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JULIA DE BURGOS Our Julia*

By Sherezada Vicioso

In 1977, I was on my way to a workshop on the poetry of César Vallejo with a Puerto Rican poet; and when we reached the corner of 5th Avenue and 104th Street, he said to me, "Here's where Julia de Burgos collapsed."

I then asked him the question we Dominicans always ask when her name is mentioned: Who is Julia de Burgos? He told me that she was Puerto Rico's greatest poet, that she had peasant roots, and that her poetry was extraordinary. He also told me that after Julia collapsed and was picked up by an ambulance, they took her to Mayflower Hospital, which was just around the corner, on Fifth Avenue between 105th and 106th Streets, but they would not admit her because she was Hispanic and sent her on to a hospital in Harlem.

This story immediately awakened in me a great solidarity with this woman who was first and foremost this: a woman, and a Caribbean woman to boot. My first poem to Julia sprung from that episode . . .

This corner
a corner I had spurned
as just any other corner
now soars before me, unclothing itself
with unfamiliar haughtiness
with a light that multiplies it
that expands it, that enlivens it.
This corner—
where a sun intimidated by the penetrating nakedness
vacillates
where converge into one, pioneer and solitary,
104th Street and Fifth Avenue,
claimed its place in space—
when Julia de Burgos laid herself upon it
to reinhabit, it in turn,
through poetry.

*This tribute to Julia de Burgos appears in Sherezada Vicioso's *Algo que decir: Ensayos sobre literatura femenina* (1981-1991), published in Santo Domingo, DR, by Editora Búho in 1991.

I did not yet know Julia as a poet. I had no inkling then of the Dominican Julia shared by a handful of exiles from my country—Bosch, Miolán, Mainardi, Mir, and the rival to her Río Grande of Loíza, Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón . . .

We might call this crossroads that humanity has reached the era of definitions. Not of linguistic definitions, but of human definitions rooted in man himself, which will spread over collectivities in a social dynamic that for better or worse will control people's destinies. We are in the era of man's self-definition.

There is no other path for today's man but a choice between two alternatives. Either he stands squarely on the side of reactionary forces or he chooses the path to progress which is always the path to freedom, despite the efforts of demagogues seeking to perpetuate the same retrograde forces as always. There is no middle ground for today's man. There is no room for speculation. Man has ceased being rhetorical, becoming by necessity, by the circumstances in which he lives, a scientifically-social being. He is on one side or the other; he can't straddle both.

Let's take the case of America's petty tyrants. A continental campaign has been launched to denounce and orchestrate the liquidation of the fascistoid regimes of Trujillo, Somoza, and Carías, monstrous tyrants of Santo Domingo, Nicaragua, and Honduras respectively. Either we Americans raise our voices and bolster our efforts to help destroy them, or we automatically place ourselves, by default, through either indifference or sympathy, on the side of these criminal governments.

The case of Spain offers similar angles. Either we stand on the side of the absolute Republic, without plebiscite, since the Spanish masses had already spoken, or we will be supporters of the traitor Franco.

For Puerto Rico there are only two paths. To demand the unconditional recognition of our independence, or to be traitors to freedom in accepting any other solution to our dilemma offered to us.

(Julia de Burgos, *Semanario Hispano*, New York, 1945)

This speech helped me discover the determined being, the radical being in evidence in her political writings and in her poetry. It made me discover the being split in two, torn between "essence and form," that makes Julia such a contemporary figure.

At a time when "emotional maturity," "seriousness," "adulthood," or a "successful" adaptation to the environment is measured by the absence of contradictions—by the effort to destroy the dialectics—Julia presents herself to us with marvelous complexity, like a multiple woman who sings of herself and contradicts herself, who goes to war against herself in her poem "To Julia de Burgos," and who in her challenge to the real transcends metaphysics, writing in her poem, "Nothing":

Since in your philosophy life is nothing
 let's drink to the certain not being of our bodies
 let's drink to ourselves, to them, to no one
 to the everlasting nothingness of our flesh
 to everyone, to the few, to the many, to nothing
 to the hollow shadows of the living dead
 If we come from not being and march towards being nothing,
 nothing between nothing and nothing, zero between zero and zero
 if between nothing and nothing there can only be nothing
 let's drink to the glorious not being of our bodies.

These contradictions give impulse to her search, the search for unity between essence and form, the search for the return to an integral and complete "I" symbolized, both in her life and in her poetry, by water.

