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Jaime Saenz: The Night

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Introduction

Notes from Bolivia

Some Things You Should Know about Jaime Saenz

It was with a human leg pilfered from the medical lab that Jaime Saenz, Bolivia's visionary and most influential poet, came home from the university one evening. He was in his mid-forties, still living with his mother, teaching an occasional class on poetry, but obsessed full-time with death, his most constant companion.

In his strange, late poems, visualizing the body as an abode of unfathomable space, as an otherness we carry with us, one that will come to carry us away into itself, Saenz meditated on death. Channeling its plutonic voice, he would come to write, "I am the body who inhabits you, and I am here in the darkness, and I suffer you, and live you, and die you. / But I am not your body. I am the night."

Before writing those lines, though, the young poet first had to bear, through one singular night, for who knows what manner of study, the limb of a cadaver. And in the morning, he punctually presented himself at his clerk's job with the United States Information Service at the U.S. Embassy.

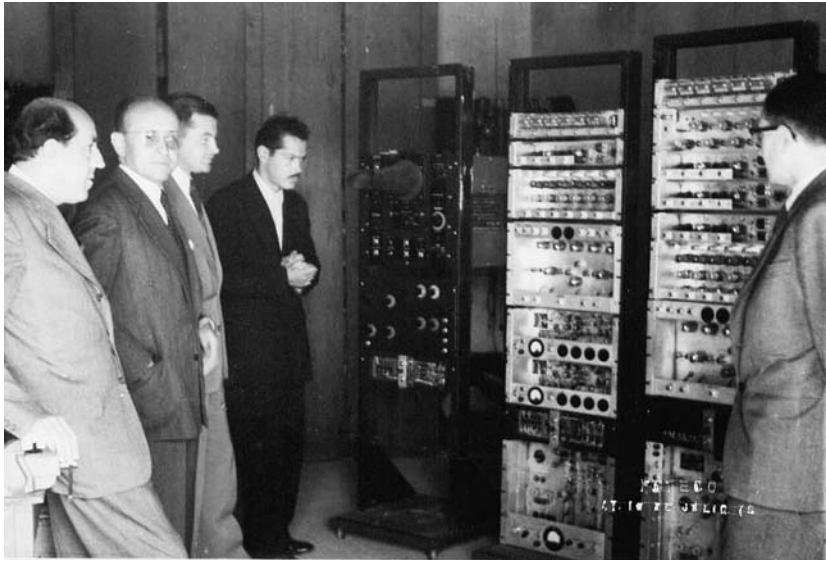


Figure 1. Saenz with U.S. Embassy personnel, ca. mid-1960s, mysteriously rubbing his hands before an early-version computer. In his late poetry, Saenz will excoriate the technology of war and condemn the technophiles to the ninth circle of Hell

Eventually, of course, the police were summoned. You can't keep a human leg hidden under your bed while you live with your mother.

Still, on weekends afterwards, the poet found occasion to visit the morgue.

His book *Recorrer esta distancia* (*To Cross This Distance*) opens with the speaker gazing upon a cadaver. As the poem progresses, we begin to realize that this speaker is a literally disembodied voice meditating upon its own lost body across the distance of the reader's mind.

For Saenz, poetry is the practice of seeing through another consciousness from the afterlife. In the body of a poem, life and death,

self and other are enfolded. The final movement of *To Cross This Distance* is spoken—the whole poem leads up to this—from inside the reader, and with such immanent tenderness that the matter of who touches or is touched, kisses, or is kissed, dissipates in the mystery of fused, shared being.

So Jaime Saenz, throughout his life, “experimented” with death. He was hospitalized three times. He insisted to his friends that when he died, they were to cut his carotid arteries. That promise was kept. Saenz was terrified of waking up in a coffin.

When he writes about death and life giving birth to each other, enchanting each other, expanding the realm of ordinary experience, he isn’t being rhetorical or merely reveling in paradox. He is articulating a philosophy.

Or a teleology. In Cochabamba, Luis Antezana, an illustrious literary critic and a close friend of the poet, tells us that Jaime Saenz had chosen the more difficult life of a mystic, the *via negativa*. Saenz, Antezana said, was looking for a Gnostic vision. He found god in drugs, alcohol, the street, the body, and death. In a way, he was like the medieval flagellates who drove their bodies into delirium and ruin. Saenz felt that since god had not come to him, he would cross this distance himself. He had his sense of humor to protect him as the distance closed.

