

# Beatrice Monroy

## Marta's Gesture

*I cannot go on. I will go on.*  
Samuel Beckett

*On the night of the carnage,  
in desperation, Marta,  
Giuliana's daughter, had  
rushed home, opened her  
wardrobe, taken out a sheet  
and written on it  
in huge letters:  
NO TO THE MAFIA.  
Then she had hung it out on  
her balcony. After a while,  
another sheet appeared on the  
balcony opposite.*

My dearest,

I carry with me the thought of you on rocks, seas and mountains. What you ask of me is really very difficult, because we were as if drunk at the time. As you well know, after being drunk one remembers little. So it took me some ten years to understand the significance of the adventure we experienced and, later again, to realise how this same adventure allowed me to find my place in the world.

You ask me for a story that, like all stories, is made up of a world of things, faces, names, speeches, sounds and noises, like the clamour of weapons, bombs, police sirens, of besieged men, of a city that lives an embattled and armoured life. So it is in life that things happen that should be judged outrageous, but instead you go on living with them, without being able to judge or condemn or get any perspective. You can no longer tell, no longer remember, you delete what should not be deleted.

When I think of those years now, the following words come into my mind: enormous confusion; senseless mess; drunkards; wars; imperialism; always the same; a trampled world. Our wishes as people from the South are constantly distorted; down here, we are no longer able to understand anything, nobody knows who they are anymore, everything is confused by other people's desires that are imposed on us as if they were our own when they are not. It is a world full of stories with nobody to remember them. Forgetfulness is one of the characteristics of this land, in order to make everything disappear: horrors and tragedies, but also victories, personal stories, migrations, the Americas. The key word is to "forget".

For this reason I find the task you give me particularly difficult. Like all Sicilian people, I am not used to remembering, I tend rather to erase the past, put it aside, not let it concern me. And then - I repeat - during those

years we were all as if drunk.

Ours is a strange milestone: it is an instant; the instant when the judge Giovanni Falcone died. That was a moment of no return, when it was not possible to ask yourself why. No questions. You continued without being able to stop and look. It has been a kind of race without pause: to go on, to manage somehow.

On the afternoon of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May 1992, the carnage was announced on Italian television. For some minutes we did not know who had been blown up by the bomb, who had died, who had become a limbless hero, who had become a myth. Some more minutes passed before we heard their names - names that made us cry and scream. I knew nothing would ever be the same again. Yet, I only knew that judge through photographs and television images. His slightly hoarse voice had a special intonation that still moves me to tears when I hear it. I cried because everything had changed. I was scorched, blistered, burnt forever, but it would take me years to understand this.

It was 7.30 p.m. For those who have children that is the time when you start making dinner and also the time for the regional television news. For me it was a day like many others, as a mother like many other mothers. On television Mariolina Sattanino, the journalist, like a modern Cassandra, white as a sheet, unable to utter a word, almost reluctant, looked as if she wanted to apologise to the Italians for the news she had to announce: "In Palermo, on the highway to the airport... an explosion... maybe..."

I remember it word for word and then I recall the deafening noise made by the plate I was holding in my hands as it dropped to the floor, a crash that echoed the distant explosion, the thunder of the highway blown into pieces, the crash of the

wrecked vehicles blown up in the air, of corpses reduced to fragments, of the screams and cries. I know that unheard blast intimately, and still, after years, it is confused with the slow-motion of a plate shattering on my kitchen floor, its pieces exploding into a thousand shards that bounce and bounce as they fall.

Then came the mourning, the crying, the swollen eyes.

At the funeral the interminable rain covered our tears. I remember soaked clothes, leaden skies, darkness, whilst people crowded around the big church where all the Italian politicians and authorities arrived with journalists from all over the world. I remember. I remember. I remember.