Julia Like a Fish Out of Water

That first contradiction—thinking being/Nature, or better yet, Julia as a fish out of water—is reflected in all of Julia's poetry, in her sensorial and organic identification with nature and with a water that she fathoms, to which she sings—as much in her poems to the river, as in those to the sea—in *El mar y tú* [*The Sea and You*].

The organic unity lost when Julia is no longer stone, light, or plant, turns Julia into "A voice between two echoes," into a "powerful blast of the jungle and the river," in the poem "Agua, vida y tierra" ["Water, Life, and Earth"] from *Canción de la verdad sencilla* [*Song of the Simple Truth*], into a poet, as Juana de Ibarborou put it, "with eyes open wide like twin abysses."

Country-City

Julia was born on February 17, 1914, in Carolina, a suburban, almost rural area of Puerto Rico, on the banks of a river, her river, where she discovers the contradictions of her society: the country/city contradiction, or that of the city as colonial legacy, where it symbolizes, in its growth and development at the expense of the countryside, the metropolis in relation to the colony. Julia dedicates her first book, *Poema en veinte surcos* [*Poem in Twenty Furrows*] to that countryside:

Countryside . . .
 colt that tamely saddles a horizon armed
 with peasant tears
 Tradition is ablaze in the countryside!
 Hope is ablaze in the countryside!
 Man is ablaze in the countryside!
 It is the earth bursting open, scorched by injustices
 that can't be extinguished by rivers

that can't be extinguished by ponds
Nor by the appetite of the clouds, or the appetite of the birds
The flame is in the robust breast of the roots
Breast of a mature earth eager to clamber
primed to build barricades against the masters.

That contradiction, countryside/city—one in which Julia comes to symbolize Puerto Rico and the city embodies the metropolis, the United States—takes her even further in her search for the reason behind the vital disharmony in which her nation is mired.

Colonial Subject/Metropolis

While at the university, a professor initiates Julia in the nationalist struggle, and she joins the Daughters of Freedom, the women's section of the Cadets of the Republic.

In 1935, the Puerto Rican Nationalist Party's most active year, Julia tells us her peasant truth in "Es nuestra la hora" ["The hour is ours"]:

Traitors and righteous
tremble alike
the hour is ours
Ours.

The wail of the peasants draws near
and the exploited masses
the exploited masses awaken.
Where is the little one whose life
was defoliated by rickets?
Where is the wife who died of anemia?
Where is the harvest that the dead one
helped sow?

Where is the cow?
Where is the mare?
Where is the land?

Noble peasant
your misery has only one answer
United States imperialism
has all-encompassing arms
there is your dead one
there is your little one
there is your little cow

there is your mare
 your harvest and your land.
 Noble peasant
 your tragedy has only one answer
 sharpen your hoe
 whet your machete
 temper your soul
 Descend from your cliffs
 and march across the fields drunken with cane
 look at the *centrales*
 There is your dead one
 Watch the savage feast of the machinery
 Hold firmly to your hoe
 and move on
 saying I will return
 Draw near
 Here are the Banks
 Their paper alone could fill your house
 with plenty of coins.

You have it? No matter
 here is your land
 your sole little cow
 your harvest and your mare
 Watch it all:
 façades
 bankers
 coins
 hold firmly to your machete
 and move on
 saying I will return!
Draw near
 Many await your arrival
 it is decisive to our cause
 Pick up your hoe
 . . . hold firmly to your machete
 and swell the ranks of *Independence*.

The consciousness of the United States' role in Puerto Rico broadens through Julia's contact with other Antilleans, exiles from the same tyranny, with whom she comes into contact in Puerto Rico, New York, and Cuba, a consciousness that can be measured by the testimony of her great love, the famous Mr. X of the anthologies, the late Dominican political leader Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón, in the sole interview he granted me, after giving him incontrovertible proof of my love for Julia and promising not to reveal anything that would cloud her memory . . .

The romance began in mid-1938. I gave three lectures in San Juan, Julia attended, she seemed to like those expositions of mine I later gathered in my book *Luchemos por nuestra América* [*Let's Struggle for Our America*], and she told me that she was interested in showing me her poetic work.

I had been welcomed in Puerto Rico as a Latin American intellectual and revolutionary, the press had hailed my arrival, and the lectures I gave were at the Ateneo Puertorriqueño, San Juan's most important cultural organization . . . The romance was to last throughout my stay in Puerto Rico, which began in mid-1938 and ended in late 1939. I calculate Julia was twenty-four years old then.

