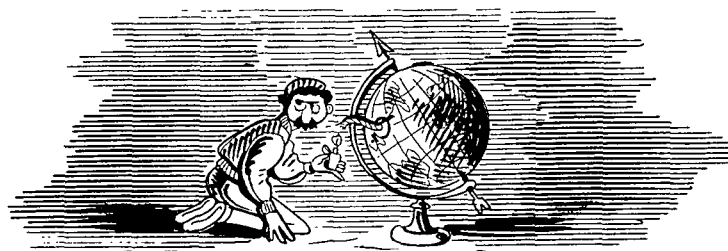


THE MIAMI SPECTATOR



DESPERADO

by Algis Valiunas

On December 16, 1988, Mr. Leonardo Mercado of Miami got into a strenuous tussle with six local police officers, an ill-advised course of action for even the most upright of citizens to undertake, let alone a much-arrested drug dealer whom police suspected of putting a contract out on one of their membership. Mercado paid for his lapse in judgment with his life, such as it was. His corpse, loaded with cocaine and marijuana, bore forty-four bruises and lacerations; an Adidas sneaker print was embossed on his forehead, the relic of a fast break that must have been conducted at very high speed indeed.

The police officers, known as the Jump Out Gang, went on trial in Miami this past November, charged with conspiring to commit murder, violating Mercado's civil rights by murdering him, and violating Mercado's teenaged stepsons' civil rights by beating them. The policeman maintained that Mercado had gone berserk and it had required extraordinary force to subdue him. Miami is a town slow to buy a case like the one for Mercado. Numerous prospective jurors informed the court that Mercado had, by his choice of profession, violated their civil rights and surrendered his own. The witnesses for the prosecution, taken from Mercado's troops, affronted simple decency and grated it raw. Mercado's stepsons, Pedro and Jose Soto, were confessed drug dealers and perjurers; one lawyer dubbed them "Teenage Mutant Ninja Sotos." Pedro offered the most colorful testimony, with his charge that one policeman had defenestrated him head-first and thereby caused him to fly "like Superman." In a pre-trial statement, however, Pedro had said that he'd been coming in through the window and the policeman had simply pushed him back out, like a wingless criminal buffoon.

On December 3, the jury acquitted the officers on seventeen counts and voted eleven to one for acquittal on the remaining seven counts. The verdict was the signal, long familiar in these pre-

cincts, for rioting to commence. Now two of the acquitted officers were Cuban, three black, and one white, while Mercado was Puerto Rican, so it was Mercado's old neighborhood of Wynwood, a Puerto Rican stronghold, that went up in flames. Although the Puerto Ricans are well represented in Miami's professional class, Wynwood is poor, and last year it had the city's highest crime rate. Yet, despite that imposing supremacy, Wynwood did not put on much of a riot. The damage to property was limited to some \$30 million, and there were no serious injuries. The bolder rioters looted and torched some of the neighborhood's leading businesses, while the less ambitious settled for starting fires in dumpsters. Some of the looters had towels pulled up over their faces and others had paper bags pulled down over their heads, so that it appeared as though a pack of *intifada* desperadoes had hooked up with a horde of football fans in the throes of a serious grievance. The event was not purely a festival of mass larceny and destruction, however. There was much impassioned chanting, of Mercado's nickname, *Cano*, of such epithets as *bandoleros* and *asesinos*, and of the demand, in molten gold, *justicia*.

Justice is a lot to hope for, even under the most civilized human arrangements; in Miami the past several years, it has seemed beyond anyone's reach. The empire of lawlessness has demolished the rule of law. Many decent people took it for granted—and most people probably had a suspicion—that the police had murdered Mercado precisely as the prosecution had contended; this rough justice did not cause a tremor of offense among them. For these people, disgust with the murderous drug traffic, and with the general fecklessness of attempts to stem it, overcame the customary civilian regard for the legal process. They knew law wasn't good enough to get the job done anymore, and if some measure of justice was to be done, one shouldn't be appalled that it was shadowy and not quite clean.