Immediately afterwards, the struggle began, with a relentless motion, without questions, without a political why, without divisions or flags. It was just a struggle; a very simple struggle: saying no, and meeting each other. First of all we made the human chain: our shoulders and arms ached because we spent hours in a forced position. People had gathered spontaneously beneath the Court of Justice where Giovanni Falcone had worked; then hands began to search for other hands to hold, to drag the long human chain through the streets of the mourning city. Hand in hand, in silence, while the church bells rang out at our passing. Everybody was crying. We cradled the whole city in our arms and rocked it, from the old neighbourhoods where the Court of Justice is, to the new part of the city where the judge had lived. Since then, a magnolia tree just underneath his home has been called Falcone's tree and the people of Palermo hang letters, questions or descriptions of injustices on it. We hung a small sheet there on which we had written NO TO THE MAFIA: we were the Committee of the Sheets.

Giuliana Saladino was a journalist and writer. After the Second World War she

had participated in the occupation of the land with the Communists, but, after the events in Hungary, she left the Communist Party. For many of us in Palermo, who for years had tried to understand the strange prison without bars in which we lived, Giuliana was a fundamental point of reference. She had remained pure in the midst of an uneducated bourgeoisie that colluded with criminal factions. She had never surrendered, remaining a clear and coherent intelligence in the darkest years of our city, when every day we counted the dead people killed because of the mafia.

I remember Giuliana's phone call: "Tonight we will meet at Marta's, will you come? Let's try to do something". Paolo and I went. On the night of the carnage, in desperation, Marta, Giuliana's daughter, had rushed home, opened her wardrobe, taken out a sheet and written on it in huge letters: NO TO THE MAFIA. Then she had hung it out on her balcony. After a while, another sheet appeared on the balcony opposite.

How can one explain to other Italians what an extraordinary measure of courage that gesture needed here where we live? How can one explain to the people of one's own nation that there really is a part of Italy where democracy does not exist? Where a mad bloody power, fed by the international traffic in drugs and arms, and fuelled by the political games that split up the world, strangles any attempt at freedom? How can one explain this without being considered an exaggerated mythomaniac or without succumbing to the banality of the usual ways of thinking? Isn't Sicily sunshine, *coppola* hats and *lupara* guns? Yet it was precisely in those years - I should almost thank our martyrs - that we could speak out finally; even though this only lasted for a short while.

It is different from the rest of Italy: here there is the mafia. How can one explain

that this is not just a matter of criminal acts, but above all an affront to the individual? We Sicilians have always been comic strip figures in the folklore of the world, with the boss character in his striped-suit, *borsalino* hat, smoking a big cigar. How can one explain that there is something more serious and that it is difficult not to be contaminated by this way of thinking. Mafia means not only death, but most of all great silences and the impossibility of living freely. The mafia is an authoritarian project that denies our culture and our freedom of thought. You are not allowed to be anything else; you must be as the cannibals and their allies want you to be. The mafia kills diversity. The affront and outrage is that it stops you living; it compresses the person into a form of existence that amputates and defiles a part of the individual.

Deadly fear: fear is the most prevalent feeling in the city. Scandalous events happen: violence to people, injustice; culture is erased. Yet nobody reacts. Scandal is a word that nobody remembers. Nobody says: that is enough. Screaming and fury are not permitted. This is the real hell. Everything is digested in silence.

In this context Marta's gesture was a revolution and the Committee of the Sheets was born. It was the sheet revolution: to hang white sheets at the windows, a silent, female gesture that broke the conspiracy of silence. It was the first gesture of rebellion from the people of Palermo: sheets multiplied at the windows.

There were about twenty of us. We met almost clandestinely in our homes. We took action silently. We had clear ideas, we were small and weak, ordinary people with no power. There were very few of us, but we had a new identity, strong and successful: it was a matter of working in modest spaces, hidden away, of being resilient, present again, other, different, reminding the rest of

the citizens that a world without the mafia was possible. It was possible to be oneself and recognise injustice; to dream of a world where things could be built, beginning from our own culture and not from the culture others say is ours. We wanted a world where it was possible to say that Sicilian is beautiful instead of Sicilian means mafia; a world where the Sicilian values of peace, justice and culture were restored instead of the images of *coppola* hats and petty crime. It was all very simple and complicated. Actually, we took upon ourselves the huge task of "thinking" a new and original thought, in a part of the country where there were only exportable kinds of thoughts.

