افغانستان آزاد – آزاد افغانستان

AA-AA

چو کشور نباشد تن من مبـــــاد بدین بوم وبر زنده یک تن مــــباد
همه سر به سر تن به کشتن دهیم از آن به که کشور به دشمن دهیم

www.afgazad.com afgazad@gmail.com

European Languages	زبان های اروپائی

M. Mandl

Difficult Forgiveness

In Colombia, a female fighter on life after FARC.

https://www.guernicamag.com/difficult-forgiveness/

By Valeria Luiselli
December 12, 2016

Flag of the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia—People's Army (FARC-EP).

The Female Fighter Series *pairs female writers with women who are fighting, or have fought, in armed resistance movements worldwide to bring to light the distinctive personalities, politics, and circumstances of participation. This* Guernica *series is in partnership with the Politics of Sexual Violence Initiative and V-Day: A Global Movement to End Violence Against Women and Girls. Subsequent essays will be published in 2017.*

* * *

My mother landed in Bogotá on August 23, 2016, one day before Colombia publicly announced the signing of the peace accords between the government and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). She was there to interview Sandra, one of the at least eight thousand ex-combatants of the FARC waiting to hear how their lives would be redefined after the peace accords were signed.

A few days later, in the early hours of August 29, ex-combatants of the FARC circulated an encrypted message through emails, SMS messages, radio, and telephone calls: "Tell Mauricio Babilonia, over there in Macondo, to release the yellow butterflies, for the war has ended." The line, a reference to Gabriel García Márquez's foundational novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, was a response to the public announcement that, after fifty-two years of war and four years of negotiations, the head of the Colombian delegation, Humberto de la Calle, and the chief FARC negotiator, Iván Márquez, signed the agreement at a ceremony in Havana. Of course, there were new uncertainties and fears. But, fundamentally, there was much hope that the armed conflict was over and Colombia could finally begin to transition toward a period of long-deserved peace. The accords, however, were rejected shortly after in a national public referendum held on October 2. The "no" votes won with 50.21 percent: an unexpected outcome.

But, paradoxically, "unexpected" has been the rule and not the exception during this past tumultuous year. (If the year 2016 were a novel, it would be one of those paperback airport fictions: abominably plotty, far-fetched, and so badly written as to be difficult to believe and impossible to finish.) Keeping up with and understanding the ongoing changes, coming to terms both intellectually and emotionally with sudden outcomes, and rearranging the present into a coherent narrative has become a laborious, if not impossible, task. Between the day that I sat down to write the first notes for this piece and the days I spent working on its final revisions, the peace accords were announced, then repealed through the public referendum, then revised, then re-announced, and finally approved by Congress.

But perhaps it is not at all our task—as writers or as readers—to interpret and explain the present as it precipitously comes into new being, as it constantly "refreshes" into new shock waves of information every time we dare check in on it. Perhaps, on the contrary, in this era of the instant and the unexpected, of the spectacular and the breaking, we should aspire instead to shut our tired eyes now and then, and listen to the quieter voices of the more distant past. If we want to start making sense of all this, maybe we need to start by lowering the volume of the overwhelming noise and newness in which everything seems to be wrapped and made ready for us, and learn to reach further into the thoughts and words of the older generations. Not because older generations have a better vantage point or definite answers, but because, in the slower and

more patient back-and-forth of a conversation with our elders, we might at least be able to find a place to stop and examine things a little longer.

For a week after she landed in Bogotá, my mother talked to Sandra—forty-something, though she wouldn't share her exact age—either while walking around the capital or sitting around in the house Sandra shared with other ex-combatants. My mother transcribed all her conversations with Sandra and took copious notes in her journal (all, of course, in Spanish). What follows is my own translation of my mother's transcriptions of her conversations with Sandra, as well as my "translator's notes" on those conversations. Some of my notes are meant to engage in a dialogue with my mother's transcriptions of Sandra's testimony and her thoughts about it. A few others seek to provide a wider historical context for the reader, or function more like parenthetical annotations to particular terms and expressions that need further explanation. This text is a layering of many different stages of transcription and translation. My hope is that, in the spaces between all those layers, a conversation between women of different generations slowly emerges.

* * *

Today is August 24, 2016. The final peace accords between the FARC and the Colombian government have just been announced.

Translator's Notes:

§ While it is perfectly OK for there to be reliable and unreliable narrators in literature, there's really no such thing as reliable and unreliable translators—there's only reliable ones and bad ones. Since any daughter would necessarily be a bad translator of her mother, and perhaps even the worst possible translator (daughters exist in order to correct their mothers, I know because I have a daughter myself), I decided to append these "Translator's Notes" after some of my mother's texts.

§ As I read these first few words written by my mother—the opening lines to her notes—and type them in English, I immediately remember another crucial date of declarations and agreements, which perhaps serves as a distant but determining background to this particular story. On the day the NAFTA agreement was put into effect in North America—January 1, 1994—the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) in the south of Mexico declared itself at war with the government. It was, of course, a date that shook the entire country. Some weeks later, my mother gathered the family and told us she was joining the Zapatista movement. She would be moving to a town in Chiapas called La Realidad (literally, The Reality) and working with a group of women specifically devoted to supporting children and female fighters in the Zapatista movement.

Translating Sandra's story through my mother's conversations with her and against the backdrop of my mother's own involvement with the Zapatistas, however, does not imply drawing any kind of parallel between the EZLN and the FARC. The two movements are hardly comparable, even

if, in their very beginning and original projects, both were concerned with land—with the land and its use, always usurped by the wealthier and more powerful from those who are least favored, always left destitute and overseen. (As Malcolm X said in another very different context, it always has been and always will be about land.)

