

Wild Garlic: The Journal of Maria S.

by *Elisavietta Ritchie*

Ce texte recrée le journal d'une femme emprisonnée en Amérique du Sud pour des raisons politiques

What am I here for? Playing my mouth organ in the rain. No substitute for my guitar, but they broke my fingers last time in. You perform with what you have.

"You only play one tune!" a man complained, rain dripping from his hat. Then, from pity or to rub it in, he tossed one coin in my empty beret. Few passersby on such a rainy night. Even the mottled cur who always followed me remained in my doorway.

I know many songs, but nowadays you can only hear up close, then you would rather hear than look. Still, I write my songs, take my risks, earn my coins—

Not like that bitch by the bridge. In her satin dress, she sits on a parapet and smokes and begs—pretends she's lost her purse.

So when he said, "You want to come along?" I went. Anyone who still asks me—I'll dammit go with him, especially when it rains.

I should never have offered to brew him a glass of *maté* on the electric ring, but my room is close by the plaza and we were soaked with rain. The cur stretched across my threshold growled, would not have let him pass. Should trust a dog more than a man.

Across the shelves stood photographs of my lovers. Heroes of the revolution. All dead. Yellowed newspaper clippings, speeches in my handwriting, foreign books, hidden but not well enough. Rolled

*"The circle, the most elementary form, is the synthesis of the greatest opposites; it combines the concentric with the eccentric in a simple and balanced form."
V. Kandinsky*

in corners: the posters of me with my guitar in the packed stadium. Two decades ago. Then, everyone knew my name, everyone hummed my songs, a few dared sing the words.

After the last demonstrations, I tried to slip out of sight.

The cards failed to warn that someone would recognize me. And I should have smelled his stink of militia. He remembered my file, fingered me, turned me in. The wasp in the cold coffee cup still floats, opaque but live. Welcome to our shadowed land.

At least my harmonica broke his jaw.

* * *

Morning. Pain drums every bone. My head is stuffed with the stuff strewn on these stone floors: dead leaves, fruit pits, paint chips, coal grit, lint, flattened crickets, lost lice, wasp nests knocked into bits, dustballs hardened to marbles, plain dust, the dust of blood, and sepia scraps of last year's news—

How did news matter so? How we died to create it. How our country died with us.

In some café beyond the walls, a band strikes up a tango.

Tomorrow my rage will be raw again. Today my hate is swathed in pain. Cracked ribs don't show.

* * *

A militiaman enters. Not the same one. This one hands me a dented tin can: "Here, you old bag, is your cup." Empty, with redness around the edges. Then one brown banana and half a roll: left from his breakfast? The weather is warm, but he gives me a tattered khaki blanket, leads me down to the garage.

A van backs into the entrance. Roses and orchids are painted over the sides, and beneath them in curlicue letters: "Flowers For All Occasions." On the rear doors are painted funeral wreaths.

The driver leaves on its motor, and waits. From his radio spins El Presidente's speech. The man in the passenger seat tests the sights of his rifle. The militiaman unbolts the back of the van, motions me in with his pistol. The sill is too high. Hands reach out and pull me aboard.

The van is jammed with women, mostly young. Many wear black. Some with swollen bellies under their flowered skirts sit on the benches. The rest of us crouch on the floor. They look at me without speaking. The back door of the van bangs shut, I hear the bolt slide into place. The van revs its motor, jolts forward through traffic, blaring its horn. El Presidente winds up his speech. Then it is marches, tangos, love songs. The driver whistles along. The van stops and starts, at last keeps moving, faster and faster, over roads wind-

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hovers like a dirigible.*

ing and ruttled. With every jolt, my ribs scream.

When the van slows, we hear sheep, goats or cattle, or the sounds of a village. Loudspeakers replay the speech of our ruler, his words pry their way through the front windows, the chinks where the van doors do not quite meet the frame, waft up through the holes in the rusted floor. We hear the clink as they fit the nozzle of gas into the tank. When the van is still, heat billows inside like surf.

"They are moving us to larger quarters," one large woman whispers. Her hands grope around me, press on my shoulders.

"My name is Maria," I tell her.

"Maria is my name too," she answers, then, as if repelled by my boniness, she turns away.

Later I cannot find the roll the militiaman gave me. The banana squashed in my pocket. Everyone whispers of thirst.

At last the van stops, the door is unbolted, we climb down.