Humor: there is plenty to go around at a drinking party of Bolivian literati. After we present our first book of translations of Jaime Saenz’s poetry (*Immanent Visitor: Selected Poems of Jaime Saenz*) to a full house at CEDOAL, Bolivia’s principal cultural center, people gather at a bar in Sopocachi, a fashionable section of town. When we both stand, somewhat ceremoniously, to make a toast to Saenz, one of Bolivia’s prominent critics jumps up, clacks his heels, and ex-

tends his arm in mock Fascist salute. No one seems discomfited by the gesture except us.

I lean over and ask a fairly inebriated Humberto Quino, one of Bolivia's big-name poets, what he thinks about Saenz's early Nazi sympathies. "Oh, no, no, it's no big thing, you know, and nothing very surprising," he says. "Saenz was a great poet in the tradition of San Juan and Sor Juana de la Cruz, fascinated by death and the occult, and in his youth he was very seduced by mystical fascist ideology, you see. In politics, he is a bit like Pound, Celine, Heidegger, Mishima, even Pessoa and Borges, eh. . . . You know Borges spoke fawningly of the dictator Videla, and praised his 'iron hand' during the 'Dirty War,' no? Well, except these guys professed their fascism when they were all grown up! Saenz was a kid strutting around Wiesbaden in high boots. But who gives a damn? Long live poetry!"¹ I mention to him that political allegiance is not considered irrelevant in the United States. "Yes, yes, sure," he says, "but isn't it fantastic that the little fascist came to be such a big and freaky poet? Look, there's a big movement of young, working-class poets and artists in Bolivia right now. They live up there on the hills of El Alto in concrete-block houses with no plumbing. Almost all of them are of the hard left. They want to burn down Kentucky Fried Chicken and send the bourgeoisie to the salt flats of Uyuni to be eaten by flamingoes. Who is their number one poetic hero? Saenz! Isn't that beautiful? Long live poetry!"

¹ It is important to note that Borges was actually a political conservative who was also an ardent anti-fascist, and he stood against the rise of fascism in the 1930s when significant numbers of Latin American writers and artists enthusiastically supported its European manifestations—including some who later became prominently identified with Marxism. While Borges did indeed offer lamentable endorsements of the vicious far-right Chilean and Argentine juntas late in his life, some of which he later repudiated, it bears emphasizing that he publicly attacked fascism throughout its officially sanctioned apogee in the Peronist era. And he courageously stood up against anti-Semitism as early as 1934, in his essay "I, a Jew." We thank Eliot Weinberger for pointing out the need for this clarification.

On his wedding night, Jaime Saenz bought and brought home a panther.

It slept with the newlyweds until it grew too large and his wife finally said that it was either her or the panther.

La Paz, That Thin-Aired and Scarcely Believable City

Without foreknowledge, we arrive in La Paz on the day of the solstice, the Aymara new year.² The streets are bright with the breathy, joyous crossing melodies of pipes and Andean flutes. Unlike most other Latin American capitals, La Paz is an overwhelmingly indigenous city. Most of the women along the street are Aymara, *cholas paceñas* in elaborate heavy skirts, called polleras, and derby hats, their rainbow-colored *rebozos* (portage or carrying shawls) full as spinnakers over their backs.

What fills the spinnakers blows toward the past. And yet the women on the street tread forward, hunched, their domed bowlers like dark beacons. Invisible, the *aparapitas*³ in their stitched, bricolaged rai-

²The Aymara are a large Andean indigenous group living in the vast windy Titicaca plateau of the central Andes in modern Peru, Bolivia, and Chile, numbering up to two million.

³As Luis Antezana explains in his afterword to our translation of *The Night*: “One of Saenz’s most famous characters is the *aparapita* of La Paz. An *aparapita* is an indigenous immigrant—more precisely, an Andean Indian or ‘Aymara’—who lives in poverty in the city and its fringe neighborhoods. Although one can imagine him as an actual homeless man of the large Western cities, an *aparapita* is not a drifter or a beggar; mostly, he works as a porter in the public markets or in the transportation centers and stockyards. In Saenz’s world, the *aparapitas* also frequent the garbage dumps and spend their nights drinking alcohol in taverns. When he knows his life has run its course, an *aparapita* works tirelessly to make enough money to drink himself to death. When he finally dies, his few belongings are inherited by his fellow *aparapitas* and his anonymous body ends up in the morgue. Nevertheless, according to local beliefs, his ‘spirit’ now protects his friends in the tavern.”