* * *

We are in the Hotel Casa Americana, a two-story residence, precariously adapted to house many people in very few rooms. The second floor is reserved for bedrooms. On the ground floor, there is a small kitchen and a small living room with a TV and several tables, some square and some round, where the residents sit down to eat, or work, or talk.

Attentive to the news, I am the only one sitting in front of the TV in the small living room. I notice that neither Sandra nor the rest of the young ex-combatants seem at all interested in the news. When I ask her why, Sandra tells me that they had all previously read the discourse that is being given right now by the Comandante Iván Márquez, and that's why no one else is interested in listening to him. On the news, Iván Márquez is saying that the peace accords are not a point of arrival, but a departure point.

This is indeed a departure point, and one full of uncertainty and anxiety about the future. Everyone here is trying to come to terms with the idea of being an *ex*-combatant for the FARC: the eight female fighters who, together with the twenty-two men in this unit, were accused of "rebellion" and later pardoned because they had not committed more serious crimes. They are all waiting for the first results of the peace signing, waiting to see what will happen in the Conferencia Nacional Guerrillera and waiting for the eventual results of the national referendum when Colombians will vote in favor of or against putting the peace accords into effect. I thought I'd see a great wave of joy sweeping over the ex-combatants. But nothing like this happens. There is no enthusiasm in their faces, no excitement when they reached for their cellphones, no willingness to celebrate. I see nothing like that. What I see is the uncertainty in their eyes. There are many questions to be answered, much hesitation and mistrust.

In the meantime, the thirty of them live here, in the Hotel Casa Americana. They have been here since February 2016, when most of them were released from prisons. The residence is right across from the American embassy—an irony I don't quite know how to wrap my mind around. The space was assigned to them by the Colombian government, which also provides food and a small stipend. During the seven months of "transition" that followed their release, they have been preparing for a life back in civil society. Six of the eight women, for example, are back in high school, and two are attending university.

Sandra tells me she prefers to walk while we talk. She is not comfortable with being recorded, which of course makes me nervous, as I know I'll have to remember everything that she tells me and rely only on my notes.

As we cross through the door and walk out to the street, she says she still feels strange in civilian garments and misses her boots and the weight of her gun on her shoulder. Sandra is a small, thin, sturdy woman. She walks resolutely, and very fast, so much so that it is often hard for me to keep

up. Now she is wearing a short skirt, a buttoned-up shirt, a blazer, high-heeled boots, and carries a small purse.

"You have to dress elegantly when you go to the government offices where we're negotiating our post-conflict life," she says, and immediately corrects herself, "or, negotiating our post-agreement lives, right? Because what's coming now are many more conflicts."

I nod in agreement, and she asks a question she knows I cannot answer. "Tell me, what will happen after the peace agreements are signed?" I tell her I don't know but ask her how she feels about it.

"Full of uncertainty" is the only thing she says.

"I don't see how you wouldn't feel so much uncertainty here, in these new surroundings. You've spent more than half your life in the jungle, right?"

"Yes, and you don't feel so exposed in the jungle," she says.

"But didn't you feel exposed when you had to go out into battle?"

"No" is her rotund and unambiguous answer.

Translator's Notes:

§ Sandra did not want to be recorded, as my mother explains. What she doesn't explain is that Sandra agreed to be interviewed only after difficult negotiations with writer and activist Nimmi Gowrinathan. Nimmi, who had partnered with *Guernica* to publish a series of features on female fighters, explained to me in an email that the magazine was interested in listening to other people, as well as in "question[ing] the assumptions we make about certain populations that are off limits (too radical)." I knew when I accepted this assignment that I would have to face my many prejudices and patch my scarce previous knowledge on the matter, not only with a lot of research but also with an active willingness to simply listen to the testimony I would be reading and then translating.

* * *

We walk along the towering cement wall behind which is the American embassy—though no flag is visible from the outside. Sandra tells me that, just as it is hard for her to accept her new civilian attire, she wonders whether having relinquished her weapon will be worth it. Moving inside this new context, in a life of legal activity, fills her with mistrust, insecurity, and discomfort. She wonders how she will make her ideas and projects happen, now that she doesn't have a gun.

"Will I have to beg for spare change now, so we can fund our new projects?" she asks.

We reach a large cement square with some structures for children to climb on. She tells me that she was locked up for two years, after being accused of rebellion. "But then the State gave us a pardon and released us from charges." She says this thrusting her dark eyebrows upward—a gesture I'm not sure how to read. Her eyes gaze intently into mine when she speaks, and I wonder how it is that a personality like hers, full of tenacity and resolve, is not at odds with the kind of tenderness and warmth in her face.

The pardon that Sandra and the others in this unit received was not as complicated to negotiate as many others', as none of the people here are accused of crimes against humanity. And although I imagine she is relieved to be out of jail and released from charges, she says she experiences this new life as a kind of destitution, like being orphaned suddenly. Whenever she talks about being an *ex*-combatant, she does so with a hint of chagrin.

"We had to sign a document before they released us. In that document we had to promise never again to carry arms, never again to use our FARC uniform, and never again to return to our camps."

Translator's Notes:

§ In the line "She says this thrusting her dark eyebrows upward—a gesture I'm not sure how to read," I added the last clause, "a gesture I'm not sure how to read," both because there is an implicit bafflement in my mother's description of Sandra's gesture and because there is, indeed, a perplexing ambiguity in all of it. The pardon itself is difficult to grasp, as are the entire mechanics of forgiveness in circumstances like the ones that have unfolded in Colombia over more than half a century. I am not a connoisseur of the history of the FARC, nor of Colombian history, but I know that, in many cases, movements that begin as one thing transform into something utterly other. Initially, the FARC, which began in 1964 as a guerrilla movement and military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, fundamentally promoted agrarianism and advanced an anti-imperialist ideology borrowed heavily from Marxism. But that was only in its beginnings. The FARC later moved on to employ brutally violent warfare tactics—kidnapping, torture, murder—and developed direct ties with drug trafficking, which then led to its classification as a terrorist organization by the governments of the European Union, USA, and Colombia, among others. As many other Latin Americans of my generation, including many of us who identify as left-wing in our fundamental ideological stances, I grew up hearing and later reading horror stories about the FARC and have always thought of the organization as an example of how everything can go terribly wrong. But, of course, it is not at all my place either to endorse or condemn the FARC. My place, at least here, is simply to translate and annotate. This I have to constantly remind myself as I go through the text.

