

5-2011

Awake: A young adult novel in verse

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AWAKE: A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL
IN VERSE

A Thesis

by

MINERVA VASQUEZ

Submitted to the Graduate School of
The University of Texas-Pan American
In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2011

Major Subject: Creative Writing

AWAKE: A YOUNG ADULT NOVEL
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May 2011

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ABSTRACT

Vasquez, Minerva, Awake: A Young Adult Novel in Verse. Master of Fine Arts (MFA), May, 2011, 162 pp.

This project is a manuscript for a YA novel written in verse and represents the type of YA literature I hope to publish after graduating. *Awake* chronicles the story of Alejandra de Luna, a high school student from the Rio Grande Valley who must come to terms with an abusive home situation, while at the same time struggling to find her place and her voice as an artist, writer, daughter, and young Latina. To complicate her world more, she begins to dream of Tenochtitlan, the former capital of the Aztec Empire. She experiences Aztec culture as one of patriarchy and violence through the dialogue of several Aztec characters, one of which crosses the threshold of time to become part of Alejandra.

DEDICATION

To my husband, Jaime: Thank you for your continual encouragement and support in my goal to be a published novelist, without which the completion of my thesis manuscript would not have been possible. To my children, David, Celeste, and Jaime: Thank you for being you and for believing in Mommy.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First, my success in life and in writing this novel would not have been possible without the blessing of creative genius provided to me by God. Second, I would like to thank my family once again—my husband, Jaime, and three children, David, Celeste, and Jaime, for the excessive support they have given me throughout this three-year long MFA journey. Last, I'd like to thank my thesis director, Emmy Pérez, and my thesis committee members, Dr. Marci McMahan and Dr. William Broz. To Emmy, thank you for always making me feel like a real writer. I am so glad I took my first poetry workshop with you back in 2008. To Marci and Bill, thank you for accepting the invitation to be members of my committee and for helping me update the content of my critical introduction and providing feedback for my YA novel.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

As a girl growing up in a family of eight in Mercedes, Texas, I was eager to read anything I could get my hands on including a 1970's set of encyclopedias in my older brother's bedroom. I slept on a cot in my parents' bedroom, while the rest of the girls shared one pink bedroom. We all slept with the *ventanas* open at night and had no room to breathe, much less hold any books or keep any personal space for writing.

Although I had heard of Rolando Hinojosa Smith, a native writer from my hometown of Mercedes, Texas, I never seriously considered writing as a career because in my mind writers were not born in little Tex-Mex border cities with the occasional *baile* or *quinceañera* at the Knights' of Columbus dance hall. Mercedes, where adults were primarily working class Hispanics, and we, the graduating class of 1992 wanted to at least be middle class Hispanics. We had realistic career goals like teaching, medicine, or business. Nineteen years later, both my husband and I are teachers, and our kids have never slept next to a space heater nor scraped their knees on dirt and rock driveways.

Now three years have passed since I started my path to "authorhood" and sat in my first poetry workshop with Professor Emmy Pérez at UT-Pan American. Most of my creative works for the MFA program have featured a YA voice, and when I am not busy being a wife, mother, teacher, servant of God, and graduate student, I read, blog, and write YA, voraciously above anything else. My goal as a writer is to create works of fiction with literary merit that are

accessible to a young adult and adult audience. By literary merit, I mean memorable narrators and an aesthetic structure of lyrical words, images, and forms, as I have attempted to include in *Awake*, my thesis manuscript for a YA verse novel.

Awake chronicles a few months from the life of Alejandra de Luna, a 17 year old student at Weslaco East High school who is grappling with more than just the usual teenage concerns of studying, dating, and socializing. Her view of the world and of self has been shaped by the domestic abuse in her home. She has learned to be quiet and not question, to write her pain on paper or canvas through journal entries, poetry, and art, but she keeps most of her personal life hidden from everyone. In the midst of trying to cope with the abuse her father inflicts on her mother, she begins to have a series of Aztec dreams in which she learns about the lives of Papanzín and Mayahuel the patriarchal, violent society where they reside. At the same time, Alejandra is reading a multitude of Latina/o texts, and these two things, the dreams and the readings, are helping her understand the legacy of Mexican American culture and the plight of women dating back to indigenous societies. Alejandra and her mother are facing the same stories and patterns of violence against women from 500 years before; however, a contemporary setting provides them with more opportunity to escape victimization at the hands of men and adds the border culture of South Texas. By the end of the novel, Alejandra envisions a life free from abuse even if it includes a fresh start without any of her family.

I am attempting to write literary YA, taking risks with form and style that may prove to be a challenge for a younger YA audience. For instance, two poems from the section “Women Songs” feature multiple narrative voices to create visual dream sequences. The core of both poems is found in the dialogue between two young Aztec women, Papanzín and Mayahuel. The

dialogue occurs during a dream state experienced by the main character, Alejandra, a contemporary teenager from the Rio Grande Valley:

September 23, Two Aztecas—Wednesday's Dream

Papanzín motions with her hand. *Come, Mayahuel,*

I've been waiting. For you. For your gifts.

(The agave falls to the ground. The pitcher
shatters to pieces, breaking the water)

But you are ghost, whispers Mayahuel.

(into woman, fractured and goddess, skin waves of sun.) (85)

The dialogue pushes the plot forward and provides distinctive voices for the indigenous characters, while a third narrative voice written within parenthesis and between the dialogue is Alejandra's interpretive view of the external elements, or the action taking place during the dream.

Since Alejandra is an artist and enjoys using lyrical language in her journal entries, she is at liberty to bring out her dreams as visual images and elevate her use of language to match the tone of the dialogue between the Aztec characters. Alejandra wants to interpret the action, the agave and pitcher falling to the ground, in surreal terms to match what she is seeing, experiencing, in her dream state.

With *Awake*, I want to bring out Alejandra's voice to speak as a young Latina from the Rio Grande Valley, living in a home environment of oppression and trying to develop a sense of identity. By speaking her thoughts with words and art, Alejandra develops a sense of

empowerment. Her words and art will comprise a new, everyday voice, her new Latina voice as a fourth generation teenager who has not grown up with significant barriers based on race and poverty like those of her parents. She is an upper-middle class teenager and has not experienced some of the struggles others in her community have faced before or are still facing. The borders Alejandra experiences are those imposed by self and those she has allowed others to impose on her.

Being a teacher, I recognize that Alejandra's voice is different than the ones young people have been exposed to in many Latina/o texts used in high school curriculums. She lives in an area where Mexican Americans make up the majority of the population, and she also represents a segment of the Rio Grande Valley my children belong to —Mexican Americans who have been blessed with material gain possibly denied to their parents, grandparents, and anybody else who came before them. This is not to say the Valley does not still have significant areas of poverty and a high number of families labeled as having low socio-economic status, but *Awake* does not focus on this segment of the population.

Merging Forms

Poetry and playwriting have had a significant impact on my growth as a writer, and more so playwriting, since by the end of my second year in the MFA program, I had already written a full play, *Eternal Dance*, and a significant portion of a critical introduction for a playwriting thesis. I returned to writing a YA narrative for my thesis when my inner novelist voice reminded me I did not actually want to be a playwright; therefore, I should use my play as the basis for a YA manuscript and incorporate poetic technique by writing a novel in verse. As a result, I have been able to incorporate all three genres in writing *Awake*.

The study of YA verse novels and an understanding of episodic narrative structure are two things that have helped my novel become fully fleshed out; however, without *Awake* having first been a play, I would have had a lot less direction and been prone to use a non-linear construction out of my lack of organized thought. *Eternal Dance* and *Awake* are two halves of a whole, converging through the symbolic and aesthetic quality of poetry.

Writing a verse novel allows for more experimental forms and abstract thought through the use poetry and the conceptual stage world of speaker, environment, and aesthetics, written in lines and performed through the page. Less dialogue and narration is necessary since the poetry is both dialogue and narration from the speaker's perspective. What results is non-linear, episodic events mirroring the fragmentary social language of most people, especially teenagers. Since *Awake* is told in a series of journal entries, Alejandra is able to jump in and out of time and narrate events with a specific aesthetic design, whether it be free verse poems, multiple narrators, or play structure.

I have seen in my years as a high school teacher that adolescents are prone to view their lives as a progression of events without clear connection or chronology, yet still making up the whole of their young existence and creating their own truth. As for communication within their peer group, many teenagers move from topic to topic in fragmentary ideas, and even when focusing on a current situation in their lives, they weave counter stories and new events relating to the situation. They waver between present, past, and possible future. This is what I aim to achieve in *Awake* and through Alejandra's poetic, journal entries.

One of the reasons I initially chose playwriting as a possible thesis focus was because of the pull of stage realism and theatricality. If the world of the stage is not real, then playwrights can create worlds and settings that best bring out their characters and themes to move an

audience. The complexity and challenge of playwriting comes from the visualization of the world as depicted on the stage, since according to Sam Smiley and Norman E. Bert in *Playwriting: The Structure of Action*, the “conception of the world reflected in the play controls the manner in which the drama is carried out in words, characterizations, and scenery” (274). The stage only reflects reality, and in that sense, the stage is a dream world where characters represent human interaction, conflict, and action with high theatricality and fantastical elements rather than realism. This dream world is now a central part of my novel.

The stage world of the my novel, *Awake*, is divided into a pre-conquest Aztec setting and a present day setting in Weslaco, Texas, connected by a burial vault acting as a border symbol, allowing indigenous, ethnic roots to pass through to the contemporary time. The burial vault serves as a portal from the indigenous world only known through historical documentation to a new, contemporary world where patterns of the old continue in some form through collective consciousness passed from cultural and ethnic lines either to bring oppression or strength. In an interview with Bridget Kevane and Juanita Heredia, playwright Cherríe Moraga states women possess a “primordial state of female hunger” (107). She goes on to explain how this “hunger is prememory” and how the hunger for being and for empowerment is undermined by “patriarchal myths” (107). It is this hunger that first emerges in *Awake* with Alejandra’s journal entry “August 30, 2010, Local News” (59). Alejandra recognizes she must help her mother say yes to change and escape rather than spend so much time studying for school.

The stage world and characters that originated in *Eternal Dance* would probably make for a spectacular revisionist historical novel, but writing narration is not one of my strongest points at the moment because of my previous focus on playwriting and poetry. So the next best option, and the one that works better with the dream structure of the storyline, is the verse novel.

The verse novel began to emerge in the YA genre in the mid 1990's by writers who were attempting to crack the boundaries of YA literature, with one of the earliest being *Make Lemonade* by Virginia Euwer Wolff in which the narrative is broken into lines similar to poetry to better match the voice and style of the teenage protagonist (Crowe 117). Some may argue this is not real poetry, but I see the novel as taking risk with form and making a way for other YA novelists to develop the verse novel more fully.

The general stylistic elements of the YA verse novels written in the last two decades include a present tense, first person narration by a teenage protagonist, and chapters or vignettes of one or two page poems ending with strong lines of free verse to provide closure and allow readers to move on without being bogged down by the emotional intensity of the poetry (Campbell 611). My novel follows this description of YA verse novels very closely with several chapters ending in lines that are longer, set apart from other verses, drawing a conclusion, or encapsulating Alejandra's immediate reaction or awareness towards a specific event.

For instance, "November 12, Wishing for San Antonio" reflects the speaker's thoughts after a physical attack from her father and ends with the lines "I will float on my back, / under restaurant umbrellas— / magenta, turquoise, green. / Mexican violins at my ear. / My bruises / concealed / in water" (138). Another example can be seen in "August 21, I Don't Feel" when Alejandra leaves the reader with a final impression of her home life:

Las lavandas, purple in bloom, cry

behind backyard fence.

They are what I know,

only place I've been. (43)

The verse novel continues its growing significance in contemporary young adult literature by YA authors such as Patricia McCormick and Ellen Hopkins who feature first person teenage voices grappling with sensitive topics. McCormick's novel, *Sold*, a 2007 *National Book Award* finalist and Hopkins' novel, *Burned*, a 2006 nominee for the *ALA Best Books for Young Adults*, have both been very influential in my goals as a YA author. Both are written in free verse and told from the perspective of teenage girls dealing with violence against women. My novel more closely resembles *Burned* in that both protagonists have first-hand experience with domestic abuse stemming from a father's downward descent with alcoholism.

In *Awake*, the free verse is focused on the artistic and aesthetic elements of poetry, and most of the poems are more than progression of plot. Some poems in *Awake* are an attempt by Alejandra to be a poet; therefore, line breaks and endings show a considerable amount of conscious effort to leave readers with a certain image before moving on to the next line. Or, the speaker reveals her dreams of Aztec history and culture through the lens of a contemporary teen who enjoys various forms of media. For instance, "October 8, Back to Dreams" begins with the following line: "A scene from Aztec Terminator" (102). Also, the section titled "Aztlán" does not recount a specific event, but rather reveals the concept of a collective consciousness that continues cultural traditions. Alejandra reveals this concept by using enjambment with the word "gatekeepers" and by using details she is familiar with based on her knowledge: "They are the gate— / keepers of flame / mist. / Keepers of myths. / Aztlán in sleep and dream" (157). The gatekeepers are the priests serving in the Aztec temples, and she sees them as proponents of patriarchal tradition who keep vigil with an alter of fire. The speaker has taken this image from literary and media portrayals of religion, including pagan mythology, Eastern belief systems, and Judeo-Christian practices.

The verse novel in YA literature has allowed for other forms of experimental writing in the genre, with one of the most notable being *Monster* by Walter Dean Myers, the *Printz Award* winner for 2000, written as a multi-genre novel including the personal journal and screenplay forms (Crowe 117). These are two structures I use in my novel since most chapters are written as free-verse journal entries while other chapters are comprised of poetic dialogue with minimal narration and staging directions. In the following excerpt from *Awake*, a journal entry from the section “Aztec Films,” Alejandra records her dream as a screenplay. She takes liberty in changing industry mandated screenplay form, to create her own version, one that makes better sense to her as a poet:

October 9, Coming to a Theatre Near You

My dream, a cinematic experience.

Fade in: to Aztec grandeur. The exterior at twilight.

SHE.

Papanzín standing against a backdrop

blazing in reds, golds, blues, greens, and Montezuma’s shadow.

I have seen a vision in sleep.

HE.

Sounds of thunder rise, a forewarning of Montezuma’s presence,

unseen, unheard. Then he speaks. He reverberates

in god-king voice.

In death. (104)

The challenge in writing a YA verse novel is making the literary aspects more accessible to a young adult audience whose primary tastes run the way of *Twilight* and *Vegan Virgin Valentine*, both genre fiction. According to a study conducted by Melanie D. Koss and William H. Teale for the *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literature*, the majority of YA falls under contemporary realism (566). But even with contemporary realism, not all YA is deemed as literary by YA reviewers since many of the books deal with “typical teenage life” (567) and are written in a voice and style of mass, mainstream production.

