

THE PONGO'S DREAM

José María Arguedas

Arguedas learned Quechua as a boy from servants in the household of his stepmother and his father, an itinerant lawyer. Until his suicide in 1967, the novelist and anthropologist was perhaps more responsible than any other Peruvian for the impassioned defense of the Incan tongue and cultural autonomy for millions of Quechua speakers, challenging the powerful ideologies of “modernization” and “national integration” predicated on the erasure of Peru’s indigenous past. Although there was a strong utopian strain in Arguedas, he was not just interested in indigenous traditions. He also wrote about the challenges of migration and modernity, and proclaimed himself an “hombre Quechua moderno,” a modern Quechua man, reflecting his desire for a cultural pluralism for Peru that would go beyond a retreat into a narrow traditionalism. An adaptation of a story Arguedas heard from a Cuzco peasant, “The Pongo’s Dream” captures the rigidity of the feudal order that still prevailed in many parts of the Andes in the mid-twentieth century. But the denouement, where the world turns upside down as in the Inkarrí myth, suggests the existence of a spirit of independence and opposition, which was to fuel the peasant movements of the 1950s and the breakup of the landlords’ rule.

A little man headed to his master’s mansion. As one of the serfs on the lord’s estate, he had to perform the duty of a pongo, a lowly house servant. He had a small and feeble body, a meek spirit. His clothes were old and tattered. Everything about him was pitiful.

The great lord, owner of the mansion and lands surrounding it, could not help laughing when the little man greeted him in the mansion’s corridors.

“What are you? A person or something else?” the lord asked the little man in front of all the other serfs.

The pongo bowed his head and did not answer. He stood frightened,

eyes frozen. "Let's see!" the lord said. "With those worthless little hands, you must at least know how to scrub pots or use a broom. Take this garbage away!" he ordered.

The pongo knelt to kiss his master's hand and followed him to the kitchen hanging his head.

The little man had a small body but an average man's strength. Whatever he was told to do he did well, but he always wore a slight look of horror on his face. Some of the serfs laughed at him, while others pitied him. "The most orphaned of all orphans," a cook of mixed blood once said upon seeing him. "His frozen eyes must be children of the moon wind, his heart must be all sadness."

The little man rarely talked to anyone. He worked and ate quietly. Whatever they ordered him to do was done obediently. "Yes, *papacito*, yes, *mamacita*," were the only words he uttered.

Perhaps because of the little man's frightened look and his threadbare, filthy clothes, or perhaps because of his unwillingness to talk, the lord regarded the pongo with special contempt. He enjoyed humiliating him most at dusk, when all the serfs gathered to say the Hail Mary in the mansion's great hall. He would shake him vehemently in front of the serfs like a piece of animal skin. He would push his head down and force him to kneel, and then, when the little man was on his knees, slap him lightly on the face.

"I believe you are a dog. Bark!" he would tell the pongo.

The little man could not bark.

"Stand on all fours," the lord would order him next.

The pongo would obey and start crawling on all fours.

"Walk sideways like a dog," the lord would demand.

The little man had learned to run like the small dogs inhabiting the high moors.

The lord would laugh heartily. His whole body shook with exhilaration.

"Come back here!" he would yell, when the servant reached the end of the great hall.

The pongo would return, running sideways, arriving out of breath.

Meanwhile, some of the other serfs would quietly say their Hail Marys, as if their voices were a wind hidden in their hearts.

"Perk up your ears, hare! You are just an ugly hare!" the lord would command the exhausted little man. "Sit on your two paws. Put your hands together."

The pongo could sit in the exact same prayerful pose that these animals take when they stand still on the rocks, looking as if he had learned

this habit while in his mother's womb. But the one thing he could not do was perk up his ears. Some of the serfs laughed at him.

With his boot, the lord would then knock him to the brick floor.

"Let us say the Our Father," he would then say to his Indians as they waited in line.

The pongo would get up slowly, but he could not pray because he was not in his place, nor did any place belong to him.