* * *

We sit down in a small diner-like place to have something to eat, and I decide to tell Sandra a little about my involvement with the Zapatistas in the nineties. Something in her attitude toward me softens after this, as if for the first time she believes that I am not there to judge her and that

my previous experience perhaps allows me to understand her better. She asks me for details that make it clear she is well informed about the Zapatistas. From my bag I take out a book I wrote about the Zapatista movement some years after the uprising and show her two brief texts I used as prologues, because I think she might relate well to them. One is called "The Right to Rebel," written by the Mexican social-reform activist Ricardo Flores Magón in 1910. The other is a statement released by Zapatista leader Subcomandante Marcos in January 1994, titled "What are they to forgive us of?"

She asks to see the book, and I hand it to her. She reads the first text aloud to me, and then the second, halting now and then to comment. We speak about the right to rebel, and the limits of that right, and those who decide where those limits are. Then we speak about the more difficult problem of forgiveness, a question she has given a lot of thought to in the past months. The last lines of Marcos's statement strike a deeper chord in her, and she reads them once more: "Who should ask for forgiveness and who can give it? The president? The secretaries of state? Congressmen? Governors? Municipal authorities? Policemen? The Army? The lords of banking, industry, commerce? Landowners? Political parties? Intellectuals? The media? Students? Teachers? The colonized? Workers? Farmers? The indigenous peoples? And all those who have died of useless death?" She finishes reading the list, and as she nods her head in agreement, adds, "International observers? Priests? The Autodefensas? The Colombian Army?"

We pay our bill, and our conversation is over for the day. Sandra excuses herself because she has to go back to the Hotel Casa Americana, where she will meet with "a government man." She tells me that he's a psychologist from the Agencia Colombiana para la Reintegración (Colombian Agency for Reintegration), which has been working with ex-combatants from several armed groups since 2003 to promote reintegration. "He is a good man," she adds. I take a taxi back to my hotel, where I will spend the rest of my waking hours making notes.

Translator's Notes:

§ After my mother decided to join the Zapatistas, she spent the next few years coming and going between Chiapas and Pretoria, South Africa, where I had relocated with my father after the summer of 1994. I was ten years old, so my knowledge and understanding of the situation—both political and personal, though the two would be forever twinned thereafter—was fragmentary and confused and possibly biased against the Zapatistas. I hated Marcos, and for me the Zapatistas were the masked people that had taken my mother away. For years, I was angry with my mother, incapable of understanding why other people were more important to her than her family.

* * *

"Everything is going to be different now," Sandra says when we start our walk the next day. "Everything will be different, and though I know all of this is necessary, I also realize that many people involved in the peace accords are not being honest about all this."

I ask her what she means by "this," and she goes on to tell me that she attended an event at a university not long ago, where she participated in a series of conferences given mostly by academics and left-wing politicians. She felt completely out of place. When it was her turn to speak, she told them: "We have to go back to the essence of this and be done already with all the meaningless talking, which will not lead us to any kind of unity. We need unity."

"Do you think that the left is unified in their opinion with respect to these matters, Sandra?"

"No. There is no unity, no ideological honesty, and no congruency. That's why the left does not exist anymore and hasn't existed for a while. Less so, a Latin American left."

After her brief intervention in that conference, everyone applauded, including her co-panelists. And when the event was over, many rushed out to meet her and talk to her in person. But she ran away as quickly as possible, inundated by a kind of vertigo.

"Why vertigo?"

"Vertigo of being so completely exposed."

Later that day, when I return to my hotel to make notes and think about Sandra's words regarding the need to "go back to the essence" of things, I am flooded by my first memories of Tirofijo, a founder and early leader of the FARC. He had been an almost mythological figure for the thousands of young Latin Americans living the revolutionary fervor of the 1960s, that "Latin American left" that, as Sandra said, does not exist anymore. Today, most of those same people are grandmothers and grandfathers or perhaps just old. But all of us now live in a kind of constant bewilderment before a world in which we were not capable of achieving our much sought-after common good, nor materializing the ideals of justice and equality that we upheld so feverishly and outspokenly. Now we are mostly silent witnesses of a much more savage and merciless world, a world of pure and barren competition among the younger ones, where only the stronger ones survive.

Translator's Notes:

§ The word my mother actually uses to describe Tirofijo is "character." I changed that word to "almost mythological figure." This difference is perhaps of degree and not of kind: for my generation, Tirofijo had become more of a myth than a real character, someone who belonged in the sphere of foundational fictions, rather than in history. Tirofijo, by the way, is a nickname that would translate as "Steady Shot"—as in the quality of having a calm, firm pulse while shooting a gun. In Spanish, the name has the same kind of flavor that Apache names have, feeling like a distinction earned in battle. I remember the first time I ever heard his name. My father used to tell a story about when he was eighteen or nineteen, just graduated from high school, and left Mexico City to make his way down to Colombia in search of Tirofijo and the guerrilla. He left without permission and with very little money in his pocket. The story is hazy in my memory, since my father stopped telling it when the FARC came to be seen more widely as a terrorist

organization—and the details would not be relevant here anyway. But I do know that he never found Tirofijo and instead had a romance with a young prostitute in Bogotá who later helped him pay his airfare back to Mexico.

