

I. The challenge

The duel-singer Florentino
rode across the wide plains
on the road of Desolation,
late in the afternoon.

Point rider in a solitude
veiled black from the prairie's burning;
blossoms of dust spring up
under his horse's steady pace.
Blind eye of the dry marsh
without herons, reeds, or flocks,
hollow basin buried in cracked mud
where a hoof might falter.
Wretched, spiny thorn bushes
bare their yellow skeletons.
Stupefying shrill of cicadas
in the ashes of twilight.
Palm trees so still
it seems the world has ended.

The lone poet-singer
goes with grave pride
riding over the wild desert
as if it were a lush garden.
In the dry channel of Las Animas
he pauses, wracked with thirst,
and at the foot of a tall cottonwood,
sees the glint of a well of water.

He throws the drinking horn,
hears it splash down;
when he pulls it up
his feet are spattered with water,
but in the empty horn
there's not a drop to drink.
He throws it down - and again
clear water spatters his feet -
yet only sand can be seen
in the muddy depths.

Breath of burning wind,
his steed paces the prairie;
the poet turns his thoughts
and his steps home to his cabin,
when he hears an ominous thunder of hoofbeats,
a rider, coming up from behind.

A man in a black cloak,
a black horse, too,
a black cowboy hat
shadows his face;
he rides by singing a couplet
without looking back:

"Friend, if you dare,
meet me in Santa Ines -
I'm going there, seeking
a singing duel with you."

An evil shadow of horror
sweeps over the plains.
Distant, ghostly cowboys
ride with it in a mad rush;
they cover and obscure
the blowing chaff of nightfall.

Florentino, thoughtful,
picks his way to the opposite bank.
Point rider in a wasteland
ash-black from past flames,
he rides, keeping a deep love
of the savanna in his mind.
In a passionate song
his voice rings out to the empty dark:

"Savanna, savanna,
land of hard work and love,
open field of boundless roads,
well-watered or dying of thirst,
join with my soul in its loneliness,
join with God in the faith:
over your naked breast
I take a stand and respond:
Let the somber singer know
that I stick to my code of honor
and since I sing with everyone
I must accept his deadly challenge."

II. The singing-duel

Night veils the plain
with a violent thunderstorm;
in the lit-up ranch house,

exciting, lively rhythms.
Inside, the maracas are sounding,
outside the rain pounds down;
here, the tender strumming of the cuatro,
that heart-beat of cedar wood;
nearby, the savanna's muddy breast
barely shows through the wild river;
further off, wandering cloud-choirs
thunder out their black fury,
and all the while, the rhythmic joropo
weaves its bittersweet melodies;
spikes of lightning make the lone palm tree
throw pointed shadows.

Suddenly there's a man in the door:
an Indian of haughty bearing,
black eyes, black hair,
forehead craftily wrinkled,
neat felt hat gleaming
in the lamplight.

A bold gust of wind
makes his shirt flutter,
revealing the hilt of a dagger
half-hidden in his waistband.
He enters quietly and settles
among the musicians.
"Look, man, it's the Devil!" –
the rumor spreads across the room.

"Look how he got here
in all this mud and rain,
his clothes pressed and dry,
without a horse, without a coat."
"They saw him earlier, coming upriver,
from down near Nutrias,
ferried by a dark boatman
through the passage of Las Brujas."

Florentino is whistling
an old ballad of brave deeds,
his left hand presses down the strings,
his right strums them, freely flying,
when the silver-tongued Indian
greeted him with a verse:

THE DEVIL
Oh carefree redhead,

answer me this question:
Tell me what rooster
always wins in a cockfight;
even though they hit him in the head,
he gives a shrewd peck.

FLORENTINO

He gives a shrewd peck -
the rooster who parries
and never attacks too aggressively -
it's good if he slashes with his spurs,
but better if he rips out
his enemy's proud tail feathers.

THE DEVIL

Better if he bites his enemy's feathers.
If you're such a know-it-all,
tell me, what is the country
where treasure is looted
without any difficulty?

FLORENTINO

Without any difficulty -
it's the beehive in a papaya tree
that has a trunk of soft wood:
even a man with no machete
scoops out the honey with his nails.

THE DEVIL

He scoops out the honey with his nails.
You replied to the second,
now answer the third,
and tell, if you're such an expert traveller
on the savanna when there's no sun or moon:
Who is it that drinks sand
in the deepest dark of night?

FLORENTINO

In the deepest dark of night
I don't want to hide my shadow
and I'm not afraid of yours.
The lance's thrust isn't dangerous
unless you fail to parry it.
If you can't drink water,
you've got to drink sand.

THE DEVIL

If one never drinks water.

This sort of answer
is just avoiding the question.
If you know, give the reason,
if not, say nothing:

Who quenches the bitter fire
in a dry well of pure sand?
Who slakes his thirst without water
in the profound solitude?