The truth is that my parents remained totally opposed to that love, and I felt a lot of respect and love, a true veneration, for them. I decided therefore to leave for New York in November of 1939, with the intention of writing a historico-political book about the Dominican Republic . . . Julia arrived in New York some fifteen days after I did, and we stayed there until May or July of 1940, when I left because I felt harassed by the economic situation and wanted to publish immediately the book I had just completed. I wanted to publish it in Cuba, where I had many friends, great contacts, and where I hoped to receive the same welcome I had had before and to be invited again by some cultural societies to give lectures. But when I arrived I found a very serious political situation that impacted on cultural activities, and which greatly reduced the possibility of giving paid lectures. Precisely one of those paid lectures was the one in Trinidad (Cuba) I mentioned, where Julia went with me.

When we went to Trinidad I didn't have a penny, but I had a lecture scheduled for which I was to be paid \$50. I had barely enough to buy the train tickets for Julia and me, so I bought the tickets and I believed I had about twenty cents left, we didn't have enough money left to eat lunch that day until we arrived at 6:00 p.m. . . . After I gave the lecture, which Julia loved, we went to the source of a stream and I remember that that afternoon, on the mountains, she sat down to write that poem about the river, which is also so very beautiful. All those water poems are part of *El mar y tú* and they are monumental.

We remained in Cuba for two years, from July 1940 to March 1942 when she returned to New York . . . she re-engaged.

Those were years of intense political activity for the exiled Dominican community and Julia collaborated within limits. She, for example, wrote a poem against Trujillo and many other poems about the struggle that must be in the hands of the CIA, because they took away her passport and all her papers when she entered Miami on her return to New York.

It was the period of the Second World War, I remember that I was in San Juan when the Molotov-Preventov treaty was signed and

then I wrote an article for a magazine arguing that this was a tactical step for the USSR. Julia was extremely interested in this article. We discussed politics constantly . . .

Her social formation, her passion for justice, all that was much more intuitive. She had not studied the evolution of the democratic movement, or of representative democracy, nor the evolution of the Socialist Movement. Neither had she read anything of Marx, nor had I at that time, maybe some brief summaries by Lenin. Julia did not know Marxism, but intuitively she was a Marxist, she was aware of the class struggle, but all this was bound with her lyrical chimeras and with all those feelings that implied a penetration into the roots of life, death, water, air, nature, love, and pain. That's why she could express the love of justice so well in her poetry without falling into pamphleteering, without losing her lyricism.

Out of the impact of the exile Julia shared with Juan Isidro Jimenes Grullón and other Dominicans came poems like "Himno de sangre a Trujillo" ["Hymn of Blood for Trujillo"], the most imposing poem written by a woman against one of the most repressive dictatorships in America . . .

Not even in death may the roses of love sustain you,
 General of Death, mercilessness for you.
 May blood forever hound you, General of Death,
 to the toadstool, the bone, the ephemeral
 maggot condemned to your compost . . .
 General Rafael, Trujillo General
 may your name be an eternal echo of cadavers
 drumming within you, hunting you relentlessly
 may the lilies shield their eyes from your gaze
 alive or dead, for evermore
 may the flowers refuse to germinate from your bones,
 may the earth refuse to shelter you:
 may nothing sustain you, General, may your corpses
 depeople your life, may you bury yourself.

Dictator, to what new horizons of crime
 your suicidal gaze now turns?
 That zenith of corpses on which you prop your triumph,
 Can it ever protect you from the dagger of life?
 Will that bloodless fear that once again uplifts you,
 forever cloud the faces of a spying world?
 Dictator of that glorious Dominican people
 massacred in its yearnings and asleep in its ired,
 What is your scepter made of? From what sun are you feeding?
 From the men who daily bite your name into shreds

from the agony a big bedstead vows to you in its bosom,
 But not from sprigs of wheat,
 not from the rivers that will cleanse the dust
 over which you trod, trampling over life,
 not from the hands of children growing up,
 fertilizing with new universes their laughter,
 not from the future, dictator of death,
 your own scorn dooms you to a grave full with scorn.

You be damned, General, from a sepulchre in arms
 that clamors for your life,
 from the ever-present voice of the dead marching on
 to sprinkle with crosses the insolence of your triumphs!
 You be damned! is the cry, ample and absolute
 reaching you through my voice in the name of your prey!