§ I wondered a long time about this line about her aging generation: "All of us now live in a kind of constant bewilderment before a world in which we were not capable of achieving our much sought-after common good, nor materializing the ideals of justice and equality that we upheld so feverishly and outspokenly." Many of us, the offspring and byproducts of that generation, listened to their stories in awe and silence. We were all unsure about how we were expected to carry the heavy corpses of all those memories, experiences, and ideologies that our romantic, politically committed, and well-intentioned lefty parents dropped on us while we were small kids, only to announce to us years later, and with varying degrees of self-disappointment, that it was all a big mistake, that the world they once believed in was a lie, and that it was better to live in this post-ideological, more matter-of-fact world. I think that this was one of the main concerns I shared with many Latin Americans of my generation while we were teenagers moving into our twenties. We of course didn't phrase our concern like that back then, but we felt it, the inherited frustration. We had all heard stories like the one about going off in search of Tirofijo—similar versions told by our mothers and fathers, many times, at the dinner table or on long highway drives. And after hearing them, we were always left with a kind of nostalgia for an epoch not lived. But then, some years later, those same stories were either silenced or emphatically dismissed as folly. So we turned that nostalgia we'd grown up with into a kind of resentment, or into a kind of abandonment syndrome (abandonment not by our parents themselves, but by the people they had been and ceased to be). What was the reproach we had for our parents, exactly? I guess it was this: that the only things we'd been handed over was their unsurpassable and unbreakable belief system, and later, their totally broken beliefs and disappointment—also unsurpassable. So, in a way, it felt as if everything we lived and would live was second hand, and secondary: second-hand nostalgia and secondary disappointment. Perhaps I am being too harsh in judging my parents' generation. But if I am, it's only because I hope that my children do the same. And they surely will have reasons to, because, as my mother writes at the end of this note, we will have left them a "much more savage and merciless world."

* * *

When I ask Sandra how she's felt since she and the other ex-combatants were moved to the residence in February, and how their lives have changed, she looks worried and says, "The days keep passing by, you know, and the future doesn't look any clearer to us."

She then tells me she decided to do a written exercise with some of her fellows, her "*compañeras y compañeros*," as she refers to the members in the unit. She asked them all to write down what they might like or hope for, now that they've been granted the pardon, are out of jail, and free to decide what to do with their new lives. They all spent the day writing their thoughts and wishes, and that night when she read them all, she could not contain her tears.

"Why?" I ask.

"All those dreams, and all that grief!"

“What did they write about?”

“One of the men said he wants to be an engineer; another one wants to be a lawyer.

“And the women?”

“The women say they are interested in accounting, communications and journalism, theater, singing, and even poetry. All of us [women] are well trained in nursing and first aid, you know, and even if we don’t have certificates or diplomas, we know how to do a lot of things. The good thing is that some of us are being tested and have been able to begin studying or go back to studying. We know we have to join the life that other civilians live. But we also know that the stigma of the *guerrillero* won’t be easy to get rid of.”

“And the media doesn’t help much, do they?”

“The media has to become more democratic and quit manipulating all the information.”

I realize, listening to her, how important it is for multiple stories to be listened to and written about. Historical reconciliation and real forgiveness will be impossible otherwise.

She speaks to me about the very equivocal and often misleading conceptualization of the ex-combatants that has developed during the peace processes, and says she thinks the root of the problem is in the very language that is being used in the framework of the peace accords. She lists some of these words: “demobilize them,” “reinsert them,” “surrender arms,” “relinquish weapons.” The ex-combatants, she explains, talk about “reincorporating to civilian life” and wonder about their right to education, right to public health, right to having remunerated jobs. Will it at all be possible to live like civilians, they wonder.

“How and where will we live?” Sandra asks, though I know she’s not expecting an answer from me.

“Where do you plan to start?” I ask.

“I don’t know. But I will tell you this: ‘relinquishing weapons’ is only the tip of my little finger compared to everything else that has to be done, on both sides. What has to be done implies a monumental effort; a lot of work has to be done after the peace is signed.”

Later, reflecting on the conversation, I realize that the “monumental effort” is really just about the small effort of listening to personal stories, recording them, and passing them on. Real lives and particular stories have to be shared and understood before general conclusions can be made.

Translator’s Notes:

§ When I translate the lines "I realize, listening to her, how important it is for multiple stories to be listened to and written about. Historical reconciliation and real forgiveness will be impossible otherwise," I know, somehow, I am also somehow writing them myself, agreeing with them and acknowledging them in a way I did not expect ever to be able to when I started this work. People like Sandra are seldom given chances to write their side of history. And no history can ever be complete if people's stories are jettisoned, dismissed on the basis of their supposed illegitimacy. Acts and motivations may be deemed illegitimate—but stories are never illegitimate.

