TONIA LEÓN
Tonia León

For José Emilio Pacheco:
the child who dared to hear
the poet who dared to write

Shema

Hay que darse valor para hacer esto:
escribir cuando rondan las paredes
ácidos perros del furor, guardianes
de un orden que estalló
y en sus pedazos
sueña la lepra envenenar la tierra.
Hay que darse valor para hacer esto.
No se puede callar, ir al silencio
Y es tan profundamente inútil hacer esto.
Y es doloroso hablar.
Más doloroso,
más difícil aún,
callarse a tiempo.
Antes que los gusanos, los instantes,
abran la boca muda de una letra
y le coman su espíritu.

José Emilio Pacheco, El Reposo del Fuego,
(México: Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1966) 67-68
I. Bridge to Nowhere

On a bridge, a small bridge somewhere, there is a man with his mouth open in an almost oval forming a scream which like your worst nightmare can't be heard, because:
1. It is silent
2. It is not loud enough
3. No one is around
4. Everyone is deaf
5. It is a scream in another language
6. Anyone present is behind a computer screen, engaged in writing a program which can analyze holocaust literature, and the writer is at the thirteenth hour because the deadline for the grant proposal was this morning.
7. We are standing behind window shades
8. We are engaged in reading our newspapers to be abreast of what is happening in the world.
10. That's not my profession
11. The screamer is probably an escapee from an insane asylum
12. I have a plane to catch to a conference in Providence, R.I.
13. He's probably a Nazi
14. He's an illegal alien
15. He's a dirty Jew
16. I know that guy he lives next door, always been a pain in the ass.
17. I have a sore throat and if I go out, the night air will make it worse.
18. It's a shame, but I just don't feel up to it right now.
19. Do you have any idea of what happens when you get involved with those kind of things?
21. I can’t hear a thing.
22. I began to go out, but then I couldn’t find my other shoe.
23. I’m afraid

II. Screams

Solitary scream
solitary screams.
Now, dissonant choir of formless horror.
Sanitized screams
processed and frozen into ink, letters, words, critiques and commentaries.
But open THAT book to any page(if you dare),
pry open the doors of any cattlecar,
compressed onto pages, thrown into ditches,
unformed words smothered in pits
the Earth
no tombstones, graves)
those muted screams tumble out but fail to fly
screams which won’t be silenced
herd them back; push them back.
But you can’t;
They are ringing in your ears, deafening all other sounds.

Oh, where’s that wonderful key?
The one which deletes all words/sounds from consciousness?
Try ESCape (upper left)
Muted screams still tremble through time, 
screams so rackingly loud  
that (almost) no one could hear them. 
Exception: In 1944- a five-year old on a bus  
somewhere in Mexico City heard and began to cry. 

Eons for starlight to travel to our planet, 
only decades for those sounds, those screams to reach our ears. 

A scream pressed into a book. 
A scream resuscitated by those words,  
like chuño, the freeze-dried potatoes of the frigid Andes  
Now reconstituted by writer and reader.  
"Goddam, Pacheco, why do you come back to us with these bloody old tales?"  
"Why?"  
"We Mexican, Maya-Quiche, TzolTzil, Huicholes, Zoque, we mestizos  
beloved children of ancient peoples.  
We the beloved sons and daughters of ancient peoples carry the precious though  
bloodied memories of our past,  
We remember. We remember, we don't forget. We won't forget."

III. How to Respond? 

How to respond to a scream  
which ceaselessly escapes  
from that book?  
From the near abyss of recent history,  
How to respond?  

It drips onto the day, a reopened wound.  
It won't go way.
It's an epidemic, a pandemic.
Now I hear it dripping off the pages of the La Jornada
January 1998, screams from the south, from the hills.
Is it Lhasa or Las Casas?
Or Putamayo in the Colombian Amazon?
Round-up, Monsanto, Glyphosate -
unwelcome visitor, the grandchild of Nazi science,
once exterminator of Jews, gypsies, gays, and other deviants,
continues its lethal legacy
efficiently (or not so efficiently) exterminating coca plants, fields, children,
women, simple farmers, villages, peoples, ancient heritages
herbicide/pesticide/homicide/genocide
The dying earth bleeds, gushes forth
black sticky blood.
The moans mingle.
How to respond?
A choir of corporate voices makes comforting sounds.

