.e. he goes to the slaughterhouse. (A Spanish proverb.)

I lived the life of an outlaw, and never stayed where people lived.  
I used to go there in the daytime -- but I was always up on the roof  
like a *carancho*,\* spying out for the police.\*

A gaucho who's in trouble lives like a hunted fox,  
until he makes the slightest slip and the dogs tear him to bits --  
as even the man who's most careful always makes some mistake.

And at that hour of the evening when everything falls asleep,  
and the world seems to enter into a life of purest calm,  
he makes his way to the grasslands with sorrow in his soul.

The little lamb is bleating by the side of the white ewe,  
and the tethered calf calls out to the cow as she moves away –  
but a gaucho in his misfortune has no one to hear him cry.

And so, when night came on I would go and seek my lair,  
since where the wild cat makes its den a man can live as well –  
and I didn't want the police-troop surrounding me in a house.

Even though when they come for you they're only doing their duty,  
I see things another way and that's a rule I live by –  
that no gaucho with any pride should fight where there are women.

And I'd go off on the plain all alone, wild as a deer,  
to look for a ruined cabin to shelter in, like a stray dog,  
or to spend the night stretched out in a viscacha-warren.\*

Without an aim or a fixed course in that immensity,  
with that great darkness round him, a gaucho roams like a ghost --  
out there, the authorities will never catch him asleep.

Courage is his hope, caution is his protection,  
his horse means safety -- and you live in watchfulness  
with no help except from heaven and no friend except your knife.

And so one night, I was out there gazing at the stars,  
which it seems are more beautiful the more unhappy you are,  
and that God must have created them for us to find comfort there.

A man feels love for them, and it's always with joy  
that he sees the Three Marias\* coming out -- because when there's been rain,  
as soon as it clears, on the pampa, the stars are a gaucho's guide.

Your Professors are no good here, experience is all that counts.  
Here, those people who know everything would see how little they know –  
because this has another key to it, and a gaucho knows what it is,

It's a sad thing to spend whole nights out in the midst of the plain,  
gazing at the stars that God created, in their course,  
without any company except the wild beasts, and your loneliness.

As I was saying.... there I was in that solitary place  
with that great darkness round me, letting the wind hear my complaints –  
when the cry of a *chaja* bird.\* made me prick up my ears.

I flattened myself on the ground like a worm, to listen --  
soon I heard the beating of horses' hoofs –  
and I could tell straight off there were riders -- a good many of them.

When a man's in danger he shouldn't be too confident,  
so I fixed all my attention stretched there belly-down,  
and before long I'd heard a sound like the clank of a sword.

They were coming so stealthily it put me on my guard:  
maybe they'd spotted me and were coming to pick me up --

but I wouldn't run off as that's the coward's way out.

Straight away, I crossed myself and took a swig of gin,  
bending over the bottle curled up like an armadillo --  
"If they're going to pay my wages" I said, "it might as well be now."

I slipped off my spurs so as not to be fighting in shackles;  
I rolled up my pants and fixed my belt good and tight --\*  
and on a tuft of grass I tried the edge of my knife.

I tied my horse to a clump of grass\* to have him ready at hand,  
I fixed his girth -- and with my back against him  
in that hour of danger, I waited for them, quite calm.

When I heard them near me and that they'd stopped right there,  
my hair stood up on end -- and though my eyes couldn't see anything,  
"Don't fret, you'll get what you want!"\* I said to them as they came up.

I wanted to let them know they'd got a man to deal with:  
I knew what they'd come for, and just because of that  
I had first haul at them, not waiting for their call to give myself up.

"You're an outlaw" said one of them, acting virtuous,  
You've killed a coloured man and another one in a store,  
and this is the police here come to settle your accounts --  
they'll make you pay for it if you resist them now."\*

"Don't you come to me" I answered, "with tales about dead men --  
this is another matter, see if you can come and get me --  
I'm not surrendering even if you all come at once."

But they didn't wait any longer and dismounted, the whole crowd.  
With so many of them, they surrounded me like hunting a wild dog --  
I called on the saints to help me and got a hold on my knife.

