

Craig Woods

Dog Days:

*Reflections on Time, Abandonment, and
Pedro Páramo*

It stares at me through a film of dust - a second-hand copy of Juan Rulfo's *Pedro Páramo*, the dog-eared cover adorned with an illustration of two vandalized Mexican figurines; bride and groom, arm in arm, their once featureless faces now scarred with black eyeless sockets and cold skeletal grins. I can taste their tragedy in the dust, Jo-Jo. The bland report of time's grey train as it grinds meaninglessly forwards in your absence. This dust has become my home since you left. I can trace my runaway thoughts and dreams in the tiny furrows carved there by phantom winds.

Those same winds have carried my emissary to Comala. As I type, I can sense her progress; my heart reverberating with the rhythms of her lithe muscles and the fires of her feral breath. Though an enormity of time and space separates her from me, Soledad is as symbiotically joined to me now as she has ever been. Like every other character I have ever written, she has accompanied me since childhood; skulking anonymously in the grey afternoon shadows of hazily remembered play-grounds, lying curled tight by the open fire on long-forgotten Christmas eves, her low canine growls lacing my boyish dreams with a latent but gorgeous fury. She had endured those years with the patience of a volcano. Waiting for me to write her story. Waiting to become it. Now our roles are reversed. It's the natural way of things. As her writer I can but only report on her progress. I can no more influence her actions nor decide her destiny than I could do so for my friends and associates in the corporeal realm. She has slipped out of time while I am laboured with it. It is only she and not I who can properly interrogate the landscape of her birth. In the fractured heart of modernizing Mexico, her keen hybrid senses can pick out the shards of dream and memory necessary for me to continue writing her story. Like her wild lupine ancestors she will hunt, capture and retrieve the material with savage single-mindedness. It is my duty to catalo-

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gue and assemble the material she retrieves. I must be prepared. I must shake off this dust before her return.

This is the painful part, Jo-Jo. This dust ties me to you. Ties me to those last hours we spent together in carnal embrace before your departure. A departure as sudden as Soledad's. Since you first lit up my sky, everything now happens with a logic of suddenness. The previously steady flow of one event bleeding gradually into another has long since been discontinued. Recent events are solid and partitioned, each as certain as the dark jewels shining from your proud Latin eyes, my love. I should be used to the "suddenlys" by now.

I'm thinking of you, Jo-Jo. Of our laughter among the red buildings. Of when we watched the swans in the fine April rain. We counted a thousand dogs in the liberated streets; we were writing a new story together on a grey parchment of sky. We sheltered from its darkness with red wine and jazz records. In my bed your hips were unfaltering as if propelled by the fire of shooting stars.

Those sheets lie abandoned. The signature of your impassioned bite now fades from the skin of my shoulder. Time has closed its fist in the silence you left behind.

"In my life there are many silences. In my writing too."

~Juan Rulfo

There's a peculiar timelessness about abandoned places. The shells of factories, distilleries, apartment blocks, hospitals, schools and the residual skeletons of entire townships which litter the post-modern landscape lend an anachronistic edge to the fringes of even the most ultramodern urban sprawl. As the ongoing legacy of the Industrial Revolution continues to alter our social environment into seemingly endless combinations of overpopulation and standardized municipal designs, so too does it generate an increasing number of nowhere-zones; derelict husks of architectural and industrial trends obsolete before their time in the merciless onward flow of a very narrowly defined form of progress. With spectral persistence, these faded vistas impose upon our collective psyche the reminders of a not-so-distant past which seems barely to have existed, while also merging with their modernized surroundings to ensure that we find ourselves in a temporal void where the notions of past and future are as flimsy as damp sugar paper. *The past may be dead*, these shabby remnants seem to suggest, *but the future was an illusion from the start*.

As children playing among these seemingly boundless ruins, we are arguably more attuned than our logic-bound adult counterparts to the anti-

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temporal aberrance at work in post-industrial desolation, instinctively projecting upon it our wayward dreams and feverish fantasies which are magnified and perpetuated among the fathomless shadows and defiant angles of a neglected architecture. I feel qualified to confirm this with the testimony of my own childhood spent wandering the slow industrial decay of the west of Scotland, where the once proud facades of world-renowned whisky distilleries and shipbuilding yards have for decades been exhaling their protracted black smoke death gasps across the waters of remote estuaries. The worlds our juvenile psyches uncover in these shabby hamlets are a hybrid concoction of our own inventive imaginations as they collide with the actual human dramas which took place there and whose every detail remains embedded in the moss-grown walls and rotten roofs -- recorded data waiting there for our minds and nervous systems to supply the soft-ware necessary for its replay. It is the ongoing changes of the post-modern landscape which allow these phantoms to survive and communicate with us, their myriad identities mingling with our own in a melting pot of shared consciousness. Throughout this endlessly repackaged modernist milieu where past and future have been rendered nothing more than effigies, we now exist in an eternal present where the infinite narratives of time are available to witness, to manipulate, and to be manipulated by. Our everyday environment is populated by ghosts and makes time travelers of us all.