Figure 2. Saenz seated in his writing room, map of La Paz behind him

ment, drink to the dregs, barely speaking, sunk in dank, unmarked bodegas, knowing, as Saenz affirmed, that they know nothing and know everything, everything that matters in the end. The man with a briefcase smartly clicks his little cell phone shut and squats, unsmiling, to have his future read in cards by a brujo.

The city clings to a landscape that resembles a grooved funnel. A mountain-rimmed vortex of congested streets eases us down to



Figure 3. Chola paceña on the streets of La Paz

Plaza San Francisco and the central street that drains away into the wealthier neighborhoods of La Paz.

Pigeons and vendors and everyone waiting for anyone loiter in Plaza San Francisco beside a church notable for its baroque-mestizo architecture. Even in June, Bolivia's winter, the sun is intense. A businessman holds his newspaper to the side of his head while he talks to a pineapple vendor. Hawkers hold forth fake fossil trilobites. The *voceadores*—those who shout the litany of stops from passing minibuses—can be heard here as on every street in La Paz. And scores of bootblacks ply the crowd. The younger ones wear ski masks, despite the heat, in order to keep from being recognized by family or friends.

One approaches us. His boot brush blurs. The drying foam of his spit flecks the wool hole around his mouth. I smile and give him a

tip, and he winks and says in a seductive voice, “Nos veremos, Señor Afortunado” (We’ll be seeing one another, Fortuned Sir).

On the cathedral’s facade, Inca gods and snakes and fruit mix it up with the Apostles. And in each of the thousands of stone blocks there are fading Greek letters, carved there by indigenous masons, almost four hundred years back. It’s a mystery, those letters. Some think there may be a code written into the cathedral—cut and scrambled by the toilers. Inside, the church is vast and dark; garish, peeling saints glare sternly down at the supplicants, or peer erotically heavenward, stigmatic and aureoled, bolted to the walls from their backs with massive mahogany screws.

In the cathedral square, an old man indicates to me with one of his stumps to put the coins in his coat pocket.

Those who dare to cross the class 5 rapids of Avenida Prado put their lives at stake.

A woman is singing, “Sopa de cerdo, un peso, un peso.”

Across town, hundreds of men and women are marching and chanting slogans for workers’ rights. A taxi driver explains to us the merits of nationalizing the petroleum industry. In a bar near the university, artists and writers drink and joke in groups or read alone at a table with an orange juice. On our first day in La Paz, we are told that a llama fetus is buried under every house and every municipal building in the city. For luck. We return to our own neighborhood and an alley full of *hechiceros* (shamans) who promise to read the future in patterns of coca leaves they scatter over a blanket.

Imaginary and Real Photographs

Now a respected poet in his own right, one of Jaime Saenz's protégés describes him seated on the curb with an old man by Plaza San Francisco. Saenz spoke little Aymara. The other man spoke little Spanish. They were passing a bottle back and forth.

On the Aymara new year, the day we arrive, the hechiceros on Avenida Linares take big swigs of clear alcohol and then spit it back onto the fire, yelling a blessing, the fire fueled by rags, herbs, fruit, llama fetuses, palm votives of Pachamama. When the men spit, the flames spurt up, speaking back. The bottle is passed from hand to hand. The fire grows and smells acrid, weird. Men in suits hold the hands of hechiceros and kiss them on the cheek. People arrive, bearing the clear alcohol as a gift. In this crowd of celebrants we are the strangers, looking in. The bottle is never offered us. No one looks at us nor speaks to us. We are simply not there.

Late at night, at the house of Jaime's younger sister, we are shown many photographs. One of them is of his only child, the girl born of his German Jewish wife, who was an organizer for the Bolivian fascists just before World War II. Jaime Saenz never saw his daughter at the age she is in this photograph, about sixteen, with long dark hair and dramatic, sad, mascaraed eyes. After the war, when the child was still a baby, her unhappy mother, giving up on the marriage (and, one presumes, the politics), hauled her back to Germany.