And just then I saw the flash of a shot from a gun --  
but that shirker's\* feeble luck decided to make him miss me --  
and right there I lifted him on my knife, like a sardine.

Another one was in a hurry getting his bolas out --  
I went for him just once and let him have a touch of steel,  
and he bolted straight off, like a dog when someone treads on his tail.

They were getting so worried, and getting so desperate  
that the whole lot came at me just where I was expecting them --  
they fell on top of each other and couldn't see for trying.

Two of them who had swords and were more bold and daring  
stopped, facing me, with their ponchos round their arms -- \*  
and they rushed at me both at once like dogs let off the leash.

I moved backwards, as a trick, and threw my poncho in front of me --  
and when one clumsy fool put his foot on it  
I gave it a sudden pull and flung him onto his back.

When he found he was on his own the other one stopped short,  
so then I went for him without giving him time to breathe --

but he'd begun to give way already and shot off like a... flash.\*

One of them had the blade of some shears\* tied to a long cane --  
he came on as if he thought I was flimsy as a hitching-rail --  
but with two well-aimed strokes from me he ran off into the distance, howling.

By good luck, at that moment the dawn came turning red --  
and I said, "If the Virgin saves me in this dangerous hour,  
I swear from now onwards to be gentle as a mallow-flower".

I gave a jump, and fearlessly I got in amongst them all --  
I stayed there, crouched on guard, and a pair of them went for me,  
and I led them on, feinting with the point of my knife on the ground.

The greediest one of them lit on me with a slash,  
I fended it with my arm -- if not, he'd have killed some lice -- \*  
and before he could take a step I threw dust into both his eyes.

And while he was shaking his head, rubbing his eyes, trying to see,  
I was at him like a streak\* and right there I closed with him.  
"God help you" I said -- and had him down with a back-hand stroke.

But at that very instant I felt the point of a sword  
tickling me in the ribs, and my blood turned to ice....  
From that moment onwards there was no holding me.

I took a few steps backwards till I could get a footing --  
cutting and thrusting I threw one man down in front of me --  
he put his foot in a hole in the ground, and under the ground I sent him.

Maybe it was a blessed saint who touched the heart  
of one gaucho there, who shouted and said, "This is Cruz --  
and I'll have no part in the crime of killing a brave man this way!"

And there and then he came to my side and attacked the troop of police.  
I rushed at them again -- between two of us, it was robbery --  
and this man Cruz was fighting like a wolf\* defending its lair.

He sent one of them off to hell out of two that attacked him --  
the rest crowded backwards because there was no stopping us --  
and before long they scuttled off like a pack of vermin.

The ones who were stretched out cold stayed there side by side,  
another went slung like a saddle-bag -- and Cruz called after them,  
"Get some more police to come with a cart to take them away!"

I heaped up the corpses, I knelt and said a prayer for them.  
I made a cross from a little stick and asked my God in his mercy  
to forgive me for the crime of killing so many men.

We left the poor men who had died piled up in a heap;  
we went off to shelter, so I don't know if they collected them  
or if the caranchos ate them right there where they were.

The two of us grabbed the bottle from hand to hand between us --  
at a time like that anyone's glad of a drink,  
and Cruz was never a slow one, he didn't stint his throat.

We warmed our gullets, and we rode off holding ourselves very stiff,  
still keeping on kissing the spout and by the look of us  
we must have seemed like storks when they're stretching out their necks.

"My friend," I said, "I'm going wherever fate may take me,  
and if there's anyone who dares to get in my way,  
I'll follow my destiny -- because a man does what he must.

"I'm a gaucho who's out of luck -- I have no place to shelter in,  
not a post to scratch myself on, nor a tree to shade me --  
but even these things don't worry me because I can look after myself.

"Before I got caught for the army I had a family and a cattle herd --  
when I got back, they hadn't even left my woman to me....  
What the end of this fight will be only God can tell."

#### NOTES to I.9

I.9.1] *carancho*] a large carrion bird.

*police*] i.e. a local force appointed by the Judge, often of former criminals (the job was unpopular (see I.12.5, II.23.8).

I.9.7] *viscacha-warren*] see I.6.16.

I.9.11] *Three Maries*] the stars of Orion's Belt, prominent in the southern night sky.

