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THIS BOOK
is dedicated a todos mexicanos
on both sides of the border.

G.E.A.

Preface

The actual physical borderland that I’m dealing with in this book is the Texas-U.S Southwest/Mexican border. The psychological borderlands, the sexual borderlands and the spiritual borderlands are not particular to the Southwest. In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

I am a border woman. I grew up between two cultures, the Mexican (with a heavy Indian influence) and the Anglo (as a member of a colonized people in our own territory). I have been straddling that tejas-Mexican border, and others, all my life. It’s not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. Hatred, anger and exploitation are the prominent features of this landscape.

However, there have been compensations for this mestiza, and certain joys. Living on borders and in margins, keeping intact one’s shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an “alien” element. There is an exhilaration in being a participant in the further evolution of humankind, in being “worked” on. I have the sense that certain “faculties”—not just in me but in every border resident, colored or non-colored—and dormant areas of consciousness are being activated, awakened. Strange, huh? And yes, the “alien” element has become familiar—never comfortable, not with society’s clamor to uphold the old, to rejoin the flock, to go with the herd. No, not comfortable but home.

This book, then, speaks of my existence. My preoccupations with the inner life of the Self, and with the struggle of that Self amidst adversity and violation; with the confluence of primordial images; with the unique positionings consciousness takes at these confluent streams; and with my almost instinctive urge to communicate, to speak, to write about life on the borders, life in the shadows.

Books saved my sanity, knowledge opened the locked places in me and taught me first how to survive and then how to soar. La madre naturaleza succored me, allowed me to grow roots that anchored me to the earth. My love of images—mesquite flower-
ing, the wind, Ebécatl, whispering its secret knowledge, the fleeting images of the soul in fantasy—and words, my passion for the daily struggle to render them concrete in the world and on paper, to render them flesh, keeps me alive.

The switching of "codes" in this book from English to Castillian Spanish to the North Mexican dialect to Tex-Mex to a sprinkling of Nahuatl to a mixture of all of these, reflects my language, a new language—the language of the Borderlands. There, at the juncture of cultures, languages cross-pollinate and are revitalized; they die and are born. Presently this infant language, this bastard language, Chicano Spanish, is not approved by any society. But we Chicanos no longer feel that we need to beg entrance, that we need always to make the first overture—to translate to Anglos, Mexicans and Latinos, apology blurring out of our mouths with every step. Today we ask to be met halfway. This book is our invitation to you—from the new mestizas.
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Atravesando Fronteras
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The Homeland, Aztlán

El otro México

El otro México que acá hemos construido
el espacio es lo que ha sido
territorio nacional.
Esté esfuerzo de todos nuestros hermanos
y latinoamericanos que han sabido
progresar.
—Los Tigres del Norte

"The Aztecs del norte . . . compose the largest single tribe
or nation of Anishinabeg (Indians) found in the United States
today . . . Some call themselves Chicanos and see themselves as
people whose true homeland is Aztlán [the U.S. Southwest]."1

Wind tugging at my sleeve
feet sinking into the sand
I stand at the edge where earth touches ocean
where the two overlap
a gentle coming together
at other times and places a violent clash.

Across the border in Mexico
stark silhouette of houses gutted by waves,
cliffs crumbling into the sea,
silver waves marbled with spume
gashing a hole under the border fence.
The Homeland, Aztlan / El otro México

Mi ro el mar atacar
la cerca en Border Field Park
con sus buchones de agua,
an Easter Sunday resurrection
of the brown blood in my veins.

Oigo el llorido del mar, el respiro del aire,
my heart surges to the beat of the sea.
In the gray haze of the sun
the gulls' shrill cry of hunger,
the tangy smell of the sea seeping into me.

I walk through the hole in the fence
to the other side.
Under my fingers I feel the gritty wire
rusted by 139 years
of the salty breath of the sea.

Beneath the iron sky
Mexican children kick their soccer ball across,
run after it, entering the U.S.

I press my hand to the steel curtain—
chainlink fence crowned with rolled barbed wire—
rippling from the sea where Tijuana touches San Diego
unrolling over mountains
and plains
and deserts,
this "Tortilla Curtain" turning into el río Grande
flowing down to the flatlands
of the Magic Valley of South Texas
its mouth emptying into the Gulf.

1,950 mile-long open wound
dividing a pueblo, a culture,
running down the length of my body,
staking fence rods in my flesh,
splits me splits me
me raja me raja

This is my home
this thin edge of barbwire.

But the skin of the earth is seamless.
The sea cannot be fenced,
el mar does not stop at borders.
To show the white man what she thought of his arrogance,
Yemaya blew that wire fence down.

This land was Mexican once,
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.

Yo soy un puente tendido
del mundo gabacho al del mojado,
lo pasado me estará pa'atrás
y lo presente pa'adelante.
Que la Virgen de Guadalupe me cuide
Ay ay ay, soy mexicana de este lado.

The U.S.-Mexican border es una herida abierta where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms it hemorrhages again, the lifeblood of two worlds merging to form a third country—a border culture. Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants. Los atravesados live here: the squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulato, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal." Gringos in the U.S. Southwest consider the inhabitants of the borderlands transgressors, aliens—whether they possess documents or not, whether they're Chicanos, Indians or Blacks. Do not enter, trespassers will be raped, maimed, strangled, gassed, shot. The only "legitimate" inhabitants are those in power, the whites and those
who align themselves with whites. Tension grips the inhabitants of the borderlands like a virus. Ambivalence and unrest reside there and death is no stranger.

In the fields, la migra. My aunt saying, “No corran, don’t run. They’ll think you’re del otro lado.” In the confusion, Pedro ran, terrified of being caught. He couldn’t speak English, couldn’t tell them he was fifth generation American. Sin papeles—he did not carry his birth certificate to work in the fields. La migra took him away while we watched. Se lo llevaron. He tried to smile when he looked back at us, to raise his fist. But I saw the shame pushing his head down, I saw the terrible weight of shame hunch his shoulders. They deported him to Guadalajara by plane. The furthest he’d ever been to Mexico was Reynosa, a small border town opposite Hidalgo, Texas, not far from McAllen. Pedro walked all the way to the Valley. Se lo llevaron sin un centavo al pobre. Se vino andando desde Guadalajara.

During the original peopling of the Americas, the first inhabitants migrated across the Bering Straits and walked south across the continent. The oldest evidence of humankind in the U.S.—the Chicanos’ ancient Indian ancestors—was found in Texas and has been dated to 35,000 B.C. In the Southwest United States archeologists have found 20,000-year-old campsites of the Indians who migrated through, or permanently occupied, the Southwest, Aztlán—land of the herons, land of whiteness, the Edenic place of origin of the Azteca.

In 1000 B.C., descendants of the original Cochise people migrated into what is now Mexico and Central America and became the direct ancestors of many of the Mexican people. (The Cochise culture of the Southwest is the parent culture of the Aztecs. The Uto-Aztecan languages stemmed from the language of the Cochise people.) The Aztecs (the Nahuatl word for people of Aztlán) left the Southwest in 1168 A.D.

Now let us go.
Tibueque, tibueque,
Vámonos, vámonos.
Un pájaro cantó.
In the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the 
tejanos (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands, committing all manner of atrocities against them. Their illegal invasion forced Mexico to fight a war to keep its Texas territory. The Battle of the Alamo, in which the Mexican forces vanquished the whites, became, for the whites, the symbol for the cowardly and villainous character of the Mexicans. It became (and still is) a symbol that legitimized the white imperialist takeover. With the capture of Santa Anna later in 1836, Texas became a republic. Tejanos lost their land and, overnight, became the foreigners.

Ya la mitad del terreno
les vendió el traidor Santa Anna,
con lo que se ha hecho muy rica
la nación americana.

¿Qué acaso no se conforman
con el oro de las minas?
Ustedes muy elegantes
y aquí nosotros en ruinas.
—from the Mexican corrido,
"Del peligro de la Intervención"³

The justice and benevolence of God will forbid that... Texas should again become a howling wilderness trod only by savages, or... benighted by the ignorance and superstition, the anarchy and rapine of Mexican misrule. The Anglo-American race are destined to be forever the proprietors of this land of promise and fulfillment. Their laws will govern it, their learning will enlighten it, their enterprise will improve it. Their flocks range its boundless pastures, for them its fertile lands will yield... luxuriant harvests...

—William H. Wharton⁹

The Gringo, locked into the fiction of white superiority, seized complete political power, stripping Indians and Mexicans of their land while their feet were still rooted in it. Con el destierro y el exilio fuimos desahuciados, destroncados, destr-
My grandmother lost all her cattle, they stole her land.

"Drought hit South Texas," my mother tells me. "La tierra se puso bien seca y los animales comenzaron a morir de se. Mi papá se murió de un heart attack dejando a mamá pregnant y con ocho buercos, with eight kids and one on the way. Yo fue la mayor, tenía diez años. The next year the drought continued and el ganado got hoof and mouth. Se cayeron in droves en las pastas y el bushland, pansas blancas ballooning to the skies. El siguiente año still no rain. Mi pobre madre vinda perdió two-thirds of her ganado. A smart gabacho lawyer took the land away mamá hadn't paid taxes. No hablaba inglés, she didn't know how to ask for time to raise the money." My father's mother, Mama Locha, also lost her terreno. For a while we got $12.50 a year for the "mineral rights" of six acres of cemetery, all that was left of the ancestral lands. Mama Locha had asked that we bury her there beside her husband. El cementerio estaba cercado. But there was a fence around the cemetery, chained and padlocked by the ranch owners of the surrounding land. We couldn't even get in to visit the graves, much less bury her there. Today, it is still padlocked. The sign reads: "Keep out. Trespassers will be shot."

The Homeland, Aztlan / El otro México

In the 1930s, after Anglo agribusiness corporations cheated the small Chicano landowners of their land, the corporations hired gangs of mexicanos to pull out the brush, chapparral and cactus and to irrigate the desert. The land they toiled over had once belonged to many of them, or had been used communally by them. Later the Anglos brought in huge machines and root plows and had the Mexicans scrape the land clean of natural vegetation. In my childhood I saw the end of dryland farming. I witnessed the land cleared; saw the huge pipes connected to underground sources sticking up in the air. As children, we'd go fishing in some of those canals when they were full and hunt for snakes in them when they were dry. In the 1950s I saw the land, cut up into thousands of neat rectangles and squares, constantly being irrigated. In the 340-day growth season, the seeds of any kind of fruit or vegetable had only to be stuck in the ground in order to grow. More big land corporations came in and bought up the remaining land.

To make a living my father became a sharecropper. Rio Farms Incorporated loaned him seed money and living expenses. At harvest time, my father repaid the loan and forked over 40% of the earnings. Sometimes we earned less than we owed, but always the corporations fared well. Some had major holdings in vegetable trucking, livestock auctions and cotton gins. Altogether we lived on three successive Rio farms; the second was adjacent to the King Ranch and included a dairy farm; the third was a chicken farm. I remember the white feathers of three thousand Leghorn chickens blanketing the land for acres around. My sister, mother and I cleaned, weighed and packaged eggs. (For years afterwards I couldn't stomach the sight of an egg.) I remember my mother attending some of the meetings sponsored by well-meaning whites from Rio Farms. They talked about good nutrition, health, and held huge barbeques. The only thing salvaged for my family from those years were modern techniques of food canning and a food-stained book they printed made up of recipes from Rio Farms' Mexican women. How proud my mother was to have her recipe for enchiladas coloradas in a book.

El cruzar del mojado/Illegal Crossing

"Ahora si ya tengo una tumba para llorar," dice Conchita, upon being reunited with
her unknown mother just before the mother dies
—from Ismael Rodriguez' film,
_Nosotros los pobres_12

_**La crisis.**_ Los gringos had not stopped at the border. By the end of the nineteenth century, powerful landowners in Mexico, in partnership with U.S. colonizing companies, had dispossessed millions of Indians of their lands. Currently, Mexico and her eighty million citizens are almost completely dependent on the U.S. market. The Mexican government and wealthy growers are in partnership with such American conglomerates as American Motors, IT&T and Du Pont which own factories called _maquiladoras_. One-fourth of all Mexicans work at _maquiladoras_; most are young women. Next to oil, _maquiladoras_ are Mexico's second greatest source of U.S. dollars. Working eight to twelve hours a day to wire in backup lights of U.S. autos or solder miniscule wires in TV sets is not the Mexican way. While the women are in the _maquiladoras_, the children are left on their own. Many roam the street, become part of _cholo_ gangs. The infusion of the values of the white culture, coupled with the exploitation by that culture, is changing the Mexican way of life.

The devaluation of the _peso_ and Mexico’s dependency on the U.S. have brought on what the Mexicans call _la crisis_. _No hay trabajo_. Half of the Mexican people are unemployed. In the U.S. a man or woman can make eight times what they can in Mexico. By March, 1987, 1,088 pesos were worth one U.S. dollar. I remember when I was growing up in Texas how we’d cross the border at Reynosa or Progreso to buy sugar or medicines when the dollar was worth eight _pesos_ and fifty _centavos_.

_**La travestía.**_ For many _mexicanos_ del _otro lado_, the choice is to stay in Mexico and starve or move north and live. _Dicen que cada mexicano siempre sueña de la conquista en los brazos de cuatro gringas rubias, la conquista del país poderoso del norte, los Estados Unidos._ En cada Chicoño y mexicano vive el mito del _tesoro territorial perdido_. North Americans call this return to the homeland the silent invasion.

"_A la cueva volverán_"
—El Puma en la canción "Amalia"

South of the border, called North America’s rubbish dump by Chicanos, _mexicanos_ congregate in the plazas to talk about the best way to cross. Smugglers, coyotes, _pasadores_, _enganchadores_ approach these people or are sought out by them. "¿Qué dicen muchos a echarse de mojado?"

"Now among the alien gods with weapons of magic am I."
—Navajo protection song,
sung when going into battle.13

We have a tradition of migration, a tradition of long walks. Today we are witnessing _la migración de los pueblos mexicanos_, the return odyssey to the historical/mythological Aztlan. This time, the traffic is from south to north.

_**El retorno**_ to the promised land first began with the Indians from the interior of Mexico and the _mestizos_ that came with the _conquistadores_ in the 1500s. Immigration continued in the next three centuries, and, in this century, it continued with the _braceros_ who helped to build our railroads and who picked our fruit. Today thousands of Mexicans are crossing the border legally and illegally; ten million people without documents have returned to the Southwest.

Faceless, nameless, invisible, taunted with "Hey cucaracho" (cockroach). Trembling with fear, yet filled with courage, a courage born of desperation. Barefoot and uneducated, Mexicans with hands like boot soles gather at night by the river where two worlds merge creating what Reagan calls a frontier, a war zone. The convergence has created a shock culture, a border culture, a third country, a closed country.

Without benefit of bridges, the "_mojados_" (wetbacks) float on inflatable rafts across _el río Grande_, or wade or swim across naked, clutching their clothes over their heads. Holding onto the grass, they pull themselves along the banks with a prayer to _Virgen de Guadalupe_ on their lips: _Ay virgencita morena, mi madrecita, dame tu bendición._

The Border Patrol hides behind the local McDonalds on the outskirts of Brownsville, Texas or some other border town. They set traps around the river beds beneath the bridge.14 Hunters in army-green uniforms stalk and track these economic refugees by the powerful nightvision of electronic sensing devices planted in
the ground or mounted on Border Patrol vans. Cornered by flashlights, frisked while their arms stretch over their heads, los mojados are handcuffed, locked in jeeps, and then kicked back across the border.

One out of every three is caught. Some return to enact their rite of passage as many as three times a day. Some of those who make it across undetected fall prey to Mexican robbers such as those in Smugglers' Canyon on the American side of the border near Tijuana. As refugees in a homeland that does not want them, many find a welcome hand holding out only suffering, pain, and ignoble death.

Those who make it past the checking points of the Border Patrol find themselves in the midst of 150 years of racism in Chicano barrios in the Southwest and in big northern cities. Living in a no-man's-borderland, caught between being treated as criminals and being able to eat, between resistance and deportation, the illegal refugees are some of the poorest and the most exploited of any people in the U.S. It is illegal for Mexicans to work without green cards. But big farming combines, farm bosses and smugglers who bring them in make money off the "wetbacks'" labor—they don't have to pay federal minimum wages, or ensure adequate housing or sanitary conditions.

The Mexican woman is especially at risk. Often the coyote (smuggler) doesn't feed her for days or let her go to the bathroom. Often he rapes her or sells her into prostitution. She cannot call on county or state health or economic resources because she doesn't know English and she fears deportation. American employers are quick to take advantage of her helplessness. She can't go home. She's sold her house, her furniture, borrowed from friends in order to pay the coyote who charges her four or five thousand dollars to smuggle her to Chicago. She may work as a live-in maid for white, Chicano or Latino households for as little as $15 a week. Or work in the garment industry, do hotel work. Isolated and worried about her family back home, afraid of getting caught and deported, living with as many as fifteen people in one room, the mexicana suffers serious health problems. Se enferma de los nervios, de alta presión.15

La mojada, la mujer indocumentada, is doubly threatened in this country. Not only does she have to contend with sexual violence, but like all women, she is prey to a sense of physical helplessness. As a refugee, she leaves the familiar and safe
Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan

Esos movimientos de rebeldía que tenemos en la sangre, nosotros los mexicanos surgen como ríos desbocados en mis venas. Y como mi raza que cada vez deja caer esa esclavitud de obedecer, de callarse y aceptar, en mí está la rebeldía encimada de mi carne. Debajo de mi humillada mirada está una cara insolente lista para explotar. Me costó muy caro mi rebeldía —acalambrada con desvelos y dudas, sintiéndome inútil, estúpida, e impotente.

Me entra una rabia cuando alguien sea mi mamá, la Iglesia, la cultura de los anglos —me dice haz esto, haz eso sin considerar mis deseos.

Repele. Hable pa’ tras. Fui muy bocicona. Era indiferente a muchos valores de mi cultura. No me dejé de los hombres. No fui buena ni obediente.

Pero he crecido. Ya no soló paso toda mi vida botando las costumbres y los valores de mi cultura que me traicionan. También recojo las costumbres que por el tiempo se han probado y las costumbres de respeto a las mujeres. But despite my growing tolerance, for this Chicana la guerra de independencia is a constant.

The Strength of My Rebellion

I have a vivid memory of an old photograph: I am six years old. I stand between my father and mother, head cocked to the right, the toes of my flat feet gripping the ground. I hold my mother’s hand.
To this day I'm not sure where I found the strength to leave the source, the mother, disengage from my family, mi tierra, mi gente, and all that picture stood for. I had to leave home so I could find myself, find my own intrinsic nature buried under the personality that had been imposed on me.

I was the first in six generations to leave the Valley, the only one in my family to ever leave home. But I didn't leave all the parts of me: I kept the ground of my own being. On it I walked away, taking with me the land, the Valley, Texas. Gané mi camino y me largué. Muy andariega mi hija. Because I left of my own accord me dicen, "¿Cómo te gusta la mala vida?"

At a very early age I had a strong sense of who I was and what I was about and what was fair. I had a stubborn will. It tried constantly to mobilize my soul under my own regime, to live life on my own terms no matter how unsuitable to others they were. Terca. Even as a child I would not obey. I was "lazy." Instead of ironing my younger brothers' shirts or cleaning the cupboards, I would pass many hours studying, reading, painting, writing. Every bit of self-faith I'd painstakingly gathered took a beating daily. Nothing in my culture approved of me. Había agarrado malos pasos. Something was "wrong" with me. Estaba más allá de la tradición.

There is a rebel in me—the Shadow-Beast. It is a part of me that refuses to take orders from outside authorities. It refuses to take orders from my conscious will, it threatens the sovereignty of my rulership. It is that part of me that hates constraints of any kind, even those self-imposed. At the least hint of limitations on my time or space by others, it kicks out with both feet. Bolts.

Cultural Tyranny

Culture forms our beliefs. We perceive the version of reality that it communicates. Dominant paradigms, predefined concepts that exist as unquestionable, unchallengeable, are transmitted to us through the culture. Culture is made by those in power—men. Males make the rules and laws; women transmit them. How many times have I heard mothers and mothers-in-law tell their sons to beat their wives for not obeying them, for being hoccinonas (big mouths), for being callajeras (going to visit and gossip with neighbors), for expecting their husbands to help with the rearing of children and the housework, for wanting to be something other than housewives?

The culture expects women to show greater acceptance of, and commitment to, the value system than men. The culture and the Church insist that women are subservient to males. If a woman rebels she is a mujer mala. If a woman doesn't renounce herself in favor of the male, she is selfish. If a woman remains a virgen until she marries, she is a good woman. For a woman of my culture there used to be only three directions she could turn: to the Church as a nun, to the streets as a prostitute, or to the home as a mother. Today some of us have a fourth choice: entering the world by way of education and career and becoming self-autonomous persons. A very few of us. As a working class people our chief activity is to put food in our mouths, a roof over our heads and clothes on our backs. Educating our children is out of reach for most of us. Educated or not, the onus is still on woman to be a wife/mother—only the nun can escape motherhood. Women are made to feel total failures if they don't marry and have children. "¿Y cuándo te casas, Gloria? Se te va a pasar el tren." Y yo les digo, "Pos si me caso, no va ser con un hombre." Se quedan calladitas. Sí, soy hija de la Chingada. I've always been her daughter. No 'tés chingando.

Humans fear the supernatural, both the undivine (the animal impulses such as sexuality, the unconscious, the unknown, the alien) and the divine (the superhuman, the god in us). Culture and religion seek to protect us from these two forces. The female, by virtue of creating entities of flesh and blood in her stomach (she bleeds every month but does not die), by virtue of being in tune with nature's cycles, is feared. Because, according to Christianity and most other major religions, woman is carnal, animal, and closer to the undivine, she must be protected. Protected from herself. Woman is the stranger, the other. She is man's recognized nightmarish pieces, his Shadow-Beast. The sight of her sends him into a frenzy of anger and fear.

La gorra, el rebozo, la mantilla are symbols of my culture's "protection" of women. Culture (read males) professes to protect women. Actually it keeps women in rigidly defined roles. It keeps the girlchild from other men—don't poach on my preserves, only I can touch my child's body. Our mothers taught us well, "Los hombres nomás quieren una cosa"; men aren't to be trusted, they are selfish and are like children. Mothers made sure we didn't
walk into a room of brothers or fathers or uncles in nightgowns or shorts. We were never alone with men, not even those of our own family.

Through our mothers, the culture gave us mixed messages: 

*No voy a dejar que ningún pelado desgraciado maltrate a mis hijos.* And in the next breath it would say, *La mujer tiene que hacer lo que le diga el hombre.* Which was it to be—strong, or submissive, rebellious or conforming?

Tribal rights over those of the individual insured the survival of the tribe and were necessary then, and, as in the case of all indigenous peoples in the world who are still fighting off intentional, premeditated murder (genocide), they are still necessary.

Much of what the culture condemns focuses on kinship relationships. The welfare of the family, the community, and the tribe is more important than the welfare of the individual. The individual exists first as kin—as sister, as father, as *padrino*—and last as self.

In my culture, selfishness is condemned, especially in women; humility and selflessness, the absence of selfishness, is considered a virtue. In the past, acting humble with members outside the family ensured that you would make no one *envidioso* (envious); therefore he or she would not use witchcraft against you. If you get above yourself, you’re an *envidiosa*. If you don’t behave like everyone else, *la gente* will say that you think you’re better than others, *que te crees grande*. With ambition (condemned in the Mexican culture and valued in the Anglo) comes envy. *Respeto* carries with it a set of rules so that social categories and hierarchies will be kept in order: respect is reserved for *la abuela, papá, el patrón*, those with power in the community. Women are at the bottom of the ladder one rung above the deviants. The Chicano, *mexicano*, and some Indian cultures have no tolerance for deviance. Deviance is whatever is condemned by the community. Most societies try to get rid of their deviants. Most cultures have burned and beaten their homosexuals and others who deviate from the sexual common. The queer are the mirror reflecting the heterosexual tribe’s fear: being different, being other and therefore lesser, therefore sub-human, in-human, non-human.

**Half and Half**

There was a *muchacha* who lived near my house. *La gente del pueblo* talked about her being *una de las otras*, “of the Others.” They said that for six months she was a woman who had a vagina that bled once a month, and that for the other six months she was a man, had a penis and she peed standing up. They called her half and half, *mita’ y mita*, neither one nor the other but a strange doubling, a deviation of nature that horrified, a work of nature inverted. But there is a magic aspect in abnormality and so-called deformity. Maimed, mad, and sexually different people were believed to possess supernatural powers by primal cultures’ magico-religious thinking. For them, abnormality was the price a person had to pay for her or his inborn extraordinary gift.

There is something compelling about being both male and female, about having an entry into both worlds. Contrary to some psychiatric tenets, half and halves are not suffering from a confusion of sexual identity, or even from a confusion of gender. What we are suffering from is an absolute despot duality that says we are able to be only one or the other. It claims that human nature is limited and cannot evolve into something better. But I, like other queer people, am two in one body, both male and female. I am the embodiment of the *hieros gamos*: the coming together of opposite qualities within.

**Fear of Going Home: Homophobia**

For the lesbian of color, the ultimate rebellion she can make against her native culture is through her sexual behavior. She goes against two moral prohibitions: sexuality and homosexuality. Being lesbian and raised Catholic, indoctrinated as straight, I *made the choice to be queer* (for some it is genetically inherent). It’s an interesting path, one that continually slips in and out of the white, the Catholic, the Mexican, the indigenous, the instincts. In and out of my head. It makes *for loquedad*, the crazies. It is a path of knowledge—one of knowing (and of learning) the history of oppression of our *raza*. It is a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.

In a New England college where I taught, the presence of a few lesbians threw the more conservative heterosexual students
and faculty into a panic. The two lesbian students and we two
lesbian instructors met with them to discuss their fears. One of
the students said, "I thought homophobia meant fear of going
home after a residency."

And I thought, how apt. Fear of going home. And of not
being taken in. We’re afraid of being abandoned by the mother,
the culture, la Raza, for being unacceptable, faulty, damaged.
Most of us unconsciously believe that if we reveal this unaccepta-
ble aspect of the self our mother/culture/race will totally reject
us. To avoid rejection, some of us conform to the values of the
culture, push the unacceptable parts into the shadows. Which
leaves only one fear—that we will be found out and that the
Shadow-Beast will break out of its cage. Some of us take another
route. We try to make ourselves conscious of the Shadow-Beast,
stare at the sexual lust and lust for power and destruction we see
on its face, discern among its features the undershadow that the
reigning order of heterosexual males project on our Beast. Yet
still others of us take it another step: we try to awaken the
Shadow-Beast inside us. Not many jump at the chance to con-
front the Shadow-Beast in the mirror without flinching at her
lidless serpent eyes, her cold clammy moist hand dragging us
underground, fangs barred and hissing. How does one put
feathers on this particular serpent? But a few of us have been lucky—
on the face of the Shadow-Beast we have seen not lust but
tenderness; on its face we have uncovered the lie.

Intimate Terrorism: Life in the Borderlands

The world is not a safe place to live in. We shiver in separate
cells in enclosed cities, shoulders hunched, barely keeping the
panic below the surface of the skin, daily drinking shock along
with our morning coffee, fearing the torches being set to our
buildings, the attacks in the streets. Shuttering down. Woman does
not feel safe when her own culture, and white culture, are critical
of her; when the males of all races hunt her as prey.

Alienated from her mother culture, "alien" in the dominant
culture, the woman of color does not feel safe within the inner
life of her self. Petrified, she can’t respond, her face caught
between intersticios, the spaces between the different worlds
she inhabits.

The ability to respond is what is meant by responsibility, yet
our cultures take away our ability to act—shackle us in the name
of protection. Blocked, immobilized, we can’t move forward,
can’t move backwards. That writhing serpent movement, the
very movement of life, swifter than lightning, frozen.