Only with Saenz could something like this be real: a Jewish Nazi spouse, with an Amazonian panther on their conjugal bed. So, yes, let's talk about it: It is the most discomfiting fact that Saenz was a member of the Bolivian Nazi Youth in his late teens. And it is most



Figure 4. Portrait of the artist as a young Hitler Youth recruit

discomfiting he never went on record as regretting it. In love with the idea of the German—an idea of considerable historical weight in Bolivia—he joined when he was around sixteen and sailed to Germany, with his twenty-five-member scholarship brigade, in September, 1938. He remained until late 1939, working on construction projects and undergoing rigorous military training.

Saenz claimed with bravado to have fought against Titoist forces in Yugoslavia, but this has been disproved by facts of chronology. One would like to be able to say that he unambiguously renounced his political past. But it is simply not clear what his attitude toward fascism became later in life. He remained an avid reader of Heidegger, Nietzsche, and German Romanticism until his death. Like Pound, he elected to distance himself via silence from the matter of his earlier affiliations. Whatever the case, this much can be said: There is

no evident mark of anti-Semitism or racism in his voluminous work (poetry, fiction, criticism, drama, and nonfiction); to the contrary, a profound and prolific empathy for the oppressed—the non-Spanish, the laborers, the homosexuals, the outcasts—is to be found there. And in the great indigenous and working class revolution of 1952 against the right-wing oligarchy that had long ruled his nation, Saenz put his military training from Germany to use, fighting on the barricades with miners, shopkeepers, students, and Aymara. Juan Lechin, Latin America's leading Trotskyist, and the country's most influential Marxist thinker, became a close friend and correspondent. And in *The Night*, Saenz paints the plotters of the attempted fascist coup of October, 1979 (led by the infamous General Natush Busch) as flesh-eating demons. How to explain this aparapita's coat of ideological paradoxes? Can it be explained? In what way, exactly—with this poet whose very grammar is Janus-faced with paradox—should it be?

A photograph records a meeting of Saenz with two acolytes of the Krupp Workshops, the notorious, highly influential group who gathered around Jaime Saenz. A brilliant, outsider poet, Saenz would advertise the Krupp Workshops by posting fliers that described a variety of bizarre literary exercises the attendants might expect to attempt. The first page of one of those announcements reads that the "Convocation" has been beamed by means of telepathy to all the "subsidiary" *cacho* (the Andean version of "craps") branches of the world. Under "Retadores" (Challengers) are the compulsory pseudonyms to be adopted by the players elected from the many applicants. Saenz was always game master, the "Jurjizada." It was a kind of Jack Spicer Magic Workshop, but more demanding.

On Miraflores Avenue, there are four different houses in which Saenz lived. As each lease expired, with rent payments due, he



Figure 5. Meeting of the Krupp Workshop

moved farther away from the city into the quiet, which he loved, but also into isolation.

The opening of *The Night* records that aloneness in the last house in which he lived, *La Casa del Poeta*, and the terrors that often entered it:

The night, its feelers twitching in the distance

the night locked into a box swallowed by the night in the
desk in the nook

while my eyes and especially that space between my eyes and
nostrils stretches the length of a two-story gutter

startled and unnerved, I'm suddenly aware—there's a tubu-
lar cocoon, spun between my eyes, through which I see only
the night, fractured and phantasmagoric

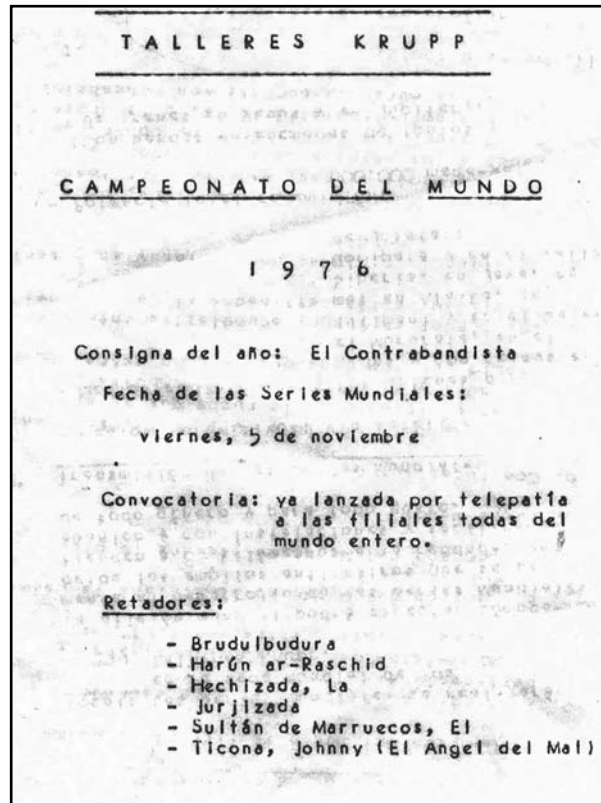


Figure 6. Announcement of Krupp Workshops. Reproduced from Blanca Wiethüchter's *Memoria Solicitada*, a narrative centered on her apprenticeship to, and deep friendship with, Saenz