Dark now, no moon, nor lights of village or farm. The men shine flashlights in our faces. We file forward to the front of the van, line up to relieve ourselves by a ditch. Headlights imprison us in their beams. The wind is chilly: we must be in the highlands. A dark shape rustles across the road. The guards give the pregnant women oranges. The rest of us drink cold tea poured from a glass jug. My cup tastes of tomato paste.

Beyond the headlights, I could roll into the ditch, disappear in the hollow, crawl away in the night—

The rifle cracks: one girl tried it. We are counted and loaded back into the van. We hear the scrape of a spade. The driver takes one of the women out of the van for a few minutes. The other man watches us with his rifle. Then he takes his turn. The woman is put back inside. The motor starts up again.

I think two days pass. At stops, they add water or gas to the van, change drivers. We pretend to sleep.

The lines on my palm foretold journeys.

The van turns off its motor. We get out stiffly, are herded inside a building....

The fragrance of a house just renovated.

Smell of fresh plaster, still too wet to paint. Patches dry to map uncertain continents. Gray walls mute the glare of dangling bulbs. Was this a villa once? Without the clutter of brocade, mahogany, wintering geraniums which grew too tall, these halls are airy rectangles of space. How my guitar would resonate!

Guards prod us toward the stairs. I follow ragged backs of people down a slanted white-washed corridor. One side opens into arches: we move too fast to see beyond wrought iron. In the courtyard, a stone cross from the belfry lies in a corner, half shot away. Over a doorway I note: *IN THE HOUSE OF OUR SAVIOUR.*

No vespers or matins here. The church bell has lost its tongue.

Sentinels: Three piebald kittens, stubby tailed, behind the garbage cans, uncurl their paws to scratch. They watch as guards herd us along.

Cats mean at least there won't be mice.

We are shoved into cells that once held monks. Where have they gone? Outlines of crucifixes etched in dust cling to walls. Small windows are open this mild day except for grills. Mine overlooks a cemetery....Like Saint Jerome contemplating the skull, I gaze at graves, meditate on how to get away.

Beyond the monastery walls, departure is discouraged by iron bars, barbed wire, big dogs. Our government is generous.

What is going on in here?

Like scanning newspapers without my spectacles—broken in the fray (that poetic word which hides knuckles, truncheons, cattle prods)—I decipher only bold headlines of this place. Texts, subtexts, remain illegible, in alien tongues.

If I learned the code, I'd read the single drops of blood which stain their hands, our crevices, our skin. All I comprehend of that vermilion flow is a river, muddy red, always surging on.

The sun sets through barbed wire behind a mountain stretched out, worn until rounded. They call it: Woman Asleep. I say: Woman Slain.

You cannot whip a mountain or pull out its fingernails. Though you scar its flanks, you cannot bury it into a hole. However you torture a mountain, it will not betray anyone's secrets. Can a hill feel pain, or cry? If you probe its veins and caves with instruments, underground rivers may gush from the mountain's core. If you hold a flame to its breast, the surface burns. Cooled, it turns ashen and brown, yet does not entirely die. If you strip its skin, avalanches avenge the wound.

Would we might engulf and drown our tormentors.

Barbed wire snares the sun in rusty claws. The sun escapes behind the peaks. Beyond the peaks, more mountains stretch for centuries.

The pregnant women have their own table, receive beef in their soup, sugar cane, tins of milk. Sometimes a baby is born. It is always taken away. Often the mother also disappears. Then in the morning, through the window grill I notice dirt is disturbed in the cemetery beyond the walls. In a day or two, it blends with the ground.



Shlomit Segal, *Untitled, Mixed Media, 1987*

Beyond the barbed wire toward the town, the wives of the guards push perambulators.

* * *

New women are brought in. New bonds of friendship form. Everyone here says her name is Maria. The matron calls all the women, even young, *señora*.

I am not so young. A crackled harpsichord in some rock band. The others leave me mostly alone.

Until this noon: a new girl, fragile as jasmine, blonde, still wearing yellow silk, was dealt the other bunk. What is she in for—prostitution? petty theft? unpaid fines? or did she just cross the plaza on the wrong day?

I don't ask questions. She has none. That cloak of numbness fast cocoons us all, we forget to rage against our fate.

* * *

Chili still burns my mouth like the twisted scythe of peppers redder than blood, or the brick lace of the bruise on my cheek.

"For your own good you're here," the matron snarls, "and for good we protect you from each other and the world from you."

They file our nails, cut our hair likenuns. *Safe-keeping*, they call it. Who needs forks or knives for soup?

As if a spoon could not gouge eyes. As if the handle, snapped, would not cut veins.