Vegan Virgin Valentine by Carolyn Mackler is what many teen girls would describe as good chick-lit YA reading, but the novel would not find a place in the classroom alongside Alice Munro’s *Lives of Girls and Women*. Both follow a first person narrative from a teen girl’s perspective, chronicling a period of growth and maturity. But, what separates them? A rich development of setting, character, and theme. Also, Munro’s novel is not true YA. It is adult fiction with a storyline and theme appealing to a younger audience, featuring a protagonist who has already matured and possesses the hindsight to understand how personal trials and events have shaped her adult identity.

Where does *Awake* fit in? I hope more along the lines of Munro since I wrote *Awake* as literary YA, only making up about a fourth of the novels in the study conducted by Koss and Teale (568). Of course, YA books with a very literary style are usually the award winners as chosen by adults (568). More specifically, *Awake* fits in with the 37 percent of YA novels with non-traditional structure and the 3 percent of YA written in verse (568). *Awake* is non-traditional in that it is told through a series of personal diary entries, some of which recount the story of two Aztec girls from 16th century central Mexico. And, to make it more non-traditional, all of the journal entries are told in verse.

The bigger question, however, relates to how Latina/o literature fits in with a contemporary young adult readership and how *Awake* fits in this context. The study by Koss and Teale reveals a majority of YA books focus only on one cultural group, with the most highly represented being European American. Of the twenty percent labeled as multicultural, none of the books feature American minority groups such as Latina/o, Asian American, or Native American (566). As a teacher I know books such as *Bless Me, Ultima* by Rudolfo Anaya and *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros have found their way into mainstream high school curriculums, but Latina/o texts are not well represented in the YA genre, and even less so are novels dealing with the unique border region of deep South Texas and fourth generation Mexican American youth.

YA Latina/o Texts

In 1996 *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* by Victor Martinez won the *National Book Award for Young People's Literature*, bringing experimental forms inherent in adult Latina/o literature to YA audience (Nies 4). *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* contributes to a small segment of Chicano YA by using “literary experimentation to highlight the discursive nature of identity,” and Martinez’s poetry background is evident in prose rich in metaphor and his use of an episodic style like Sandra Cisneros (4).

The episodic style allows Cisneros to treat story and character through seemingly separate scenes framed together by a search for identity in a society promoting assimilation without providing equal opportunity. With Cisneros the vignettes read like poems and provide snapshots of images from her environment. *Awake* relates to *The House on Mango Street* with the use of poetic journal entries that bring out Alejandra’s feelings and ideas regarding her

situation. She matches Esperanza's need to "escape the oppressive conditions of home and the limited options it affords her" and find an eventual return home "through writing, through revision" where the "community replaces home" (Nies 8). Esperanza experiences a new level of consciousness, recognizing the broader sense of home in the community of her youth. In *Awake*, Alejandra is forced to leave home after a fire kills both her parents, and she does not indicate whether she will return to Weslaco later in her life since she hopes to find a new home, a place of safety with her brother. Her new consciousness occurs as Alejandra begins to conceptualize the Chicana/o vision of Aztlán as a homeland for all who lack a place in society, similar to the idea expressed in Cherríe Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Medea*.

Further, the most important stylistic influence for my own writing comes directly from Cisneros and the lyrical, poetic vignettes in *The House on Mango Street*. I don't know when I last read it, but I do know I have taught it off and on in my teaching career. I have not had a chance to review or breakdown the literary structure of *The House on Mango Street*, but even so there are portions of *Awake* that sound like Cisneros in pacing, verb usage, and images. In the entry "September 6, Under My Bed" Alejandra describes a painting, "The Lady of Shallot," hanging in her bathroom using a similar cadence as Esperanza's voice: "Her ghost looks / back from the mirror where I comb my hair brown like new mud. Where Mami dries my hair. / Where Mami sometimes looks sad too. / Is beautiful. / The Lady and my Mami" (70).

YA Chicana/o literature reflects the adult literary forms of ethnic identity influenced by gender (Nies 9). *The House on Mango Street* was not written as YA and matches the Chicana feminism developing in the 1980's that "railed against the confining nature of the home, pointing to the weight of patriarchal beliefs in Chicano culture and religion, and the attendant virgin/whore dichotomies that pervades Chicano fiction" (Nies 8). *Awake* follows this tradition

as well, but to a lesser degree since Alejandra is an American teenager who lives in a time period not closely aligned with the movement and who is grappling more with the hypocrisy of her home, acceptance within her peer group, first love, and other teen issues. She does rebel against her father by having a boyfriend, allowing him to sneak into her room, and talking back to her father when he has to take her to school. She also becomes more vocal and openly defiant with her mother. Her oppressive home goes beyond patriarchal authority to alcoholism and abuse, with her mother fulfilling the role of obedient wife even in the face of violence. Although the indigenous becomes part of her, Alejandra is not a sudden-made, political Chicana feminist just because she reads a few excerpts from Gloria Anzaldúa.

Alejandra is unaware of Mayahuel. Mayahuel only exists in Alejandra, but Alejandra does not know this. She accepts the power without being aware of where the power comes from, and it could very well just be the rebellious teen coupled with the realization her life doesn't have to be like what she lives, especially knowing her brother has escaped and has possibly created a different life for himself. It could also be her belief in God, although she doesn't often show her faith in the novel. She prays briefly and sporadically when situations in her life become overwhelming, but she does attend an evangelical church on a regular basis, and the Biblical teachings she has heard for several years manifest themselves in the poem "Engulfed, November 19" when she breaks free from a demonic spirit: "Last thing I say, 'By the authority of God, your power is rendered useless!'" (151).

Alejandra is only a teenager and realistically cannot stop the cycle of abuse for her mother, but can stop it for herself. For now she is a teenager with a small plan for escape. And, *Awake* joins the ranks of Latina/o texts with an "emphasis on border crossings, so endemic to the adult tradition" (Nies 9). Her story also depicts a region not seen in YA multicultural literature

except by David Rice and Rene Saldaña, Jr. In *Crazy Loco: Stories*, Rice includes one story with a teenage female character named Milagros who escapes the Valley and succeeds in attending a university out of the Valley even though her parents are adamant about keeping her at home. This is one story of one Valley girl. *The Tequila Worm* by Viola Canales is another, focusing on a girl from McAllen, the second largest city in the Valley, who receives a scholarship to play soccer at an elite school in Austin, Texas. Now, *Awake*, will be one more story of a Valley girl, one whose father is an attorney and one whose world is shadowed with domestic abuse rather than barrio life.

According to David Rice in a shared interview with Sandra Cisneros broadcast on *Talk of the Nation*, today's YA readers do not want to read the "old stuff" because it seems boring to them and does not relate to their experiences (Conan). Rice admits he is bored with his own stories and "bored with Mexican American literature right now," and in the same interview, Cisneros believes "we [Mexican Americans] really need to create more writers" (Conan). I share these same sentiments, especially when I go to my school library at Med High and see that the new Latina/o writers and stories are not well represented.

Alejandra cannot be Esperanza from *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros, nor can she be Maria from *Call Me Maria* by Judith Ortiz Cofer. Esperanza resides in a poor Chicago neighborhood and lives in the marginalized society of a previous era, while Maria, although a teenager in the present decade, is a recent immigrant from Puerto Rico living in New York. Both of these characters live in the barrio and are having trouble finding their place because of cultural and language borders.

All three of them, Esperanza, Maria, and Alejandra, share a love of language and expression which helps them sort out their teen identities. Alejandra fits in a lot more with Maria

since they are both contemporary teenagers. However, Alejandra regards herself as American like most teens living in the Valley today and doesn't struggle with living in a barrio or the cultural shock of being a recent immigrant like Maria. Yes, Alejandra lives in a cultural and language border, but not all fourth generation Mexican-Americans are facing the same level of oppression based solely on ethnicity or low socio-economic status. The stories of young Latina women like Maria from *Call Me Maria* and Lina from *Confetti Girl* by Diana Lopez are barely starting to emerge, and Alejandra in *Awake* will now be added to this new body of work within the YA genre.

In speaking to youth, David Rice encourages them to tell their stories, but they are reluctant because they feel there is no place for their stories (Conan). It will take a new wave of writers, of which I hope to be a part of, to let them know their story is relevant, to fuse the old to the new, and keep the emphasis on the new. The publishing market is currently very strong for multicultural YA books as noted by Christina Granados in her review for *Confetti Girl* by Diana Lopez (16). Diana Lopez is represented by Little, Brown, and Company, a major YA publishing house, rather than a smaller press specializing in Latina/o publications. In *Confetti Girl*, the main character, Lina, writes of her Corpus Christi community in everyday terms and does not differentiate between the Mexican American or white student populations. She includes some Spanish words and cultural practices, such as *dichos* and *cascarones*, but they are worked in very smoothly with the strong Mexican American presence of South Texas and do not bring a sense of frustration to a wider reading audience.

Awake also finds its voice in the limited scope of YA literature dealing with feminism and young women. Eve Ensler's latest contribution to contemporary feminism for a younger generation features a speaker who seizes her female identity:

I am an emotional creature.

Why would you want to shut me down

or turn me off?

I am your remaining memory.

I am connecting you to your source.

Nothing's been diluted.

Nothing's leaked out.

I can take you back. (Awakening Woman)

This is Alejandra's same message to her mother, but her mother ultimately rejects her youth and her help. As stated by Marianne Schnall in her blog, *The Woman's Media Center*, Ensler wrote *I Am an Emotional Creature: The Secret Life of Girls* "to create a girl revolution" with the central theme of "the girl in everybody, the muted, censored, shut down, diminished, undermined girl in the entire species" through fictional, dramatic monologues. In a way *Awake* is one long dramatic monologue in verse and follows Ensler's views on the ability of monologues to externalize the interior of a character through the uninterrupted speech of poetry and emotion (Schnall).

Alejandra is a far from this line of thinking. She is barely experiencing this new feminism because adult role models have not exposed her to female empowerment. She has only been a witness to her mother's abuse and the hypocrisy of her home. Her mother, the one woman with the most potential influence in Alejandra's life, has not been able to fight back against the oppression she lives on a daily basis at the hands of an alcoholic, violent husband. Her mother's identity has been stripped, leaving her to show Alejandra that obedience and fear are the best course of action when it comes to dealing with domestic abuse. The second most potential

influence on young girls today are the women who teach in the school system, but most often, we, the teachers, focus on egalitarianism for all, for all boys and girls, rather than promote the empowerment of just girls even though many sectors of society are still male dominated as shown by the high numbers of men who hold political office. Ironically, Mayahuel, the indigenous Aztec, hears of the new feminism before Alejandra, through Papanzín's words of empowerment in "September 26, Papanzín's Turn to Speak," validating a young woman's existence:

I have seen you in sleep as a water goddess
born of the agave. You are Mayahuel.
Daughter, Mother, Girl, Woman
of man, Creature of Emotion.
Tears for love, anger for shame,
skin for touch. (88)

Chicana Feminism in *Awake*

It is completely relevant to know our history and legacy, but my history and legacy is different than that of Sandra Cisneros or Ana Castillo—it lies somewhere between a *molcajete* and "The Cosby Show," and Alejandra in *Awake* has a completely different history and legacy than mine. She belongs to the wave of "gradual Hispanization" referred to by Cherríe Moraga (148), and Alejandra does not recognize how far her generation is straying from the core of a Chicana/o heritage, nor does she feel its "ghost" as Moraga does. Although *Awake* touches on some of the issues of a pre-colonial indigenous past, *mestizaje*, and Chicana feminism, none of

them completely identify the novel. Alejandra gains an understanding of the Chicana/o struggle, of *mestizaje*, as she attempts to understand her own story of domestic abuse.

I categorize *Awake* as a young adult novel with a contemporary teenage Latina voice such as Michelle Serros' *Honey Blonde Chica*, in which Evie Gomez, an upper-class teen, tries to find her place among the privileged Mexican Americans and Mexicans at her private school. As for Alejandra, she is an upper-middle class girl whose mother does not have to work because her father is an accountant. One of Alejandra's main teenage issues is finding her place within the American high school experience of the Rio Grande Valley, a metropolitan region wherein more Mexican Americans have better lives and equitable conditions today because of the rights fought for and gained in previous decades. When Alejandra writes "October 5, Missing Truth," a response to a mural depicting the historical, political, and cultural changes of the Valley up through the 1970s, she states, "Not a part of me. / I have better education. / I have *justicia*" (96). This poem appears in the middle of the novel after Alejandra completes a multitude of readings regarding the Latina/o experience. By this point she knows of her heritage as part of *mestizaje*, and she is able to question the artist's patriarchal depiction of Mexican American history in the mural:

Where are the streams of red flowing off the thorn of a desert star?

The pierced thighs of Aztec rituals forgotten under a night sky?

...The girls in closets, closing their ears? Muffled mother screams from other rooms? (96)

The mural dismisses the culture of violence against women throughout history including Alejandra's and that of her mother, Denaria.

Still, a newfound sense of Chicanidad does not permeate her life in the same way as her search for identity. In an early poem, “August 23, Art Club Social Scene,” Alejandra writes, “Let all the cheerleaders gossip. / Let band fanatics get all crazy with drum cadences. / Let me speak art. / Say, hey world, meet moonbeam girl, birthing stars with purple acrylic” (49). Even after Mayahuel has merged with Alejandra, Alejandra still seeks the teenage girl dream of making a spectacular entrance and taking her dream boy out of the arms of another girl in the poem “A Week Ago, November 19...Total Teenage Drama” (145). But, by this point, she is a different person, allowing Mayahuel and what she has learned about *mestizaje* take a stronger hold of her, as represented in an Aztec headdress she wears to the Winter Masquerade and her recognition of the potential, indigenous woman power within the headdress to make “life / from liquid / nectar, / bitter, / sweet, / full of power” (145).

Above the teenage quest for identity, the primary struggle she faces is one she shares with her mother, and that struggle, domestic abuse, is a universal struggle for all societies, regardless of ethnic and socio-economic backgrounds. *Awake* shows the patriarchy of pre-conquest Aztec culture through the dialogue of the Aztec characters. In “October 12, Aztec Mural,” Papanzín asks Mayahuel if her life is like that of every other oppressed woman in the Aztec empire (106). She also reveals how Mayahuel’s skin will be flayed for an Aztec religious ritual (108). In “November 7, Here,” Papanzín announces how she is no longer available for bloodletting rituals or for any other use by men (131). Aztec culture was extremely harsh and violent by today’s standards based on what we know of their high regard and widespread use of sacrificial killings wherein hearts were wrenched from the body and the heads of those killed were arranged on a skull racks. But as stated in the *Handbook to Life in the Aztec World* by Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, even in just everyday living, ritualistic bloodletting was prevalent among all members

of Aztec society, and children were expected to be obedient in all matters as commanded by the family patriarch upon penalty of punishment (174, 353).