We do not engage fully. We do not make full use of our
faculties. We abnegate. And there in front of us is the crossroads
and choice: to feel a victim where someone else is in control and
therefore responsible and to blame (being a victim and transffer-
ing the blame on culture, mother, father, ex-lover, friend,
absolves me of responsibility), or to feel strong, and, for the most
part, in control.

My Chicana identity is grounded in the Indian woman’s
history of resistance. The Aztec female rites of mourning were
rites of defiance protesting the cultural changes which disrupted
the equality and balance between female and male, and protest-
ing their demotion to a lesser status, their denigration. Like la
Llorona, the Indian woman’s only means of protest was wailing.

So mamá, Raza, how wonderful, no tener que rendir cuentas
a nadie. I feel perfectly free to rebel and to rail against my culture.
I fear no betrayal on my part because, unlike Chicanas and other
women of color who grew up white or who have only recently
returned to their native cultural roots, I was totally immersed in
mine. It wasn’t until I went to high school that I “saw” whites.
Until I worked on my master’s degree I had not gotten within an
arm’s distance of them. I was totally immersed en lo mexicano, a
rural, peasant, isolated, mexicanismo. To separate from my cur-
ture (as from my family) I had to feel competent enough on the
outside and secure enough inside to live life on my own. Yet in
leaving home I did not lose touch with my origins because lo
mexicano is in my system. I am a turtle, wherever I go I carry
“home” on my back.

Not me sold out my people but they me. So yes, though
“home” permeates every sinew and cartilage in my body, I too am
afraid of going home. Though I’ll defend my race and culture
when they are attacked by non-mexicanos, conosco el malestar de
mi cultura. I abhor some of my culture’s ways, how it cripples its
women, como burras, our strengths used against us, lowly burras
bearing humility with dignity. The ability to serve, claim the
males, is our highest virtue. I abhor how my culture makes macho
caricatures of its men. No, I do not buy all the myths of the tribe
into which I was born. I can understand why the more tinged
with Anglo blood, the more adamantly my colored and colorless
sisters glorify their colored culture's values—to offset the
extreme devaluation of it by the white culture. It's a legitimate
reaction. But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture which
have injured me and which have injured me in the name of
protecting me.

So, don't give me your tenets and your laws. Don't give me
your lukewarm gods. What I want is an accounting with all three
cultures—white, Mexican, Indian. I want the freedom to carve
and chisel my own face, to staunch the bleeding with ashes, to
fashion my own gods out of my entrails. And if going home is
denied me then I will have to stand and claim my space, making a
new culture—una cultura mestiza—with my own lumber, my
own bricks and mortar and my own feminist architecture.

The Wounding of the india-Mestiza

Estas carnos indias que despreciamos nosotros los mexicanos
asi como despreciamos y condenamos a nuestra madre, Malinali. Nos condenamos a nosotros mismos. Esta raza vencida,
enemigo cuerpo.

Not me sold out my people but they me. Malinali Tenepat,
or Malintzin, has become known as la Chingada—the fucked one.
She has become the bad word that passes a dozen times a day
from the lips of Chicanos. Whore, prostitute, the woman who
sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit
out with contempt.

The worst kind of betrayal lies in making us believe that the
Indian woman in us is the betrayer. We, indias y mestizas, police
the Indian in us, brutalize and condemn her. Male culture has
done a good job on us. Son los costumbres que traicionan. La india
en mí es la sombra: La Chingada, Tlazolteotl, Coatlicue. Son ellas
que oyemos lamentando a sus hijas perdidas.

Not me sold out my people but they me. Because of the color
of my skin they betrayed me. The dark-skinned woman has been
silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage,
bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twen-
tieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap
labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people
(and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs was not
free of wounding). For 300 years she was invisible, she was not
heard. Many times she wished to speak, to act, to protest, to
challenge. The odds were heavily against her. She hid her feel-
ings; she hid her truths; she concealed her fire; but she kept
stoking the inner flame. She remained faceless and voiceless, but
a light shone through her veil of silence. And though she was
unable to spread her limbs and though for her right now the sun
has sunk under the earth and there is no moon, she continues to
tend the flame. The spirit of the fire spurs her to fight for her
own skin and a piece of ground to stand on, a ground from which
to view the world—a perspective, a homeground where she can
plumb the rich ancestral roots into her own ample mestiza heart.
She waits till the waters are not so turbulent and the mountains
not so slippery with sleet. Battered and bruised she waits, her
bruises throwing her back upon herself and the rhythmic pulse of
the feminine. Coatlicue waits with her.

Aquí en la soledad prospera su rebeldía.
En la soledad Ella prospera.
Entering Into the Serpent

*Sueño con serpientes, con serpientes del mar,
Con cierto mar, ay de serpientes sueño yo.*
*largas, transparentes, en sus barrigas llevan*
*lo que puedan arrebatarle al amor.*
*Oh, oh, oh, la mató y aparece una mayor.*
*Oh, con mucho más infierno en digestión.*

I dream of serpents, serpents of the sea,
A certain sea, oh, of serpents I dream.
Long, transparent, in their bellies they carry
All that they can snatch away from love.
Oh, oh, oh, I kill one and a larger one appears.
Oh, with more hellfire burning inside!

—Silvio Rodriguez, "Sueño Con Serpientes"

In the predawn orange haze, the sleepy crowing of roosters atop the trees. *No vayas al escusado en lo oscuro.* Don't go to the outhouse at night, Prieta, my mother would say. *No se te vaya a meter algo por allá.* A snake will crawl into your *nalgas,* make you pregnant. They seek warmth in the cold. *Dicen que las culebras* like to suck *chiches,* can draw milk out of you.

*En el escusado* in the half-light spiders hang like gliders. Under my bare buttocks and the rough planks the deep yawning tugs at me. I can see my legs fly up to my face as my body falls through the round hole into the sheen of swarming maggots below. Avoiding the snakes under the porch I walk back into the kitchen, step on a big black one slithering across the floor.
Ella tiene su tono

Once we were chopping cotton in the fields of Jesus Maria Ranch. All around us the woods, Quelite towered above me, choking the stubby cotton that had outlived the deer's teeth.

I swung el azadón hard. El quelite barely shook, showered nettles on my arms and face. When I heard the rattle the world froze.

I barely felt its fangs. Boot got all the veneno. My mother came shrieking, swinging her hoe high, cutting the earth, the writhing body.

I stood still, the sun beat down. Afterwards I smelled where fear had been: back of neck, under arms, between my legs; I felt its heat slide down my body. I swallowed the rock it had hardened into.

When Mama had gone down the row and was out of sight, I took out my pocketknife. I made an X over each prick. My body followed the blood, fell onto the soft ground. I put my mouth over the red and sucked and spit between the rows of cotton.

I picked up the pieces, placed them end on end. Culebra de cascabel. I counted the rattlers: twelve. It would shed no more. I buried the pieces between the rows of cotton.

That night I watched the window sill, watched the moon dry the blood on the tail, dreamed rattler fangs filled my mouth, scales covered my body. In the morning I saw through snake eyes, felt snake blood course through my body. The serpent, mi tono, my animal counterpart. I was immune to its venom. Forever immune.

Snakes, víboras: since that day I've sought and shunned them. Always when they cross my path, fear and elation flood my body. I know things older than Freud, older than gender. She—that's how I think of la Vibora, Snake Woman. Like the ancient Olmecs, I know Earth is a coiled Serpent. Forty years it's taken me to enter into the Serpent, to acknowledge that I have a body, that I am a body and to assimilate the animal body, the animal soul.

Coatlalopeuh, She Who Has Dominion Over Serpents

Mi mamagrande Ramona toda su vida mantuvo un altar pequeño en la esquina del comedor. Siempre tenía las velas prendidas. Allí hacía promesas a la Virgen de Guadalupe. My family, like most Chicanos, did not practice Roman Catholicism but a folk Catholicism with many pagan elements. La Virgen de Guadalupe’s Indian name is Coatlalopeuh. She is the central deity connecting us to our Indian ancestry.

Coatlalopeuh is descended from, or is an aspect of, earlier Mesoamerican fertility and Earth goddesses. The earliest is Coatl, or "Serpent Skirt." She had a human skull or serpent for a head, a necklace of human hearts, a skirt of twisted serpents and taloned feet. As creator goddess, she was mother of the celestial deities, and of Huitzilopochtli and his sister, Coyolxauhqui. She With Golden Bells, Goddess of the Moon, who was decapitated by her brother. Another aspect of Coatl is Tonantzi. The Totonacs, tired of the Aztec human sacrifices to the male god, Huitzilopochtli, renewed their reverence for Tonantzi who preferred the sacrifice of birds and small animals.

The male-dominated Azteca-Mexica culture drove the powerful female deities underground by giving them monstrous attributes and by substituting male deities in their place, thus splitting the female Self and the female deities. They divided her who had been complete, who possessed both upper (light) and underworld (dark) aspects. Coatl, the Serpent goddess, and her more sinister aspects, Tláloc, and Cihuacoatl, were “darkened” and disempowered much in the same manner as the Indian Kali.

Tonantzi—split from her dark guises, Coatl, Tláloc, and Cihuacoatl—became the good mother. The Nahua, through ritual and prayer, sought to oblige Tonantzi to ensure their health and the growth of their crops. It was she who gave México the cactus plant to provide her people with milk and pulque. It was she who defended her children against the wrath of the Christian God by challenging God, her son, to produce mother's milk (as she had done) to prove that his benevolence equalled his disciplinary harshness.

After the Conquest, the Spaniards and their Church continued to split Tonantzi/Guadalupe. They desexed Guadalupe, taking Coatlalopeuh, the serpent/sexuality, out of her. They
completed the split begun by the Nahuas by making la Virgen de Guadalupe/Virgen Maria into chaste virgins and Tlazolteotl/Coatlicue/la Chingada into putas; into the Beauties and the Beasts. They went even further; they made all Indian deities and religious practices the work of the devil.

Thus Tonantissi became Guadalupe, the chaste protective mother, the defender of the Mexican people.

El nueve de diciembre del año 1531
a las cuatro de la madrugada
un pobre indio que se llamaba Juan Diego
iba cruzando el cerro de Tepeyac
cuando oyó un cantó de pájaro.
Alzó al cabeza vio que en la cima del cerro
estaba cubierta con una brillante nube blanca.

Parada en frente del sol
sobre una luna creciente
sostenida por un ángel
estaba una azteca
vestida en ropa de india.

Nuestra Señora María de Coatlapoebuh
se le apareció.

"Juan Diegito, El-que-habla-como-un-aguila,"
la Virgen le dijo en el lenguaje azteca.
"Para hacer mi altar este cerro éligo.
Dile a tu gente que yo soy la madre de Dios,
a los indios yo les ayudaré."

Esto se lo contó a Juan Zumarraga
pero el obispo no le creyó.

Juan Diego volvió, llevo su tilma12
con rosas de castilla
creciendo milagrosamente en la nieve.
Se las llevó al obispo,
y cuando abrió su tilma
el retrato de la Virgen
abí estaba pintado.

Guadalupe appeared on December 9, 1531, on the spot
where the Aztec goddess, Tonantisi ("Our Lady Mother"),
had been worshipped by the Nahuas and where a temple to
her had stood. Speaking Nahua, she told Juan Diego, a poor
Indian crossing Tepeyac Hill, whose Indian name was Cuaotlao-huac and who belonged to the mazehual class, the humblest
within the Chichimeca tribe, that her name was Maria Coatla-lopeub. Coatl is the Nahua word for serpent. Lopeub means "the
one who has dominion over serpents." I interpret this as "the
one who is at one with the beasts." Some spell her name Coatla-lopeub (pronounced "Cuaotlahuac" in Nahuatl) and say that
"lopeub" means "crushed or stepped on with disdain." Some say
it means "she who crushed the serpent," with the serpent as
the symbol of the indigenous religion, meaning that her religion
was to take the place of the Aztec religion.13 Because Coatla-lopeub
was homophoneous to the Spanish Guadalupe, the Spanish identified
her with the dark Virgin, Guadalupe, patroness of West
Central Spain.14

From that meeting, Juan Diego walked away with the image
of la Virgen painted on his cloak. Soon after, Mexico ceased
to belong to Spain, and la Virgen de Guadalupe began to eclipse all
the other male and female religious figures in Mexico, Central
America and parts of the U.S. Southwest. "Desde entonces para
el mexicano ser Guadalupano es algo esencial/..."15

| Mi Virgen Morena | My brown virgin |
| Mi Virgen Ranchera | my country virgin |
| Eres nuestra Reina | you are our queen |
| México es tu tierra | Mexico is your land |
| Y tú su bandera. | and you its flag. |

—"La Virgen Ranchera"16

In 1660 the Roman Catholic Church named her Mother of
God, considering her synonymous with la Virgen Maria; she
became la Santa Patrona de los mexicanos. The role of defender
(or patron) has traditionally been assigned to male gods. During
the Mexican Revolution, Emiliano Zapata and Miguel Hidalgo
used her image to move el pueblo mexicano toward freedom.
During the 1965 grape strike in Delano, California and in subse-
quent Chicano farmworkers' marches in Texas and other parts
of the Southwest, her image on banners heralded and united the
farmworkers. Pachucos (zoot suiters) tattoo her image on their
bodies. Today, in Texas and Mexico she is more venerated than
Jesus or God the Father. In the Lower Rio Grande Valley of south
Texas it is la Virgen de San Juan de los Lagos (an aspect of Guadalupe) that is worshipped by thousands every day at her shrine in San Juan. In Texas she is considered the patron saint of Chicanos. Cuando Carito, mi hermanito, was missing in action and, later, wounded in Viet Nam, mi mamá got on her knees y le prometo a Ella que si su hijito volvía vivo she would crawl on her knees and light novenas in her honor.

Today, la Virgen de Guadalupe is the single most potent religious, political and cultural image of the Chicano/mexicano. She, like my race, is a synthesis of the old world and the new, of the religion and culture of the two races in our psyche, the conquerors and the conquered. She is the symbol of the mestizo true to his or her Indian values. La cultura chicana identifies with the mother (Indian) rather than with the father (Spanish). Our faith is rooted in indigenous attributes, images, symbols, magic and myth. Because Guadalupe took upon herself the psychological and physical devastation of the conquered and oppressed indio, she is our spiritual, political and psychological symbol. As a symbol of hope and faith, she sustains and insures our survival. The Indian, despite extreme despair, suffering and near genocide, has survived. To Mexicans on both sides of the border, Guadalupe is the symbol of our rebellion against the rich, upper and middleclass; against their subjugation of the poor and the indio.

Guadalupe unites people of different races, religions, languages: Chicano protestants, American Indians and whites. "Nuestra abogada siempre serás / Our mediatrix you will always be." She mediates between the Spanish and the Indian cultures (or three cultures as in the case of mexicanos of African or other ancestry) and between Chicanos and the white world. She mediates between humans and the divine, between this reality and the reality of spirit entities. La Virgen de Guadalupe is the symbol of ethnic identity and of the tolerance for ambiguity that Chicanos-mexicanos, people of mixed race, people who have Indian blood, people who cross cultures, by necessity possess.

La gente Chicana tiene tres madres. All three are mediators: Guadalupe, the virgin mother who has not abandoned us, la Chingada (Malinche), the raped mother whom we have abandoned, and la Llorona, the mother who seeks her lost children and is a combination of the other two.

Ambiguity surrounds the symbols of these three “Our Mothers.” Guadalupe has been used by the Church to mete out institutionalized oppression: to placate the Indians and mexicanos and Chicanos. In part, the true identity of all three has been subverted—Guadalupe to make us docile and enduring, la Chingada to make us ashamed of our Indian side, and la Llorona to make us long-suffering people. This obscuring has encouraged the virgen/puta (whore) dichotomy.

Yet we have not all embraced this dichotomy. In the U.S. Southwest, Mexico, Central and South America the indio and the mestizo continue to worship the old spirit entities (including Guadalupe) and their supernatural power, under the guise of Christian saints.17

Las invocoa diosas mías, ustedes las indias sumergidas en mi carne que son mis sombras. Ustedes que persisten mudas en sus cuevas. Ustedes Señoras que ahora, como yo, están en desgracia.

For Waging War Is My Cosmic Duty: The Loss of the Balanced Oppositions and the Change to Male Dominance

Therefore I decided to leave
The country (Aztlán),
Therefore I have come as one charged with a special duty,
Because I have been given arrows and shields,
For waging war is my duty,
And on my expeditions I shall see all the lands,
I shall wait for the people and meet them
In all four quarters and I shall give them
Food to eat and drinks to quench their thirst,
For here I shall unite all the different peoples!
—Huitzilopochtli speaking to the Azteca-Mexica16

Before the Aztecs became a militaristic, bureaucratic state where male predatory warfare and conquest were based on patrilineal nobility, the principle of balanced opposition between the sexes existed.19 The people worshipped the Lord and Lady of
Duality, *Ometecuhli* and *Omecihuatl*. Before the change to male dominance, *Coatlicue*, Lady of the Serpent Skirt, contained and balanced the dualities of male and female, light and dark, life and death.

The changes that led to the loss of the balanced oppositions began when the Azteca, one of the twenty Toltec tribes, made the last pilgrimage from a place called Aztlán. The migration south began about the year A.D. 820. Three hundred years later the advance guard arrived near Tula, the capital of the declining Toltec empire. By the 11th century, they had joined with the Chichimec tribe of Mexitin (afterwards called Mexico) into one religious and administrative organization within Aztlán, the Aztec territory. The Mexitin, with their tribal god *Tetzauhctotl Huitzilopochtli* (Magnificent Humming Bird on the Left), gained control of the religious system.20 (In some stories *Huitzilopochtli* killed his sister, the moon goddess *Malinalxoch*, who used her supernatural power over animals to control the tribe rather than wage war.)

*Huitzilopochtli* assigned the Azteca-Mexica the task of keeping the human race (the present cosmic age called the Fifth Sun, *El Quinto Sol*) alive. They were to guarantee the harmonious preservation of the human race by unifying all the people on earth into one social, religious and administrative organ. The Aztec people considered themselves in charge of regulating all earthly matters.21 Their instrument: controlled or regulated war to gain and exercise power.

After 100 years in the central plateau, the Azteca-Mexica went to Chapultepec, where they settled in 1248 (the present site of the park on the outskirts of Mexico City). There, in 1345, the Aztec-Mexica chose the site of their capital, Tenochtitlan.22 By 1428, they dominated the Central Mexican lake area.

The Aztec ruler, *Itzcoatl*, destroyed all the painted documents (books called codices) and rewrote a mythology that validated the wars of conquest and thus continued the shift from a tribe based on clans to one based on classes. From 1429-1440, the Aztecs emerged as a militaristic state that preyed on neighboring tribes for tribute and captives.23 The "wars of flowers" were encounters between local armies with a fixed number of warriors, operating within the Aztec World, and, according to set rules, fighting ritual battles at fixed times and on predetermined battlefields. The religious purpose of these wars was to procure prisoners of war who could be sacrificed to the deities of the capturing party. For if one "fed" the gods, the human race would be saved from total extinction. The social purpose was to enable males of noble families and warriors of low descent to win honor, fame and administrative offices, and to prevent social and cultural decadence of the elite. The Aztec people were free to have their own religious faith, provided it did not conflict too much with the three fundamental principles of state ideology: to fulfill the special duty set forth by *Huitzilopochtli* of unifying all peoples, to participate in the wars of flowers, and to bring ritual offerings and do penance for the purpose of preventing decadence.24

Matrilineal descent characterized the Toltecs and perhaps early Aztec society. Women possessed property, and were curers as well as priestesses. According to the codices, women in former times had the supreme power in Tula, and in the beginning of the Aztec dynasty, the royal blood ran through the female line. A council of elders of the Calpul headed by a supreme leader, or *tlactlo*, called the father and mother of the people, governed the tribe. The supreme leader's vice-emperor occupied the position of "Snake Woman" or *Cihuacoatl*, a goddess.25 Although the high posts were occupied by men, the references referred to females, evidence of the exalted role of women before the Aztec nation became centralized. The final break with the democratic Calpul came when the four Aztec lords of royal lineage picked the king's successor from his siblings or male descendants.26

*La Llorona*’s wailing in the night for her lost children has an echoing note in the wailing or mourning rites performed by women as they bid their sons, brothers and husbands good-by before they left to go to the "flowery wars." Wailing is the Indian, Mexican and Chicana woman's feeble protest when she has no other recourse. These collective wailing rites may have been a sign of resistance in a society which glorified the warrior and war and for whom the women of the conquered tribes were booty.27

In defiance of the Aztec rulers, the *macbales* (the common people) continued to worship fertility, nourishment and agricultural female deities, those of crops and rain. They venerated *Chalchiubtlicue* (goddess of sweet or inland water), *Chicomecoatl* (goddess of food) and *Huitzilohuitl* (goddess of salt).

Nevertheless, it took less than three centuries for Aztec society to change from the balanced duality of their earlier times
and from the egalitarian traditions of a wandering tribe to those of a predatory state. The nobility kept the tribute, the commoners got nothing, resulting in a class split. The conquered tribes hated the Aztecs because of the rape of their women and the heavy taxes levied on them. The Tlaxcalans were the Aztec’s bitter enemies and it was they who helped the Spanish defeat the Aztec rulers, who were by this time so unpopular with their own common people that they could not even mobilize the populace to defend the city. Thus the Aztec nation fell not because Maltzal (la Chingada) interpreted for and slept with Cortés, but because the ruling elite had subverted the solidarity between men and women and between noble and commoner.28

**Sueño con serpientes**

*Coatl.* In pre-Columbian America the most notable symbol was the serpent. The Olmecs associated womanhood with the Serpent’s mouth which was guarded by rows of dangerous teeth, a sort of *vagina dentata*. They considered it the most sacred place on earth, a place of refuge, the creative womb from which all things were born and to which all things returned. Snake people had holes, entrances to the body of the Earth Serpent; they followed the Serpent’s way, identified with the Serpent deity, with the mouth, both the eater and the eaten. The destiny of humankind is to be devoured by the Serpent.29

Dead,
The doctor by the operating table said.
I passed between the two fangs,
the flickering tongue.
Having come through the mouth of the serpent,
swallowed,
I found myself suddenly in the dark,
sliding down a smooth wet surface
down down into an even darker darkness.
Having crossed the portal, the raised hinged mouth,
having entered the serpent’s belly,
now there was no looking back, no going back.

Why do I cast no shadow?
Are there lights from all sides shining on me?
Ahead, ahead.

After each of my four bouts with death I’d catch glimpses of an otherworld Serpent. Once, in my bedroom, I saw a cobra the size of the room, her hood expanding over me. When I blinked she was gone. I realized she was, in my psyche, the mental picture and symbol of the instinctual in its collective impersonal, pre­human. She, the symbol of the dark sexual drive, the chthonic (underworld), the feminine, the serpentine movement of sexuality, of creativity, the basis of all energy and life.

**The Presences**

She appeared in white, garbed in white, standing white, pure white.
—Bernardino de Sahagún30

On the gulf where I was raised, *en el Valle del Río Grande* in South Texas—that triangular piece of land wedged between the river *y el golfo* which serves as the Texas-U.S./Mexican border—is a Mexican *pueblito* called Hargill (at one time in the history of this one-grocery-store, two-service-stations town there were thirteen churches and thirteen *cantinas*). Down the road, a little ways from our house, was a deserted church. It was known among the *mexicanos* that if you walked down the road late at night you would see a woman dressed in white floating about, peering out the church window. She would follow those who had done something bad or who were afraid. *Los mexicanos* called her *la Jila*. Some thought she was *la Llorona*. She was, I think, *Cihuacoatl*, Serpent Woman, ancient Aztec goddess of the earth, of war and birth, patron of midwives, and antecedent of *la Llorona*. Covered with chalk, *Cihuacoatl* wears a white dress with a decoration half red and half black. Her hair forms two little horns (which the Aztecs depicted as knives) crossed on her forehead. The lower part of her face is a bare jawbone, signifying death. On her back she carries a cradle, the knife of sacrifice swaddled as if it were her *papoose*, her child.31 Like *la Llorona*, *Cihuacoatl* howls and weeps in the night, screams as if demented. She brings mental depres-
sion and sorrow. Long before it takes place, she is the first to predict something is to happen.

Back then, I, an unbeliever, scoffed at these Mexican superstitions as I was taught in Anglo school. Now, I wonder if this story and similar ones were the culture’s attempts to “protect” members of the family, especially girls, from “wandering.” Stories of the devil luring young girls away and having his way with them discouraged us from going out. There’s an ancient Indian tradition of burning the umbilical cord of an infant girl under the house so she will never stray from it and her domestic role.

* A mis ancas caen los cueros de culebra,
  cuatro veces por año los arrastro,
  me tropiezo y me caigo
  y cada vez que miro una culebra le pregunto
  ¿Qué traes conmigo?

Four years ago a red snake crossed my path as I walked through the woods. The direction of its movement, its pace, its colors, the "mood" of the trees and the wind and the snake—they all "spoke" to me, told me things. I look for omens everywhere, everywhere catch glimpses of the patterns and cycles of my life. Stones "speak" to Luisah Teish, a Santera; trees whisper their secrets to Chrystos, a Native American. I remember listening to the voices of the wind as a child and understanding its messages. Los espiritus that ride the back of the south wind. I remember their exhalation blowing in through the slits in the door during those hot Texas afternoons. A gust of wind raising the linoleum under my feet, buffeting the house. Everything trembling.

We’re not supposed to remember such otherworldly events. We’re supposed to ignore, forget, kill those fleeting images of the soul’s presence and of the spirit’s presence. We’ve been taught that the spirit is outside our bodies or above our heads somewhere up in the sky with God. We’re supposed to forget that every cell in our bodies, every bone and bird and worm has spirit in it.

Like many Indians and Mexicans, I did not deem my psychic experiences real. I denied their occurrences and let my inner senses atrophy. I allowed white rationality to tell me that the existence of the "other world" was mere pagan superstition. I accepted their reality, the "official" reality of the rational, reason-

...ing mode which is connected with external reality, the upper world, and is considered the most developed consciousness—the consciousness of duality.

The other mode of consciousness facilitates images from the soul and the unconscious through dreams and the imagination. Its work is labeled “fiction,” make-believe, wish-fulfillment. White anthropologists claim that Indians have “primitive” and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the “magical” mind, the “savage” mind, the participation mystique of the mind that says the world of the imagination—the world of the soul—and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to become “objective,” Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them. This dichotomy is the root of all violence.

Not only was the brain split into two functions but so was reality. Thus people who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes. Such is the case with the *India* and the *mestiza*.

Institutionalized religion fears trafficking with the spirit world and stigmatizes it as witchcraft. It has strict taboos against this kind of inner knowledge. It fears what Jung calls the Shadow, the unsavory aspects of ourselves. But even more it fears the supra-human, the god in ourselves.

"The purpose of any established religion . . . is to glorify, sanction and bless with a superpersonal meaning all personal and interpersonal activities. This occurs through the 'sacraments,' and indeed through most religious rites." But it sanctions only its own sacraments and rites. Voodoo, Santeria, Shamanism and other native religions are called cults and their beliefs are called mythologies. In my own life, the Catholic Church fails to give meaning to my daily acts, to my continuing encounters with the "other world." It and other institutionalized religions impoverish all life, beauty, pleasure.

The Catholic and Protestant religions encourage fear and distrust of life and of the body; they encourage a split between the body and the spirit and totally ignore the soul; they encourage us to kill off parts of ourselves. We are taught that the body is an ignorant animal; intelligence dwells only in the head. But the
body is smart. It does not discern between external stimuli and stimuli from the imagination. It reacts equally viscerally to events from the imagination as it does to "real" events.

So I grew up in the interface trying not to give countenance to el mal aígre, evil non-human, non-corporeal entities riding the wind, that could come in through the window, through my nose with my breath. I was not supposed to believe in susto, a sudden shock or fall that frightens the soul out of the body. And growing up between such opposing spiritualities how could I reconcile the two, the pagan and the Christian?

No matter to what use my people put the supranatural world, it is evident to me now that the spirit world, whose existence the whites are so adamant in denying, does in fact exist. This very minute I sense the presence of the spirits of my ancestors in my room. And I think la Jala is Cibocato, Snake Woman; she is la Llorona, Daughter of Night, traveling the dark terrains of the unknown searching for the lost parts of herself. I remember la Jala following me once, remember her eerie lament. I’d like to think that she was crying for her lost children, los Chicanos/mexicanos.

La facultad

La facultad is the capacity to see in surface phenomena the meaning of deeper realities, to see the deep structure below the surface. It is an instant "sensing," a quick perception arrived at without conscious reasoning. It is an acute awareness mediated by the part of the psyche that does not speak, that communicates in images and symbols which are the faces of feelings, that is, behind which feelings reside/hide. The one possessing this sensitivity is excruciatingly alive to the world.

Those who are pushed out of the tribe for being different are likely to become more sensitized (when not brutalized into insensitivity). Those who do not feel psychologically or physically safe in the world are more apt to develop this sense. Those who are pounced on the most have it the strongest—the females, the homosexuals of all races, the darkskinned, the outcast, the persecuted, the marginalized, the foreign.

When we’re up against the wall, when we have all sorts of oppressions coming at us, we are forced to develop this faculty so that we’ll know when the next person is going to slap us or lock us away. We’ll sense the rapist when he’s five blocks down the street. Pain makes us acutely anxious to avoid more of it, so we hone that radar. It’s a kind of survival tactic that people, caught between the worlds, unknowingly cultivate. It is latent in all of us.

I walk into a house and I know whether it is empty or occupied. I feel the lingering charge in the air of a recent fight or lovelmaking or depression. I sense the emotions someone near is emitting—whether friendly or threatening. Hate and fear—the more intense the emotion, the greater my reception of it. I feel a tingling on my skin when someone is staring at me or thinking about me. I can tell how others feel by the way they smell, where others are by the air pressure on my skin. I can spot the love or greed or generosity lodged in the tissues of another. Often I sense the direction of and my distance from people or objects—in the dark, or with my eyes closed, without looking. It must be a vestige of a proximity sense, a sixth sense that’s lain dormant from long-ago times.

Fear develops the proximity sense aspect of la facultad. But there is a deeper sensing that is another aspect of this faculty. It is anything that breaks into one’s everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception. This shift in perception deepens the way we see concrete objects and people; the senses become so acute and piercing that we can see through things, view events in depth, a piercing that reaches the underworld (the realm of the soul). As we plunge vertically, the break, with its accompanying new seeing, makes us pay attention to the soul, and we are thus carried into awareness—an experiencing of soul (Self).

We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. There is a prejudice and a fear of the dark, chthonic (underworld), material such as depression, illness, death and the violations that can bring on this break. Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and la facultad.
La herencia de Coatlicue

The Coatlicue State

protean being
dark dumb windowless no moon glides
across the stone the nightsky alone alone
no lights just mirrorwalls obsidian smoky in the
mirror she sees a woman with four heads the heads
turning round and round spokes of a wheel her neck
is an axle she stares at each face each wishes the
other not there the obsidian knife in the air the
building so high should she jump would she feel
the breeze fanning her face tumbling down the steps
of the temple heart offered up to the sun wall
growing thin thinner she is eyeless a mole
burrowing deeper tunneling there tunneling through the air in the photograph a double
image a ghost arm alongside the flesh one inside her
head the cracks ricocheting bisecting
crisscrossing she hears the rattlesnakes stirring in
a jar being fed with her flesh she listens to the
seam between dusk and dark they are talking she hears
their frozen thumpings the soul encased in black
obsidian smoking smoking she bends to catch a
feather of herself as she falls lost in the
silence of the empty air turning turning
at midnight turning into a wild pig how to get back
all the feathers put them in the jar the rattling
Enfrentamientos con el alma

When my father died, my mother put blankets over the mirrors. Consciously, she had no idea why. Perhaps a part of her knew that a mirror is a door through which the soul may "pass" to the other side and she didn’t want us to "accidentally" follow our father to the place where the souls of the dead live.

The mirror is an ambivalent symbol. Not only does it reproduce images (the twins that stand for thesis and antithesis); it contains and absorbs them. In ancient times the Mexican Indians made mirrors of volcanic glass known as obsidian. Seers would gaze into a mirror until they fell into a trance. Within the black, glossy surface, they saw clouds of smoke which would part to reveal a vision concerning the future of the tribe and the will of the gods.

There is another quality to the mirror and that is the act of seeing. Seeing and being seen. Subject and object, I and she. The eye pins down the object of its gaze, scrutinizes it, judges it. A glance can freeze us in place; it can “possess” us. It can erect a barrier against the world. But in a glance also lies awareness, knowledge. These seemingly contradictory aspects—the act of being seen, held immobilized by a glance, and “seeing through” an experience—are symbolized by the underground aspects of Coatlicue, Cihuahtcin, and Tlazolteotl which cluster in what I call the Coatlicue state.

El secreto terrible y la rajadura

Shame is a wound felt from the inside, dividing us both from ourselves and from one another.

—George Kaufman

I was two or three years old the first time Coatlicue visited my psyche, the first time she “devoured” me (and I “fell” into the underworld). By the worried look on my parents’ faces I learned early that something was fundamentally wrong with me. When I was older I would look into the mirror, afraid of mi secreto terrible, the secret sin I tried to conceal—la sena, the mark of the Beast. I was afraid it was in plain sight for all to see. The secret I tried to conceal was that I was not normal, that I was not like the others. I felt alien, I knew I was alien. I was the mutant stoned out of the herd, something deformed with evil inside.

She has this fear that she has no names that she has many names that she doesn’t know her names She has this fear that she’s an image that comes and goes clearing and darkening the fear that she’s the dreamwork inside someone else’s skull She has this fear that if she takes off her clothes shoves her brain aside peels off her skin that if she drains the blood vessels strips the flesh from the bone flushes out the marrow She has this fear that when she does reach herself turns around to embrace herself a lion’s or witch’s or serpent’s head will turn around swallow her and grin She has this fear that if she digs into herself she won’t find anyone that when she gets “there” she won’t find her notches on the trees the birds will have eaten all the crumbs She has this fear that she won’t find the way back

She felt shame for being abnormal. The bleeding distanced her from others. Her body had betrayed her. She could not trust her instincts, her “horses,” because they stood for her core self, her dark Indian self. La consentida, la rancherita que se avergonzaba de su cuerpo tried not to show pain but the kids could read her face.

Her soft belly exposed to the sharp eyes of everyone; they see, they see. Their eyes penetrate her; they slit her from head to belly. Rajada. She is at their mercy, she can do nothing to defend herself. And she is ashamed that they see her so exposed, so vulnerable. She has to learn to push their eyes away. She has to still her eyes from looking at their feelings—feelings that can catch her in their gaze, bind her to them.

"Oh, silencio, silencio ... en torno de mi cama Tu boca bien amada dulcemente me llama."

—Alfonsina Storni, "Silencio"

Internada en mi cuarto con mi intocada piel, en el oscuro velo con la noche. Embrazada en
La herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State

pesadillas, escarbando el hueso de la ternura me envejezco. Ya verás, tan bajo que me he caído.

Días enteros me la paso atrancada con candado. Esa Gloria, ¿qué estará haciendo en su cuarto con la santa y la pervertida? Mosquita muerta, ¿porqué 'tas tan quietecita? Por que la vida me arremolina pa' ca y pa' ya como boja seca, me araña y me golpea, me deshuesa —mi culpa por que me desdene. Ay mamá, tan bajo que me he caído.

Esa Gloria, la que niega, la que teme correr desenfrenada, la que tiene miedo renegar al papel de víctima. Esa, la que voltea su cara a la pared descascarada. Mira, tan bajo que se ha caído.

Despierta me encuentra la madrugada, una desconocida auleando profecías entre cenizas, san­grando mi cara con las uñas, escarbando la desgracia debajo de mi máscara. Ya vez, tan bajo que me he caído.

Se enmudecen mis ojos al saber que la vida no se entrega. Mi pecado no es la rebeldía ni el anajamiento. Es que no amé mucho, que anduve indecisa y a la prisa, que tuve poca fe y no fui dispuesta de querer ser lo que soy. Traicioné a mi camino.

Ya verás, tan bajo que me he caído. Aquí nomás encerrada en mi cuarto, sangrándome la cara con las uñas. Esa Gloria que rechaza entregar a su destino. Quiero contenerme, no puedo y desbordo. Vas a ver lo alto que voy a subir, aquí vengo.

I locked the door, kept the world out; I vegetated, hibernated, remained in stasis, idled. No telephone, no television, no radio. Alone with the presence in the room. Who? Me, my psyche, the Shadow-Beast?

During the dark side of the moon something in the mirror catches my gaze, I seem all eyes and nose. Inside my skull something shifts. I "see" my face. Gloria, the everyday face; Prieta and Prietita, my childhood faces; Gaudi, the face my mother and sister and brothers know. And there in the black, obsidian mirror of the Nahua is yet another face, a stranger's face. Simultáneamente me miraba la cara desde distintos ángulos. Y mi cara, como la realidad, tenía un caracter multiplice.

The gaping mouth slit heart from mind. Between the two eyes in her head, the tongueless magical eye and the loquacious rational eye, was la rajadura, the abyss that no bridge could span. Separated, they could not visit each other and each was too far away to hear what the other was saying. Silence rose like a river and could not be held back, it flooded and drowned everything.

Nopal de castilla

Soy nopal de castilla like the spineless and therefore defenseless cactus that Mamá Grande Ramona grew in back of her shed. I have no protection. So I cultivate needles, nettles, razor-sharp spikes to protect myself from others.

There are many defense strategies that the self uses to escape the agony of inadequacy and I have used all of them. I have split from and disowned those parts of myself that others rejected. I have used rage to drive others away and to insulate myself against exposure. I have reciprocated with contempt for those who have roused shame in me. I have internalized rage and contempt, one part of the self (the accusatory, persecutory, judgmental) using defense strategies against another part of the self (the object of contempt). As a person, I, as a people, we, Chicanos, blame ourselves, hate ourselves, terrorize ourselves. Most of this goes on unconsciously; we only know that we are hurting, we suspect that there is something "wrong" with us, something fundamentally "wrong."

In order to escape the threat of shame or fear, one takes on a compulsive, repetitious activity as though to busy oneself, to distract oneself, to keep awareness at bay. One fixates on drinking, smoking, popping pills, acquiring friend after friend who betrays; repeating, repeating, to prevent oneself from "seeing."

Held in thrill by one's obsession, by the god or goddess symbolizing that addiction, one is not empty enough to become possessed by anything or anyone else. One's attention cannot be captured by something else, one does not "see" and awareness does not happen. One remains ignorant of the fact that one is afraid, and that it is fear that holds one petrified, frozen in stone. If we can't see the face of fear in the mirror, then fear must not be there. The feeling is censored and erased before it registers in our consciousness.
An addiction (a repetitious act) is a ritual to help one through a trying time; its repetition safeguards the passage, it becomes one’s talisman, one’s touchstone. If it sticks around after having outlived its usefulness, we become “stuck” in it and it takes possession of us. But we need to be arrested. Some past experience or condition has created this need. This stopping is a survival mechanism, but one which must vanish when it’s no longer needed if growth is to occur.

We need Coatlicue to slow us up so that the psyche can assimilate previous experiences and process the changes. If we don’t take the time, she’ll lay us low with an illness, forcing us to “rest.” Come, little green snake. Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. The soul uses everything to further its own making. Those activities or Coatlicue states which disrupt the smooth flow (complacency) of life are exactly what propel the soul to do its work: make soul, increase consciousness of itself. Our greatest disappointments and painful experiences—if we can make meaning out of them—can lead us toward becoming more of who we are. Or they can remain meaningless. The Coatlicue state can be a way station or it can be a way of life.

The Coatlicue State

Coatlicue da luz a todo y a todo devora. Ella es el monstruo que se tragó todos los seres vivientes y los astros, es el monstruo que se traga al sol cada tarde y le da luz cada mañana. Coatlicue is a rupture in our everyday world. As the Earth, she opens and swallows us, plunging us into the underworld where the soul resides, allowing us to dwell in darkness.

Coatlicue6 is one of the powerful images, or “archetypes,”7 that inhabits, or passes through, my psyche. For me, la Coatlicue is the consuming internal whirlwind,7 the symbol of the underground aspects of the psyche. Coatlicue is the mountain, the Earth Mother who conceived all celestial beings out of her cavernous womb.8 Goddess of birth and death, Coatlicue gives and takes away life; she is the incarnation of cosmic processes.

Simultaneously, depending on the person, she represents: duality in life, a synthesis of duality, and a third perspective—something more than mere duality or a synthesis of duality.

I first saw the statue9 of this life-in-death and death-in-life, headless “monster” goddess (as the Village Voice dubbed her) at the Museum of Natural History in New York City. She has no head. In its place two spurts of blood gush up, transfiguring into enormous twin rattlesnakes facing each other, which symbolize the earth-bound character of human life. She has no hands. In their place are two more serpents in the form of eagle-like claws, which are repeated at her feet: claws which symbolize the digging of graves into the earth as well as the sky-bound eagle, the masculine force. Hanging from her neck is a necklace of open hands alternating with human hearts. The hands symbolize the act of giving life; the hearts, the pain of Mother Earth giving birth to all her children, as well as the pain that humans suffer throughout life in their hard struggle for existence. The hearts also represent the taking of life through sacrifice to the gods in exchange for their preservation of the world. In the center of the collar hangs a human skull with living eyes in its sockets. Another identical skull is attached to her belt. These symbolize life and death together as parts of one process.

Coatlicue depicts the contradictory. In her figure, all the symbols important to the religion and philosophy of the Aztecs are integrated. Like Medusa, the Gorgon, she is a symbol of the fusion of opposites: the eagle and the serpent, heaven and the underworld, life and death, mobility and immobility, beauty and horror.

When pain, suffering and the advent of death become intolerable, there is Tlazolteotl hovering at the crossroads of life to lure a person away from his or her seemingly appointed destination and we are held embrujadas, kept from our destiny, our soul arrested. We are not living up to our potentialities and thereby impeding the evolution of the soul—or worse, Coatlicue, the Earth, opens and plunges us into its maw, devours us. By keeping the conscious mind occupied or immobile, the germination work takes place in the deep, dark earth of the unconscious.

Frozen in stasis, she perceives a slight movement—a thousand slithering serpent hairs, Coatlicue. It is activity (not immobility) at its most dynamic stage, but it is an underground movement requiring all her energy. It brooks no interference from the conscious mind.
The Coaticue State Is A Prelude To Crossing

Voy cagándome de miedo, buscando lugares acuevados. I don't want to know, I don't want to be seen. My resistance, my refusal to know some truth about myself brings on that paralysis, depression—brings on the Coaticue state. At first I feel exposed and opened to the depth of my dissatisfaction. Then I feel myself closing, hiding, holding myself together rather than allowing myself to fall apart.

Sweating, with a headache, unwilling to communicate, frightened by sudden noises, estoy asustada. In the Mexican culture it is called susto, the soul frightened out of the body. The afflicted one is allowed to rest and recuperate, to withdraw into the "underworld" without drawing condemnation.

I descend into miktlán, the underworld. In the "place of the dead" I wallow, sinking deeper and deeper. When I reach bottom, something forces me to push up, walk toward the mirror, confront the face in the mirror. But I dig in my heels and resist. I don't want to see what's behind Coaticue's eyes, her hollow sockets. I can't confront her face to face; I must take small sips of her face through the corners of my eyes, chip away at the ice a sliver at a time.

Behind the ice mask I see my own eyes. They will not look at me. Miro que estoy encabronada, miro la resistencia—resistance to knowing, to letting go, to that deep ocean where once I dived into death. I am afraid of drowning. Resistance to sex, intimate touching, opening myself to the alien other where I am out of control, not on patrol. The outcome on the other side unknown, the reins falling and the horses plunging blindly over the crumbling path rimming the edge of the cliff, plunging into its thousand foot drop.

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a travestia, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape "knowing," I won't be moving. Knowledge makes me more aware, it makes me more conscious. "Knowing" is painful because after "it" happens I can't stay in the same place and be comfortable. I am no longer the same person I was before.

No, it isn't enough that she is female—a second-class member of a conquered people who are taught to believe they are inferior because they have indigenous blood, believe in the supernatural and speak a deficient language. Now she beats herself over the head for her "inactivity," a stage that is as necessary as breathing. But that means being Mexican. All her life she's been told that Mexicans are lazy. She has had to work twice as hard as others to meet the standards of the dominant culture which have, in part, become her standards.

Why does she have to go and try to make "sense" of it all? Every time she makes "sense" of something, she has to "cross over," kicking a hole out of the old boundaries of the self and slipping under or over, dragging the old skin along, stumbling over it. It hampers her movement in the new territory, dragging the ghost of the past with her. It is a dry birth, a breech birth, a screaming birth, one that fights her every inch of the way. It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch, another rattle appears on the rattlesnake tail and the added growth slightly alters the sounds she makes. Suddenly the repressed energy rises, makes decisions, connects with conscious energy and a new life begins. It is her reluctance to cross over, to make a hole in the fence and walk across, to cross the river, to take that flying leap into the dark, that drives her to escape, that forces her into the fecund cave of her imagination where she is cradled in the arms of Coaticue, who will never let her go. If she doesn't change her ways, she will remain a stone forever. No hay más que cambiar.

The one who watches, Darkness, my night. There is darkness and there is darkness. Though darkness was "present" before the world and all things were created, it is equated with matter, the maternal, the germinal, the potential. The dualism of light/darkness did not arise as a symbolic formula for morality until primordial darkness had been split into light and dark. Now Darkness, my night, is identified with the negative, base and evil forces—the masculine order casting its dual shadow—and all these are identified with darkskinned people.

In attending to this first darkness I am led back to the mystery of the Origin. The one who watches, the one who whispers in a slither of serpents. Something is trying to tell me.
That voice at the edge of things. But I know what I want and I stamp ahead, arrogance edging my face. I tremble before the animal, the alien, the sub- or suprahuman, the me that has something in common with the wind and the trees and the rocks, that possesses a demon determination and ruthlessness beyond the human.

That Which Abides

En esta tarde gris me siento entre dos aguas, el calor de mi casa y el frío de afuera. Los dos armarian por el cuadro de vidrio de la ventana. I can sense the premonition of cold in the way the wind stirs the leaves in the trees, in the gray slate square of sky that frames my window. Winter's coming.

I sit between warmth and cold never knowing which is my territory, domesticated as I am by human warmth and the peck peck of my keyboard. Having lived my whole life in an ignorant shadow, under the sight of hunger shuffling its little child feet, whimpering, lost. Pain is the way of life. Now I sense a warm breath on my face, see the shadow of a giant bird, her huge wings folding over me. Ella.

I spent the first half of my life learning to rule myself, to grow a will, and now at midlife I find that autonomy is a boulder on my path that I keep crashing into. I can't seem to stay out of my own way. I've always been aware that there is a greater power than the conscious I. That power is my inner self, the entity that is the sum total of all my reincarnations, the godwoman in me I call Antigua, mi Diosa, the divine within, Coati-Cihuateotl-Tlanoltoc-Tonantzin-Coatlalopeuh-Guadalupe—they are one. When to bow down to Her and when to allow the limited conscious mind to take over—that is the problem.

Let the wound caused by the serpent be cured by the serpent. For a few minutes, Antigua, mi Diosa, I'm going to give up my control to you. I'm going to pull it out. I plunge my hands into my solar plexus, pull. Plop. Out comes the handle with a dial face, dripping blood, unblinking eyes, watching. Eagle eyes, my mother calls me. Looking, always looking, only I don't have enough eyes. My sight is limited. Here, Antigua, take this lever-shaped handle with needles that measure the temperature, the air pressure, danger. You hold it for a while. Promise to give it back. Please, Antigua.

I'll take over now, she tells me. The alarm will go off if you're in danger. I imagine its shrill peel when danger walks around the corner, the insulating walls coming down around me.

Suddenly, I feel like I have another set of teeth in my mouth. A tremor goes through my body from my buttocks to the roof of my mouth. On my palate I feel a tingling ticklish sensation, then something seems to be falling on me, over me, a curtain of rain or light. Shock pulls my breath out of me. The sphincter muscle tugs itself up, up, and the heart in my cunt starts to beat. A light is all around me—so intense it could be white or black or at that juncture where extremes turn into their opposites. It passes through my body and comes out of the other side. I collapse into myself—a delicious caving into myself—imploding, the walls like matchsticks softly folding inward in slow motion.

I see oposición e insurrección. I see the crack growing on the rock. I see the fine frenzy building. I see the heat of anger or rebellion or hope split open that rock, releasing la Coati-Cue. And someone in me takes matters into our own hands, and eventually, takes dominion over serpents—over my own body, my sexual activity, my soul, my mind, my weaknesses and strengths. Mine. Ours. Not the heterosexual white man's or the colored man's or the state's or the culture's or the religion's or the parents'—just ours, mine.

And suddenly I feel everything rushing to a center, a nucleus. All the lost pieces of myself come flying from the deserts and the mountains and the valleys, magnetized toward that center. Completa.

Something pulsates in my body, a luminous thin thing that grows thicker every day. Its presence never leaves me. I am never alone. That which abides: my vigilance, my thousand sleepless serpentine eyes blinking in the night, forever open. And I am not afraid.
How to Tame a Wild Tongue

"We're going to have to control your tongue," the dentist says, pulling out all the metal from my mouth. Silver bits plop and tinkle into the basin. My mouth is a motherlode.

The dentist is cleaning out my roots. I get a whiff of the stench when I gasp. "I can't cap that tooth yet, you're still draining," he says.

"We're going to have to do something about your tongue," I hear the anger rising in his voice. My tongue keeps pushing out the wads of cotton, pushing back the drills, the long thin needles. "I've never seen anything as strong or as stubborn," he says. And I think, how do you tame a wild tongue, train it to be quiet, how do you bridle and saddle it? How do you make it lie down?

"Who is to say that robbing a people of its language is less violent than war?"
—Ray Gwyn Smith

I remember being caught speaking Spanish at recess—that was good for three licks on the knuckles with a sharp ruler. I remember being sent to the corner of the classroom for "talking back" to the Anglo teacher when all I was trying to do was tell her how to pronounce my name. If you want to be American, speak 'American.' If you don't like it, go back to Mexico where you belong."

"I want you to speak English. Pa' hallar buen trabajo tienes que saber hablar el inglés bien. Qué vale toda tu educación si
Overcoming the Tradition of Silence

**Abogadas, escupimos el oscuro.**

Peleando con nuestra propia sombra
el silencio nos sepulta.

_Enboca cerrada no entran moscas._ "Flies don't enter a closed mouth" is a saying I kept hearing when I was a child. _Ser habladora_ was to be a gossip and a liar, to talk too much. _Muchachitas bien criadas_, well-bred girls don't answer back. _Es una falta de respeto_ to talk back to one's mother or father. I remember one of the sins I'd recite to the priest in the confession box the few times I went to confession: talking back to my mother, _hablar pa' trás, repelar_. Hocicona, repelona, chismosa, having a big mouth, questioning, carrying tales are all signs of being _mal criada_. In my culture they are all words that are derogatory if applied to women—I've never heard them applied to men.

The first time I heard two women, a Puerto Rican and a Cuban, say the word "_nosotras,_" I was shocked. I had not known the word existed. Chicanas use _nosotros_ whether we're male or female. We are robbed of our female being by the masculine plural. Language is a male discourse.

And our tongues have become
dry the wilderness has
dried out our tongues and we have forgotten speech.
—_Irena Klepfisz_

Even our own people, other Spanish speakers _nos quieren poner candados en la boca_. They would hold us back with their bag of _reglas de academia._

**Oyé como ladra: el lenguaje de la frontera**

_Quien tiene boca se equivoca._

—Mexican saying

_“Pocho, cultural traitor, you’re speaking the oppressor’s language by speaking English, you’re ruining the Spanish language.”_ I have been accused by various Latinos and Latinas. Chicano Spanish is considered by the purist and by most Latinos deficient, a mutilation of Spanish.

But Chicano Spanish is a border tongue which developed naturally. Change, _evolución, enriquecimiento de palabras nuevas por invención o adopción_ have created variants of Chicano Spanish, _un nuevo lenguaje_. _Un lenguaje que corresponde a un modo de vivir._ Chicano Spanish is not incorrect, it is a living language.

For a people who are neither Spanish nor live in a country in which Spanish is the first language; for a people who live in a country in which English is the reigning tongue but who are not Anglo; for a people who cannot entirely identify with either standard (formal, Castillian) Spanish nor standard English, what recourse is left to them but to create their own language? A language which they can connect their identity to, one capable of communicating the realities and values true to themselves—a language with terms that are neither _español ni inglés_, but both. We speak a patois, a forked tongue, a variation of two languages.

Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos’ need to identify ourselves as a distinct people. We needed a language with which we could communicate with ourselves, a secret language. For some of us, language is a homeland closer than the Southwest—for many Chicanos today live in the Midwest and the East. And because we are a complex, heterogeneous people, we speak many languages. Some of the languages we speak are:

1. Standard English
2. Working class and slang English
3. Standard Spanish
4. Standard Mexican Spanish
5. North Mexican Spanish dialect
6. Chicano Spanish (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona and California have regional variations)
7. Tex-Mex
8. _Pachuco_ (called _caló_)

_todavía hablas inglés con un 'accent,”’ my mother would say, mortified that I spoke English like a Mexican. At Pan American University, I, and all Chicano students were required to take two speech classes. Their purpose: to get rid of our accents.

Attacks on one's form of expression with the intent to censor are a violation of the First Amendment. _El Anglo con cara de inocente nos arrancó la lengua._ Wild tongues can’t be tamed, they can only be cut out.
How to Tame a Wild Tongue

My "home" tongues are the languages I speak with my sister and brothers, with my friends. They are the last five listed, with 6 and 7 being closest to my heart. From school, the media and job situations, I've picked up standard and working class English. From Mamagrande Locha and from reading Spanish and Mexican literature, I've picked up Standard Spanish and Standard Mexican Spanish. From los recién llegados, Mexican immigrants, and braceros, I learned the North Mexican dialect. With Mexicans I'll try to speak either Standard Mexican Spanish or the North Mexican dialect. From my parents and Chicanoos living in the Valley, I picked up Chicano Texas Spanish, and I speak it with my mom, younger brother (who married a Mexican and who rarely mixes Spanish with English), aunts and older relatives.

With Chicanas from Nuevo México or Arizona I will speak Chicano Spanish a little, but often they don't understand what I'm saying. With most California Chicanas I speak entirely in English (unless I forget). When I first moved to San Francisco, I'd rattle off something in Spanish, unintentionally embarrassing them. Often it is only with another Chicana tejana that I can talk freely.

Words distorted by English are known as anglicisms or pochismos. The pocho is an anglicized Mexican or American of Mexican origin who speaks Spanish with an accent characteristic of North Americans and who distorts and reconstructs the language according to the influence of English.3 Tex-Mex, or Spanglish, comes most naturally to me. I may switch back and forth from English to Spanish in the same sentence or in the same word. With my sister and my brother Nune and with Chicano tejano contemporaries I speak in Tex-Mex.

From kids and people my own age I picked up Pachuco. Pachucos (the language of the zoot suiters) is a language of rebellion, both against Standard Spanish and Standard English. It is a secret language. Adults of the culture and outsiders cannot understand it. It is made up of slang words from both English and Spanish. Rueca means girl or woman, vato means guy or dude, chale means no, simón means yes, churro is sure, talk is periquiar, pigionear means petting, que gacho means how nerdy, ponte águila means watch out, death is called la pelona. Through lack of practice and not having others who can speak it, I've lost most of the Pachuco tongue.

