

Empire State

I am a prisoner of bones
of keyrings habits teeth and hair
I am a tenant of torn skies
I am a runner in the air
of escalators that ascend
a hundred storeys to a chair
 high
 where Old Fireye
 punches the astral timeclock.

And from this mountain of aluminum
I loose strange birds upon
the city, poems in guise
of pigeons, doves by teletype—
creatures of bolt and cam
spun by my typewriter
 keys,
 mechanical mysteries
 flying over the watertowers:

Toggle Switch
Kicker Baffle
Drive Shaft
Disc Locknut
Alemite Fitting
Circuit Breaker
Bolts cal.
w/2 CP Hexnuts.

Raintatters trail
the skymast of my mountain: she
a ship asail through time and tearful thunders
and seismographic tremors
of shifts and faults in global marketplace,
is no less beautiful to me
than Fuji or far
Kilimanjaro—
especially seen as shadow in the rain

like those veiled mountains deep within
the mind's geography.
How many times of storm I've seen
her crown of crags hidden in clouds,
how many sea-mist mornings felt
old Rip Van Winkle's
rainbeard
blown from her summit over the shrouded city.
But dawns become her best: the traffic jam
of stars in a hurry to get gone
from night's graveyard shift, the subway express
dawns that come roaring to city skies:
below in the early chill streets a stir
of something about to begin, the stone
lions at Fifth and Forty-Second Street
shaking night's pigeons from their manes,
flophouses on the Bowery
shaking the night's fleas, as heaven
shakes the last pale stars:

And again it is
jobday another
morning in the gray
beginning when five million
alarm clocks salute the sun
in unison and the
Flow Indicator Top Connector
throws the Master Switch wherefore
on the Remote Control Panel
of the Photoelectric Scanner I'm
spotted
seized
swept sorted scanned
pinched punched processed pressed
dissolved digested
soulmashed
to join the oozing gray indifferent
lifesludge
of primal protozoan human logjam
that feeds
the great soul factory and
greases the great big wheels.

And deep down dark under
bedrock riverbed and tungsten
bones in subcellars
in the very solar-plexus of it all
I'm chewed spat cannonaded through lightyears
and awful vaults of voids
where all the money of the world is kept
past timeclocks punching in and out like mad,
till suddenly I'm there—
sole occupant and heir,
 the slave
 of the chair
 in the air.

O Radiant Element, O mystery
of Terminal Lug, Feed Nut
De-Ion Circuit Breaker
Safety Valve Cap Release Nut Cotter Pin—you
on the great master plan
must share the universe with me
and other oddments:
someone must make the world's boilers,
but by what depression of what star-crossed key
has the Great Univac selected me?
I'd better stop thinking.
Poems press at my skull.
My eyes are bursting horse-chestnuts.
Slivers of light, chameleons
wriggle between the keys
of an insane typewriter that has forgotten its name
and can spit only hexnuts
lockwashers eyebolts screws cams bushings.
It is the era of keypunch man.
O powerful totems
Colossi whose shadows
straddle the world—
what do you want of me?

I leaned from the tower of my skull
over the city and saw
the great skyscrapers of gold and porphyry
bend to the little golden god
in Rockefeller Plaza—but he

was busy trampling his words and he
godlike could only make the blunt reply:
"You can kiss my golden ass!" and therefore I
 lone wanderer over flattop wilderness
 make this my outcry to the god
 of cities:

There is a country deep within
Spacer Collar / Fixture Cap
a selfscape I alone may claim
Main Pole / Commutating Pole
of mountains vast and mountains veiled
Drive Shaft / Bushing / Governor Valve
and no flag flies there but my own
4 1/8 x 4 7/8
 and none may buy
 Oval Handhole Plates
 its real estate
 w/ Bolts and Nuts.

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Olga Cabral (1909-1997) was born in the West Indies of Portuguese parents, spending most of her life in New York City. She first published her poetry in the leftist and modernist magazines of the 1930s; her books include: Cities and Deserts (1959), The Evaporated Man (1968), The Darkness in My Pockets (1976), Occupied Country (1976), In the Empire of Ice (1980), The Green Dream (1990), as well as several children's books. Voice/Over (1993), a volume of selected poems, is available from West End Press (PO Box 27334, Albuquerque, NM 87125). Cabral worked variously as an office worker, art gallerist, and director of a children's art workshop. Having never accumulated any savings, she "worked right up to her death," according to publisher John Crawford. In Cabral's own words: "I have lived through all the wars of this century, together with the rise of fascism, the Great Depression, the cynical witch hunts of McCarthyism, the atom bomb, the Cold War—I've seen it all. The twentieth century. My century." —Eds.