From my teaching experience as a world history teacher, it seems that some modern societies still have a degree of patriarchy, and it seems more prevalent in areas marked by a strong ethnic group presence where they follow traditional male and female roles of provider and caretaker. The prevalence of patriarchy and machismo may be found in the Valley because some of the myths and traditions that have consolidated the cultural practices of Mexican Americans in this region “have been written from the male patriarchal perspective,” as explained by Gloria Anzaldúa in *Interviews / Entrevistas* (219). I take this to mean that the myths portray women as weak or deviant and in need of control, and the myths continually feed the culture until the myths are accepted as truth. Most acts of gendered violence and domestic abuse have women as their target, and many times the violence is unnamed or the violence is defended. There are a few poems in *Awake* in which Alejandra and her mother dispute the domestic abuse occurring in the home, ending with Alejandra denouncing her father's brutality and hypocrisy and Denaria defending her husband.

Her father has spiritually dismembered Denaria, beating her on a regular basis and separating her from the role of accomplished woman and good mother even in Alejandra's eyes. This brings to mind Gloria Anzaldúa when she describes the Aztec patriarchal myth of Coyolxauhqui, the decapitated and dismembered goddess whose body was spread throughout the land, a “symbol not only of violence and hatred against women but also of how we're split body and mind, spirit and soul” (220). With domestic abuse, the separation between “body and mind, spirit and soul” is life-damaging, and it is often not contained in one generation, but the cycle

continues as the daughters in the family have the images of abuse imprinted as truth. They may then lack knowledge of their own self-worth similar to their mothers before.

Since Alejandra's story began as a play with themes of Chicana feminism, the verse novel, *Awake*, also has something to say about the role of Chicana women. *Awake* follows the model of Chicana/o playwriting and fiction with their focus on issues and themes relevant to the Chicana/o experience. Jorge A. Huerta, author of *Chicano Drama: Performance, Society, and Myth*, states in the introduction to his book that the Chicano/a plays of the 1990's are "ostensibly about Chicana/os living in the United States but by their very definition, Chicana/os recognize and celebrate their Mexican cultural roots. Although these plays take place in the United States, Mexico is always in the background, contributing to the characters' fractured identities" (ii). The roots of an indigenous and conquered culture keep some Mexican-Americans tied to an ethnic minority label. The label may not allow them to be fully immersed within American culture without relinquishing a significant part of their history and identity, as has happened with the Hispanization of third and fourth generation Mexican-Americans, including Alejandra who has never even been to Mexico:

September 2, Home

I'm no Aztec scholar. And I've never crossed the border

into Mexico a few miles south from my home behind my chain-

link fence with *lavandas* in bloom along the *callejón*. (64)

Alejandra's cultural heritage only begins to emerge when she is 17 years old through a series of Aztec dreams and through the merging of body and spirit with Mayahuel.

As for *mestizaje*, Alejandra initially only knows what books have recorded about the Aztec conquest and that she is Mexican American. Alejandra, though, does become more political in her beliefs as the indigenous world becomes her own through dreams, through her own research and readings, and through works of art she has encountered. It is not until all these elements converge together that Alejandra has what Alicia Gaspar de Alba has coined as “cultural schizophrenia,” (242) but to a lesser degree than someone who has close ties to a different home country or to the barrio. Alejandra has another girl, Mayahuel, within her, who enters her water as she lies in the bathtub, and this is the inciting incident for the small rebellion she leads in her home against the truth of domestic abuse her mother is not willing to admit and that everybody else is willing to hide.

Mayahuel does not initially recognize she comes from a legacy of patriarchy and violence—the rituals, the bloodletting, the flaying of skin, the selling of women—all deeply embedded parts of Aztec culture. And, being a young girl, Mayahuel has less voice and less knowledge of what will be required of her in preparation for a sacrificial ritual until Papanzín reveals the truth in “October 12, Aztec Mural”:

Your body will be offered for priest lust
disguised as sacrifice. A deflowering,
then skin stripped to clothe priest-men.
Macabre gown sewn with agave fibers.

No woman in right mind approves, but all comply. (108)

As for Alejandra, she lives a society where women can have a voice and where violence is never warranted in the “just say no” culture of America, even though violence and the victimization of women is displayed vagrantly on all media forms with men being the main perpetrators—a legacy of violence from all past cultures from the Romans to Aztecs. Today the

violence is subtle, hidden, until it explodes, as in her entry for “August 30, 2010, Local News” when she describes the brutal death of a Weslaco woman at the hands of her fiancé (59).

As Ana Castillo explains, the Massacre of Dreamers, in reference to *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanism*, represents us, the Mexican Americans, “if we’re afraid to dream...if we’re afraid to have vision...if we’re afraid to speak up” (in Saeta 149). Although dreamers literally refers to those who prophesied Montezuma’s doom in the Aztec codices, now the dreamers are all those who have vision to remove themselves from apathy and vision to take action (149). Papanzin takes action by recounting the prophesy of conquest to her father; Mayahuel takes action by accepting Papanzin’s charge to speak to Montezuma and to leave her world for Alejandra’s; Alejandra takes action through words, art, and her escape from a violent household.

Any “cultural schizophrenia” Alejandra faces is short lived once Mayahuel merges with her. Her Aztec dreams end and she goes back to her life, but with more understanding of where she comes from, resulting in her role as “the keeper of the memories, the rituals, the stories, the superstitions, the language, the imagery of her Mexican heritage” (De Alba 245). Alejandra is on her way to becoming one “who changes the culture...breeds a new language and a new lifestyle, new values, new changes, new images and rhythms, new dreams and conflicts into that heritage” (245). Alejandra as imagist and myth-maker is first revealed in her poem “August 31, Flying” when she describes Tenochtitlan as a scene from a graphic novel with “visually stunning / panels in 3D” (60). Alejandra sees the ancient city as a “fantasy-scape, floating / on a lake of gold. / Urban...” (60). Later examples include when she describes the *chinampas* as “islands, / absorbing / tears of women” in the poem “September 1, Tonight’s Dream” and when she creates her own Aztec flower song in “September 28, Watermelon Fish” (63, 91). But, her flower song

is one geared to the boy she loves from afar rather than the Aztec call to war: “I crave flowers. You flower-sing. Nectar and rain” (91). Alejandra is able to create a new language as shown in “October 25, Dreamless,” and it is a language based on new Aztec flower songs, forged from opposing myths, natural images, high tech media, and art:

Snakes, water swirling in a flute cadence. Flowers sprouting moons
of dew. Tiers of earth glowing crimson from the sun. HD vibrancy,
color hypnotic, plausible fantasy. All on canvas. Mayahuel’s world
collidingwithmine. Camelot sprouting pyramids. Ellyon now Aztlán. (121)

Further, *Awake* as a verse novel of journal entries fits in with what Elizabeth C. Ramirez, author of *Chicanas/Latinas in American Theatre: a History of Performance*, describes in regard to Chicana writers going beyond shedding light on the plight of the Mexican American female experience and issues of *mestizaje* without using “traditional, linear structures,” and instead “searching for new and different approaches to writing for performance” (104). Ramirez asserts “[identity] is established along the lines of a continuously unstable borderline of difference between Mexican and American social ideologies,” and the identity of the Chicana “expresses itself as the historical working out of that contradiction[...].” (104), which Alejandra begins to recognize and deal with in “September 13, Searching for Papanzín” when she acknowledges Malinche “as first mother to first mestizo” (74).

Ramirez quotes Sonia Saldivar Hull’s term for the place of Mexican America women in South Texas when she uses “feminism on the border” to describe how Chicana writers, specifically playwrights “live between worlds, cultures, and histories” (104). Alejandra is part of this “feminism on the border” just by being Mexican American and by living in the Tex-Mex border. Alejandra cannot forget what she witnesses and hears in her Aztec dreams and in the

research and readings she completes to better understand Aztec and Latina/o culture. A playwright such as Cherríe Moraga is simply creating the stage world reflective of other Chicana feminist writers, like Gloria Anzaldúa or Ana Castillo.

I wrote *Eternal Dance* without ever having heard or read Moraga's *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Media*. But my play and novel is similar to Moraga's play with the merging of Aztec myth and contemporary society and a focus on the patriarchy of both time periods. Medea is a *Mestiza* as defined by Gloria Anzaldúa and has a need to develop a new consciousness of identity to reconcile her place as a mother and woman within a male dominated society that dismisses her because of her taboo relationship with Luna. For Anzaldúa, being a Chicana means being a new *Mestiza*, but to be this new *Mestiza* is a challenge, since as Anzaldúa explains, "a *Mestiza* must learn to be an Indian in Mexican culture, to be a Mexican from an Anglo point of view...to juggle culture...sustain contradictions" (101). Being of mixed blood and cultures, has an impact on Mexican American women, fracturing their identities based on ethnicity, unless they are willing to have a "tolerance for ambiguity" (101). In *Awake*, Alejandra and Denaria have fractured identities due to a home environment of gendered violence.

Alejandra's identity is shaped by her mother's role as abused wife who bears with the oppressive nature of her husband. Denaria lacks a home since she is a *Mestiza* like other second generation Hispanic women, but beyond that she has no voice, home, or place of safety because of gendered violence, and this keeps her from fulfilling the role of nurturing mother and shaping her daughter's identity in a positive way. Denaria has to stop condoning a violence which Anzaldúa states is a result of "false machismo" in men to shame and brutalize women as

compensation for their feelings of inadequacy when measuring themselves against white men (105).

Awake is political in that Alejandra is finding her voice as a young Latina, but on a smaller scale since the story is told from the perspective of a fourth generation teenager who has little interest in labels such as Latina, Chicana, or Xicana. She is only beginning to understand how women's bodies have been victim to colonization within the Mexican American community, which mirrors the occupied state of what Moraga calls the Chicano nation (150). As Moraga puts forth, "[the] Chicano Nation is a mestizo nation conceived in a double rape: first, by the Spanish and then by the Gringo" (153). Alejandra makes the connection when she questions the lack of mutilated women's bodies in "October 5, Missing Truth" (98). The mutilated bodies refer to the current state of women suffering from gendered violence, but also to the bloodletting and flaying of skin encountered in Aztec culture.

Violence against women shadows Alejandra's world more than the struggles of a Chicana/o culture because she has not experienced Anzaldúa's or Moraga's history. Her father, through abuse, has transformed Denaria into a long-suffering woman, and he perpetuates the role of the patriarchal father bent on a streak of alcoholism and violence. Alejandra is not the new champion of Chicana feminism; she cannot even say she is successful in saving her own mother from abuse, but she knows life can be better for herself. She is aware the National Hispanic Fund will get her into college (74), and that she will not have to fight for "her claim to this land and its resources" as stated by Moraga (156), unless it means her body and her mind, and by the end of *Awake* she is better equipped to do this.

Denaria fits the mold of what Anzaldúa describes as the merging of woman and creature in "La Conciencia de la Mestiza." Anzaldúa describes herself as "an 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” (103). The Aztec women in *Awake* are creatures of darkness as viewed by the Aztec patriarchy even though Aztec religion has a pantheon of goddesses. This is how I depict the lives of Papantzín and Mayahuel. Likewise, the patriarchy of contemporary Latino culture keeps Denaria and Alejandra as creatures of darkness in a violent home.

The Aztec women only have opportunity to leave darkness behind by giving a portion of their indigenous, goddess-like strength to Alejandra and her mother after crossing the threshold of time. Anzaldúa states, “myths and fictions create reality, and these myths and fictions are used against women and against certain races to control, regulate and manipulate us,” so she is “rewriting the myths” to use them “against the oppressors” (219). Anzaldúa has rewritten the stories of central figures in Latina history such as Coatlicue and La Llorona from the female perspective (219). *Awake* does not rewrite the history of these central figures but does have a revision of the Aztec warrior nation and its pre-conquest glory. Montezuma, Mayahuel’s father, and the priests are all depicted in a negative light as Alejandra has transposed Aztec dialogue from dream states into poetry. In her dreams she has learned Aztec women were used in violent rituals for the appeasement of gods and land and for the name building and glorification of Aztec men:

(Mayahuel) When my father—when he sent me
here—he did not speak of death. Only of skin
fragrant with orchid oil, hair weaved
with amethyst, honor for Montezuma.

Your father deceives. The honor he speaks
is blood and death. (107)

Also, *Awake* makes new goddesses out of non-deified Aztec women. Papanzín experiences a transfiguration with her ability to receive a prophetic dream of the Aztec conquest and her spiritual guidance in helping Mayahuel leave her current time space. In “September 23, Two Aztecas—Wednesday’s Dream,” Alejandra describes Papanzin as “Aztec Aphrodite,” merging the indigenous with classical mythology (85). She describes Papanzín with gold skin and a headdress of power, the same headdress that imbues Mayhuel with a strength to cross a time and cultural border and provide Alejandra with a sense of empowerment. In telling her story, Alejandra is also dispelling the myth that violence does not occur in Christian homes, the myth that young girls cannot understand the importance of Chicana feminism, the myth that all women today are able to stand up for themselves, the myth that “all’s well that ends well,” the myth that today’s youth is media driven and cannot appreciate other visual forms.

The source of power is in the headdress, and it passes to Alejandra and her mother every time either of them touch it or place it on their heads. Both Alejandra and her mother are now able to question the dark and light in their world and reshape their identities and their home by new definitions of what is wrong or right.

Ultimately, only Alejandra continues the search for home. It is not necessarily the homeland described by the prolific Alurista when he explains how “people call California, Arizona, Nueva Mexico and Colorado Aztlán, but really, Aztlán is wherever we are. We don’t recognize borders” (Allen-Taylor). By recording her dreams in free verse, poetic dialogue, and stage scenes, she is participating in *El Plan de Aztlán* through a “continuation of the indigenous past,” and without realizing it, she is “affirming that the conquest of space does not necessarily lead to the extinction of a people’s cultural identity, memory and vernacular traditions” (Arrizón 25).

But to Alejandra what resonates the most is the idea of home, not the idea of a Chicano Nation as perpetuated by the Chicano movement, which Chicana feminists like Moraga critique as being a male-centric conception. Medea in *The Hungry Woman: A Mexican Media* feels displaced in the Aztlán / Chicano Nation at the start of the play and has a strong desire by the end of the play to establish a homeland not defined by Chicano notions of patriarchy. For Alejandra, her displacement comes from her father's alcoholism and perpetuation of abuse, her mother's inability to protect, and her brother's abandonment. Her Aztlán is somewhere near San Antonio, the last place she knows her brother has lived and the home of the university she plans to attend. She does recognize the historical and mythological importance of Aztlán to Chicana/os, but the idea of finding a home, a family, is more important.

Aztlán,

ancestral homeland

of Nahua people,

now mestizos

without home

or place anywhere.

Aztlán,

wherever we are

without borders—

motherland. (158)

But Alejandra's last lines point to something more personal: "I will make a new home, / leave what I know. / Aztlán, Elleyon, my brother Antonio. / Myth reborn / along the San Marcos River" (160). This personal cry is reiterated in Alejandra's letter to Ethan and the world where she questions her future and asks for someone to know her even when all seems lost:

What if rivers swallow our earth?

What if mountains disintegrate?

What if nuclear snow fades the world?

