



DRAWINGS © Radomir Mudrinic

Gint Aras

A Dialogue on José Lezama Lima

A few weeks after my graduation from college—a five-year path of squalor, poverty and bad jobs in kitchens and hotels—I attended a party at a professor’s home. Dr. Paulo Fischer of Argentina was a star of the Comparative Literature department, translator of over 100 works from Spanish to English, a Pulitzer prize winner and MacArthur fellow. He was an authority on Cervantes, a lover of Baroque art and architecture, and an unlikely but fierce champion of Laurence Sterne’s *Tristram Shandy*. Fischer lived in the “Cadillac of Collegetown,” a neighborhood of wide lawns and ancient trees where only professors, physicians and occasional restaurateurs owned homes. None of the dozen invited students—a supposed *crème de la crème*—had ever been to this neighborhood. I didn’t even know it existed, and only three blocks from my roach-infested room. Fischer’s tall foyer and leather sofas seemed to promise us chosen students, contrary to the warnings of our parents and friends, that the study of Literature did not lead to the gutter.

The student-teacher party teetered someplace between bad and tolerable. Fischer had bottles of Chilean and Argentinean wine, and Claudia, his petite, soigné wife produced attractive cutting boards of cured meats and robust cheeses, prunes and dried figs, sliced apples and mangoes. Conversations went on about one student’s Fulbright and some guy’s class in Veracruz. A girl told of her acceptance to Cambridge, but whined over rejection from the Sorbonne. I avoided puking only by listening to Claudia’s stories about her village in Bolivia; her dad and older brother had managed to support a family of six by picking coffee. She said, “Paulo mentioned you drive a hearse to pay your rent. Is this true?” I had been fired from the job for falling asleep behind the wheel and driving into a ditch. So I told her I was unemployed.

During dinner, Fischer drank a bottle of Carménère by himself. Once Claudia served the dessert, little pyramids of berries covered in caramel cream, he started telling stories of his “wild” days. He had passed a course in Modern