Sacabo & Rulfo

An essay by Elena Poniatowska

Juan Preciado promised his mother at the moment of her death that he would go to Comala to search for his father, Pedro Páramo. There, in a vacant, ravaged town of ghosts where time and distance are suspended and where the living are indistinguishable from the dead, he found Josephine Sacabo, dressed in black and wrapped in a black rebozo. It was she with her pale hand who guided him through the darkness.

A photographer, Josephine Sacabo began to extricate—from the shadows, from the desolate landscapes, from the night sky, from the voices of the stones, from the murmuring of the dead, from the spines of the cactus—not only the *patrón* Pedro Páramo but also Susana San Juan, most luminous of all women, most inaccessible, most deranged, sanest, boldest. Juan Preciado, or rather Juan Rulfo, became aware that Josephine Sacabo was not from this world when he realized that she could take pictures of the dead. Actually, Rulfo and Sacabo had already met, for before his only published novel would find her photography, he and she—beneath the earth—conjoined their deepest, most sorrowful roots—those of a major novelist from southern Jalisco with those of a major photographer born on the border between Mexico and the United States. Although they never met face to face, they were soulmates nonetheless, knowing each other in darkness and in light, in icy mist and in fog, in love and in hate.

Would Rulfo write for Sacabo? Would he write for the photographer who gave face and body to Susana San Juan, who created a desolate and tormented landscape for Pedro Páramo, who yoked herself forever with death in order to plumb the ruffian spirit? How could Josephine capture a world that possesses us like an unquiet soul and torments us because it is the world of death? When one looks at the artist's photographs, it is clear that they are not the work of an illustrator but rather of an illuminata, a widow, a mourner, a tragic heroine, a Texan of ancient Greece. Josephine herself wrote me, "I never meant for this series to illustrate *Pedro Páramo*. It was a creation that sprang from a very personal response, particularly to Susana San Juan and her dilemma. I felt immediately that

Rulfo was describing a world I already knew."

I don't recall any series of photographic images that are as powerful as the words of Juan Rulfo. Not even the photos by Rulfo himself, a great photographer in his own right.

If photography elevates the mastery of light to the level of art, and if a literary masterpiece illuminates a universe of characters, one may conclude that the two series of images by Rulfo and Sacabo are an apprehension of ghosts, a confrontation with darkness, with shadows that resist and spurn the distant light of both artists—for light does not wield the power of shadows.

Shadows as seductive as poetry.

Shadows that tell a story, observe, reveal, whisper, keen.

Shadows that illuminate the darkness.

Shadows that shear off the roots of the soul.

Rulfo emerges from a pantheon not from a graveyard.

Rulfo is not a saint and nonetheless what is his is sacred.

Sacabo makes sacred every image.

Sacabo gains entrance to where the dead lie sleeping, the Greek definition of cemetery.

In the cemetery the writer and the photographer find each other and together construct a myth of immortality. Artists dig deeply into their own lives and the lives of others and lay them bare. If their work touches the soul, they themselves matter little. Images and words become eternal.

Images and words are made of stone.

A blinding light captures the spirit of the pages and they take on form and weight, they accept the yoke of gravity, and they are immobilized.

There is a click. A road lined with stony trees appears beneath the smothering sky. One page gives way to the next and becomes the body awaiting inevitable punishment. Another click. Heaven and earth throb in the heat of a frenetic coupling. Another page, a quiet hand on a breast reaches out, waiting for something more than misery, wanting to cling to the remembered body bathed by the sea.

Half a face watches its other half. Freed from her tomb, Susana San Juan places one foot on the first step of the sarcophagus, but the way is long and difficult to see.

Who begins the summoning of the spirits? Rulfo's tortured page? Sacabo's passionate lens? Who resurrects whom in this game of time and distance? These artists animate each other in a dimension far beyond the laws of physics where

ideas come together and freely unite.

Josephine Sacabo is Rulfo's lover.

She is his lover in death.

Her hands toy with his skull.

Josephine takes Juan Rulfo's head in her hands and caresses it. "I want to bring you out of hell," she tells him.

"I want you to redeem me," he responds.

She saddens. "I cannot free you from your own violence."

On some occasion, in some interview Rulfo told me, "When I wrote *Pedro Páramo* I was trying to escape a great angst. Because to write one truly suffers."

Josephine feels the creative burden in much the same way.

The confrontation between Sacabo and Rulfo is one of intense forces.

Sacabo, like Rulfo, reduces everything to its essentials. She knows that nothing is more important than death.

The tumbled down walls, the broken windows that are part of the rulfian ambiance, Rulfo's obsession with doors—symbolizing the path to light and to darkness—they fill our eyes with dust, dust and more dust, the dust that we will all become. Both the writer and the photographer see dust and smoke or skulls—a world as black as the world of death. Candles afford the only possible illumination, allowing us to glimpse a pale hand, a cloud, a reclining woman's back, a breast, a forehead, a cemetery statue, a stairway to the abyss, an angel from behind, a sudden flame.

Pedro Páramo is the loss of paradise. The tentative title, "The Deserts of the Earth," alludes to the barren expanse of the Great Plain of southern Jalisco and to the spiritual emptiness of Father Rentería, who was the son of Pedro Páramo in the first version. Rulfo changed the title to "The Murmurs," closer to Edgar Lee Masters' *Spoon River Anthology*, from which the Mexican writer formally proceeds. He chose a new title, "A Star Next to the Moon," and rejected it as too celestial and because it had nothing to do with the dark *patrón* Pedro Páramo.

Josephine and Juan walk hand in hand, and because Susana San Juan is their guardian angel, they do not fear death. She wraps them in the poetic power of her madness: the wind lifts them into flight. They do not prick themselves on the cactus or the thorny tree branches. Susana San Juan, the mad angel, protects them, freeing them from the cruelty and constraints of the traditional church and sending them into an astral space, the habitation of spirits and stars.

—*Translated by* Connie Todd, Curator,
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