Chicano Spanish

Chicanos, after 250 years of Spanish/Anglo colonization have developed significant differences in the Spanish we speak. We collapse two adjacent vowels into a single syllable and sometimes shift the stress in certain words such as maiz/maiz, cohece/ coete. We leave out certain consonants when they appear between vowels: lado/lao, mojado/mojo. Chicanos from South Texas pronounce fas j as in jue (fue). Chicanos use "archaism" words that are no longer in the Spanish language, words that have been evolved out. We say semos, truje, baiga, ansina, and naiden. We retain the "archaic" j, as in jalar, that derives from an earlier b, (the French balar or the Germanic balon which was lost to standard Spanish in the 16th century), but which is still found in several regional dialects such as the one spoken in South Texas. (Due to geography, Chicanos from the Valley of South Texas were cut off linguistically from other Spanish speakers. We tend to use words that the Spaniards brought over from Medieval Spain. The majority of the Spanish colonizers in Mexico and the Southwest came from Extremadura—Hernán Cortés was one of them—and Andalucia. Andalucianos pronounce ll like a y, and their d's tend to be absorbed by adjacent vowels: tirado becomes tira. They brought el lenguaje popular, dialectos y regionalismos.4)

Chicanos and other Spanish speakers also shift ll to y and z to s.5 We leave out initial syllables, saying tar for estar, toy for estoy, hora for ahora (cubanos and puertorriqueños also leave out initial letters of some words.) We also leave out the final syllable such as pa for para. The intervocalic y, the ll as in tortilla, ella, botella, gets replaced by torta or torti, ea, botea. We add an additional syllable at the beginning of certain words: atocar for tocar, agastar for gastar. Sometimes we'll say lavaste las vacijas, other times lavaste las vaciás (substituting the ater verb endings for the aste).

We use aneglicisms, words borrowed from English: bola from ball, carpeta from carpet, máquina de lavar (instead of lavadora) from washing machine. Tex-Mex argot, created by adding a Spanish sound at the beginning or end of an English word such as cookiar for cook, watchbar for watch, parkiar for park, and rapiar for rape, is the result of the pressures on Spanish speakers to adapt to English.

We don't use the word vosotros/as or its accompanying verb form. We don't say claro (to mean yes), imagine, or me
emociona, unless we picked up Spanish from Latinas, out of a book, or in a classroom. Other Spanish-speaking groups are going through the same, or similar, development in their Spanish.

Linguistic Terrorism

Deslenguadas. Somos los del español deficiente. We are your linguistic nightmare, your linguistic aberration, your linguistic mestisaje, the subject of your burla. Because we speak with tongues of fire we are culturally crucified. Racially, culturally and linguistically somos huérfanos—we speak an orphan tongue.

Chicanas who grew up speaking Chicano Spanish have internalized the belief that we speak poor Spanish. It is illegitimate, a bastard language. And because we internalize how our language has been used against us by the dominant culture, we use our language differences against each other.

Chicana feminists often skirt around each other with suspicion and hesitation. For the longest time I couldn’t figure it out. Then it dawned on me. To be close to another Chicana is like looking into the mirror. We are afraid of what we’ll see there.

Pena. Shame. Low estimation of self. In childhood we are told that our language is wrong. Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives.

Chicanas feel uncomfortable talking in Spanish to Latinas, afraid of their censure. Their language was not outlawed in their countries. They had a whole lifetime of being immersed in their native tongue; generations, centuries in which Spanish was a first language, taught in school, heard on radio and TV, and read in the newspaper.

If a person, Chicana or Latina, has a low estimation of my native tongue, she also has a low estimation of me. Often with mexicanas y latinas we’ll speak English as a neutral language. Even among Chicanas we tend to speak English at parties or conferences. Yet, at the same time, we’re afraid the other will think we’re atringadoras because we don’t speak Chicano Spanish. We oppress each other trying to out-Chicano each other, vying to be the “real” Chicanas, to speak like Chicanos. There is no one Chicano language just as there is no one Chicano experience. A monolingual Chicana whose first language is English or Spanish is just as much a Chicana as one who speaks several variants of Spanish. A Chicana from Michigan or Chicago or Detroit is just as much a Chicana as one from the Southwest. Chicano Spanish is as diverse linguistically as it is regionally.

By the end of this century, Spanish speakers will comprise the biggest minority group in the U.S., a country where students in high schools and colleges are encouraged to take French classes because French is considered more “cultured.” But for a language to remain alive it must be used.8 By the end of this century English, and not Spanish, will be the mother tongue of most Chicanos and Latinos.

So, if you want to really hurt me, talk badly about my language. Ethnic identity is twin skin to linguistic identity—I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself. Until I can accept as legitimate Chicano Texas Spanish, Tex-Mex and all the other languages I speak, I cannot accept the legitimacy of myself. Until I am free to write bilingually and to switch codes without having always to translate, while I still have to speak English or Spanish when I would rather speak Spanglish, and as long as I have to accommodate the English speakers rather than having them accommodate me, my tongue will be illegitimate.

I will no longer be made to feel ashamed of existing. I will have my voice: Indian, Spanish, white. I will have my serpent’s tongue—my woman’s voice, my sexual voice, my poet’s voice. I will overcome the tradition of silence.

My fingers
move sly against your palm
Like women everywhere, we speak in code . . .
—Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz

"Vistas," corridos, y comida: My Native Tongue

In the 1960s, I read my first Chicano novel. It was City of Night by John Rechy, a gay Texan, son of a Scottish father and a Mexican mother. For days I walked around in stunned amazement that a Chicano could write and could get published. When I read I Am Joaquin8 I was surprised to see a bilingual book by a Chicano in print. When I saw poetry written in Tex-Mex for the
first time, a feeling of pure joy flashed through me. I felt like we really existed as a people. In 1971, when I started teaching High School English to Chicano students, I tried to supplement the required texts with works by Chicanos, only to be reprimanded and forbidden to do so by the principal. He claimed that I was supposed to teach "American" and English literature. At the risk of being fired, I swore my students to secrecy and slipped in Chicano short stories, poems, a play. In graduate school, while working toward a Ph.D., I had to "argue" with one advisor after the other, semester after semester, before I was allowed to make Chicano literature an area of focus.

Even before I read books by Chicanos or Mexicans, it was the Mexican movies I saw at the drive-in—the Thursday night special of $1.00 a carload—that gave me a sense of belonging. "Vámonos a las vistas," my mother would call out and we'd all—grandmother, brothers, sister and cousins—squeeze into the car. We'd wolf down cheese and bologna white bread sandwiches while watching Pedro Infante in melodramatic tear-jerkers like Nosotros los pobres, the first "real" Mexican movie (that was not an imitation of European movies). I remember seeing Cuando los hijos se van and surmising that all Mexican movies played up the love a mother has for her children and what ungrateful sons and daughters suffer when they are not devoted to their mothers. I remember the singing-type "westerns" of Jorge Negrete and Miquel Aceves Mejia. When watching Mexican movies, I felt a sense of homecoming as well as alienation. People who were to amount to something didn't go to Mexican movies, or bailes or tune their radios to bolero, rancherita, and corrido music.

The whole time I was growing up, there was norteño music sometimes called North Mexican border music, or Tex-Mex music, or Chicano music, or cantina (bar) music. I grew up listening to conjuntos, three- or four-piece bands made up of folk musicians playing guitar, bajo sexta, drums and button accordion, which Chicanos had borrowed from the German immigrants who had come to Central Texas and Mexico to farm and build breweries. In the Rio Grande Valley, Steve Jordan and Little Joe Hernández were popular, and Flaco Jiménez was the accordion king. The rhythms of Tex-Mex music are those of the polka, also adapted from the Germans, who in turn had borrowed the polka from the Czechs and Bohemians.

I remember the hot, sultry evenings when corridos—songs of love and death on the Texas-Mexican borderlands—reverberated out of cheap amplifiers from the local cantinas and wafted in through my bedroom window.

Corridos first became widely used along the South Texas/Mexican border during the early conflict between Chicanos and Anglos. The corridos are usually about Mexican heroes who do valiant deeds against the Anglo oppressors. Pancho Villa's song, "La cucaracha," is the most famous one. Corridos of John F. Kennedy and his death are still very popular in the Valley. Older Chicanos remember Lydia Mendoza, one of the great border corrido singers who was called la Gloria de Tejas. Her "El tango negro," sung during the Great Depression, made her a singer of the people. The everpresent corridos narrated one hundred years of border history, bringing news of events as well as entertaining. These folk musicians and folk songs are our chief cultural myth-makers, and they made our hard lives seem bearable.

I grew up feeling ambivalent about our music. Country-western and rock-and-roll had more status. In the 50s and 60s, for the slightly educated and agringado Chicanos, there existed a sense of shame at being caught listening to our music. Yet I couldn't stop my feet from thumping to the music, could not stop humming the words, nor hide from myself the exhilaration I felt when I heard it.

There are more subtle ways that we internalize identification, especially in the forms of images and emotions. For me food and certain smells are tied to my identity, to my homeland. Woodsmoke curling up to an immense blue sky; woodsmoke perfuming my grandmother's clothes, her skin. The stench of cow manure and the yellow patches on the ground; the crack of a .22 rifle and the reek of cordite. Homemade white cheese sizzling in a pan, melting inside a folded tortilla. My sister Hilda's hot, spicy menudo, chile colorado making it deep red, pieces of panza and hominy floating on top. My brother Carito barbequing fajitas in the backyard. Even now and 3,000 miles away, I can see my mother spicing the ground beef, pork and venison with chile. My mouth salivates at the thought of the hot steaming tamales I would be eating if I were home.
Si le preguntas a mi mamá, "¿Qué eres?"

"Identity is the essential core of who we are as individuals, the conscious experience of the self inside."
—Kaufman

Nosotros los Chicanos straddle the borderlands. On one side of us, we are constantly exposed to the Spanish of the Mexicans, on the other side we hear the Anglos' incessant clamoring so that we forget our language. Among ourselves we don't say nosotros los americanos, o nosotros los españoles, o nosotros los hispanos. We say nosotros los mexicanos (by mexicanos we do not mean citizens of Mexico; we do not mean a national identity, but a racial one). We distinguish between mexicanos del otro lado and mexicanos de este lado. Deep in our hearts we believe that being Mexican has nothing to do with which country one lives in. Being Mexican is a state of soul—not one of mind, not one of citizenship. Neither eagle nor serpent, but both. And like the ocean, neither animal respects borders.

Dime con quien andas y te diré quien eres.
(Tell me who your friends are and I'll tell you who you are.)
—Mexican saying

Si le preguntas a mi mamá, "¿Qué eres?" te dirá, "Soy mexicana." My brothers and sister say the same. I sometimes will answer "soy mexicana" and at others will say "soy Chicana" o "soy tejana." But I identified as "Raza" before I ever identified as "mexicana" or "Chicana."

As a culture, we call ourselves Spanish when referring to ourselves as a linguistic group and when coping out. It is then that we forget our predominant Indian genes. We are 70-80% Indian.10 We call ourselves Hispanic11 or Spanish-American or Latin American or Latin when linking ourselves to other Spanish-speaking peoples of the Western hemisphere and when coping out. We call ourselves Mexican-American12 to signify we are neither Mexican nor American, but more the noun "American" than the adjective "Mexican" (and when coping out).

Chicanos and other people of color suffer economically for not acculturating. This voluntary (yet forced) alienation makes for psychological conflict, a kind of dual identity—we don't identify with the Anglo-American cultural values and we don't totally identify with the Mexican cultural values. We are a synergy of two cultures with various degrees of Mexicanness or Angloness. I have so internalized the borderland conflict that sometimes I feel like one cancels out the other and we are zero, nothing, no one. A veces no soy nada ni nadie. Pero hasta cuando no lo soy, lo soy.

When not coping out, when we know we are more than nothing, we call ourselves Mexican, referring to race and ancestry; mestizo when affirming both our Indian and Spanish (but we hardly ever own our Black ancestry); Chicano when referring to a politically aware people born and/or raised in the U.S.; Raza when referring to Chicanos; tejanos when we are Chicanos from Texas.

Chicanos did not know we were a people until 1965 when Ceasar Chavez and the farmworkers united and I Am Joaquin was published and la Raza Unida party was formed in Texas. With that recognition, we became a distinct people. Something momentous happened to the Chicano soul—we became aware of our reality and acquired a name and a language (Chicano Spanish) that reflected that reality. Now that we had a name, some of the fragmented pieces began to fall together—who we were, what we were, how we had evolved. We began to get glimpses of what we might eventually become.

Yet the struggle of identities continues, the struggle of borders is our reality still. One day the inner struggle will cease and a true integration take place. In the meantime, tenemos que hacer la lucha. ¿Quién está protegiendo los ranchos de mi gente? ¿Quién está tratando de cerrar la fisura entre la índia y el blanco en nuestra sangre? El Chicano, si, el Chicano que anda como un ladrón en su propia casa.

Los Chicanos, how patient we seem, how very patient. There is the quiet of the Indian about us.13 We know how to survive. When other races have given up their tongue, we've kept ours. We know what it is to live under the hammer blow of the dominant norteamericano culture. But more than we count the blows, we count the days the weeks the years the centuries the
eons until the white laws and commerce and customs will rot in the deserts they've created, lie bleached. *Humildes* yet proud, *quietos* yet wild, *nosotros los mexicanos-Chicanos* will walk by the crumbling ashes as we go about our business. Stubborn, persevering, impenetrable as stone, yet possessing a malleability that renders us unbreakable, we, the *mestizas* and *mestizos*, will remain.

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6

**Tlilli, Tlapalli**

The Path of the Red and Black Ink

"Out of poverty, poetry; out of suffering, song."
— a Mexican saying

When I was seven, eight, nine, fifteen, sixteen years old, I would read in bed with a flashlight under the covers, hiding my self-imposed insomnia from my mother. I preferred the world of the imagination to the death of sleep. My sister, Hilda, who slept in the same bed with me, would threaten to tell my mother unless I told her a story.

I was familiar with *cuentos*—my grandmother told stories like the one about her getting on top of the roof while down below rabid coyotes were ravaging the place and wanting to get at her. My father told stories about a phantom giant dog that appeared out of nowhere and sped along the side of the pickup no matter how fast he was driving.

Nudge a Mexican and she or he will break out with a story. So, huddling under the covers, I made up stories for my sister night after night. After a while she wanted two stories per night. I learned to give her installments, building up the suspense with convoluted complications until the story climaxed several nights later. It must have been then that I decided to put stories on paper. It must have been then that working with images and writing became connected to night.
Invoking Art

In the ethno-poetics and performance of the shaman, my people, the Indians, did not split the artistic from the functional, the sacred from the secular, art from everyday life. The religious, social and aesthetic purposes of art were all intertwined. Before the Conquest, poets gathered to play music, dance, sing and read poetry in open-air places around the Xochicuahuitl, el Árbol Florido, Tree-in-Flower. (The Coaxibuitl or morning glory is called the snake plant and its seeds, known as ololiuhqui, are hallucinogenic.) The ability of story (prose and poetry) to transform the storyteller and the listener into something or someone else is shamanistic. The writer, as shape-changer, is a nahual, a shaman.

In looking at this book that I'm almost finished writing, I see a mosaic pattern (Aztec-like) emerging, a weaving pattern, thin here, thick there. I see a preoccupation with the deep structure, the underlying structure, with the gesso underpainting that is red earth, black earth. I can see the deep structure, the scaffolding. If I can get the bone structure right, then putting flesh on it proceeds without too many hitches. The problem is that the bones often do not exist prior to the flesh, but are shaped after a vague and broad shadow of its form is discerned or uncovered during beginning, middle and final stages of the writing. Numerous overlays of paint, rough surfaces, smooth surfaces make me realize I am preoccupied with texture as well. Too, I see the barely contained color threatening to spill over the boundaries of the object it represents and into other "objects" and over the borders of the frame. I see a hybridization of metaphor, different species of ideas popping up here, popping up there, full of variations and seeming contradictions, though I believe in an ordered, structured universe where all phenomena are interrelated and imbued with spirit. This almost finished product seems an assemblage, a montage, a beaded work with several leitmotifs and with a central core, now appearing, now disappearing in a crazy dance. The whole thing has had a mind of its own, escaping me and insisting on putting together the pieces of its own puzzle with minimal direction from my will. It is a rebellious, willful entity, a precocious girl-child forced to grow up too quickly, rough, unyielding, with pieces of feather sticking out here and there, fur, twigs, clay. My child, but not for much longer. This female being is angry, sad, joyful, is Coatlicue, dove, horse, serpent, cactus. Though it is a flawed thing—a clumsy, complex, groping blind thing—for me it is alive, infused with spirit. I talk to it; it talks to me.

I make my offerings of incense and cracked corn, light my candle. In my head I sometimes will say a prayer—an affirmation and a voicing of intent. Then I run water, wash the dishes or my underthings, take a bath, or mop the kitchen floor. This "induction" period sometimes takes a few minutes, sometimes hours. But always I go against a resistance. Something in me does not want to do this writing. Yet once I'm immersed in it, I can go fifteen to seventeen hours in one sitting and I don't want to leave it.

My "stories" are acts encapsulated in time, "enacted" every time they are spoken aloud or read silently. I like to think of them as performances and not as inert and "dead" objects (as the aesthetics of Western culture think of art works). Instead, the work has an identity; it is a "who" or a "what" and contains the presences of persons, that is, incarnations of gods or ancestors or natural and cosmic powers. The work manifests the same needs as a person, it needs to be "fed," la tengo que bañar y vestir.

When invoked in rite, the object/event is "present;" that is, "enacted," it is both a physical thing and the power that infuses it. It is metaphysical in that it "spins its energies between gods and humans" and its task is to move the gods. This type of work dedicates itself to managing the universe and its energies. I'm not sure what it is when it is at rest (not in performance). It may or may not be a "work" then. A mask may only have the power of presence during a ritual dance and the rest of the time it may merely be a "thing." Some works exist forever invoked, always in performance. I'm thinking of totem poles, cave paintings. Invoked art is communal and speaks of everyday life. It is dedicated to the validation of humans; that is, it makes people hopeful, happy, secure, and it can have negative effects as well, which propel one towards a search for validation.2

The aesthetic of virtuosity, art typical of Western European cultures, attempts to manage the energies of its own internal system such as conflicts, harmonies, resolutions and balances. It
bears the presences of qualities and internal meanings. It is dedicated to the validation of itself. Its task is to move humans by means of achieving mastery in content, technique, feeling. Western art is always whole and always "in power." It is individual (not communal). It is "psychological" in that it spins its energies between itself and its witness.  

Western cultures behave differently toward works of art than do tribal cultures. The "sacrifices" Western cultures make are in housing their art works in the best structures designed by the best architects; and in servicing them with insurance, guards to protect them, conservators to maintain them, specialists to mount and display them, and the educated and upper classes to "view" them. Tribal cultures keep art works in honored and sacred places in the home and elsewhere. They attend them by making sacrifices of blood (goat or chicken), libations of wine. They bathe, feed, and clothe them. The works are treated not just as objects, but also as persons. The "witness" is a participant in the enactment of the work in a ritual, and not a member of the privileged classes.  

Ethnocentrism is the tyranny of Western aesthetics. An Indian mask in an American museum is transposed into an alien aesthetic system where what is missing is the presence of power invoked through performance ritual. It has become a conquered thing, a dead "thing" separated from nature and, therefore, its power.  

Modern Western painters have "borrowed," copied, or otherwise extrapolated the art of tribal cultures and called it cubism, surrealism, symbolism. The music, the beat of the drum, the Blacks' jive talk. All taken over. Whites, along with a good number of our own people, have cut themselves off from their spiritual roots, and they take our spiritual art objects in an unconscious attempt to get them back. If they're going to do it, I'd like them to be aware of what they are doing and to go about doing it the right way. Let's all stop importing Greek myths and the Western Cartesian split point of view and root ourselves in the mythological soil and soul of this continent. White America has only attended to the body of the earth in order to exploit it, never to succor it or to be nurtured in it. Instead of surreptitiously ripping off the vital energy of people of color and putting it to commercial use, whites could allow themselves to share and exchange and learn from us in a respectful way. By taking up

curanderismo, Santeria, shamanism, Taoism, Zen and otherwise delving into the spiritual life and ceremonies of multi-colored people, Anglos would perhaps lose the white sterility they have in their kitchens, bathrooms, hospitals, mortuaries and missile bases. Though in the conscious mind, black and dark may be associated with death, evil and destruction, in the subconscious mind and in our dreams, white is associated with disease, death and hopelessness. Let us hope that the left hand, that of darkness, of femaleness, of "primitiveness," can divert the indifferent, right-handed, "rational" suicidal drive that, unchecked, could blow us into acid rain in a fraction of a millisecond.

Ni cuicani: I, the Singer

For the ancient Aztecs, tlalli, tlapalli, la tinta negra y roja de sus códices (the black and red ink painted on codices) were the colors symbolizing escritura y sabiduría (writing and wisdom). They believed that through metaphor and symbol, by means of poetry and truth, communication with the Divine could be attained, and topan (that which is above—the gods and spirit world) could be bridged with mictlán (that which is below—the underworld and the region of the dead).

Poet: she pours water from the mouth of the pump, lowers the handle then lifts it, lowers, lifts. Her hands begin to feel the pull from the entrails, the live animal resisting. A sigh rises up from the depths, the handle becomes a wild thing in her hands, the cold sweet water gushes out, splashing her face, the shock of nighttime filling the bucket.

An image is a bridge between evoked emotion and conscious knowledge; words are the cables that hold up the bridge. Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness.

The Shamanic State

When I create stories in my head, that is, allow the voices and scenes to be projected in the inner screen of my mind, I "trance." I used to think I was going crazy or that I was having hallucinations. But now I realize it is my job, my calling, to traffic
in images. Some of these film-like narratives I write down; most are lost, forgotten. When I don't write the images down for several days or weeks or months, I get physically ill. Because writing invokes images from my unconscious, and because some of the images are residues of trauma which I then have to reconstruct, I sometimes get sick when I do write. I can't stomach it, become nauseous, or burn with fever, worsen. But, in reconstructing the traumas behind the images, I make "sense" of them, and once they have "meaning" they are changed, transformed. It is then that writing heals me, brings me great joy.

To facilitate the "movies" with soundtracks, I need to be alone, or in a sensory-deprived state. I plug up my ears with wax, put on my black cloth eye-shades, lie horizontal and unmoving, in a state between sleeping and waking, mind and body locked into my fantasy. I am held prisoner by it. My body is experiencing events. In the beginning it is like being in a movie theater, as pure spectator. Gradually I become so engrossed with the activities, the conversations, that I become a participant in the drama. I have to struggle to "disengage" or escape from my "animated story," I have to get some sleep so I can write tomorrow. Yet I am gripped by a story which won't let me go. Outside the frame, I am film director, screenwriter, camera operator. Inside the frame, I am the actors—male and female—I am desert sand, mountain, I am dog, mosquito. I can sustain a four- to six-hour "movie." Once I am up, I can sustain several "shorts" of anywhere between five and thirty minutes. Usually these "narratives" are the offspring of stories acted out in my head during periods of sensory deprivation.

My "awakened dreams" are about shifts. Thought shifts, reality shifts, gender shifts: one person metamorphoses into another in a world where people fly through the air, heal from mortal wounds. I am playing with my Self, I am playing with the world's soul, I am the dialogue between my Self and el espíritu del mundo. I change myself, I change the world.

Sometimes I put the imagination to a more rare use. I choose words, images, and body sensations and animate them to impress them on my consciousness, thereby making changes in my belief system and reprogramming my consciousness. This involves looking my inner demons in the face, then deciding which I want in my psyche. Those I don't want, I starve; I feed them no words, no images, no feelings. I spend no time with them, share not my home with them. Neglected, they leave. This is harder to do than to merely generate "stories." I can only sustain this activity for a few minutes.

I write the myths in me, the myths I am, the myths I want to become. The word, the image and the feeling have a palatable energy, a kind of power. Con imagenes domo mi miedo, cruzo los abismos que tengo por dentro. Con palabras me hago piedra, pájaro, puente de serpientes arrastrando a ras del suelo todo lo que soy, todo lo que algún día seré.

Los que están mirando (leyendo),
los que cuentan (o refieren lo que leen).
Los que vuelven ruidosamente las hojas de los códices.
Los que tienen en su poder
la tinta negra y roja (la sabiduría)
y lo pintado,
ellor nos llevan, nos guían,
nos dicen el camino.6

Writing Is A Sensuous Act

Tallo mi cuerpo como si estuviera lavando un trapo. Toco las saladas venas de mis manos, mis chichis adormecidas como pájaros a la anochecer. Estoy encorvada sobre la cama. Las imágenes arremolinan alrededor de mi cama como morciélago, la sabana como que tuviere alas. El ruido de los trenes sufráneos en mi sentido como conchas. Parece que las paredes del cuarto se me arriman cada vez más cerquita.

Picking out images from my soul's eye, fishing for the right words to recreate the images. Words are blades of grass pushing past the obstacles, sprouting on the page; the spirit of the words moving in the body is as concrete as flesh and as palpable; the hunger to create is as substantial as fingers and hand.

I look at my fingers, see plumes growing there. From the fingers, my feathers, black and red ink drips across the page. Escribe con la tinta de mi sangre. I write in red Ink. Intimately knowing the smooth touch of paper, its speechlessness before I spill myself on the insides of trees. Daily, I battle the silence and
the red. Daily, I take my throat in my hands and squeeze until the
cries pour out, my larynx and soul sore from the constant
struggle.

Something To Do With the Dark

Quién canta, sus males espanta.
—un dicho

The toad comes out of its hiding place inside the lobes of my
brain. It's going to happen again. The ghost of the toad—that
betrayed me—I hold it in my hand. The toad is sipping
the strength from my veins, it is sucking my pale heart. I am a dried
serpent skin, wind scuttling me across the hard ground, pieces of
me scattered over the countryside. And there in the dark I meet
the crippled spider crawling in the gutter, the day-old newspaper
fluttering in the dirty rain water.

Musa bruja, venga. Cubrese con una sábana y espante mis demonios que a rempujones y a cachetadas me roban la pluma me rompen el sueño. Musa, ¡misericordia!

¡Oigame, musa bruja. ¿Porqué buye uste' en mi cara? Su grito me desarrolla de mi caracola, me sacude el alma. Vieja, Quitese de aquí con sus alas de navaja. Ya no me despedaze mi cara. Vaya con sus pinche uñas que me desgarran de los ojos hasta los talones. Váyese a la tiznada. Que no me coman, le digo. Que no me coman sus nueve dedos canibales.

Hija negra de la noche, carnal, ¿Porqué me sacas las tripas, porque cardas mis entrañas? Este hilvanando palabras con tripas me está matando. Jijia de la noche ¡vete a la chingada!

Writing produces anxiety. Looking inside myself and my
experience, looking at my conflicts, engenders anxiety in me.
Being a writer feels very much like being a Chicana, or being
queer—a lot of squirming, coming up against all sorts of walls.
Or its opposite: nothing defined or definite, a boundless, floating
state of limbo where I kick my heels, brood, percolate, hibernate
and wait for something to happen.

Living in a state of psychic unrest, in a Borderland, is what
makes poets write and artists create. It is like a cactus needle
embedded in the flesh. It worries itself deeper and deeper, and I
keep aggravating it by poking at it. When it begins to fester I
have to do something to put an end to the aggravation and to
figure out why I have it. I get deep down into the place where it's
rooted in my skin and pluck away at it, playing it like a musical
instrument—the fingers pressing, making the pain worse before
it can get better. Then out it comes. No more discomfort, no
more ambivalence. Until another needle pierces the skin. That's
what writing is for me, an endless cycle of making it worse,
making it better, but always making meaning out of the expe-
rience, whatever it may be.

My flowers shall not cease to live;
my songs shall never end:
I, a singer, intone them;
they become scattered, they are spread about.
—Cantares mexicanos

To write, to be a writer, I have to trust and believe in myself
as a speaker, as a voice for the images. I have to believe that I can
communicate with images and words and that I can do it well. A
lack of belief in my creative self is a lack of belief in my total self
and vice versa—I cannot separate my writing from any part of
my life. It is all one.

