

## PASCUA 2003, GUANAJUATO ... and various epilogues

Ana Cervantes

### April 2006:

Yesterday evening a dear friend and I got to talking about the Easter midnight mass in the Templo de la Compañía here in Guanajuato. Our conversation reminded me of this piece of writing which I'd forgotten about for almost two years. It seems I meant to send it in April, and then again in October of '04 and both times I put other pots on the front burner. Now it's too long -- not an essay any more, it's more like an Easter journal strung out over three years. No matter, finally I will share it with you. These thoughts still seem to have a lot to do with what's going on in the world.

With love from

Ana

### April 2004:

*I wrote this in a flurry that Easter night of 2003 and then put it away for many moons and forgot about it. 2003 was a busy year of concerts as both soloist and collaborator; and a good part of the time from Christmas 2003 to Easter 2004 has found most of my energy deeply involved in **Agua y Piedra**, my newest recording. Somehow I had little energy left over for writing, although there were numerous things about which I felt I'd like to write. During these last few days, having finally finished recording, I was going through some of the usual stacks of papers and found these thoughts I'd written so rapidly that Easter night a year ago. I started to reflect on where we are now, a year later. Here's what I wrote a year ago, finally to share among my friends, and at the end a kind of epilogue.*

### **EASTER 2003, GUANAJUATO**

It's a few hours from Easter 2003, and I've never felt the world so desperately in need of redemption as I do this Spring, never before felt the weight of human capacity for evil pressing down on me so suffocatingly.

All day long, I've had the sense that I need to participate in some kind of communal celebration of new light and new life. I found myself remembering the first and only time I attended an Easter Mass. It was three years ago in the Templo de la Compañía here in Guanajuato, with the two young Englishwomen who were renting Casa Jardín next door. I started to write this in an effort to clarify my thoughts, to figure out why I feel such a compelling need, this night, to be in that church again.

In the closing days of March, A\*\*\* and J\*\*\* --two women friends-- came here to visit from the United States. Towards the end of their visit I took them to San Miguel de Allende (Ah-YEN-deh), another small colonial city about an hour and a half east of Guanajuato. One of our first stops was the *parroquia* (pah-ROH-keea, parish church) that is right on the Jardín (hahr-DEEN, garden), the central plaza of the town. The church is gothic, with lofty spires soaring towards heaven. It is quite grand, though it seemed to me rather correct and sedate inside, with none of the extravagant rococo ornamentation of the Templo de San Caetano in Valenciana here in Guanajuato.

By its side, however, is the church which more moved me, as it did two dear friends --political activists from way back-- who visited from the States about a year and a half ago. It is a workmen's chapel, devoid of the gold ornaments and elaborately carved stonework, the funerary homages to respectable citizens, of its more exalted neighbor. Its adornments, if such they may be called, are statues --often almost lifesize- of various saints and of the Christ. There is a flavor of deep empathy about them; they seem to exemplify a human connection felt by workers who made them, with the personages they were representing in paint and wood and plaster.

One scene I remember, a sort of diorama, is of the crucifixion. In it the Christ hangs exhausted on his cross, with blood seeping from his various wounds; to each side of him are the two thieves who were executed with him. One twists in agony, half falling from his cross -- the centurions did a careless job with him. The mouth of the other is open in a silent scream of agony, so realistic I was surprised to

hear the deafening silence around me when I looked at it, and looked away, and looked again, wrenched by terrible pity. Another diorama shows Christ being flogged by Roman centurions; he flinches from the blows and clutches his rags around him, as would any human man being beaten. The figures have the look of art made by people who intimately knew the body language of physical suffering.

The cool of that little workers' church made it a refuge from the baking heat of the square outside. In the plain air of its simple faith the human expressions on the carved and painted faces arrive straight to the heart, and suddenly I found myself crying. I stood there for a while and finally made some kind of prayer for peace; and dropped five pesos in the offering box near the entry as I left.