I dream of hearing my people say: "This is art... this is culture... we like this... this is us" while instead, I always hear: "You should like this, that is what we expect from you Sicilians, this is the cultural product that defines you and you like it because we like you in that way." Then, we knew perfectly the great risk we took in deciding to think and express our thought in a region where power/thought is exclusive and authoritarian. To think, at that time, was terribly frightening. It was better to be told by others what to think.

I remember the day when we decided - at a meeting at Giuliana's house - to wear on our clothes a little badge made from an electrical element, so hidden and yet so obvious in its open meaning: resistance; to resist and be; to remember the screams and the fury, to remember that there is a limit to horrors, scandals and outrages that should be denounced. We wanted to exist. Many of us were artists, writers, painters, theatre people who had been forced into silence over the years, forced to emigrate or sell ourselves for a piece of bread. Now we were there, offering our creativity with joy, in order to exist again as people. This little happening in Palermo,

that might seem banal to other places in the western world, really was, and still is, a revolution.

If the Committee of the Sheets had not existed in my life, I would never have realised how important it is to work with small steps, almost in a monastic way, when the giants around you act and kill both physically and morally.

Meanwhile it was happening: they - the others - were in fact killing.

I remember the judge Paolo Borsellino speaking out his last will and testament, in the hall of the Public Library. He summoned us - us, the people of Palermo - in order to commemorate Giovanni Falcone, but he was speaking about himself; he was saying goodbye; he knew his days were numbered.

And the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1992 arrived. This time the bomb exploded in the very centre of the city: disembowelled buildings, body parts flying through the air and hanging from the balconies here and there. I remember the compact wall of his young armed escort on the night of his execution.

We went to the streets an hour after this carnage. Fear was as thick as fog. There were no alternatives. The escort policemen, the friends and colleagues of those slaughtered by the bombs of the 23<sup>rd</sup> of May and the 19<sup>th</sup> of July, had black stripes on their arms as a sign of mourning. We marched behind them along the small city streets, the alleyways of the mafia. The young escort policemen went ahead with stony, set faces, they had no weapons, but they carried with them the strength of their muscles. They stopped in front of doorways where they knew a mafia member or collaborator lived, and banged on the closed shutters with their fists. The walls of the alleys got narrower and narrower around us. For Falcone there had been crying, now for Borsellino there was rage and war. The doors

were closed, the buildings seemed empty, but gradually, from some balconies, women's arms began to appear and for that whole night, with an everyday and almost indifferent gesture, they started to hang out the most beautiful white sheets, those from the dowry.

I remember the fear of that night and thinking: civil war has broken out; I cannot do anything about it.

We were at the bottom of the well, in one of the worst places in the world; mafia and Europe; all was confused so as not to allow us to understand anything. Yet with all that horror, we suddenly had an opportunity: the world was looking at us, at last; we were no longer alone. We could speak and be heard and believed. Now everyone spoke of that hell called Palermo. This completely changed the perspective of our lives.

I felt drunk with the feeling that now, if you spoke, the others, the outsiders, believed you. Drunk: I could think and speak. My sorrow, my tragedy, my imprisonment; the pain and tragedy of my people could be received, understood, supported by the rest of humanity.

It was not easy. We were uneducated: for decades we have been kept apart from the connections of the contemporary world. An abyss of ignorance separated us from the western world. It was deliberate: we should remain a little like a caricature of ourselves; a golden island, for all the illegal international business. The island of myth, of poets, of playwrights from Aeschylus to Pirandello had become the land where savage and bloody dictators acted as landlords.

It took me a very long time to understand this simple mechanism, but when at last I did, I decided to do something specific: culture. Because, down here, doing cultural activities is a revolutionary action.