thanks to a force from who knows where the space of my
dream has been split by a wall

on this side sleep is not possible and on the other it's
perfectly possible but nevertheless thoroughly impossible

the wall, in fact, is not a wall but a live thing that writhes and
throbs and this wall is me



Figure 7. Saenz dreams below a portrait of him by Enrique Arnal

He rarely left his room in his last years. To see him, it was necessary to take a taxi to his house. He might be found lying in bed, drinking a cup of maté with seven sugars and reading a new poem to his friend, the young poet Blanca Wiethüchter. It is her dissertation for the Sorbonne on his body of work that will first bring him major critical attention.

The memorable evening at Blanca's art- and antique-filled house with her husband Alberto Villalpando, and their daughters and their companions: Blanca brings out Saenzian treasures bequeathed to her—photos, letters, the original typescripts of *The Cold*, *Death by Feel*, *To Cross This Distance*, all with many notations in his hand. And there is an unpublished libretto for an opera scored by Alberto, Bolivia's most famous composer. The opera is never produced because Saenz decides at the last minute that he will not allow it. He apparently never explains why. "All he said on the phone," says Alberto, "is 'No, it's impossible, it can't be done.' So I said, 'What the hell do

you mean, Jaime? We've spent more than two years on this thing!' And he just says, 'No, no, it's impossible, it can't be done.' And that was the last time we ever directly spoke."

El Montículo is a park at the precipice of a hill in the Sopocachi zone that Saenz loved to visit. At the upper end of a cobblestone street, it is a lover's park with baroque colonnades and the stanzas of a tango to Mount Illimani inscribed on four rocks along the entrance path. From El Montículo it is possible to see the distant, upper limits of the city, where streets abrupt into sheer cliff faces which, when it rains, crumble into the lower precincts of the neighborhood appropriately called Tembladerani. Along those cliffs, Saenz and his friend Leonardo Garcia Pabón used to hike toward the massive vertical limestone rise called Llojata. Here, they could take one step forward, behind Llojata, and enter a sepulchral silence. Or they could take one step backwards and hear again the clamor of the city echoing up the mountain.

At a party at the poet Humberto Quino's house, nestled beneath the stalagmite-like towers of Llojata, we meet the editors of Bolivia's leading literary journal, *Global Lepidoptera*. They publish the great Latin American poets unknown to us. And they've translated Dickinson, Whitman, Pound, Eliot, Williams, Auden, Lowell, Plath, and Ginsberg, among others. News of our more recent poetry hasn't reached them yet—just as almost none of Bolivia's more recent poetry has reached us. In fact, almost none of their literature has reached us, modernist or postmodern.

Perhaps it was from El Montículo that Saenz began to form his idea—seriously held, from all accounts—that La Paz was cupped on a thin shell of rock over a vast chasm, and that one day the shell would break and the city fall, like a yolk, into the fathomless Hades beneath it.

First Day in La Paz

Overheard conversation: Don't let the taxi driver turn the lights out at night. Ask him to turn them back on.

There is a passage in the third section of *The Night* where Saenz, in drunk elation, gives the *taxista* his multivolume *Complete Works of Nietzsche* as payment for the fare, and the man drives away, never to be seen again.

Although men are the same, urinals are curiously different from country to country. These are petaled like orchids and fairly low to the floor.

