

# PEN INTERNATIONAL

Volume 58, No. 2, Autumn/Winter 2008



## Context:

Latin America and the Caribbean

## Contexte:

Amérique latine et Caraïbes

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América latina y el Caribe

The magazine of International PEN  
Le magazine de PEN International  
El periódico de PEN Internacional



Published with the support  
of the Culture Sector

**Bloomberg**

## Jeff McMahon

### A Poor Man's Che

Less than three years after the U.S. Cavalry massacred the Sioux at Wounded Knee, Chicagoans could safely observe Sioux encampments at the World's Columbian Exposition, and the science of ethnography was born. So goes the story, and so it will go with socialists.

As soon as the last socialist dies – which might happen soon in Cuba – we will study them as curiosities, celebrate them as nostalgic objects, observe them through some modern version of a Columbian Exposition exhibit. It has already begun with Che Guevara: four years ago Gael García Bernal portrayed Che's formative years in *The Motorcycle Diaries*, and soon we will be able to safely observe the revolutionary Che, played by Benicio Del Toro, in a 268-minute biopic by Steven Soderbergh. We can watch while wearing our Original Che Berets, on sale right now at the Che Store for only \$24.99 – \$5.00 off the regular price. I will celebrate Che as much as the next subject of capital, but when I think of socialism I will not think of Che. I will think of Lozandro Polanco.

To introduce Lozandro Polanco, to explain why he should be remembered, I must take you back to a hot, dusty, desperate dry season in Nicaragua in 1987, when the whole country ran out of beer. I should say more precisely that it ran out of bottles, which waiters watched the way cats watch goldfish. The ragged Sandinista economy had just enough bottles to deliver the people's beer to the people's bellies – as long as it shipped the bottles straight back to the brewery to fill them up again. The waiters watchdogged this fragile economy, but they could not watch the bottlers, and when the bottlers took two days off to honor the Virgin during Purisima, the whole country ran out of beer.

The drought stung all the more for the sublime quality of Nicaragua's two native brands, Toña lager and Victoria pilsner. A cold sip at the end of every hot, dry day broke sharply from the relentless tragedy that day had inevitably chronicled: the widows and orphans, the crippled veterans, the felled forests and shelled towns.

With the dry season upon us, with the beer gone, you could feel the temperature rise. The few men who idled away hot afternoons in thatched outdoor bars sat in gloomy silence and stared blankly at the skinny dogs roaming Managua's dirt streets. The guards keeping watch at the Palacio Nacional – then the vacant centerpiece of a ruined downtown – barked at the boys playing stickball in the weedy plaza. There had always been soldiers in ill-fitting Cuban fatigues rushing to the front on the backs of flatbed trucks, but now they gripped their AK-47s with a new anxiety. They had left Managua without that final beer.

Even the American reporters who crowded into the bar at the Hotel

Intercontinental (then Nicaragua's only multi-story building) seemed unusually tense during the beer drought, despite the hotel's endless stocks of rum and cola. Their impatience leaked into the reports they filed on the deadly, dimwitted standoff between Ronald Reagan and the band of Ivy League-educated revolutionaries now running Nicaragua.

It was in this parched atmosphere that I was dispatched one afternoon to a press conference called by Interior Minister Tomás Borge at a new women's prison in Managua. The Sandinistas poured their pride into public institutions – schools, clinics, prisons – and it showed here. The inmates wore beige shirts and trousers with red collars and cuffs, like factory workers, and they bustled like workers, too, buzzing from workrooms to rec rooms across manicured lawns. There was no barbed wire atop the freshly painted walls.

But it was within these walls that the cracks showed in Sandinista ideology.

Already in 1987, Tomás Borge was the last living founder of the Sandinista movement. Daniel Ortega and the *nuevos* Sandinistas who ran the country called him 'El General de la Revolución'. A stout, puggish man, Borge emerged into the courtyard smiling, the Sandinistas' red and black scarf knotted around his neck, a woman under each arm. He sucked all the power out of the prison yard and into his swelling chest. There was no question who, in this crowd, was the general.