Of course, who was shadowy and unclear if not Mercado, whose name nevertheless became a rallying cry for those Puerto Ricans demanding justice. For them, it did not matter that he had been a criminal preying on their neighborhood; he was a representative of their common plight. His death at the hands of the police supposedly bespoke their own danger from the lawlessness of the lawmen. Law had become the enemy, and still they called to the law for help, speeding things along with the help of a little gasoline. The rioters got as much help from the law as they deserved. So, too, one hopes, did Mercado and the six policemen. The entire affair, however, revealed this city in its naked hopelessness—aching, exhausted, and foul.

It is the intention of a black Miami lawyer, Mr. H. T. Smith, that all America be made to appreciate the singular foulness of Miami. He has made a videotape celebrating the city's wretchedness that he intends to distribute nationwide. Smith is the leader of a black boycott, which has been in effect since last July, of the city's convention industry. What provoked the boycott was the chill welcome that Miami gave to Nelson Mandela last June. The city's Cuban mayor, Xavier Suárez, took an immediate dislike to Mandela's longstanding fondness for such statesmen as Castro, Qaddafi, and Arafat. There were, consequently, no parades—no proclamations, even. (Someone pointed out that even Robo-Cop had received a proclamation; but then, the coming of Robo-Cop to Miami is precisely comparable to the coming of Christ anywhere else.)

The Mandela wound was still fresh in early July when a fight between a Cuban storeowner and a Haitian customer inspired a thousand Haitians to demonstrate outside the Rapid Transit Factory Outlet clothing store in Little Haiti. To make the Cubans pay for the Mandela insult—as well as to demand that the storeowner be jailed as the customer had been—was the crowd's vital passion. Signs read, "Viva Castro"

and "Cubans Back to Cuba." Finally, as the demonstration was into its fifth day, police riot squads attacked the Haitians when they refused to disperse. Subsequently, there was much talk of justice and its opposite, and the incident further fueled the boycott.

H. T. Smith is leading the boycott of what is known as the hospitality industry because "riots don't work." Behind the talk of Mandela is a surprisingly sensible and attractive request for admission to the city's more desirable economic purlieus. Smith laughs darkly at the "mysterious mathematical coincidence" that the convention industry employs no black lawyers, no black accountants, and only a handful of black vendors. Young black professionals find Miami so inhospitable that they head north *en masse*, to Atlanta. Blacks have even lost out on the lower-paying service jobs, although they had filled most of them before the 1960s, when the Cubans arrived. The tourism industry, Smith declares, has boycotted blacks for the past twenty or thirty years. "For blacks [Miami is] Selma, Alabama."

Smith has already steered between \$5 and \$25 million in business away from Miami. On a local television talk show he had the opposition begging to know what it can do to bring the thing to an end. Unfortunately, Smith cleaves to some nebulous but non-negotiable notions of black self-respect, so it seems that the obvious economic concessions will not be sufficient. The Mandela business is intractable, an excuse for perpetual bickering. Smith doesn't have it in him to see that Mandela's heroism is deeply vitiated—some would say, negated—by his warmth toward certain unspeakable regimes, and that there is no reason to expect people who have suffered from one such regime to welcome him with honor into their city of exile. Smith's boycott may yet earn the blacks in Miami some taste of justice, but only if he moderates his understanding of what justice consists in. For there will not be any justice in this town so long as everyone demands his own above everyone else's and self-righteousness shades readily into hatred. □

Algis Valiunas, a Chicago writer, vacationed in Miami last December.

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CURRENT WISDOM

New York Times

Black humor:

If Nancy Cruzan truly lived only the first 25 years of her life, the remaining 8 were remarkably productive. She is responsible for a Supreme Court decision that . . . will free countless Americans of some of the fears attending death. "I think this is quite an accomplishment for a 25-year-old kid," her father said, "and I'm damn proud of her."
[December 27, 1990]

The Great Books Series

In competition for the most egregious mixed metaphor, a Mr. Hedrick Smith achieves a world record:

The second major incident that stepped on the Reagan parade in 1981, and nearly derailed it, was another self-inflicted wound . . .