* * *

A need for defensive measures. To kill if you have no weapons: maintain surprise, find two sharp rocks, swing them like cymbals in a curve toward the temples—your target will squash like a frog. You can also hug-break ribs, shark-kiss throats, bite necks, slice skin, smother in mud.

Our barren yard is bare even of stones. And I am five feet tall, a gnarled nanny goat of a crone.

Wait till I get outside.

* * *

Night times are long. They lock our cells at dusk. But we have nocturnal companions.

Five inches plus two-inch antennae, the cockroach drops by, walks down the wall, hovers like a dirigible. Six legs poised to dash, still all night he observes from his window grill. Protecting? Threatening? Perverse.

On earth before vertebrates, the cockroach will outlive man. So I can't repudiate his right to share my span of unserved time, seven inches of space, the warmth of my lamp.

And I admire his grace, his ability to decamp: when danger threatens, he runs, survives in a crack, hides from searchlight and sun, is patient, later resumes his station.

At night, also, we witness transfigurations: from my house, the moon was an apricot, glowing, ripe. Beyond these grills it hangs rotten, lumpy, zebra-striped.

Other transmutations occur.

Rats even creep into dreams. A young one, mutant, albino, becomes almost tame. A kitten licks the rat's face as if she were its mother. A phone rings! Here! The

blonde Maria says her lover is coming for dinner to meet me, so I start to boil potatoes and carrots in milk, but the poor rat, half-drowned, surfaces in the saucepan. I wrap him in a white towel. While I am drying his fur, he turns into a baby, all peaches-and-cream. I dress the baby in a yellow blanket: he will stay up for supper.

Then the guard taunts me for sleeping late—"Who do you think you are, señora?"

* * *

The blonde Maria moves to a cell down the hall: she has discovered her circles.

"God's everywhere," she says.

"Bless you," I say, as if she had sneezed, "He is."

Playing out His infinite domino games.

* * *

In the continuing night, horses shriek, loom in the dark, paw the flames—

Red jaws leer from the woods—Jaguars—

Vultures plummet—

Nightmare, or real? In the morning, corpses in courtyards appear substantial, prove heavy to lift into the truck. I recognize a Maria who just gave birth.

We learn to do as we are told the hardest way.

* * *

At work time, we adapt our woman skills to others' lives. But have we nothing better to do with our own than stitch uniforms for militiamen under the guards' needle eyes? We would rather sew their shrouds.

* * *

At exercise time, they make us trot around the courtyard like fillies at the track. Guards on the balconies shout their bets. The dirt smells of manure, rain smells of urine.

At least the sun! I feel like neighing. How I'd canter, prance—jump the fence—

But, a splay-legged mare, I hobble and wheeze around, around, around...

* * *

Bath time. We're carved from amber or onyx or alabaster. I'm marble: veined, mottled, nicked, but hard.

Beneath her starched khaki, the massive matron looks pulpy, an overgrown manioc. Even with her revolver, she seems more naked than we.

Some night, all together the girls will jostle her, wrestle her down to the slippery tiles.

Until then, we scramble for chips of soap, complain of cold water, ignore her orders: "Hurry, señoras, hurry, no more time."

* * *

For pastimes, we play checkers with pebbles, shuffle in slippers, wash our rags in a bucket. With a chunk of charcoal we draw all over the walls of our cells: lovers, babies, houses—

As if we were gypsies clipping the real estate section, atheists dreaming of God, monks dreaming of girls. I dream mangoes and oceans, and my room in a pink house with cracking walls.

I collect scraps of paper. With a pencil stub dropped by a guard, I arrange my patterns of taps, encode my notes.

Some nights I hum my tunes on a borrowed comb. Someone recalls the words. Someone identifies me. Suddenly everyone sings, remembers why we are here.

* * *

Someone reported on me.

Here, music is only the clatter of rifles, clang of gates, soft-peddalling truncheon, curses, screams.

Now I only compose inside my bandaged head, sing so loudly I smash the skull.

* * *

One Sunday, there are visiting hours. Children trying to smile are brought for an hour by grandmothers complaining of inflation, lumbago. Everyone cries. Those whose babies are not brought, were taken away at birth, are not known, cry the most. I would cradle them.

The rest of us, silent, wait. I read the lines on my hand. Nobody visits me. I've outlived all who might have dared.

* * *

Winter is a long-term sentence, spring a season of false arrests, broken paroles.