When I write it feels like I'm carving bone. It feels like I'm
creating my own face, my own heart—a Nahuatl concept. My
soul makes itself through the creative act. It is constantly remak-
ing and giving birth to itself through my body. It is this learning
to live with la Coatlque that transforms living in the Borderlands
from a nightmare into a numinous experience. It is always a
path/state to something else.

In Xóchilt in Cuicatl

She writes while other people
sleep. Something is trying to come out. She fights the words,
pushes them down, down, a woman with morning sickness in the
middle of the night. How much easier it would be to carry a baby
for nine months and then expel it permanently. These continu-
ous multiple pregnancies are going to kill her. She is the battlefield for the pitched fight between the inner image and the words trying to recreate it. La musa bruja has no manners. Doesn't she know, nights are for sleeping?

She is getting too close to the mouth of the abyss. She is teetering on the edge, trying to balance while she makes up her mind whether to jump in or to find a safer way down. That's why she makes herself sick—to postpone having to jump blindfolded into the abyss of her own being and there in the depths confront her face, the face underneath the mask.

To be a mouth—the cost is too high—her whole life enslaved to that devouring mouth. Todo pasaba por esa boca, el viento, el fuego, los mares y la Tierra. Her body, a crossroads, a fragile bridge, cannot support the tons of cargo passing through it. She wants to install 'stop' and 'go' signal lights, instigate a curfew, police Poetry. But something wants to come out.

Blocks (Coatlícue states) are related to my cultural identity. The painful periods of confusion that I suffer from are symptomatic of a larger creative process: cultural shifts. The stress of living with cultural ambiguity both compels me to write and blocks me. It isn't until I'm almost at the end of the blocked state that I remember and recognize it for what it is. As soon as this happens, the piercing light of awareness melts the block and I accept the deep and the darkness and I hear one of my voices saying, "I am tired of fighting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall. On this night of the hearing of faults, Tlazolteotl, diosa de la cara negra, let fall the cockroaches that live in my hair, the rats that nestle in my skull. Gouge out my lame eyes, rout my demon from its nocturnal cave. Set torch to the tiger that stalks me. Loosen the dead faces gnawing my cheekbones. I am tired of resisting. I surrender. I give up, let go, let the walls fall."

And in descending to the depths I realize that down is up, and I rise up from and into the deep. And once again I recognize that the internal tension of oppositions can propel (if it doesn't tear apart) the mestiza writer out of the metate where she is being ground with corn and water, eject her out as nabual, an agent of transformation, able to modify and shape primordial
energy and therefore able to change herself and others into turkey, coyote, tree, or human.

I sit here before my computer, Amiguita, my altar on top of the monitor with the Virgen de Coatlalopeuh candle and copal incense burning. My companion, a wooden serpent staff with feathers, is to my right while I ponder the ways metaphor and symbol concretize the spirit and etherealize the body. The Writing is my whole life, it is my obsession. This vampire which is my talent does not suffer other suitors.9 Daily I court it, offer my neck to its teeth. This is the sacrifice that the act of creation requires, a blood sacrifice. For only through the body, through the pulling of flesh, can the human soul be transformed. And for images, words, stories to have this transformative power, they must arise from the human body—flesh and bone—and from the Earth’s body—stone, sky, liquid, soil. This work, these images, piercing tongue or ear lobes with cactus needle, are my offerings, are my Aztecan blood sacrifices.
La conciencia de la mestiza

Towards a New Consciousness

Por la mujer de mi raza
hablaré el espíritu.

Jose Vasconcelos, Mexican philosopher, envisaged una raza mestiza, una mezcla de razas afines, una raza de color—la primera raza síntesis del globo. He called it a cosmic race, la raza cósmica, a fifth race embracing the four major races of the world. Opposite to the theory of the pure Aryan, and to the policy of racial purity that white America practices, his theory is one of inclusivity. At the confluence of two or more genetic streams, with chromosomes constantly “crossing over,” this mixture of races, rather than resulting in an inferior being, provides hybrid progeny, a mutable, more malleable species with a rich gene pool. From this racial, ideological, cultural and biological cross-pollination, an “alien” consciousness is presently in the making—a new mestiza consciousness, una conciencia de mujer. It is a consciousness of the Borderlands.

Una lucha de fronteras / A Struggle of Borders

Because I, a mestiza,
continually walk out of one culture
and into another,
because I am in all cultures at the same time,
alma entre dos mundos, tres, cuatro,
me zumba la cabeza con lo contradictorio.
Estoy norteada por todas las voces que me hablan simultáneamente.
The ambivalence from the clash of voices results in mental and emotional states of perplexity. Internal strife results in insecurity and indecisiveness. The mestiza’s dual or multiple personality is plagued by psychic restlessness.

In a constant state of mental neapantilism, an Aztec word meaning torn between ways, la mestiza is a product of the transfer of the cultural and spiritual values of one group to another. Being tricultural, monolingual, bilingual, or multilingual, speaking a patois, and in a state of perpetual transition, the mestiza faces the dilemma of the mixed breed: which collectivity does the daughter of a darkskinned mother listen to?

El choque de un alma atrapado entre el mundo del espíritu y el mundo de la técnica a veces la deja entallada. Cradled in one culture, sandwiched between two cultures, straddling all three cultures and their value systems, la mestiza undergoes a struggle of flesh, a struggle of borders, an inner war. Like all people, we perceive the version of reality that our culture communicates. Like others having or living in more than one culture, we get multiple, often opposing messages. The coming together of two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference causes un choque, a cultural collision.

Within us and within la cultura chicana, commonly held beliefs of the white culture attack commonly held beliefs of the Mexican culture, and both attack commonly held beliefs of the indigenous culture. Subconsciously, we see an attack on ourselves and our beliefs as a threat and we attempt to block with a counterstance.

But it is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence. The counterstance refutes the dominant culture’s views and beliefs, and, for this, it is proudly defiant. All reaction is limited by, and dependent on, what it is reacting against. Because the counterstance stems from a problem with authority—outer as well as inner—it’s a step towards liberation from cultural domination. But it is not a way of life. At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are on both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react.

A Tolerance For Ambiguity

These numerous possibilities leave la mestiza floundering in uncharted seas. In perceiving conflicting information and points of view, she is subjected to a swamping of her psychological borders. She has discovered that she can’t hold concepts or ideas in rigid boundaries. The borders and walls that are supposed to keep the undesirable ideas out are entrenched habits and patterns of behavior; these habits and patterns are the enemy within. Rigidity means death. Only by remaining flexible is she able to stretch the psyche horizontally and vertically. La mestiza constantly has to shift out of habitual formations; from convergent thinking, analytical reasoning that tends to use rationality to move toward a single goal (a Western mode), to divergent thinking,* characterized by movement away from set patterns and goals and toward a more whole perspective, one that includes rather than excludes.

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. She learns to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be Mexican from an Anglo point of view. She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode—nothing is thrust out, the good the bad and the ugly, nothing rejected, nothing abandoned. Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else.

She can be jarred out of ambivalence by an intense, and often painful, emotional event which inverts or resolves the ambivalence. I’m not sure exactly how. The work takes place underground—subconsciously. It is work that the soul performs. That focal point or fulcrum, that juncture where the mestiza stands, is where phenomena tend to collide. It is where the possibility of uniting all that is separate occurs. This assembly is not one where severed or separated pieces merely come together. Nor is it a balancing of opposing powers. In attempting to work out a synthesis, the self has added a third element which is
greater than the sum of its severed parts. That third element is a new consciousness—a mestiza consciousness—and though it is a source of intense pain, its energy comes from continual creative motion that keeps breaking down the unitary aspect of each new paradigm.

En unas pocas centurias, the future will belong to the mestiza. Because the future depends on the breaking down of paradigms, it depends on the straddling of two or more cultures. By creating a new mythos—that is, a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves, and the ways we behave—la mestiza creates a new consciousness.

The work of mestiza consciousness is to break down the subject-object duality that keeps her a prisoner and to show in the flesh and through the images in her work how duality is transcended. The answer to the problem between the white race and the colored, between males and females, lies in healing the split that originates in the very foundation of our lives, our culture, our languages, our thoughts. A massive uprooting of dualistic thinking in the individual and collective consciousness is the beginning of a long struggle, but one that could, in our best hopes, bring us to the end of rape, of violence, of war.

La encrucijada / The Crossroads

A chicken is being sacrificed
at a crossroads, a simple mound of earth
a mud shrine for Eshu,
Yoruba god of indeterminacy,
who blesses her choice of path.
She begins her journey.

Su cuerpo es una bocacalle. La mestiza has gone from being the sacrificial goat to becoming the officiating priestess at the crossroads.

As a mestiza I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-His-

panics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it, a new value system with images and symbols that connect us to each other and to the planet. Soy un amasamiento, I am an act of kneading, of uniting and joining that not only has produced both a creature of darkness and a creature of light, but also a creature that questions the definitions of light and dark and gives them new meanings.

We are the people who leap in the dark, we are the people on the knees of the gods. In our very flesh, (r)evolution works out the clash of cultures. It makes us crazy constantly, but if the center holds, we've made some kind of evolutionary step forward. Nuestra alma el trabajo, the opus, the great alchemical work; spiritual mestizaje, a "morphogenesis," an inevitable unfolding. We have become the quickening serpent movement.

Indigenous like corn, like corn, the mestiza is a product of crossbreeding, designed for preservation under a variety of conditions. Like an ear of corn—a female seed-bearing organ—the mestiza is tenacious, tightly wrapped in the husks of her culture. Like kernels she clings to the cob; with thick stalks and strong brace roots, she holds tight to the earth—she will survive the crossroads.

Lavando y remojando el maíz en agua de cal, despojando el pellejo. Moliendo, mixteando, amasando, haciendo tortillas de masa. She steeps the corn in lime, it swells, softens. With stone roller on metate, she grinds the corn, then grinds again. She kneads and moulds the dough, pats the round balls into tortillas.

We are the porous rock in the stone metate squatting on the ground.
We are the rolling pin, el maíz y agua, la masa harina. Somos el amasijo.
Somos lo molido en el metate.
We are the comal sizzling hot, the hot tortilla, the hungry mouth.
We are the coarse rock.
We are the grinding motion, the mixed potion, somos el molcajete.
We are the pestle, the comino, ajo, pimienta,
We are the *chile colorado*,
the green shoot that cracks the rock.
We will abide.

**El camino de la mestiza / The Mestiza Way**

Caught between the sudden contraction, the breath sucked in and the endless space, the brown woman stands still, looks at the sky. She decides to go down, digging her way along the roots of trees. Sifting through the bones, she shakes them to see if there is any marrow in them. Then, touching the dirt to her forehead, to her tongue, she takes a few bones, leaves the rest in their burial place.

She goes through her backpack, keeps her journal and address book, throws away the muni-bart metromaps. The coins are heavy and they go next, then the greenbacks flutter through the air. She keeps her knife, can opener and eyebrow pencil. She puts bones, pieces of bark, *hierbas*, eagle feather, snakeskin, tape recorder, the rattle and drum in her pack and she sets out to become the complete *mestiza*.

Her first step is to take inventory. Despojando, desgranando, quitando paja. Just what did she inherit from her ancestors? This weight on her back—which is the baggage from the Indian mother, which the baggage from the Spanish father, which the baggage from the Anglo?

*Pero es difícil* differentiating between *lo heredado, lo adquirido, lo impuesto*. She puts history through a sieve, winnows out the lies, looks at the forces that we as a race, as women, have been a part of. Luego bota lo que no vale, los desmierios, los desencuentros, el embruteamiento, Aguarda el juicio, hondo y enraizado, de la gente antigua. This step is a conscious rupture with all oppressive traditions of all cultures and religions. She communicates that rupture, documents the struggle. She reinterprets history and, using new symbols, she shapes new myths. She adopts new perspectives toward the darkskinned, women and queers. She strengthens her tolerance (and intolerance) for ambiguity. She is willing to share, to make herself vulnerable to foreign ways of seeing and thinking. She surrenders all notions of safety, of the familiar. Deconstruct, construct. She becomes a *moldeadora*, able to transform herself into a tree, a coyote, into another person. She learns to transform the small "I" into the total Self. *Se hace moldeadora de su alma. Según la concepción que tiene de sí misma, así será.*

Que no se nos olvide los hombres

"Tú no sirves pa' nada—
you're good for nothing.
Eres *pura vieja.*"

"You're nothing but a woman" means you are defective. Its opposite is to be *un macho*. The modern meaning of the word "machismo," as well as the concept, is actually an Anglo invention. For men like my father, being "macho" meant being strong enough to protect and support my mother and us, yet being able to show love. Today’s macho has doubts about his ability to feed and protect his family. His "machismo" is an adaptation to oppression and poverty and low self-esteem. It is the result of hierarchical male dominance. The Anglo, feeling inadequate and inferior and powerless, displaces or transfers these feelings to the Chicano by shaming him. In the Gringo world, the Chicano suffers from excessive humility and self-effacement, shame of self and self-deprecation. Around Latinos he suffers from a sense of language inadequacy and its accompanying discomfort; with Native Americans he suffers from a racial amnesia which ignores our common blood, and from guilt because the Spanish part of him took their land and oppressed them. He has an excessive compensatory hubris when around Mexicans from the other side. It overlays a deep sense of racial shame.

The loss of a sense of dignity and respect in the macho breeds a false machismo which leads him to put down women and even to brutalize them. Coexisting with his sexist behavior is a love for the mother which takes precedence over that of all others. Devoted son, macho pig. To wash down the shame of his acts, of his very being, and to handle the brute in the mirror, he takes to the bottle, the short, the needle, and the fist.

Though we "understand" the root causes of male hatred and fear, and the subsequent wounding of women, we do not excuse, we do not condone, and we will no longer put up with it. From
the men of our race, we demand the admission/acknowledgment/disclosure/testimony that they wound us, violate us, are afraid of us and of our power. We need them to say they will begin to eliminate their hurtful put-down ways. But more than the words, we demand acts. We say to them: We will develop equal power with you and those who have shamed us.

It is imperative that mestizas support each other in changing the sexist elements in the Mexican-Indian culture. As long as woman is put down, the Indian and the Black in all of us is put down. The struggle of the mestiza is above all a feminist one. As long as los hombres think they have to chingar mujeres and each other to be men, as long as men are taught that they are superior and therefore culturally favored over la mujer, as long as to be a vieja is a thing of derision, there can be no real healing of our psyches. We’re halfway there—we have such love of the Mother, the good mother. The first step is to unlearn the puta/virgen dichotomy and to see Coatlpopohu-Coatlicue in the Mother, Guadalupe.

Tenderness, a sign of vulnerability, is so feared that it is showered on women with verbal abuse and blows. Men, even more than women, are fettered to gender roles. Women at least have had the guts to break out of bondage. Only gay men have had the courage to expose themselves to the woman inside them and to challenge the current masculinity. I’ve encountered a few scattered and isolated gentle straight men, the beginnings of a new breed, but they are confused, and entangled with sexist behaviors that they have not been able to eradicate. We need a new masculinity and the new man needs a movement.

Lumping the males who deviate from the general norm with man, the oppressor, is a gross injustice. Asombra pensar que nos hemos quedado en ese pozo oscuro donde el mundo encierra a las lesbianas. Asombra pensar que hemos, como feministas y lesbianas, cerrado nuestros corazones a los hombres, a nuestros hermanos los jotos, desheredados y marginales como nosotros. Being the supreme crossers of cultures, homosexuals have strong bonds with the queer white, Black, Asian, Native American, Latino, and with the queer in Italy, Australia and the rest of the planet. We come from all colors, all classes, all races, all time periods. Our role is to link people with each other—the Blacks with Jews with Indians with Asians with whites with extraterrestrial.

trials. It is to transfer ideas and information from one culture to another. Colored homosexuals have more knowledge of other cultures; have always been at the forefront (although sometimes in the closet) of all liberation struggles in this country; have suffered more injustices and have survived them despite all odds. Chicanos need to acknowledge the political and artistic contributions of their queers. People, listen to what your jotería is saying.

The mestizo and the queer exist at this time and point on the evolutionary continuum for a purpose. We are a blending that proves that all blood is intricately woven together, and that we are spawned out of similar souls.

Somos una gente

Hay tantísimas fronteras que dividen a la gente, pero por cada frontera existe también un puente.

—Gina Valdés

Divided Loyalties. Many women and men of color do not want to have any dealings with white people. It takes too much time and energy to explain to the downwardly mobile, white middle-class women that it’s okay for us to want to own “possessions,” never having had any nice furniture on our dirt floors or “luxuries” like washing machines. Many feel that whites should help their own people rid themselves of race hatred and fear first. I, for one, choose to use some of my energy to serve as mediator. I think we need to allow whites to be our allies. Through our literature, art, corridos, and folktales we must share our history with them so when they set up committees to help Big Mountain Navajos or the Chicano farmworkers or los Nicaragüenses they won’t turn people away because of their racial fears and ignorances. They will come to see that they are not helping us but following our lead.

Individually, but also as a racial entity, we need to voice our needs. We need to say to white society: We need you to accept the fact that Chicanos are different, to acknowledge your rejection and negation of us. We need you to own the fact that you looked upon us as less than human, that you stole our lands, our personhood, our self-respect. We need you to make public restitution: to
say that, to compensate for your own sense of defectiveness, you
strive for power over us, you erase our history and our experience
because it makes you feel guilty—you’d rather forget your brutish
acts. To say you’ve split yourself from minority groups, that you
disown us, that your dual consciousness splits off parts of your-
self, transferring the “negative” parts onto us. (Where there is
persecution of minorities, there is shadow projection. Where
there is violence and war, there is repression of shadow.) To say
that you are afraid of us, that to put distance between us, you wear
the mask of contempt. Admit that Mexico is your double, that she
exists in the shadow of this country, that we are irrevocably tied
to her. Gringo, accept the doppelganger in your psyche. By
taking back your collective shadow the intracultural split will heal. And
finally, tell us what you need from us.

By Your True Faces We Will Know You

I am visible—see this Indian face—yet I am invisible. I both
blind them with my beak nose and am their blind spot. But I exist,
we exist. They’d like to think I have melted in the pot. But I
haven’t, we haven’t.

The dominant white culture is killing us slowly with its
ignorance. By taking away our self-determination, it has made us
weak and empty. As a people we have resisted and we have taken
expedient positions, but we have never been allowed to develop
unencumbered—we have never been allowed to be fully our-
selves. The whites in power want us people of color to barricade
ourselves behind our separate tribal walls so they can pick us off
one at a time with their hidden weapons; so they can whitewash
and distort history. Ignorance splits people, creates prejudices. A
misinformed people is a subjugated people.

Before the Chicano and the undocumented worker and the
Mexican from the other side can come together, before the
Chicano can have unity with Native Americans and other groups,
we need to know the history of their struggle and they need to
know ours. Our mothers, our sisters and brothers, the guys who
hang out on street corners, the children in the playgrounds, each
of us must know our Indian lineage, our afro-mestisaje, our
history of resistance.

To the immigrant *mexicano* and the recent arrivals we must
teach our history. The 80 million *mexicanos* and the Latinos
from Central and South America must know of our struggles.
Each one of us must know basic facts about Nicaragua, Chile and
the rest of Latin America. The Latinoist movement (Chicanos,
Puerto Ricans, Cubans and other Spanish-speaking people work-
ing together to combat racial discrimination in the market place)
is good but it is not enough. Other than a common culture we will
have nothing to hold us together. We need to meet on a broader
communal ground.

The struggle is inner: Chicano, *indio*, American Indian,
*mojado*, *mexicano*, immigrant Latino, Anglo in power, working
class Anglo, Black, Asian—our psyches resemble the border-
towns and are populated by the same people. The struggle has
always been inner, and is played out in the outer terrains. Aware-
ness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in
turn come before changes in society. Nothing happens in the
"real" world unless it first happens in the images in our heads.

*El día de la Chicana*

I will not be shamed again
Nor will I shame myself.

I am possessed by a vision: that we Chicanas and Chicanos
have taken back or uncovered our true faces, our dignity and
self-respect. It’s a validation vision.

Seeing the Chicana anew in light of her history. I seek an
exoneration, a seeing through the fictions of white supremacy, a
seeing of ourselves in our true guises and not as the false racial
personality that has been given to us and that we have given to
ourselves. I seek our woman’s face, our true features, the positive
and the negative seen clearly, free of the tainted biases of male
dominance. I seek new images of identity, new beliefs about
ourselves, our humanity and worth no longer in question.

*Estamos viviendo en la noche de la Raza, un tiempo cuando
el trabajo se hace a lo quieto, en el oscuro. El día cuando acepta-
os tal y como somos y para en donde vamos y porque—ese día
será el día de la Raza. Yo tengo el compromiso de expresar mi*
On December 2nd when my sun goes into my first house, I celebrate el día de la Chicana y el Chicano. On that day I clean my altars, light my Coastalopeuh candle, burn sage and copal, take el baño para espantar basura, sweep my house. On that day I bare my soul, make myself vulnerable to friends and family by expressing my feelings. On that day I affirm who we are.

On that day I look inside our conflicts and our basic introverted racial temperament. I identify our needs, voice them. I acknowledge that the self and the race have been wounded. I recognize the need to take care of our personhood, of our racial self. On that day I gather the splintered and disowned parts of la gente mexicana and hold them in my arms. Todas las partes de nosotros valen.

On that day I say, "Yes, all you people wound us when you reject us. Rejection strips us of self-worth; our vulnerability exposes us to shame. It is our innate identity you find wanting. We are ashamed that we need your good opinion, that we need your acceptance. We can no longer camouflage our needs, can no longer let defenses and fences sprout around us. We can no longer withdraw. To rage and look upon you with contempt is to rage and be contemptuous of ourselves. We can no longer blame you, nor disown the white parts, the male parts, the pathological parts, the queer parts, the vulnerable parts. Here we are weaponless with open arms, with only our magic. Let's try our way, the mestiza way, the Chicana way, the woman way.

On that day, I search for our essential dignity as a people, a people with a sense of purpose—to belong and contribute to something greater than our pueblo. On that day I seek to recover and reshape my spiritual identity. ¡Animate! Raza, a celebrar el día de la Chicana.

El retorno

All movements are accomplished in six stages, and the seventh brings return.
— I Ching

Tanto tiempo sin verte casa mía, mi cuna, mi hondo nido de la huerta.
—"Soledad"
How I love this tragic valley of South Texas, as Ricardo Sánchez calls it; this borderland between the Nueces and the Rio Grande. This land has survived possession and ill-use by five countries: Spain, Mexico, the Republic of Texas, the U.S., the Confederacy, and the U.S. again. It has survived Anglo-Mexican blood feuds, lynchings, burnings, rapes, pillage.

Today I see the Valley still struggling to survive. Whether it does or not, it will never be as I remember it. The borderlands depression that was set off by the 1982 peso devaluation in Mexico resulted in the closure of hundreds of Valley businesses. Many people lost their homes, cars, land. Prior to 1982, U.S. store owners thrived on retail sales to Mexicans who came across the border for groceries and clothes and appliances. While goods on the U.S. side have become 10, 100, 1000 times more expensive for Mexican buyers, goods on the Mexican side have become 10, 100, 1000 times cheaper for Americans. Because the Valley is heavily dependent on agriculture and Mexican retail trade, it has the highest unemployment rates along the entire border region; it is the Valley that has been hardest hit.11

"It's been a bad year for corn," my brother, Nune, says. As he talks, I remember my father scanning the sky for a rain that would end the drought, looking up into the sky, day after day, while the corn withered on its stalk. My father has been dead for 29 years, having worked himself to death. The life span of a Mexican farm laborer is 56—he lived to be 38. It shocks me that I am older than he. I, too, search the sky for rain. Like the ancients, I worship the rain god and the maize goddess, but unlike my father I have recovered their names. Now for rain (irrigation) one offers not a sacrifice of blood, but of money.

"Farming is in a bad way," my brother says. "Two to three thousand small and big farmers went bankrupt in this country last year. Six years ago the price of corn was $8.00 per hundred pounds," he goes on. "This year it is $3.90 per hundred pounds." And, I think to myself, after taking inflation into account, not planting anything puts you ahead.

I walk out to the back yard, stare at los rosales de mamá. She wants me to help her prune the rose bushes, dig out the carpet grass that is choking them. Mamagrande Ramona también tenia rosales. Here every Mexican grows flowers. If they don't have a piece of dirt, they use car tires, jars, cans, shoe boxes. Roses are the Mexican's favorite flower. I think, how symbolic—thorns and all.

Yes, the Chicano and Chicana have always taken care of growing things and the land. Again I see the four of us kids getting off the school bus, changing into our work clothes, walking into the field with Papí and Mami, all six of us bending to the ground. Below our feet, under the earth lie the watermelon seeds. We cover them with paper plates, putting terremotes on top of the plates to keep them from being blown away by the wind. The paper plates keep the freeze away. Next day or the next, we remove the plates, bare the tiny green shoots to the elements. They survive and grow, give fruit hundreds of times the size of the seed. We water them and hoe them. We harvest them. The vines dry, rot, are plowed under. Growth, death, decay, birth. The soil prepared again and again, impregnated, worked on. A constant changing of forms, renacimientos de la tierra madre.

This land was Mexican once
was Indian always
and is.
And will be again.
NOTES

The Homeland, Aztlán / El otro México

1. Los Tigres del Norte is a conjunto band.


4. Chávez, 9. Besides the Aztecs, the Ute, Gabrilino of California, Pima of Arizona, some Pueblo of New Mexico, Comanche of Texas, Opata of Sonora, Tarahumara of Sinaloa and Durango, and the Huichol of Jalisco speak Uto-Aztecan languages and are descended from the Cochise people.

5. Reay Tannahill, Sex In History (Briarcliff Manor, NY: Stein and Day/Publishers/Scarborough House, 1980), 308.


10. The Plan of San Diego, Texas, drawn up on January 6, 1915, called for the independence and segregation of the states bordering Mexico: Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado, and California. Indians would get their land back, Blacks would get six states from the south and form their own independent republic. Chávez, 79.


12. Naucrates los sobres was the first Mexican film that was truly Mexican and not an imitation European film. It stressed the devotion and love that children should have for their mother and how its lack would lead to the dissipation of their character. This film spawned a generation of mother-devotion/ungrateful-sons films.


Movimientos de rebeldía y las culturas que traicionan


Entering Into the Serpent

1. From the song "Sueno Con Serpientes" by Silvio Rodrígues, from the album Diary of Flores. Translated by Barbara Dane with the collaboration of Rita Benvmaur and Juan Flores.


3. Dicen que las culebras like to suck chiches: they say snakes like to suck women's teats.

4. Ella tiene su tono: she has supernatural power from her animal soul, the tomo.

5. Quelite: weed.


8. Culebra de cascabel: rattlesnake.

9. In some Nahuatl dialects Tonatsi is called Tonatzin, literally "Our Holy Mother." Tonaz was a name given in Nahuatl to several mountains, these being the congelations of the Earth Mother at spots convenient for her worship. The Mexica considered the mountain mass southwest of Chapultepec to be their mother. Burr Cartwright Broundage, The Fifth Sun: Aztec Gods, Aztec World (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1979), 154, 242.


Mother Worship: Themes and Variations, James J. Preston, ed.

12. Una tela tejida con aspas fibrar de a rape. It is an ombloth cloth that hangs over the back and ties together across the shoulders.


15. "Desde el cielo una hermosa mañana," from Propios de la vista de Nuestra Señora de Guadalupe, Guerrero, 124.


17. La Virgen Marta is often equated with the Aztec Telecinam, the Maya Izbel, the Inca Mamacocha and the Yuroba Yemayá.


20. Parrinder, 72.


22. Nash, 352.


27. Nash, 358.


31. The Aztecs muted Snake Woman's patronage of childbirth and vegetation by placing a sacrificial knife in the empty cradle she carried on her back (signifying a child who died in childbirth), thereby making her a devourer of sacrificial victims. Snake Woman had the ability to change herself into a serpent or into a lovely young woman to entice young men who withered away and died after intercourse with her. She was known as a witch and a shape-shifter. Bundage, 168-171.