Will you know me then? Know me

in the barest sense, stark, lean,

the essential of me underneath? (154)

Alejandra is still shaping her identity and whether or not she will become a Chicana feminist is still in question although an appreciation of her Aztec past provides a performance space for Aztlán, and her art gives a new meaning to what it means to be a 4th generation Latina. As Alicia Arrizón states in *Mythical Performativity: Relocating Aztlán in Chicana Feminist Cultural Productions*, "Aztlán performs the border space," and Alejandra's border space is more than the border between Mexico and the United States (26). Her border space is the post-Chicano place of her generation who has lost a portion of their legacy but can learn to appreciate it and move on to heal other barriers based on gender, isolation, violence, apathy, and loathe of self, all of which are issues dealt with in the writings and artistic works of Chicana feminists.

She is in what Anzaldúa terms “Nepantla, the Borderlands,” a passage way to self-transformation since, “[i]dentity is a process-in-the-making” (238). Alejandra has not quite completed her passage through Nepantla, but she is emerging through the “Coatlicue state—the cave, the dark” (225-226) and she will come through as a changed young woman with a new sense of self:

I am the fairy
queen of agave,
I wear the Aztec crown,
princess headdress,
adorned in jade,
quetzal flowers.
One I’ve seen
on Mayahuel,
brown-haired
maiden
growing maize,
taking hearts
from agave,
making life
from liquid
nectar,
bitter,
sweet,
full of power. (146)

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CHAPTER II

AWAKE

Prologue

October 18, Sunday's Best

My mother standing at bathroom door, gathering wits. I see her
breathing though my eyes are closed. She's had a long night.
Nothing my brain wants to know.

Bet she's in Sunday's best. Sunglasses, of course. Black
slip under blouse—lace under long sleeves,
discreet, hiding purple arms.

I'll pretend

I'm asleep. Bath water is warm, scented with my favorite,
jasmine and lilac oil.

Alex! Get out right now, her voice demands.

I'm asleep, remember?

Breathe in, breathe out. I'm a water fairy floating on wet sand.

Alejandra Lizette De Luna! I said get out. Apúrate

You know we can't get to church late.

Do I dare say it? Say what I think? I only mutter *I don't care*
under my breath. Under water. I sink.

Alex! Right before her manicure flings water at my face.

Ok, Mom. I get it. But just once let me stay?

You know your father. Let's not ruin today, ok?

She bends to water, wrists like yellow leaves, old bruises healing, lingering
on the porcelain. Her skin touching mine. Her palm on my cheek, warm,
jasmine and lilac oil.

I do what I can everyday, Alex.

She never does anything for me. My eyes water and beg.

Now she begs,

Don't look at me that way.

I turn away. Count tiles—cool, violet, gold, wet. Make her wait. Ice.

You better be ready—last thing from her lips, sounding just like Dad.

Under water all is dark. I swim calm in one place,

waves far away. Door slams shut.

If Truth be Told

August 16, Flashback

Lilac petals line the chain-link fence behind my house, crying
tears for my mother.

I wake to silence, morning shadows. My father already gone
on Sunday. Used to be our day of peace, pancakes, butter
swirled syrup.

But the silence is loud. My window percolates in clouds, coffee
mugs lay dormant, unmoistened by lips.

Only dishes to clean, rinse, sterilize. Left undone
by my mother. My mother undone by my father
during dinner the night before.

Doesn't matter why.

He drove a fork in her thigh.

A silver	Stab,	Pull
flash,	<i>scream.</i>	out,
<i>scream.</i>		<i>scream.</i>

He grips her neck with one hand. Pulls hair with other.

Says, *next time in your face*. A threat to her.

And you, lárgate. Says, get out. To me.

Wanna gouge his eyes out? Yeah, sure, right now.

Instead sleepy time. Bed covers
and pillows buffer all fork sounds.

Stainless steel replaying,
scream imprinting,
stab pricking my mind.

Hungry.

Can't fight.

August 19, Better Days

with my brother, Antonio. How we built forts and castles from mud sticks, cardboard boxes and make-believe. Fire-ant dragons, toad gargoyles.

I was Princess Alexandra. My brother Prince Tonio. Later my protector who left home when I turned thirteen. Before all got out of hand. All he left was a note for me.

gotta go, Alex girl -leave when you can cuz mom won't -joined marines

-Tonio

Four years later. Nothing.

Tonio, why did you forget me?

I wish I was a normal girl with a hot boyfriend I could never get.

He'd make me forget.

Cappuccino and waffles. That's who we'd be,

warm lips to kiss. Moistened.

August 20, Church Women

Respectable? Not all.

Upstanding men of God? Maybe some.

What I've seen?

Suits and God, conservative ties, holier than I.

Acrylic nails, colored hair, perfume saturated wrists—sweet-sick.

More like it.

All of them think my dad's appealing, charismatic, godly.

Quite handsome I've heard women say.

I overheard "Sister" so and so talking to another "Sister" so and so
in women's restroom at church last week.

Dear Lord, I mean, he didn't pick the most, how do you say,

vibrant wife? Could've done a lot better don't you think?

I flush, push door open, and walk past them to wash hands.

You'd think this was high school. I tell them off through the mirror,
my reflection accusing, words cutting. Stare down time.

*But, you don't think, do you? And that's cuz your face never been bashed in
with a 2 x 4.*

I see red fish lips go ape—gape open. See face gills under layers of make-up
lose color, air.

Before I walk out to my spectacular life.

August 21, I Don't Feel

like going tomorrow, Sunday. Round number 523 it seems, of Daddy wearing church deacon pin tacked on his tie. He greets, assists, ushers to empty seats, flashes smiles to pretty women. Turns on charm for grandmas, for *las viejitas*.

All the while, my mother *hallelujahs* and *amens*.

Once a month she smile-hides behind sunglasses and big hair, third pew, left side of sanctuary. Sits beside me where I do not listen to a word anybody says.

Other women smile at her, at me, knowing. But not really knowing a devil sleeps in our home. And the woman who maybe does know, doesn't care. He touches her hips behind doors.

He only touches my mother with a fist.

The all-occasion kick.

Las lavandas, purple in bloom, cry

behind backyard fence.

They are what I know,

only place I've been.

August 22, Gypsy Make-Over

This is it! Senior year!

Year I won't be afraid. Ten months, English IV, bit of physics,
lots of art, gov./eco. Then gone.

Texas State U, here I come! (if I get all my paperwork in gear...)

What do I want to leave behind? I'm not talking legacy.

Just more than yearbook Alex—gray, plain.

Some random guy asking *hey you know that girl? Sits in corner
drawing on her jeans, paper?*

Yeah, Alex. I think. Into her or what?

Nah, just every time I look up, she's like looking at me.

Never smiles. Just keeps drawing. Weird.

Yeah, Alex. That's her. Her friend Lena weird too, but hot.

Yeah, Alex. That's me—let my hair drape over face, a blanket,
brown, straight, dull. Brown eyes like everybody else.

Prominent nose (to say it nicely)? Not a ten at all.

The un-kissed girl. The unaware girl. The under-radar girl.

My whole high school experience, pretzel bag in vending machine.

No.

This is me.

Magic
carnival girl,
gypsy ribbon
hair whipping
under moon air,
spinning life
out of fire,
water,
from core
of earth.
Energy
shooting
through my limbs,
drawing
gypsy boy
to me.

But more. Drawing colors out of me, embracing
my mother in scarves, reconstructing space, time, energy, chaos
theory of the heart, with butterflies in my hair.
Daddy a faded photograph with all bad gone good.

All good
in memory
files labeled
“Once I Knew”
or “Better Times.”

Ten more months till I toss my graduation cap high.

Guess I need to start with gypsy boy and one good kiss.

August 23, Art Club Social Scene

First day at school, same routine, Weslaco East High.

Really summer extension for those who hung around Valley since June. At beach, movies, parties, with heat sticking skin to skin.

Always connected. Except now with books and more things to do.

Connection continued on grander scale with shared classes, cheating, everything—sports, dance teams, cliques, lockers, favorite library nooks.

Texting 24/7, updating statuses under desks, under equations until teacher gives the look, means *put that away*. Never at me.

Have nobody to text except Lena, my best-friend, with her cell phone always dead.

So, I fade into sea of 2000 kids, fall into Art Club by default, see Lena in between, see my gypsy boy around, Ethan Cruz—he never sees me. (Hope he never sees me looking at him...)

Art Club means rushing to Mr. Castillo's room at lunch, eating a sandwich on my way, visualizing ideas, *paintstorming*. Then a couple of hours everyday after school, not Friday. Mr. Castillo says more to life than student art in every space—life won't wait.

No one will wait for me after school today. Lena's absent,
her annual first day protest against school. I will go see Mr. Castillo,
instead, get details for semester art project.

Before calling Lena for ride—before sun contemplates sleep,
air tinged pink.

At home Mom always cleaning, organizing,
scrapbooking, her former teacher days in latest role—
Hestia, unblessed goddess of hearth, her sacred fire
put out by fork.

Dad working late, then drinking, fuming
alone in his home office space, waiting to blow
steam for dinner—always the same, after eight,
roast chicken or baked fish, sometimes a side
of Mexican rice, *comino* and *ajonjolí* lingering in air,
but still bland. Everything quiet,
no one dare speak unless Dad says,
then I better speak.

Fork in, fork out.
From plate to mouth.
Clean.

No need to hurry home. I'm better here—the Art Club social scene,
speaking texture, color, line. We only speak to our art.

Sometimes to one another about art.

Let all the cheerleaders gossip.

Let band fanatics get all crazy with drum cadences.

Let me speak art.

Say, hey world, meet moonbeam girl, birthing stars with purple acrylic.

August 24, There is One

close friend, I mean. Lena.

Used to go to same church as me. Still does, just far and in between.

We don't talk about God things, but I know she hurts like me.

Just shows it different.

Lena's a big X, part of the weird-different list, founding member
of *Arte y Poética Política* (don't ask), hair like crow's nest,
pop-star geisha lips.

I'm just a regular C. Unofficial fourth member without opinions
about anything, who missed all summer meetings at Weslaco Public Library.

Still, Lena includes me, pretends with me, waits for me. Today's no different.

Second day of school for Weslaco East world, but first day back for Lena.

Says first day's pointless, just lame ice-breakers, seating charts, and syllabi preaching.

Lena actually texts me.

Lena: *forget art-meet@ lib*

Me: *why*

Lena: *major reading list-need u completely involved*

Me: *again why*

Lena: *make protest piece-real art@lunch*

I know what you're thinking—I must be her only friend.

Actually, she likes it that way. Lena wants protestors. Those who think big, scary thoughts about how the world should be, then debate it, make a production of it—rules out about 96 percent of WEHS, even pretend protestors sneaking buy with dark eye shadow, pierced lips.

Lena Protest Day, sometime last May, consisted of Luis, member number two playing the ukulele, and Lena ranting against the border wall, the obstruction of Tex-Mex freedom, sealing off all underprivileged on Mexico side from possible better life. I stayed on side-lines, sitting on bottom step of main staircase.

There's only one topic off limits. What I live.

Too close to home.

Close to her, too.

Shopping, manicure buddy she is not. That's cool mom's role, but neither one us really knows what that means. Me, more so than Lena.

August 25, Sure Fix

Quick smack to the face, all you need
when Dad can't find wallet. Sure fix
for Tuesday night dinner.

What a way to start new school year.

He pushes hot breath at her face. Says all little minds work the same.

*Little minds love money. Gets a hold of you, makes you steel,
makes you want to leave. Gets to where you think
you can leave, but with what money? With what damn money?*

Wants to know where she hides it, twists her neck-skin,
moves his mouth over ear, whispers nightmare.

August 26, Different Once

If truth be told, things haven't always been like this—the blue,
black, red, all mottled purple below Mom's collarbone.

Truth is, all came like a wave
when I was seven. Mami young,
pretty. Hair like sand, eyes brown
seaweed, a Latina mermaid.

First—words like sea-salt, bitter, cold. A shock
to the system, preliminary sting, but then gone,
a residue of words like whore, slut, worthless, *estupida*,
remain, burning Mami's skin. Ache
cooling by nightfall.

Sand goes down shower drain.

Later, Mami waist deep, riding waves better.

Always expecting, anticipating. Surge of salt words

dull senses, keep her quiet, good, sad for next rip. Then the Hit.

Tidal wave pounding her body to ground.

Water ebbs away.

Until next wave, stronger, harder, fiercer than last.

fences
will get better
suffocating
sand
near
tell
Wednesday church
don't tell
swim
eyes
wave
Mami
bethere
love
be
under-water
get talk
it worse
hate
fish
float
woman's
dead
just
purple
sick
home
don't
tell
gills
to
sick
ok
evening
always

paciencia, un prayer de fe. Un día más, Gloria a Dios. Survive another day.

Please, God.

August 27, *Gloria a Dios!*

Lena in two of my classes and gypsy boy in Art II.

Lena's weird with black-blond hair chunks,
cowgirl boots, mis-matched halter top and mesh cardigan.
She sticks to classroom corners, nose in a book, writing poetry
on her arm, not listening to anything irrelevant,
which seems to be everything in Lena's book.

My only good friend since freshmen year, Art I—
first person to really speak art with me. My partner
for year-long project.

She wanted functional, I wanted beauty.
Solution? A book of *dichos* with illustrations.
Her grandma whips them out by the dozens, proverbs,
like *más vale maña que fuerza* (which Lena translates
as skill better than strength) or *quien mal anda,*
mal acaba (which she said means my dad will end
up in grave).

We blended word and image monthly, weekly, then daily.
Sometimes lunch, other times after school. Sometimes for art,

other times just because, for friend's sake. Even came to my house once.

My mom nice, Dad not so much. Then Lena banned. Dad told me
with arm twist, he silenced mom with a look.

Lena knows what I live. Says at least I don't have a little sister to protect.

I say at least Lena's mom fights back. He calls her mother slut,
she yells back, *mal nacido* (spawn of evil in villain talk).

He throws punches, she jumps on his back,
bites.

He calls Lena a *floja* like her mother who's never had a real job.

Lena says screw you. Drives her baby sister to Gibson Park,
for *raspas*, cherry ice cold on tongue.

Her dad is kicked out of house for a week. But always comes back—

Says last time, brings roses, washes clothe, then time for *la playa*.

Beach, sun, waves. South Padre Island.

Never beat Lena's butt blue after she turned 13, mom threatened cops.

Wonder if she still dances, toes on her Daddy's feet, the sand cool, dry underneath.

August 28, Poetry Time

with beach on my mind. Haven't been to South Padre
in years, but won't forget. I'll lay it down
in words, moonsand poetry.

Winds of salt,
dance a ritual
under night stars.

When Dad loves
little girl
warm from waves.

Sand,
infinite,
grand,
like future tears.

Raisin toes on my feet.

He carries
my weight,
dances
my night away.

Carries me off
to truck bed.

Sand and roar and night and cold
lull me
to sleep.

