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Bajo Un Cielo Desgarrado

The psychotic horizon wept a red ghost of defeat. Below an archaic sun the scorched landscape screamed its despair from an ancient molten throat. No human ear could hope to decipher that primal yell which reverberated throughout Soledad's every sinew, hurrying her blood to the tempo of a cosmic tide. With the soldiers and horses slaughtered, their viscera coalescing into a singular crimson mush upon the hostile terrain, that sound and rhythm thundered for her alone. Around her, the Chihuahua prairies - their yellow blades static in the breezeless air - had succumbed to a silence as heavy as the lead in her bullets and thicker than the blood spilled at her feet.

In the ten or so minutes it had taken to pursue the fleeing pair of Federal troops and their exhausted horses from the battle's epicentre to this anonymous grassland, time and space had seemed to relinquish their grip on Soledad. The fatally languid speed with which the enemy had attempted to repel her attack had struck her not so much as a symptom of the men's fatigue but might rather be attributed to an uncanny form of temporal dislocation. As the first soldier had spun in his saddle, raising his rifle at her advance, his doomed movements had appeared unnaturally slow, as though the air around his bones had congealed to treacle. With all the swiftness and accuracy which had originally caused Pancho to become so enamoured with this urchin circus runaway that he had welcomed her unquestionably under his revolutionary banner, Soledad spun her revolver in one nimble hand and leveled the barrel at the trooper's sweat-soaked forehead. Even those moist beads seemed crystallized like jewels on his reddened flesh, fixed in place by the invisible fingers of an unknown phantom. The enemy's horse had reared upwards, impossibly slowly, its heavy hoofs pounding feebly at the imperceptible walls of the time-bubble in which it was ensnared. Soledad's bullet sent the rider's brains crashing through the back of his skull in an unhurried haze of red. She was quite able to count each drop of blood, every shard of bone and sliver of matter as it bloomed in the sunlight, dispersing as languorously as cherry blossom in a spring draught.

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The second soldier descended from his own steed with gravity-defying tardiness, fumbling his pistol sluggishly and sending a snail of lead into the skull of the riderless horse. At that moment the truth of this weird spectacle glowed lucidly in Soledad's mind. Unaffected by the invisible swamp hampering the movements of her remaining foe, she and her own horse watched him through a gash in time; a wound which had opened exclusively for Soledad's benefit, an event horizon through which she had attained access to a zone significantly less encumbered by the edicts of a temporal world. From this vantage point, she could predict her enemy's every move, could read the pale preliminary flicker of each murderous thought across his stern face before he was even aware he'd thought it. It amused her to consider that, in the eyes of her remaining adversary, her own movements must have appeared supernaturally swift. For the first time since her escape from Matthias' authoritarian regime and her subsequent return to Mexico, she found herself smiling wide. The past year of warring at Pancho's side - endless days and sleepless nights of guerrilla violence and enforced vigilance among the ranks of the División del Norte - had kept her wits and senses keen, but simultaneously the rigours of revolutionary life had proved arduous. This blissful aberration which now permitted her access to a new temporal plain presented ample opportunity to indulge in some selfish fun which she leapt at with puppyish abandon. Descending from her horse, she holstered her revolver and stood before the Federal gunman, arms held out passively at her sides.

"Dispárame," she pronounced the words slowly, dragging out each syllable so as to ensure she was understood through the distortion her voice no doubt incurred on its passage through the event horizon to the man's ear. "Estoy desarmado. Mátame si puedes."

Slow-motion tears welled in the man's eyes, his features twisted in the raw terror of one confronted by the unexplainable. The ailing branch of his arm convulsed spastically as he raised his gun to fire once more, his laden movements appearing to Soledad's gaze like the slothful gestures of some cryptic ceremony. As the soldier applied pressure to the trigger, Soledad darted as swiftly as she was able to one side. The report of the pistol was stretched, the texture of the sound thinning out in the time-slowed atmosphere, and echoed across the prairie like the crashing of waves on a distant shore. So languid was the bullet's trajectory that Soledad was able to reach out and snatch it from the air between her thumb and forefinger. Almost five whole seconds passed before the soldier's eyes drifted towards her, his strained features now turning a ghastly white. Words, slow and warped, dribbled unintelligibly from his slackened jaw. Soledad brandished the seized projectile triumphantly before his unbelieving gaze.

"Ah, mala suerte. De atención para volver a intentarlo?"

