

READINGS AND CONVERSATIONS

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with BELL GALE CHEVIGNY

READING

ELENA PONIATOWSKA : First I'll read from *Hasta no verte Jesus mio*. A little piece on Jesusa. Jesusa Polanco is the heroine of *Hasta no verte Jesus mio* which was translated into *Here's to You, Jesusa!* And she thought very little of herself. This is a little piece.

(Reads in Spanish.)

"I am like the gypsy from nowhere. I don't feel Mexican and I don't recognize Mexicans. If I had money, I would be Mexican, but I am worse than dirt. I am nothing. That's right. That's what I am. Garbage for the dogs to pee on and keep right on walking. The wind comes and blows and that's the end of it. There is nothing else for me to be. I have never been worth anything. My whole life I have been the same good-for-nothing germ you're looking at right now."

Now, this is when it's to show you how easy death is. Jesusa's husband is on the battle - Pedro, her husband, Pedro Aguilar - and that's how she finds out he dies.

"The combat started at three in the morning, in the dark, and we had a lot of casualties. We shot toward wherever we saw gun bursts, but those bandits were protected by parapets; they were behind the rocks. General Espinosa y Cordoba ordered an about-face but since we didn't hear the counterorder and we kept going, shooting all those sons of you-know-whats. Dawn broke, and we fought all day. I rode next to Pedro carrying the Mauser for him. The troops had dispersed and we kept going, taking out those thieves like it was nothing. I was handing him the loaded Mauser and when he didn't take it, I turned around to see what was wrong, and Pedro wasn't on the horse. At about four in the afternoon my husband was shot in the chest and that's when I realized that he and I were out there all alone. I saw him lying on the ground. When I got off my horse to pick him up he was already dead, with his arms folded across his chest. He didn't bleed much. A little later the two assistants caught up with us and they helped me tie him on his horse. The enemy fired and hit Pedro as if they had wanted to kill him again, but he had...he was already good and dead.

In *A Massacre in Mexico*, Mario Carmen Rodriguez, a student of Spanish literature at the American University, speaking of her boyfriend after the killing of students, said,

"I suddenly saw him as I had never seen him before. I saw his very pale face as white as snow with blue veins, his little goatee, his little beard, that I had kept begging him not to shave off: "Leave it, leave it, please"! - because it made him look older than he really was, twenty-one; I saw his deep-set blue eyes (they've always had a very sad look in them), and felt his warm body next to mine. Both of us were soaking wet from the rain and from having fallen into so many puddles every time we flung ourselves down on the ground during the shooting, yet his arm felt nice and warm around my shoulders. Then for the first time since we've been going together, I told him, yes, that when the Army troops let us go I'd live with him, that we were going to die some day, sooner or later, and that I wanted to live, that I was saying, yes, yes, yes, I love you, yes, I really love you, I'll do whatever you want, I'm in love with you, too, yes, yes, yes, I want to, yes....."

I was struck later by the resemblance of Maria del Carmen's words to a paragraph I'm sure you're going to recognize. "I asked him with my eyes to ask again, yes, and then he asked me, would I? Yes, to say yes, yes, my mountain flower. And first I put my arms around him, yes, and drew him down to me so he could feel my breasts, all perfume. Yes. And his heart was going like mad and, yes, I said, yes, yes, I will, yes." It's part -- it is part of Molly Bloom's final monologue written by James Joyce, in his *Ulysses*.

The following is a story that was sent of a --of a student who was sent on one of the university brigades to the stadium where the bodies were kept after the earthquake in September, 1985.

(from *Nothing, Nobody*)

"We arrived at the social securities baseball stadium known as Delta Park and just seeing it made my throat close up. We got all the stuff out of the van, the formaldehyde, the dry ice, the fumigators. Then I saw the stadium. It was as if we were in the middle of a play but there with spectators because all the bleachers were empty. The center of the arena was brightly lit and the actors were below on stage, but they were dead. In the back stood three huge plastic tents also brightly illuminated by the field lights with signs saying, "Unidentified Bodies"; another read, "Identified Bodies"; and the third, "Remains": remains in plastic bags that I had never wished to see and, thank God, never had to see. These small plastic bags were treated with the same care as the whole bodies.

As a defense mechanism I began to feel as if I were watching a movie. The smell of formaldehyde was very strong. At the entrance could be heard the clatter of the employees' typewriters who were filling out death certificates. From the trucks they brought down bundles and more bundles. Those bundles were bodies.

The first thing we did was to establish a line beyond which nobody could pass without being fumigated. This is called a sanitary carpet because by then the men, women, and children had been dead for three days, and the process of putrefaction was advanced. We created a layer of plastic and cloth on the ground to serve as a boundary and as the spot where people would stand and be sprayed. And we sprayed people going in and out: the stretcher-bearers, the relatives, the people who brought the coffins.