I hear violins
mexican
melodic
mournful
beautiful

for sleeping, for dreams,

for my Daddy a long time ago, a man

named Gerardo, called *Amor* by a woman

he never married. She soared over *canal*

bridge, when Dad was drunk, hit a semi-truck.

Her body launching through glass, ascending

over water, plummeting to water death. My unknown

half brother submerged within her body.

A woman I never knew, though I saw her picture

once in the wallet he carries. My Dad

called *Amor* again by my Mami. Someone

he could never love the same. Except on beach
after I slept. I always peeked.

His head on her lap, eyes closed
by porcelain hands—stars blacked out
by so much sea. Back when I was four.

And six. But not at nine, twelve,
or seventeen. Water fills all.
Fills my eyes, stings.

August 30, Local News

at 10 PM. Wolves on rampage.
29 year old woman, north of Weslaco, dead.
Beat comatose. Trailer-home death.

No more physics homework tonight.

Two men, her fiancé and his brother, raging, savage. Fists
pummeling, dragging from car, twisting scalp, boots
driving into back.

Blood strewn along caliche, red splattered over painted tires,
make-shift flower pots.

The man *She* thinks she loves will change her mantra, make her
say yes to everything he says.

He says, she's my *desgraciada*, worthless, to own, break,
strangle when I want. Her body goes limp, says *yes*.

Split
lip,
ribs,
side
of face.
Skull
cracked
open.
Asleep
for a week,
coma.

Los Villalobos, brothers, wolves.

Wolves, moons. Must be related
to *De Luna*. I better help Mami
say yes, no, something.
Fight, bite, leave.

Physics won't.

Siempre Digas La Verdad / Always Speak Truth

August 31, Flying

I dreamt of Tenochtitlan last night, birthplace of power. I flew over
as a hand led by another spirit. Many have searched relics,
words from the ancient city, remnants
left behind in Mexico City,
but I've been there,
done that,
once.

Tenochtitlan,
place of magic, power,
color. Chants, god-kings, vibrant
feathers. Think graphic novel, visually stunning
panels in 3D. City of gold, pyramids, warriors. City of Aztecs,
ancient people wielding complex temples, rituals. My Tenochtitlan is mesmerizing.

A
fantasy-
scape, floating
on lake of gold. Urban, expansive,
brilliant against indigo sky. The Great Temple
center-stage, a marking line between sacred ground and village.

Then royal palace behind, shrinking the horizon, bringing shadow faster than twilight.

The burial grounds near a stream, a mirror to the sky. Garden fountains, orchids. Heaven
on earth, imperial vaults for people royal and dead. Like Princess Papanzín,
the Great Daughter of the Azteca. Dead within the women's quarters,
cremation preparations soon to begin. This same night
I became part of her story. Or, I guess,
she became part
of mine.

September 1, Tonight's Dream

Princess Papanzín once more, this time lying on red reed mat.

Montezuma, Lord of the Aztecs, gazes upon his daughter, Papanzín,
far from breath. In the next few days, a dripping of water
over the head. The last priest rite, before agave cloth
over her face, her body turned over to fire. Flesh becoming ash.

Her skin cold, heart dead. Unfit for sacrifice, hungry gods,
fields of dry rain. But Papanzín's spirit soars in a realm above,
ancestors guiding her further away. Her body on reed mat
dressed in turquoise, embroidered in gold, red. A marriage gown
for Montezuma's favored general, the Lord of Texcoco.

Both men look away. Fists clenched. Stoic.

Death now claims Papanzín as his own. New bride of spirit realm,
out of the hands of men, earth, flesh.

But her secret lover mourns in silence beyond the palace
grounds, covered by loin cloth, dirt, sweat.

He is not guest.

He belongs to the *chinampas*,
labor fields of agave, maize, avocado pears.

The *chinampas*,

floating

islands,

absorbing

tears of women.

Papanzín's mother,

blood sisters,

all sisters

of the Azteca.

Waters

they can't hold in,

can't release.

The horizon bleeds into an indigenous Eden, away
from burial vault of Princess Papanzín against gray clouds.

September 2, Home

I'm no Aztec scholar. And I've never crossed the border
into Mexico a few miles south from my home behind my chain-
link fence with *lavandas* in bloom along the *callejón*.

An alley of lilac.

Petals.

Where my father breathes out fire. Leaving mother and I drained of color.

Her blood turns blue under skin.

September 4, Hope to Get

one book down from Lena's list
of must read books this weekend.

She shows up Monday at my locker with two grocery bags full.
All her arsenal of summer reading paid with Chili's tips.

Lena says I should start with something short but radical,
Malinche's Daughter by Michelle Otero, then stabilize
with something not so much, but with still a point to make,
The House on Mango Street by Sandra Cisneros—book I read
in seventh grade multicultural unit. Book Lena says
so much more than metaphors, similes, and rice tacos of shame.

Next book she pulls out, *Massacre of the Dreamers: Essays on Xicanism*.
I couldn't help asking,

Since when do you read such intense stuff? And why is it all Hispanic?

*It's Latino, Alex. Not all of us are part Spaniard,
and even if, why? Why identify with those who stripped our land
and people? You know, why did they resort to raping Indian women?
Just because they left all of theirs at home?*

Once she starts, you can't stop Lena. You have to get a word in anywhere you can.

Lena, I don't know anything about this stuff. I'm art,

I'm mystical unicorn stuff.

Alex, Alex, Alex, Lena gets impatient right away. Nothing wrong

with a little Sparrow book or I Am Morgan Le Fey.

The Song of Sparrow, I correct. How can she forget my new favorite?

And with that she hands me a second bag.

Please. Reading Sparrow was sheer poetry torture. I mean,

either be a novel or an epic poem.

But—

Trust me, you won't miss any of the fantasy.

You don't know anything, so read it like you've never heard it.

What am I supposed to do with it? I'm not Lena.

As if she reads my mind,

I don't know. Expand your mind? Plan art around it?

She takes out Rene Saldaña, Jr.

Look, this guy's from the Valley. He mentions La Joya and Mission.

I take the book, read the back blurb for *Finding Our Way*.

What else? I ask, already submitting to The List of Lena.

*Crashboomlove. I read that first and then fell into all this
Latina/ Latino stuff and thought—Alex. She would love this.*

And where am I supposed to put all this? All I get is a smile.

So, now a pile of books all over my room.

From *The Surrender Tree*

(Lena says I'll love cuz all in poetry)
to *Bodega Dreams* (says too good
not to be read, takes place in Spanish Harlem).

From *Honey Blonde Chica*

(says like *Gossip Girls* but speak Spanglish)
to Latina Bible of everything Latina—
Borderlands/ La Frontera: The New Mestiza
(what she calls scary reads).

From adult classics like *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *In the Time of Butterflies* (what she says we should have read instead of *Oedipus Rex* or *Frankenstein*) to new YA classics, *Parrot in the Oven: Mi Vida* and *Call Me Maria* (says first book from 1990's and second one from just a few years ago).

To more scary stuff like *Massacre of the Dreamers* (says goes perfect with all my Aztec dreams).

Then *Sammy and Juliana in Hollywood* (says about a girl murdered by her father, just ignore all the bad words) and *Last Night I Sang to the Monster* (which she says we both live in some way or other and may not really count as Latino).

And one non-Latina book, but all about female empowerment, *I Am an Emotional Creature* (says should be number 3 on my list, then go from there).

Tells me go read *Queen of Camelot* if all gets to be too much.

September 5, Yesterday' Dream, Friday

Again, Papanzín. She treads her fingers through bath water,
warm, clear like a mirror, jade and silver. Her arms, chiseled
ribbons of gold. Her dress, white, woven cotton of nobility.
Her crown, jade, quetzal feathers.

Almost Greek,
almost Egyptian
except skin,
color of cacao beans,
eyes like jaguar cat,
scorched maíz.

Free from her tomb, Papanzín brings dismay
to her father, Montezuma, and all his men.

Her hair, corn-silk, black on gold skin.

September 6, Under My Bed

Reading one my old journals from back when I was ten. Rewriting it here, now, not so therapeutic 'cus blue always the same. Mami the same, eyes more broken.

I have full hips, 36 B's, hair. Mirror image of Mami when she was 17.

And the *Lady of Shallot*, my faery queen, not so magical.

March 5, 2003, The Lady of Shallot

Do you know The Lady of Shallot? I completely love her long, red hair. I saw her first in Ms. Piñeda's class, favorite 4th grade teacher, and I was all "Please, Mami, please, get me the art print for my birthday. She's my favorite faery queen."

That was last October. The Lady hangs in my bathroom now behind gold and glass. Her hair, eyes, and mouth are more sad than ever. Her ghost looks back at me from the mirror where I comb my hair. Where Mami dries my hair. Where Mami sometimes looks sad too. Is beautiful. The Lady and my Mami.

September 8, Questions

Found another one, felt lost. Ten years old. Still do. 17.

May 17, 2003, What I Remember

Dear Lady,

Do you remember when I first saw you? About a year ago or more back before I was ten? It was in Mrs. Piñeda's class painted with mermaids and Greeks—myths all over the walls. I remember the room always dark, but colored with art and projector light. I remember slide after slide, brushstrokes and worlds different from anything I'd ever seen. And I listened. We all listened to all of Mrs. Piñeda, stories. The stories behind the art. It seems sort of long ago now. All my old friends have new friends. Some of them already going to church Youth Night, but Daddy won't let me go. He always says "God's word is best understood alone. You don't need friends to know God." He thinks some of them might already be following the wrong path, straight away from grace.

What is my path? I ask God every day, before sleep.

Talk to you tomorrow, always, sincerely, your Alex.

September 13, Searching for Papanzín

Frustrated, been too sleepy for any art. Too busy with keeping GPA up, and all this Papanzín stuff. Haven't been to Art Club—better make time before end of first six weeks. When non-members show up for last minute project things, maybe Ethan, making no progress in Art II according to Lena.

Meanwhile, I've searched for Princess Papanzín. More interested now since she won't leave me alone, since submerged in Lena's Latina Books I've even added some of my own, mainly reference books, handbooks to Aztec culture, life.

I found Papanzín at the library hiding in lost cultures, folklore, myths. Books dirty with dust, gold inside. Her story outside the neurons of my brain, outside of sleep where dreams do not reside.

Nothing new here. Only what I've already seen when shades are drawn, fan blades whirling overhead, over my bed, bringing sleep, a panoramic truth spread out like postcards in my mind.

I know more from sleep.

First view.

The priests whisper she walks after death. Her father,
Montezuma, does not accept.

Second view.

In sleep, Papantzín sees men of pale skin, eyes like sapphires
arriving from the water with a cross, silver, and desire.

Third view.

Her words fly to Montezuma—
the chief warrior, lord,
king, and her father.

Her words dismissed.

Next.

The Great Temple does not tremble at her words. Many do not
believe until the first siege begins. The men from the sea,
like gods, white with zeal, bodies emblazed in light.

Last.

The Massacre.

What the books do not show. Only words of the legacy instead,
of *mestizaje*—the blending of European and brown.

A new race, mixed but ethnically rich. Multicultural some say
today of anything we write.

Like me. Raised cheekbones,
bronze legs, and eyes everyday brown.

More brown than white.

More white than brown.

More quiet. Good for work.

For getting A's. For Hispanic Scholarship Fund.

Thank-you, Malinche, Aztec woman named traitor.

Actually, Aztec woman slave, lady gift to a Spaniard,
first mother to first *mestizo*.

You're number 1 in my book.

Something new.

In the books.

Papanzín was one of the first to convert,
leave paganism,

embrace Spaniard faith.

The blessed Papanzín, first baptized Aztec.

Sept 15, Change of Mind

Rewriting old journal entries—therapeutic. Let me go back to my Lady,
back when slammed doors were the worst thing I ever heard at home.
Need a Papanzín break anyway. I don't know what she wants with me.

May 18, 2003, What I Remember

Everything already seems wrong here with Daddy never really here,
and when he is here it's super quiet. I'm a mouse who doesn't move.
Mami scurries around our hole. Once in a while venturing out, looking
all quiet, a beautiful shadow with long, brown hair. Specks of red in between.
A few slammed doors when Daddy needs quiet time, or when he wants something
to be different. Cleaner, quieter, stricter, more *behavioed*. My word for more
and more and more. Wish I could make my own story, sketch it out in favorite
colors. Just take a blank page or wall and make my world better. Far away land.

Here's what I remember about you, Lady.

What I remember about you is the name Raphael and words
like girl, curse, mirror, and Camelot. I don't know what all that means
but I have my own story.

First, Lady, you must answer some questions.

Was Raphael your Prince Charming and all you ever wanted and hoped
and dreamed?

Was he what your Mami told you to find in your dreams?

Did you get to the castle on your lonely canoe and live happily ever after?

Did you get rid of all your mirrors and woven rugs of beautiful things
you could never really touch or see?

Swans and unicorns and chrysanthemums?

And then did you live?

Really live?

September 16, Wednesday's Dream

My Papanzín dreams are taking a break. Now sleep more complicated
with new dreams, new Aztec girl—her name is Mayahuel.

Here is my dream, she, Mayahuel, becoming me.

Near the burial grounds, Mayahuel, a young woman
of Aztec royalty, receives the daily admonition from her governess.
to please her gods, her blood-line, her household, her future
husband. She keeps her head bowed, arms to her side, resisting
a desire to dance with hummingbirds.

Her ears submit to words.

Words I hear as spoken to me.

My head fills with dizzy thoughts, my bed won't let me think

As me. Only as Mayahuel.

*Mayahuel, the governess speaks, though you are a child,
you will soon be woman-child
and your cheek will draw the breath of men*

I hear Mayahuel. Who am I? Am I me or she?

Mayahuel tells me she's been more than child since the summer winds
when heat penetrated all fabrics and swarmed on the skin.

She wonders if only she had felt the change?

But, no, even her mother had complained of the heat. Summer
winds pushed through all of Tenochtitlan and brought change.

*Do not be swayed by an intent eye, Mayahuel,
since the eye always falls on any flesh bronzed.*

Mayahuel suppresses a laugh. Little does her governess know
she ponders that same flesh when she walks through
the imperial gardens

Morning dew,
skin of men,
groundsmen
of the palace,
glisten
with early sweat.
They prune
orchids and wild
flowers.
She considers
noon heat
already seeping
through the terrace.
Morning is gone,
men have left,
but yet she thinks

of treading
through gardens
once again
to carry more
gifts to Princess Papanzín's
tomb.

The governess speaks,

Do you receive the teaching of womanly virtue, Mayahuel?

The appropriate and expected response from Mayahuel:

*As do all women. For from this the sun rises high
and the moon takes her place as a white shadow in pale light,
and a star in the night sky.*

For in this, her children reflect light in darkness

Her lips, my lips
move in obedience,
but my eyes
draw away
toward the orchids
beyond the terrace,
to the princess,
Papanzín.
The one
Mayahuel,
me,
thought was dead.

But, the princess

only waits for me, for Mayahuel.

