



NICOLÁS GUILLÉN

*Nicolás Guillén (1902–1989), internationally acclaimed black poet and folklorist, was born in Camagüey, Cuba. The son of a newspaper editor who was killed by the government, he experienced poverty in his youth but managed to complete secondary school and went on to study law in Havana. Subsequently, he became a journalist, magazine editor, and a founder of a research center for the study of Afro-Caribbean culture. He began writing in the 1920s under the influence of European modernists who were in rebellion against Western tradition. Later, his interest in Cuban folklore and music provided a foundation for his poetry. His first major work, *Sound Themes*, appeared in 1930 and was hailed as a major effort to bring Afro-Cuban culture into the mainstream of Cuban literature. Using a popular Cuban musical form, the son, he explored the socioeconomic and psychological factors that guide the lives of Afro-Caribbean people. In later volumes, he expanded his themes to include a wider range of subjects and a broader historical perspective. Guillén's volumes that have been translated into English include *The Great Zoo and Other Poems* (1967, tr.) and *Tengo* (1964, tr.).*

He remained throughout his career a poet and prophet of the common people. Seeing into their wounds and suffering, he offered the solution of hope and revolt. From the beginning, Guillén viewed his role as an artist as inseparable from his commitments as a political activist. In the 1930s, he became a member of the Cuban Communist Party and a spokesman for left-wing causes, which resulted in periods of exile and extensive travel abroad. After Fidel Castro came to power in 1959, Guillén actively supported the Cuban revolution and held positions in the government. "Can You?" and "Ballad of the Two Grandfathers" typify his concerns with politics and culture.

Can You?

for Lumir Civrny, in Prague

Can you sell me the air that passes through your fingers
and hits your face and undoes your hair?

Maybe you could sell me five dollars' worth of wind,
or more, perhaps sell me a cyclone?

Maybe you would sell me
the thin air, the air

(not all of it) that sweeps
into your garden blossom on blossom
into your garden for the birds,
ten dollars of pure air.

The air it turns and passes
with butterfly-like spins.
No one owns it, no one.

Can you sell me some sky,
the sky that's blue at times,
or gray again at times,
a small part of your sky,
the one you bought—you think—with all the trees
of your orchard, as one who buys the ceiling with the house?
Can you sell me a dollar's worth
of sky, two miles
of sky, a fragment of your sky,
whatever piece you can?

The sky is in the clouds.
The clouds are high, they pass.
No one owns them, no one.

Can you sell me some rain, the water
that has given you your tears and wets your tongue?
Can you sell me a dollar's worth of water
from the spring, a pregnant cloud,
as soft and graceful as a lamb,
or even water fallen on the mountain,
or water gathered in the ponds
abandoned to the dogs,
or one league of the sea, a lake perhaps,
a hundred dollars' worth of lake?

The water falls, it runs.
The water runs, it passes.
No one holds it, no one.

Can you sell me some land, the deep night
of the roots, the teeth of
dinosaurs and the scattered lime
of distant skeletons?
Can you sell me long since buried jungles, birds now extinct,
fish fossilized, the sulphur
of volcanoes, a thousand million years
rising in spiral? Can you
sell me some land, can you
sell me some land, can you?

The land that's yours is mine.
The feet of all walk on it.
No one owns it, no one.

Translated from the Spanish by Robert Márquez

Ballad of the Two Grandfathers

Shadows which only I see,
I'm watched by my two grandfathers.
A bone-point lance,
a drum of hide and wood:
my black grandfather.
A ruff on a broad neck,
a warrior's gray armament:
my white grandfather.

Africa's humid jungles
with thick and muted gongs . . .
"I'm dying!"
(My black grandfather says).
Waters dark with alligators,
mornings green with coconuts . . .
"I'm tired!"
(My white grandfather says).
Oh sails of a bitter wind,
galleon burning for gold . . .

"I'm dying"	
(My black grandfather says).	20
Oh coasts with virgin necks	
deceived with beads of glass . . . !	
"I'm tired!"	
(My white grandfather says).	
Oh pure and burnished sun,	25
imprisoned in the tropic's ring;	
Oh clear and rounded moon	
above the sleep of monkeys!	
So many ships, so many ships!	
So many Blacks, so many Blacks!	30
So much resplendent cane!	
How harsh the trader's whip!	
A rock of tears and blood,	
of veins and eyes half-open,	
of empty dawns	35
and plantation sunsets,	
and a great voice, a strong voice,	
splitting the silence.	
So many ships, so many ships,	
so many Blacks!	40
Shadows which only I see,	
I'm watched by my two grandfathers.	
Don Federico yells at me	
and Taita Facundo is silent;	
both dreaming in the night	45
and walking, walking.	
I bring them together.	
"Federico!	
Facundo!" They embrace. They sigh,	
they raise their sturdy heads;	50
both of equal size,	
beneath the high stars;	
both of equal size,	
a Black longing, a White longing,	
both of equal size,	55
they scream, dream, weep, sing.	
They dream, weep, sing.	
They weep, sing.	
Sing!	

*Translated from the Spanish by Robert Márquez
and David Arthur McMurray*

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. Discuss "Can You?" as an attack on materialism and a critique of the rules of the marketplace.
2. Which images in "Can You?" evoke freedom and beauty? How do they convey the poem's meaning?
3. Discuss the difference between the two grandfathers in "Ballad of the Two Grandfathers." How do their historical roles differ?
4. How does the poet reconcile the differences between the two grandfathers?
5. Discuss the broad historical and cultural implications of "Ballad of the Two Grandfathers."