The doctor in charge ordered me, 'Start fumigating the corpses.'

Fortunately I was not involved in the first spray, not even the second. At a distance of almost 20 yards you could see

the plastic bags, the dry ice, and the heaps, but those mounds, poorly covered with plastic sheets, were bodies. The power hose was so strong that it blew off the plastic sheets, so I thought, 'I have to force myself to look, I have to overcome my fear, because if I don't do this right, I could be spraying other workers. Death is part of life: I must force myself to look.'

The first thing I saw was a tall girl lying on the ground, very fair, her body covered with bruises, completely naked. Her pubis had been shaved and she had very large breasts, full of milk. The sign said, "Number 74, Gynecology-Obstetrics Hospital Juarez." I noticed that she had a cut in the shape of a half moon on her womb, a big gash in the lower abdomen, and it made me very sad to realize that she had just had a baby, her child. Her womb had not been barren. She was so pale, she looked like a statue, a mistreated statue. "You, why did you have to die?"

Unconsciously I started a dialog with the dead. I kept spraying them, and in talking to them I talked to myself. I kept asking them why. I saw a fat woman with a very cheap dress. I saw so many people. I felt a great sense of shame. I told them so. "I have no right to be seeing you like this with your dress up your legs, with your naked body; I have no right to see you."

I saw dark, blackened bodies, and at a certain point I said to myself, "This stuff here has nothing to do with the people; these bodies are nothing anymore. They are not human any longer. This here is no longer human." I repeated it to myself many times as if to protect myself. "This here is simply organic matter. These crushed arms, these swollen faces, these tongues sticking out; this is no more than organic matter; there are lots of bacteria here and I have to prevent them from spreading; that is why I am spraying."

When I turned up -- when I turned my head to the left I saw a little girl with eyes wide open and the grimace of an interrupted smile, an eight-year-old: "Little girl, why on earth didn't you run? Why did the beam fall on you?" All the time I kept talking to the bodies with an insistence that was filled with rage, anger, bitterness, hatred: "This isn't fair." It's not fair that in this country hospitals, maternities, schools, government buildings, public offices should collapse just like that. It's not fair that it should always hit the poorest, the most deprived people. It's not fair that this should happen to the most screwed-over people."

All of us in the crew were cold in our legs because of the dry ice and the smell of formaldehyde. Besides, we were scared. Maybe at the beginning we were scared of contamination, but we soon realized that those of us with the formaldehyde were the best protected. Someone told us, "If there is an immune bunch, it is you."

A small, brown, skinny fellow came in. He was the typical Mexican who has had to work very hard from birth, who probably lived in some lost tenement in some miserable slum with a sweater that was all too thin. Damn! Jesus! Really! Why are our people so terribly unprotected? What helplessness, God! Really! It makes you mad how forsaken they are. It really makes you so angry to see them like that, so deprived.

"The boxes," he asked, "the boxes." There were three coffins for him. He wanted to know how much they were. And how would he have paid for them, the poor boy?

"Have you identified your family?"

"Yes, yeah. They are over there. But tell me, how much I have to pay for the caskets?"

"No, the coffins are free; we'll give them to you right away. Did you come here by yourself?"

He was there to claim his sister and two nieces; one was fourteen, the other nine years old. I was profoundly sorry. While he went to get the bodies, I prepared the caskets, a big one and two small ones, and I realized that one of them had two nails sticking out but I said, "Too bad! It doesn't matter anyway." Later, I saw how the little guy was trying to flatten the nails with his sneaker and stepped on them and when he wasn't able to do it, I saw him bending the nails with a board and with that sole act he gave back all human dimension to the bodies. I had thought that the only real things were the bacteria. But for this skinny guy, even though his bodies were torn apart, there was still his skin and they had the right not to be hurt by the nails.

A fat guy helped him place the bodies in the coffins, and we had the task of spraying them with lime. We asked people for permission to do this. "Would you allow us to sprinkle the body with lime?"

I asked the skinny little fellow, "Hey, listen, will you let me sprinkle your relatives with lime?"

"Yes."

We had to put the fourteen-year old girl in an adult coffin because she didn't fit in the smaller one and when I began to sprinkle the lime on her, I thought of Hamlet. It's really pathetic... Hamlet, when Ophelia, after losing her mind, drowns. Hamlet's mother sprinkles violets on her body and says in her mind, "Look, I come to put flowers on your body, the ones I should have placed on your wedding bed." I had exactly the same sensation. "Girl, I'm sprinkling limestone on you, little girl, so you will go all whitened up, you who have not lived at all, not at all, but you'll be white because of the lime. You didn't live, little fourteen-year old girl. There you go, all white." You know, all these mental associations that we have with purity, dignity, and being untouched... all I could do was to sprinkle a little bit of limestone on her. Not a single flower, just a lot of white dust.