Around the time of A\*\*\* and J\*\*\*'s visit here, I noticed that a Red Oakleaf lettuce had seeded itself in the pot where my basil was growing. I didn't see it until I gave the basil a heavy-duty haircut, and it surprised me, because I hadn't had that lettuce or any other growing in my little clay-pot garden for almost eight months. Where on earth had that seed come from, and how had it lain dormant for so long until finally deciding to germinate? In any case, without the basil to compete with, it grew right along, and now I have just started to take cuttings from it. I hope that by the time the red oakleaf is done, the greens I seeded in shallow oval pots while A\*\*\* and J\*\*\* were here will be giving me a real cutting garden for salad.

I don't get the urge to plant much any more; certainly not on the grand scale I did in my 5-bed veggie garden back in Roosevelt, New Jersey. J\*\*\* is a dedicated and knowledgeable perennial flower gardener –perhaps it was her being here that gave me that unaccustomed itch; perhaps also it was the sense of Spring, some kind of renewal, new things starting, and a need to be part of that. In any case, a friend here who has a car offered to bring me along on a *vivero* (vee-VEH-ro, plant nursery) trip a week ago, and I enthusiastically accepted. We went to one place a little outside town where I bought a couple of pots and a succulent which is that blue-celadon color of maguey but has the shape of a large luxuriant rose. Then we went on to a different *vivero* where I bought ANOTHER several pots and a different kind of thyme than what I already have, as well as a deep red bachelor-button, now in passionate flower.

I sat and practiced today for a good stint. Before I really got to work I spent a couple of hours playing Bach. The *Sarabande* of the C-minor French Suite had begun to creep into my mind: for all its brevity surely one of the most profound and spiritual pieces of music I know. Full of darkness and, at the end, a consolation which for me is an acknowledgment of the existence of terrible suffering and of faith in spite of that suffering.

I continue to believe with all of my being that the very act of making music –composing it or playing it- is an act of love, of hope and of life. It behooves us to make many of those acts always, but especially in these days.

What is this current of evil that seems to be sweeping the world? In those suffering faces in the workers' chapel in San Miguel I saw the photographed faces of burned Iraqi children, the imagined faces of people who died in torment in the hands of Saddam's torturers. Is one worse than the other? How is it possible for anyone to believe that mutilating innocent people is somehow qualitatively better when my country does it than when Saddam did it? And how is it possible for Cuba to excuse its use of state-sanctioned death by saying that the United States does it too? Two wrongs don't make a right, as the old saying goes. So many times we humans have used, as the justification for acting on the worst that's in us, the idea that someone else has done the same thing. All we do when we act the same way is – act the same way. When will we learn? That simple workers' chapel has that to teach us as well: that fancy excuses dreamt up by ideology don't make one kind of killing better, or more justifiable, than another.

I wonder from time to time, these days, if something is out there in the universe, far away, looking down on us and weeping, or shaking its head in profound dismay. Part of the idea of resurrection and redemption, I believe, is that we have within us, collectively and individually, the capacity to learn and do better. There's a good parable making the email rounds these days that's come to me in both English and Spanish. A wise old indigenous person tells his (or her?) disciple, "I have two wolves fighting within me. One is hungry and mean, angry, wants only to strike out against others. The other is gentler and wants to find ways to make peace." The disciple, naturally, asks which of the two animals will win the battle. Says the wise old one, "It depends which one I feed" ...

The two years after that first Easter Mass in the Templo de la Compañía, I didn't go; no reason, except that both years a more personal acknowledgement of this moment felt appropriate. I was brought up Unitarian, so I am unattached to these sorts of rituals either ideologically or by force of habit. But tonight I feel this urgent need to be part of something communal which like music is an act of hope and of life, which celebrates a restoration of light to the world, and with it the idea of redemption. As I write I realize that it's at least partly because I feel that this is a common mess we're in; because we are all in this together, we humans: we are part of the problem and part of the solution too; it depends which part of us we choose to nourish.

So I go down to the Templo de la Compañía. I bring a candle, remembering how it was that time three years ago.

