

# IMAGES OF PERU

H. S. Toshack

# *Images of Peru*

H S Toshack

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### Earth Tremor in Lima

The earth lurched today  
In the earliest of light  
And my hotel room window trembled to come in.  
I started awake and felt robbed  
Of my weight:  
I was a grain  
Between the grinding stone above  
And the groaning stones beneath.

I was also robbed today  
Of my watch, snatched without hate from my wrist  
(To feed, I try to think, a family)  
In the throng,  
In the press of need,  
Notwithstanding it was Palm Sunday  
And I outside a church.

I was robbed of my worth today.  
I look at the blood on my wrist  
And I, too, tremble,  
At the thought of what might have been  
If the stones had chosen to fall on me,  
If the people had chosen to fall on me.



### Gold Mask

Squat pate,  
I choose to ignore  
Your hot hate  
Behind the plate glass  
Of your display case  
In the Museo de Oro,  
For your time has passed  
And will return no more.

But you make me uneasy  
Though it seems you are contained:  
Gold-blind as I am  
I can still see  
Through the slits in your eyes  
Casqued darkness and dreams.

Since it is gold-bright in your close realm,  
We are unlit,  
And your image gleams on the inward glass,  
You see only yourself.  
(We are faint ghosts  
Beyond the shimmering pane,  
Barely showing against the black.)

Inside your helm  
You bide your time  
For you believe that one day  
Our time too will become old,  
And pass.  
Then the glass will crack,  
Each pane will crack,  
And your golden time will come again.

### Lima Airport

Shoe-boys scamper like glossy monkeys  
In the forest of passenger legs.  
When they see dirty shoes  
They hop and gibber and point,  
Begging the feet inside,  
The people above,  
To stop.

Kneeling they minister,  
And through the day  
As they scrape and wipe, brush and buff,  
The hues of their labour  
The signs of their trade  
Steal over their skin,  
Up to the line of their boot-black hair.  
Thus they take upon themselves  
The stains of the world.

At night,  
Before they skitter into their blankets,  
I think they do not wash,  
But burnish themselves,  
And go to bed  
Shining.

### Andes from the Air

Like the blunt black whales  
In depths of shifting water  
Booming their loneliness across the dark and heaving miles  
In search of other whales,  
The mountains,  
Lifting their dark and heavy heads  
Through the surface of bright clouds,  
Sing endlessly to each other  
In the falling sun,  
In the falling, thin and brittle sun,  
But can come no closer  
For all their calling.



### Boat on a Jungle Path

Boat, are you abandoned?  
But how did you get here,  
Where you should not be,  
A mile from the river?  
Yes, it rains heavily in season,  
But that surely is no reason for your lying here  
Thwarting my march:  
You cannot have drifted on the night's drench  
So far,  
From the dusk-dark river-bank  
With its green, green grass,  
To arrive here at dawn on this path.

You look, come to think of it, like a long white husk  
Yellowing in the stripes of the early sun,  
Something that began in the trees  
And was already gouged  
When it fell to the ground  
And filled with rain.

Has no-one told you yet  
That you are meant to hold water out,  
Not in?  
Your are made to float,  
Not sink in the greenness of this track  
As it grows up around you.

To learn that lesson you must go to the river  
And lie against the bank  
With its green, green grass below the water line  
Where no grass should be,  
The curving bank where the water thins  
And wavering grasses,  
Drowned by the hissing rain,  
Wait to become river-wrack.

What a strange place is this,  
Where the rivers grow grass,  
And the trees,  
Boats.



### Charcoal

Great black hive of bees  
Ten feet tall  
With a thick buzz of smoke around it  
And a keeper stirring it to anger  
With his stick.

How many years  
Are swarming up over the trees  
Never to settle  
Again?

### The River

I was piscoed the night before  
And woke sour  
So would not walk  
At such an early hour  
To see the Bora  
Who were like the Yagua we had already seen  
But wore bark instead of leaves and lived  
Much  
Further away. Besides  
Which  
If we were going to see Indians  
I wanted them to be live,  
Not specimens pinned out,  
Grinning to please,  
In a space between huts,  
By a volley from our warning drums  
Arrowing over the trees.