“Yes, there is a structure in Pedro Páramo, but it is a structure made of silences, of hanging threads, of cut scenes, where everything occurs in a simultaneous time which is a no-time.”

~ Juan Rulfo

The ruins of Comala spread before Soledad in a haze of red shadow. In the infernal sunlight the town's boundary fades into a shimmering plain. The plain is a transparent lake dissolving in mists that veil a grey horizon. Farther in the distance, a range of mountains. Farther still, faint remoteness.

These are the dog days, the season when the August wind blows hot, venomous with the rotten stench of saponaria blossoms. Despite the enormity of this atmosphere, it cuts easily as paper at the blades of Soledad's heightened canine senses. She detects the shuffle of ungainly feet and the muted stink of stale sweat long before the figure emerges from the shattered door of the once white house, its walls now blackened and corroded. She has both revolvers trained on the stranger - one at his head, the other at his heart - as his eyes roll lethargically towards her. Those pale orbs glimmer with a lunatic quality but betray no hint of hostility. His voice is a frail whisper struggling to be heard through the air's humidity:

“Is that you, doña Eduvigis? What’s going on? Were you afraid?”

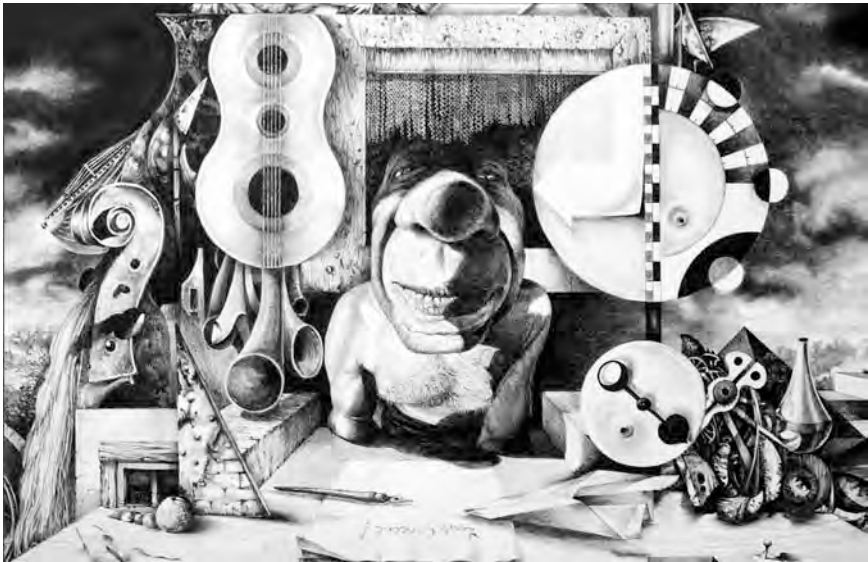
“My name isn’t Eduvigis. I am Soledad. I heard someone was here and I’ve come to see Comala. I intend to rest here a while.”

“Damiana Cisneros? Aren’t you one of the women who lived at the Media Luna?”

“I have never lived here. And my name is Soledad. I know no Damiana.”

“My mother told me about a woman named Damiana who looked after me when I was born. Was that you?”

Soledad lowers the guns which the man has evidently failed to acknowledge. There is no doubt that he is delirious, possibly insane. But he is not dangerous. She holsters her weapons and steps forward.



“Yes, I’m the one,” she relents, telling him what he wishes to hear. “I’ve known you since you first opened your eyes.”

“I’ll be glad to come with you.” His face brightens, the slack lips flexing in a fatigued grin. “I can’t get any rest here because of the yelling. Didn’t you hear it? How they were murdering someone? Didn’t you hear it just now?”

Inclining her face to the breeze, Soledad sniffs sharply three times. Some muted traces of human scent emanating from the opposite side of town but nothing nearby, only the drab lonely smells of desolation and abandonment.

“It may be some echo trapped in here. These deserted towns are full

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of echoes, especially since the Revolution. There are some screams that just don't stop as long as you're here to listen."

Her words seeming to pass ineffectually through him, the man raises a limp arm and gestures towards the door from which he emerged.

"It was doña Eduvigés who opened it. She told me it was the only room she had available."

"You actually spoke to this ... Eduvigés?"

"Yes. She was the one."

"Good for Eduvigés. Then she and this town are very much alive now that time is dead."