However, in that moment, it was

our task to wake up; we provincial people living at the bottom of the well with our poorly trained eyes were required to rid ourselves of the commonplace thinking about us, to chase the dictators away, seize our history back and be at the centre of the world again. It was not easy. We had lost the habit of seeing with our own eyes; for too long we had become used to looking through other eyes. Now we needed new lenses, we had to get used to democracy, to freedom of thought, to the clash of ideologies. We were intoxicated with the speed of the success we seemed to achieve. We trusted our own skills too much and badly misplaced our immense energy and desire for freedom. It was too hard, too difficult. So, some years later, they - the others - returned.

Nevertheless, before the defeat, there were a few years full of joy and enthusiasm. I remember Guido, sitting in my living room, whilst the others talked and talked, drawing one logo after another, in order to find the right symbol for a political campaign in which we believed we would find our freedom: "Together for Palermo. Vote for Leoluca Orlando as mayor." I remember the logo that we all liked: two hands clasped together like the human chains, when we held each other's hands so tightly that our arms hurt.

I remember the night of our victory, when Leoluca Orlando was elected mayor, and we all gathered in Pretoria Square with tears in our eyes. We found the gate of the Town Hall shut. Someone brought a very long ladder and Leoluca - whom we all called Luca - climbed up. It looked like the taking of the Winter Palace. I remember the much loved Luca of that period. He pushed us; he seemed to be a refuge for our thoughts, speaking them on television, letting them bounce into Italian households. He seemed to be our spokes-man then. Often, in a simple and familiar way, we used



Anti-mafia demonstration in Palermo. Photo: Shobha

to gather with him in one of the homes of the many people who joined this new way of being every day, and there, at ease, he spoke for us and we all spoke freely and felt part of a new line of thought. I would like to succeed in keeping this memory intact, to place it at the heart of the utopia with many other small and precious things, because after that history got stuck.

Once Luca became mayor, it was time to govern. Everything was more complex than it had appeared to us when we were on the streets. The white sheets remained hanging from the windows. The whole world spoke of Palermo as of the Renaissance. Those who were governing killed themselves with exhaustion in order to hurry, to keep always a step ahead of those who had set after us already, who threatened us with death, stealing our air and breath. We were intoxicated with pride and our regained dignity. It was difficult to realise that not everything was going right in the meantime.

For years we have been at the centre of the world; drunk. Very few listen to me. Again there is silence around me. They - the others - have come back. But even then there was shooting outside.

In the bereaved city, people continued to die. Again I was forced to hear the hateful sound: crack, crack, crack. When they shoot a man, you can only hear a dry bang. In the city, the war still raged. The little grey-green soldiers, with machine-guns on their shoulders, clung to the walls in search of some shade. They protected the houses of judges, of some politicians, and of more and more ordinary people who embraced the struggle, risking being killed. The young soldiers had wanted to do military service in the Alpine corps and had ended up in the forty-degree heat of the Palermo summer, taking care that no more bombs should explode; also because, if

another bomb exploded, they would be the first to blow up with it.

In my street there were five long stripes indicating where cars could not be parked, for danger of bombs. The young soldiers stayed there, scared, hot; the tenants of the buildings would take them ice-tea or some lemon-ice; the children would pass on their bikes and stop to look enthusiastically at their machine-guns. A little further on, in front of the city's largest prison, the Ucciardone, tanks were on guard. Also there, other young soldiers were ready to fight in order to defend our lives.

Luca Orlando, and dozens of other people, lived under armed surveillance. He moved around using three different armoured cars. If he came to visit us, his secretary, Fabio, would phone first, in order to arrange a time. Then, a police car would stop under our house several hours in advance. All the people in the building were informed and some complained: "Is it really necessary to put us at risk?" Then the armed escort would arrive and would check the whole flat: "Have any workers been here lately?" Then Luca would arrive, running from the car only after the house door had been opened. His escort would block access from the stairs, he would use the lift, and finally he would arrive in the house with one of his bodyguards. The children would joke and play around cheerfully as if all this was normal.