Borge had been captured by the Somoza dictatorship in 1956, tortured and imprisoned for three years, nine months of which he spent with a black hood over his head. Somoza's men raped and murdered his wife. When the Sandinistas seized power in 1979, he confronted his torturers in court. When he was allowed to choose their punishment, Borge famously said to them: 'My punishment is to forgive you.'

It was a good Catholic socialist revolution.

Borge said a few words about this ideal new prison in the ideal new state, but the real story, subtler than the headlines, appeared when he finished his speech: workers wheeled two metal coolers into the yard, each the size of a small Soviet car, and opened the lids. Inside, nestled in an arctic sea of icewater, were hundreds of bottles of Victoria pilsner.

Everyone drank slowly.

It was like that in Nicaragua. In this poorest of nations, this most idealistic of revolutions everywhere showed signs of compromise. Sandinista leaders like Borge and Ortega lived in posh homes by Nicaraguan standards, captured from the fascists and capitalists they had deposed. Inside these homes one could find objects one found nowhere else in Nicaragua, like color televisions, teenage sons, beer. It was the socialist paradox: becoming one people and still taking a little plunder for yourself. The meager plunder of such revolutions will make a curious exhibit at the next Columbian Exposition. But there will be no artifacts belonging to Lozandro Polanco on display, for Lozandro Polanco owned nothing.

I first wrote about Polanco soon after I met him and soon after I met Borge, when I traveled to a resettlement camp near the northern front. The camp had a new school and a new clinic, but had probably never known a single bottle of beer. I wrote about him again a decade later, and now, two decades later. His story is still with me. This is how I usually tell it:

Lozandro Polanco paced the camp's dirt streets cradling a Kalashnikov rifle in his right arm and cradling a granddaughter, barefoot and wet-nosed in a pink

dress, in his left. All the other men had left the camp in uniform and gone into the jungle, or into the earth. Even those too young to shave were old enough to march; but thin, toothless Polanco had too many years. So he remained among the women and babies, patrolling the streets in a drab olive uniform and cap. He kept the rifle's banana clip wedged in the waistband of his trousers. He wore black rubber boots, the kind worn by people who clean fish.

Polanco had lived in the border village of Comwapa until 1983, when Reagan's Contras attacked. They killed his brother and five-month-old niece. They kidnapped his daughter and some of her children. Polanco trailed them into Honduras before returning to Nicaragua alone and settling in the camp.

'I would like to stay here and take care of what we have,' he told me.

Polanco led me on a tour of the camp, and then I followed him into his home, a shack assembled from sticks and palm fronds. The shadows inside were as dark and cool as the sun outside was bright and hot. Bare feet had polished the dirt floor smooth. Polanco owned nothing, nothing at all save for a clay stove, its belly full of gray ash, and a cloth pouch that hung from the ceiling. The pouch was wet, and a single drop of water fell from it when Polanco untied the strings that cinched it closed. His fingers slipped inside and pulled out two eggs. He handed them to us. They felt as cold as if they had been in a refrigerator.

'Take them for your journey,' he said.

Lozandro Polanco's socialism was marked by two sentiments: 'I would like to stay here and take care of what we have', and here, take everything we have for your journey.

The U.S. Cavalry massacred the Sioux at Wounded Knee to clear the Black Hills for farmers and miners, for American businessmen. Now the Cavalry has cleared all but the last of the socialists. Easily and often we remember the worst of them: Stalin and his purges, Pol Pot and his Killing Fields. But as we plunge into the blind night of unballasted capitalism, we should take for our journey some memento of socialism's immaterial best: Not just Che Guevara's original beret, not just Tomás Borge's forgiveness and beer, but Lozandro Polanco's selflessness, his courageous generosity in radical poverty, his stone cold *huevos*.

*This essay first appeared in the Summer 2008 issue of Contrary.*

### Coming in Spring 2009: Volume 59, No. 1: Heaven and Earth

*Pen International* will lead off in 2009 with an issue timed to coincide with **Free the Word!** International PEN's annual springtime festival of world literature in London. It will also share International PEN's literary theme for 2009 and for the festival: 'Heaven and Earth'.

Many elements govern the relationship between Heaven and Earth, from the fantastical paradises created in our imaginations to the most material of concerns. Key concepts include, but are not limited to: faith and reason, hope and disillusionment, ideology and reality, the environment and politics, freedom and imprisonment.