We went instead,  
Later in the morning,  
To see the river,  
Which was real,  
Was not drummed up nor pinned down,  
And did not paint its smooth brown face.



### Jungle Trees

Jungle trees do not live  
Until they are thirty feet or more in the air,  
Then they live  
Suddenly.

Look at those thin, white, dry trunks,  
Thin sticks ready to break,  
And look, look  
At the bursts of greenfire that soar above,  
Firework foliage,  
Leaf-bomb and blossom-shell.

Only the ashes fall to earth,  
Serving to shore up the thin white trunks  
And let the show go on.

Let the show go on!



Macaws

Don't be fooled  
And look for others like them in the trees.  
They aren't from round here,  
Can't be found here  
In the empty trees round the camp.

They were caught and carried from far downstream,  
To add a touch of colour to the bar,  
A talking point on boozy nights;  
But, like floozies painted and perched to dry,  
They've tainted the place,  
Added some sleaze and made it a joint.

Whoever brought them here bungled:  
They ought not to have been porterred to the park  
To please the guests  
But left at ease,  
At rest,  
In the jungle,  
Shining against the dark.

### Jungle Paths

Her husband walked two hours to work  
Every day.  
We too had walked two hours, to get there,  
Down dark jungle paths,  
And were proud until we heard her say (in Qechua),  
'Every day.'  
What he needed to grow would not grow there,  
Where we were,  
On the river.

She was small, and her children were small,  
And her husband no doubt small,  
But miles are miles  
After all.

The children clung, and waited,  
Their skin like the river,  
Their eyes darker and clearer than the river  
But light at the edges like the river.  
We watched them play  
With the balloons we had brought,  
Children and balloons the only bright things in the dust;  
And they waited  
Until they too must walk two hours to work  
Every day.



## Butterflies

Some butterflies have purpose,  
And wing straight  
Like homeward birds  
At dusk.

This morning as we drifted and fished from the boat  
In the dank shadows under the trees  
An orange fleck shimmered sharp from the other bank  
And journeyed on a line just over our heads  
Then dropped from sight among the leaves.  
Another,  
Too far behind for sight  
So I do not know how steered,  
Took the same tight path  
Near my rod's tip  
Into the green and the shadows of green.  
They would be together when they stopped.

(Others merely flutter, or swirl in columns  
Like those pale yellow scraps there  
In the smooth scoop of the smooth brown bank,  
Fighting for air as if fearful of drowning in earth.)

The ones I want to photograph rarely settle:  
The great gleaming blues  
(I cannot give their colour more than that,  
Nor their name) –  
They, too, have aim, and will.  
They do not flutter, nor swirl, nor swerve,  
But flap without pain or panic,  
Calmly,  
And their flight is not like flight,  
More a dolphin's curving  
Through the heavy air,  
Driving down the river's edge  
Through the fine lianas.

There was one on a leaf,  
Closed,  
But I leant too far forward,  
And it went.  
I was not sorry:  
Folded and still,  
It was not the same.



### Boy Seated

In front of the boy  
And below  
His family bends over an outside table  
Trying to make do  
With the odds-and-ends of their life.  
He does not see them,  
Nor us, prying between them,  
Zooming in on their little concerns,  
And overlooks even the bobbing black heads  
Of his passing friends  
Kicking a ball on the flat river-bank,  
A spinning ball that trails thin streamers of cries  
Through the evening air  
And holds the players in its threads,  
Pulling them this way and that.

It is the river that he watches,  
Slick against its bank  
And bending out of sight,  
The slow, wide, sliding river  
Down which he will one day go.



### The Well

No more than a hole in the earth  
From which they draw their water.  
You lean over  
And look down,  
Onto this fly-blown surface,  
Hoping to see yourself as you are  
In this different place.

But this is no mirror,  
Your face does not appear:  
It is a mottled window where you see  
Through the scum darkly  
But all too clear  
The lot of the people who live here.

You are invited to fill your water bottle  
For the hot toil back but,  
Too particular for this life,  
You recoil.  
Perpendicular to this life,  
You do not see in this water what you are  
But, starkly,  
What you are not.