I.9.14] *chaja* (cha-HA)] a large marsh bird, famous (like the *tero*, see I.12.19) as a "watch-dog", and named from the sound it makes.

I.9.18] *pay my wages*] literally, "give me money for tobacco".

I.9.20] *to a clump of grass*] so that a simple pull on the rein would release it.

I.9.21] *you'll get what you want*] literally, "you won't die of wanting".

I.9.26] *shirker*] firing a gun was seen as cowardly (real men use a knife).

I.9.29] *ponchos round their arms*] as a shield when fighting with knives (see I.8.19).

I.9.31] *like a.... flash*] a blank in the original suggesting a ruder word.

I.9.32] *shears*] for sheep-shearing or cutting horses' manes, etc.

I.9.35] *killed some lice*] i.e. cut my scalp

I.9.40] *wolf*] an inherited European image (see note at I.7.30).

I.9.36] *like a streak*] like the stripe on a poncho -- a live image.

#### *Cruz*

I tell you, friend. that suffering is what men were born to do.  
It's at times like these you show you're a man of strength --  
until death comes and grabs you and knocks you on the head.

It's no discredit to me going around so poorly dressed.  
I may not be a saint, but I can feel for someone else's troubles --  
I may look a poor flat sort of pancake, but I'm a good fat pie at heart.\*

I warn you, I've no lack myself of troubles and misfortunes --  
I've got my sorrows too, though I'm not too worried by that --  
I can act like a lame pig when the situation requires it.

And with a few tricks I know I keep alive, even though it's in rags.  
Sometimes I act as if I'd got the plague and there's not a spot on my skin --  
but I'm keen to get at the liquor flask as a fat man is for popcorn.

Sorrows don't kill me so long as my skin's whole.  
Let the sun come in summer and the frost in winter time --  
if this world is a hell, what's that to worry a christian man?



Let's show a brave face to our troubles, brother –  
as even the cunningest old fox can fall into a trap like a duck –  
he'll come to steal a lamb and leave his skin stretched on the stakes.

These days, we're obliged to suffer crimes worse than you can say,  
but no one need be surprised at that -- that's the way the pudding's cooked –  
a man has to turn this way and that spinning round like a reel.

I'll never give myself up into the arms of death:  
I drag my sad fate along step by step and as best I can –  
because where a weak man gets stuck a strong one can pull through.

Everyone has to keep in mind, each one, what he's had to suffer.  
As for me, friend, that's the way I do my own accounts –  
what's past is past now, tomorrow's another day.

I too used to have a woman who filled my heart up full --  
and at that time, if anyone had come looking for me  
they'd have found me for sure stuck close on her as a button.

There's no beast that'll lose its way along the trail of love --  
women don't miss chances, and any gaucho's top of his class  
when he's singing to his love if it means tuning the strings.

Is there any one so hard of soul as not to love a woman?  
She'll help him in his troubles -- unless he's one who treats them light,  
she's the best companion a man can have in life.

If she's a good one, she won't leave him when she sees he's out of luck,  
she'll help him by caring for him willingly with her love --  
and maybe you've not given her even a skirt or a shawl.

It was a grand life I had with that girl of mine,  
living in happiness like a fly in honey...  
What a time that was, friend! *la pucha!* but I loved her!

She was an eagle,\* flying down from the clouds to a tree --  
she was prettier than the dawn when the sun comes streaking up –  
she was a lovely flower growing in a clover field.

However, my friend -- the Commandant in charge of the militia  
wasn't one to lose chances, and he came sneaking into my house –  
I could tell from the look of him that he was up to no good.

He pretended to be my friend, but I didn't trust him.  
He was the Chief, and naturally I couldn't compete with him –  
he stuck close to my cabin just as fast as a leech.

Before long, I could tell he'd pushed me off my seat.  
He was always full of fancy talk though he never gave me a cent –  
he had me sent all over the country like the cheap-rate letter post.

He was always sending me long distances, as a messenger:  
now it would be to a big ranch, now to the town, now the frontier –

but inside the Commandant's office he never so much as set foot.

A man going through his hard life is the saddest thing there can be  
if he doesn't have a woman to help and comfort him –  
but for someone else to get her from you, better not to have one at all.