[from *The Power Game*, by Hedrick Smith, Ballantine Books, 1989, page 358]

Interview

Another of America's moral colossi, whilst dining with anti-abortionists, finds veal on the menu and abandons himself to art:

Veal is not just a baby cow that meets with an accident in the barnyard. Veal doesn't live life to the cow max. Veal is an animal that lives its entire life in darkness and bondage, confined to a crate so it can't develop its muscles, its flesh thus remaining tender to the tooth. The veal calf is force-fed a diet that contains no iron and is confined in a crate that is assembled without nails within reach of its tongue so it won't even be able to lick steel nails. The critter we call veal lives in a state of deliberately induced anemia so that its flesh will be appealingly white to the diner. If the veal were not slaughtered at a young age, it would die of anemia before attaining maturity anyway.

Not a very good choice for feeding the pro-choice. The veal calf has no choice in its own short life, even if it's rated choice by the U.S. government. Perhaps unborn veal would have been a better choice for the dinner—at least it would have been spared the cruelty of the innocent veal calf's cruel and unusual punishment in a bizarre outside world. Unborn veal knows only the relative bliss of the womb.

Choice isn't something that happens a few times in one's life, in a moment of crisis. Choice is a constant. Every day, every hour presents opportunities to do the right thing, to do the better thing, aesthetically, morally—hey, cosmically too, huh? When we choose to exercise our rights we have the opportunity to act for the betterment of all life. A woman shouldn't have to bear a child she doesn't want—but that's not the only important choice she will ever make. Some other important ones might be served up when they're least expected.

[May 1990]

New York Times

Another act of unprovoked narcissism from the appalling Anna Quindlen:

Nixon was our introduction to government. He taught us that politicians were always other people, deeply unlike ourselves. Our parents believed we would outgrow our dislike of him, just as we would outgrow our rock-and-roll. They were wrong on both counts. It is commonplace to think that the pivotal leader of our formative years was John F. Kennedy. But Kennedy was never much more than fleeting myth, the epitome of what might have been; Nixon became what was.

When we think of the war, when we think of the draft lottery, when we think of the enemies list and the President bugging himself, even when we think of the mothers who said, "If that skirt was any shorter you'd be naked" and the fathers who said, "You can cut that hair or you can find another place to live," hovering over all is Nixon. The image of him walking on the beach in a suit and lace-up shoes became a metaphor for everything we hated. He was the ultimate adult at a time when adult had become the greatest pejorative.

You can get a good argument going at a liberal gathering these days about who was more pernicious, Richard Nixon or Ronald Reagan, the canny lifelong politician or the vague, paternalistic pitchman. Ronald Reagan's winning nowadays. But then something happens to remind you that, in terms of sheer symbolism, there's no contest: Nixon's the one.

[November 11, 1990]

Alternatives

In a prestigious New Orleans monthly, a philosophic defense of masturbation by one of America's foremost onanists (name withheld):

By identifying with the rational, we have exiled from our lives our women, our children and the planet that sustains us. And, we have praised ourselves as genius in the doing. By severing mind from body we have sanctified thought and condemned feeling. With that we have produced an insensitivity to the pain we inflict on ourselves and others.

In order to counteract the resulting alienation and isolation, in order to feel passion with and not against ourselves, others, and the Earth, we men must re-discover our own bodies—not instrumentally, as objects to be manipulated to fit into a preconceived ideal. We must learn to value our bodies as the source of knowledge, pleasure, dignity and our connection with the divine. We must learn to trust the non-rational—intuition, feelings, the unexplainable and the unknown. By doing so, we can strip ourselves of our puny insistence to be masters in control, and surrender to powers of which we are only a part.

I believe an exploration of surrender will be central during the next decade.

[November 1990]

Wall Street Journal

The baneful spread of the deconstructionist menace, as displayed in the howl columns of the venerable *Journal*:

In the case of my four-year-old, though, since he is clearly twice as sophisticated as his two-year-old sister, I must gear my pitch to him accordingly. I'll say, "Look Sebastian, it's 'Monsterpiece Theater!' Now observe closely, here's something you may have missed the first 20 or 30 times that you saw it. You recall the discussion we recently had about the evolution of obscenity laws and how public acceptance of the 'frog' expletive has changed through the years? This episode is a good example of an ironic allusion to a previously scandalous use of the term. When Kermit says to Miss Scarlet that he doesn't have the froggiest, we know that he means something other than what he says, and this is what makes it funny. Do you understand what I'm saying?"