September 17, Mayahuel Asleep, Back to Me

My favorite diary poem from a long time ago. Must be from around same time,

May something, 2003.

The Girl With Red Hair

The girl with hair like frizzy silk,
red, long past her waist. Sailing
away to Faeryland, to her secret
getaway, away from all the sound,
from all the silence
always loud
when my Mami is quiet,
is sad in her blue light from curtains that only let in shadows.
I sail to dreams, to Faeryland with pencils
made for color. My colors on white paper
hide under my bed.
One day I'll sketch my far, far away on my wall.
Somehow I will live
in castle walls spilling ivy from tall towers,
like tears flowing away
from the princess
who lives happy.
My forever after will be near
waters for swans, unicorns, and purple flowers
on lily pads.
Waters for dance, for woodland feasts.
Waters of gold and Woodland dancers
who never grow old.

I hope it looks real like a dream. The kind you remember and seems crazy
and seems beautiful. Maybe my teacher can help. Maybe no one can.

It's my world of magic in my house of blue no one can ever see.

Only the Lady of Shalott knows my heart is sad, the color of old water.

The color of Mami's room. Faded jeans. I wish Daddy would go to sleep.

Let Mami have peace.

September 18, 2011, Mirrors and Glass

I am *The Lady of Shalott*.

Princess

imprisoned,

draped in green,

with fairy hair

floating

over water-

frogs and river.

Lilies. Shadowed

with November

sun.

Drifting

to Camelot.

Away

from Ellyon—

magic realm

of elves, fey,

eternal waves.

Away

from palace,

my girl place

of glass, mirrors,

looms, spinning

reflections

of what could be

outside.

You.

Smiled at me once, but I looked away.

Glass breaks. My life as window pane over.

Stars weave my fate.

Women Songs

September 23, Two Aztecas—Wednesday's Dream

Papanzín motions with her hand. *Come, Mayahuel,*

I've been waiting. For you. For your gifts.

(The agave falls to the ground. The pitcher
shatters to pieces, breaking the water)

But you are ghost, whispers Mayahuel.

(into woman, fractured and goddess, skin waves of sun)

*I am spirit. Resurrected. You know
me, your limbs are my own, your hair
maíz, the perfume of all our women.*

(like Atzec gold)

*You are Papanzín. A woman
in communion with gods.*

(like Aztec Aphrodite)

*And you, Mayahuel. A name too beautiful
for this world.*

(rising from moon, sand, sleep)

I only come for more water.

(with hair, limbs, curves, blurred,
color of seaweed and pearls.)

Do you come for more life?

September 24, Mayahuel's Response

Please, I must return, my Lady.

My governess waits.

I am not goddess, I am not
daughter. I am not even
woman, yet.

I am forbidden to speak.
To approach men, Lords,
God-Kings is death.

My father in *Colhuacan*
spoke of honor I would receive
from Montezuma's throne.

But I may not draw near him.
Until he calls for me. Until
I am needed by priests.
I do not yet know my path.

Release me.

September 26, Papanzín's Turn to Speak

And your father? In *Colhuacan*? Does he wait?

(The agave thorn brings life and motion.

SONG I)

I have seen you in sleep as a water goddess

born of the agave. You are Mayahuel.

Daughter, Mother, Girl, Woman

of man, Creature of Emotion.

Tears for love, anger for shame,

skin for touch.

Your spirit flows

from above, from the place of stars,

moons. Your limbs pour

syrup and *pulque*,

healing and solace.

(The agave thorn is poison, piercing the thigh.

Blood stops motion.

TRUTH)

You are flower, *aguamiel* in your heart, nectar

springing from your skin.

Now, receive my command.

Find your lord, find Montezuma. Speak
how Papanzín calls from bath water
of imperial vault.

My words will speak for you.

Do not be afraid.

Today Montezuma will see
more, hear more
As for me,
he no longer owns.

(The agave thorn brings movement. Streams of red
flowing, moving, feeding a land of drum-beatings.

SONG II)

Tell me, Mayahuel, is it the same
for you as it was for me?

(The agave thorn draws breath from veins.
The body turns cold, blue.

TRUTH)

Take my headdress from my hair. Your flower
will never end, your song will not cease.

A melody will raise you up
to the gardens not far from here,
to Montezuma.

(The agave thorn drips honor and sacrifice.

SONG III)

Find energy, power, gold
weight, in the jade crown I wear.
Take it. My headdress
as your own. As your source
of power.

(The agave thorn hits to bone, releasing
pain as fountains.

TRUTH)

September 28, Watermelon Fish

You looked at me today. I pulled you to my skin. My hair brushed your shoulder
when I walked to my table of oils, acrylics, woods. A double dose of girl surging
through your neurons, swirling in gold. Luminescent. Pheromones under glass, concealed—
awakening a tribal dance set to canvas rhythms.

Song 1

I crave flowers. You flower-sing. Nectar and rain.

I draw a recessed moon above a wood-sky. Moon releases her orb, her translucence.

She feeds life with red and green force, creates new astral bodies,

dropping jade energy east and west—You and me. Our hearts swell red.

Fish like watermelon form a myriad in between, but only to entice, *aromate* our air, *aquatate*.

Song 2

I crave flower. You flower-sing. We dance in water-wood.

You sit one table away, arranging colors in rhythm, in glass, a private mosaic I want to help
shape. I radiate through my skin. Know me. Consider my orb. Be my art when the sun
declines and we will progress, meld forms—trees, fruits, fish, lips. Let my touch be
nature, your touch nurture. Our body, the escape in aquatics.

Song 3

????????????????????

Interrupted. Real life when I see him tap his fingers. See Ethan glance here, there, then at me, dripping words from mouth. “Think you could take a look at this?”

Sure. No problem. Maybe say something smart, artistic. Different from other girls in jeans.

Small violet splatters on new cashmere sweater.

October 1, Best Day

Last good day with my father when I was 13. A sober moment.

Middle of summer, Mami at a woman's meeting, church. She left without cooking and Daddy not too upset.

He banged a couple of cabinet doors around, moped around the kitchen, muttered a few words, I'm sure.

I tried best to keep out of his hair. Spent my time outside with a book, *Black Beauty*.

Then I see him walking, and I'm thinking I'm in trouble for something Mami did or didn't do. Could go either way. But when I looked up, he was smiling at me.

You hungry? In normal dad voice. No vodka edge. *Ándale, let's go.*

I nodded.

We didn't talk the whole way. Just enjoyed oldies station, "Just my Imagination," Denny's restaurant, pigs in blanket for dinner.

October 2, Thinking

Ever heard good girls go bad? It starts like this.

Days

playing Barbie

over. Trade make-believe

for something real, hands,

warm breath, lips

against

skin.

Broomstick

hips fill out like a coke

bottle. Boys drink all in,

take picks. Girls

make picks,

consider,

give in.

October 4, Back to Dreaming

A storm brews past the horizon. Gardens wither in steam, waters roll in boil. Stars diminish, hide behind clouds, when Montezuma, the god-king, thrashes and flails at the absurdity of a woman coming back to flesh. His daughter, Papanzín, cold, dead, more than ghost, reassuming her birthright, as if still reserved for her.

All this spoken by a woman-child, the one named Mayahuel, a sacrifice for the coming feast, her skin supple, unmarked by blood or man. She may be enshrouded in spiritual garment, but if possible, she'd be dead right now, or at least nearly strangled. Fortunate for the insipid girl, he cannot penetrate her shield, lay one hand on her.

Then all comes to an end.

Mayahuel disappears, leaving only a cloak of agave fibers in her place. She returns to Papanzín.

October 5, Missing Truth

in art mural Mr. Castillo showed us today.

Our semester art project is a 3 panel mural sketch.

First panel complete on canvas by December 13.

Must tell a story, summarize a legacy, symbolize truth.

The Last Haven by Fidencio Duran.

Let's start at the beginning, left side panel, with a river
of palms and a heron—last of its kind, flying like a cloud
escaping summer heat.

Women gathering fish from shoreline, whispering of tears
buried among the *chinampa* islands. Quiet chants
to their daughters—lavender
Water Lilies kneeling by their feet.

Men baking like clay, Indian, loin cloth ready to fight
jaguar. Men, Women, exposed to earth, wind, fire.
Water and war on the flute.

Then the struggle, Middle Panel.

For land = loss.

The labor

of land, industry = forced.

The preservation

of dignity = difficult.

The fight, Last Panel.

For rights = never ending.

Chicanos protesting in Edcouch-Elsa, Valley city near Delta Lake.

Not a part of me. I have better education. I have *justicia*.

In comparison. My prison is the XY of the XXI century.

Skin breaking in flower, purple exhibit for botanics of fists.

Splitting skin.

The pre-conquest *this* and the pre-columbian *that*

not so glorious like mural shows. More of a myth.

The *artista's* male point of view.

Dear Duran,

Where are the streams of red flowing off thorn of a desert star?

The pierced thighs of Aztec rituals forgotten under a night sky?

The women-slaves disowned and owned?

The women with mutilated bodies?

The girls in closets closing their ears tight? Muffled mother screams from other rooms?

Where is she, me, Mami?

My prison is the XY

Some things never change.

October 6, I'm done
dreaming,
done hoping change.
Done waiting
for Mami,
for screaming
to end.

Never happens.
He reaches for her.
His breath dark,
dank, fast. His hands
all over
her beauty,
making black
out of cream
neck.

Done
hoping she,
I will escape.

Maybe
only me.

Maybe
I don't need so far an escape.

Maybe
I just go bad.

Not so bad out to fall out of grace, just bad enough to do what I want. Away from everyone who knows me one way. Quiet church girl wearing designer t-shirts, always a little paint, and jeans, stained with blues, yellows, aquamarines, a random mermaid drawn on left knee. Hair to waist, plain face, model daughter of father who maybe never lays waste on bottle, at least not in public. He takes care of *his*—in case anybody wonders. Wife always sick. No church for her today. Daughter staying late at school, tutoring, using her mind for good.

Never heard bad feels good when a boy involved.

October 7, *Taqueria Love*

I lied for the first time.

Said I was one place, went somewhere else.

A beat-down might come of this. Who cares. Coming anyway.

Sooner for Mami, later for me.

Truth,

I've seen Ethan everyday this week,

helping him with project after school. Art

room. 317.

Except today. He shows up, takes me by elbow, whispers *let's go*.

All it took for sin to get a hold.

Lie,

I hated not telling the truth.

Lie,

nobody I know saw us.

Lie,

Ethan is just a boy, a crush.

Lie,

I know what to do with boys.

Truth,

he took me to a *taqueria* north side of town. *Salsa verde* with lime juice over *tacos de bistek*. Green bowls of *frijoles al la charra*, steaming over tables draped with *manteles* embroidered with Mexican flowers. Drinking *limonada*.

Finding me. Finding him. His shoulder pulling me in. Art in the truest sense with words, smiles, all kinds of happy talk, his eyes on me.

He dropped me off a block away from home, but not without showing me what to do.

Close my eyes, wait for warmth on lips, his hand on my neck, smell of him engulfing all.

A brisk walk home, holding my body close, savoring goosebumps of 90 degree weather, Valley weather. October cicadas chiming in Caps Lock under leaves. My scarves waiting in drawers, anticipating fall, a long embrace.

Aztec Films

October 8, Back to Dreams

A scene from Aztec Terminator.

Montezuma steps from the shadows

And says, *Who are you dressed in the tradition
of The Great Ones?*

I am Papanzín. More than dream with message.

Then speak. I am not afraid.

Not yet.

I know what the gods say. They speak of coming greatness.

Then I come with blessing of vision.

Proceed. I will make judgment.

Father, I come to warn of the fall. Your kingship
crumbles. Our people perish by sword. I have lived
beyond the horizon, among the dead and not seen
the gods of our forefathers, those same false gods
you follow. Gods I no longer serve.

*What falseness in gods who receive our sacrifice?
Who prosper the world I have made for their honor?
Your visitation is one of darkness, from unconsecrated
flesh, smoke. A place of ash over truth.*

No, Father, truth and threat come in the waves,
in words spoken by men beyond twaters, flying
in vessels over sea. I come to speak for all

our people. Mark my words. Prepare.
False gods prevail in all places, in all
times. Their spirits corrupt men.

October 9, Coming to a Theatre

near you. My dream, a cinematic experience.

Fade in: to Aztec grandeur. The exterior at twilight.

SHE.

Papanzín standing against a backdrop
of reds, golds, blues, greens. Montezuma's shadow
over all.

I have seen a vision in sleep.

HE.

Sounds of thunder, forewarning Montezuma's presence,
unseen, unheard. Then he speaks. He reverberates
in god-king voice.

In death.

Cut to Montezuma. Shadow converges with Aztec lord,
screen turns red.

SHE.

Cut to Papanzín, the lens moves closer. Papanzín turns
away to the stars, her face translucent. Close on her face,
asleep and awake, her eyes closing.

A voice of sapphire and silver in the river valley. Clear, crystal, good.

Stream-of-consciousness montage, continuous, superimposed.

Papantzín, sheer, luminous underneath the image.

The Aztec backdrop blazing in reds, golds, blues, greens.

Whispering my name, speaking my time is not fully yet. Pointing my spirit to the smoke mountains and gods of serpent heads, skulls, feathers, twisted necks.

HE.

Camera cut to Montezuma.

Our gods? You have seen them?

SHE.

Speaks off camera. Montezuma's rage fills the screen.

They withered in fire, yet did not turn to ash.

His features bleed into her word image.

Beyond the river, a shadow flies over waters.

HE.

What you speak is merely death-dreams.

END SCENE

October 12, Aztec Mural

Latest dream, Monday. Thinking could work well for mural sketch.

The story of how Papanzín blessed Mayahuel.

First Panel—

*Papanzín at royal bath, rising to meet Mayahuel, extending her hand forward,
her life-force a gold mist diffusing through second and third mural panels.*

A dialogue between Papanzín and Mayahuel in curved lines, colors, shapes—

(Papanzín) You are still in one piece.

(Mayahuel) I know not the words I spoke.

Yet, Montezuma comes. To see a woman
returned from the dead.

Surely, he will see a goddess—gold
emanating from your spirit.

Montezuma sees weakness, malignant curves,
and flesh for use of men. Tell me, Mayahuel,
is it the same for you?

I—I do not understand.

Are you your mother's daughter, waiting
to take her role? With a man who gives no voice?

Will your daughters know you? Will you sell them,
give them over for rituals without meaning?

I do not know what you mean.
I am not woman yet.

You will soon be among our women. For all time.
Even when ages pass, when stone structures rise,
forming a new horizon of metal, light, mirrors, noise, fumes—
Only then may women fare better in life.
Yet, even then, some will suffer.

Second Mural Panel--

*White herons ascending to a spiritual realm of women as wingless seraphim,
embracing in rivers, entwined with sky. Dialogue continues in fluid, abstract art—*

(Mayahuel) I do not know my mother.

(Papanzín) Nor do I know mine.
But when wings carry her beyond clouds,
to the place I've been, then I will know.
We will mourn our earthly roles, our spirits
will enfold one another.