I don't like it when another cock comes cackling round. my hen,  
I'd already got my suspicions, and then one fine day  
I caught him beside the fire with his arms round my girl.

The old fellow had a face on him like a calf licked the wrong way,  
and seeing him so daring I said "Better make the most of it –  
you must have been bleating for a bit of love like a stray lamb\* for milk."

He pulled out his sword and went for me as if he wanted to spit me through,  
but I didn't hesitate, I went right on and said,  
"Careful you don't get yourself... bogged down -- you'll need some help to get out of this one."\*

He aimed a thrust at me but I got out of the way,  
and as I dodged it -- carefully, so as not to kill an old man --  
from a little way off, I gave him a whack with the flat of my sword .

But as the one who's in command always has some hanger-on,  
on this occasion, one of these who was standing there nearby  
came up, gritting his teeth like a milk-fed puppy.

He sent a revolver-shot at me which he thought couldn't fail –  
he was sure of himself, and I'll swear to you it did come pretty close,  
but when I'm in a tight spot my joints always loosen up.

He kept on shooting but couldn't get to hit me --  
and I went snaking round him till in the end I closed in  
and there and then I finished him off without giving him time to breathe.

Next, I started in to round up the old love-bird.  
Poor fellow, he'd hidden himself inside a tub of lye --\*  
Lord knows the state he was in after the fright he'd had!

A christian man takes leave of his senses when love gets a hold over him.  
He kept gazing at the wretched woman, and then I smelt such a stench  
I've never known a stink like it not even in a town eating-house.

So I said to him "Your grandma had better clean up what you've dropped --"  
I started choking and went out holding my nose,  
and the old boy stayed there sniffing like a baby that's got the worms.

When a mule starts backing it's a sign it's going to kick –  
it always acts that way even though it tries to hide it --  
and a woman backs away like a mule when she wants to forget.

I took my poncho and my gear and I went off to suffer wrong  
through the fault of a woman who tried to cheat two men at once --  
I said goodbye to my cabin never to return again.

Women -- I've known them all since then, from that one.  
I won't try my luck again with a card that's marked so clear –  
women and bitches with litters\* are things I don't go near.

NOTES to I.10

I.10.2] *pancake... pie*] the first (*torta frita*) a humble, and the second (*pastel relleno*) a luxury item of gaucho food.

I.1015] *eagle*] like "wolf" and "lion", a poetic cliché transferred from Europe.

I.10.23] *Careful... etc*] literally, a double meaning insulting to old age, relating (probably) to ox-carts, and (as in 29-30) to the effects of fear on the bowels.

I.10.28] *lye*] ashes, used for cleaning mixed with water.

I.10.33] *bitches with litters*] proverbially treacherous.

11

*Cruz*

Other folk can spout verses like water from a spring,  
and the same thing happens with me though mine aren't worth anything –  
out from my mouth they come like sheep out of a corral.

Soon as the first one comes through the gate the others follow it,  
and the ones at the back come crowding hustling against the bars,  
and jump and trample each other without a space between.

I'm ignorant, so it's hard work for me to make myself clear,  
but when I get to open my trap you can take this for certain –  
out comes one verse, and the next one will be poking its nose round the door.

So pay attention to me, you'll hear me tell of the sorrows  
that fill the soul I bear – because no matter how things are  
a gaucho pays for his ignorance with the blood from his veins.

After that misfortune I escaped to the wild grass-lands.  
I roamed among the thistles\* like a beast without a lair –  
I can tell you, friend, to live that way means to live like an animal.

And so many wretched times I've found myself going through,  
that with all I've suffered, and all the pain I've had to bear,  
I've an idea that my heart must have grown a callus on it.

So I roamed about like an orphan calf\* that's lost after a storm.  
One day for my sins I heard of a dance that was going on,  
and I headed my colt directly towards the local store.

The place where the dance was held was a shack you wouldn't care to die in,  
and it got to be so crowded we had to shove our way through --  
there'll always be collisions when a poor man starts having fun.

I had on some half-boots\* which were pretty badly creased,  
they wore my heels into ridges till they looked like cocks' combs --  
you should have seen how worried I was thinking that I'd got corns!