Singani and Pico de Macho at El Rey, surrounded by mirrors on green stucco. The Pico de Macho, a hot dish of shredded pork, makes us take gulps of water with every bite. The singani, a traditional drink, a mix of hard liquor and wine, tastes something of a cross between apple juice and codeine. Returning to our hotel in taxi, we come across large, happy crowds lining El Prado, as if waiting for a parade. The taxi driver tells us that they are indeed waiting for some kind of big parade, a *desfile*, but he isn't sure what kind. The next morning we open the paper and read that La Paz has experienced its very first march for gay rights, and the photos show that it has been a most festive event, by all accounts a great success, with nary an instance of harassment. The reporting, on TV and in the papers, is quite supportive of the march, which, we read, was headed by a purposeful contingent of indigenous lesbians in bowler hats and polleras. It was Jaime Saenz who wrote *Los Papeles de Narciso Lima-Acha*, the first novel in Bolivia—and one of the very first in Latin America—to openly deal with homosexual themes.

A man with a mustache and a blind, milky eye approaches our table to tell us that we look like strangers, and the beer we are drinking, Paceaña, is vastly inferior to the other local beer, Huari.

Later that day, at a bar some streets away, a tall man with dark, slicked-back hair and Errol Flynn mustache sits down at the table next to ours. He engages us, and we come to find out he used to be a captain in the Bolivian Armed Forces, dishonorably discharged through a “framing,” he claims, an event that has led to his losing everything, including his family. Still, he wears an impeccably pressed suit and looks quite dashing. He is writing a novel, “a historical one, like *War and Peace*,” and we discover that its plot is informed by an exaltation of all things Spanish, and a debasement of most things indigenous, for, he tells us, it is Indian culture that has been the ball and chain of the nation, kept it mired in superstition and despair. Having noticed that he appears to be packing an object beneath his coat, we choose to change the subject rather than to challenge, and come to hear much about the government’s and military’s complicity in the cocaine trade, for in the army he “saw things that are hard to believe.” And we learn from him that the U.S. is perfectly aware of the Bolivian military’s involvement in the coke trade and for all intents and purposes turns a blind eye. “It’s a dark and dangerous world,” he pronounces, smoke issuing from his nose. “And it’s not for sissies.” Then he begins to talk about the Indians again, and of all their maladies, and we make up an excuse to leave. Outside, we both agree he reminded us of the figure in “The Gatekeeper” section of *The Night*, the tall, mustachioed man with gummed hair parted down the middle, who approaches the delirious Saenz in his bed, gleefully rubbing his hands and making little bows, who tickles him under the arms, head-butts him in the chest, and then plunges a butcher knife into his groin.

Ignoring us completely, two men in black leather coats and three in white shirts with alpaca jackets, sitting as close as lovers around one small table, throw the dice relentlessly.

As Saenz did with his acolytes in the *Kreis*-like⁴ meetings of Los Talleres Krupp, Saenz as Stefan George, of course, and the main game was called *cacho* (craps). We hear stories of Saenz flying into a rage when he lost: rage not at having been beaten in a game of talent or wits (apparently he was a perfectly good loser at chess and checkers), but in a game of pure chance, as if the gods were arrayed against him in the dice.

Someone mutters “*yanqui*” as I pass and after a few more steps I pause, thinking I might respond in some thoughtful way to rehabilitate his estimation of me, but when I look back, I see he has been studying me the whole time and he waves his hands dismissively and crosses the street.

We eat tongue and *tunta*, an ancient potato that can be stored for thirty years, we are told, its flavor steadily intensifying.

Given what happens to my stomach on the second and third day, the *tunta* must have been 500 years old.

I observe that the number of mannequins in La Paz must be a healthy percentage of the total human population! From the stores along the Street of Coats, the Street of Weddings, the Street of Flowers, the Street of Hardware, the Street of Shoes, the Street of

⁴*Kreis*: a select and secretive circle of writers led by a charismatic figure. The term is generally associated with Stefan George’s group in late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century Germany. In contemporary times the term has been used in association with the 1960s Jack Spicer circle in San Francisco.



Figure 8. Image of Saenz in an *aparapita's* coat

Cloth (La Paz must certainly be the most eighteenth-century Paris-like city on Earth), the mannequins stare out, wacky, grimaced looks right out of late-night shows on the Cartoon Channel. Where do they come from? Is there a Street of Mannequins where one goes to buy them?

All day there are lines by Plaza San Pedro and on Illampu Street where *hechiceros*, seated on small wooden stools and holding frying pans over braziers, melt lead, *plomo*, into a brilliant silver-white liquid that supplicants ladle into a bucket of cold water. Immediately, the lead solidifies into grotesque shapes that tell the future for those who have faith. Here is the alchemist's dream, the lead of spirit transformed into a luminous and malleable promise.