I am fairly sure the Mass will start at midnight, so I don't hurry especially, but approaching the Templo, I suddenly have doubts: Was it just that year? Was it at eleven instead of at midnight? But as I am almost there I see other people walking towards, and into, the church, in that peculiarly Mexican way of being purposeful: not hurrying but not sauntering either. And outside the darkened church under the trees I see a single small light, the one which must be illuminating the head of the procession which will -if the world survives the pinpoint on which it is metaphorically balanced at this instant- enter the church in a few moments with the promise of new life and redemption; and my heart lifts.

The Templo de la Compañía was built in the early to mid 1700s, and is Baroque rather than Gothic, so that although it is very tall, it feels spacious rather than lofty. Its "bóvedas" (BOH-veh-das) or vaulted ceilings are unusual in that the bricks used are dark -black, in fact-- instead of the usual terracotta color of the brick of which most modern bóvedas here are made. [Now, in 2011, I have to say that they did a huge restoration work on the Compañía and the bóvedas are no longer black!]

When I arrive the church is entirely dark, even darker because of the black bricks in the bóvedas high, high above. There is no light at all, the only illumination is what faintly enters through the open doors, from a couple of our soft golden Guanajuato street lights outside. At first, before my eyes and ears have adjusted, I think Goodness, perhaps there aren't so many people here. As I move forward slowly and find myself a place in one of the side aisles, I realize that the church is filled with a multitude of people, their sound a constant susurrant of hundreds of breaths and whisperings. I am surrounded by a vast murmurous space. At one point the priest speaks (through the yes, loudspeaker system, but softly) and asks the people who are entering to come forward into the church and not light their candles.

We are all standing and sitting there together in the darkness; an occasional baby whimpers, there is the almost silent whisper of feet on the stone floor. It seems like a long time. And suddenly there is a drumbeat and the sound of bugles. Slowly, a single flickering light enters the church, and as its small flame is magnified by our darkness, we see that it is a huge candle. People cluster around to light their candles at its flame; and then each one with a lit candle lights the unlit one of his or her neighbor. I go to a woman to my right and she lights my candle; I take it to other people in the pews to my left

and offer my lit candle to light theirs. This is a cycle, I realize as I offer my candle, a kind of giving back in brief: just one example, of which another is passing on to my students what my teachers gave to me. It's a metaphor, too, for the cycle of the seasons, for composting vegetable matter from one year to become food for the harvests of the next. Reap what you sow. The same is true of violence and terror - it depends on what we choose to nourish in ourselves. Redemption, in the end, for someone brought up Unitarian like me, is our own choice. Something given to us if we choose to accept the gift, with all its responsibilities and joys.

The whole place is ablaze now with light, all the candles are lit, the drums and bugles are close and jubilant. The bier with the Templo's Christ is passing through the side aisle now, close to me, borne by at least a score of men. The priest asks for all the lights of the church to be turned on now -the one who was killed has risen again. The economical and cold fluorescent bulbs come on, but all of our candles, miraculously lit in a small act of generosity from one human to another, are still glowing. I have an awed moment of wondering what this must have been like before the invention of electricity, or before electricity came to Guanajuato. And then something happens which I find absolutely of México - the priest asks for enthusiastic applause for the resurrection of the Cristo, and the church fills with the sound of hands clapping. This happens several times.

Meanwhile, one of the men who brought in the Christ lying on his bier has --assisted by another man-- brought the Christ back up to the space above the altar which he occupies during the year, and from which he has been absent during this entire Lenten season. I was not brought up Catholic, as I've indicated, but when the figure of the Christ is raised into the sheltering vaulted semicircle of his home in this church, and finally stands upright, still holding in his hand the rough wooden cross symbolizing his death, my breath catches and tears come into my eyes. The hot wax burns as it dribbles onto my right hand holding the candle.

This is not unique to Christianity. There must be a hundred stories of murdered deities and holy people restored to life through faith and arduous effort: Osiris, Zoroaster, how many more? Even deeper, Gaia, our planet herself, that great body which dies each winter and is reborn each spring. There are the cycles from which we derive our notion of seasonal change, which in turn come from the motion of our planet around the sun; the rhythm of the human and animal heartbeats from which we derive so many of the rhythms in our magnificently various musics, the oxygen we breathe into our lungs and out again into flutes of bone or wood made in every corner of our globe for tens of thousands of years; all this we have in common as humans ... including the idea of a second chance, resurrection, redemption, the opportunity to do better the next time, the next season.