IV. Communication Problem

No problem in the emission, nor in the communication
The message is clear and horrifying
IT IS NOT ENCODED IN ANOTHER LANGUAGE
There's no problem in deciphering it
The problem resides in the receptor
Who doesn't want to receive the message
Who refuses to receive the message.

2. Close your eyes.
3. Throw the book away or return it to the library.
4. Rationalize:
   It was a long time ago,
   It's a work of fiction,
   Historical fiction.
   Those times are over.

This text requires analysis
but my mind refuses to sit, to calculate,
to count, to analyze
while that screaming keeps on drumming in
my ears, my bloodstream, memory
and this has been going on for years.
This is a text which requires analysis
(Nazi scientists were prototypes of rational, logical, analytical
I search in vain for that citation of Octavio Paz:
In the twentieth century we learned to murder coldly,
scientifically. Reason and intellect have united, collaborated
to produce an efficient termination of extraneous (i.e. unwanted) life.

V. How Could You Be Such a Naive Reader?

You are a naive reader caught up in the manipulations of a text.
Frightfully, the images appear:
creations of a masterful writer's imagination

Is that so?
Invention or echoes of history's machinations?
Come on, didn't its author sit down to write a best seller?
To demonstrate his skills at creating new perplexing
forms for the reader to decipher?
Quite a literary feat the "nueva novella entendible of the incomprehensible?"
My dear accomplished scholar,
I'm sorry to tell you this,
but you've been caught up in the nets
of a brilliant, prizewinning writer.

VI. To Be Or Not To Be An Axolotl

The ever open-eyed axolotl
Refuse to close their eyes
Refusing to hide in words or history.
Do you remember those “pequeños rostros rosados aztecas”
those
small, coral-colored Aztec faces of the mudpuppies that Cortázar
saw in the Paris aquarium?
Los axolotl eran como testigos de algo y como horribles juíces?
(425)
The mudpuppies were like witnesses of something and like terri-
fying judges.
“Los ojos de oro seguían ardiendo con su dulce, terrible luz:
seguían mirándome.” (244)
Their eyes of gold kept on burning with a sweet terrible light:
they kept on looking at me.”
“Acaso los ojos veían en plena noche, y el día continuaba para
ellos indefinidamente.”
Perhaps the eyes could see in the middle of the night, and the
day continued eternally for them.
But worst of all:
LOS OJOS DEL AXOLOTL NO TIENEN PÁRPADOS.
Could melatonin work if we had no eyelids?
VII. *The Reluctant Witness*

Reluctantly I come in contact with this text; it sears my skin, my eyelids, my glands; it's a cancer of the consciousness which I could do without; I have my own problems, real life problems we all have our problems.

This text can't be read in the usual manner; it insidiously enters the bloodstream like radioactivity of the consciousness, like platelets which have become a thousand eyes, each eye a light, each light a letter of the Talmudic script. G-d has been here (or at least tried)

This consciousness like the smell of vinegar penetrates all places, all spaces stinging the eyes offending the nose.

You, you at your desk, you there in your lab, or at your computer screen analyzing, analyzing. you think you have some control of something because you have the chemical formula and its name Pridefully you've named it,
or better still numbered it.
After you've finished analyzing this vinegar
What then? it still stinks.

VIII. Venetian Blinds and Newspapers

This document is calling for action,
but what action since this isn't "Back to the Future"?
(Now there are cries from the mountains, not the Alps,
not the Polish mountains, murmurs here from the South)
What action beyond the movement of a heavyhearted pen?

Open the shades,
Open to the shadows
Look beyond the newspapers
beyond the shades and newspapers,
Venetian blinds.
Persian blinds.
Austrian blinds.
Mexican blinds.
Colombian blinds.
Celluloid blinds.
Bamboo blinds.
Wooden blinds.
Now the forests have been cut down
They can't blind us any more.
Nor hide THEM
but where will the birds and jaguars sleep?

Blinds made of words,
and images,
as well as silences.
They're all around us-
windows which blind us
with painted scenes across their screens
called nightly news.

Is homo sapiens a camel?
Do we have films on our eyes?
(or just in front of our eyes)
If not blinds, words to hide behind.
Or silences, unwritten news.

You will die:
This is the imam's call to prayer 6x a day
The novice monk sits and contemplates the corpses,
Fresh corpses, old corpses in Llasa or is it Las Casas?
You have to forgive me,
I get confused about these far-off places.
Mountaintowns
Terrorized by history.
Calling us to awakening, to pain.
Modern civilization:
The classification of pain & suffering
The organization of p and s
The rationalization of pain & suffering
The analysis of pain & suffering
Painkillers- killers of pain- killlers- pain

IX. Whose Suffering? Who's Suffering?

Others' pain and suffering
Other in death is fragmented
little fragment, slivers of your bones
stab our being
whose leg, whose neck in the pits?
No identifying marks like capped teeth
Or rings,
We know where they went.

He's looking out the shutters
But his sight is limited
How much can you see through a chink of the blinds.
Or is she blinded by fear, shivering, locked in.
Is it fear of becoming the Other?
The victim, the prey?
No definitely not remorse
just fear of a shift in the players.

X. Meta-analysis

Calm down:
This is just another literary analysis not a political poem.
Why wrestling so with this Mexican novel?
The slippery words, slimy thoughts, unthinkable referents defy words.
It is a theoretical framework a frame for the unframable,
the unthinkable? That which cannot be thought of because it is not comprehensible.
Not so: there is psychoanalysis of the irrational part of our psyche/there is analysis of the common cold, if not of cancer and AIDS. Why do you in your arrogant ignorance believe this book is beyond analysis? Have you looked at literary approaches to the analysis of holocaust literature?
To classify always represents a compromise with reality.
What happens cannot be faithfully depicted in words.
The unmentionable, ineffable cannot be described in words. "Words are garbage," a Buddhist teacher once proclaimed.
Humankind mistakes the finger pointing to the moon for the moon. Here there is only darkness. The moon, even the moon can't bear viewing this human desecration/creation/organization/ quintessence of rational thought motored totally by the shadows of ego. But theory is a way to help us understand. To refuse to work in a theoretical framework is a sign of ignorance or intellectual indolence.

XI. Writer or Transcriber

"All right then, listen to me," Mordecai said after a bit more reflection. "Open both ears; If a man suffers all alone, it is clear his suffering remains within him. Right?"
"Right," Ernie said.
"But if another looks at him and says to him, 'You're in trouble, my Jewish Brother,' what happens then?"
The blanket stirred and revealed the sharp point of Ernie Levy's nose. "I understand that too," he said politely. "He takes the suffering of his friend into his own eyes."
Mordecai sighed, smiled, sighed again. "And if he's blind, Do you think that he can take it in?"
"Of course, through his ears."
"And if he is deaf?"
"Then through his hands," Ernie said gravely.
"And if the other is far away, if he can neither hear him nor see him and not even touch him—do you believe then that he can take in his pain?"
"Maybe he could guess at it," Ernie said with a cautious expression.
Mordecai went into ecstasies. "You've said it, my love—That is exactly what the Just Man does" He senses all the evil
rampant on earth, and takes it into his heart’”
A finger against the corner of his mouth, Ernie followed
the course of a thought. He exhaled sadly, But what good does it do
to sense it if nothing is changed?”
“It changes for God, don’t you see?”
And as the child frowned skeptically, Mordecai suddenly
became terribly pensive. “That which is far off, he murmured
as if to himself, “that which is profound, profound, who can reach it?”

André Schwarz-Bart *The Last of the Just*, p.174 trans. from the French

*Epilogue*

A nombre de qué puedo condenar a muerte
a otros por lo que son o piensan?
Pero ¿cómo dejar impunes
La tortura o el genocidio o el matar de hambre?
No quiero nada para mí,
sólo anhelo
Lo posible imposible:
un mundo sin víctimas.

José Emilio Pacheco, “Fin de Siglo” in, *Fin de siglo y otros poemas*,
México, D.F: Secretaría de Educación Pública, Cultura SEP : Fondo
de Cultura Económica, 1984

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