But it was not normal. Fear makes you mad. It excites your reactions, it makes them abnormal and out of control. Once, Luca said to me: "I have become a monster." It took me years to understand what he meant. I was not able to do so then, I was drunk.

Very few listen to me, I know. It is difficult, but it is a struggle that is worthwhile. At that time, the struggle for our own survival, not to be killed, not to surrender to

"their" power, devoured us from the inside. It was too hard, too difficult. The weakening began, the collusions, and, little by little, everything changed. The world around was devouring us.

For this reason I chose to act in small ways. One day, in the middle of that confusion, within all that intoxication, I decided: I want to go on, this is my life, I do not want to surrender. Maybe little by little "they" will end up devouring me, but it is easier to resist in a smaller dimension, even though the storm of violence remains thick outside and the quarrels and aggressions do not change. But it is possible to go on. Or, rather, even though everything around you suggests that you should give up, you must go on. This is my place and my battle.

For all the strangeness of this life that destiny has given me, at some point, as a way to resist, to make culture, I decided to open a small bookshop with some girlfriends: a little cultural space, a place to think, called *Libr'aria*. It would be a place where culture could be spread, small theatre performances and readings presented. It was our contribution to the revolution, our way of being. It would be a place to accumulate, archive and disseminate intellectual diversity and write, tell, create, perform.

It frightens me so to write these things. It is so difficult for me to move away from the milestone, I embrace it so as not to see and observe it. Like the other people of Palermo, I cover my eyes. I forget our responsibility. It is easier.

My milestone is this heap of shattered hopes, of over complicated wishes, of inadequacy, frustrations and joys. It is the instant - which lasted ten years - when I understood towards what kind of life I had to aim. It was precisely only by being inside the sorrow and frustration that I understood what my place in the world was. I am grateful to destiny for having given me the

chance to understand this, in the middle of the incredible chaos of those years. But I still cannot understand how I managed to overturn my way of perceiving the reality in which I lived. All sorts of things happened around me: big cultural spaces opened up; the temple of opera was at last restored after twenty years and given back to the citizens; theatre was presented everywhere; yet something did not work. There was silence again. This time homologation and silence were taking the shape of praise to the "prince".

I needed, wished, and wish, to be a free voice. I believed, and still believe, that the responsibility of the intellectual and the artist is always and simply to make their own voice heard, outside the chorus.

Instead, at the same time, behind the facade, the warlords were regaining control of the city. It was necessary to fight again in order to exist; we had to do it and we did. *Libr'aria*, our small place is the space our city allows for dignity to exist, the dignity of one's own difference.

It was necessary to begin again, as at the time of the Committee of the Sheets, within our own four walls, but this time searching for what had been missing before: international connections, like-minded people in the world, especially masters, those who had already lived, crossing the desert and changing their view of the world.

But where do you search for another perspective, when you are not used to seeing with your own eyes? Only now, after I have long ago left the milestone behind me, do I begin to understand that the way in which you look at the world is the revolution. I have decided to do this with my life: to teach what once, Giuliana, an independent little woman, had taught me: to teach how to look with one's own eyes.

At the beginning it was difficult to decide to stop and go against the flow, to stop and patiently observe and then choose,



in an exuberant time, when everybody congratulated themselves for being so good, perfect, the saviours of the city. It was difficult, in other words, to choose not to go along with the stream that no longer seemed very clean.

Again, as I write, I feel a lump in my throat. Too many memories arrive all of a sudden. I would like to chase them away, but actually, it is I who hold them back. I have only this still present past with which to keep my life warm, now that things have changed.

There is a big silence here. But my bookshop still exists; we have quarrelled and cried, but the bookshop has made it, it remains.