§ At the end of these notes, my mother refers to the "small effort of listening to personal stories, recording them, and passing them on." That process, I think, is exactly what this piece is really about. The way I eventually came to think about this story—after reading, thinking, annotating, translating, rethinking, ordering, and reordering all its bits and pieces—was as a slow and layered conversation among four women working in very different fields and contexts. It was a conversation among women who not only belonged to different countries (Colombia, Mexico, and the US) but also to different generations (in our thirties, mid-forties, and early sixties). It was, moreover, a conversation among women who in their lives have stood at completely different points on the spectrum of political involvement and activity. First of all, there was Nimmi, whose work has focused on studying the impact of militarization, displacement, and sexual violence on women's political identities, as well as thinking about the reasons behind women's decisions to join radicalized groups. It was her idea to interview a female fighter in Colombia. Her role in this conversation, therefore, beyond the necessary preparative fieldwork she did, was to provide a kind of common framework—both solid enough to bring the rest of us together and porous enough not to impose any preconceived concepts on this very particular circumstance. Then there was my mother, Marta (or "Martica," as Sandra preferred to call her), who has a degree in sociology and in the 1990s had been involved with the Zapatistas, in Chiapas, where she lived and worked with female fighters. Her role here was to ask, listen, and record, using the baggage of her past experience as the common platform in an encounter with a female fighter, but also to be ready to receive all that was unforeseen and unexpected in that exchange. My role, as writer of fiction and sometimes nonfiction, was to be a narrative vehicle. My duty was to translate everything as accurately and thoroughly as possible, and then put it all together in a storyline, which also sometimes meant recording my own biases and resistances to the flux of the story. And finally, there was Sandra, an ex-combatant in the FARC, who had lived most of her life in the jungle and now had to live in Bogotá. Her personal story was the invisible core around which everything else had to circle in a common effort to shine light upon a bunch of general questions the rest of us each had about female fighters. Of course, her story ended up reflecting back a lot of light on the very questions being asked: their underlying assumptions, their prejudices, their intrinsic limitations. The goal we all shared, I think, was to make the small effort of listening to stories, recording them, and passing them on. And I think it was possible because we all recognized that the conversation was spurred by a sense of urgency and threaded together by a commitment to mutual understanding.

* * *

"Can you talk to me about your years in prison?" I ask Sandra. I want to know more about this period, where the transition to this new life as a civilian began for her.

“They got me during battle. I was wounded and a soldier picked me up. He didn’t leave me there to die. I told him: ‘You’re a Bolivariano soldier.’ And he said no he wasn’t, said he was a soldier of the nation but that he was going to help me. I was grateful, and in return I gave him the locket I was wearing—a locket my mother had given me when I was a little girl. Then they delivered me to the Seccional de Investigación Judicial de la Dirección Central de Policía Judicial e Inteligencia, where I was interrogated together with another eight captured *compañeros*. I was the last one to be interrogated, and the person who interrogated me recognized me. He had been my schoolmate during my high school years, and he helped me. Those two men helped me, and if it hadn’t been for them, I think I would have been disappeared. In all people, there is something good, and there can always be signs of love. I know that.”

Sandra goes on to speak about the two years she was imprisoned, and says that although being locked up produces so much frustration, sadness, and shame with one’s family members, it can also be formative as an experience. Without hesitation, she says that overall, she considers her prison experience as a positive one. “I never get bored, you know. And if I don’t have any work to get done, I invent work. I don’t know how to sit still.”

While in jail, she played a leading role among the women—not only the political prisoners, but also the imprisoned paramilitary women and other, non-combatant inmates—working to secure access to education and better living conditions. She also wrote poems and participated in a short-story contest, which won her an honorific mention.

“An honorific mention among three thousand participants!” she says proudly, her black eyes gleaming.

Her fellow inmates called her “*la profe*” (the prof), and so did *las dragoneantes*, or the prison guards. After she was granted pardon and let free, she returned many times to her old prison, and several other prisons, in order to “give pedagogy,” a term she uses to refer to providing basic education to prisoners.

“Are you still doing this?” I ask.

“The project is still alive, but it’s been put on hold now. I have been insisting on it, telling the government people I’m in touch with that it’s something important, that bringing education to prisoners is necessary. But it seems that maybe they’re all waiting to see what happens after the peace accords.” She’s more engaged with this issue than any other I’ve heard her speak about. “It’s not only the ones in prison. You know, there are so many people who have supported the FARC in different ways and now know nothing about what will happen to them. Everyone is nervous and lost, because they don’t know any other life except the one they had. All of those people will have to find another way of life. I remind them all the time about it. All the time I tell them we can’t behave like pigs waiting for someone to come feed us in our sty.”

I repeat those words over and over, in order to not forget them.

Translator's Notes:

§ "I think I would have been disappeared…" I realize, perhaps for the first time while I translate this text, how likely it would have been for her to be "disappeared" by the Army, with possibly no consequences for those who perpetrated the act. And also how strange it is that she does not attribute her being alive to anything like luck or chance or even a miracle, but rather to the "good" of which all people are capable—even enemies in battle.

§ The "paramilitary women" whom Sandra refers to, for example, worked for the groups that combated the guerrilla. They were previously known as the "counter-insurgence" and the "Autodefensas." They were privately funded, by landowners or other wealthier people, and not infrequently received support from Colombia's military. The United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, for instance, at the behest of the Colombian military, reportedly carried out the murder of labor-union leaders and others suspected of supporting rebel movements.

§ The term "*las dragoneantes*," used by Sandra to refer to the prison guards in the women's prison, of course comes from the word "dragon." It might translate to "the dragonators": those who "dragon" others.

§ Sandra mentions that there are "many people who have supported the FARC in different ways." One of the points in the peace accords stipulated that the FARC, within 180 days of the public referendum, had to provide a list with the names of all combatants and those who aided. The exact number of FARC members is not currently known.

* * *

As the days go by, it becomes easier to ask Sandra more direct questions, not only about her present life and her recent time in prison, but about her days with the FARC.

"When and why did you join the FARC?"

"When I was in jail I wrote some poems, which I hope to publish one day, and one of them starts with the line '*Ever since I was a girl, I thought…*' because since I was a girl, I realized many things; I realized how much injustice there was, and the need to do something about that always surged from inside me."

She tells me that her mother took her to live in a boarding school for girls. There, she saw a little a girl of about three who started screaming in the middle of the night and hid under her bed, shouting, "The *chulos* are coming! They're coming!" The *chulos* was what they called soldiers.

"She was so scared, that little girl," Sandra says.