In the darkness, the serfs would leave the great hall for the courtyard and head to their living quarters.

"Get out of here, offal!" the master would often order the pongo.

And so, every day, in front of the other serfs, the master would make his new pongo jump to his demands. He would force him to laugh, to fake tears. He would hand him over to the other workers so that they would ridicule him too.

But . . . one afternoon, during the Hail Mary, when the hall was filled with everyone who worked and lived on the lord's estate and the master himself began to stare at the pongo with loathing and contempt, that same little man spoke very clearly. His face remained a bit frightened.

"Great lord, please grant me permission. Dear lord, I wish to speak to you."

The lord could not believe his ears. "What? Was that you who spoke or someone else?"

"Your permission, dear master, to speak to you. It is you I want to talk to," the pongo replied.

"Talk . . . if you can."

"My father, my lord, my dear heart," the little man began. "Last night, I dreamt that the two of us had died. Together, we had died."

"You with me? You? Tell all, Indian," the master said to him.

"Since we were dead men, my lord, the two of us were standing naked before our dear father Saint Francis, both of us, next to each other."

"And then? Talk!" ordered the master, partly out of anger and partly anxious with curiosity.

"When he saw us dead, naked, both standing together, our dear father Saint Francis looked at us closely with those eyes that reach and measure who knows what lengths. He examined you and me, judging, I believe, each of our hearts, the kind of person we were, the kind of person we are. You confronted that gaze as the rich and powerful man that you are, my father."

"And you?"

"I cannot know how I was, great lord. I cannot know my worth."



Figure 22. Peasants from Paucartambo, Cuzco, the area where “The Pongo’s Dream” takes place. Photograph by Martín Chambi, 1928. (Courtesy of Teo Allain Chambi)

"Well, keep talking."

"Then, our father spoke: 'May the most beautiful of all the angels come forth. May a lesser angel of equal beauty accompany the supreme one. May the lesser angel bring a golden cup filled with the most delicate and translucent honey.'"

"And then?" the master asked.

The Indian serfs listened, listened to the pongo with a limitless attention, yet also afraid.

"My owner, as soon as our great father Saint Francis gave his order, an angel appeared, shimmering, as tall as the sun. He walked very slowly until he stood before our father. A smaller angel, beautiful, glowing like a gentle flower, marched behind the supreme angel. He was holding in his hands a golden cup."

"And then?" the master asked once again.

"'Supreme angel, cover this gentleman with the honey that is in the golden cup. Let your hands be feathers upon touching this man's body,' ordered our great father. And so, the lofty angel lifted the honey with his hands and glossed your whole body with it, from your head down to your toenails. And you swelled with pride. In the splendor of the heavens, your body shone as if made of transparent gold."

"That is the way it must be," said the lord. "And what happened to you?"

"When you were shining in the sky, our great father Saint Francis gave another order. 'From all the angels in heaven, may the very least, the most ordinary come forth. May that angel bring along a gasoline can filled with human excrement.'"

"And then?"

"A worthless, old angel with scaly feet, too weak to keep his wings in place, appeared before our father. He came very tired, his wings drooping at his sides, carrying a large can. 'Listen,' our great father ordered the angel. 'Smear the body of this little man with the excrement from that can you brought. Smear his whole body any way you want and cover it all the best you can. Hurry up!' So the old angel took the excrement with his coarse hands and smeared my body unevenly, sloppily, just like you would smear mud on the walls of an ordinary adobe house. And in the midst of the heavenly light, I stank and was filled with shame."

"Just as it should be!" crowed the master. "Keep going! Or is that the end?"

"No, my little father, my lord. When we were once again together, yet changed, before our father Saint Francis, he took another look at us, first at you, then at me, a long time. With those eyes that reach across the

heavens, I don't know to what depths, joining night and day, memory and oblivion. Then he said: 'Whatever the angels had to do with you is done. Now, lick each other's bodies slowly, for all eternity.' At that moment, the old angel became young again. His wings regained their blackness and great strength. Our father entrusted him with making sure that his will was carried out."