



Reprinted courtesy of Jaime Sabines' family

## On the Death of Jaime Sabines

*Jaime Labastida\**

The death of poet Jaime Sabines is no less painful because it was expected. Only a year ago, two other major Spanish-language poets, Octavio Paz and Margarita Michelena, died. Mexico seems to be suddenly falling silent as our great poets, who gave voice to the human condition, abandon and orphan us.

Sabines was a poet of love and death, two inseparable concepts for Man. Few other poets have been able to cast these age-old themes in a new light. Sabines was able to write his most profound poems about death because man exists for death. People think immortality would be delightful. On the contrary, we forget that death allows us the delight of loving and being loved. Only because of death is

mankind able to create art and poetry. The gods have a torturous disease: tedium, the boredom that stems from their own immortality. In that man dies and is conscious of his own mortality, he is able to love.

In *On Myth*, one of his first poems, Sabines wrote, "My mother told me that I cried in her womb./ They said to her: he'll be lucky./ Someone spoke to me every day of my life/ into my ear, slowly, taking their time./ Said to me: live, live, live! It was death." In only six lines and two verses, Sabines distills true anguish.

Where is pain born? Where does the need to love come from? Jaime Sabines is often called the loving poet, the last of the romantics, as if his poetry, also known for its supposed populism, were not also profound and wise. The verse just quoted

sounds as if it had been wrenched from the sayings of Heraclitus. As the Ephesian philosopher said, "It is not for men's best that everything goes their way. For men, sickness makes health pleasing, evil makes good pleasing, hunger makes satiety pleasing, work makes rest pleasing." Surely Heraclitus could have added: death makes life pleasing. This is what Sabines tells us. Death shouts in all of our ears every day, softly, with a smooth slowness, for us to live, because from the moment we are born, Nature pronounces an implacable death sentence on us. Sabines knew this in a way few others do. His poetry seems to have a Freudian base, a carefully considered one that the poet has made his own. The poetry of Sabines has been built on the borders of Eros and Thanatos, and from thence comes its profundity.

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Sabines told us, appropriately enough, about Pain, "It has been written in the first testament of man:/ do not scorn it because it has much to teach you./ Lodge it in your heart tonight./ At dawn it must go./ But you will not forget what it told you from the cruel shadow." In effect, pain is what teaches us to value life. We must accept suffering for it teaches us.

In the last years of his life, Sabines learned to live with pain. His operations, infirmity and terrible illness did not dishearten him. I can testify to his stoicism,

his serene gallantry in the face of his oncoming death. I also saw how much he desired for Mexico, and especially his home state of Chiapas, a timely and dignified peace.

His modesty moved him to ask for private burial and funeral services, touched only by the grief of his family and intimate friends. He knew what he meant to us, yet something inside of him (perhaps a touch of irony) inspired discretion. The true greatness of the man can also be seen in this silent deed. He always hated

presumption. I am sure that the homage rendered him will bear witness to the grief of the people, who recognized Sabines as its very beloved poet.<sup>1</sup>

I loved him as a brother, and I admired him as a master. **MM**

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NOTES

<sup>1</sup> On the afternoon of April 23, the nation paid homage to Jaime Sabines in the Fine Arts Palace in Mexico City. Writers Angeles Mastretta and Carlos Monsiváis spoke and writers Ali Chumacero and Guillermo Sheridan, actress Ofelia Guilmain and others read poetry. [Editor's Note.]

WHAT A BARBAROUS CUSTOM, THIS BURYING OF THE DEAD!  
Killing them, annihilating them, obliterating them from the face of the earth.  
It's betraying them, depriving them of the chance to revive.

I'm always hoping that the dead will rise up, that they'll  
break out of the coffin and say happily What are you crying about?

So I'm nervous at funerals. They check the sections of the  
lid, they lower it all, they put flagstones on top of it, and  
then dirt, more, more, more, shovel after shovelful, clods,  
dust, stones, stamping on it, packing it down, flattening it,  
there you'll stay, you won't get out of here.

They make me laugh, after that, the crowns, the flowers,  
the crying, the unrestrained kisses. It's a joke. Why did  
they bury him? Why not leave him out to dry until his  
bones talked to us about his death? Or why not burn him,  
or give him to the animals, or throw him into the river?

There ought to be a rest home for the dead, airy and  
clean, with music and running water. There would be at  
least two or three, every day, who would rise up and live.