



detail from a reproduction of *Il Quarto Stato*, 1901, by Giuseppe Pellizza da Volpedo

The History of the 20th Century
Cristián Silva

On February 21, 1974 at 1:30 pm, weighing in at 3.47 kilos and measuring 47 cm in length, Johanna de Lourdes Unzueta Rivas was born in the maternity ward of the San Juan de Dios Hospital (on Matucana Avenue in Quinta Normalⁱ). She was originally to be named Victoria Francesca but her mother, Celia Georgina Rivas Argandoña, a faithful devotee of the Virgin of Lourdes, decided at the last minute to honor her firm religious beliefs - perhaps in homage to a decrepit, old statuette that she inherited from her own mother. Celia Georgina, better known as Gigi, would often say: "We all have our cross to bear." She and Johanna's father, Francisco Maximiliano Unzueta Santiago, met in the early 1960s while working together at the main branch of the Santiago Post Office (Correos y Telégrafos), where Gigi had begun working a few years earlier. Francisco Unzueta was originally from the southern city of Curicó and had come to Santiago to finish high school and had then begun a Nursing Assistant program while also doing compulsory military service. (In fact it was there, in the hallways of the *Bacteriológico de Santiago*ⁱⁱ that he met Salvador Allende). Gigi was not only a devotee of the Virgin of Lourdes but also had a plaster figure of the Sacred Heart of Jesus that she inherited from her mother-in-law Rebeca. Francisco however, perhaps influenced by his father Armando or his grandfather Maximiliano (both political radicals) or marked by that chance encounter with Allende - chose to be an atheist early on and eventually joined the Chilean Socialist Party in the 60s. Because both of her parents worked full time, Johanna - along with her older brother Jorge Maximiliano who was named after an uncle who died before his time on the Curico train line - were cared for by others from a very young age. Jorge was entrusted to his grandmother Juana Argandoña while Johanna was placed in the post office's daycare center which was located on the top floor of a building on the corner of Morandé Street and Moneda Avenue, right next to the presidential palace (*La Moneda*). Johanna quickly became one of the teachers' favorites and was frequently named Class Queen, representing the Virgin Mary or a country girl dancing *Cueca*ⁱⁱⁱ, depending on the nature of the particular event. At the daycare Johanna particularly enjoyed arts and crafts. For example, she would trace drawings on colored cards and then embroider the outlines with wool yarn; or she would cut out geometric forms from small colored pieces of cardboard and then arrange them on other (two or three dimensional) surfaces. These early productions were like a mixture between Bauhaus and the now extinct *CEMA-Chile*^{iv}. Perhaps her teachers' only complaint about her was that she didn't like to eat and constantly hid food inside her mouth. Johanna and her family always lived in Villa Frei, near the *Rotonda Grecia* (Roundabout Greece), in Building 4981-D, Apt. 31. They took the *Carrascal-Santa Julia* #23 bus to the daycare. This changed when Johanna began to attend the Santa Gema Galgani School. In order to get there she and her brother had two options, the *Pila-Ñuñoa* #45C or *Los Leones*, #62B. Run by French Passionist priests, the Santa Gema Galgani School was an institution that provided an educational alternative for dissidents of the dictatorship during the 80s. In fact, many of the students were from exiled or disappeared families. Johanna was a good pupil although a little disorganized, but always supportive of her classmates - she was frequently called "the defender of lost causes." She was also known as the "Unzueta girl," in reference to