FLORENTINO

In the profound solitude
it's the heart of the desert.
The verses that sing it a lullaby,
the legend that it's steeped in,
the soul that traverses it,
the night that covers it,
the wind that lays it bare,
the palm tree that guards it,
the starlight that illuminates it.
Gentlemen, I am not to blame
if he that looks for me, finds me!

THE DEVIL

If you look for me and find me,
fright makes you back down from the fight.
It's a quarter to one
when the lamp flickers
when the aimless ghosts
roam the prairies in their anguish,
when Florentino shuts his mouth
because he runs out of ideas,
when the pavita cries its death-warning,
when the rooster crows.

FLORENTINO

When the rooster crows
my throat gets in tune
and my wits get crystal clear.
I'm like the little thorn bush
that flowers in the savanna:
If you ride on by, I give sweet perfume
but mess with me, and I prick you.

EL DIABLO

Mess with me and I prick you.
I don't envy the little thorn bush
the glories it boasts of:

when the fire sweeps by
its roots are blackened.
You can't win the fight
by rearing up and flapping your wings.
You should come forth and face me
so that you can see me in the darkness.

FLORENTINO

So you can see me in the darkness.
Buddy, don't get too close
or your horse will start acting up.
It doesn't matter if you're in front or behind
if your feet aren't tied together.
If you're behind, you're looking forward,
And if in front, you can whirl around deftly.

THE DEVIL

The guy in front whirls around quickly
to contemplate the doom
rising to erase all that is living:
in the rainy season, the endless marsh
in the dry season, dusty clouds of smoke.

I like to sing in the open air
in the night when the wind blows
because that's the way to know for sure
who is the better duel-singer.

FLORENTINO

The better duel-singer
makes his arguments in the daytime
and works hard at the task.
"Catch this spinning top on a fingernail
and see if you can keep it going!"
I'm not a barn owl
out in the village bell tower
to sing in the darkness
when the night is this ugly.

THE DEVIL

When the night is this ugly
the donkey thinks one thing
and the guy on his back, another.
Ah, red-headed Florentino!
Listen to my warning:
give up on this duel,
call an end to it, calm down, be quiet,
if you don't want to lose your voice

when you're damned to hell.

FLORENTINO

Your voice when you're damned to hell.
While the cuatro inspires me
and the maracas are shaking
No spur can speed me up,
no rein can check me;
no one can oblige me to drink
from a cup filled by another.
O Rhymer that sings and plays,
you have this "fair" advantage:
you play when you feel like it,
you sing only if it suits you.

THE DEVIL

You sing only if it suits you.
If dueling is your destiny,
even if it rains and thunders,
I'll be your opponent.
Buddy, in this duel
I haven't come to serve you
with sweet cakes and honey.
When our duel gets bitter,
your fear doesn't surprise me:
once a tree snake has bitten you,
a hanging vine gives you goosebumps.

FLORENTINO

Hanging vines give you goosebumps.
Against a ragged old fighting cock
I don't whet my rooster's spurs.
Among singers, I sing,
Among men I get rowdy,
among women I dress up
in fine muslin and velvet;
when one girl says goodbye,
I get another to console me.
Ever since I was a kid
throwing stones at hopscotch,
even in the dark of night,
I've been able to see
the Southern Cross in the sky.

THE DEVIL

The Southern Cross in the sky.
I don't spook at shadows
nor does light keep me awake;

in the sun I'm a sparrowhawk,
and in the night, a red owl;
like the lapwings and plovers
I sing better when I'm flying;
and like a slippery trout,
if you grab me, I leap and escape;
and I'm a savage gator, alert,
lurking in the river channel's mouth.

FLORENTINO

Lurking in the river channel's mouth.
I call to mind, what, long ago,
my grandfather taught me:
If you're a live wire, but don't dare to act,
overcaution makes you an idiot.
For a gator, use a spear,
for a tricky trout, a hook;
a dandy that rides English-style
can't gallop his horse bareback.
How can you wipe sweat from your face
if you don't carry a handkerchief?
Why bother to wash your feet,
if you go to sleep in the dirt?

THE DEVIL

If you go to sleep in the dirt,
you have your ear to the ground,
and if you always nap that way,
no one will kill you in your bed.

The roosters are crowing-
listen to their song!
The dogs are howling -
remember our bargain.

Vultures of La Barrosa,
of the shady grove at Frio,
congratulate me, gentlemen,
that Florentino is now mine.

FLORENTINO

That Florentino is now mine.
Flamingos of Banco Seco!
Ibises of Pionio!
If you say that I'm yours,
then I must have sold myself to you,
and if you bought me, pay up –
because I don't let anyone owe me money.

I'm not a farmer in a bottomland shack
that gets flooded out by the river,
I'm not a foolish bird
warming up an empty nest.