We go, on our last day, to the store of the aged Doña Chepa, one of the most legendary proprietors on Linares. The day before, amidst horns and antlers from apocryphal animals and skins from real jaguar, anaconda, and boar poached from the Beni and Madidi National Parks, I had seen a single condor wing for sale, at least five feet from severed base to tip, stretched out above the age-stained print of an Aryan Jesus. It has been sold. Piled and scattered about are the ubiquitous pink and green holy candies (were these the ones Saenz sucked his teeth out on?), llama fetuses, and dark coprolite-looking things, the identity of which we never do learn.

“And the anaconda skin, how much is it, Doña?”

“Five hundred and fifty, my love.”

“Five hundred and fifty bolivianos?”

“No, no, five hundred and fifty dollars. In Miami it would be at least three times that! Skins this size now are very, very rare! Look, if you rolled it out it would reach down to Sagarnaga Street!”

We walk along Avenue Ecuador and, glancing to our right between buildings, see all the way across the city to the far cliffs of La Paz, lit up this early evening in countless yellow, blue, and white speckles of light, a pointillist shimmer.

Accounts of the Poet

We have dinner with the wonderfully kind and brilliant Vicky Aylon, director of the CEDOAL, and with the country’s most famous actor, David Mondaca, who has been making a film about Jaime Saenz. As fireworks celebrating the Festival of San Juan explode

over the city sprawling beyond the restaurant's tinted window, he alternately talks about Saenz and impersonates him. His face concentrates and breaks into what can only be called a radiance. Each time he says "Jaime," his voice drops a register and he allows a drag between the syllables to lengthen the name and give it weight.

It's not only his voice. His whole face drops away into something other. It is an astonishing, somewhat disturbing, thing. David and Vicky tell us how his one-man play about Saenz has been a success in numerous countries in Latin America and Europe. But what pleases him most of all is the reception when it is performed in the working class theaters of El Alto, the ramshackle city above La Paz. "The audience feels Jaime as one of them," he says. "It is magic. This is when I have felt the most fulfilled in my life as an artist."

He tells us that Jaime was always sucking mint or caramel candies that, eventually, rotted his teeth. He could have had them fixed, of course, but he was more terrified of dentists than he was of losing his teeth.

We learn that cocaine came to replace alcohol, after he stopped drinking in the mid-'60s. And his consumption of coke is legendary. Saenz began to take it through prescription for a severe toothache, apparently, a very fine strain dispensed by La Paz pharmacies into the early 1980s, according to Blanca. And coke was the drug of choice, too, at the Talleres Krupp. Saenz's principal acolyte, Guillermo Bedregal Garcia, the Rimbaud of Bolivia, who published an astounding body of work before his death at the age of 20 in 1974 (a death he uncannily foretold in two poems), was also an addict. I learn this from his lovely widow, Corina, who at a party toward the end of our stay, tells me, in a voice that makes me think of a music box, all about her young genius husband, and she holds my hand the whole time, as if to comfort me. "Yes, my Guillermo and Jaime used



Figure 9. Experimental photos at the Krupp Workshop

to do coke in large quantities, this was what they did, and then they would talk and write and argue at their voice-tops for days on end! They were so sweet together. Oh, they loved each other like father and son.”

Jaime was *el hijo de Illimani*, continues David Mondaca, he was the son of that colossal mountain which presides over La Paz. Also, he was a magic man, *era brujo*. David thoughtfully pulls the end of an imaginary mustache with his thumb and forefinger, and then he draws his palms together over his mouth, praying hands channeling

a secret prayer. And a voice comes through him but from somewhere else. It is a swallowed voice, a voice from inside a well, the voice of someone without teeth, of someone whose tongue can't quite get out of breath's way. His words are banked into his inner cheek. They are all but effaced of their distinct phonemes before they finally erupt as the rolling growl of Jaime Saenz.

And after finishing the filming of a scene in the Poet's House, where Saenz last lived, David tells us he stepped outside with the crew, cameras off, and there in front of the house, at that exact moment, passed a "trotting funeral," men high-stepping along the sidewalk with a coffin on their shoulders.