Still - as always - in the winter sun, I go to the enchanted beach of my wonderful and unhappy city. The white lilies emerge sweet and unexpected from the piles of rubbish, the bad smell of an open sewer mixes with that of seaweed rotting on the shore. Far away, the sea crashes gently on the string of pink shells. Maybe I am here on the enchanted beach only to understand how to heal myself and those around me. To heal - from what? From this overflowing rubbish? Here I find a turned up and half burnt garbage container: tampax, nappies, cactus fruit skins, super toxic sprays, pieces of paper with hand-written songs, a watermelon skin, a bone that a passing dog jumps on.

It is a question of finding a passage among the debris.

Healing: this is surely a bizarre way of being in the western world. Who understands anything? There is a great confusion here in between Europe and Africa. I remain; I know all that has happened in this city. The world is full of the cemeteries of assassinated cultures and we are one of them. I have nothing else to do in life, I can only tell this story. But if I succeed at all that

is already something.

Shreds of life come to my mind: journeys of pain, and then of joy, small victories and griefs. In spite of the powerful and of their untameable arrogance, I still think. In spite of the bombs which have exploded in our minds, of the pieces of flesh strewn on the motorway - yes, in spite, in spite of them, the others - here I am, on the beach, alive. I have been killed neither in my body nor in my soul. I can testify and remember. In all these years I have seen it all, I know the facts, I am a witness. I bring with me the words and stories of very particular people, people I met in the fire because they grew up in the fire.

Will I be able to live? And what will my life be like with all the things I have left behind me? The wanderer's time erases the residue, so it is also the time of renewal. The milestone is still there well in sight, while I travel on with my friends and companions. After the residue, after the dry branches, it is time to go on even though our feet hurt.

Some of us will cross the Styx, will put a coin between Charon's lips so as to be taken beyond the waters that separate languages. A fool, with his lips perfumed by the sounds of the universe, will be the first to cross the waters. And from there, in the space of freedom, he will make signs for us to follow him, but how many of us will be able to do so? How many of us will have the courage to continue when the whole world shouts: "Stop! Think of yourself!"

It is as difficult to understand the dark side of things, as it is to understand the silent dead. But if we prick up our ears and bend a little towards the world to observe the small things, the things trampled by war, violence and power, perhaps we can comprehend something more.

The door through which we have to pass is very small. There stands Cerberus, and also Hermes, inhabitant of the border-

lands. With his notorious dexterity, he will help us understand a part, perhaps a very small part, of our destiny. We walk, one foot after the other, with little steps, and then sometimes we run downhill, then up again slowly and we proceed briskly along the plains. On foot - yes, on foot - we will travel on.

Look, my dearest self, the weather on the beach is changing. Big black clouds move up there. Seagulls fly low. The smell of the sea is strong and intense. It is time to go back to the dark and kind city, to open the shutters of the little bookshop. Perhaps today two or three people will come in, like yesterday, like the day before yesterday, and little by little the legitimacy of disobedience will take shape more and more. The important thing is to bear witness.

The best people are at the margins of the world: the whole wisdom of the world is contained in their solitary paths; in their tragic loneliness, foreign and misunderstood; in their crazy speeches kissed by God. For this reason I choose to follow them and unite my research with theirs. Masters and monk-like people wander on earth in order to save what can be saved. I am with them.

Now my life's milestone is far behind me, but if I turn around I can still see it. From this perspective, I smile at the destiny that has given me the possibility of understanding.

To Giuliana, friend and master, we miss you so much.

Translated from Italian by Maria Ficara

BEATRICE MONROY (Italy) was born in Palermo, where she attended the Theatre School directed by Michele Perriera. She has taught theatre and playwriting in Naples, Palermo, Florence, Rome and Pisa. In Palermo, she directs L'Atelier, a centre for expressive research, and the Free School of Writing, within the activities of her bookshop and cultural centre Libr'aria, created in 2000. She is the author of several texts for theatre, a playwright for television and editor for the Sicilian section of the newspaper *La Repubblica*. She has published several novels and poems.