"How was it at that school?"

"Well, I collaborated in the commissions for nutrition and health that they organized, and that later became my specialty. Later on, I ran for mayor of the student council, and I won. But I was

only eleven years old, so my mother got all worried, and she pulled me out of school. She wanted to keep me locked away at home, but I went back to school and continued to study, and when I was a little older, I became the president of the student council."

Sandra graduated high school and began a degree in law. Her mother always helped her through those stages. Now she is seventy years old and still works every day. She runs a small shop in the town where they are from. "She always helps me," Sandra reiterates.

While she was studying, she also worked in a government enterprise that later on accumulated a fiscal debt and went bankrupt.

"They fired sixty of us just like that, no explanation given. I confronted the director and told him that he could not send us all out into the streets that way. He said he couldn't do anything for us. I told him: next time you see me I will have a different face."

I think it was around that time that she decided to join the FARC although every time I ask her for more precise dates, she evades the question. It could have been earlier than that, or perhaps later. But in the end, I guess, the exact moment is irrelevant. She might have been thirteen or nineteen: what is important in her story is that ever since she was a girl she was conscious of social injustice in Colombia and always felt an urge to combat it. That consciousness and that urgency are perhaps what converted her into a leader.

"In rural Colombia," Sandra explains, "when the doors were closed, armed struggle opened them up again; and if human dignity was ignited, there was always the possibility of rebellion."

Though I know the two movements are so different, and that our respective experiences are so different, I tell Sandra that what she says about armed struggle reminds me of what happened in Chiapas in 1994. I tell her that those same reasons—doors always closing on some people, and on basic human dignity—drove me and many others to join the Zapatista movement, though I chose not to take up arms, and my participation in it was as a civilian. And though our life experiences are so different, we agree that these kinds of decisions feel like a great implosion, a discharge of interior energy that then has to be turned into an act of will so that it is possible to work with others toward a common purpose. We agree that turning personal anger and frustration at social injustice into a decision to act in consequence also feels like a kind of liberation.

When I ask her about family—if she ever wanted one, and if she thinks that would have clashed with her political convictions—she tells me that she never wished to have a partner and never wanted children. All Colombians, she tells me, felt to her like her children.

"Since my first years with the FARC, I understood my life was no longer my life, that it was no longer for me alone; and so I gave it to the organization. It's not like keeping a discipline; it's about having understood a vision."

And when I ask her about her nuclear family, as she was still growing up, and how they reacted to her decision, she tells me that her older sister was somehow already expecting her to end up

getting involved with the FARC. “With a character like yours,” her sister would often tell her, “you’ll end up with the guerrilla.”

“And yes,” Sandra says, “I came to this life, here, to do that. That’s why I’m here.”

She also tells me that she often dreamt that she was running and holding a weapon, and that a fortuneteller once told her that in her cards she could see many weapons. Her comment strikes me as odd; she seems to be a woman with her feet so fixed on the ground.

“Or perhaps my dreams are a memory of a past life—do you believe in those things?”

“I do,” I say, “but don’t tell anyone.”

The last thing she tells me before we part is that her life still is and always will be with and for the FARC, except now it will be a “legal political life.” Those are the first words I write down in my journal that night, back in my hotel: “legal political life.”

Translator’s Notes:

§ “As the days go by, it becomes easier to ask Sandra more direct questions, not only about her present life and her recent time in prison, but about her days with the FARC” is a line I added to the original text. It strikes me that indeed this is what began happening in the consecutive days of the interview.

§ Sandra says that her mother “runs a small shop in the town where they are from.” I asked my mother if she could write her a message and ask her to specify (so she could tell me) what town this was exactly. My mother instantly replied: “No. Sandra was clear that she did not want to give any specifics like those.”

§ Sandra uses these exact words in Spanish: “*si la dignidad humana se encendía*,” which means, literally, “if human dignity was ignited.” I found this expression most mysterious. What did she mean by an “ignited dignity”? I decided, however, to leave the expression she used. (I decided as soon as I read the text the first time, before translating it, that I would be as literal as possible in translating Sandra’s particular expressions and ways of phrasing her ideas.)

§ The clarification “though I chose not to take up arms” are words that I’ve put in my mother’s mouth here, though she does state in the original text that she participated in the Zapatista movement “only as a civilian.” I know, because it’s something that we talked about many times as it used to be an obsessive concern of mine, that she’s never held a weapon.

§ I think, for a long while, about my mother and Sandra’s mutual sense of agreement when they discussed the idea that deciding to join a social movement felt like a kind of “internal explosion” or “liberation.” I remember the time my mother explained something similar to me, when we met in Greece for my twelfth birthday. Our first day in Athens, she decided it was necessary to take

me to see Apollo's temple, at the Oracle of Delphi. So we jumped on a shaky local bus and traveled way too many hours to that ancient town, which the Greeks had once considered the very navel of the world but seemed to me then like the very confines of the mapped universe. All the while, on the way there, she spoke about the strength and power of the pythonesses, the priestesses of the temple who had once served as oracles by allowing themselves to be filled with "enthusiasm" or "*enthousiasmos*." I remember the definition she gave to me of the term, breaking it down to its parts. (I guess I remember it because I did not know till then that words could be cut up like that.) Making a kind of cutting gesture with her hands, one palm as board and the other as knife, she said: "en," "theos," "seismos";"in," "god," "earthquake." "A kind of inner quake produced by allowing oneself to be possessed by something larger and more powerful."

