



Reprinted courtesy of Jaime Sabines' family

The Lovers Are in Mourning¹

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Poet Jaime Sabines died March 19 this year. Clerks, students, pedestrians, housewives and secretaries are in mourning. The president, officials, merchants, entrepreneurs, workers, hermits, poor and rich alike, academics and rogues are all in mourning. *The lovers* are in mourning. His readers are in mourning. "For this we all weep," to paraphrase Shelley.

Jaime Sabines did not want official remembrances or massive demonstrations for his funeral. This simple, forceful man preferred a discrete, family burial. He took a ferocious joy in life that inspired profound reflections on love and death throughout his work.

Poetry and literature owe much to Sabines. A poet of simple words, he abom-

inated "literary-ness," but that did not keep him from being a baroque and allegorical writer. He expanded the tradition of the great poets of the Americas, plumbing the depths of human experience. Sabines fortified the poetic character of modern Spanish which Rubén Darío had created.

I met Jaime Sabines in mid-1965, at the house of some mutual friends who had a horse ranch near Texcoco. Jaime, who was working at the time as a feed salesman, often visited his friends and clients in the area. Sabines dedicated his book *Yuria* in 1967 to these devotees of poetry and music, writing, "To Rosita and Carlos Viesca. *Yuria* doesn't mean anything. It is everything: it is love, it is the wind, it is the night, it is the dawn; it could also be a country. You are in *Yuria*. Or perhaps, like a disease, you have

Yuria." The dedication comes close to a kind of Baudelairian spleen, and concludes, "*Yuria* is a cup in which other poems may fit. But it is this, this spoiled liquor, that Jaime offers you."

At those occasional, magical parties, Jaime Sabines would read aloud poetry by different authors, and in his own grand style, of course. He modulated his voice, and we would listen to the footsteps of pain, the shadow of loss and the pleasure of joy. The music in the verses of Pablo Neruda, Miguel Hernández or Tagore (in whom he sought "Oriental serenity and tenderness") resonated with grand trumpets and rosy dawns.

In an interview Sabines was asked, "Would you keep writing if you knew you would have no readers?" He answered, "I think I would keep writing, because I don't write for fame or prizes. I write to com-

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municate, to build a bridge from man to man. I write to confess, not in the Catholic sense, but to show my faith in my fellow man. My confession is a simple act of saying *me to you*, and that's enough."²

All creation is also reflection, and a reason for living. The poetry of Jaime Sabines is a reflection on the course of human events: "I don't want to convince anyone of anything. Trying to convince someone of something is improper, an offense against his or her freedom of thought. I want to introduce, to show, not to demonstrate. Let every person arrive at truth in his or her own way. Who has the right to say definitively, 'This is so,' if the history of humankind is nothing more than a story of contradictions, trials and searching?"³

In 1981, Sabines published *Poemas sueltos* (Loose Poems), a collection of verse and prose. This was the first book to be put out by the publishing house Papeles Privados, which specialized in poetry. By 1981, Sabines had gone 10 years without publishing, though his audience and fame had kept growing. This collection of "loose poems" sold out quickly. Poems like *El peatón* (The Pedestrian), *Sísifo* (Sisyphus), *Caballos de fuerza* (Horse Power), and *Recado a Rosario Castellanos* (Message to Rosario Castellanos) were quickly embraced by readers.

In 1993, Papeles Privados published a trilingual version of *Algo sobre la muerte del Mayor Sabines* (Something about the Death of Major Sabines) in English, French and Spanish, illustrated by painter Rafael Coronel. Then, in 1995, the bilingual, English-Spanish edition of *Pieces of Shadow/Fragmentos de Sombra* took the poet and myself to New York. Sabines, ill for years due to a broken leg with exten-

sive surgical complications, in a show of great fortitude, read a rich selection of his poems in the Cathedral of St. John the Divine. Poet W.S. Merwin, the anthology's translator, read in English at Sabines' side, giving a serene and emotional performance. Both poets reading together created a magical atmosphere that gave the poetry its truly cathedral dimension. *Pieces of Shadow* was released in the United States and enjoyed a warm reception among U.S. readers.

We celebrated the reading the next day with a helicopter flight over the skyscrapers of Manhattan. It thrilled his poet's soul to see Whitman's Hudson River from that height.

The New York reading infused new life into Jaime Sabines' last years. Other successful recitals followed in Rotterdam, Paris, Madrid, Quebec and other capitals, including several Mexican cities. The world had opened its arms to the poet.

Jaime Sabines was an extraordinary reader of his own poetry. His teacher was poet Carlos Pellicer, also a notable reader of poetry and a friend. Pellicer offered to write a short introduction to Sabines' first book, *Horas*, but Sabines respectfully declined. "Poetry must be its own defense," he said, "It either is or is not poetry." *Horas* was published in 1951, in a modest edition. The volume not only brought forth a grand new style, but also laid the foundation for the greatest Mexican poetry of the last half of the twentieth century.

Sabines' love for life could only be conquered by death, a premonition-like metaphor in almost all his poetry. *Tarumba*, published in 1956, is a book filled with premonitions. Jaime Sabines is both bard and prophet, and as such, he proph-

esies when he asks, "What the hell can I do with my knee, with my leg that's so long and scrawny..." *Tarumba* is the testament to the fall. It predicts the physical pain, and death walks the four cardinal points of this beautiful and intense poem. In whole poems and random verses, poetry changes in time. The poet, who distantly sees the path of his own future through a labyrinth of words, creates an alchemy of days. What a poem predicts truly happens. *El paralítico* (The Paralytic) of 1961 is another example of this. It says, "He came to look and he remained still. He doesn't move and he can't get up. He has a black angel on his shoulder....Even if he wanted to, even if he were crying/ to run, he couldn't. His body / is his enemy, keeps him stuck....A dark lead in his legs,/ slowly he's growing a lead mushroom..." The "Prince Cancer" metaphor, among others, gives form to the profound and dramatic poem *Algo sobre la muerte del Mayor Sabines* (Something about the Death of Major Sabines), yet more proof of the poet's second sight.