And I know that he does because he always answers, "Sure, Dad," with just a soupcon of irony.

—Garrett Tomczak
Minneapolis

[December 6, 1990]

Santa Cruz Sentinel

From historic Santa Cruz, a report on the recent doings of a local chapter of Americans for Democratic Action:

Calling all dolphins and whales! Two groups are seeking your attendance at a two-day festival of dancing, prayer, meditation, drumming, visualizations and music today and Saturday at the Loudon Nelson Center and the Municipal Wharf.

The Bay Area Dolphin Experience (BADGE) and the New World Institute are asking "all dolphins and whales in the area to come to the wharf Saturday at noon to meditate and party with us."

All humans are invited to assemble at the Nelson Center at 7 p.m. tonight to invite the finny friends to the Municipal Wharf tonight and Saturday. Meditation invitations to the seagoing guests begin on the Wharf at noon Saturday.

After the dolphins and whales arrive, they'll be asked to participate in an "inter-species meditation to stop the killing of dolphins and whales and clean the pollution out of Monterey Bay and the world's oceans."

Dolphins are pretty easy to call, said Asa Williams, 66, a one-time deputy assessor for Contra Costa County and now a "high-class bum who walks around the world."

He attracts dolphins "by prayer, meditation, visualization and breathing. There's a dolphin breath that I've learned . . .

"You take a long, slow breath, breathing from the bottom (of your lungs). You fill up to your maximum and dive into your psyche like the dolphin dives in the oceans."

[November 9, 1990]

Village Voice

The American Renaissance continues:

Kyle Gann: *From 1983 to '85 you quit writing for electric guitars. Why, after that, did you decide to write for 100 guitars?*

Rhys Chatham: It started with a bet. I was touring with [dancer] Karole Armitage in 1980. This was the height of "noise-rock." I didn't think I was doing noise-rock, but I decided to let the label stick. So I thought, wouldn't it be great to get 100 electric guitars, put them in a small room, lock the audience in, have them play really loud, and call the piece *Torture Chamber*? . . .

It was scary, because no one has ever written a piece especially for 100 guitars. Guitarists have massed together; I think the world record is 265 guitarists playing "Louie Louie." But this is the largest proper ensemble, and it's a special sound.

[November 27, 1990]

New York Times

A blast to the lower lumbar vertebrae of Mr. Garry Kasparov, supplied by the estimable *Times's* politically correct chess columnist:

The champion's choice of the Scotch Opening flew in the face of a century of experience, which says the opening naively hits the center so early that its striking force is quickly dissipated. But that is not so unusual these days, when almost everyone attempts to surprise their opponents with the most outlandish or outmoded thing they can think of. What is more unusual is Kasparov's picking an opening that has a certain vogue with the women's world champion, Maya Chiburdanidze. One would surely have expected the champion, an outspoken male chauvinist, to avoid anything whose leading proponent nowadays is a woman.

[November 28, 1990]

Washington Post

Richard Cohen's wistful reflections on a bizarre affair gone sour:

Peace Lady called from California. She has a plan to bring peace to the Persian Gulf region. Her scheme is to divvy up Kuwait's oil so that Iraq gets what she says is its fair share. To Peace Lady's utter surprise, I reacted with anger. Saddam Hussein gets nothing, I said. After many years and dozens of calls, Peace Lady and I have broken up. The phone went click.

Peace Lady and I go back a long way—so long that maybe I owe her an explanation for why we now have what the lawyers call "irreconcilable differences." After all, we once agreed on almost everything. We were both opposed to the war in Vietnam, questioned some of the assumptions of U.S. foreign policy and viewed the Reagan administration's visceral anti-communism with some trepidation. We still can't get all that upset about the Sandinistas.

[December 13, 1990]