The dancing had started up with *gatos* and *fandanguillos*,\*  
and so as to see the fun I ducked down and slipped in –  
but the Devil stuck his tail in too and messed up everything.

It turned out to be a big-mouth who was playing the guitar:...

I don't have much patience to let things pass, when there's no call to --  
I don't go provoking people, but if they touch me, I'll be there.

I took a girl out to dance a *pericon*,  
and soon as he saw me there he recognised me, no doubt,  
and he sang this little rhyme trying to make a fool of me:

*Women are all of them  
just like mules,  
not quite all, I don't say --  
but some of them  
pull the feathers off  
from birds who fly away.*

*Some gauchos think they know  
how to keep a lady,  
I won't say they think they can  
but that's what they boast about --  
and then most likely  
they'll find they're left down and out.*

The women started whispering and I'd got my temper up.  
I swung round and shouted at him, "Stop chirping, grasshopper --"  
And with one slash I cut through all the strings of his guitar.

In a flash, out from a back room came a gringo with a gun --  
but I've never been a coward -- danger doesn't scare me much --  
I slipped off my poncho and threw it over the lamp.

I got to the door at once shouting, "Don' get in my way!"  
The women were in a commotion because they were all in the dark  
and they started getting nervous mixed up in that crowd of men.

The first to come out was the singer, and he went for me --  
but I don't lose my head even after a drink or two --  
and some folk where I come from consider I'm pretty smart.

He won't have picked a fight again, because his joke cost him dear.  
When your friend here has had a drink it sharpens up his wits --  
and the poor fool turned out to be soft as pigeon's meat.

When it comes to bringing help women aren't slow to act --  
they propped him against some barrels before he'd lost much blood --  
and I left him there with his guts hanging out to make himself new strings from.

I got on my horse, and free as thought I headed for open country,  
to live like the clouds in the wind with nowhere to rest my head --  
because an outlaw has no nesting-place, nor a house, nor a safe home.

There's no fighting against the fate that Heaven has marked out for you.  
Even if it's no comfort if hardship's your lot, go through with it --  
no one scratches himself the smooth way, and you don't strip hide against the grain.

There's no one who won't make speeches against a gaucho who's in trouble:  
the least mistake lets him in for a life out there among the ostriches --  
Folk who know more about life make mistakes and there's always someone to excuse them.

NOTES to I.11

I.11.5] *thistles*] giant thistles covered wide stretches of the pampa (see W.H.Hudson's *Far Away and Long Ago*, chapter 5).

I.11.7] *orphan calf*] *guacho* (orphan, bastard) may according to one theory be the origin of the name *gaucho*.

*local store*] see note at I.3.3.

I.11.9] *half boots*] The typical gaucho boot (*bota de potro*) was moulded from fresh skin off a horse's leg, leaving the toes free (see II.14.3); other different kinds of boot are noticed (see also at I.7.15). Gauchos often felt uneasy on foot; and calluses seem to have been on Cruz's mind (see above, verse 6).

I.11.10] *gatos*(GATos), *fandanguillos* (*fandanGEEyos*)] dances with songs, sometimes an exchange of witty remarks.

I.11.12] *periconI* (periCON)] a figure dance with the musician as "caller".

12

*Cruz*

I don't know how many months that life of mine went on.  
At times we were so poor we had to eat horse meat --  
I'd joined up with some others out of luck like myself.

But curse it, what good does it do chattering about these troubles?  
A gaucho's born and he grows old and his luck never gets any better,  
until one day, out comes death to claim the hide off him.

But as there's no misfortune that doesn't end sometime,  
so, after all these hardships that's what happened to me --  
a friend did me the favour of putting me right with the Judge.

I can tell you, in my part of the land there's not a real criollo left:  
they've been swallowed by the grave, or run off, or been killed in the war -- \*  
because in this country, friend, there's no end to the bad times.

That's why it was, I take it, the Judge sent for me one day  
and told me that he wanted to have me on his side,  
so that I could do service as a soldier in the Police.

And he launched a long speech at me calling me a hero,  
saying I was a decent man -- and from that moment on  
he was appointing me Sergeant in command of the troop.