### Beyond Ticlio

Beyond Ticlio there is a falling.  
All the colours fall:  
The thick blue of the sky settles,  
The heavy blue of the firmament settles,  
Leaving only fundamental grey.  
Rock becomes soil,  
Brunt black mountains soften,  
Melt into hazy hills,  
And the hills run to faded water.  
The colours of Ticlio lose their weight and line  
As oil becomes wash,  
Essence, tincture,  
Outline, fill,  
Chiselled rock, calmer clay,  
Blunt and sharp statements, conditional  
And strife an agreement of elements.

### Goatherd

The ragged boy herded his goats  
With sharp stones  
Flunk at their flanks,  
To stop their stray,  
To keep them away  
From the hotel flowers on their grassed banks  
And the cars flying past.

Goaded by granite  
They were quick to learn.

There are harder ways to herd goats  
And drearier.

Their coats were patched and dusty,  
All of them;  
And the boy too looked over his shoulder for stones  
Telling him which way to turn.

### At Huancayo, Easter Saturday

Arriving after dark  
We clasp our bags before us down the street  
Against the light touch of dirty fingers,  
The clean touch of razors.  
The people hurry in the patchy gloom,  
And clutch themselves  
From the touch of light,  
The keen blades of night air.

They hurry too next morning,  
Hurry enormously (there can be nobody left inside)  
For a town where there is nowhere much to go;  
But today they are open in their haste,  
And smile widely,  
And there is food everywhere.



Convento de Ocopa (1725)

The cool, creaking rooms  
Of the monastery at Huancayo  
Are filled with the fading relics  
Of jungle forays.

What must the creased and shining mountain folk  
Have thought of the things  
Their priests brought back to them  
(Costume and creature,  
Weapon and tool)  
In those dark and distant days?

In the Meeting Hall,  
Where prayers were said to help decide  
Who should wind down strange mountain paths

And to what depths beyond,  
Heavy stools squat solid against white walls  
And the ghosts take turns to sit.

In the narrow Library  
Where even the floorboards dare not speak  
Heavy books brood stolid against white walls,  
Mouldering remains  
Of missions into men's minds.

What must the mountain folk  
With their creased and shining faces  
Have thought of the things  
Their priests brought back to them  
From those dark and secret places?

### Soupa

If this is soupa  
Piled high with huevas  
What do you get  
When you ask  
For eggs?



### The Biggest Gourd of All

The biggest gourd of all  
Cost twenty dollars,  
Had taken him two weeks to carve,  
He smiled and said (without guile),  
Told the story of a wedding and the building of a house.

I chose a gourd one quarter the size  
Which would not over-fill my knapsack,  
And be less of a burden.  
For a gourd which had taken two weeks  
And cost twenty dollars  
Was too heavy by far.

This one too depicts a wedding.  
I had rather it told the life of a man  
Who could work for two weeks  
And twenty dollars,  
And still smile.



Mambopato Wildlife Reserve, 3.00 a.m.

They say nothing much comes here at night –  
A monkey, perhaps, or a rat,  
Under the huts,  
Scavengers after supper scraps and candy wraps.

But I have just looked out.  
It is dark.  
There are no lights  
And they are all asleep.  
So how do they know that?

A dog has barked.  
But there are no dogs here  
So what have I heard?  
And the barking is strung on silent wires among the trees  
And slides swiftly past the camp.  
Unless dogs can fly  
(And there are no dogs here)  
It is a bird.  
But unless birds can bark...

### Lemming-like the Jungle

Lemming-like the jungle marches to the edge  
Of the mud-cliff river-bank,  
Keen to cast its greenness  
(Without asking why)  
Down the terra-cotta flanks  
Into the sliding flow,  
The slick brown swirl below.

There is more jungle where this came from,  
More than the eye can see  
Squinting from the tallest tree  
Against the brightness of the sky.

And yet there is a kind of hesitancy there,  
In those bushes and trees,  
A reluctance to fall,  
A lingering cling to crumbling lip,  
A fear that there is no way back  
And the jungle not endless after all.

Around the next bend  
We meet another march,  
A line of men  
Trampling new tracks in search of oil.

Lemming-like the jungle marches to the edge  
Of its own future,  
Ready to slip into the slick brown swirl.  
But there is a kind of hesitancy there,  
In those bushes and trees,  
A reluctance to fall:  
Perhaps the jungle is not endless  
After all.