Sabines and Juan Rulfo both tell tales of apparitions and disappearances. How many similarities there are between these two! But there are other preferences, other images where Jaime Sabines abbreviates and put his finger on the sore spot. We find many echoes of philosophies and poetics, both ancient and modern. Echoes of Fernando Pessoa, who he read late in life, in the concise baldness of his work. Sabines struggled with Pablo Neruda's influence on his writing, largely due to his overwhelming love for the Chilean writer's poetry. In addition to Dostoevsky, Joyce and Kafka, we also find echoes of *La Biblia* (The Bible), the literary anthology edited

by Cipriano de Valera and Casiodoro Reina. Not erudition, but wisdom.

Jaime Sabines wrote sophisticated poetry, and he did so in a unique way. He was persistent, as seen in *Algo sobre la muerte del Mayor Sabines*. And he was popular, because when confronted with life, he embraced it with the senses and emotions of the common man. He created reality without artifice, "with verses," as Juan José Arreola says, "notable because they are made up of bare words, without facade." The work of Jaime Sabines is not extensive. It is brief. All of his books were republished in only

one volume titled *Otro recuento de poemas* (Other Collected Poems).

Mexico recently suffered the loss of Octavio Paz. Only a few months later, we lost Carlos Illescas, the Guatemalan poet who had made Mexico his home. This March, we lost Jaime Sabines. The work of the great poets endures, and each is different. Jaime Sabines endures in our generation and in those to come. He will live on in the hearts of his readers, those who know the necessity of his verse, and in the hearts of those of us who were honored to know him. Jaime Sabines was loved and admired not only by his own

friends, but by scholars, poets, politicians, musicians and artists and writers in general. But more than anything, he was a poet of the people, a modern poet of his nation. He was a poet who spoke of Man and his times, in the voice of Everyman. **MM**

NOTES

¹This essay was read at the posthumous homage to Jaime Sabines at Mexico City's Fine Arts Palace, March 23, 1999.

²Mónica Mansour, *Uno es el poeta. Jaime Sabines y sus críticos* (Mexico City: SEP, 1988).

³Jaime Sabines, *Diario semanario y otros poemas en prosa* (Xalapa, Veracruz: Universidad Veracruzana, 1961).

WHAT THE HELL CAN I DO WITH MY KNEE,
 with my leg that's so long and scrawny,
 with my arms, my tongue,
 with my weak eyes?
 What can I do in this whirlwind
 of well-meaning imbeciles?
 What can I do with the smart rotten ones
 and with the sweet girls who don't love men but poetry?
 What can I do with the poets wearing the uniforms
 of the academy or of communism?
 What, among hucksters or politicians
 or the shepherds of souls?
 What the hell can I do, Tarumba,
 if I'm neither a saint nor a hero nor a bandit,
 nor an adorer of art
 nor a druggist
 nor a rebel?
 What can I do if I can do it all
 and all I want is to look and look?

Tarumba (1956)

THE LOVERS¹

The lovers say nothing.
Love is the finest of the silences,
the one that trembles most and is hardest to bear.
The lovers are looking for something.
The lovers are the ones who abandon,
the ones who change, who forget.
Their hearts tell them that they will never find.
They don't find, they're looking.

The lovers wander around like crazy people
because they're alone, alone,
surrendering, giving themselves to each moment,
crying because they don't save love.
They worry about love. The lovers
live for the day, it's the best they can do, it's all they know.
They're going away all the time,
all the time, going somewhere else.
They hope,
not for anything in particular, they just hope.
They know that whatever it is they will not find it.
Love is the perpetual deferment,
always the next step, the other, the other.
The lovers are the insatiable ones,
the ones who must always, fortunately, be alone.

The lovers are the serpent in the story.
They have snakes instead of arms.
The veins in their necks swell
like snakes too, suffocating them.
The lovers can't sleep
because if they do the worms eat them.

¹ All poems are reprinted from *Pieces of Shadow*, a bilingual edition of a selection of Jaimes Sabines poems, compiled by Mario del Valle and translated by W.S. Merwin (Mexico City: Papeles Privados, 1995).

They open their eyes in the dark
and terror falls into them.

They find scorpions under the sheet
and their bed floats as though on a lake.

The lovers are crazy, only crazy
with no God and no devil.

The lovers come out of their caves
trembling, starving,
chasing phantoms.
They laugh at those who know all about it,
who love forever, truly,
at those who believe in love as an inexhaustible lamp.

The lovers play at picking up water,
tattooing smoke, at staying where they are.
They play the long sad game of love.
None of them will give up.
The lovers are ashamed to reach any agreement.

Empty, but empty from one rib to another,
death ferments them behind the eyes,
and on they go, they weep toward morning
in the trains, and the roosters wake into sorrow.

Sometimes a scent of newborn earth reaches them,
of women sleeping with a hand on their sex, contented,
of gentle streams, and kitchens.

The lovers start singing between their lips
a song that is not learned.
And they go on crying, crying
for beautiful life.

Horai (1950)