That's how she went."

Edward Weston and Tina, his apprentice, went from California to Mexico in 1923 where she became a photographer and the pictures of her naked - as you saw them, some of them, not all of them - scandalized Mexico.

(from *Tinisima*)

"Soon after their arrival in Mexico, Tina, Weston, and his son Chandler settled into El Buen Retiro, an old and beautiful

ten-room house in Tacubaya, a suburb of Mexico City. One rainy afternoon, Weston suddenly began to take off his clothes, shouting, "Let's go up on the roof. Tina, Chandler, come on," he urged as he raced up the stairs. The boy was first; then came Tina, laughing enthusiastically as she undressed. "We're going to play hide-and-peek. Tina's 'it.'" Weston leapt away. Tina's hair covered her face. "I can't see anything, the rain is blinding me." It rained harder. "Come on, Chandler, come on." Tina's breasts shook as she laughed.

Drops of water slid over her lips, down her neck, and onto her legs as she approached him. Weston sprang up and escaped. As a child, Weston had been a weakling. Determined to overcome this, he trained as a long-distance runner. At thirty-six, ten years Tina's senior, he was proud of his physical condition, his flat stomach, his good muscle tone. When he lived in Glendale, he wrestled naked with his four children and in Tacubaya, he bathed in cold water every day. But Tina, what a beauty she was! Her perfect, dense triangle shone like a diamond in the rain. Chandler rushed to his father, who happily embraced him. Then, triumphantly joyous to be alive, they ran inside, wrapped themselves in towels, and sat down to read *Moby Dick*. What wonderful rooftop verandas they have in Mexico! What's on the rooftops in California, anyway? Tina had never bothered to find out.

As she read out loud, Weston collected the water that dripped from her hair. Her damp fingers left marks on the pages. "Melville wouldn't have minded." Weston smiled. "I am fiercely happy," Tina said. She shone with well-being. She threw her arms around Edward's neck and kissed him with such force that he felt he had to defend himself: "Enough, enough, enough, your love will kill me."

He had been staring at the sky; when he lowered his eyes, he saw Tina lying naked in the sun. He pointed his camera at her and clicked the shutter. Then he followed her to her room, where she put a robe on over her still warm skin. In the darkroom, he and Tina eagerly examined the negatives. "This is the best series of nudes I have ever done." The pictures had a face and a sex - a rare thing for Weston, who had always hidden one or the other on his previous model, Margrethe Mather.

In the darkroom, beside her master, Tina watched as a new image of herself appeared out of the chemical bath: there it was, her body, which had always been such a stranger to her. Now she could reinvent her relationship to herself, begin to love herself. If her body could communicate such strength, the harmony and rhythm of its design, then she, too, was extraordinary. The body on the paper was working its way into her consciousness. Edward had given her a new way to be Tina, without disguises; showing herself naked was like showing others her most beautiful gown. Edward had placed within her grasp the elements of discovery: the silver plates, the celluloid, the emulsion, the light, elements that could be turned upon herself or that she could turn upon the world.

Before daybreak, in the silent house, Weston slipped behind his desk to write in his journal. He rose from each session feeling cleansed, as if his writing had swept the cobwebs out of his heart and mind.

Outside, Mexico was waiting, slow, violent Mexico. The Aztec valley as Jean Charlot, the French painter, called it: fierce, brilliant Mexico. Inside: silence, *penumbra*, solitude at the work table at dawn. It was his space.

Weston lived in a state of revelation thanks to Tina and the country she had offered him. "I like everything, I feel part of the people." And he embraced everything within reach. "Tina, look at the color of the wall, that bougainvillea." "Did you notice, Eduardito, that the girls sweep and wash down the sidewalk before the sun rises? Each person cleans his own little piece of the city. Isn't this a fair distribution of beauty? In Mexico, every stone is alive, it speaks. I am going to make a place for myself in this land, I am going to bring Mamma, my family, they will feel at home here, like in Udine. Do you see the air, Edward, do you see it? This high valley is so close to the sky we can touch it. Do you see how delicate the air is? It makes me want to fly. When I was a girl, I dreamed that I could fly, that I left the earth behind, that there was only me and the sky, the sky and me, me and the sky."

One morning, they were awakened by gunfire. They rushed out to the balcony. "Is there a new revolution." Soon they grew accustomed to the fireworks. Another day, Weston said to Elisa, the maid, "There were more fireworks this morning." The girl answered impassively. "Yes, there was another gun battle in Tacubaya." "What?" "Don't worry. When the snipers load their machine guns and are ready to shoot, they wave their hats in the air so the passerby can get out of the way." Weston asked Roubicek, the owner of the Aztec Land gallery, if there would be another revolution. He answered, "Not one. Forty."

Weston wrote it down in his diary."