That's how I came to be in the force -- but what orders could I give?  
Last night when we came to get you I saw a good opportunity...  
Anyway, I don't like going around with a sword clanking on my belt.

So now you know who I am -- you can put your trust in me.  
Cruz gave you his hand as a friend, and he'll not abandon you --  
together, we can go seeking one shelter for the two of us.

We'll live like outlaws if we have to, to save our lives --  
we'll never need to go short of a good horse to get away on,  
nor a stretch of high grass to sleep in, nor good meat to put on the spit.

And when in time we're left without a single rag to wear,  
I'll ask the loan of a skin from any kind of a wolf --\*  
if I work it soft, I'll make a poncho better than waterproof.

Tail meat's the same as breast for me and spine's as good as haunch.  
I make my nest wherever I may be and I eat whatever I find --

I'll get down in the dust if need be, and I'll stop off at any gate.

And so I let the ball roll on -- one day it has to stop.  
A gaucho has to go through with it until he's swallowed by the grave...  
Or else till there comes a real criollo to take charge of things in this land.

They look at a wretched gaucho as if he was scrag meat.  
They treat him like dirt ... But as things go this way  
because that's what the ones who rule us want -- we'd best put up with beatings.

*Pucha!* if you were to hear them as I did one time --  
a nice little conversation the Judge had with a friend!  
I swear to you, when I heard that, it made my heart shrink up.

They were talking about getting rich with lands on the frontier,  
and moving the frontier further out to where there was unclaimed land,  
and taking men from all over the province to go and defend it for them.

They turn everything into schemes for railways and settlements,\*  
and chucking money away in thousands, on hiring gringos --  
while as for the poor recruit, they strip him bare, the swine.

But if things go on in the way they've been going up to now,  
it could be that suddenly we'll find the country turned to a desert,  
and see nothing but the whitening bones of the people who have died.

For a long time now we've borne our fortunes running backwards.  
A gaucho works and gets nowhere, because the best that happens is  
they whip you out of the place without leaving you time to spit.

Folk in the town may talk a lot about the wrongs that we endure,  
but they're acting like the teros\* do when they want to hide their nests --  
they make a noise in one place and they've got the eggs somewhere else.

And they pretend it's impossible to get at the root of the trouble,  
and meanwhile the authorities treat the gauchos with the harshest laws --  
the way they're doing things, the cure gets nowhere near the disease.

#### NOTES to I.12

I.12.4] *a real criollo*] i.e. a countryman.

*in the war*] the war between Argentina, Brasil and Uruguay against Paraguay lasted 1865-9

I.12.10] *wolf*] poetic licence -- meaning any animal.

I.12.16] *railways and settlements*] by about 1870, when the civil wars subsided, material "progress" in Argentina expanded outwards from the city, encroaching on the estancias and gauchos' traditional life.

I.12.19] *teros*] marsh birds, named from their cry, known for courageous defence of their young.(see also II.14.8, and note at I.9.14).

#### *Martin Fierro*

I can see we're both of us chips off the same block.  
I'm known as an outlaw and you're in the same situation --  
And as for me, to make an end of it all I'm off to the indians.

I ask my God to forgive me as he's been so good to me,

but since it has to be that I go and live with heathens,  
I'll be cruel where others are cruel -- that's how my fate has willed it.

God created the flowers, so pretty and delicate as they are,  
he made them perfect in every way as much as he knew how --  
but he gave something more to man when he gave him a heart.

He gave light its clearness and strength to the wind in its course,  
he gave out life and motion from the eagle to the worm --  
but he gave more to christian men when he gave them intelligence.

And even though he gave the birds -- besides other things I don't know of --  
their little golden beaks and feathers smooth as a picture --  
he gave a greater treasure to man when he gave him a speaking tongue.

And since he gave to the wild beasts their fierce strength, so strong  
that no power can overcome them and nothing can frighten them --  
what less could he give to man than courage to defend himself?

But I suspect that when he gave him so many good things at once,  
he was thinking to himself that man was going to need them --  
because he balanced the good things with the sorrows he gave him.

And it's driven by my sorrows that I want to leave this hell.  
I'm no longer a young fledgling, I know how to handle a spear --  
and the powers of the Government don't reach to the indians.