32. Anthropologist Lucien Levy-Bruhl coined the word participation misticque. According to Jung, "It denotes a peculiar kind of psychological connection ... (in which) the subject cannot clearly distinguish himself from the object but is bound to it by a direct relationship which amounts to partial identity." Carl Jung, "Definitions," in Psychological Types, The Collected Works of C.G. Jung, Vol.6 (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1953), par. 781.

33. I have lost the source of this quote. If anyone knows what it is, please let the publisher know.

34. Some mexicanos and Chicanos distinguish between aire, air, and mal aire, the evil spirits which reside in the air.

La herencia de Coatlicue / The Coatlicue State

1. Marius Schneider, El origen musical de los animales-símbolos en la mitología y la escultura antiguas (Barcelona, 1946).


5. The suffix "coa" means skirt and is a word to describe a lady. "Coatl" not only means serpent, it also means twin.


7. Yemayá is also known as the wind, Oya as the whirlwind. According to Luisah Teish, I am the daughter of Yemayá, with Oya being the mother who raised me.
8. Another form of the goddess Coatlicue is Chimalma, Shield Hand, a naked cave goddess of the Huizhnahuas who was present at Aztián when the Aztecs left from that point of origin. Burland, 166-167.

9. A sculpture, described as the most horrifying and monstrous in the world, was excavated from beneath the Zocalo, the cathedral square in Mexico City, in 1824, where it had lain since the destruction of the Aztec capital of Tenochtitan. Every year since the Conquest, people had come during an autumn festival with gifts of fruit and flowers which they laid on the pavement of the central square. The Indians maintained that there was somebody very holy and powerful underneath. Burland, 39-40.


How to Tame a Wild Tongue


11. "Hispanic" is derived from Hispanis (España, a name given to the Iberian Peninsula in ancient times when it was a part of the Roman Empire) and is a term designated by the U.S. government to make it easier to handle us on paper.

12. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo created the Mexican-American in 1848.

13. Anglos, in order to alleviate their guilt for dispossession of the Chicanos, stressed the Spanish part of us and perpetuated the myth of the Spanish Southwest. We have accepted the fiction that we are Hispanic, that is Spanish, in order to accommodate ourselves to the dominant culture and its abhorrence of Indians. Chávez, 88-91.

Tiilii, Tlapalli: The Path of the Red and Black Ink


3. Armstrong, 10.


6. Leon-Portilla, 125.

7. In Xóchitl in Cuititl is Nahual for flower and song, flor y canto.

8. Nietzsche, in The Will to Power, says that the artist lives under a curse of being vampirized by his talent.

La conciencia de la mestiza / Towards a New Consciousness

1. This is my own "take off" on Jose Vasconcelos' idea. Jose Vasconcelos, La Raza Cósmica: Misión de la Raza Ibero-Americana (México: Aguilar S.A. de Ediciones, 1961).

2. Vasconcelos.


5. To borrow chemist Ilya Prigogine's theory of "dissipative structures." Prigogine discovered that substances interact not in predictable ways as it was taught in science, but in different and fluctuating ways to produce new and more complex structures, a kind of birth he called "morphogenesis," which created

6. *Tortillas de masa harina*: corn tortillas are of two types, the smooth uniform ones made in a tortilla press and usually bought at a tortilla factory or supermarket, and *gorditas*, made by mixing *masa* with lard or shortening or butter (my mother sometimes puts in bits of bacon or *chicharrones*).


9. “*Soledad*” is sung by the group, Haciendo Punto en Otro Son.

10. Out of the twenty-two border counties in the four border states, Hidalgo County (named for Father Hidalgo who was shot in 1810 after instigating Mexico’s revolt against Spanish rule under the banner of *la Virgen de Guadalupe*) is the most poverty-stricken county in the nation as well as the largest home base (along with Imperial in California) for migrant farmworkers. It was here that I was born and raised. I am amazed that both it and I have survived.
Más antes en los ranchos

"Dicen que no tengo duelo, Llorona,
porque no me ven llorar.
Hay muertos que no hacen ruido, Llorona
y es más grande su penar.
Ay de mí, Llorona."
—"La Llorona," a Mexican song
White-wing Season

The whitemen with their guns
have come again
to fill the silence and the sky
with buckshot.

She shakes out the wrinkles
snapping the sheets,
they crack like thunder
lean on the wind.

The gringos pull their caps
down to their eyes
hand her the bills,
the green flutter in her hand
will reshingle her roof.

Once her tender arms raised up
her brother's rifle
pointed at the cooing sounds
sprigs and two feathers floated down
near her feet twitching plumage
translucent eyelid blinking
across its eye
the small opened bill
blood from its mouth

She pours blueing into the washtub
plunges her arms in
puncturing the sky.
She wrings the sábanas
they sail and snap in the wind.
Startled, plump bodies rise
from the wooded areas and desert brush.
The beating of feathers
white patches on wings and tail.

The shots
feathers fall over the fields
cover her roof.

On their way back
to the midwest
the hunters drop two birds
on her washboard.

Her eyes shiny pellets
watching the wind
trying to lift their wings.
Tinges of pink
small twisted necks
line the furrows.

She dunks the doves in the boiling pot
plucks out the feathers
in her belly a rumble
the sky reddens then blackens
a flurry of night rain
gentle as feathers.
Cervide

La venadita. The small fawn. They had to kill their pet, the fawn. The game warden was on the way with his hounds. The penalty for being caught in possession of a deer was $250 or jail. The game warden would put su papi en la cárcel.

How could they get rid of the fawn? Hide it? No, la guardia’s hounds would sniff Venadita out. Let Venadita loose in the monte? They had tried that before. The fawn would leap away and seconds later return. Should they kill Venadita? The mother and Prieta looked toward las carabinas propped against the wall behind the kitchen door—the shiny barrel of the .22, the heavy metal steel of the 40-40. No, if they could hear his pickup a mile and a half down the road, he would hear the shot.

Quick, they had to do something. Cut Venadita’s throat? Club her to death? The mother couldn’t do it. She, Prieta, would have to be the one. The game warden and his perros were a mile down the road. Prieta loved her papi.

In the shed behind the corral, where they’d hidden the fawn, Prieta found the hammer. She had to grasp it with both hands. She swung it up. The weight folded her body backwards. A thud reverberated on Venadita’s skull, a wave undulated down her back. Again, a blow behind the ear. Though Venadita’s long lashes quivered, her eyes never left Prieta’s face. Another thud, another tremor. La guardia and his hounds were driving up the front yard. The venadita looked up at her, the hammer rose and fell. Neither made a sound. The tawny, spotted fur was the most beautiful thing Prieta had ever seen. She remembered when they had found the fawn. She had been a few hours old. A hunter had shot her mother. The fawn had been shaking so hard, her long thin legs were on the edge of buckling. Prieta and her sister and brothers had bottle-fed Venadita, with a damp cloth had wiped her skin, had watched her tiny, perfectly formed hooves harden and grow.
horse
(para la gente de Hargill, Texas)

Great horse running in the fields
come thundering toward
the outstretched hands
nostrils flaring at the corn
only it was knives in the hidden hands
can a horse smell tempered steel?

Anoche some kids cut up a horse
it was night and the pueblo slept
the Mexicans mutter among themselves:
they hobbled the two front legs
the two hind legs, kids aged sixteen
but they're gringos
and the sheriff won't do a thing
he'd just say boys will be boys
just following their instincts.

But it's the mind that kills
the animal the mexicanos murmur
killing it would have been a mercy
black horse running in the dark
came thundering toward
the outstretched hands
nostrils flaring at the smell
only it was knives in the hidden hands
did it pray all night for morning?

It was the owner came running
30-30 in his hand
put the caballo out of its pain
the Chicanos shake their heads
turn away some rich father
fished out his wallet
held out the folds of green
as if green could staunch red

pools dripping from the ribbons
on the horse's flanks
could cast up testicles
grow back the ears on the horse's head
no ears of corn but sheaths
hiding blades of steel
earth drinking blood sun rusting it
in that small Texas town
the mexicanos shuffle their feet
shut their faces stare at the ground.

Dead horse neighing in the night
come thundering toward the open faces
hooves iron-shod hurling lightning

only it is red red in the moonlight
in their sleep the gringos cry out
the mexicanos mumble if you're Mexican
you are born old.
Immaculate, Inviolate: Como Ella

She never lived with us
we had no bed for her
but she always came to visit.
A gift for mi'jita
two folded dollar bills secretly put in my hand.

I'd sit at her side
away from the bucket of brasas
enveloped en el olor de vieja
watch her roll her Buglar
yellowed talons plucking tobacco
knotted fingers rolling it thin, thinner,
tongue gumming edge of paper
sealing it pinching the ends
stroking it before striking match on thumbnail
watch smoke escape between chapped lips
curl through her white hair and pink skull.
They said at sixteen it had turned white overnight.

My grandmother could not tolerate heat.
She kept well away from fires.
A long time ago she burned herself.
She'd bent over the belly
of her woodburning stove
had seen no glimmer of a spark
had heaved up a can of kerosene

propping the edge on her hip
and cradling it to her chest
she'd let a few drops fall
on the charred sticks.
An invisible spark ignited
shot up the spout into her windpipe,
boom.
It took my uncle a long time
to carry the buckets of water from the well
soak the blankets
wrap them around her.

Mamá, usted ya no puede quedarse aquí sola.
They made her give up the ranchhouse
photographs, books, letters, yellowing.
Armaríos, pantry closets looted
rot growing under the covers.

She'd stay two weeks with one, two with another,
back and forth in her black dress
and with her thick velices
white sweat streaks across her round back,
under arms.
She never stopped wearing luto
first for my papagrande
who died before I was born
then for her brother
and, until she died eleven years ago,
she wore black for my father.
I didn't go to her funeral
that too must have made her suffer.

Platicame del rancho Jesús María,
de los Vergeles, Mamagrande,
where I was reared.
Tell me about the years of drought
the cattle with hoof 'n mouth
the rabid coyotes.
And as she talked I saw her breathing in the fire,
coughing up sooty spittle
skin blistering, becoming pus
nerve endings exposed,
sweating, skin pallid, clammy
the nausea, the dizziness,
swelling to twice her size.

I watched the charred scars
on her throat and breasts
turn into parchment splotches
they catch the sheen of the coals
glow pink and lavender over the blue skin.
She'd felt numb, she told me,
her voice hoarse from the fire
or the constant cigarette in her mouth,
as though frostbitten.

Once I looked into her blue eyes,
asked, Have you ever had an orgasm?
She kept quiet for a long time.
Finally she looked into my brown eyes,
told me how Papagrande would flip the skirt
of her nightgown over her head
and in the dark take out his palo, his stick,
and do lo que hacen todos los hombres
while she laid back and prayed
he would finish quickly.

She didn’t like to talk about such things.
_Mujeres no hablan de cosas cochinas._
Her daughters, my _tías_, never liked to talk about it—
their father’s other women, their half-brothers.

Sometimes when I get too close to the fire
and my face and chest catch the heat,
I can almost see Mamagrande’s face
watching him leave
taking her two eldest
to play with his other children
watching her sons _y los de la otra_
grow up together.

I can almost see that look
settle on her face
then hide behind parchment skin
and clouds of smoke.
_Pobre doña Locha_, so much dignity,
everyone said she had
and pride.

---

_como ella_—like her
_m’ijita_—an endearment; my dear daughter
Nopalitos

It's that time of day
when the musty smell of dust hangs in the air
mingling with the scent of orange blossoms.
Dogs sprawl in the heat
tongues loll, drip saliva,
flanks ripple off flies.
The wind shifts.
I smell mesquite burning.

Next door in her back yard
la señora stirs a huge olla of menudo.
On the steps of the back porch
hunched over a bucket
I carefully pull out a sprig of mesquite
cushioning the top layer of cactus,
pluck out a tiny nopalito.
At the base of the stump I lay
the sharp blade
under the tender curl
sheathing each thorn.
A tangy green smell
seeps through the afternoon.

I throw the bleeding nopal
into a pan, pull out another.
It takes hours to defang cactus.
The thought of them: tender,
cooked in chile colorado
keeps me stooped over the cubeta
ignoring the tiny slivers
piercing my thumb.

Under the sighing leaves
and the lengthening shadows of the palo blanco
a gallo stretches his wings,
darts headlong toward a hen pounces
beak seizing crest he pumps her.

Squawking she shakes him off,
fluffing her feathers
raining gold dust in the sunlight.
Overhead, the immense blue.
Across the road Tio Nasario unwinds his hose,
water mists dusk, jasmine, and rose.
The women gather on porches
in twos and threes, murmur
and rock, chairs lapping
the edges.
Their laughter swells over the garden,
laves me,
then evaporates in the still air.
Though I'm part of their camaraderia
am one of them

I left and have been gone a long time.
I keep leaving and when I am home
they remember no one but me had ever left.
I listen to the grillos more intently
than I do their regaños.
I have more languages than they,
am aware of every root of my pueblo;
they, my people, are not.
They are the living, sleeping roots.

I sweep up mesquite leaves,
thorns embedded in my flesh,
stings behind my eyes.

Nopalitos—tender cactus leaves of the nopal
olla of menudo—black pot of a soup made of stomach, chile colorado, and hominy
cubeta—pail
palo blanco—a tree
gallo—rooster
grillos—cicadas
regaños—scoldings
¡Qué lejos del suelo donde he nacido!
intensa nostalgia invade mi pensamiento;
y al verme tan solo y triste cual hoja al viento,
quisiera llorar, quisiera morir de sentimiento.
—"Canción Misteca," a Mexican corrido
sus plumas el viento
(for my mother, Amalia)

Swollen feet
tripping on vines in the heat,
palms thick and green-knuckled,
sweat drying on top of old sweat.
She flicks her tongue over upper lip
where the salt stings her cracked mouth.
Stupid Pepita and her jokes and the men licking
her heels,
but only the field boss,
un bolillo, of course, having any.

Ayer entre las matas de maíz
she had stumbled upon them:
Pepita on her back
grimacing to the sky,
the anglo buzzing around her like a mosquito,
landing on her, digging in, sucking.
When Pepita came out of the irrigation ditch
some of the men spit on the ground.

She listens to Chula singing corridos
making up los versos as she
plants down the rows
hoes down the rows
the chorus resounding for acres and acres
Everyone adding a line
the day crawls a little faster.

She pulls ahead
kicking terremotes,

el viento sur secándole el sudor
un ruido de alas humming songs in her head.

Que le de sus plumas el viento.
The sound of hummingbird wings
in her ears, pico de chuparrosas.

She looks up into the sun's glare,
las chuparrosas de los jardines
¿en dónde están de su mamagrande?
but all she sees is the obsidian wind
cut tassels of blood
from the hummingbird's throat.

She husks corn, hefts watermelons.
Bends all the way, digs out strawberries
half buried in the dirt.
Twelve hours later
roped knots cord her back.

Sudor de sobacos chorriando,
limpia de hierba la siembra
Claws clutching hoe, she tells the
two lead spatulas stirring the sand,
jump into it, patas, wallow en el charco de mierda,
breathe it in through the soles of your feet.
There was nothing else but surrender.
If she hadn't read all those books
she'd be singing up and down the rows
like the rest.

She stares at her hands
Manos binebadas, quebradas,
thick and calloused like a man's,
the tracks on her left palm
different from those on the right.
Saca la lima y raspa el azadón
se va a mochar sus manos,
she wants to chop off her hands
cut off her feet
only Indians and mayates
have flat feet.

Burlap sack wet around her waist,
stained green from leaves and the smears of worms.
White heat no water no place to pee
the men staring at her ass.
Como una mula,
she shifts 150 pounds of cotton onto her back.
It's either las labores
or feet soaking in cold puddles en bodegas

cutting washing weighing packaging
broccoli spears carrots cabbages in 12 hours 15
double shift the roar of machines inside her head.
She can always clean shit
out of white folks toilets—the Mexican maid.
You're respected if you can use your head
instead of your back, the women said.
Ay m'ijos, ojalá que hallen trabajo
in air-conditioned offices.

The hoe, she wants to cut off . . .
She folds wounded birds, her hands
into the nest, her armpits
looks up at the Texas sky.
Si el viento le diere sus plumas.

She vows to get out
of the numbing chill, the 110 degree heat.
If the wind would give her feathers for fingers
she would string words and images together.
Pero el viento sur le tiró su saliva
pa' trás en la cara.

She sees the obsidian wind
cut tassels of blood
from the hummingbird's throat.
As it falls
the hummingbird shadow
becomes the navel of the Earth.

bolillo—a derogatory term for Anglos meaning hard crust of loaf of white bread.
entre las matas de maíz—between the corn stalks
terremotes—sods
El viento sur secándole el sudor—The south wind drying her sweat
Cultures

vete
go out take the pick axe
take the shovel
my mother would tell me

hard brown earth with the axe
I’d pick at its dark veins
disinter a rotting tin can
unmould a shell from a lost ocean
bones of an unknown animal

with my eyes I’d measure out a rectangle
I’d swing and shove and lift
my sweat dripping on the swelling mounds

into the hole I’d rake up and pitch
rubber-nippled baby bottles
cans of Spam with twisted umbilicals
I’d overturn the cultures
spawning in Coke bottles
murky and motleyed

my brothers never helped
woman’s work and beneath them
under the clothesline
three times a year, two feet apart

I’d dig and sweat and grunt
above me clothes flapping like banners
wire taut between the crossed posts
crucifixes over earlier graves

when it rots
trash replenishes the soil
my mother would say
but nothing would grow in
my small plots except
thistle sage and nettle.

sobre piedras con lagartijos
(para todos los mojaditos que han cruzado para este lado)

Pst!
ese ruido rumbo al Norte, muchachos,
párense, aquí nos separamos.

Tengo que descansar,
Ay que tierra tan dura como piedra.
Desde que me acuerdo
así ha sido mi cama,
mi vida. Maldito fue el día
que me atreví a cruzar.
Nada más quiero hacer unos cuantos centavos
y regresar a mi tierra.

Dicen que unos norteamericanos son puros hijos
Bueno, pues, yo puedo trabajar como un burro.
Lo único que me falta es el burro
porque hasta sus dientes tengo.

Uno tiene que hacer la lucha
¿Cómo la estará pasando mi vieja?

Ayá la dejé con los seis chiquitos.
Tuve que dejarlos,
dejar ese pinche pedazo de tierra
El maíz no levantaba cabeza
ni llegaba hasta mi rodilla.

Por mis hijos estoy aquí echado como animal
en el regazo de la madre tierra.
Ojalá que la Santísima virgen me tenga en sus manos.

¡Qué sol tan miserable!
y el nopal por todos rumbos.
Ni un árbol ni nada, ay madrecita,
los lagartijos y yo—tenemos el mismo cuero
pero yo ya no soy ligero.

Los trozos de leña que cargaba al mercado
los costales de maíz, empinado desde niño
tratando de sacarle algo verde
al caliche que era mi parcela.
La vida me ha jorobado,
ando como anciano
ladiando de un lado al otro.
Ya casi ni veo.

La niña le estará preguntando
¿Cuándo viene mi papí?
y los chiquillos chillando
sus manitas estrirándole la falda
bocas chupando sus chiches secas
pobre vieja. Al menos no tengo que ver
esa mirada en sus ojos
que me hace un nudo en mi pecho.

Que se que les pasó a los otros.
Cuando oímos el ruido
de la camioneta
corrimos por todos rumbos.
Yo me hice bola y me metí
debajo de un chollo
allí estuve atorado en una cuevita
que algún animalito había hecho.
No pude aguantar los piquetes—madrotas.
Todavía siento remolineándose debajo de mi piel
y aborita que desperté
vi que una víbora me estaba velando.
Pues, allí estuve echo bola
en la panza de ese cacto dos o tres días
la sed me quita la memoria,
mi boca seca de bechar maldiciones, de miedo

Dicen que si llego a Ogaquinabua
ayá me encontrará con unos paisanos
que me ayudarán a ballar chamba, a sacar papeles.
Pronto volveré a mi tierra
a recoger mi señora y mis hijos.

Mira como los lagartijos se alejan
aventando piedritas por todos lados
Oy, ¿Qué es ese ruido
El sonavabitch
(for Aishe Berger)

Car flowing down a lava of highway
just happened to glance out the window
in time to see brown faces bent backs
like prehistoric boulders in a field
so common a sight no one
notices
blood rushes to my face
twelve years I'd sat on the memory
the anger scorching me
my throat so tight I can
barely get the words out.

I got to the farm
in time to hear the shots
ricochet off barn,
spit into the sand,
in time to see tall men in uniforms
thumping fists on doors
metallic voices yelling Halt!
their hawk eyes constantly shifting.

When I hear the words, "Corran muchachos"
I run back to the car, ducking,
see the glistening faces, arms outflung,
of the mexicanos running headlong
through the fields
kicking up clouds of dirt

see them reach the tree line
foliage opening, swishing closed behind them.
I hear the tussling of bodies, grunts, panting
squeak of leather squawk of walkie-talkies
sun reflecting off gunbarrels
the world a blinding light
a great buzzing in my ears
my knees like aspens in the wind.

I see that wide cavernous look of the hunted
the look of hares
thick limp blue-black hair
The bare heads humbly bent
of those who do not speak
the ember in their eyes extinguished.

I lean on the shanty wall of that migrant camp
north of Muncie, Indiana.
Wets, a voice says.
I turn to see a Chicano pushing
the head of his muchachita
back into the nagas of the mother
a tin plate face down on the floor
tortillas scattered around them.
His other hand signals me over.
He too is from el valle de Tejas
I had been his kid's teacher.
I'd come to get the grower
to fill up the sewage ditch near the huts
saying it wouldn't do for the children
to play in it.
Smoke from a cooking fire and
shirtless niños gather around us.

Mojados, he says again,
leaning on his chipped Chevy station wagon
Been here two weeks
about a dozen of them.
The sonavabitch works them
from sunup to dark—15 hours sometimes.
Como mulas los trabaja
no saben como hacer la perra.
Last Sunday they asked for a day off
wanted to pray and rest,
write letters to their familias.
¿Y sabes lo que hizo el sonavabitch?
He turns away and spits.
Says he has to hold back half their wages
that they'd eaten the other half:
sack of beans, sack of rice, sack of flour.  
Frijoleros sí lo son but no way  
could they have eaten that many frijoles.  
I nod.

Como le dije, son doce—started out 13  
five days packed in the back of a pickup  
boarded up tight  
fast cross-country run no stops  
except to change drivers, to gas up  
no food they pissed into their shoes—  
those that had guaraches  
slept slumped against each other  
sabe Dios where they shit.  
One smothered to death on the way here.

Miss, you should've seen them when they  
stumbled out.  
First thing the sonavabitche did was clamp  
a handkerchief over his nose  
then ordered them stripped  
hosed them down himself  
in front of everybody.  
They hobbled about  
learning to walk all over again.  
Flacos con caras de viejos  
aunque la mitad eran jóvenes.

Como le estaba diciendo,  
today was payday.  
You saw them, la migra came busting in  
waving their pinche pistolas.  
Said someone made a call,  
Guess who? That sonavabitche, who else?  
Done this three times since we've been coming here  
Se ña Dios how many times in between.  
Wets, free labor, esclavos.  
Pobres hijos de la chingada.  
This the last time we work for him.

no matter how fregados we are  
he said, shaking his head,  
spitting at the ground.  
Vámonos, mujer, empaca el mugrero.

He hands me a cup of coffee,  
half of it sugar, half of it milk  
my throat so dry I even down the dregs.  
It has to be done.  
Steeling myself  
I take that walk to the big house.

Finally the big man lets me in.  
How about a drink? I shake my head.  
He looks me over, opens his eyes wide  
and smiles, says how sorry he is immigration  
is getting so tough  
a poor Mexican can't make a living  
and they sure do need the work.  
My throat so thick the words stick.  
He studies me, then says,  
Well, what can I do you for?  
I want two weeks wages  
including two Saturdays and Sundays,  
minimum wage, 15 hours a day.  
I'm more startled than he.  
Whoa there, sinorita,  
wets work for whatever you give them  
the season hasn't been good.  
Besides most are halfway to Mexico by now.  
Two weeks wages, I say,  
the words swelling in my throat.  

Miss uh what did you say your name was?  
I fumble for my card.  
You can't do this,  
I haven't broken no law,  
his lidded eyes darken, I step back.  
I'm leaving in two minutes and I want cash  
the whole amount right here in my purse.
when I walk out.
No hoarseness, no trembling.
It startled both of us.

You want me telling every single one
of your neighbors what you've been doing
all these years? The mayor, too?
Maybe make a call to Washington?
Slitted eyes studied the card again.
They had no cards, no papers.
I'd seen it over and over.
Work them, then turn them in before paying them.

Well, now, he was saying,
I know we can work something out,
a sweet young thang like yourself.
Cash, I said. I didn't know anyone in D.C.
now I didn't have to.
You want to keep it for yourself?
That it? His eyes were pin pricks.
Sweat money, Mister, blood money,
not my sweat, but same blood.
Yeah, but who's to say you won't abscond with it?
If I ever hear that you got illegals on your land
even a single one, I'm going to come here
in broad daylight and have you
hung by your balls.
He walks slowly to his desk.
Knees shaking, I count every bill
taking my time.

¿Y sabes lo que hizo?—And you know what he did.
Frijoleros sí lo son.—Bean eaters they are.
Como le dije, son doce.—Like I told you, they're 12.
guarache—sandal
sabe Dios—God knows
Flacos con caras de viejos—skinny with old faces
aunque la mitad eran jóvenes—though half were youths
Como le estaba diciendo—as I was telling you
la migra—slang for immigration officials
pistolas—guns
esclavos—slaves
Pobres hijos de la Chingada—poor sons of the fucked one
fregados—poor, beaten, downtrodden, in need
Vamonos, mujer, empaca el mugrero.—Let's go, woman, pack our junk.

Corran muchachos—Run boys.
muchachita—little girl
naguas—skirt
el valle de Tejas—Rio Grande Valley in Texas
mojado—wetbacks, undocumented workers, illegal immigrants from Mexico
and parts south
Como mulas los trabaja.—He works them like mules.
no saben como hacer la perra.—They don't know how to make the work easier
for themselves.
Mar de repollos
(para la gente que siempre ha trabajado en las labores)

Hincado, manos bichadas
sudor floreciendo en su cara
su mirada en altas veredas
sus pensamientos torciendo cuerdas
para pescar esa paloma de las alturas.
Siglo tras siglo nadando

brazos artríticos dando vueltas
y vueltas y vueltas recorriendo surcos
un gusano en un mar verde.
una vida estremecida por el viento
meciendo en una goma de esperanza
atrapsada en las redes con la paloma.

A mediodía en la orilla
de las verdes colmenas
en la labor de un ranchito en Tejas
saca sus tortillas con chile
toma agua becha caldo por el sol.
A veces maldice

su suerte, la tierra, el sol.
Sus ojos: inquietos pájaros volando
sobre veredas altas en busca
de esa paloma blanca
y su nido.

Hombre en verde mar.
Su herencia: manos gordas manchadas
bechando raíces en la tierra.

Aunque empinado, vivía cara arriba,
en sus ojos telarañas
pescaban las plumas blancas.
Sus manos rompen repollos de sus nidos
rompen venudas hojas cubriendo hojas tiernitas
cubriendo hojas más pálidas, el corazón.
A Sea of Cabbages
(for those who have worked in the fields)

On his knees, hands swollen
sweat flowering on his face
his gaze on the high paths
the words in his head twinning cords
tossing them up to catch that bird of the heights.
Century after century swimming

with arthritic arms, back and forth
circling, going around and around
a worm in a green sea
life shaken by the wind
swinging in a mucilage of hope
caught in the net along with la paloma.

At noon on the edge
of the hives of cabbage
in the fields of a ranchito in Tejas
he takes out his chile wrapped in tortillas
drinks water made hot soup by the sun.
Sometimes he curses

his luck, the land, the sun.
His eyes: unquiet birds
flying over the high paths
searching for that white dove
and her nest.

