"Martin Fierro" (1872) by José Hernández of Argentina

You'll read more about Hernández and his defense of the gaucho in *Gauchos and the Vanishing Frontier*. In the excerpts that follow, the poet relates the unhappy but typical tale of a gaucho. Drafted into the frontier military, he loses his home and family.

Born November 10, 1834 (Argentines still celebrate his birthday) in Chacra de Pueyrredón, Buenos Aires, at age 14, he left Buenos Aires because of illness to live in the healthier countryside -the pampas--where he learned the ways of the gauchos. From 1853 to 1868 he engaged in provincial political struggles. After the unsuccessful revolt against President Domingo F. Sarmiento's government in 1870, Hernández fled to Brazil. In January 1871, he returned to Buenos Aires and wrote his gaucho epic *El gaucho Martín Fierro*. He accurately depicted the life of a persecuted gaucho and well rendered the gaucho's voice into poetic form. In the poetic narrative's second part, *The Return of Martín Fierro*, 1879, the gaucho hero is reintegrated into the society he had abandoned. From their own ballads and legends a literature of the gaucho -la literatura gauchesca- grew and became an important part of the Argentine cultural tradition. Beginning in the mid-19th century, after the heyday of the gauchos, Argentine writers celebrated them. José Hernández died on October 21, 1886, in the town of Belgrano, near Buenos Aires. By the way, the translator of the poem, Walter Owen, has managed to retain the meter of the original Spanish version. The poem's rhythm is like a horse galloping-- dada dada dada dada
I step not aside from the furrowed track,  
Though they loosen their hilts as they come;  
Let them speak me soft, I will answer soft, But the hard may find me a harder oft;  
In a fight they have found me as quick as they, And quicker far than some.

When trouble's afoot -now Christ me save, And Christ me save from sin,-  
I feel my heart grow big and strong, And my blood rise up like a rolling song,  
For life is a battle, it seems to me, That a man must fight to win.

A son am I of the rolling plain, A gaucho born and bred;  
For me the whole great world is small, Believe me, my heart can hold it all;  
The snake strikes not at my passing foot, The sun burns not my head.

I was born on the mighty Pampas' breast, As the fish is born in the sea;  
Here was I born and here I live, And what seemed good to God to give,  
When I came to the world; it will please him too, That I take away with me.

And this is my pride: to live as free As the bird that cleaves the sky;  
I build no nest on this careworn earth, Where sorrow is long, and short is mirth,  
And when I am gone none will grieve for me, And none care where I lie.

I have kept my feet from trap or trick In the risky trails of love;  
I have roamed as free as the winging bird, And many a heart my song has stirred,  
But my couch is the clover of the plain, With the shining stars above.

And every one that hears my song, With this he will agree:  
I sought no quarrel, nor drew a knife, Save in open fight and to guard my life,
And that all the harm I have done to men Was the harm men wished to me.

Then gather around and hearken well To a gaucho's doleful story, In whose veins the blood of the Pampas runs, Who married a wife and begat him sons, Yet who nevertheless is held by some As a bandit grim and gory. . . .

When by favor of none the gaucho rode O'er the rolling pampas wide; But now alas, he grows sour and grim, For the law and the police they harry him, And either the Army would rope him in, Or the Sheriff have his hide.

You can hardly step through your own door-posts, And the Mayor gets to know-- Like a hawk he's down on you, sound or sick, Though your wife has her baby a month too quick,-- Ah there's never a thong but gives at last. Nor a time but has to go!

And give yourself up for lost, my boys, If the Mayor nooses you; They'll drag you off with a hail of blows, Though why neither God nor the Mayor knows, And they finish you quick if you stand and draw, As the gaucho used to do.

And blue and black they drub your back, And over the head they rap you, And then all sore and smothered in gore, I They truss you up and they give you more, And elbow to elbow tethered tight, the filthy stocks they clap you. . . .

Not even the lookers -on were spared In the drive they made that day, They made no bones about right or wrong, But all they laid hands on they hustled along, Save one that to please the barkeep's wife, The sergeant let get away.

They formed us up at the door and said We must serve the Government; And they mixed us up with a wretched lot That at some other place they'd caught; Not the devil himself, it seems to me, Could anything worse invent.

I knew the Judge had a down on me, For I'm no politician; On voting day I had stayed away, And somebody since had heard him say That those that didn't vote for him Were helping the opposition.

And so no doubt I was ruined there At a game where I held no hand, For whether the lists be bad or good, At the polls there's always trouble brewed, And I stay away, for I've got no use For things I don't understand.

And before we went off, the Judge he up And made us a long harangue; He said they'd treat us like gallant men, And he promised us over and over again, That we'd only serve six months and then, He'd send the relieving gang. . . .

A neighbor told me afterwards That I hadn't been gone very long, When they sold the cattle to pay the rent, And that after the cattle the land soon went, And one day the Justice seized the rest And auctioned it off for a song.

And my poor boys, when the place broke up, Were scattered with the rest; They had to go when the land was sold; They got jobs as 'peones' I was told, But how could they work?

-the featherless chicks, Thrown out too soon from the nest.
When I think of their lot it seems to me My heart is near to break.
They told me the older of the two Said he'd stick to the young one, and see him through;
God send some Christian to take them in, If only for pity's sake.

And my wife - alas! what good are tears; She is lost to me forever.
They said with some hawk she flew away, That had hung round there for many a day;
No doubt she did it to get the bread That I wasn't there to give her.

Full often, of things one has to spare, Another has none or few;
When she hadn't a single copper left, And of husband and sons she was bereft,
If she wasn't to stay and starve to death, What else could the poor thing do?

And as I wasn't at all well in With the law of that neighborhood,
As soon as I saw him begin to kick, I thought I'd better be moving quick;
So I made for the horse-rail, trying to look As innocent as I could.

I mounted, and calling on God for help, I took up the trail again;
For the gaucho that gets a bad name must roam,
There's never a place he can call his home;
Wherever he goes he is dogged by woes, And his life is but sorrow and pain.

He is always flying before the law In misery, want, and grime;
He has neither den nor lair nor nest, You'd think he was cursed from his mother's breast: To be a gaucho - that's enough! - 'Barajo!' that's a crime!

Like an ownerless horse the gaucho is, That everyone may ride.
They break his back and they break his heart, For life he must struggle from the start,
Like the tree that without a shelter grows On the wind-swept mountain-side.

As soon as he's born and they've baptized him, They drop him and give him a whack;
The priest says: 'You'd better to work begin;
Run off and find someone to take you in.' And into the world like a donkey he goes,
With his suffering on his back.

And here and there with the wind he roams, Like a sheep without flock nor fold,
While his father is pressed by the Government, And off to some frontier post is sent;
No help nor shelter can he get, Though he perish of want and cold.

They call him a drunken gaucho beast If he takes a spot of gin;
If he goes to a dance he's an upstart boor;
If he plays at cards he's a sharper sure;
He's a brawler if he defends himself;
If he doesn't - they do him in.

Neither sons nor wife nor friends has he, To make his lot less hard.
He's like a stray bullock that nobody owns, And that's only good for its hide and bones;
For what good is a bullock that doesn't plough, Except for the slaughter-yard?

His home is the wild; and his only friends Are his lasso, his horse, and knife;
If dying with hunger and fatigue, He drops his loop on some sucking-pig,
They hunt him off for a 'gaucho-thief,' And he has to fly for his life.
And if they stretch him belly-up, There's never a soul to care;
By the side of the trail they let him rot, With never a cross to mark the spot,
Or into some hole, like a dog he's thrown, With a curse instead of a prayer.