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Again she stood statuesque, arms wide, and feigned helplessness as the soldier leveled his slowly shaking weapon a third time. Once more she casually evaded the shot, catching the shell effortlessly and waving it in a taunt before her adversary's dumbfounded face. Already exasperated by this game, the soldier did not wait for Soledad to volunteer herself again and now spun the gun on her without warning. However, she had read the thought in a dialect of twitching muscle upon the man's face and dashed out of the bullet's path before it left its chamber. Struggling vainly against the clutches of time which hindered him, the soldier continued spinning, firing at random. A cluster of bullets sailed as gracefully as placid insects around Soledad as she avoided each one with ease. Sweeping one arm out casually behind her, she caught the entire load in her hand with the nonchalance of a dreamy child snatching lazily at breeze-blown leaves. She had time enough to inspect the projectiles nestling in her palm - five static silver stars yanked from a remote sky - before the gunman finally clapped eyes upon her and fired his final round. Sidestepping the shell, she flinched with dismay as she heard it sink with an expanded wet crack into the eye of the soldier's horse. She turned to watch the beast collapse with agonizing delay. Its magnificent mane swirled as though immersed in invisible water, the heavy limbs buckled with the drawn-out tragedy of felled spruce trees in an indolent dream forest. Animal anguish rose in Soledad's heart and she turned back to the soldier who had realigned his aim upon her and was now pressing down on a useless trigger, the pistol clicking empty. With a vindictive pleasure,

she watched as the man's face sagged, his earnest expression melting like the transient countenance of a snowman doomed by the morning sun. Prolonging his agony, she allowed him to fumble at his belt for an excruciating minute as he scabbled for fresh rounds. Finally she uttered his death sentence:

“Juego. Tu pierde.”

Clenching the seized bullets together in a fist, she volleyed them at the man's face. Breaking through the event horizon which separated the two adversaries, the projectiles tore through the soldier's skull with deadly ferocity, causing a mess of blood and bone to erupt into the air in a red liquid incendiary display. It was with a cruel pleasure that she watched the enemy's body sail to the ground, the slow descent exuding a melancholy elegance that betrayed the authoritarian rigidity which had characterized his paltry existence. When his corpse had finally come to rest upon the yellow grass, Soledad drew her own revolver and blasted two whole cylinders into the bellies of the dead Federals, watching mesmerized as blood and viscera exploded into the air in unhurried fountains.



When finally she had seen enough, she holstered her weapon and gazed out at the Chihuahua landscape. That golden vista seemed no longer so magnificent to her eyes, its claim upon her psyche shaken profoundly since her passage into a new zone of consciousness. Within a single morning, time and space had surrendered a significant margin of their authority

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upon her. The surrounding scenery; the vast plains, the forests and the sky and sun above them had ceased to be absolute. The very fabric of reality had revealed itself to be crucially fallible, its boundaries no more concrete than those of the awnings she had raised and dropped daily as a lowly carnival child.

In spite of the enormity of this revelation, Soledad was not humbled by it. Indeed, the morning's events had unfolded with a logic which, while not immediately comprehensible, struck her as entirely appropriate, even predictable. As the hybrid humanoid daughter of a dog-faced circus freak, a psychology which countered and adapted readily to life's most bizarre and atrocious impartations was her manifest inheritance. From infancy, there had always been something more profound than pure survivalist instinct at work upon her destiny; something unnameable, a unique psychic voice resounding in her mutant flesh and bones, drawing her unalterably towards danger and atrocity - a subliminal prophet guiding her through festivities of violence to an unimaginable promised land. It was this inner compulsion which, even in her direst predicaments - from the slums of Mexico City to the insufferable regime of Matthias' carnival - had maintained a reassuring blaze in her belly. Intuitively she had known that in her mutant biology lay the innate potential for the achievement of a higher state; an accessibility to an altered vantage point from which the material superfluities of the physical world might be manipulated to more effective ends, if not dispensed with entirely. This inherent knowledge kept her alive, alert, and always eager for the most intense of experience, regardless of the horrors regularly incurred. As a result, her brief existence up to this point had been disproportionately filled with violence, revulsion and excessive hardship. While the majority of these events had been far from enjoyable, Soledad had never laboured under any doubt as to their immeasurable value. Carnage and adversity had continually taught her that every wound was also an opening, a portal to new tiers of understanding. Thus she grew to thrust her muzzle enthusiastically into the weeping sores of the universe at any opportunity.