In 1942 Tina Modotti died in a taxi, remembering her Cuban lover, Julio Antonio Maya, who was assassinated in Mexico. She also remembered her life in the communist party and in the battlefields of the Spanish civil war.

"When the taxi stopped at the corner of Insurgentes and Villalongín, Tina gave the driver the Doctor Balmis address and he asked, "Where is that?"

"Right in front of the General Hospital."

Nacho Aguirre and Hannes Meyer who had come with her, heard her say as she leaned into the back seat, "See you later."

In the taxi, Tina feels she is flowing like a river. Julio's body comes toward her. "Julio, don't die, I love you so much." Her sex is waiting for Julio, Julio and the sea that has enveloped her ever since. "It is good to go like this, wrapped in water. It doesn't hurt, it doesn't hurt to die. Why am I crying if it doesn't hurt?" The water is Julio, the water is rest, the water is infinite like the reflections of the sun on the Danube the afternoon of her mission to Budapest; when the gold of the Danube gilded her, she forgot about the danger of the mission and thought about the splendor of the world and her eyes grew damp with gratitude.

A new Tina observes her, accompanies her. She is sweeter, more tender than the Tina of the last few years; she advises her gently: "Let yourself go, let yourself go, that's it, all by yourself, don't make any effort, just let the current carry you." Her lungs are bursting, but there is no feeling of suffocation, no reason to struggle. The silk scarf her

godmother gave her in Udine floats on the water, her only item of luxury. Tina stretches out her hand and picks it up with fingers aching from twelve hours at the loom. "Don't you want to buy it? It's the most beautiful thing I have." The scarf disappears. With that money, there will be bread, ham, and oil. She will see the surprise on the faces of her mother and brothers and sisters when they sit down to eat. José Guadalupe Rodríguez from the Central Committee of the Party comes in. "Go ahead, comrade, you have the floor." Yelena Stasova is wearing that horrible felt hat, and she runs out into the street. Tina wants to catch up with her, but many hands hold her back. They cling to her black skirt. A loaf of bread, a bandage, a chair, a glass of water, give me, give me, give me, the child's face is burned, his hand is bloody, the wounded and their demands, the stretcher-bearers in the muddy trench, pick him up, comrade, pick him up, don't let him rot, give me your hand, I want to die looking at a beautiful woman, the smell of the dead, the stench of war, of urine, of excrement, of vomit, the wounded, the dead, their blood on her hands, their blood on her skirt, letters began to fly up in the air, a piece of paper goes up into her mouth and sticks to her palate. "I am beyond good and evil," she once said, laughing in Vittorio's face. "Oh, really. That's why your friends in Mexico said you were an expensive whore." I am falling to pieces. Sheets of paper, shouts: "You didn't make a copy. Where is the translation?" Steam surrounds her, doesn't let her move, the steam from the boiling pots, she can't explain that it hurts, that the pain is intolerable, horribly intense and doesn't stop, each second it gets worse, dear heart, where are you?

She throws back her head. She sees the sky, black and star-studded, through the window. "Oh, I am dizzy! What strange things am I thinking? Am I dead or alive?" "Comrade, your documents. Are you the one in the photo? The picture was taken when you were young? Please sign again, we must compare the signatures." The borders are closed, but the sea is vast and open. "You have never gone naked into the sea?" "You haven't felt the infallible joy of the ocean?" The sea, the sky, were not for her. The ships point down toward the horizon. Total blackness, abyss, bad water. The stars go crazy, an avalanche of light on her eyes. She feels like vomiting and stops herself, but something must have come out, because she tries to wipe her chin. Her right arm doesn't respond. Her left arm aches. Again she opens her eyes and the brightness of the stars forces her to close them. The pressure on her right side diminishes. "It's so easy to die," she thinks. "I am going, I am going. Mamma is calling, she tells me to follow the Milky Way. Mamma." The stars are filling her belly, they give off sparks, a swarm of fireflies awaits. "Julio, what a good death, do you remember, Julio?" She tries to see him when the last star closes her eyes.

The taxi stops in front of the General Hospital.

"Here we are, senora, we have arrived."

The driver hears a soft moan. When he opens the back door, he says again, "Senora, senora, we are here, we have arrived."

She doesn't move. He runs into the hospital and points to the taxi. He insists, and two nurses come with him.

"It's too late, she is dead. Take her to the Green Cross."

A reporter is present when they open the dead woman's purse. There is no compact, not even a comb, only a crumpled handkerchief, a one-peso bill, some keys, an oval photograph of a young man with curly hair, and a document with the name Tina Modotti Mondini, 137 Doctor Balmis."

And now I'll just read you a last little piece of Spanish -- in Spanish --from the book called *La Flor de lis*, which is a little bit autobiographical.

(Spanish spoken).

Muchas gracias.

Thank you very much for listening.