

Boniato Prison: Tale of a Massacre

Armando F. Valladares

From a collection of poems entitled From My Wheelchair. The poems were smuggled out of a Cuban prison.

I.

It is the year of the First Communist Congress*
the Party and all mass organizations
are preparing themselves for this grand event.
It is September and the day continues blue and
indifferent.

Cuba is an island
surrounded by Communists on all sides.
In Oriente there is
the Center of Extermination and Biological
Experimentation
(of the Prison of Boniato):
no experiments are made with rabbits.
There is torture, and experiments with men.
Not with any man,
there are experiments with political prisoners.

II.

A long corridor,
grey
with forty doors of terror
with welded sheets of iron
with enormous Russian locks.
Inside the long Communist night
(eternity)
in two meters length of anguish
by one of torture
and one never sees the light of the sun
(nor artificial light either)
because another welded sheet
closes to the sight
that which once was a window.
The air is also rationed.
There is no bathroom,
nor running water.
In one corner is a latrine,
on the level of the floor there is a hole.
There is no toilet paper
(nor anything else).
Cleaning must be done with the fingers
(or not at all).
Sometimes warm diarrhea
runs down the length of thin thighs
and the excrement piles up
and over them a palpitating cloak
(of worms).
The prison cell is naked,
not a piece of furniture
not an object.

One sleeps on the floor.
There, seven years ago,
a group of political prisoners
were brutally tortured;
and no one can see them.
Their relatives never.
With a tomorrow without tomorrow,
they never leave those cabinets.
No clothing to cover oneself.
Naked,
cadaverous and starving
victims of torture
died:
Esteban Ramos Kessel
Ibrahim Torres Martinez
and José Ramon Castillo
and the sky continued blue and indifferent.

III.

Everything is with scientific strictness organized.
Only boiled carbohydrates,
weighed with care,
nine hundred calories and even less.
The hunger that brings out the bones
beyond the skin.
The absence of proteins and vitamins
makes men swell like frogs.
The legs become inflamed,
the testicles and abdomen
without medical assistance...
One day we were visited by a captain of the political
(police).
Clean
elegant
martial and cold.
He explained with simpleness and courtesy
that the objective
of the Ministry of the Interior
was to convert us into refuse
(destroy us...).
He bowed from the waist gently and left.
Soon there will be a celebration of the First Congress
of the Communist Party of Cuba.
The garrison of the Prison of Boniato
is also preparing itself for this grand event.

IV.

The bodies are covered with scabs
(redried and reddish)
As if there were not enough skin left to cover,
the bleeding mouths become cracks,
hair falls

*First Congress of the Cuban Communist Party, December, 1975.

A Wife's Story

Armando F. Valladares, 40, is a Cuban political prisoner, poet, artist.

"He is an invalid now, confined to a wheelchair as a result of his treatment in prison," his wife, Martha, said in a telephone interview from her home in Florida.

Former Venezuelan President Romulo Betancourt delivered a letter to Mrs. Rosalyn Carter from Mrs. Valladares when the First Lady toured Latin America this spring. "I wrote the note in President Betancourt's home," Mrs. Valladares said. President Betancourt has been active in efforts to appeal for her husband's release, she said, and she hoped that the personal expression of concern by the distinguished Venezuelan might prompt Carter administration interest in the case.

How was her husband paralyzed? "In 1974 the director of La Cabaña prison, where my husband was confined before he was sent to Boniato prison, where he wrote the poem you publish, told the political prisoners that to go to the mess hall to eat they had to wear the blue uniform of common criminals. My husband and other political prisoners refused.

"The director then declared that everyone who refused the blue uniforms

was on a hunger strike. From June 24, 1974, to August 12, 1974, the men were not permitted to receive the already poor, small amount of food they had been getting. As a result, six men became paralyzed. They had no medical treatment during this period, no vitamins, nothing. He lost the use of his legs. The disease is called polineuritis, which I believe is similar to polio. If treated in time, it can be cured."