My mother is already there.

Then she waits. She smiles over the agave I return
to you. Take the agave. Yours for the After.

*Bottom of Second Mural Panel—
Pagan ritual, woman-child spread on alter, priests with fingernails as blades.
Heavy, expressive brushstrokes— Papanzín's warning to Mayahuel—*

(Papanzín) Take heed, the Festival of *Teteoinnan*,
Aztec earth goddess, will soon take place.
Your body will be offered for priest lust
disguised as sacrifice. A deflowering,
then skin stripped to clothe priest-men.
Macabre gown sewn with agave fibers.

No woman in right mind approves, but all comply.

(Mayahuel) When my father—when he sent me
here—he did not speak of death. Only of skin
fragrant with orchid oil, hair weaved
with amethyst, honor for Montezuma.

Your father deceives. The honor he speaks
is blood and death.

*Third Mural Panel—
Equal parts collage and paint. Papanzín's gold mist extending into panel,
a vine motioning forward to burial vault, emptying into the sea. Quetzal bird
feathers shooting through canvas. Dialogue closing
with fluidity and 3D edge—*

(Papanzín) I will honor you. Take the agave,
receive it back. Walk through the vault,
to the other side.

*Papanzín gestures toward the burial vault, Mayahuel moving
Forward, her skin suddenly chilled, mesmerized by what lies
beyond the great, white stone, a sea of blue-black lines.*

(Papanzín) Things will prove difficult,
you may not know yourself. But you
will thrive. You will resist, break free.
You will leave our world, leave men
who command here for a new world
where a sister waits. Warmth
will never leave you.
New breath in a different age waits.

(Mayahuel) I do not understand.

You do not have to.

The vault is death.

October 17, Dream—Mayahuel Enters

tomb. But not before thinking of her mother.

Mayahuel cradles the agave in her hands, her hair touching tips of pointed petals.

She buries her eyes in green plant fibers, remembers when her mother died—
season after the summer winds in Colahuacan. Remembers the poultice
applied on her mother's wrist, a potion of agave.

Mayahuel did not know her mother then. Her mother with eyes like mud
and water, behind curtains of the sick bed. Her sisters cradling her head,
cleasing her face with *aguamiel* . Mayahuel touching hem of sheer cloths
draped over the body, lingering in her mother's scent. Closing her eyes
to pale flesh once color sun-honey.

Memory-vision fades, is replaced by Papanzín, kneeling in front of Mayahuel.
Mayahuel reaches forward, touches Papanzín's lips, listens to their warmth
and truth.

Papanzín's lips whisper,

Touch my shoulder.

Mayahuel moves closer, grazes her fingers along Papanzín's neck, seeking heart rhythm,
sacred breath to usher her past the vault, past the white stone to other side.

“Your mother accepts, Mayahuel. She knows.”

Mayahuel’s spirit wavers, pulled her out of her own skin.

“Then I will go.”

Papanzín embraces Mayahuel, a parting gift of warmth.

This is from me.

Then her lips graze Mayahuel’s head.

This is from your mother.

Mayahuel quickens with recognition, closing her eyes for a moment, inhaling the rich smell of jasmine wafting through her mother’s skin.

Her mother speaking through Papanzín’s spirit.

Enter the waters.

“Papanzín, will you be with me?”

“No, but my spirit will be with you.”

She places the jade diadem on Mayahuel’s head, infusing her with gold rays.

“Whoever wears this crown is clothed in Papanzín,
in protection, strength.”

She releases Mayahuel, guides her to the vault.

“Enter the waters.”

Donde Hay Humo, Hay Calor / Fire Brings Heat

October 17, 2011, Asleep and Awake

Mayahuel enters

the vault with a bird

of song at her side.

She soars low

to darkness ahead,

past orchids,

jasmine, marigolds,

past gates of horizon

to a prism, spectral time,

light speed ahead.

To where I sleep,

aware of my father's hands

on my mother's shoulders

behind a bedroom door.

I see tiled baths, turquoise streams.

I hear the hymn of Mayahuel

coming through vault,

through chain-link cerca,

Lavandas closed to bloom.

And, I dreamt—I am part *Mayahuel*.

*To my father I am Alejandra,
but I am more than my father
in heaven.*

*Very soon. My father will burn
in his own fire.*

*My mother and I—we
will pour the fuel.*

*Mayahuel and I
will take arms together.*

I am awake.

October 18, The Other Me

She is here. The other girl I dream. Who speaks what I dream. Small, light brown,

black hair. Me when I was eight. But not me. Who moves towards me.

My eyes closed underwater.

I do not dare breathe.

Her eyes are narrow. Egyptian petals filled with brown-gold.

Energy, fluidity, warmth.

Her ankles, slender and bare, float across the tiled floor.

Organic, tranquil, spectral.

A mist of gold enshrouds her. She enters my space, my water

where I dream-sleep. Her hair, a river weaving through

motionless air, entangled in a headdress of ancient gems and feathers.

Her skin connecting to mine.

Her body submerged with mine.

Her hair entwined with mine.

My breath gone.

Sucked from being.

The gold mist in my lungs and her breath now mine.

A gasp of air and a need to burst from the water.

Fully awake. Not me, but she. No, wait. Not she.

I know this room. I know my skin. My mother. She just left.

She said get ready. Sunday.

I'd rather sleep.

The headdress on my hair, jade, feathers, drips water. It does not belong to me. Belongs under white towel on my vanity. No one can see.

Mom walks in.

October 19, Sunday's Best Part 2

Huge fight yesterday before church

*Alex, it's been half an hour. You just can't sit there
doing I don't know what.*

I don't hear you, Mom. I don't hear your truth.

Alex, what's a matter with you? Why aren't you drying your hair?

I don't feel your touch on my scalp, your hands frantic,
towel drying my hair. My ghost speaks to me. She says
stay. Don't go. To me. Not you. She says speak.

To me. For me to speak to you. I say,

How can you go out with your face, fresh-bruised?

I see your shock, broken with truth you don't want
to see. But I see. Whole world sees. Just nobody
wants to say.

Maybe now she'll leave me alone. Natural beige make-up
from Walgreens does a good enough trick. Plus Gucci
sunglasses. Shield from ultra-fluorescent bulb rays

hanging off church ceiling, burning skin bright for all to see.

Be outside in 15 minutes.

She turns to walk away. Her shoulders shaped like puddles.

Then pauses, pleads,

Let this be a good day. Please. I need you.

Under my breath—*Like that will ever happen.*

What was that?

Nothing, Mom, just go already. There's no way I'm gonna be ready.

October 20, Emotions Fly

Rewind to Sunday again. Let the movie begin.

Frustrated: “Why are you doing this to me, Alex? All you have to do is sit on the same pew next to me.”

Give an I-don’t-care-smile: “I’m sorry, Mom, but you can’t be the one to need me. I need you. I’ve always needed you, but things haven’t worked out that way, I guess.”

Give a Best-Mother-in-the-World appeal: “I’ve always been here for you, Alex. Don’t you forget because who do you think protects you from him? I take all his anger, and I would never let him lay a hand on you.”

Teenage angry comeback: “What about when I tell him what a hypocrite he is?”

Grab rebellious teenager by shoulders. Shake her violently:
“Do not provoke him.” Keep up the shaking. “You don’t know what he’s capable of. I don’t know how I would live with myself if he ever—if he ever—”

Whispers: “Hit me?”

Adult pulls away and straightens up, indignation in her chin:

“He would never.” As if truth.

Teenage truth: “I’ll just be another woman to him soon. Like you.

Living under his roof and needing good pinch, hit, every once in a while.

I’m no longer his daughter. He is everything but a father—I hate him!

Why don’t you?”

Mother all weepy: “I can’t hate him. He’s not a monster.”

Teenager rolls her eyes and thinks...sure. “Then I’ll do it for you.

He’s only got the devil inside.”

Mother needs to lie: “Just needs deliverance. That’s all. I know the man
that used to be.”

Teenager wins: “I know a mother that used to be.”

Mother lets emotions fly. Reacts with a slap. Daughter holds
cheek, stunned. Tears stinging.

Mother wins: “Take that back.”

October 25, Dreamless

Lately I just want to paint in blues, golds, reds, the finery of ancient rituals, dress. Not medieval scenes, fairy folklore of before, but rivers, stars, fire.

Snakes, water swirling in a flute cadence. Flowers sprouting moons of dew. Tiers of earth glowing crimson from the sun. HD vibrancy, color hypnotic, plausible fantasy. All on canvas. Mayahuel's world *collidingwithmine*. Camelot sprouting pyramids. Ellyon now Aztlán.

Her dream.

Her vision.

Her myth.

Mine.

If I look closely in the mirror I can still see her, Mayahuel. But more and more she is invisible. I can only birth her in visual poetry, brushstrokes. Mayahuel no longer reveals anything of her Aztec life. I only know her conversations with Papanzín from dreams before. I no longer dream of Tenochtitlan.

But, I see it vivid, in 3D graphic design.

At night I am back to dreaming black. My father a shadow waiting. My mother in a body bag after a few nips—a lá Frida Kahlo.

Here is Me / Mayahuel.

Self-Portrait at the Border of Me and She.

Sun, moon, terracotta—a fuse. New generation power surge.

October 29, Been Thinking

what if

Mom left him?

What if

we left him?

To his rage,

drunk and hot,

ramming fists

into wall, blue

like ghosts.

A minefield

of punches.

The drywall

spitting back

at him.

White powder

a reminder—

she's gone.

His skin bruised,

bloodied

from his own

blood—

dark, burgundy.

Ritual complete

without my mother,

without her

red, her rich,

her velvet

dripping

out her nose.

If only.

Maybe.

November 1, Ethan and I
have to be careful all the time.

Art project tossed aside. Orange grove
behind his house instead.

Too many questions, smiles
from petite mom, pretty
with green eyes,
cream skin,
perfect teeth,
unscarred ribs.

Everytime I go inside.

But oranges belong to us. Fires of nectar encased in bitter
skins. Sun hues the world, emblazons trees with sherbet
gold, perfect for drawing, Ethan holding, Ethan speaking, dream-
planning for perfect date. November 27, day I turn 18.

Not a word about Mom, Dad, hole in wall, covered by art.

Though Ethan knows of anger, drinking, how strict he is
with Mom, me. How he could never accept his daughter's
boyfriend.

What he doesn't know?

Definitely not the missing fingernails, ones Mami bled
to near bone, scratching her way out of locked pantry
closet, when Daddy caught her, us, trying leave,
Tonio and me waiting in backseat of car, Mami
getting one more thing, Daddy home, Tonio and me hiding
under seats, Mami walking outside front door,
Daddy yanking her hair, Mami saying...*Tonio, Alex,*
come inside. Please. Daddy saying...*That's right not time*
to leave yet. Tonio crying...saying *don't hurt Mommy,*
all my idea. Daddy releasing Mami's hair, grabbing
Tonio in headlock, a knee pinning his chest to ground,
Tonio turning blue, me screaming...*daddy don't, he didn't*
do it! Mommy just said "Let's go!" Daddy let Tonio go,
says...*get in house.* Dragging mommy from hair. Leaving me
by porch standing, crying.

November 4, What I Remember.

Palm trees coated with snowflakes, December 2004. Miraculous snow-
angels on Tex-Mex border, last happy day with my brother, Antonio.

Mami tasting snow. Daddy not too bad. Kept drinking low for Christmas Eve.

Christmas day. Bam.

Icicles make a torrid mess. Daddy a mess. Goes for mom.

Antonio jumps Dad. Dad gets it good. Tonio gets it worse.

Lungs coughing blood like poinsettias,

brilliant against cold.

Like Blood-Flowers offered at temple of terror
during the festival of *Xipe-Totec*—obsidian blades
peeling skin off captives.

Like Blood-lust of Aztec priests dressed
in cadaver skin.

A few days later, December 31st, 2004, Antonio's letter.

gotta go, alex girl -leave when you can cuz mom won't -joined marines

-Tonio

Class of 2012 next year. Still no Antonio. End of the world maybe.

As long as Ethan wraps his body around mine.

Against the orange blossom fort,

under the trees we make-out.

Under candle light constellation, the northern star

bright to San Antonio.

November 5, Have to Be

perfect for momdadschoolGodpeoplebrother.

Am I the model daughter?

I tried once when Daddy was better. Now wants to waste his life
away, be drunk, rage, beat Mami in face, deep, blue sea.

I can't stop him.

I can't help her leave him for me, for herself

I can't try for Mami any longer.

I can only do for me. Texas hill country calling my name.

November 7, Here

is what Mayahuel did not see.

She came before—though, my dreams now her dreams, right?

Don't know, but do know this was the last dream.

Sometime late October...

Montezuma: *stands before Papanzín,
without embrace, only god-king voice—*

I know not of your physical or spiritual powers,
but if you remain on earth, you will continue
in your role as high daughter of the Azteca.

You will continue in your duties
as woman. Let me remind you.

Papanzín: *leaning against
imperial bath, treading her fingers
through water, ripples of warmth—*

I do not receive it.

You will give due respect and obey in all matters
pertinent to the lineage of Montezuma.

As I allowed for bloodletting
from my pierced flesh? For your gods,
your consumption of land, people?
For your divine rule? Though you
were deified, my dear father,
in coronation ceremony, I did not witness

your god, Quetzalcoatl, descend
upon on your spirit. I worshipped you
as a god, beamed when I thought of
mighty Montezuma. God-king
who loved me as he loved mother.
But, you never loved mother.

Do not speak of her. You shame her
with your words.

You and all men shame women.
O, what I would have done
for one embrace, for one whisper
of my name from your breath.
I would have loved you. A god
or a father, you have not been.

Montezuma steps close, grabs her from arms—

It is your role to obey, respect, listen.
Follow after a woman's virtues,
be chaste in youth,
a woman to one man,
maintain hearth fires,
teach your daughters modesty
and wifely duties. Your mother knows
these things, your sisters, every woman.

The Azteca lives to serve her gods,
her father, her husband, and her lord.

Now you shame all with your tongue
of flame. Your blood is tainted, unworthy
of sacrifice. No husband will now have you.

I would have loved you

Fully enraged, holding Papanzín close at neck—
You would have been your husband's gift.
You would have ascended to the heavens.
You are dismissed.

I am no longer your daughter.

My thighs no longer pierced
for flow of blood off Great Temple.

You are dismissed from the Azteca and our gods.

Breaks out his choke-hold, turns to leave—

Your gods deceive.

They will not guide

your men in fight.

Papanzín looks to burial vault—

I go now

to the shore.

Place between

heaven and earth,
where stars pull,
push. Where dark
meets sun.
God waits.

May the gods have mercy on your soul.

Papanzín rises, moves legs toward vault—

Montezuma, unwilling to lose—
You have not been dismissed from my presence.

*Papantzín does not respond; a gold mist
upon her body, disappears past large white tomb,
border to eternity, new world —el otro lado.*

*Montezuma follows after, but stone slab shuts
with force; a red mist escapes Montezuma's flesh,
goes through vault—*
Papanzín!