(The bells are still pealing as I write, almost two hours after this moment of reborn light.)

I think as I stand there, it is true that in precisely such a church only a few hundred years ago, people (some of whom were probably among the ancestors of the people in this very church, perhaps among my own) were incited to believe that it was an offering to the glory of their God to kill, in the cruellest fashion they could imagine, other humans who were thought to be heretics, or witches, or who simply disagreed with precisely this church; and they believed it and cheered on the mobs of the very respectable and very manipulable who burned the people and the books. And on a hundred other occasions, the belief of the group -or the belief of a few with whom the group went along for their own various reasons-- became an excuse for killing those who didn't conform.

I think of the burned Iraqi child with his arms blown off, of the people who have perished all over the world for the dream of being free to have their own faith and beliefs; I am reminded vividly of what the great writer José Saramago has had to say about this, detailing for us the shame we bear as human beings but telling us at the same time something from which we may learn. Precisely in that sense, I suppose, that idea of redemption as an integral part of us humans, just as integral as our horrifying

capacity to do evil. Every time a child is burned by a bomb or maimed by a landmine, every time a government takes the life of one of its citizens, that faith in redemption is strengthened. Well, I think, it may be. It depends on us, what part of us we choose to nourish.

I leave as the Lessons are being read. Walking through the streets still half-filled with the revelers of last night and today, I have again that sense which I sometimes have here, of walking almost invisibly through a scene from a film of Fellini.

Home again, I go up on the roof to feel the cool of the evening. As I stand there, ruminating on human good and evil, heart full, looking out on the city dotted with the golden streetlights, the bells peal out ecstatically from the Templo de la Compañía and I hear – all the way over here on my roof I hear it—many voices raised in singing. The bells ring on, their ropes pulled by human hands rejoicing. Above, the still-full moon gleams out from behind the clouds like an inner voice in a Bach fugue.

### EPILOGUE, PASCUA 2004 ...

Mexico City/Guanajuato. A kind of birth to celebrate. Ten days before Easter 2004 I finished recording. My second CD is about to be born: It is, in its own small way, an action for mutual understanding and the role the arts may play in that endeavor. I, who carry the US passport, won a grant from CONACULTA-FONCA, the Mexican national Foundation for Culture and the Arts, to make a recording of recent music of México. I continue to feel honored and blessed about this; part of both of those feelings is rooted in my continuing belief that music can communicate things which words cannot, and that we have an obligation to keep trying to communicate.

We are still killing and being killed in Iraq. As I write this, the chances are good that some poor US citizen (or Salvadoreño, Japanese, Briton; at least not Spaniard any more, after Rodríguez Zapatero's courageous and moral decision ...) who believed that atrocious snake-oil, or who found no choice, is being blown up, or will be in the next twenty-four hours. I wrote to a dear friend a few days after Easter 2003, *"I am always the one who sees six sides to every debate, who argues for consensus, who accepts the innate cumbersomeness of democracy because I think that process is so all-important to a good human future. But I have to say that in this instance I feel an urgent conviction that what's going on is bad, rotten to the core and has been from the start, I have no sense whatsoever that it's appropriate to give Bush & Co the benefit of the doubt. I feel that now is a particularly dangerous time, in the sense that the dramatic moments of the invasion are over; now it will be even easier to paper over what the government of our country has in store for the Middle East by calling it "liberation" or something. And moreover, how many people really want to hear about it? People, understandably, want to feel that it is a bad moment which is now over; there has been no real challenge to our ideals or our principles; perhaps a momentary faltering but nothing, in the end, to worry about. And my sense is that nothing could be further from the truth"*.

I hope passionately that the American people's love for our Constitution and Bill of Rights will continue to wake up as it seems to have done over the last few weeks, and that they will realize they do have choice and the ability to act politically. Meanwhile there are some 700 US citizens dead over there, not to mention countless Iraqis and others, and the bloodbath seems far from ready to abate.