As could be expected when I went anywhere with my mother, it was too late when we finally got there, and the access to the oracle was closed. My mother predictably suggested—in the name of "*enthusiasmos*"—that we break in by climbing over the fence. I obeyed, maybe enthusiastically (that kind of will for adventure I either got or resignedly learned from her). But, alas, we didn't get far. As soon as we were on the other side of the fence, we heard a sonorous, terrifying dog bark, and then more barks, all getting ominously closer—surely a large pack, savage. So we climbed out and took a night bus back to Athens. I think I remember all of this so vividly because of the conversation I had with my mother on our return to Athens. It was about her decision, years earlier, to join the Zapatistas and her experience in the movement. I wanted to know why she had "left me" and gone to live with others. She gave me her reasons. That conversation was an oracular experience for me, in the sense that it was full of enigmas, obscure meanings, and perplexing. But also in the sense that it planted a seed in me that would later, as I grew older, flower into a deeper understanding of things—about things both personal and political; about my mother in particular and about women in her generation more generally. Or perhaps the right word is not "understanding," which has always sounded rather passive to me. Perhaps the right word is "recognition," both in terms of knowing something again, for a second or third time, and finally grasping it.

* * *

It is the evening, and we are back in the Hotel Casa Americana. Sandra is telling me all about her new career. She did not continue her studies in law and instead opted for a degree in public administration. I am exhausted after a day of walking around and talking, and I've taken a seat in one of the chairs in the living room, in front of a round table on which I place my notebook and pen. She is pacing up and down, tireless.

Time is always running after her, pressing her. She is constantly answering messages she receives on her phone; she accepts the invitations to speak in conferences, welcomes the people who come speak to her, and is always available to her fellow ex-combatants, who always seem to be coming to her for advice and help. It is 7:00 p.m. and she is still going on and on, hasn't stopped for a minute all day. She says she is disappointed that she hasn't been able to study for her online course the last two days. She still has to read tonight, she tells me, so she can prepare for some of her virtual exams.

Aside from her studies, she is also firmly committed to creating, with some of her fellow ex-combatants, the first *legal* FARC organization, named FUCEPAZ [Spanish initials for Colombian Foundation of Ex-Combatants and Peace Promoters]. "Leaving our arms does not mean leaving behind political activity and social awareness. We can have a political life from here, one without arms. Now we are going to put forward new projects and requests for support and funding, both nationally and internationally."

In the seven months after the pardon, Sandra tells me, she has acquired many new responsibilities and obligations and has all her energy and mind set to making her new project happen.

"What has been the most complicated part for you about this transition?" I ask.

"It's been like losing an identity, like forgetting a way of operating in the world and forgetting a way of being and living in this life. When I was in the jungle, I knew what to expect, even if that meant expecting death to arrive any minute. Now, for seven months, I live between offices, and ministries, and even inside a virtual university! Isn't all that enough for anyone to lose their sanity?"

But Sandra seems like the opposite of anyone losing sanity. And although she is unhesitant about expressing a degree of nostalgia about the past, she also maintains a temperate mellowness about present struggles and future uncertainties. The only moment when I see her more noticeably upset during this conversation is when she talks about the role that female ex-combatants played in the peace negotiations. She is very cautious while she speaks about this issue, but she is not ambiguous. "We were not prepared, not well enough, for what is happening now with the agreements. I would have liked to participate in the negotiations in Havana, and our commanders could have prepared us better for it, but there is always certain *machismo*. Don't you think there was insufficient feminine presence in the agreements? And don't you think that as women we always do things with a different frame of mind? We don't forget a certain tenderness, or love. Considering others and taking care of them is something normal and natural for me, and for the other women I know here. Taking on responsibility of my fellows is something that just happens, like from the heart."

"What do you think women's role should be now in the process after the peace accords are signed?"

"I just think the priority for all of us, where we are standing right now, is to act with honesty and congruence. We have to renovate our living space but continue our path in trying to counteract the injustices that affect our communities, and seek those things that will represent a benefit for those communities. I am convinced that women of this century will accomplish a lot. We, here, will. I know this. We are brave and have the capacity to struggle and work tirelessly without expecting anything in return."

I write as many of her words down as my hand is able to catch. But I want to know more about the male and female roles in the organization and ask her how her relationship has been generally with male commanders in the FARC. She thinks for a minute and says she always remembers

Jacobo Arenas with particular fondness, and she does not conceal her enthusiasm when she speaks about his ideas, though her eyes look tired, and she sometimes looks blankly past me.

"When I am tired, when I get so tired, I sit still and listen to Jacobo."

The commander Jacobo Arenas, a co-founder of, and the principal ideologist behind, the FARC, died in 1990. When she says she "listens" to him, I am not sure if she means that she has old recordings that she plays to herself or if his words are engraved deep in her mind somewhere, and I decide not to ask.

"When I listen to him, I recover a certain peace and find strength again."

Sandra says she thinks Jacobo Arenas would agree with her views on the imbalance of power between male and female members of the organization, and on the obvious unevenness in the amount of men and the amount of women who were present in the peace negotiations that took place in Cuba. These issues were always addressed by Jacobo Arenas, she says, and he was also always concerned about the organization's lack of contact with the outside world.

"So what is it in his words that gives you back your confidence?"

"Congruence, that's the only thing. The only thing that returns our confidence to face whatever is coming is congruence. What I mean by this is not forgetting what was most essential in our purpose, and not ceasing to have that purpose."

As I make these notes I remember, also, the figure of Tirofijo and how we all did forget and how we all, in different countries and different sorts of struggles, ceased to have a purpose.

Translator's Notes:

§ As I translate my mother's description of Sandra's "enthusiasm" when talking about Jacobo Arenas and his ideas, I remember the deeper, original meaning of the term my mother once gave me—"a kind of inner quake…"

§ My mother brought back a little medallion from Colombia, for me to give to my father, whom she hasn't seen in some years. It's a medallion with the face of the young Tirofijo. I wonder what it would mean now to my father, and to others of his generation, who once felt such enthusiasm, and later, over the years, distanced themselves absolutely from everything related to the FARC. I wonder, and worry, about how they might read this text and how they might relate to or judge the testimony gathered here, piece by piece, layer over layer. And if that generation, or mine, would ever be willing to even listen to something like Sandra's story and try to understand—to recognize—anything in it.

