

Death Watch

By Elizabeth Hanly

EL SALVADOR. By Carolyn Forché. Edited by Harry Mattison, Susan Meiselas, Fae Rubenstein. Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative, \$29.95; \$10.95 paper.

Salvador oozes it. You know that from the moment you land. It's thick as the dust or the exhaust in the air. Not so much terror. It's more complete than terror: the sense that ordinary dimensions have been smashed or twisted into something obscene. Even the moon seems too big in Salvador these days—too close, a preying moon. There are no limits here. Out of this ground comes the Mattison, Meiselas, Rubenstein collection, *El Salvador*. It includes work by 30 internationally known photographers, and text by Carolyn Forché. Remarkably, it's the tenderness, not the horror, which lingers long after the reading—tenderness and a feeling for its subtlety. Rubenstein said she wanted each image to tell the whole story. Often they do. Indeed, it was around the issue of context that the book was conceived: several journalists, concerned that the media were using their photographs in ways that distorted Salvadoran reality, set out to reclaim their work.

The photographs focus on detail, developing small gestures and interactions into a language full-bodied, even lush. A swollen hand. Sliver-thin legs. Dry, half-parted lips. Years of sweeping the coffee harvest. A woman's hand arrogant on her hip, her guard waiting, rifle cocked. Another woman, this one aproned and with a big straw shopping bag. Two soldiers peer at her, in almost a child's game, from around a corner, and she at them. A man spills a drink in the loneliest bar in the world. Moments in 1979. Salvadoran lines are drawn, but there's still air in these photographs. Children are not yet casual as they pass a bloodstained pavement.

1980-1981. The heat rises. The scale changes; more long shots, often epic ones. Some are glorious: on a Sunday, in the capital, just after all the opposition parties have announced their intention to work together, only banners and celebration can be seen. Turn the page, and a National Guardsman grins while using an ice-cream vendor as a shield and firing on demonstrators. After the Romero funeral (and what a study in impunity those shots are), faces become more masked. Those arrested are forced to their knees or even their bellies—in supplication to what? Five women lie in a garage, victims of a death squad. A child shrugs. A progressive paralysis is recorded. With each image the feeling of powerlessness is deepened. Mothers look through pictures of remnants of faces for their children in "Book of the Missing." Not one will raise her eyes to the camera.

1981-1982. The war machine is in motion. It's the faces one sees now on Salvadoran soldiers, not just the power posture. They look confused, scared. In a scene straight out of *Apocalypse Now*, a U.S. adviser sleeps with a revolver on his pillow. Shots of a small hut where a man makes explosives out of paint cans, and a



"National Policeman using ice-cream vendor as a shield during skirmish with demonstrators, San Salvador."

guerrilla-trained local militia numbering nearly a hundred—a feast of faces in military formation. A few are bored, most enormously alert, proud. Throughout the collection the images are so spare they look like icons. At the same time they seem always in motion—sequencing and pacing then pushes them until the collection becomes nearly cinematic. This beat

against the silence of the images is as jarring and desperate as anything the photographs record.

Carolyn Forché's prose, delicately detailed and fierce as the photographs, pulls this tension tighter still—but oh, so quietly. She holds out broken bits of conversation: a campesino's voice, a guardsman's, a guerrilla's. "Miguel's family has

made a cheese called *quesa de teron* for generations. Miguel is afraid now, partly because of his cheese. The army has been asking him questions about it because it is a kind that needs no refrigeration."

God knows it's thick, but much more than polarization and death are reported here. You see it in the dancing at a guerrilla camp, in the way men and women touch one another. Or in the literacy classes attended almost universally by the campesinos living in refugee camps. Perhaps not yet a birth, but certainly a gestation. At one point Forché's "The Colonel"—with, quite literally, its ears pressed against the ground—faces a Meiselas image all in shadow: bus passengers



"Families looking for 'disappeared' relatives in the 'Book of the Missing,' Human Rights Commission Office, San Salvador."

forced against a cliff and searched by soldiers. In silhouette the image reads as if the earth is aching and trembling to find its form, rising up. There's a similar sense in some of the shots of the pueblos. The villages feel organic, so much so that the presence there of a soldier seems more than intrusive—cutting. Maybe this is *El Salvador's* most difficult success; to convey a struggle so deep that its dimensions have become mythic.

The book's third section, a chronology at its conclusion, outlines Salvadoran history. It tracks attempts by generations of centralists to rein in the repression, attempts betrayed by special interest groups, the U.S. among them. Here, with similar understatement, is the skeleton for the images which have come before. I talked with the editors about their presentation of this material. Out of the 100,000 photographs studied, they found not one of guerrilla atrocities. Shots of the oligarchs are rare too; most of them refused to be photographed. They're invisible as gods: you see their power, those who do their bidding, but never the source. In one of the rawest portraits, a mother, her face twisted with rage, receives her soldier son's body. Two friends hold her back, but her fist remains raised. The photographs record a step in a process: mothers of dead soldiers and of the disappeared have recently begun to work together for peace.

Many of these photographs are being exhibited across the United States. Wherever they go, responses are invited. Thousands of notes have come back to the editors, thanking them for cutting through the rhetoric. Three of the photographers included here have been killed in Central America. When I spoke about that with Harry Mattison, himself a combat photographer, he said, "Consider the number of Salvadoran dead." The more you know about Salvador, the more this book can say.