Mel Gibson's movie *The Passion of Christ*. I haven't seen the movie, so I'm commenting from an unfair vantage point, but I'll comment anyway ... Lots of blood and gore, it seems, lovingly lingered upon; nothing left, as they say, to the imagination. It's not a very big leap to think that this kind of thing, which over time asphyxiates the imagination, has a close connection with the considerable public support the Bush administration enjoyed during such a long time for its invasion of Iraq. Does it take the imagination of a great artist to imagine what might be happening to people under the kind of bombardment to which we subjected Iraq during those first few weeks? Did anyone seriously

imagine that there would be no children with their arms blown off? How much imagination does it take to think of what life must have been like under the embargo we maintained against that country for years until this government found a way to engineer the invasion? I think there is a connection between the cruelty going on the world right now and the cruelty which apparently reigns in this Gibson movie (just as it does in any number of spectacles which Hollywood routinely churns out); and the callous we've grown over our human affect. This, of course, is nothing new ... it depends on what part of us we choose to feed.

I have to say that, from my own strictly personal standpoint, I couldn't quite understand people's being surprised by the gore element. If you read the stories told by the various evangelists, in many of their accounts --though not all-- the cruelty of the basic story is hair-raising. To connect with that all we need to do is to let our empathic abilities run free for a few moments. In any case, Jesus was certainly not the only person treated with horrendous cruelty by the Romans; in fact he was not the only person treated with horrendous cruelty by any number of people in power during any number of eras in our history, including the present. Today in certain parts of the world women are still stoned to death for what in many parts of Europe and the US are considered harmless pleasure-taking activities, or perhaps even an expression of some basic human need for the warmth and affection which in Spanish we call *cariño*.

Here in México, all that blood and gore, plus the empathic response of the artisan and artist, is right there to be seen in places like that little workers' chapel in San Miguel. It is, I learned recently, part of a particular tradition in ecclesiastical art outlined in an essay in *Proceso* (a leading Mexican weekly which has high intellectual, journalistic and writing standards) by Blanca González Rosas (#1431, 4 April 2004). This tradition in religious art is known here as "*los Cristos sangrantes*", the Bleeding Christs. It came to the fore in Spain and Latin America as a result of the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent, which took place between 1545 and 1563. (A historical parenthesis: Cortés landed on the shores of México in 1519.) One of the specific results of the Council of Trent, according to González Rosas, was an injunction that religious art not only instruct people in the stories of the religion but also compel a visceral reaction, penetrating "into the human spirit. ... transforming the contemplative function of sacred art into one which was persuasive and manipulative of people's thinking and religious feelings." She goes on to talk about how these ideas acquired particular resonance during the colonial period in México and speaks of how three-dimensional media came to be used in order to give even more visual power to the images. She comments, "many of these images center their poetry in the brutal and bloody damage done to the body of Jesus. Dramatic in appearance, they were detailed with human materials like hair and/or with animal bones --to represent Christ's bones-- giving them a strange physiognomy somewhere between the profane and the ritual/liturgical."

González Rosas begins her essay by asking, "The excessive representation of the blood of Christ is effective: it moves, it angers, it sells well ... but does it do a good job of evoking the mystery of Jesus' sacrifice? Does the dramatic excess of blood manage to provoke a transformative and intimate religious experience?" One of the reactions to the movie in México, thus, sees it in a historical perspective as just another variant on a very old theme. It also asks if the blood really means anything very much without being accompanied by a moral lesson.

In this same issue of *Proceso* there is an article by Enrique Maza about the Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Passion According to Saint Matthew*. According to this essay Pasolini, a committed Marxist artist, suddenly felt compelled to make the film after reading the Gospel according to Matthew which happened to be in his hotel room one night on the road -- because, Maza says quoting Pasolini, it suddenly became real to him as a story of social transformation. By his own account it became vital "to follow the Evangel according to Matthew, point by point, without staging or changing it, to

translate his narration faithfully into images ... without a single omission or addition." Making the movie was a difficult journey for him, as the entire Catholic hierarchy was opposed to it; although Pope John XXIII apparently supported him. Maza quotes Pasolini as saying that at times he felt "monstrously alone." When the movie was released, Pasolini was condemned in Italy to three months in jail for "vilifying the Catholic religion". Not something Gibson needs to fear, I imagine. (An interesting footnote here is that the film of Kazantzakis' *The Last Temptation of Christ* has only just, after decades of church-backed censorship, been released in México.)