Valladares was jailed in December, 1960. Mrs. Valladares met her husband in 1961, when she went to visit her father, who had also been detained for his political opposition to Castro's regime. "Like my father, they falsely accused my husband of terrorism. Neither one was ever involved in any kind of violent activities. They both just dissented from the Communists politically," she said. Valladares had been a leader of student activists fighting against the previous dictatorship of Fulgencio Batista.

The Valladareses were married in October, 1969, when prison authorities permitted the ceremony to take place in confinement. "I have seen my husband only once since we were married, in December, 1969," Mrs. Valladares said. She came to the U.S. in 1972, when her father, who was released from

and there are screams of anguish
and nightmares
and terror that destroys and separates,
and depressions and delusions.
Sometimes they filled the hallways
of our graves
ready to beat us,
and we were threatened,
and they did not enter,
and they laughed at our terror,
and returned, placing the key
(in the Russian locks).
And they did not enter
and returned again,
and then they entered
and kicked us,
and this way, slowly,
with Communist proficiency,
the bodies and the nerves were destroyed,
and still they are doing it...

V.

It is September and soon will come the celebration
of the First Congress of the Communist Party
and there will be a fiery Constitution

full of "respect" for human life.
Cuba is an island
surrounded by Communists.
Do not forget it.
In the Political Prison of Boniato
There is a Center of Extermination
(and Biological Experimentation).
The psychologists of the Department of Penal Evaluation
(have arrived).
And Russian doctors
with their heavy interrogations.
They are interested in knowing
at what time we feel better
or worse,
whether we think about our families,
and what we dream,
if we have lost our memories.
They feel our bodies
or extract blood for their experiments.

VI.

Laureano's teeth are destroyed
as everyone's,
the inflamed gums

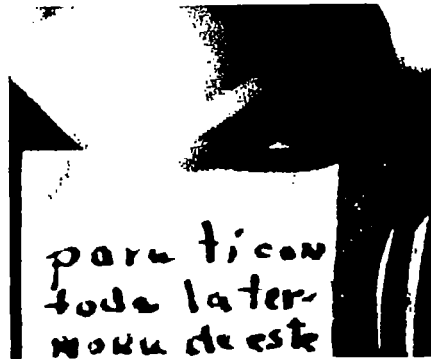
jail in 1969, was permitted to leave the island.

"My husband's mother has not been permitted to visit him since 1969. He has no mail or visiting privileges. We don't know what his treatment is now. In the past we have had clandestine information about his condition, but even that has been cut off for the last ten months," Mrs. Valladares said in July. "He is supposed to be held in the new prison, Combinado Del Este, which the prisoners sometimes call Havana East."

Although Mrs. Valladares has written repeatedly to Cuban government authorities on her husband's behalf, her letters have never had a response. Three Amnesty International local membership groups in Sweden, West Germany, and Holland have "adopted" her husband as a political prisoner "case," sending letters to President Fidel Castro, Interior Minister Sergio Del Valle, the Cuban Red Cross, and the director of Valladares' prison.

"No answer," said Mrs. Valladares.
—Theodore Jacqueney

Theodore Jacqueney visited Cuba last year. His article, "The Yellow Uniforms of Cuba," appeared in the January/February, 1977, issue of Worldview.



Mrs. Valladares with handpainted miniature greeting card, one of several drawn by her husband in prison.

bleeding red
the lips burning blistered
and the torture within the torture.
A molar tooth,
a shell almost,
is making him crazy with rotted pain
black and fetid.
The petitions for medical or dental assistance
are useless.
An aspirin is as impossible
as seeing the light of the sun
which the bayonets prohibit.
Laureano is mad with pain.
With a spoon and a rusted nail
he himself tore the torturing molar tooth.
Slow hours passed
and pus invaded his face.
We screamed asking for medical assistance.
There were screams from other cell blocks
and the voices screeched,
in the gray and long hallways.
Officers from the political police arrived,
and we spoke to them,
but that was also useless...
They left, leaving behind a cloud of threats.

VII.

Morning came in September with a blue and indifferent sky.

Laureano was in critical condition.

We struck with fists and spoons
the doors of silence.