It was a funeral for one of the *aparapita*, the selfless, heroic, hopeless, and stoic caste of men who for centuries have carried great loads up and down the long, steep hills of La Paz. Their creed: They are condemned, and alcohol is their first principle and solace. Three steps out of our hotel, passing the ancient, small church, "at that exact moment," we see an elderly *chola* in elegant *pollera* and shawl, offering her hand to the family members of the deceased, who wait on the steps in greeting line. She is the very first in a long line of condolence behind her. What timing: we are on our way to the CEDOAL, to speak of translating Saenz.

Jaime Saenz's niece, Gisela, remembers his vivid long stories, his descriptions of his walks through the streets she was too young to explore on her own. She remembers the way he held forth in the living room and dominated the conversation.

Something shattered once, Gisela continues. Something broke in the kitchen and the loud noise triggered in her uncle a sudden rage and a tirade she has never forgotten.

Her mother, Jaime's sister, Sra. Elva Morales, puts down her spoon, nods, adds that these moments were often simply "spectacular with drama." But also, she continues, almost at a whisper, there was in him deep tenderness and a great capacity for sympathy. He was a very, very complicated man, she says, looking up, her eyes very wide.

He was known for the vehemence of his assertions. In a book about the places and people of La Paz, Saenz wrote, "Those who do and say things without feeling them, I condemn them a million times."

At lunch one afternoon, Luis Antezana tells us Saenz was "*un hombre*." And here, Luis puts his index finger below his right eye and pulls the flesh down from his lower lid. "*Un hombre muy sabio*." A man very shrewd.

Placing a finger beneath the eye and pulling down the lower lid is also a universal sign of warning or danger in Latin America: the *ojo*. That may be what Luis means, actually: Be careful where you allow him to take you.

Antezana points out that although Saenz always felt a deep empathy and connection with marginalized people, he never romanticized the Aymara. In his writing, Saenz doesn't depict them in indigenous ponchos, but in ragged coats, one part of a vibrant urban collage. Improvising a neologism, Antezana says Saenz *aparapitó* the Aymara, he carried them, in his work, into the pile of life that characterizes the magical hybrid culture of La Paz.

Last Day in La Paz

We learn our first Aymara expression: If you have to lay down your life, you do it.



Figure 10. Jaime and his sister Elva as children

The aparapita with his cargo, ten times larger than himself, running uphill past us, almost brushing us with his load, his eyes glazed, doesn't even glance our way, though here we are, gringos, sticking out like baboons at a baptism. He trots up the cobblestoned street, his dark cheeks almost Dizzy Gillespie with coca leaves. He goes up and up. We walk down, "fresh and rosy," as Saenz says in *To Cross This Distance*, from our "thousand vitamins." Then we go back to the hotel, sit in the flowered courtyard and puff up our cheeks with some just-bought leaves ourselves—we, aging turistas, talking post-



Figure 11. Condor over the Inca Road at the summit of Inka-Rakay

modern poetics, swallowing the juice of the poor. The winter sun feels good on our hamster-like jowls.

Gisela invites us into the room where Saenz's sister has stored his things. We sit at Jaime's wooden writing table upon which she has placed, and covered with a red scarf, his death mask. We try to look elsewhere. Here is a round stain on the table where tea sloshed from its saucer. And here is a cluster of cigarette burns. And here the whole corner must have caught fire. And here, in front, is the little drawer where, in his poem, the night is kept. Gisela plays a tape of Saenz talking in that hollow, smoky voice of his, and we listen and make small talk for an hour, the death mask still veiled before us.

Meanwhile, the centerpiece of his eccentric menagerie, Saenz's famous porcelain doll, huge and life-like, with real blonde hair, gazes

at us, bug-eyed in the corner. On the wall, facing us, an imposing painting in gilded frame, circa early eighteenth century, the Virgin Mary levitating, surrounded by cherubs. “Yes,” says Gisela, matter-of-factly, “this has been in the family for generations.” Sra. Elva comes in cheerily with a plate of sausages and cheeses. “This sausage is a special one—it was Jaime’s favorite until he lost his teeth!” Gisela clicks off the tape and smiles at us, coyly. “Well, then. Would you like to see him, finally?” The doll looks on.

As we say goodbye, across the table, over the death mask, dramatically unveiled at last, I notice a pin-prick hole in each of his nostrils.

At dawn, on the way to the airport, our taxi driver takes both hands off the wheel and extends them laterally, one arm out the window, one sweeping into the passenger seat, and then leans sideways in one direction and then the other as he speeds along the highway showing us, frozen in the back seat, how condors fly.