I know that the chiefs over there\* will give shelter to christians,  
and they treat them as "brothers" when they go of their own accord....  
Why keep on going through these alarms? Take our ponchos, and let's go.

There's dangers in the crossing but this doesn't scare me,  
I go rolling across the earth dragged along by my destiny --  
and if we lose the way, well.... we won't be the first to lose it.

No one can answer for us whether we'll survive or not.  
We have to strike straight inland towards where the sun goes down --  
one day we'll get there, we'll find out where afterwards.

We won't get off our course, we're a good team, the two of us:  
a gaucho goes where he aims for, even though he can't tell where he is --  
the grass-blades turn their points towards the setting sun.

We won't die of hunger, as according to what I've been told,  
in the wild lands there are animals, all the kinds you need --  
wild does, deer, mulitas\* armadillos and ostriches.

When you're travelling in the desert you eat everything, even the tails --  
women have crossed it on their own\* and arrived safe the other side --  
and an ostrich'll be a real gaucho if it escapes the bolas I throw.

I'm not afraid of thirst, either, I can bear it quite cheerfully --  
I can find water sniffing the wind, and while I'm still sound of limb  
I can dig and reach it right away anywhere there's a white-peach tree.\*

We'll find safety over there since we can't have it here --  
we'll have less troubles to bear, and it'll be a happy time

the day we light upon one of the indians' camps.

We'll fashion ourselves a tent out of a few horse-hides,  
as so many others do -- it'll be our kitchen and living-room --  
maybe there'll even be an indian girl who'll come and take pity on us!

Over there, there's no need to work, you live like a lord --  
going on a raid from time to time, and if you get out from that alive  
you live lying belly-up watching, the sun go round.

And now that Fate has beaten us and left us high and dry,  
maybe we'll see light, over there, and our sorrows come to an end.  
Any land will do for us -- let's be going, Cruz my friend.

If you can handle the bolas and know how to throw a lasso,  
and sit an unbroken colt with no fear he'll get you off --  
even among savages you won't have too bad a time.

A criollo can make love by singing, as he does war --\*  
besides, we might pick up something for ourselves, in one of the raids....  
Anyhow, friend, I've had enough of this life of wandering.

\* \* \* \* \*

At this point, the singer reached for a bottle to comfort him.  
He took a drink deep as the sky and brought his story to an end --  
and with one blow, smashed his guitar into splinters on the floor.

"I've broken it" he said, "and I'll not tune it again.  
No one else will play on it -- you can be sure of that:  
no one else is going to sing once this gaucho here has sung."

And I'll finish off my poem by taking up the story.  
There'll always be someone who's curious and inquisitive, like a woman --  
and maybe he'd like to know what happened in the end.

Cruz and Fierro rounded up a string of horses from a ranch:  
they drove them in front of them as wise criollos know how,  
and soon, without being spotted, they crossed over the frontier.

And after they had passed it, one clear early morning,  
Cruz told him to look back at the last of the settlements --  
and two big tears went rolling down Martin Fierro's face.

And following their true course they entered into the desert....  
I don't know whether they were killed in one of the indian raids --  
but I hope, some day, I'll hear certain news of them.

And now, with this report, I've come to the end of my story.  
All the sad things you've heard about I've told because they are true --  
every gaucho that you see is woven thick with misfortunes.

But he has to fix his hope in the God who created him....  
And with that I'll take my leave -- I've related as I know how  
*evils that everyone knows about, but no one told before now.*



NOTES to I.13

I.13.9] *chiefs over there*] there was contact between the indian tribes and the settlers; some indians were of mixed blood, through captive women, and numbers of deserters, criminals and others went to join them. Before the "extermination", diplomatic negotiations were carried on by the government (see note at I.3.22).

I.13.13] *mulita*] a kind of small armadillo.

I.13.14] *women have crossed it*] i.e. the few captive women who managed to escape.

I.13.15] *white-peach tree*] *duraznillo blanco*, a shrub indicating water at its roots.

I.13.21] *as he does war*] as they rode into battle, gauchos sang morale-raising songs (*vidalitas, zambas*).

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