The Communists arrived in a hive,
commanded by Lieutenant Raul Perez de la Rosa.

First, they machine-gunned the prisoners
(of Cell Block D)

that were not totally isolated.

The breasts of some exploded by bullets,
and they threw three hand grenades.

Afterwards, they moved to the gray long hallways
with metallic doors,

and the prisoners were taken out one by one,
shoved to the bottom,

with rifle butts and kicks,

as beasts are struck

as blood sprinkled on the walls

heads were opened in slices.

The soldiers retreated slightly,

and the rifles were raised

and they fired volleys

and death echoed and screeched

in the hallway gray and red
and the sky continued blue and indifferent.

VIII.

Gerardo was a Cuban political prisoner,
a preacher of the Bible and of hope.
He always had a piece of heaven
 (in his hands),
and in the eyes a bit of sun.
We called him the Brother of Faith
because he gave it.
He raised his hands to the invisible, indifferent sky.
Forgive them, my Lord, they know not what they do!
and Lieutenant Perez de la Rosa
emptied the clip of his Soviet rifle
upon the wretched body.
The rifle muzzle spit orange flames,
and from the naked, ravaged breast
gushed happy sprinklers of blood.
Enrique bent over to help him
and fell over, shot.
Nine streams of fire ran through him
 (side to side).
They continued firing with pleasure
and many fell.
The gunsmoke and powder,
gyrated in white clouds
between screams and death.
Only three months are left
for the First Congress
of the Communist Party of Cuba.
The garrison at Boniato
salutes this grand event
with red flags of tortured blood.

IX.

On the ground more than twenty
 lie shot.
They roll in red puddles
of escaping life.
The Communists are mad with enjoyment,
and in spasms of that orgy,
convulsed with hate,
they mash the skulls,
and finish them off by kicking,
stomping the heads,
grasping the weapons by the muzzles.
They did it to Evelco Hernandez.
Breaking clavicle bones
with leadpipes and sticks,
the arms
the ribs.
Running through with bayonets
the buttocks
the thighs
the entrails.
Ripping testicles.
They did it to Roberto Martin Perez.
The invalids were torn
from their wheelchairs

and dragged by their legs,
their bloodied heads
hitting the steps.
They did it to Liuva del Toro and Pascasio.

X.

Naked as always,
struck and kicked they were taken down,
while others rolled down stairsteps
and blood flowed, drop by drop,
step by step,
tired and sweating blood...
Later on they took the prisoners of Cell Block D
below again to strike them.
Sick and wretched
invalid and old
beneath the open sky for the first time
in many years.
And today it was dark and aggressive,
blowing cold and cutting wind.
The dead and the wounded
were taken down as they pleased,
for they have the power and the bayonets
and the backing of the U.N. and the words
and they will celebrate the First Congress of the Party.

They were thrown under the rain,
under the rain they washed their wounds
and purple puddles formed
and rivulets of water-blood ran,
and in such a way the hours passed while they emptied
another cell block.
Everything was carried out with perfect organization.
Those who died were perfectly murdered.
Those wounded were perfectly wounded,
skulls perfectly broken
the same as clavicle bones
ribs and arms.

XI.

Two days later
they staged a farce.
Communists posed as prisoners
attacking the guards.
They took photographs and films.

We are in Cuba in the year of the First Congress
and the Communist Party and the mass organizations
are preparing themselves for this grand event.
The garrison of the Prison of Boniato
Center of Extermination and Biological Experimentation
will present a magnificent report to salute
 (the Congress).
Of course! they have not yet achieved their goals.
There are still political prisoners there
and they are almost alive
and the sky is still blue and indifferent.

"We Are Alone"

Letter from Valladares to an official of Amnesty International that was smuggled out of a Cuban prison in 1975.

Friends:

I have received several Christmas messages from members and delegations of "Amnesty International." They have deeply moved me. I shall never forget them. I will always remember such an attention, such consideration, such a demonstration of human solidarity.