her older brother Jorge, who was known as "Papito Corazón" (Daddy Heart), because of the affectionate manner in which he took care of his sister. Johanna's was among the very last names on the class list (#37), followed only by her classmates Verdugo and Vjencio. Towards the end of that decade (the 70s) her mother attempted to make her more social by signing her up for the YMCA basketball team, but Johanna soon switched over to the swim team because she did not get along well with her teammates. She later joined the Girl Scouts Club at her school but this ended in a similar manner. Despite the fact that she enjoyed the organized trips around Chile, she abandoned the group after a few years because she refused to tolerate the endless competitions and the pressure to always win, nor did she like the frequent bee stings. She had a more positive group experience when she joined the *Brigada Muralista Elmo Catalán* (Elmo Catalán Muralist Brigade) - a youth group for the children of Socialist Party members. There she would meet with fellow members to play guitar and paint together as a group. In those days, Johanna was called "Luna," a pseudonym with which she signed her drawings and paintings. She liked to listen to *Radiotanda*^v in the mornings, and was also a big fan of Heidi and constantly listened to a tape of music from the cartoon. She spent nearly every summer with her father's extended family on the outskirts of Curicó. She took the train with her grandmother Rebeca, who loved her cats so much that she would bring all of them on the train with them. Upon arriving to Curicó, they would travel by road to the sprawling Unzueta house, where they played with the chickens, took walks in the cornfields and played on a swing that hung from a weeping willow. They would also take the road across the Mataquito River to the black sandy beaches of the Iloca Resort. The year 1982 brought many changes in Johanna's family life: her mother retired from the post office and immediately began studying accounting; they finally bought a car (a red Charade); and her grandmother Juana Argandoña died. Juana was originally from Iquique and at age 14 left Santiago to run off with a German diplomat named Carlos Ritter with whom she had two children before he disappeared from Chile. She then married Johanna's grandfather, Jorge Rivas, and ran her own shop for many years, managing to save enough money to buy three houses before she died. Because Johanna liked to have her hair long and messy, and dyed several different colors, her mother gave her money one day and asked her to go to the hairdresser. She was delighted to see her daughter return with her head completely shaved. Sometimes when Johanna came home late at night, she had to park the Charade (which she herself was accustomed to repairing when necessary) on the other side of the neighborhood and then walk through a relatively dangerous area; she learned to run as fast as possible from one side of the neighborhood to the other, fleeing from potential assailants. In response to her mother's concerns, she would say "Mom, the Virgin accompanies and protects me and when I run so, I become invisible." Her best friend at that time was her classmate Alejandra Molina (Ali), who had grown up in exile in Kassel, Germany. During recess Johanna would share her ham sandwich or *dulce de mebrillo*^{vi} with Ali who was also her partner in crime and together they would commit rebellious acts like the time they made a bonfire out of desks and chairs in the classroom. Johanna tended to spend quite a bit of time alone, making clothes for herself and for her dolls with her Singer sewing machine that she had inherited from her grandmother. She would also pass the time waiting for her brother to get out of class in the school library where she would help shelf books or play chess. One of her favorite books, which she almost always took home (and it eventually stayed there after many years), was *Alice in Wonderland*. She also spent hours in the library looking at atlases, and in her head she travelled around the world

getting to know capital cities, rivers, archipelagos, geological formations or mapped out international train routes. In this way she memorized the Trans-Siberian route, which she eventually managed to travel in real life. And although she never visited the snow-covered mountains in Chile (it wasn't until she lived in Brooklyn that she saw snow for the first time), Johanna always dreamed of being born Sámi or Eskimo in a cold climate, in the immensity of snow and the contemplation of the infinite. In early 2000, Johanna and her brother returned to the old Unzueta house in Curicó to find that it had been torn down to make way for a bus terminal. The only thing that survived was a piece of the old pergola, so they cut down a bunch of grapes, took them back to Santiago and put them in the freezer.

ⁱ A large working class neighborhood in Santiago, located just south of the city centre.

ⁱⁱ A public health institution founded in 1929 during the presidency of Carlos Ibañez del Campo, it later became part of the *Instituto de Salud Pública, Ministerio de Salud*, Chile

ⁱⁱⁱ Cueca is the national dance of Chile. Its origins are ambiguous but it is believed to have both Spanish and African roots.

^{iv} "CEMA-Chile was a network of Mothers' Centers run by Lucía Iriarte, General Pinochet's wife. [...] CEMA had been a paternalistic charity that handed out sewing machines in exchange for political support since 1964. Under general Pinochet, CEMA-Chile retained this character, but also propagated conservative values." Peter Winn, *Americas: The Changing Face of Latin America and the Caribbean*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006.

^v A Chilean radio program in the 60s and 70s that was representative of that era. The author's father, Sergio Silva, was a popular radio host on this program.

^{vi} A sweet, firm paste made from quince fruit. It is originally from Spain and is a typical snack in many Latin American countries.



Radiotanda with the orchestra "Los Orates Sereneiders," Santiago de Chile, circa 1972