

## Breaking Ground

“Don’t over-pay them,” says a fellow tourist,  
“otherwise you raise their expectations.”  
She is American, we are Brits, but we  
are the same tribe, the Bargain Vigilantes,  
and wield the mighty dollar.

We’re in the shoeshine capital of the world,  
the capital of *soroche* (mountain sickness).  
We stroll past pavement vendors of minute  
potatoes—a few handfuls—or cigarettes  
in ones and twos, or—to ward off spells—  
llama fetuses. We pass shop windows  
of undertakers piled with white-  
painted child-size coffins.

Now we are further north  
in the heartland of the Inca  
land of hyperinflation  
where a bottle of water costs a million *inti*.  
The tour bus stops at a tree-lined plaza  
with stalls, and views of alien-looking distance.  
We look to haggle.  
Here is a gourd with intricate decoration.  
“¿Cuánto?” He names a price. “*Demasiado.*”  
We walk away but he runs after  
holding the gourd out at the lower price.  
The Bargain Vigilantes ride again.

It has been a familiar object until for the first time  
I look at the drawings incised in the surface.  
So many! Angular figures:  
a procession of notables with feather crowns,  
long robes, elaborate shawls.  
Below them, hatted and trousered, smaller figures  
I realize are a marching band  
with saxophones (or what look like saxophones).  
One has a wide fiddle, one a harp.  
There is much foliage  
round them, and above  
birds. Further round, the agricultural section.  
Peons lead llamas through a stylized forest,  
others bend to wield mattocks. Two pairs of oxen  
draw ploughs—the furrows around them clearly shown.  
Further, more peasant farmers bend  
to harvest what looks like cane  
and behind the cane rows is some kind of building.  
Further, the forest grows dense and leafy and we see  
the tail end of the band.

*continued*

My likeness, my brother artist,  
thirty-two years your scenes I never studied.  
I imagine you bent over the work for hours,  
your dark features composed in concentration,  
using some kind of burin to engrave  
around the neck of the gourd rosettes and points  
in geometric patterns and populate  
this miniature surface with your beings.  
I remember Coppard's story of the Higglar  
who lost the love of his life, obsessed with barter,  
and bowing down like one of those hatted peons  
dig these words into my crust of guilt.