November 8, Winter Masquerade

two Fridays from today, and I have gypsy boy to go with.

In secret. Dad can't know.

All planned out. Have my dress with Lena's help—her 7th grade Onion Fest pageant gown, deep mauve, velvet, full skirt, halter top, a dress from her "Lenaida" days. Now Lena the X signature all over. Tiers of black mesh draped over velvet, asymmetrical neck, one sheer sleeve, cut low on back to waist—more skin, more Lena than me.

More Mayahuel than me. Designed after my latest sketch, Mayahuel in red, a sheeth of Greek column, shoulders, arms, gold. Mayahuel's face mine. Hair spirals of quetzal feathers, gems. Jade crown lifting Mayahuel, carrying her out of Ellyon. My new Lady, the Aztec fairy here. Stepping out of canvas, out bedroom, out front door, never coming back.

For	one	night.	With	Ethan.
Windows				lead
to many				places.
Beaches,				roads,
orange	groves.	Home.	Anywhere.	Escape.

November 9, Dry Ice in Color

I had an Ethan dream. Though he was not main showcase.
I was. But not me. Me as succubus, dark fairy, seductress.

Draw the curtains:

On stage, one bed, one sleeping Ethan, one me entwined with him on bed,
one not me, her silhouette, a fire glow, illuminated behind panel screen, shadow
seductress. She emerges enshrouded in red mist like one I've seen
on Montezuma, on my father lately when he enters any room.

Red shadow flying, taking out my breath, raising me from sleep, keeping me
in a trance, moving within me, leading me to Ethan's soul, saying,

Ethan, I need your touch. Skin, lips, they all burn for more. Say you want me.

Of course he says *Yes*, says he wants me.

Tell me again.

And, like the fool he is, he continually repeats, for any part of me.
But red shadow me resists, only tempts him. My last words...

Give me your Soul.

The fool says *Yes*.

Then my dream does a 180.

I'm pinned underneath, floating on water, bed of purple flowers.
He says *Save you* as Ethan, then not Ethan with a jerk smirk, leering
eyes, his breath hot in ear.

Now I'm the fool, say *Save me*.

???????????????????????????????????? All I can say.

All of a sudden I'm supreme she-sprite? Dear God, forgive me for this dream!

I might love Ethan, but I don't want his soul, nor do I want to give him mine.

November 10, So Stupid

sneaking Ethan in my room.

This is how it went.

Only whispered slight truths till we fell asleep.

Daddy's an alcoholic, calls my mom names, never calls me anything, threw a plate at mom, scar on upper right arm, apologized profusely, never does anything to me. Trying to work it out, never speak of Tonio, left me note, didn't say he'd come back for me, Mom says just pray for him, her, us. I pray he doesn't prey on Mom tomorrow, tonight, Can't tell no one, you better promise, not so bad just like Mom says, just wish could be with you all day, all night, like this, your heart a drum beat, Mom asleep, Dad sober.

Ethan's body a fire-blanket.

I wake up, hair wet, feverish, another nightmare, Ethan shaking me awake.

“Alex, wake up. Just me, Ethan. Stop fighting, wake up.”

I gasp and bolt upright in bed, Ethan smoothing my hair back, touching my face.

“I was burning. Seriously, Ethan, I was burning.”

“Just a dream. I'm right here. You're safe.”

Till red mist comes under door. Dad.

Papanzín's crown put away.

November 11, No School—
nothing else to say.

Requiem for a Girl

November 12, Wishing for San Antonio

Next day pain on my back

unbearable. Friday welts—

fuchsia, blue, purple,

color of wildflowers

in spring

between Weslaco

and San Antonio, city of rivers,

my brother's name.

230 miles away.

Where I want to be.

I will lay down

along shallow, cold mud

banks of the River Walk.

Soothe my burn

with therapeutic roots

of ancient trees

shooting through

the concrete.

I will float on my back,

under restaurant umbrellas—

magenta, turquoise, green.

Mexican violins at my ear.

My bruises

concealed

in water.

November 13, Rest of Conversation

After 20 last kisses, before all hell breaks loose
on screen, my mind a little paranoid.

Ethan, what time is it?

1:15 before I fell asleep. Probably around 3.

Oh, my God. You need to leave now. I mean, if he catches me I'm dead.

You? You mean me.

Ethan wraps his arms around, but a bad vibe, hint of red glowering
under bedroom door. I try to pull away.

Hey, come here. I'll leave in a bit.

Ethan with a firm grasp around my waist,
luring me in. I speak through kissing.

A few more days, Winter Masquerade. Ready for tights?

Anything you want.

*Be here at 8, ring doorbell, promise you'll have me home by 11:30,
talk sports with my dad.*

Rolls eyes,

Yeah right. Let's stick to sneaking out plan.

Though, technically, I'm not. Mom says he'll work late.

She'll say I'm already in bed, period cramps.

Then I can't help adding, whispering, kissing his eyelashes with breath, *Don't leave
your Lady stranded. Help her break free.*

Ethan makes a promise,

I'll be there by 9. I won't let you go.

I hope.

Hey, you're the one with the issues, he says, feigning offense.

My chance to vent.

*Look, if I could I would just say hey Dad, you don't own me, know anything
about me, mom, love, God, anything. But I can't even get my mom to say
there's a problem anywhere 'cus he's there with a battering ram.*

Calm down, I'm just teasing. I know things are mess.

I know. You're like my only escape.

He walks to window, blows a love goodbye, says

For a night, but I can't be your savior.

Not even for Rapunzal?

In that case, let down your hair.

Corny love talk over. Bedroom door flies open.

We separate a millisecond after hearing, "Alejandra!" My father beyond enraged,
a shadow beast flaming, snarling like a bull.

"What the hell!" Already half across the room.

Me screaming,

Daddy, no!

Dad yelling,

"Get out!" Then again when Ethan doesn't move.

“Before I beat the hell out of you!”

Me pushing Ethan to window, him fighting with me, wants to protect me,
me crying, pleading with him to leave or worse for me.

Daddy! Don't! Right before he attacks.

“Sin vergüenza! Eres una descarada!”

Throws me on bed, beats my back; I try to fight back but he throws all
his weight on me, pulls head up by the hair.

“You are—not—too old—to discipline!”

Pushes my head hard against pillow, hard to breathe, the jade crown on floor,
running out of air, his fingers digging into scalp, knee grinding into back.

Then black, out of breath.

November 15, Get Moving

Dad says. Mom can't drive you to school today. But I don't listen any more.

Respond with *I'm not going*, calmly, without emotion, just like him.

A shocked look. Anger forming on his lips.

What did you say?

I said I'm not going. Now bolder. The jade diadem in my hands,
infusing me with power.

Then his grip on my shoulders forcing me to stand up, slightly shaking me.

Get ready now.

No, Dad, the whole world knows. I can't do this today

Knows what? His anger boils, makes all his red darker, sinister.

He knows. I will not say. I will only see through him with laser vision, until

his lungs collapse.

He does not answer, only,

Be ready in 10 minutes.

A Week Ago...November 19, Total teenage drama

the moment
I walk in,
arms, neck
in gold specks,
wrists
scented
with orchid.
Dressed
in velvet,
mauve,
draped like candle wax
falling
off my skin,
tiers,
structured,
organic,
to a train of lace
curved at my feet.

Potions, stars, whispers.

Medieval
fairyland, illusory
under dry ice,
strobe lights,
plastic ivy
hanging overhead.

Potions, stars, whispers.

Lord, ladies
enshrouded in magic
mist,
parting

before me,
as waters,
river grids to Camelot,
Lancelot.

Potions, stars, whispers.

I am the fairy
queen of agave,
I wear the Aztec crown,
princess headdress,
adorned in jade,
quetzal flowers.
One I've seen
on Mayahuel,
brown-haired
maiden
growing maize,
taking hearts
from agave,
making life
from liquid
nectar,
bitter,
sweet,
full of power.

Enchantment, stars, whispers.

But Lancelot does not care.

Fingers
along the ribs,
along the lips
of someone else,

his thighs against her
hips.

Dreamlike lucidity.

More, November 19

If this were a movie, script might read *we locked eyes, disregarding entire world, disregarding Aztec attire, disregarding another girl against his body.*

But more—spellbinding—ginseng roots, mirrors, magnetic stones. Ethan, as moon, wind, earth. All sustenance. Gravitating my skin to him. Not Ethan.

Eyes dark, hypnotic. Mouth full of charm, alluring. All walls—his space, all resistance dead—his domain, his air. A catacomb, sealing off breath, a suction to my core of being.

A merengue of swirls, my arms weightless marigold,
Ethan, not Ethan, holding me from stem,
all pliable to his contours.
His hands burning my back, fusing me to him, his lips
whispering beautiful disaster
against my neck,
Spinning me faster, singeing my soul, a song of red,
violet, sun-fire.

Smoke.

Shrill of a hundred cicadas.

All black.

The Girl Who Danced With the Devil, November 19

They say you can tell a devil from the smell of his skin, sulfur, wicked.

But what about in human form?

As fallen angel, his eyes, hazel and black pools, captivating, holding
your own? As dark prince, touching your soul from neck to bone?

Incantation, seduction, magic.

Spinning you in eternal motion
to the edge of heaven, far
from hell, but flames
always at the core of his breath,
sweet, burning, possessing
your skin, one finger
touching your hair,
until all goes dark, void,
flying through stars,
then a brightness ahead,
beyond white,
smoky, ethereal, Ellyon
of seraphims,
golden thrones, God.

Back to the void,
through black to
midnight to purple to red,
All colors swirling, music
mesmerizing, lucid,
intense heat pulsating
through your blood,
exhilaration,
so, so good
it hurts.

No blood, no broken skin,
no fractured bones. Only fire
to take all away. Now a new

hurt, eternal hurt with devil,
feathered serpent, blue,
green, red, gold.

Can't escape, can't release.

Black

Me

Dead

Bruised

Clawed

Snake

Acrid Fumes

Feathers

Armageddon of the soul.

Engulfed, November 19

Last thing I say, “By the authority of God, your power is rendered useless!”

I break free, wrestle headless from his mangled hands.

Sulphuric gas rising from his cloven feet, infiltrating all air,
making me gag, piercing my skin.

Acrid fumes.

Lena says I nearly burned to death, without fire, just my skin, living embers.

Don't remember. I only remember Ethan, hungry eyes, hair so black, almost red, not Ethan,
taking me to dark place, someone else, a legion of demonic spirits, then smoke, shrieks,
black, a fury of feathers, claws, scales, obsidian blades, inhuman.

Black.

Awake on the dance floor, my body covered, imprinted with scratches, bruises of dull fire.

Ethan on floor, not coughing, not choking, just lifeless. Me crawling to him, clinging to him
praying, *God, help me! Please, don't let him leave me!*

Then Lena there, pulling me off, helping me, dragging him down stairs, to car garage,
outside ballroom in Villa de Cortez.

Telling me *hurry, we gotta go, your house*, things I couldn't comprehend. Gas line, explosion,
fire, mom, dad, police.

We leave Ethan, paramedics already there, people staring, crying, screaming, backing off
of me, fire-starter.

Lena shoves me in her car.

Once there we can't even get near my block, police barricade on corner of 18th / Texas Blvd.,
leading to my home, to Villa Escondida.

Wailing of sirens and flames like twisted snakes, reaching toward sky.

The smell of charred stone, grass, wood, hair.

I try getting through, I kick, claw, scream, gouge eyes out until I break through, a million arms trying to hold me back. I run through gate, see my house in flames.

Today, Monday, November 22, At Lena's
house. About to leave, find Tonio.

On local news, 6:00 AM—

Gas-line explosion, upscale gated community,
South Weslaco. Foul play, murder
gone awry, murder suicide?

No conclusive evidence yet,
ensure gas-line secured.

Only one person pulled from fire,
Denaria de Luna, 43 years old,
dead on scene, death by smoke
inhalation. Main suspect, her husband,
Gerardo de Luna, charred.

Witnesses good family,
kept to themselves, church
every Sunday.

One survivor, daughter, Alejandra de Luna,
17, no response, waking up today, reeling
with the death of both parents. Minor burn
marks on her body.

But I know the truth. She, my mother, exposed the fuel.

He didn't let her escape.

Will go see Ethan's mailbox today.

November 28, To Ethan (and Anyone Else who Reads This)

Do you ever think about what if? What if all stars burn out?

their brilliance closed, their heat void?

Will there still be warmth? Will our bodies discover

nocturnal rhythms, draw intimacy out of dark?

What if rivers swallow our earth?

What if mountains disintegrate?

What if nuclear snow fades the world?

Will you know me then? Know me

in the barest sense, stark, lean,

the essential of me underneath?

Till then, canvas, acrylics, oils. Self-portraits

in brushstrokes,

orchids,

geraniums,

morning glories,

layered.

See more,
feel more,
know more.

Trace your index finger over my petals,
stems. Weather me with your hands.

Before the end.

Black,
gone,
forever.

Know me in dreams.

Aztlán

December 3, Sometimes

when the evening

winds turn red,

violet,

indigo,

I remember

temples,

ancient and un-ruined.

I remember.

I. Myths

of Aztlán

birthplace

of tortoise

shells,

agave,

Mexican

rosette of sharp points.

Myths spoken to me

in dream-sleep

by the Great Ones,
priest-men
of Island City,
Tenochtitlan.

They are the gate—
keepers of flame,
mist.

Keepers of myths.

Aztlán in sleep and dream.

II. Myths
of Aztlán
are collective,
shared,
born from fires
of the Great Temple
in Tenochtitlan,
kindled
by the Great Ones,

who whisper
legends, past
glories of
Aztlán to all
generations,
to me.

Aztlán,
ancestral homeland
of Nahua people,
now mestizos
without home
or place anywhere.

Aztlán,
wherever we are
without borders—
motherland.

III. The Great Ones
never speak
of Coatlicue,

Aztec

mother of life,

or Xochiquetzal,

flower

goddess of passion.

Without

first burning

incense

at the temple

of blood.

Without

first speaking

of Huitziopchtli

and Quetzalcoatl.

Gods of war,

wind,

brilliant

feathers

on temple walls.

All women

beyond

the temple

dismissed.

In Tenochtitlan,

floating

over Lake Texcoco,

where bridges

do not lead home.

In De Luna land,

broken, cracked,

bruised like crescent moons

on ribs, hips,

places no one sees.

I will make a new home,

leave what I know.

My Aztlán,

reborn

along San Marcos River.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Minerva Vasquez earned a BA in English from the University of Texas-Pan American in December 2006 and has recently earned an MFA in Creative Writing from the University of Texas-Pan American in May, 2011. Minerva has published a few poems and participated in community readings of her work during her three year enrollment in the MFA program. She resides in Weslaco with her husband, Jaime, and her three children, David, Celeste, and Jaime Mateo. Her permanent address is listed as 611 S. Border, Weslaco, Texas, 78596.