### Trinity

Dust, sun and river,  
River, dust and sun,  
The Trinity, three in one.

### The Boots and the Parrot

They had stomped in from the sunlight,  
In late morning,  
The boots and the parrot,  
Having picked what was needful  
Before the sun was too hot.  
And now the sun was too hot,  
Crumpled and dulled by dust  
Parrot and boots sat together like old friends  
In the shade under the barn,  
Sharing the shade and the morning's memories,  
Musing what they had garnered  
Before it was too hot.

### Market Day

The Indian farmer rises before dawn  
To cull his crops for market,  
To take his crops from the breathing space he has  
Hacked and sliced,  
Burned and tilled for them  
In the jungle.  
They must be taken not too early  
And not too late  
If they are to ripen right  
And win their price.

Now, having chopped and plucked and dug,  
Having filled his grey canoe –  
Scooped from wood and caulked with tar –  
He squats in the bow  
And measures the ripening with the clop of his paddle  
Down the far ranges of the river,  
Through the morning mist-wraiths.

The mound behind him shows river-change,  
Slowly:  
Greens yellow and browns darken.

The white sun climbs through the mist  
And it, too, ripens  
In time for market.



### Dawn on the River

The sun is not the sun  
But a hole in the night,  
A gap,  
An eye out of which white gold glares  
And leaks down through the dark trees  
Onto the river.

The trees melt and,  
Losing their form in the smelt  
Of its incandescent stare,  
Waver on the water where the white gold spreads.  
Then as the horizon slides down the face of the rising night  
Which is becoming day  
The whiteness mellows,  
Yellows from glare to glory,  
And the trees cool and stiffen in their new crisp shapes.



### Sacsayhuaman

You Spaniards,  
Your cross crowning over the ruins of the town  
Says all,  
Its painted tawdriness taunting the royal rock.

But you built badly with the stones you stole,  
And when the Earth shook  
Your churches fell.

The Incan walls stood whole,  
Not on the earth but of it,  
Drawn up through soil by toil of hands  
That felt the grain of the rock,  
Knew the shapes to be shown  
And joined.

Lord Inca took the people too of hill and plain,  
Who also grew from earth,  
Smoothed and set the aylluhs\* to his plan  
So that they should not fall.

But they crumbled to rubble  
When their Lord came crashing down.

Perhaps when the earth's crust  
Shakes once more  
The Spanish walls will tumble,  
And Sacsayhuaman rise again,  
The people rise again.

Or is their granite turned to dust?

\*communities

## Machu Picchu



### I

I wish we had walked the Inca trail,  
Stalked the city from above  
And been taken by wonder from below.

But there is no surprising this too-much-photographed place,  
Nor can it startle us.  
And as the bus climbs, gears grinding,  
Up the kinked and folded road  
From the railway station  
There is a slow winding-up  
Not of anticipation  
But of fear  
At what we may fail to find here.

### II

The road and the spring unwind slowly,  
Even the disappointment tame  
At this tamed and tidied town  
In the postcard sun.  
So when we reach the gate we do not go in  
But climb above to sit and wait.

A lone ant wanders the stones at our feet,  
While down below tourists in white  
Pace the city's green and grey maze:  
And we above pity their simplicity  
Lost in its guile.  
They walk every path, climb every stair,  
Hoping to go where no-one else has been,  
To tread a step untrodden since its setting,

And let some magic free,  
To see in an angle of light through a bare window  
A new view of an old scene.

But the town will not be caught like that  
Sleeping in the mid-day sun:  
It is too old a place.

We must wait till the sun has weakened and paled  
Into the evening mist  
And the seekers go  
(To meet again tomorrow,  
In some other ruin,  
Sun and seekers)  
Before we try where they have failed.

### III

The showers come long before dark  
And the city opens to them  
Like flowers to the sun.  
For this place grew in the rain  
Comes alive in rain.  
(In the sunshine hours it merely drowses  
With one stone eye wedged open.)

White mist  
Carrying its own light  
Drifts down from the peaks  
And curls around the corners,  
Softening each sharp edge,  
Blurring that tower,  
Those houses,  
This stone.  
In the white glow  
The town grows once more,  
Flows over the mountain top  
To spill down its sides  
Like the flowers.