Man in a green sea.
His inheritance: thick stained hand
rooting in the earth.

His hands tore cabbages from their nests,
ripping the ribbed leaves covering tenderer leaves
encasing leaves yet more pale.
Though bent over, he lived face up,
the veins in his eyes
catching the white plumes in the sky.

Century after century flailing,
unleafing himself in a sea of cabbages.
Dizzied
body sustained by the lash of the sun.
In his hands the cabbages contort like fish.
Thickened tongue swallowing

the stench.

The sun, a heavy rock on his back,
cracks,
the earth shudders, slams his face
spume froths from his mouth spilling over
eyes opened, face up, searching searching.

The whites of his eyes congeal.
He hears the wind sweeping the broken shards
then the sound of feathers surging up his throat.
He cannot escape his own snare—
faith: dove made flesh.

—translated from the Spanish by the author
We Call Them Greasers

I found them here when I came. They were growing corn in their small ranchos raising cattle, horses smelling of woodsmoke and sweat. They knew their betters: took off their hats placed them over their hearts, lowered their eyes in my presence.

Weren't interested in bettering themselves, why they didn't even own the land but shared it. Wasn't hard to drive them off, cowards, they were, no backbone. I showed 'em a piece of paper with some writing tole 'em they owed taxes had to pay right away or be gone by mañana. By the time me and my men had waved that same piece of paper to all the families it was all frayed at the ends.

Some loaded their chickens children wives and pigs into rickety wagons, pans and tools dangling clanging from all sides. Couldn't take their cattle— during the night my boys had frightened them off. Oh, there were a few troublemakers who claimed we were the intruders. Some even had land grants and appealed to the courts. It was a laughing stock them not even knowing English. Still some refused to budge, even after we burned them out. And the women—well I remember one in particular.

She lay under me whimpering. I plowed into her hard kept thrusting and thrusting
Matriz sin tumba o
"el baño de la basura ajena"

Tendida estoy en una cama angosta,
calzones empapados de sangre.
Se que yo callada no soy nada.
Desdichada,
muy lejana con boca bincada,
vomitando algo amarillo,
revolviendo y repitiendo palabras sin sentido.
Siento algo reventandose
en un lugar interno.
Estoy parada en la orilla
de una noche oscura.

Una espin.a gruesa le pica la nalga,
su cuerpo se estremece.
Se entrega a un sabor de hierro
y al éter.
Sueña con una mujer que orina pus
y que come su propio excremento.

Revuelvo y repito palabras sin sentido.
Algo se rompe en un lugar interno.
Como basura un agitado viento me empuja.
Me siento muy lejana, juzgada
por ese buitre en la panza.
La bestia noche entra armada con navajas,
se me arrima muy cerquita,
me manotea, me agujera dos veces, tres veces.
Miro que me saca las entrañas,
que avienta la matriz en la basura—
matriz sin tumba.

Sueña que toma "el baño de la basura ajena"
en honor de Tlazolteotl.
Detrás de ella mira una figura

tragándose el sol.
Con obisidiana le punza cuatro veces, cinco.
¿Estoy muerta? le pregunto.
Por favor entierren mi matriz conmigo.

Un relámpago perforando el cielo
dispersa la noche.
Me sangran, me sangran.
Tengo señas de la muerte:
un color de humo en medio de los ojos
que relucen poco;
cara que se ennegrece.
Alguien me empuja entre la lumbre,
aspire humo de cabellos chamuscados.
Esta pequeña muerte,
una comenzón que no me deja a gusto.
Un dedo sale del cielo, y descende,
se insinúa entre mis rajadas cavidades.
Chispas salen del agujero
me preparo a despedirme de la vida asesina.
Revuelvo y repito palabras sin sentido.
En un lugar interno alguien se queja.

Sueña de una cara tiznada,
de una boca escupiendo sangre
y luego comiendo atole de miel y chile.
Hacia el oriente una larga cicatriz
raja el cielo.
Le punza dos veces, tres, siete.

Padezco de un mal: la vida,
una enfermedad recurrente
que me purga de la muerte.
Me sangra, me sangra.
Derramando un aguacero,
vierte la muerte por mi boca.
Voltea la cara,
revuelvo y repito palabras sin sentido:
la vida enema, matriz sin tumba.
En un lugar interno algo se revienta
y un agitado viento empuja los pedazos.

III

Crossers

y otros atravesados

Al otro lado está el río
y no lo puedo cruzar,
al otro lado está el mar
no lo puedo atravesar.
—Isabel Parra, “En La Frontera”

On the other side is the river
and I cannot cross it
on the other side is the sea
I cannot bridge it.
—Isabel Parra, “At The Border”
Poets have strange eating habits
(for Irenita Klepfisz)

Dark windowless no moon glides
across the nightsky
   I coax and whip the balking mare
to the edge
   peel the scabs from her wounds
Her body caves into itself
   through the hole
my mouth

In the border between dusk and dawn
I listen to frozen thumpings, my soul
   Should I jump face tumbling
down the steps of the temple
heart offered up to the midnightsun

She takes that plunge
off the high cliff
   hooves tumbling in the vagrant air
head tucked between her legs
   a cold wind tugging at her back
cutting tears from my eyes
the obsidian knife, air
the nightsky alone alone

She spreads out her legs
to catch the wind
   rushes to fill el abismo
the night ride has ripped open
its hunger rimmed with teeth
I feed it my throat my hands
let it glut itself on me
   till it's pregnant with me.
Wounding is a deeper healing.

Suspended in fluid sky
I, eagle fetus, live serpent
   feathers growing out of my skin

the buffeting wind
the rock walls rearing up
the Earth.

I bend my knees, break the fall
no arm snapping
   a stunned animal
I burrow deep into myself
   pull the emptiness in
   its hollows chisel my face
growing thin thinner
   eyesockets empty
tunneling here tunneling there
   the slither of snakes
   their fangs pierce my flesh
falling
   into faceless air
Taking the plunge an act as
routine as cleaning my teeth.

The Earth parts
I hit the bottom of the chasm
   peer over the edge
coax and whip the balking mare
   take that plunge again
jumping off cliffs an addiction
flailing pummeling
   flesh into images
sticking feathers
   in my arms
   slithering into holes
   with rattlesnakes
dark windowless no moon glides
across the nightsky
   I slip inside
the maw opens wide I slip inside
Taking deep breaths eyes closed
me la tragó toda*  

*me la tragó toda—I swallow it whole
Yo no fui, fue Teté
(para Mando Gaitán y Ronnie Burks)

a lo macho, simón que sí
estaba anocheciendo
sali a la calle del dormido pueblo a putear
y allí me estaban esperando
los chingones, batos grifos.
ORALE, ¿POS QUÉ TRAIN CONMIGO?
¿QUÉ PEDO ES ÉSTE?

me llevaron al yonke
zs, me dieron mis crismas
jijo 'ela chingada we struggled man, piel a piel
me escupieron en la cara
"lambiscón, culero, pinche puto"
me arrinconaron, me dieron una paliza
me partieron la madre
conocí la cara del odio, del miedo
sentí la navaja
esas miradas enloquecidas
y tienen los huevos de llamarnos "locas"
que verguenza, mi misma raza
jijo 'ela chingada
me ensucié en los pantalones
allí en el pavimento
allí me quedé jodido
aullando por la noche como huérfano
allí me dejaron
de volada me pelé pa' la casa

The Cannibal's Canción

It is our custom
to consume
the person we love.
Taboo flesh: swollen
genitalia nipples
the scrotum the vulva
the soles of the feet
the palms of the hand
heart and liver taste best.
Cannibalism is blessed.

I'll wear your jawbone
round my neck
listen to your vertebrae
bone tapping bone in my wrists.
I'll string your fingers round my waist—
what a rigorous embrace.
Over my heart I'll wear
a brooch with a lock of your hair.
Nights I'll sleep cradling
your skull sharpening
my teeth on your toothless grin.

Sundays there's Mass and communion
and I'll put your relics to rest.
En mi corazón se incuba
(para Sonia Alvarez)

Todo comienza a partir de este día,
Una tristeza me invade y
Algo extraño se oculta en mi vientre—
Un golpe de soledad que me consume.
En mi corazón se incuba una espina.

La luz de las luciérnagas se retira y
De los árboles me llaman las lechuzas.
Inmersa en un abandono, tragando miedos,
Me siento muy lejos
De la huella del amor.

En tumbas huérfanas gasto largas noches,
Los minutos pasan como agujas por mi piel.
Soy una sombra pálida en una noche opaca.
Hondo escondo mi pena, hondo.
Hondo se enraiza un sueño noconfesado.

En este oscuro monte de nopal
Algo secretamente amado
Se oculta en mi vientre
Y en mi corazón se incuba
Un amor que no es de este mundo.

Corner of 50th St. and Fifth Av.

Taking my usual walk
I run into sirens flashing red, turning
and a small crowd
watching the dark-haired man
with the thin mustache,
PR about 30,
maricón, a voice in the crowd shouts.

Two uniforms have his head
wedged down in the gap
between the bucket seats,
red sirens turning turning
just over his head.

Another pulls down his pants
holds him tight around the waist
the fourth pummels
the pale orbs over and over
till the PR’s face is flushed
the cop’s fist red
the sirens turning turning.
The first two look bored
eyes drifting slowly
over the crowd
not meeting our eyes.
He just thud got out thud of jail
I hear a Rican say
thud, the cop’s arms like baseball bats.
Finally the thuds end.
They pull his head
out of the crack,
pull pants over livid cheeks,
manacled hands going down
to cover his buttocks
the sirens turning turning
I wade through the thick air thinking
that’s as close as they let themselves get
to fucking a man, being men.
Compañera, cuando amábamos
(for Juanita Ramos and other spik dykes)

¿Volverán, campañera, esas tardes sordas
Cuando nos amábamos tiradas en las sombras bajo otoño?
Mis ojos clavados en tu mirada
Tu mirada que siempre retiraba al mundo
Esas tardes cuando nos acostábamos en las nubes

Mano en mano nos paseábamos por las calles
Entre niños jugando handball
Vendedores y sus sabores de carne chamuzcada.
La gente mirando nuestras manos
Nos pescaban los ojos y se sonreían cómplices en este asunto del aire suave.
En un café u otro nos sentábamos bien cerquita.
Nos gustaba todo: las bodegas tiznadas
La música de Silvio, el ruido de los trenes
Y habichuelas. Compañera,
¿Volverán esas tardes sordas cuando nos amábamos?

¿Te acuerdas cuando te decía ¡tócame!?
¿Cuándo ilesa carne buscaba carne y dientes labios
En los laberintos de tus bocas?
Esas tardes, islas no descubiertas
Cuando caminábamos hasta la orilla.
Mis dedos lentos andaban las lomas de tus pechos,
Recorriendo la llanura de tu espalda
Tus moras hinchéndose en mi boca
La cueva mojada y racima.
Tu corazón en mi lengua hasta mis sueños.
Dos pescadoras nadando en los mares
Buscando esa perla.
¿No te acuerdas como nos amábamos, compañera?

¿Volverán esas tardes cuando vacilábamos
Pasos largos, manos entrelazadas en la playa?
Las gaviotas y las brizas
Dos manfloras vagas en una isla de mutua melodía.
Tus tiernas palmas y los planetas que se caían.

Esas tardes tiñadas de mojo
Cuando nos entregábamos a las olas

Cuando nos tirábamos
En el zacate del parque
Dos cuerpos de mujer bajo los árboles
Mirando los barcos cruzando el río
Tus pestañas barriendo mi cara
Dormitando, oliendo tu piel de amapola.
Dos extranjeras al borde del abismo
Yo caía descabellada encima de tu cuerpo
Sobre las lunas llenas de tus pechos
Esas tardes cuando se mecía el mundo con mi resuello
Dos mujeres que hacían una sola sombra bailarina
Esas tardes andábamos hasta que las lámparas
Se prendían en las avenidas.

¿Volverán,
Compañera, esas tardes cuando nos amábamos?
Interface
(for Frances Doughty)

She’d always been there
occupying the same room.
It was only when I looked
at the edges of things
my eyes going wide watering,
objects blurring.
Where before there’d only been empty space
I sensed layers and layers,
felt the air in the room thicken.
Behind my eyelids a white flash
a thin noise.
That’s when I could see her.

Once I accidently ran my arm
through her body
felt heat on one side of my face.
She wasn’t solid.
The shock pushed me against the wall.
A torrent of days swept past me
before I tried to “see” her again.
She had never wanted to be flesh she told me
until she met me.
At first it was hard to stay
on the border between
the physical world
and hers.
It was only there at the interface
that we could see each other.
See? We wanted to touch.
I wished I could become
pulsing color, pure sound, bodiless as she.
It was impossible, she said
for humans to become noumenal.

What does it feel like, she asked
to inhabit flesh,
wear blood like threads

constantly running?
I would lie on the bed talking
she would hover over me.
Did I say talk?
We did not use words.
I pushed my thoughts toward her.
Her “voice” was a breath of air
stirring my hair
filling my head.
Once Lupe my roommate
walked right through her
dangling the car keys.
I felt Leyla shiver.
I named her Leyla,
a pure sound.

I don’t know when I noticed
that she’d begun to glow,
to look more substantial
than the blurred furniture.
It was then I felt a slight touch,
hers—a tendril of fog—
on the sheets where she’d lain
a slight crease, a dampness,
a smell between candles and skin.
You’re changing, I told her.
A yearning deluged me—
hers yearning.
That’s when I knew
she wanted to be flesh.
She stayed insubstantial day after day
so I tried to blur
my borders, to float, become pure sound.
But my body seemed heavier,
more inert.

I remember when she changed.
I could hear the far away slough of traffic
on the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway,
the people downstairs were playing salsa.
We lay enclosed by margins, hems, where only we existed.

She was stroking my arms, marveling at their solidity, the warmth of my flesh, its smell.

Then I touched her.

Fog, she felt like dense fog, the color of smoke.

She glowed, my hands paled then gleamed as I moved them over her.

Smoke-fog pressing against my eyelids
my mouth, ears, nostrils, navel.

A cool tendril pressing between my legs entering.

Her finger, I thought but it went on and on.

At the same time
an iciness touched my anus, and she was in and in

my mouth opening
I wasn't scared just astonished

rain drummed against my spine
turned to steam as it rushed through my veins

light flickered over me from toe to crown.

Looking down my body I saw her forearm, elbow and hand

sticking out of my stomach

saw her hand slide in.

I wanted no food no water nothing
just her—pure light sound inside me.

My roommate thought I was having an affair.

I was "radiant," she said.

Leyla had begun to swell

I started hurting a little.

When I started cramping
she pushed out

her fingers, forearm, shoulder.

Then she stood before me,
love
it was never like before
she'd taken on skin and bone.

Do you ever want to go back, I asked her.
No, it's slower here and I like that.
I hate summers in NYC, I told her,
wish it was winter already.
The temperature dropped 10 degrees
20 and when a chill wind began to blow in Brooklyn
I told her to stop
messing with the cycles that affected others.
I watched what I said
and let Leyla run the place.
She had snow in the livingroom
and a tree in the bathtub.
Nights I lit the illegal fireplace.
Once when reaching toward a high shelf,
I wished I was taller.
When my head touched the ceiling
I had to yell at her to stop,
reverse.

How do you do it, I asked her.
You do it, too, she said,
my species just does it faster,
instantly, merely by thinking it.

The first time she rode the subway
I had to drag her out.
I suppose it was the noise,
the colors flashing by, the odd people
that held her open-mouthed gaze.
I had to do a gig in L.A.,
speak at a conference, was short on cash,
but she wanted to come.
She walked past the flight attendants
didn't even have to hide in the lavatory.
She laughed at my amazement, said
humans only saw what they were told to see.
Last Christmas I took her home to Texas.
Mom liked her.
Is she a lez, my brothers asked.
I said, No, just an alien.
Leyla laughed.

Yo llamo a mujer,
canto por mujer.
Cubierta con serpientes vengo yo,
al lugar del encuentro me acerco,
repito conjuros para provocar amor.
Clamo por mujer.
Ya llego, llamo.
—Gloria Anzaldúa
Holy Relics
(for Judy Grahn & V. Sackville-West)

We are the holy relics,
the scattered bones of a saint,
the best loved bones of Spain.
We seek each other.

City of Ávila,
88 crenellated towers crowning a low hill.
A silent landscape rises toward indigo mountains,
empty save for clumps of broom and tormented ilex.
Here and there strange stones
like prehistoric ruins.
A granite city in a dour land,
with a cathedral for a fortress.
A land where no mists soften the rocks,
where light is relentless.

When she* died, flesh of our bones,
they buried her at the Alba de Tormes
50 miles west of Ávila.
They finally buried her
in her patched and shabby habit.
Buried her in her threadworn veil.
Bricked her in a wall of grey stone.

Nine months she lay in the grey stone.
Nine months she lay quietly.
Her daughters, the nuns of Alba, came to her daily—
came to that bricked-up place in the wall.
From that place issued a scent
to which they could give no name.
From within that tomb
issued a sound to which they could give no name.

Day by day they waited.
They waited for the good father Gracian,

---

Teresa's beloved confessor,
waited to tell him of that scent and of that sound.

Entombed nine months.
Four days it took them.
Four days in silence, in secret.
The nuns held the torches
while Father and friar shoveled.
The nuns held the torches,
then cleared away the rubble.
At last the hallowed moment,
the coffin pulled from the cavern.
The moment when the lid is broken,
when the coffin is opened.
They gazed at last at their beloved:
spider webs netted black hair to eyebrows,
earth clotted her arched nostrils.
They gazed and gazed at their beloved.
The nuns of Alba removed her mouldy habit,
with knives scraped away the earth clinging to her skin,
looked their fill,
then wrapped her in clean linen.
The good Father drew near,
lifted her left hand as if to kiss it,
placed a knife under her wrist
and from her rigid arm he severed it.
The father Teresa had loved stood smiling,
hugging her hand to his body.

We are the holy relics,
the scattered bones of a saint,
the best loved bones of Spain.
We seek each other.

Two years she lay in her tomb.
_Pero para los santos no hay descanso_,
for saints there is no rest.
Another priest fell upon her tomb
to claim her holy body for Ávila.
At midnight he sent the nuns

---

*Teresa de Cepeña Dávila y Ahumada
to the upper choir to sing Matins.
Then quietly removed the bricked-up stones, 
quietly reopened the tomb.  
The mysterious scent and her unspoiled face  
(a little more dried than before) greeted him.
And bright red as if freshly soaked 
was the cloak of white bunting 
that had staunched the flow from her mouth at her deathbed.

It stained whatever piece of cloth touched it.
The scent drifted to the upper choir 
drawing the nuns down to the tomb like flies to honey 
in time to see Father Gregorio de Naciancena 
insert his knife under the truncated arm, 
in time to see the blade pass through flesh 
as if through cheese.
And flinging the arm at the nuns of Alba 
as one would a bone to a dog 
he detained them long enough 
to mount the shroud on horseback 
and gallop away.

We are the holy relics,  
the scattered bones of a saint,  
the best loved bones of Spain.  
We seek each other.

Through the bitter winds of Ávila 
Teresa raced from the grave. 
She traveled at night, 
and briefly during the run she stopped 
to resuscitate a dying child 
with the edge of her bloodstained rag, 
paused to heal the fiery eyes of a shepherd. 
Toward the 88 towers and their indented embrasures 
they galloped. 
Through streets of Ávila, 
past highwalled houses where black eyes behind lattices 
starred down at the shroud riding on horseback. 
Into San José convent he took her 

and placed her upon a bright carpet. 
A small group gathered around, 
each held a flaming torch. 
All were crying.

Later, one witness described the corpse:
"The body is erect, though bent a little forward, 
as with old people. 
It can be made to stand upright, 
if propped with a hand between the shoulders, 
and this is the position they hold it 
when it is to be dressed or undressed, 
as though it were alive. 
The colour of the body 
is of the colour of dates; the face darker, 
because the veil became stuck to it, 
and it was maltreated more than the rest; 
nevertheless, it is intact. 
And even the nose is undamaged. 
The head has retained all its hair. 
The eyes, having lost their vital moisture, 
are dried up, but the eyelids are perfectly preserved. 
The moles on her face retain their little hairs. 
The mouth is tightly shut and cannot be opened. 
The shoulder from which the arm was severed 
exudes a moisture that clings to the touch 
and exhales the same scent as the body."

News of her disinterment spread. 
It reached the ears of the Duke of Alba. 
He petitioned the pope for the immediate return of the body.

Once more Teresa traveled, 
traveled at night 
away from the 88 towers. 
Through the bitter winds of Ávila 
she galloped toward her grave. 
Abbots on well-fed mules turned and gaped. 
Peasants stopped thrashing their corn. 
They followed the mysterious smell
and saw it cure a monk's malaria.
Through the gates of Alba
the priest rode.
He laid the shroud before the nuns.
Raising his torch high,
he uncovered the body.
"If these be the remains of your Foundress
acknowledge them before God."

Again she lay quietly
in her granite grave.
The third time she was exhumed,
a crowd gathered round,
eyes coveting her body.
Over-ardent fingers—
fingers that once had loved her—
pinched off pieces of her flesh.
A priest raised her one remaining hand,
gave a sharp twist snapping off two fingers.
Another grasped her right foot
and blessing her
severed it from her ankle.
A third fell upon her breast
and from her side
plucked three ribs.
Scrap of her bones they sold
to the aristocracy for money.
They auctioned tiny pieces of her fingernails
and one small white tooth.

Again they laid her in her grey stone grave.
And priests fell upon her body.
Her dried carnal husk
could still be torn into morsels.
They cut off her head,
laid it on a cushion of crimson satin
embroidered with silver and gold.
Like a crippled bird it lay,
left eye gouged out,
right eye protruding through full lashes,
its black lone gaze frozen.

A fifth time they dug her up years later.
A gaping hole where her heart had been ripped out
to be placed in a reliquary.
Three centuries later physicians would examine it,
would find a wound an inch and a half in length,
the edges of the wound charred
as though by a burning iron.
Above the high altar at Alba,
the fifth and final resting place,
lie the remains of a woman.

We are the holy relics,
the scattered bones of a saint,
the best loved bones of Spain.
We seek each other.
En el nombre de todas las madres que han perdido sus hijos en la guerra

Le cubro su cabecita,
mi criatura con sus piesecitos fríos.
Aqui lo tendré acurrucado en mis brazos
basta que me muera.
Parece años desde que estoy sentada aqui
en este charco de sangre.
Esto pasó esta mañana.

Cuando oí ese tiroteo
se me paró la sangre.
Con el niño dormido en mis brazos
corrí pa' fuera.
Trozos de tierra se levantaban,
volaban por todos rumbos.
Pedazos de ramas caían como lluvia,
una lluvia mojosa.
Vi a mis vecinos caer heridos,
la sangre chirispitando en mis brazos,
cayendo en su carita.

Unos soldados pecho a tierra
disparaban sus rifles
y más ayá vi unos hombres armados con ametralladoras,
disparaban a la gente, a los jacales.
Cerca de mis pies la balacera rompía la tierra.
Detrás de mí sentí mi jacal echó fuego,
un calor fuerte me aventó adelante.
Tres golpes en el pecho sentí, uno tras otro,
vi los agujeros en su camisita.

Sentí que el niño apretó su manita,
la que tenía alrededor de mi dedo gordo.
Sangre salió como agua aventada de una cubeta.
Cayó pintando las piedras
y las uñas de mis patas.
¿Quién hubiera creído
que un chiquitillo cargara tanta sangre?

Todo mundo olió a sangre.
Madre dios, ¿quién habrá cometido este mal?

Con un pedazo de mi falda,
le limpio su carita
salpicada de sangre.
Ayer Madre dios, un ojito le cuelga
y el otro no parpadea.
Ayer mi hijo, no pude atajarle la muerte.
Un duelo me sube como una fiebre.
¿Quién curará a mi hijo?

Mojo su cuerpecito.
Entre su pavoico meto su intestino.
Aplico a sus ojos agua fría.
Pongo su ojito izquierdo en su cuenca,
se le sale y se resbala por su mejilla.
Limpio la sangre en sus párpados.
Sopro sobre su carita,
sopro sobre sus cuevas.
Nueve veces soplo.
Sane, mi hijo, sano.

¿Qué voy hacer, Madre dios?
No siente alivio mi enfermito.
De aquí no me nuevo,
en este rincón de mi tierra me quedo,
aquí que me abandone mi destino.
Aqui me quedo
basta que mi hijo se baga polvo.
Aqui sentada,
viendo mis gruesos callos
en las plantas de los pies,
aqui viendo mis sandalias de hule
hinchadas con su sangre.
Aqui espantando las moscas,
viendo las sombras cuajadas de sangre.
Aqui me quedo basta que me pudra.
Toda la noche lo arrullo en mis brazos.
Saco la chiche,
se la arrimo a su boquita quebrada.
El nunca ha de beber.
El día amanece,
vivo a ver otro amanecer,
que extraño.

Tiendo al niño boca abajo
en mis piernas.
Le tapo su cara,
cubro sus huesitos rotos.
Me fijo hacia el cielo.
Busco su alma.
Alma de mijo, venga aquí a mis piernas.
Plumita ensangrada,
devuelva de los cinco destinos.
Mi inocente criatura
que no temía a nada,
que nunca lloraba,
ni cuando se le acercó la muerte.
Quiero saber si ha perdido el alma.
Aquí en mis naguas su cuerpecito,
cada hora más frío.

Te invoco Madre dios,
mujer de nuestro sustento.
¿Qué querías que hiciera, Madre mía?
Soy una pobre india.
A mi hijo no le tocaba,
no todavía no.
Estos agujeros en su pecho,
esto no es su destino.
Aquí me tiro en la tierra
soy sólo un quejido.
Le pido que alivie a mi hijo,
que le devuelva su alma.
¿Qué culpa tiene una criatura?
Sí, Madre dios,
yo traté de proteger a mis hijos.
Al mayor lo mataron en el llano.
Al segundo lo mataron en el cerro.

Y el mes pasado mataron a mi hija en el monte.
Ayyy se les acabó su destino.
Ya nada más me quedaba el chiquillo,
éste que está aquí cubierto con mi faldas.
Sí, este de los pueblos fríos.

Madre dios, quiero matar
a todo hombre que hace guerra,
que quebrá, que acaba con la vida.
Esta guerra me ha quitado todo.
¿Qué han hecho con nuestra tierra?
¿Pa' qué hacemos niños?
¿Pa' qué les damos vida?
¿Para qué sean masacrados?
¿Para qué los güeros
se burlen de la gente?
En sus ojos nosotros los indios
somos peores que los animales.

Mire como se me esta enfriando mi hijo.
Hijito, ¿por qué te quitaron la vida
antes de que aprendieras a andar?
Esta pestilencia, la guerra,
me ha quitado todo.
Esta enfermedad colorada
convierte todo a gusano.
De lugares remotos viene
este ataque contra el pueblo.

Me quiero morir, Madre dios,
que vengan más balas.
Aquí tieneme al corazón.
El resto de mí ya está muerto.
Madre dios, le suplico
en el nombre de todas las madres
que han perdido hijos en la guerra.
Madre dios, le pido que vaya,
tras de su alma,
básquelo, recójelo.
Letting Go

It's not enough
deciding to open.

You must plunge your fingers
into your navel, with your two hands
split open,
spill out the lizards and horned toads
the orchids and the sunflowers,
turn the maze inside out.
Shake it.

Yet, you don't quite empty.
Maybe a green phlegm
hides in your cough.
You may not even know
that it's there until a knot
grows in your throat
and turns into a frog.

It tickles a secret smile
on your palate
full of tiny orgasms.

But sooner or later
it reveals itself.
The green frog indiscreetly croaks.
Everyone looks up.

It's not enough
opening once.
Again you must plunge your fingers
into your navel, with your two hands
rip open,
drop out dead rats and cockroaches
spring rain, young ears of corn.
Turn the maze inside out.
Shake it.