THE DEVIL

Sitting on an empty nest.
I don't know if you're a foolish bird
but you're setting out on a journey
with your tired arms at the oar
your strokes begin to falter;
at the riverbank's edge of silence
you'll tie up your tune and quit rowing.
Like thunder, I command
an end to the duel, and call in all the bets.

FLORENTINO

The duel and the clap of thunder.
I like to see the lightning
even though it leaves me dazed,
I like to brave a storm
when the violent wind brings thunder.
Shriek of the eagle over the burning prairie,
challenge of the brave bull.
When these voices call me,
I have always responded.
There's no way you can call me
a novice rhymers!

THE DEVIL

Oh novice rhymers,
hand to hand and chest to chest
I keep adding fuel to the fire
with the spirit of poetry;
I'm a master of that skill.
Lightning flashed on the horizon -
its flames lit me up
as I pierced the nostrils of maverick bulls
and bled the surrendered ones
with the point of my dagger,
the giver of pain and shivering fear.

FLORENTINO

The giver of pain and fear.
Give me an open field: thought;
and give me the rein: free will;
and I'll teach anyone who doesn't know
how to stop running away -

and how to end their verses.

Sure, there are maverick bulls -
I won't argue with you about the yearlings.
Take out your dagger if you want;
see if I put mine back in its sheath.
It hurts when you lose a fight
because you haven't defended yourself.

THE DEVIL

When you haven't defended yourself,
what you lost can't be important;
if you stay on your feet, you've won,
because pride that can't be conquered
is worth more than the good things you have lost.
That's why I came here to you
without anything to lose
in a fifty-foot canoe
rowed to a slow beat.
And I return on foot by a shortcut,
changing the rhythm,
to see if you're on your guard.

FLORENTINO

To see if you're on your guard.
When I'm attacked, I like it -
because then I attack right back.
Black vultures of La Barrosa,
of the river channel's tall groves:
gentlemen, now you will see
the Devil hard at work.

THE DEVIL

The Devil hard at work.
Don't lie about what you don't know,
don't fake all this crazy prattle.
You should realize, this isn't the first time
that I've travelled this land;
and here, gentlemen, know,
when my dagger thrusts home,
just like I'd suck a lemon dry,
I'll bleed him, drop by drop.

FLORENTINO

I'll drain him drop by drop.
Go ahead, act high and mighty;
I'll take you down a peg.
Don't be scared, friends,

let me parry his attack.
Let me block his slick moves,
I'll know if he slips;
let his canoe get loose
so it floats into deep water;
before God wakes up at dawn,
whoever brought him will take him away.
In front, the spirited steed,
behind, the wily little burro.
Who has seen a dorodoro
singing with a mockingbird?
If you can change the rhyme on me,
I can change it too.

THE DEVIL

I can change it for you too.
Whatever rhyme, meter, or accent,
they're all the same to me,
because I've chosen my destiny:
nevermore, eternal nothingness.
Ah! Redheaded Florentino,
brave-hearted, clever singer,
what a gloomy road you're on,
one that you'll never travel again,
nothing in front of you, nothing above,
without boundaries, without a past.
without forward, without a sky,
without limit, without a past.
Already, your cowboy know-how,
your faith, and your talent -
now they're worth nothing,
oh redhead without a care,
mimic and tame nightingale!

FLORENTINO

Mockingbird and nightingale.
From walking alone on this path
my feet kick up the dust
and wear deeper ruts
into the evil wrinkle on your face:
while the prairie and heaven's light
show me your trail,
while I can hear a voice
over the tempest's roar,
I'm the one who chooses my route -
I steer with the rudder of my singing.
If anyone says I beg for help,
then they should learn the truth:

The sailor doesn't give orders
when the captain's in command.

THE DEVIL

When the captain commands,
the wind goes out of your sails;
I am the lord of the sea.
Ashes shall be your voice,
dead cinders your efforts,
thirst shall be your last impression
shipwrecked in the desert,
smoke shall be your road,
rock, your dreams;
charcoal, your memory
in the blackness of eternity,
because you can't respond
or resist me any more.
The dark Captain of Hell,
that's who's coming to get you.

FLORENTINO

That's who comes searching for me.
It's been nice knowing you -
thanks, Mr. Satan!
Black vultures of La Barrosa,
leave your shady grove,
because the Devil has picked the day
he wants to trample me underfoot.
Get me out of here, with God's grace,
Virgin of Soleda',
Virgin of blessed Carmen,
sacred Virgin of Real,
tender Virgin of Socorro,
sweet Virgin of La Paz,
Virgin of Coromoto,
Virgin of Chiquinquirá',
pious Virgin of Valle,
sainted Virgin of Pilar,
Faithful Mother of Dolores
shine your holy light for me.

Saint Michael! give me your shield,
your lance and your dagger,
blessed Child of Atocha,
Holy Trinity!

(In a ringing silence
the black boat casts off.

Your health, gentlemen! The dawn lifts
its head from the regal river's cup).