* * *

I ask Sandra what she is most worried about.

“So many things,” she answers.

“For example?”

“For example: What will happen when the FARC members are relocated to the *zonas veredales*? How will they live there? What will they do?”

Sandra is referring to the areas the government has allocated for the FARC members who are still in the jungle. She continues, “The ex-combatants who will be allowed to have any political activity will be the exception. And we know now that only some municipalities in the country will allow it. Our units are dispersed all over the country, so how is that possible? How is it that only some municipalities will allow it, and only some people will be allowed to participate in political life? This worries us, and it confuses us. Not to mention possible paramilitary attacks. How will we defend ourselves now?”

Her concern is justified. We heard on the news that, just a few days ago, a female ex-combatant in Cauca, who once had a leading role, was assassinated by a paramilitary group. I ask her what she thinks is going to happen to those paramilitary groups and how the government is going to make sure they don’t continue committing crimes with total impunity.

“Oh, Martica,” she says and shakes her head. “I don’t know. It won’t be easy.”

* * *

Before I arrived in Bogotá, I had spent a few weeks thinking about the questions I could ask the women who would agree to talk to me about their lives inside the guerrilla. I’d read and seen recordings of some of those stern, steady women of the FARC, loyal to one of the most perseverant, entrenched, and extended guerrillas in the history of armed conflicts.

I arrived in Bogotá on August 23, 2016, one day before the announcement of the peace accords. For the week that followed, I spent time with thirty ex-combatants of the FARC. Next to them, I’d witness the signing of the peace treatises on August 24. I knew I’d been given a rare opportunity as a bystander and participant of this precise historical moment. Over the next few days, I’d witness the growing bafflement among them when they heard further news about the agreements, and I silently listened to all their questions when we sat down to talk about what was coming for them.

Among the thirty ex-combatants, there were seven women, between the ages twenty and forty, who had all been female fighters. They were all rebellious, noncompliant, skeptical, and also deeply generous. I talked to them, informally, and observed them closely, with a growing feeling of respect. Among those women, there was Sandra, to whom I listened closely for many hours each day, taking notes when I could and taking mental notes when I had no other choice. From the beginning, our exchanges were marked by a sense of comradeship and trust. And as

those grew, I realized that she was less interested in telling me about her past as a female fighter than in explaining her views on the future, in the face of the changes that were soon to come.

Translator's Notes:

§ Interviewing is a way of close listening. Interviewing implies viewing or seeing someone as if in between the lines of a conversation. When I was asked to research and write a piece about female fighters in the FARC, I knew that my mother had to provide the first bridge. I imagined that her experience in the Zapatista movement would help her to listen to and observe a female fighter from inside a space of certain intimacy and common experience.

As I was translating these fragments from her notes, I initially added the word "foreign" to the line where my mother says she knew she had been given a rare opportunity as "bystander and participant." I wrote "foreign participant"—perhaps because I was imposing my own feeling of foreignness on the situation. But I later erased it, because I realized I didn't know, in fact, how far or how near my mother actually felt to Sandra and the other people around her when that historical moment blew past her and the rest of them in the living room of the Hotel Casa Americana. I suspect that her own foreignness in the situation—or whatever the opposite of that might be—was not a concern she had, or perhaps has ever had, for that matter. It seems to me that when she listens to another person, she is simply listening to that other person and not questioning or negotiating her own place in the conversation, which may be the reason why she was able to gain the trust of the people with whom she shared those few days in this particular historical moment.

* * *

In the early morning of August 29, the commander in chief, Timoleón Jiménez, ordered a ceasefire to all FARC units, after fifty-two years of armed combat. Sandra read the text message on her telephone and then passed the telephone to me so I could read it: "Tell Mauricio Babilonia, over there in Macondo, to release the yellow butterflies, for the war has ended."

"You know what would be good? I'll tell you what would be good," Sandra said in response to my asking what she was looking forward to.

"Tell me what would be good, yes."

"What would be good is this: when the old are finally able to tell their story to the very young. We have to tell our story to the new generations and explain the reasons for which we lived. Always, always trying to create awareness in them so that they never accept to simply sit still when there is injustice in front of them. But we have to tell the story with conviction and mental agility, so that we don't bore the younger ones! I think that's how ties and commitments are created across generations. Telling our stories. That's what would be good."

Translator's Notes:

§ This was the last time my mother and Sandra spoke, at least in person. Over the following months, they've continued to exchange SMS messages, some of which my mother copies and sends to me, often without explaining that what she's sending is a message written by Sandra. I scroll up and down, trying to make sense of things.

§ Translating is a way of close reading. Translating involves a kind of art of distance. An art, that is, of learning where to situate oneself with respect to the "original." As I translated, I was sometimes in intense internal dialogue with my mother; and at other times I forgot entirely that it was her notes I was working with. In certain moments, especially those where I was dealing with direct quotes from Sandra, I knew I had to get some distance from the text and comply with the old dictum of "the translator's invisibility." Other times, I felt compelled to intervene in the text more directly, questioning it with my own concerns and generational experiences. But all the while, like a gentle but clear tremor somewhere in the back of my head, I felt the same enigmatic perplexity I'd felt the day when my mother and I rode that bus between Delphi and Athens. And eventually, at last, I recognized what had perhaps been in front of me the whole time while translating Sandra's story as registered by my mother: that the more difficult art of forgiveness comes about slowly, collectively, only by threading stories across generations.