This time you must let go.
Meet the dragon's open face
and let the terror swallow you.
—You dissolve in its saliva
—no one recognizes you as a puddle
—no one misses you
—you aren't even remembered
and the maze isn't even
of your own making.

You've crossed over.
And all around you space.
Alone. With nothingness.

Nobody's going to save you.
No one's going to cut you down,
cut the thorns thick around you.
No one's going to storm the castle walls nor
kiss awake your birth,
climb down your hair,
or mount you on the white steed.

There is no one who
will feed the yearning.
Face it. You will have
to do, do it yourself.
And all around you a vast terrain.
Alone. With night.
Darkness you must befriend if
you want to sleep nights.

It's not enough
letting go twice, three times,
a hundred. Soon everything is
dull, unsatisfactory.
Night's open face
interests you no longer.
And soon, again, you return.
to your element and
like a fish to the air
you come to the open
only between breathings.
But already gills
grow on your breasts.

I Had To Go Down

I hardly ever set foot on the floors below.
Creaking wood expanding contracting,
erratic ticking of the furnace
wild animal kicking at its iron cage
frighten me.

I don’t know what impelled me to go down.
I should have waited till morning.
The stairs were dark
dust devils eddied in the corners
and the fringes of unraveling carpet
nagged at one like an abandoned child
left too long in soiled diapers
dust streaking down my nightgown.

I lingered on the second floor
shivering in the cold
gripping my broom dustpan mop and pail.
I flicked on every light,
pulled down curtains thickened by time,
scraped the caked tears from the windows,
stripped the bed of its stiff sheets
carried my bundle down to the first floor.

I had to make a seam on the wall
pry the door open
with the claw end of the hammer.
I heard footsteps in the basement,
an intruder breaking in.
But it was only a flurry of rain drops
hitting the windowpane
or the wind knocking the candle out of my hand.

I stood among the winter trees
grey and leafless in the sunken yard
the sky vast and eternal.
I gathered the rotting wood.
It took me a time to light the fire.
The house filled with smoke
before I could flush out the leaves
and the hollow furry animal in the stove pipes
before I could plug up the tubing.

I couldn't put it off any longer.
I had to go down.
Did I keep the washer and dryer in the basement?
I swung the kerosene lamp before me.
The steps down had disappeared.
I saw them lying off to one side.
I would have to lower myself
and then drop,
hope not to break anything.

The dirt floor cushioned my fall.
A rank earth smell thickened the air
in the cavernous room
flanked by four smaller rooms
with arched openings.
I stepped on a clothes hanger
that my fright had turned soft
like a hose or a snake.
Spiderwebs shrouded the narrow windows.
I brushed them off with a broomstick.
A bit of moonlight came in.

A half fallen wall
stood in a pool of bricks,
bedsprings and headboards leaning against it.
And over a broken chair stretched a dress
fading slowly from crimson into mouse.
The lace around neck and sleeves lay limp
but when I touched it it was stiff.

I could find no machines
but I found a twin cement sink
squatting on four thick legs.
In place of spouts and handles
I saw a mouth and eyes.

A dark shape rose near the center.
It was a square cast-iron boiler
perched on a wooden platform.

I scraped the grime off the gauge
H.E. Smith, Massachusetts.
Pipes thick as my hips reared up from it,
smaller ones hung in rows across the ceiling.
It wasn't until I'd filled
the glass gauge with water
that I tripped over something
sticking out of the floor.

A gnarled root had broken through
into the belly of the house
and somehow a shoot
had sprung in the darkness
and now a young tree was growing
nourished by a nightsun.
Then I heard the footsteps again
making scuffling sounds
on the packed dirt floor.

It was my feet making them.
It had been my footsteps I'd heard.
Cagado abismo, quiero saber

por qué en los hielos de noviembre
arrastro mi bruto cuerpo hacia tu hocico
por qué en enero tiritando de frío espero abril.
Quiero saber, pinche abismo
por qué estoy rodeada de paredes
prisionera frente de una hambre
que no tiene nombre
por qué fui pendéjita, por qué soy desgraciada.
Te digo, you fucker, nunca quise
que tú lamieras mi boca con la tuya.

Aquí me tienes tronándome los dedos
encadenando el futuro con las barajas
enredándome más hondamente en tus barbas
haciéndome preguntas a Urano.
Quiero saber por qué el alma indomado
continúa rastreando
mi bruta carne sobre espinas de nopal.
Sin flautas y sin flores este viaje
de murciélago ciego va hacia tu rambo.
Nunca quise que tú mordieras mi boca.

Cagado abismo, quiero saber
por qué paso la vida aguantando
noches sin ti.
Quiero saber si pasaré mis días sola
haciéndome más piedra cada día.

Quiero saber por qué mi ser desnudo
pasa mudo de rodillas
tragándose el polvo de tus caminos.
Quiero saber por qué las sombras
se hinchan cada día,
por qué yo vivo cuando tú me quieres muerta.
Ya me di cuenta después de tantos años
que ser mujer no es cosa tan dichosa.
Querido abismo, nomás esto be querido:
que tú me quieras, que tú me devorarás.
¿Por qué no me arrebatas de una vez?

that dark shining thing
(for Sandra Rounds, Bessie Jo Faris, & Denise Brugman)

You've shut the door again
to escape the darkness
only it's pitch black in that closet.

Some buried part of you prevailed
elected me to pry open a crack
hear the unvoiced plea
see the animal behind the bars
of your eyelashes.

This is not new.
Colored, poor white, latent queer
passing for white
seething with hatred, anger
unaware of its source
crazed with not knowing
who they are
choose me to pick at the masks.

I am the only round face,
Indian-beaked, off-colored
in the faculty lineup, the workshop, the panel
and reckless enough to take you on.
I am the flesh you dig your fingernails into
mine the hand you chop off while still clinging to it
the face spewed with your vomit
I risk your sanity
and mine.

I want to turn my back on you
wash my hands of you
but my hands remember each seam
each nail embedded in that wall
my feet know each rock you tread on
as you stumble I falter too
and I remember
he/me/they who shouted
push Gloria breathe Gloria
feel their hands holding me up, prompting me
until I'm facing that pulsing bloodied blackness
trying to scream
from between your legs
feel again the talons raking my belly.
I remember hating him/me/they who pushed me
as I'm pushing you
remember the casing breaking
flooding the walls
remember opening my eyes one day
sensing that something was missing.

Missing was the pain, gone the fear
that all my life had walked beside me.
It was then I saw the numinous thing
it was black and it had my name
it spoke to me and I spoke to it.

Here we are four women stinking with guilt
you for not speaking your names
me for not holding out my hand sooner.
I don't know how long I can keep naming
that dark animal
coaxing it out of you, out of me
keep calling it good or woman-god
while everyone says no no no.

I know I am that Beast that circles your house
peers in the window
and that you see yourself my prey.

But I know you are the Beast
its prey is you
you the midwife
you that dark shining thing
I know it's come down to this:
viva o muerte, life or death.

Cihuatlyotl, Woman Alone

Many years I have fought off your hands, Raza
father mother church your rage at my desire to be
with myself, alone. I have learned
to erect barricades arch my back against
you thrust back fingers, sticks to
shriek no to kick and claw my way out of
your heart And as I grew you hacked away
at the pieces of me that were different
attached your tentacles to my face and breasts
put a lock between my legs. I had to do it,
Raza, turn my back on your crookening finger
beckoning beckoning your soft brown
landscape, tender nopalitos. Oh, it was hard,
Raza to cleave flesh from flesh I risked
us both bleeding to death. It took a long
time but I learned to let
your values roll off my body like water
those I swallow to stay alive become tumors
in my belly. I refuse to be taken over by
things people who fear that hollow
aloneness beckoning beckoning. No self,
only race vecindad familia. My soul has always
been yours one spark in the roar of your fire.
We Mexicans are collective animals. This I
accept but my life's work requires autonomy
like oxygen. This lifelong battle has ended,
Raza. I don't need to flail against you.
Raza inda mexicana norteamericana, there's no-
thing more you can chop off or
graft on me that will change my soul. I remain who I am, multiple
and one of the herd, yet not of it. I walk
on the ground of my own being browned and
hardened by the ages. I am fully formed carved
by the hands of the ancients, drenched with
the stench of today's headlines. But my own
hands whittle the final work me.
Por una mujer ladina
perdí la tranquilidad
ella me clavó una espina
que no la puedo arrancar.
—”Por una mujer ladina,” a Mexican corrido
La curandera

I'll tell you how I became a healer.
I was sick, my leg had turned white.
Sobrino went to Juan Dávila
asked if Juan Dávila knew
anyone who could cure me.
Yes, Juan Dávila told him,
there is a healer in Mexico.

Juan Dávila crossed the border
to bring the healer.
When Juan Dávila didn't come back,
Sobrino followed him and found the healer dead.
Sobrino's leg became white
Juan Dávila prayed and prayed
Sobrino died.
Juan Dávila thought,
"It doesn't matter if one is sick or not
what matters is that one thinks so."
In his mind Sobrino wanted to die
In his mind he thought he was dying
so he died.

The Border Patrol came
found el sobrino dead.
We'll take the body back to the other side, they said.
No, said Juan Dávila, I'll bury him here.
Under the ground it doesn't matter
which side of the border you're in.
When they were out of sight
Juan Dávila opened his eyes.

Juan Dávila went back across the border
The Border Patrol said no way.
She's dying, he told them, meaning me.
The Border Patrol let him through.
Juan Dávila found me in pain,
the maggots in my body ate my flesh,
my dress, my hair, my teeth.

When Juan Dávila went to bury me
the ground where my body had lain was empty.
There was nothing to bury.

Juan Dávila saw pain crawling toward him.
He backed away.
Still it followed him,
until he was pressed into the wall.
He watched the pain climb up his feet, legs.
When it reached his heart,
it began to eat him.
"My thoughts cause this," he cried out.
In his head he made a picture of the pain backing off,
of the pain sliding down his leg,
of the pain crawling toward the door.

Then Juan Dávila saw the pain turn around
and come back.
"If I must die, then I'll die," he said
looking at his leg turning white.
Juan Dávila kneeled to pray.
Juan Dávila saw the pain
crawling to where my body had lain.
He saw my clothes appear,
saw my dress begin to move,
saw me sit up and open my eyes.
"You're not dead," he said.
"You prayed for me to be well," I told him.
"No, I prayed for myself," he said.
"You are everyone, when you prayed for yourself,
you prayed for all of us."

Juan Dávila looked into my eyes,
saw the longing.
"You want to die, don't you," he said.
"No, I want to be with her, la virgen santísima.
"But you are with her," he said,
eyes clear like a child's.
"She is everywhere."
And I heard the wind begin to blow.
As I breathed the air in and out,
I breathed her in and out.
I walked into my jacal to lie down
and there on the floor by my bed,
lay Juan Dávila asleep.

Get up, Juan Dávila, get in the bed.
I lay in the bed and slept.
When I woke up I saw
squirming serpents on the floor
shiny serpents on the walls
serpents moving on the windows.
A small fear appeared and entered me.
I heard a big black snake say,
“We are your healing spirit guides.”
The serpents slithered off the walls
I couldn’t see them any more,
but I felt them all around me.
“What do I do now,” I asked them.
“We will teach you,” they said,
“but first you must gather the herbs.”

Juan Dávila and I went into the fields.
“No, this way,” Juan Dávila told me.
I smiled and followed him.
We found nothing but weeds.
“Curandera, you knew
there were no yerbitas here.”
“Oh, there’s a few,” I said.
“Look behind that big weed.”
Juan Dávila bent down,
saw a tiny romero plant.
When he reached out to pick it
I said, “No leave it, it’s too small.”

“The weeds are choking it,” he said,
“and it’s got no leaves.”
“Help it,” I told him.
“I’ll go get the hoe,” he said.
“No, there’s no time, the plant will die.

She needs room,” I said.
The weeds began to move back.
The romero began to grow.
The weeds moved further back.
“No, pendejos, let’s kill her,” said a big ugly quelite.
“No, she’s so pretty,” the others said holding him back.
The tiny romero grew and grew,
told them, “You’re pretty too.”
The weeds became long graceful grasses,
they bowed down to the romero.
Herbs of all kinds
poked their heads out of the earth
covered the fields.
I’ve been a curandera
since that day
and Juan Dávila has been my apprentice.
mujer cacto

La mujer del desierto
tiene espinas
las espinas son sus ojos
si te te le arrimás te arraña.
La mujer del desierto
tiene largas y afiladas garras.

La mujer del desierto mira la avispa
clarar su aguijón
y chingar a una tarántula
mira que la arrastra a un agujero
pone un huevo sobre ella
el huevo se abre
el bebé sale y se come la tarántula
No es fácil vivir en esta tierra.

La mujer del desierto
se entierra en la arena con los lagartos
se esconde como rata
pasa el día bajo tierra
tiene el cuero duro
no se reseca en el sol
vive sin agua.

La mujer del desierto
mete la cabeza adentro como la tortuga
desentierrea raíces con su hocico
junta con las javalinas
caza conejos con los coyotes.

Como un flor la mujer del desierto
no dura mucho tiempo
pero cuando vive llena el desierto
con flores de nopal o de árbol paloverde.

La mujer del desierto
enroscada es serpiente cascabel
descansa durante el día

por la noche cuando hace fresco
bulle con la lechuza,
con las culebras alcanza un nido de pájaros
y se come los huevos y los pichoncitos.

Cuando se noja la mujer del desierto
escape sangre de los ojos como el lagarto cornudo
cuando oye una seña de peligro
salta y corre como liebre
se vuelve arena
La mujer del desierto, como el viento
sopla, hace dunas, lomas.
Cuyamaca
(for Beth Brant and Chrystos)

"This tribe is the most numerous
and the most restless, stubborn,
haughty, warlike and hostile
toward us . . . ."
—Don Pedro Fages, 1787

Driving down the canyon
on a road gouged out of the side of the mountain
red red earth and exposed roots
sticking out like amputated fingers.
145 acres for sale
the Indians safely locked up in reservations
or urban ghettos.

Driving around the mountain
inside the car
fighting for silence.
Houses stick out like pimplles
on the face of the mountain.

At the skirt of the mountain ranges
I met a woman from a nearly extinct tribe,
the Kumeyaay.
Her name was Til'pu,
meaning Roadrunner.
By a stream amidst the gushing water
under the olive woolly head of the mountain
I met her.

Under the encina tree I sat.
She emerged out of the smooth amber flesh
of the manzanita,
in sandals of woven yucca,
skin polished bronze by the sun
she appeared
with a tattoo on her arm

pricked by cactus thorns
ground charcoal rubbed on the wound.

There's a forest fire in the Cuyamaca Peaks,
a sign: 4 Parcels For Sale,
the Indians locked up in reservations
and Til'pu behind glass in the museum.
My Black Angelos

In the night I hear her soft whimper
wild masses of hair
rustling in the silence.

Una mujer vaga en la noche
and.errante con las almas de los muertos.

Aiii aiii aiii
She is crying for the dead child
the lover gone, the lover not yet come:
Her grito splinters the night
fear drenches me.
I stink of carrion,
she turns upwind tracking me.
Her teeth reflect the fire
from her rouged eyes
my black Angelos,
la bruja con las uñas largas,
I hear her at the door.

Taloned hand on my shoulder
behind me putting words, worlds in my head
turning, her hot breath
she picks the meat stuck between my teeth
with her snake tongue
sucks the smoked lint from my lungs
with her long black nails
plucks lice from my hair.

Aiii aiii aiii
She crawls into my spine
her eyes opening and closing,
shining under my skin in the dark
whirling my bones twirling
till they're hollow reeds.

Aiii aiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii
Una mujer vaga en la noche
Creature of Darkness

Three weeks I've wallowed
in this deep place
    this underplace
    this grieving place
getting heavier and heavier
sleeping by day creeping out at night

Nothing I can do
nothing I want to do
but stay small and still in the dark
no thought I want not to think
    that stirs up the pain
    opens the wound
    starts the healing

I don't want it to stop
I want to sit here and pick at the scabs
    watch the blood flow
    lick the salt from my face
while all the time
    a part of me cries Stop Stop

Behind that voice
shadows snicker
    No, we like it here in the dark
    we like sitting here with our grief
    and our longing

This is where we live
Home, they whisper
We're a creature of darkness.

A lump of me says
What are you hiding
    under that black log
    that grey fog
        a pink salamander
        a mole without eyes

Oh creature of darkness
    creature of night
    creature of the light.

I let my friends think
I'm doing a gig
somewhere on the other coast
They would come around
    coax me out of the deep
    no one must find me here in the dark

So I feed that hole to stifle the loss
    to muffle the loss
    to smother the loss
but its mouth grows and grows
    and I grow fat
    and I grow numb
sole inhabitant of this dark underplace
    this grieving place
no one must find me suspended in darkness
    soft furry body
    loose hanging skin
swinging upside down
to the yierp yierp of bats

Three weeks I rocked with that wide open maw
    refusing to move
    barely daring to breathe
    sinking deeper
    growing great with mouth
        a creature afraid of the dark
        a creature at home in the dark.
Antigua, mi diosa

Descalza, gateando a ciegas voy
sigo tus huellas ligeras y tu linaje viejo.
con astillas en las rodillas voy.
Furtiva, con paso de tortuga
camino bajo la noche desaforada.
Antigua, mi diosa, por ti sacrificé
las plantas de mis pies.
Acantilada por tus ojos vulnerada voy,
testiga de este largo invierno.

En medio de un chillido de trenes
veniste a las ruinas de Brooklyn
con tu sonido de cascabeles.
Tu voz un millón de alas.
Como un chubasco veniste
oliendo a almendras quemadas y copal.

Me diste tu golpe de hacha
cay como un árbol despetalando mis ojos.
Te tendiste a mi lado, tus dedos cantando como espadas
haciendo dibujos en mi cara.

Me entraste por todas las rendijas
con tu luz llenaste el hueco de mi cuerpo.

Me consumaste enterita,
si, mi antigua diosa,
sembraste tus semillas de luz
en los surcos de mi cuerpo.
La cosecha; esta inquietud
que se madura en agonía.
Y ahora huyes en mis entrañas como un animal.
Toditito ha cambiado, nada me satisface.
Ancient, querida, parece que no tengo cara.

Hace diez meses que me hago y me deshago—
que tarea inacabable tu me dejaste.
No te puedo darme no,
no me puedo entregar a tu regazo.
¿Cómo? si nunca me be dado a mí misma.
Antigua, mi madre, ya no soy dueña
ni de mis desengaños.
Tú acabaste con todo eso.

Deseos insepultos velan la noche
Mira como me has aruinado.
No tengo remedio.

Este pobre cuerpo renacido
tres veces ha resucitado.
La última vez me sentenciaste
con esta aflicción:
 años y años de tu ausencia.
Que gran desbandada me pediste.
Y ahora por todas las tierras vulnerada te busco.
Antigua, tu hija errante no puede alcanzarte.

Deme otra señá,
otra migaja de su luz.
Mi incendiada piel urge el saberte.
Antigua, mi diosa, quiero brotar otra vez
en tu negrísima piel.
I will love you, love you even if I die,
I will love you the next day as well,
I will love you, love you as I feel,
I will love you with good-bye and never again.

—translated by Rina Benmayor and Juan Flores
Arriba mi gente
(para Tirsa Quiñones who wrote the music and Cherrie Moraga who sang it)

Chorus: Arriba mi gente,
toda gente arriba.
In spirit as one,
all people arising
Toda la gente junta
en busca del Mundo Zurdo
en busca del Mundo Zurdo

Un pueblo de almas afines
encenderemos los campos
con una llamamarada morada—
la lumbre del Mundo Zurdo.

Chorus

Ya no, sin fe, mi gente
camino entre ilusiones
de muebles, perro, cielo
sin libro, letra. Herida.
Y con mi gente
andando mi vida
voy dando mi mensaje.

Mi gente, despierta,
limpia la Madre Tierra.
Y entre la llama púrpura
allí renaceremos
allí renaceremos.

Chorus

Hijas de la Chingada,
born of the violated india,
guerrilleras divinas—
mujeres de fuego ardiente
que dan luz a la noche oscura
dan lumbre al Mundo Zurdo

Chorus

¡Volveremos!
Prenderemos la guerra de bien adentro
con esa luz del alma.
En esta noche Zurda
renacerá el Espíritu
de nuestra Tierra.

Retornará nuestra antigua fe
y levantará el campo.
Arriba, despierten, mi gente
a liberar los pueblos.

In spirit as one
all people arising.

En esta noche Zurda, mi vida,
mirar nuestras trescientas luces
y ver la llamamarada morada
la lumbre del Mundo Zurdo.

Chorus

Levantémonos, Raza
mujeres de séptimo rayo
que ya llegamos y aquí estamos.
Arriba, despierta mi gente
a liberar los pueblos
Arriba mi gente, despierta.
To live in the Borderlands means you
are neither hispana india negra española
ni gabacha, eres mestiza, mulata, half-breed
caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from;

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the india in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that mexicanas call you rajetas,
that dening the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;

Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a burra, buey, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half—both woman and man, neither—
a new gender;

To live in the Borderlands means to
put b'ile in the borscht,
eat whole wheat tortillas,
speak Tex-Mex with a Brooklyn accent;
be stopped by la migra at the border checkpoints;

Living in the Borderlands means you fight hard to
resist the gold elixer beckoning from the bottle,
the pull of the gun barrel,
the rope crushing the hollow of your throat;

In the Borderlands
you are the battleground
where enemies are kin to each other;
you are at home, a stranger,
the border disputes have been settled
the volley of shots have shattered the truce
you are wounded, lost in action
dead, fighting back;

To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead;

To survive the Borderlands
you must live sin fronteras
be a crossroads.

gabacha—a Chicano term for a white woman
rajetas—literally,"split," that is, having betrayed your word
burra—donkey
buey—oxen
sin fronteras—without borders
**Canción de la diosa de la noche**  
(for Randy Conner)

I am a vine  
creeping down the moon.  
I have no keeper.

I fall into this world.  
The Mother, catching me in her net,  
entangles me in human flesh.

I wander on a path  
come to the patio of a ruined temple.  
Flutes lure me to a fire.  
A litany fondles my hip  
horns pin me to the ground.  
To cast out the brute,  
I shake earth, air, fire, and water  
in the lunar sistrum.  
I devour the roses of Isis.

I pass  
through the gate,  
come to the path on the left,  
past the wellspring  
beside the gnarled cypress.

At the crossroads  
where her spirit shocks  
she comes sweeping  
through the night,  
spirits and hounds  
baying behind her.  
Her wings keep me warm.  
Three jackals  
watch with me.

I am the gate  
demons and vanquished gods invade  
then pass into this world to get to you.

---

I do not want to keep to myself,  
but none see the brand on my forehead  
save you and the few who can look me in the face.  
I pass unseen, my shawl wrapped around me.  
Choosing to walk alone, I return to myself.

Daily, the present menaces,  
Splinters fly from my eyes,  
pricking liars and fools.  
Thorns and thistles grow in my hair  
drawing the blood  
of you who embrace me.

I am mad  
but I choose this madness.  
The godhead is unstrung.  
He has a grudge against me and all flesh.  
He rejects the dark within the flame.  
As for me, I renounce my kinship  
with the whole and all its parts,  
renounce my fealty to nature.

A black cock crows three times.  
Casting no shadow,  
I wake from drunkenness  
holding my own hand.  
Cloaked in panther skin,  
I sound the maddening cymbals.

I slip my knots and garments,  
utter the first no.  
It begins where it ends.

Memory  
ignites like kindling  
the time when I filled the sky.  
Parting brought death.  
Now, I drum on the carcass of the world  
creating crises to recall my name.  
The filth you relegate to Satan,
I absorb. I convert.
When I dance it burgeons out
as song.

I seek la diosa
darkly awesome.
In love with my own kind,
I know you and inspirit you.
All others flee from me.

I buff the old scratches from bone.
With flint knife, cut in our marks.
I keep the moon from bleeding
and the sun from turning black.
But water drains from the earth.

Terror seizes me.
Death's warm hand on me.
Night, unfurl your wings
and your long hair over me.
Bring your breast
to my mouth and never wean me.

With chant I break the spell,
disperse the watchers from the gates.
Wake the sleepers.
With my fist I rive
a hole in the wall:

the winds rush in,
I am the gate no longer.
You are the gate.

The deep below, the deep above.
The waters overflow.

It begins where it ends,
I descend into black earth,
dark primordial slime,
no longer repellent to me,

nor confining.
The four winds
fire weds splinter with splinter.
I find my kindred spirits.

The moon eclipses the sun.
La diosa lifts us.
We don the feathered mantle
and charge our fate.
No se raje, chicanita  
(para Missy Anzaldúa)

No se raje mi prietita,  
apriétese la faja aguántese.  
Su linaje es antiquísimo,  
sus raíces como las de los mesquites,  
bién plantadas, horadando bajo tierra  
a esa corriente, el alma de tierra madre—tu origen.

Sí mi'jita, su gente se creó en los ranchos  
aquí en el Valle cerquita del río Grande  
en la mera frontera.  
en el tiempo antes de los gabachos  
cuando Tejas era México  
De los primeros vaqueros descendiste  
allá en los Vergeles, en Jesús María—tierra Dávila  
Mujeres fuertísimas te crearon:  
tu mamá, mi hermana, mi madre, y yo.

Y sí, nos han quitado las tierras.  
Ya no nos queda ni el camposanto  
donde enterraron a Don Urbano, tu vis-visabuelo.  
Tiempo duros como pastura los cargamos  
derechitas caminamos.

Pero nunca nos quitarán ese orgullo  
de ser mexicana-Chicana-tejana  
ni el espíritu indio.  
Y cuando los gringos se acaban—  
mira como se matan unos a los otros—  
aquí vamos a parecer  
con los horned toads y los lagartijos  
survivors del First Fire Age, el Quinto Sol.

Quizá muriéndonos de hambre como siempre  
p ero una nueva especie  
piel entre negra y bronze  
segunda pestaña bajo la primera  
con el poder de mirar al sol ojos desnudos.  
Y vivas, mi'jita, retevivas.

Sí, se me hace que en unos cuantos años o siglos  
la Raza se levantará, lengua intacta  
cargando lo mejor de todas las culturas.  
Esa víbora dormida, la rebeldía, saltará.  
Como cuero viejo caerá la esclavitud  
de obedecer, de callar, de aceptar.  
Como víbora relampagueando nos moveremos, mujercita.  
¡Ya verás!
Don’t Give In, Chicanita
(para Missy Anzaldúa)

Don’t give in mi prietita
tighten your belt, endure.
Your lineage is ancient,
your roots like those of the mesquite
firmly planted, digging underground
toward that current, the soul of tierra madre—
your origin.

Yes, m’ijita, your people were raised en los ranchos
here in the Valley near the Rio Grande
you descended from the first cowboy, the vaquero,
right smack in the border
in the age before the Gringo when Texas was Mexico
over en los ranchos los Vergeles y Jesús María—
Dávila land.
Strong women reared you:
my sister, your mom, my mother and I.

And yes, they’ve taken our lands.
Not even the cemetery is ours now
where they buried Don Urbano
your great-great-grandfather.
Hard times like fodder we carry
with curved backs we walk.

But they will never take that pride
of being mexicana-Chicana-tejana
nor our Indian woman’s spirit.
And when the Gringos are gone—
see how they kill one another—
here we’ll still be like the horned toad and the lizard
relics of an earlier age
survivors of the First Fire Age—el Quinto Sol.

Perhaps we’ll be dying of hunger as usual
but we’ll be members of a new species
skin tone between black and bronze

second eyelid under the first
with the power to look at the sun through naked eyes.
And alive m’ijita, very much alive.

Yes, in a few years or centuries
la Raza will rise up, tongue intact
carrying the best of all the cultures.
That sleeping serpent,
rebellion-(r)evolution, will spring up.
Like old skin will fall the slave ways of
obedience, acceptance, silence.
Like serpent lightning we’ll move, little woman.
You’ll see.

—translated from the Spanish by the author