

**On prayer in El Salvador**

Gen. 4:10

They always pray when we come:  
the women horrible in their weakness, clinging, wailing,  
the men stiff, silent, pale—sullen at first, but in the end  
no better than the women.

There is the wet, salt, desperate prayer of parting:  
that is a tedious litany, well known to us.  
We cut it short.

There is the prayer of flesh, purpling in praise of  
something other than our rifle-butts.

There is the dull prayer of falling, eyes upturned,  
into shallow pits.

There is the white and secret prayer of bones on the beach.

We pray also, each after his own fashion:  
Augusto's incantations turn the peasants into  
terrorists and whores:  
the sergeant (a good man, gone a little  
crazy perhaps) appeals to God  
to curse all, curse Himself, curse blasphemy.  
Myself, I pray to my two hands,  
that one may be a stranger to the other.  
All of us, under our breath, under our thoughts,  
send up a prayer that is only noise,  
the roar of the ocean in dead shells.  
Our prayer castrates the light, stops ears and eyes.

They always pray when we come, and after we come—  
their black blood curdling in the shallow soil,  
forming itself into tongues.

*Tom Lips*