At last, springtime comes to the yard. The rats scramble over each other squealing with rodent ardor. Overhead, vultures circle with twigs for nests in the belfry. The guards in their balconies drink beer, fire their rifles at clouds or at us, toss dice to determine who will win the blonde Maria tonight.

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By the edge of the fence I discover a harbinger more blessed than jasmine, crocus, bougainvillea: wild garlic grass.

* * *

We have good neighbours. Beyond two sets of fences, wires, and gates with triple bolts, the men from the next wing circle inside their yard. Men blurred as photos in rain....

They notice us, straighten up, shout, ape gestures of sex. Some girls whistle back.

I rub the mud from my face. An old man catches my eye: we smile. We have known love, we have laughed, raged, sobbed, cradled babies, mourned, fought for ideals, and each other. We remember, and thank God.

Were we, some night, to leap these fences, wires and gates, we would hide together, curl in a pile of leaves or rags, enter each other with immense gentleness, our bones clanking, clanking....

* * *

Has a change occurred in the country? One night the guards drive away, and the matron. No farewell parties. Just before new guards enter the courtyard, take up their positions, I grab my tin can and the wad of papers covered with words and notes, wrap my blanket around like a shawl, find the gap where the barbed wire is loose from wrought iron, squeeze through, and begin a long journey back toward the coast.

I walk very slowly. At first, only at night. By day I sleep behind a hummock or boulder near the road. My slippers soon wear out on the unpaved roads.

Once a jitney bus stops: I have no money, but the driver lets me ride on the roof between crates of chickens and fruit. I wrestle one melon free, pry the rind with

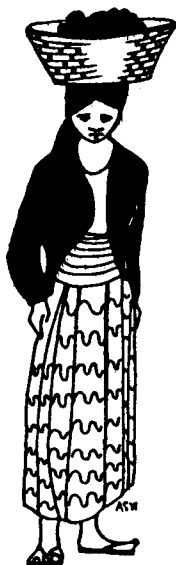
my nails. When he lets everyone off in a village, he throws me a pair of sandals somebody left behind.

When I reach the city, the pink house by the plaza, locks have been changed but I know how to pry a window. My papers, photographs, books are gone. Perhaps to the militia's archives? My mattress to the dump? But among scraps of posters swept under the wardrobe, I find my harmonica, hurry outside, relock the door.

The mottled cur limps over, lays his mangy jaw in my lap, offers his fleas. This time, though, he goes with me back to the street, the only dog not to howl when I play my harmonica, and in this old cracked voice I sing my new songs.

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Elizavietta Ritchie's Flying Time: Stories & Half-Stories includes four PEN Syndicated Fiction winners. A Wound-Up Cat and Other Bedtime Stories (Palmerston Press, Toronto) is the newest of her nine poetry collections. The Arc of the Storm (Signal Books, Chapel Hill, NC) is due in 1994. She edited The Dolphin's Arc: Poems on Endangered Creatures of the Sea.



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Artist Anne S. Walker*

RUTH MANDEL

For me writing is kicking. I am a child of a Holocaust Survivor and I write poetry about the Holocaust from the perspective of those who are raised among its ashes. I write to kick out at the silence imposed on the Survivors, our parents; and to kick against the expectations placed on us as their silence becomes our silence and our responsibility. I write to kick back at the noise created by mean-wellers who want to 'move on from the past'; and to kick back at the noise created by the deniers who want to obliterate it. I see this kicking as relevant to women's struggles with trauma and our efforts to write for comfort, connection and change.

Skin

Let me tell you a story about loss.

Once upon a time there was a loss so complete it peeled the skin off the hearts of an entire people. It was a loss so deep that for years everyone was afraid to use their blood.

Time passed impotently as no one dared ask nor utter nor evoke. Many years were spent living from the head up, hiding and protecting furiously pulsing hearts. Many years were spent fearfully pretending that many years could go on this way.

But everyone knew that one day children would be born—children who would not want to live without their flesh.

Eventually these children were conceived—the unions of two skinned histories, carried with joy and hope, held in wombs churning with suspense.

And one day these children were born. Born kicking, born frightened, born into the plot of stories untold—stories hanging heavy in their minds like mysterious pelts on a shuddering wall.

As these children grew up they didn't dare ask or utter or evoke. But their dreams were full of soulful shadows and their days were full of thin tears.

The children would soon refuse to live any longer with skinless hearts and blood stilled in their veins.

They began to kick again as when they were born.

Ruth Mandel is a writer and feminist activist in Toronto. She is the child of a Holocaust survivor and is currently writing poetry about the Holocaust.