#### IV

‘Stone cut by stone.’  
That was how he explained  
(In the hotel bar)  
The shapes  
Set so soundly.  
He was an architect  
But more he could not say,  
And I found it hard to believe even that.

The walls were the work of child’s hand  
Not draughtsman’s pen,  
Of simplicity rather than science,  
Drawn by art not ruled by line.  
And we could detect no space between stone and stone,  
For leaf or root.

We could see the leaning back from outward topple  
Of the walls that no shaking could shake:  
But the cupping we could not see,  
The cradling of each stone by those below.

Stone could not cut stone so flat  
Nor curve it so roundly.  
Therefore we must talk technology and aliens  
(He too had bought that book from the hotel shop)  
And take in the history of Nazca and the Nile,  
Trepanning and Nemrud Dag,  
He the scientist and I the sceptic,  
With no room between us for faith.  
At the end of it all  
He, the architect, must inspect the mystery once more  
While I, untrusting, sat in the bar and thought.

V

He had walked the path, he said,  
Toward the Inca Bridge.  
We had walked it too,  
But only a little way.  
We knew it was a tight path  
Between the rock and the grassy edge  
But the grasses hid from view the sheer drop below,  
And we dared not look above  
To see the mountain's sway.

When we saw next day  
(From the top of Waynu's crown)  
Where we had been  
We were appalled:  
Had we truly crawled that narrow ledge,  
That meagre scratch  
Scored in the stark wall,  
That fading scar  
Where out meant down?

He had walked it at dawn,  
Eager to reach its end.  
When he saw the mark  
In the mud  
Of the cat –  
Puma, he thought –  
He knew he had gone too far.



## VI

I have found the hidden Inca gold  
That we have sought in vain these long years past.  
There it is: those shining steps we have sauntered down  
Are all their wealth, amassed, melted and cast  
In one great ingot,  
Then beaten with stealth into simulation and service.  
Stone cannot glow like that,  
Does not gleam like that,  
And stairs of stone climb sharply,  
Or step neatly down,  
Do not flow and lean like that  
With the heat of time.



## VII

Good husbandry, I say,  
To use what was there  
In the beginning.  
Good architecture,  
Good bluff,  
To blend two leanings,  
Lend stone to slab,  
Match rock with wall,  
And seem to support  
What would never fall  
Anyway.



## VIII

Tunnels are of earth, not sky,  
Deep down intestinal things  
Driven by need,  
Drilled in the ground  
And reeking of greed.

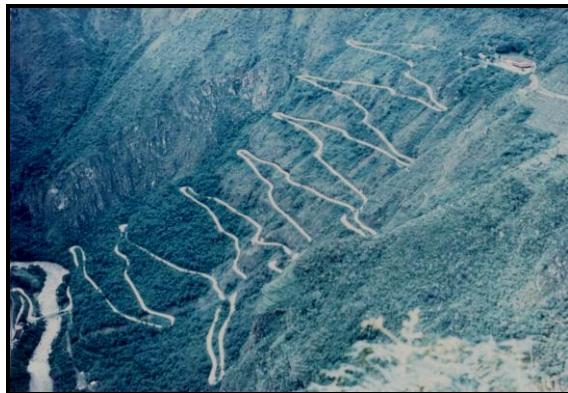
But this smooth reach through the pinnacle of rock  
Was born of a desire  
To seek not deeper but higher  
And is filled with light:  
Though sky and rain leak in  
It leads not down but up:  
It is a glistening eye  
In the head of an ironstone needle  
Though which ran a thread  
Uncoiling at dawn from the city below –  
A skein of men  
Bearing baskets of seed  
To embroider the high slopes with corn.

IX

Nothing can grow between the tight Inca stones  
And no spider nest there.  
But something came between the peoples  
(We cannot tell what - vengeance or virus?)  
And strained them apart as frost forces rock.  
They cracked and fell  
(Or were they thrust?)  
From Machu Picchu's heights,  
And were lost.

X

I have said nothing of worth  
Regarding this place,  
Made little sense of the shards, the bones of its past;  
And now I need to go back whence I came.  
The Inca left no words at the last:  
How can I supply their lack?  
You must read the stones.



XI

Little Boy Redshirt  
It's time you were gone:  
The first bus is departing,  
Blowing its horn.