The notion of the line between the everyday and supernatural being fundamentally blurred within the disused pockets of a modernized world is at the very heart of *Pedro Páramo*. Initially following the first person narrative of Juan Preciado as he travels to the rundown Mexican desert town of Comala in search of the eponymous character whom he has been informed is his father, the story (and indeed its narrator) gradually splinter into a series of dislocated vignettes and dreamlike interludes. The grim details of Comala's past are communicated to the reader via the phantoms of collective memory which emerge from the town's shadowy ruins to regale Juan Preciado with their individual testimonies, each attempting to inveigle him deeper than he would like into their own private dramas. As Preciado becomes increasingly bewildered by these apparitions, he appears simultaneously to submit to Comala's peculiar logic until finally his first person narrative vanishes from the page completely, his identity submerged in the town's cauldron of memories which go on to complete the story of their own accord.

Ultimately, with its lucid evocation of a haunted landscape, its disorientating mélange of dream and memory, and the deftness with which its author leads the reader on a tantalizing treasure hunt where scenes of desolation proffer vast narrative riches, *Pedro Páramo* is a brief novel of great contextual depth and stylistic complexity, and one rightly deserving of the "modern classic" accolade frequently ascribed to it. However, much of this praise rests upon the book's reputation as a "ghost story" in a quite limited sense of the term and somewhat neglects the quite remarkable extent to which Rulfo illuminates the fundamental human truths of fractured identity and the crumbling authority of time as a linear concept in a social and cultural landscape where the onward thrust of modernization has concurrently resulted in increased squalor and desolation.

Of course, *Pedro Páramo* deals with these concepts in a peculiarly Mexican fashion and it would be tantamount to blasphemy for me to suggest that it be read as a universally applicable treatise on the modernist anomaly I have just described. A full comprehension of Rulfo's achievement in this regard is practically impossible until one appreciates the prevailing trends in

much Latin American (and particularly Mexican) literature prior to *Pedro Páramo*'s publication. Enmeshed among its multiple onion-like layers, the novel deals with themes of exploitation, revolution, mutiny, and political subterfuge in the heart of rural Mexico. For the time of its publication in 1955, these concerns were hardly unusual ones for Mexican writers to pursue, but they were for the most part explored in logical narratives and pragmatic prose styles which can now be identified as belonging to the social realist tradition. Eschewing this narrowly defined logic and pragmatism with a commitment to representing the fluctuating nature of the human psyche through the use of fragmented non-linear narrative, florid prose rich with metaphor and the jarringly candid and concise dialogue of dreams, Rulfo effectively tossed a live hand grenade into the established mechanisms of Latin American literature. As such, *Pedro Páramo* ought to be regarded as a revolutionary post-modernist text, both in its aesthetics and in its execution. While other Latin American writers, such as Borges and Casares, had previously broken considerable boundaries in prior decades, it is arguable that it was Rulfo's dual assault on both artistic and social traditions which finally blew a hole in the Latin American literary model through which Gabriel Marquez and many other subsequent innovators were able to climb towards a more flexible future.

"Because to write, one must truly suffer."

~ Juan Rulfo

This photo you sent me already seems old, my love. As though all of history has been compacted into your image. The photo is hot in my hand, as though you yourself were sweating upon my palm. Your eyes, however, are the future. All the infinite promise of the universe glimmers darkly in your gaze, Jo-Jo. Time can't touch me there.

But still I must wait. Wait for word from you. Wait for Soledad's return. Wait for an end to this insufferable incarceration in temporal linearity, which already has robbed me of five days. Five days of uncertain silence.

This morning the sun shone as it failed to do during your visit. For a long time I stood by my window in equal parts awe and frustration at the beauty concealed in this city. Beauty which had not been illuminated for you. Then I must have day-dreamed or slept on my feet for the next thing I knew the sky had darkened, the sun moved to its midday position and droplets of rain speckled the road and pavements. I watched the droplets coalesce gradually into puddles, and every breath I breathed, I sighed. And every thought I thought was of you, Jo-Jo.

Night falls. There are no stars.

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Sounds. Voices. Murmurs. Distant singing:
My sweetheart gave me a lace-bordered handkerchief to dry my tears ...

High voices. As if it were women singing.

The sound of rain outside. Rain churning the silence of the streets.
Fading into the dark road of night. And shadows. The echo of shadows.

I dream of a different night. A different sky. A black sky filled with stars. And there, beside the moon, you shine the largest star of all.

“Don’t you hear me?” I ask in a low voice.

And your voice replies: “Where are you?”

“I’m here, in your bedroom. With your cats. Don’t you see me?”

“No, mon amour. I don’t see you.”

Your voice seems all-encompassing. It fades into distant space.

“I don’t see you.”



The engine driving *Pedro Páramo*'s radical conceptual caravan is its author's meticulous and steadfast commitment to presenting the true impact of ongoing modernization upon his country and its people on various levels; politically, socially, psychologically and spiritually. In a suitably poetic and disjointed fashion, Rulfo reports on the turmoil which characterized Mexican life from the immediate pre-Revolutionary period up to the then