I am grateful for your words of encouragement, but my chances to be freed, in spite of my being seriously ill, are so remote that actually I believe it impossible. The members of "Amnesty International" do not know what takes place in Cuban political prisons. How could I have any hopes of leaving this place when not even women, old people, or deathly ill persons have been released? How could I think that they would let me go when even those who have served their sentences are not released and they are instead re-sentenced because they have not renounced their convictions?



Valladares before his imprisonment.

My problems are serious. My situation is very difficult. My living conditions are subhuman, alienating. I live in a cell block in La Cabaña military fortress, built two centuries ago. It is humid, dark, dirty, with resounding walls, with no light, and inadequate sanitary facilities. We live in cots plagued by bedbugs, lice, flies,

roaches, and mosquitoes that will not give us an hour of rest. Here rats are very aggressive and several prisoners have already been bitten. I have been in prison for over fourteen years. I did not kill anyone. I have not been involved in bloodshed. I was sentenced without evidence, guilty by conviction, in January, 1961. But I have philosophical convictions, an approach to life, and religious beliefs incompatible with the Communist regime in Cuba. To force me to renounce my convictions, to take away from me the right that all human beings have to maintain their ideological principles, I have been brutally tortured physically and mentally. There is not an inch of my body that has not been beaten with hatred. For years I was forced to work in the extermination camps of Isla de Pinos under the butt of the rifle and the bayonet. I have suffered isolation in cells completely sealed off by steel plates without ever seeing the light of day, while being an object of biological and psychological experimentation. I have been denied medical assistance, food, mail, and visiting rights, which have been and are still being used to force me to renounce my ideals. These are the reasons why I cannot hope for freedom. I will not renounce the beliefs of which I am proud and which define me as a person, and those who do not abdicate have only one destiny: to be exterminated.

We are alone, we are abandoned. We expect nothing from Human Rights or from the International Red Cross. No organization has ever done anything for us. Our lot is sad.

The first word of encouragement from the outside world has come to me from the members of Amnesty International. But we are already physically wasted, nearly ghosts.

I am very ill. I have four malfunctionings of the heart; all serious. Pulmonary emphysema, asthma, allergy to many foods, and a certain paralysis of the vocal cords that must be operated on or I will become mute. In Cuba they cannot yet perform such an operation, although for years it has been performed in most countries of the world. I must undergo many other operations.

From June 24 to August 12, 1974, we were denied food for political reasons. From July 15 on I could no longer walk. I need *urgent* treatment in a hospital for

physical rehabilitation or I will stay an invalid forever. I have acute polineuropathy with flaccid paraplegia of the deprived type. On November 4 of last year I was seen by the neurologist Dr. Joaquin Garcia, who prescribed and ordered that I be interned in a hospital. But on December 10 Dr. Juan M. Torres Prieto, chief of the prison's medical services, told me that adequate medical assistance would only be provided on the condition that I abdicate my political beliefs. I have spent over six months lying on a cot, watching the progressive muscular atrophy of my legs. I feel I am being turned into an invalid in the most criminal way: by the denial of medical assistance. And this is taking place toward the end of the twentieth century in the very heart of the American continent.

I have not been allowed visitors of any kind for over five years. I do not believe that you will be able to obtain my release, but with you has been born and will die my only hope of not becoming an invalid. My poor physical condition is incompatible with any prison system in the world. You could request Cuban authorities to provide me with adequate medical assistance. To leave the country and be reunited with my wife, who has been waiting for me for over fourteen years, is my ambition.

I will be happy if you, Mr. Plant, could send copies of this letter to amnesty organizations. I can only write one letter per month and censorship is very tight. We were surprised that they would allow entry of Christmas cards. They have already been stopped. I will send this letter to my wife and if I succeed, she will forward it to you and to other members of Amnesty.

I have been telling my prison mates about the objectives of Amnesty International and how it works; here it was believed that you were worried about Communist and Socialist prisoners in occidental nations. Many still believe this, as well as that the heads of your organizations are Communists. I am certain this is not so. I have a place in my heart for all of you and will always remember you with gratitude.

I would like to receive your answer to this letter, please send it to my wife.

My affection to you all.

Sincerely,

Armando Valladares Perez