Her first kill, committed at the age of four, had provided the initial pointer on an ever-sprawling map of perilous discovery. He had been a nameless schoolchild around three or four years her senior who passed each morning by the door of the hovel she had shared with her mother in Mexico City. Each dawn she would observe this plump child with his immaculate uniform and leather schoolbag from behind a musty window and sense something fierce swelling within her young belly; not exactly a rage, nothing so vitriolic - simply a compulsion, a *need* for violence which only the boy's death at her hands would quell. Before long she had begun sharpening a kitchen knife in preparation, with the idea of plunging it into the

boy's neck. She had even decided the exact spot - a dark mole on the pale flesh just below his ear. When finally she leapt upon him one April morning, she had been surprised that the boy had not screamed. As murderous elation retreated and sobriety reclaimed her psyche, she saw that it had been a graceless kill. In her excitement, she had thrust the full length of the blade in through the mole to its hilt, piercing the throat instantly. Even now she could conjure the sad weight of her disappointment that the whole event had passed so quickly, that the boy had not put up more of a fight. In the years since, she had of course refined her slaying skills and also come to choose her targets more wisely and usually with a modicum of morality. Since the age of nine or so, she had not killed nor inflicted grievous harm upon anyone whom she had not felt deserving. Indeed, it was this sense of principle which had led her back to Mexico and her allegiance to the Revolution. Despite this, she could not look upon the boy's murder with shame for in a sense it had established the logic of her future and the journey of discovery upon which she was ordained to embark. The choosing of that dark circle on the boy's neck had been no accident. She had come to believe that it represented her ultimate destiny; a great simmering black wound at the centre of the universe, a fathomless hole through which she would climb towards a greater truth hidden behind ersatz dimensions and mired in social and cultural masquerades.

"Outside of this freak tent is just a bigger freak tent," Aquinas the Fish-Boy had once said to her in his effete whisper over clandestine cigars one Alabama midnight, "and bigger and bigger freak tents beyond. And for each one of them, a whole bunch of shits looking to make the biggest noise on the midway. Freaks like us, darling, we got to keep pushing through the awnings 'til the biggest of the big noises shows his ugly mug to the marks. Then a whole different carnival begins..."

Aquinas had been the theatrical queen of the freaks, naturally predisposed to an imperishable and occasionally irritating cheeriness; never failing to appreciate the unique benefits of having been born with seal flippers and shark fins in place of human limbs. This was the only occasion she'd ever seen him sombre. She'd never forgotten it.

Stepping over the bodies of the dead Federals and the bulks of their fallen steeds, Soledad approached her own horse: a noble white mare gifted to her by Pancho himself. With a firm hand, she caressed the beast's muzzle and brought her face close, staring solemnly into one of its dark eyes.

"Consumado es," she whispered against one flickering ear, "Para mí, esta revolución ha terminado. Tengo que pasar a la siguiente."

With that, she released the horse from its harness and slapped a flat palm hard against its rump. The mare whinnied triumphantly and lunged

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forward several yards before stopping for a backwards glance at its liberator. Soledad signaled with a sharp movement of one hand and the horse galloped off, a pale ghost in the golden morning.



Soledad sighed and stretched, attempting to ease the knots of tension which had coiled in her weary muscles in recent grueling months. Relaxing finally, she stood and surveyed the landscape. Though Chihuahua's beauty and adversity remained intact, it seemed now that she was viewing it through a prism of shattered preconceptions; the shimmering terrain cast adrift on a wreckage of time and space which her hybrid psyche would not deign to repair. The violence and catastrophes which had punctuated her life had acted as stations of necessity; stepping stones in an ongoing voyage, each one a revolution in its own right, permitting the transcendence of her current stage of consciousness and her ascent to the next. The Revolution being fought in the name of Mexico was but another rung on that ladder, a temporary foothold which had now served its purpose. This was the correct way of things, the staccato rhythm to which her canine heart thundered. Two years previously, on that torrid night of attrition prior to her escape from the carnival, Soledad had shed far more than her mother's blood in the East Texas rain; the social and biological authorities of family and tribe had likewise been swept away on the tides of a cosmic tempest. Standing now at a new frontier, she had manifestly also surpassed the parameters of Pancho's Revolution and its concerns with the maintenance of a nation state. In her freshly acquired status as an outlaw of time and space, she had no more need

of national identity than she did of family or rank or social status or a claim to humanity or any of the myriad trivialities which so enslaved the inhabitants of this prison planet.

Soledad slid out of her military jacket letting it fall unceremoniously to the bloodied ground. Drawing the revolver once more she raised her face to the frayed sky and aimed into the vast expanse of space beyond.

“Adiós a Mexico. Adiós a la nación.”

Stars exploded at the whim of her trigger finger.

Pedro Meyer's photographs are from his

Mexico 68: October 2 is not forgotten!

AVANDARO 71

Curated by Rogelio Villarreal

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