February 26, 1944
Pueblos Hispanos (p. 9)

Or poems like the one she dedicated to her great Dominican friend, Thelma Fiallo de Cintrón, where, in addition to a great political consciousness she displays a profound feminist feeling . . .

In you I salute the new American woman
 Resounding like starburst throughout the continent
 Growing in her blood, her virtue, her soul,
 stretching her hand to touch that of the future

From north to south they gather,
 dignity and embrace
 to face the century's cry of liberty or of death
 The night is bursting open, rent by silence
 and the trunk of the race renews itself and blooms.

Frontiers will lay down arms before her mighty thrust
 and the ideal, awakened, will gallop upon stallions
 assaulting the earth, rescuing consciences
 and cleansing the street of disloyal leftovers.

You and I belong to the century. To the pain
 To the instant.
 Flesh of the heart crushed by serpents.
 We are of the new voice, lengthened, instinctive
 whose language of advance will bring tremors of change.
 We are the clamor of the now. Banners of the Caribbean
 sustaining the inviolate modesty of our folk

I hail in you the woman my own womanhood mirrors
 Dominican blood that has been shed
 and spreads

Woman-Society

Julia learns the contradictions of the Puerto Rican social structure at a very early age. She experiences them in her own flesh when she loses several of her siblings in the early 1920s, victims to the family's poverty, and when like any other tomboy accompanying her father in his sallies through the countryside, she fashioned herself into an untamed bird oblivious to any sort of restriction in its search after life and love.

Thus Julia, breaking the rules of what would have been a "proper" woman's behavior at the time, meets and falls in love with a Dominican, divorces her husband, and follows her lover into exile, where, true to herself, she gives herself to him despite the prejudices of those who saw her as a bohemian, or worse yet, a "poet" . . . Juan Isidro:

My parents were there at the time, and found out about the romance (I believe I told them myself). They sought out information about Julia and were told that, yes, Julia was a great poet, but she was not a woman attached to the traditional values of home and family. She also had a tendency to dipsomania, and as was to be expected (my parents were good bourgeois), they opposed the relationship.

Julia replies to the slander with her *Canción de la verdad sencilla*, restoring to love, to passion, its natural truth, its elemental and simple impulse, without the complications that the city, colonialism, tradition, racial difference, and superimposed class divisions inflict upon it . . .

I was the most silent
 of those who sailed into your harbor
 I wasn't heralded by lewd social ceremonies
 nor by muffled bells of ancestral reflections
 my route was the savage melody of the birds
 spreading to the winds my kindness in full flight.

I was not borne by ships laden with opulence
 nor did oriental carpets cushion my body and soul
 high above the ships my naked face appeared
 whistling into the round simplicity of the gales.
 I didn't burden harmony with trivial aspirations
 promised me by your hand bursting with sparks
 I thought only of the soil of my agile spirit
 of the tragic abandonment hidden behind your gesture.

One day on the yellow shorelines of hysteria
many faces of cloaked ambition followed you
through the waves of your tears torn from the cosmos
voices slipped not traversing your mystery.

Life-Death

From each one of these contradictions—thinking-being/nature, countryside/city, colonial-subject/metropolis, woman/society—Julia emerges increasingly more naked, but every time more intact, sustained in her search by a great rebellion against death, a death she dared . . .

We are here to live, not to die
one dies in death, not in life
and he who has vanquished death,
has no right to give way.

Julia so battled against death that, despite death's apparent triumph in the struggle, she can mock it in her poetry, "dying" in the language that symbolizes the death of Puerto Rico—English—while continuing to live in Spanish, where our hopes still linger . . .

It has to be from here
forgotten but unshaken
among comrades of silence
deep into welfare island
my farewell to the world.

In 1987 there are few Dominicans, at least in literary circles, who ask "who is Julia de Burgos?"

It has not been easy to make her known, not because of the predictable resistance that her vertical position before life awakens in mediocre people but also because of the reaction of those who do not understand our common destiny as Caribbean countries and the unbreakable bonds that link our two islands. It should be enough to say that Pedro Mir and Juan Bosch are both sons of Puerto Rican women, and that a mother of Dominicans Julia would have been if she had not been destined to be a mother of humanity. To pay homage to her in the Dominican Republic, the land she so loved but could never visit, and to make known her contributions to the struggle for our own true independence is not only a moral obligation but another way to proffer our love.

Translated by Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert