

If we accept life on earth with its varied sufferings, including both death and the loss of love, we are overwhelmed by an invisible, internalized Earth, by a single springtime, and by life itself springing forth in our heart, that place we speak of as the organ of our compassion and the receptacle of our love.

This short introduction to Rilke's poem suggests some of the mystic and symbolist qualities that obviously captivated the mystic and symbolist photographer Josephine Sacabo. In the first of the *Duino Elegies* Rilke wrote,

... if longing overwhelms you, then sing of great lovers: even now  
their famous passions are not yet immortal enough.

And sing of those you almost envy, those who were deserted, those you  
found so much more loving than the successful ones. Begin  
again and again the song that would praise their failure.

These words could easily be applied to much of Josephine Sacabo's work. In Rilke's *Elegies* she found a poet whose voice articulated the intense emotions of her own imagery. It is as if his great poem of love, death, and angels gave voice to her great subject, a subject not easy to define because her art, like Rilke's, is more about emotion than facts, more about the senses and sense experience than it is about intellectual or mundane experience. It travels like electricity through the blood and comes out as sighs and tears; it has a madness about it like the madness of passionate love. Another poet, Federico García Lorca, did his best to describe it in a famous essay on "Deep Song." He wrote, "It comes from the first sob and the first kiss," and he said, "The woman of deep song is called Pain. . . . Pain is made flesh, takes human form, and acquires a sharp profile."<sup>3</sup>

That profile is the profile of Sacabo's work. Again and again she depicts a world of women caught up in complex and extreme emotional situations. Her well-known series of images of Susana San Juan is inspired by Juan Rulfo's tragic, surrealist novel *Pedro Páramo*.<sup>4</sup> It chronicles the world of a woman who, in Sacabo's words, was "forced to take refuge in madness as a means of protecting her inner world."<sup>5</sup>

Her book *Une femme habitée*,<sup>6</sup> her *Nocturne* series, these images inspired by the *Duino Elegies*, and her new *Salome* series all portray women at the brink of the

precipice.

Though her work has been inspired by Rulfo, Baudelaire, Rilke, García Lorca, Vicente Huidobro, and St. Mark, critic Morri Creech points out that "Sacabo avoids the dangers of the artist who takes another work of art for her subject. She understands that the task of any artist is to *transform*, to filter the source of inspiration through the lens of creative vision. . . . [Her] work rises beyond the source of its inspiration, shimmering with its own unique texture and vision."<sup>7</sup> And it is perfectly paired to Rilke's because she is one of today's leading exponents of what could be called symbolist, mystical, or metaphysical photography.

Josephine Sacabo, like the most advance guard of contemporary photographers, has turned her back on the irrelevant and antiquated modernism of the past century, on its techniques and its philosophy, turned from the abstraction of mere shapes to create a photography of content. For her and other photographers like her, shape and texture alone are no longer sufficient. Peeled paint, a crinkled leaf, patterns in sand, silt, or debris, all of which once seemed like eloquent commentary now look like the tritest of clichés. Such pictures, if made today, regardless of how beautifully they might be printed are finally no more than their surface because they are mute; they do speak, except in anachronistic whispers, nor do they transcend the shapes they report and record. They may have what passes for an "intellectual" message, a message of deliberate, mute dumbness, or a far wordier "conceptual" message. But what they lack is any sensuality beyond surface texture. In another essay on Josephine Sacabo, I once quoted a passage from novelist and art critic John Berger but substituted the word "photography" for his word "painting." It is even more relevant here in the context of her *Duino Elegies* because what Burger sees as most basic to great painting is a sensuous charge that leads into mystery. His words clarify something of Sacabo's method as well as her greatness.

[T]he basic purpose of photography is to conjure up the presence of something which is not there, it is not surprising that what is usually conjured up are bodies. It is their presence which we need in our . . . solitude to console, strengthen, encourage, or inspire us. Photography keeps our eyes company. And company usually involves bodies. . . . Photography, then, offers palpable, instantaneous, unswerving, continuous, physical presence. It is the most immediately sensuous of the arts. Body to body. One of them being the spectator's. This is not to say that the aim of every photograph is sensuous. . . . Yet, however the art of photography is used, its use begins with a deep sensuous charge. . . . [I]f the photograph is alive [it] is a sensuous shock. He who says "sensuous"—where the human body and the human imagination are concerned—is also saying "sexual". And it is here the practice of photography begins to become more mysterious.<sup>8</sup>

Sacabo's photographs inspired by the *Elegies*, like all great Symbolist art, are not so much concerned with intellectual content as with emotional content. Their power,

grace, and beauty are not lessened by saying they are built upon emotional knowledge rather than intellectual knowledge or to call them, like the *Duino Elegies* themselves, a product of an intuitive spirituality. Mysticism of any sort demands belief, not analytical reasoning, and great art does not need systems or mythologies to validate or infuse it with meaning. Ideas, concepts, and theories are, in fact, usually the cornerstones of Bad Art because they are cheap, require neither craft, technique, nor artistic ability, and are more impressive in their description than in their execution.

Without trying to pair passages in Rilke too closely to particular images, one might simply consider a few of the many passages that seem to resonate with the imagery in Sacabo's photographs:

. . . . Isn't it time that, with love, we  
freed ourselves from our loved one and, trembling, endured:  
as the arrow endures the string so that, tensed  
for its flight, it is more than itself. To stay is to be nowhere.

*(The First Elegy)*

Look, we don't love as flowers do, for a single  
season only; when we love, a sap  
from unmeasured time lifts up our arms.

*(The Third Elegy)*

. . . . Aren't lovers  
always meeting boundaries in each other,  
when they expected space, hunting, a liberal home.  
. . . . We don't know the outline  
of our own emotion: only what shapes it from without.

*(The Fourth Elegy)*

Nowhere, my love, will the world exist except within us. Our life's purpose  
and use is transformation. Outward things  
fall from us, vanish.

*(The Seventh Elegy)*

. . . . More life than I can hold  
springs up in my heart.

*(The Ninth Elegy)*

. . . . How we waste our sufferings!  
We wait in dread of them, anticipate their melancholy hours,  
hope that they may end. Yet they are  
our winter leaves, the dark evergreen of our lives,  
*one* of the seasons of our secret year-- , not a season  
merely-- , but place, country, village, garden, and home.

*(The Tenth Elegy)*

The photographs paired with individual "Elegies" were selected to suggest certain similar motifs present in both works, but one can also feel an unfolding

narrative in the photographs. However, instead of trying to yoke word to image, one should read and look at the work of these two great artists and let one's emotions make the connections. What one finds will be richly rewarding. As Symbolist painter Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo wrote, "The reality that we see before our eyes is in constant conflict with the truth in our minds—which is the one we choose to represent. . . . If the artist sticks too closely to reality in his search for the truth, he cannot achieve his full potential. The ideal truth can only be reached by sacrificing the real world."<sup>9</sup> Rilke and Sacabo would probably say "by transforming the real world." That is what these poems and photographs do.

## THE DUINO ELEGIES

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### Notes

1. Quoted in Leslie Norris and Alan Keele, Foreword, *The Duino Elegies* (Columbia: Camden House, 1993), p. v.
2. Rainer Maria Rilke, Letter to Witold von Hulewicz (R's Polish translator) in *Briefe aus Muzot*, ed. Ruth Sieber-Rilke and Carl Sieber, (Leipzig: Insel, 1940), p. 376.
3. Federico García Lorca, "Deep Song" (*Arquitectura del cante jondo*) in *In Search of Duende*, ed. Christopher Maurer (New York: New Directions, 1998), pp.10, 15.
4. Juan Rulfo, *Pedro Páramo*, trans. Margaret Sayers Peden, illustrated by