We are retreating,  
Our cartridges spent,  
The wagon train's starting  
Its winding descent.

Little Boy Redskin,  
You're chasing us down,  
Ambushing our buses  
With a whoop and a frown.

Down the sheer short-cuts  
You stumble and slide;  
We cheer, encouraging  
Infantsuicide.

Little Boy Redface,  
You made it here first,  
Your thin legs atrembling  
Your dark eyes athirst.

Little boy ready  
To hold out your hand,  
Who could walk past you  
Where shaking you stand?

You game is a boy's game,  
A gambol; and yet  
You do fatherly things  
With the money you get.



### Blind Harpist

Blissful is the word  
For the twilight smile  
That spreads softly over his round face  
Like sun through the Andean haze  
Just before dark.  
And you do not mind  
That he does not look up,  
That he smiles  
Not at the notes he has made  
But at those you have rustled into his cup.

And since whatever eyes he has  
Are closed,  
He smiles only to himself.

The evening blossoms of bright sound  
He plucks with his plump fingers  
In the fading light,  
Though,  
Are for you,  
And were before you paid

### The Inca Quickstep

Why do they perforate toilet roll  
When it  
oh  
Tears so easily anyway?

We have danced the Inca Quickstep  
From Lima through Peru –  
Apurimac and Abancay  
And Ollantaytambo.

Through corridors and colonnades,  
Down jungle trails and streets,  
Past commissars and palace guards  
And startled parakeets,  
In city brogue, and rubber boot  
And mountain walking shoe.

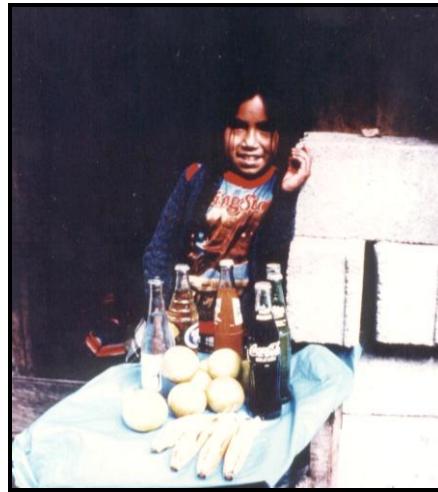
You can tell the other travellers  
Who hear that music too.

### The Catching Game

Old lady in a poncho,  
Why are you looking at me?  
You know I want to take your photograph  
So why are you looking at me?  
Don't you see I want to catch you  
With your seamed eyes on the bright mountains  
So that, back home, I can dream with you?

I know you want to catch me  
With my finger on the button  
So you can catch up your worn blue skirts,  
Hobble to the train  
And catch my eye to throw down money  
For you to catch and tuck out of sight.

But neither of us will be caught:  
We are at pains to avoid that,  
Though my need joins with yours.  
We pause, and the train jerks and pulls away.  
We shall never  
(Ah there's the catch) meet,  
Not even through a hand's warmth  
In cold coins.



### Shop

When we played shop  
And were very young  
All we sold were sham sweets  
From cardboard canisters  
With tight lids  
In tight rows  
On cardboard shelves.  
Our customers were cloth dolls  
And wooden grown-ups  
Always going somewhere else.  
Even the coins in the pretend purse were card:  
Cardboard, wood and cloth  
Was all our commerce.

Little one,  
Your wares are real,  
And so too is your smile –  
Though doubt stills its edges  
When after I've paid

I place one more dollar on the table:  
You are confused among charity, kindness and trade,  
Unable to tell which way to face.  
You are here, moreover,  
To guard your house,  
Which is half new-made  
And half fallen in,  
And the small sister just inside  
Who also falls as much as stands.

Don't be afraid,  
Nor ashamed of your home's squalor.  
Your wares are real,  
Your tepid drinks welcome,  
The inside of oranges always clean,  
And I am here to drink your health in warm coke  
And break a dusty orange in your honour.

### Traveller's Tip

Journeying to a poor place  
You should leave your pity behind  
In a safe one;  
Or at least take it in dry, powdered form  
For occasional sprinkling.  
It must, however,  
Be well packed against the damp:  
For, touched by tears,  
It could swell,  
Leak,  
And ruin your luggage.