Will this movie motivate people to treat each other better, to work for peaceful consensus, to make real in their own lives the precepts which Jesus -like many other great religious and social-activist figures in our history - taught? I wonder. If Gibson had, as Pasolini did, a track record of making movies which attempted to widen our horizons and our thinking about how we humans might learn and grow, then I suppose I'd feel more optimistic about the answer to this question.

Graphic representation unconnected, it appears, to any real moral lesson ... could it possibly be a Hollywood shoot-'em-up with pretensions? Perhaps it's that Gibson, after all those dollars and all that gore, genuinely can't tell the difference between his vision (I'm being kind) and Pasolini's? -- the worst indictment of all. This is definitely NOT fair, as I started out by saying, but I've said it anyway.

Composting. Not long ago when I watered the plants, I saw that the bachelor button I bought before Easter last year, after several months without flowering (lying dormant, I suppose) is starting to make splendid deep red flowers. I guess the basil died sometime this winter, because it has never come back - but now TWO red oakleaf lettuces are happily growing again in the same pot.

The post-postscript ... Last week the first horrifying pictures came out in the newspapers. In one of them, a naked man of obviously Mediterranean heritage is seen in front of what is clearly a prison cell. On either side of him is a man in uniform, with a leashed dog. The man is cowering with his hands between his legs, the body's irrational instincts have taken over, what help could a pair of human hands be against the jaws of one of those dogs, tearing and cutting? Even in the grainy photo, strangely neutral, the man's body language is clearly, sickeningly that of complete terror. The men in uniform are US soldiers, part of the occupation army in Iraq. I read a statement in which the young woman private from West Virginia says that it was routine and that "we thought it was funny". For all her youth this woman's imagination is, based on this statement, effectively nonfunctional. Even the immediate presence of terror and suffering, it seems, activated no human empathy in her. Bone-chilling. And terribly sad, not least because she appears convinced that she is on the side of the angels; she's not an orc, she's an elf. Did she read Tolkien as a kid? I bet not. Maybe if she had, she'd have thought twice about whether this horror was funny, or had the backbone to say no, she wouldn't be part of what was happening there. Hannah Arendt's banality of evil.

I go back and read what I wrote a year ago, and a few weeks ago. I've thought so much this past year that the worst child abuse of all is to nurse our -that is, the world's, all of our - children on hatred. It makes me more urgently conscious than ever of my responsibility as a musician to nourish that part of us that dares to seek true consensus, as scary as that may be when it's easier to see the situation in black and white.

I wonder about that entity out there in the universe looking down at us; I wonder how many more children we have breastfed on hate in the last year, what on earth we think we are nourishing here.

As I think about all this I realize that at least for me it doesn't, for all its terrible implications about us the human race, negate the reappearance of the lettuce, or the small miracle of the candles in the Templo de la Compañía.

Where I end up ... is with the Leonard Bernstein quote which soprano Patrice Michaels and I chose for the improvisation with which we have begun every concert since 11 September 2002 --remembering that 11 September meant violence and terror in Chile many years before it came to the World Trade Center in New York, and for far longer-- : *"This will be our response to violence: to make music more beautifully, more intensely, more devotedly than ever before."*

EPILOGUE, 2006:

Not much to add. I take back nothing.

More and more, as musician and as Fulbrighter, I see my work as one of forging connections. Art IS both dangerous and sublime because it puts us in touch with parts of ourselves we can't always express or even admit in words. Its alchemy can help to change the coldly institutional to the personal, run an enlivening cable from the personal to the universal and vice-versa. More and more I am convinced, in this globalizing world which means positive things to many of my friends in the US and dubious and fearsome things to my friends in the developing world (at least the Iberoamerican part of it), that music, writing, and art in general are the ways we must open --and maintain-- personal contact. If we allow that candle to go out we will really and truly be lost.