*Pen International* welcomes submissions exploring the idea of Heaven and Earth in poetry, short stories, essays, articles and excerpts from longer works.

**DEADLINE: 16 FEBRUARY 2009.** For full writing guidelines and details of how to submit visit [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk)

## About *PEN International*

Published biannually, *PEN International* presents the work of contemporary writers from around the world in English, French and Spanish. Founded in 1950, it was relaunched in 2007 with the express goal of introducing the work of new and established writers to each other and to readers everywhere. Contributors have included Adonis, Margaret Atwood, Nawal El-Saadawi, Nadine Gordimer, Günter Grass, Han Suyin, Chenjerai Hove, Alberto Manguel, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Moniro Ravanipour, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka and many others. *PEN International* is the magazine of the worldwide writers' association, International PEN. For more information about our work, and for submission guidelines to the magazine, visit [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk).

## A propos de *PEN International*

Le magazine *PEN International* paraît deux fois par an et présente les œuvres inédites d'écrivains contemporains en anglais, français et espagnol. Fondée en 1950, le magazine a été relancé en 2007 sous la direction d'un rédacteur avec un nouveau design, et les contributions d'écrivains invités, avec l'objectif explicite de populariser les œuvres d'écrivains et de traducteurs, connus ou non, auprès de la communauté littéraire et des lecteurs du monde entier. Au nombre des contributeurs, on peut relever Adonis, Margaret Atwood, Nawal El-Saadawi, Nadine Gordimer, Günter Grass, Han Suyin, Chenjerai Hove, Alberto Manguel, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Moniro Ravanipour, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka et d'autres. *PEN International* est le magazine de l'association mondiale des écrivains PEN International. Pour de plus amples informations de notre travail et des directives pour la rédaction des articles, veuillez visiter [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk)

## Sobre *PEN Internacional*

La revista *PEN Internacional* está dirigida a un público global y presenta obras originales de escritores contemporáneos de todo el mundo en inglés, francés, y español. Fundada en 1950, se realizó en 2007 un nuevo lanzamiento con el objetivo explícito de presentar el trabajo de escritores reconocidos y nuevos a los lectores de todas partes. Ésta presenta un nuevo diseño, cuenta con un editor especializado y escritores especiales invitados. Entre los contribuyentes de PEN Internacional se incluyen Adonis, Margaret Atwood, Nawal El-Saadawi, Günter Grass, Han Suyin, Chenjerai Hove, Alberto Manguel, Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Moniro Ravanipour, Salman Rushdie, Wole Soyinka, y muchos más. La revista se publica bianualmente. *PEN Internacional* es la revista de PEN Internacional, la asociación mundial de escritores. Para más información sobre nuestro trabajo, y para pautas de envío para la revista, visite a [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk)

## International PEN

Brownlow House, 50/51 High Holborn, London WC1V 6ER, United Kingdom  
Tel: +44 (0) 20 7405 0338 Fax: +44 (0) 20 7405 0339  
E-mail: [info@internationalpen.org.uk](mailto:info@internationalpen.org.uk) Website: [www.internationalpen.org.uk](http://www.internationalpen.org.uk)

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## Acknowledgements

*Cover photograph:* Jeanny Solis S.  
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*With thanks to:* Paulina Carrasco Arroyo, Pierre Astier, Casimiro de Brito, Melita del Carpio, Karen Efford, Pilar Fernandez, Frank Geary, Peter Gonda, David Hayes, Kamal, Arnélie Louat, Edith Malec, Nii Parkes, Daniel Simon, Olivia Snaije, Ana Valdés, Gaby Vallejo, Juan Carlos Vilchez, Paul de Zwart.

*PEN International* is supported by UNESCO, the Sigrid Rausing Trust, Bloomberg and an anonymous donor.

**Bloomberg**

*Editor:* Mitchell Albert

*Special editorial assistants for this issue:* Ana Fletcher, Victor Flores, Elizabeth Skelly

*Design:* [www.weareunlimited.co.uk](http://www.weareunlimited.co.uk)

*Print:* MRT Ltd, Bristol, UK

*Proofreaders:* Brandon Hopkins (English), Vincent Rey (French), Ana Fletcher (Spanish)