

I AM  
*Belkys Pulido*

(WINNER TEXT)

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## PRESENTATION OF THE AUTHOR

**Belkys Pulido.** She was born on March 4, 1966, in Cotorro, municipality of Havana, Cuba. Perhaps, from there came the blessing of the verb, since she lives from the story and the word, and reading has accompanied her throughout her life. In Elementary School she got to know bullying and grew up with a generation hopeful in the triumph of the Cuban Revolution; junior high school erased all hope, and with facts such as the exodus of the Mariel she learned the nuances that blurred the dream of the new man; high school was a nightmare.

She studied a University degree and was a member of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba. In 1993 she traveled to Mexico as part of a cultural exchange between the Ministry of Culture of Cuba and the Council for Culture and Arts of Nuevo Leon, where she worked on the design of cultural projects and directly with groups of children and older adults. She founded the Mexican Association of Reading Promoters and taught workshops and courses as part of the Alfaguara team. As a stage oral narrator, she participated in shows in various cultural spaces of this country.

When someone asks her if she considers herself more Mexican than Cuban, she is always clear in her answer: “I admired Mexico since the opening of my aunt’s geography books. Tlaloc, Quetzalcoatl and the poetry of Netzahualcoyotl told me about this country, later its inhabitants kept me company. After, love came, but Cuba is in my blood, which is not red, it is blue, and not by lineage but because eternal sky, eternal sea”.

***I am*** is an incomplete review. Although the author tries to define herself through memories, every day the flame of what she has lived is perpetuated with new glimpses. How to describe what the dust of the road redesigns? She tries to recognize herself in some branch of the family tree and flows with the social changes of a revolutionary period that was transformed. It is a book root, it rips the weed out

from a field to be cultivated. Past loves where it was established the one that was. Volition grown in the warmth of her grandparents. It is a mooring of her grandmother. A present father and an impetuous mother. *I am*, is a family dream. A nightmare too, still with wide eyes. Each paragraph has more of everybody than of her, because one is not someone without the others. *I am* is the life story of a woman without fear. It is written that she grew up accompanied and will fly alone.

I am

Belkys Pulido

Wish we could perceive the world  
from another person's point of view,  
because that way we would understand better  
how and why it acts as it does;  
this way we would tend to make less reproaches  
from a haughtily external point of view.  
Understanding means forgiving.

MARY ANNE EVANS

Because those who say this,  
clearly imply that they are seeking a homeland;  
because if they had been thinking  
where they came from,  
they certainly had time to return.

HEBREWS: 11, 14-15

*To my parents Onelio and Juana María, for saving me from myself so many  
times.*

*To my paternal grandparents, Tomasa and Antonio, for the legacy of simplicity.*

*To my maternal grandmother, Agustina, for the strength and magic.*

*To my maternal grandfather, Rogelio, for the vivid relic he is.*

*To Da, for being my inspiration.*

*To Dar, because it's my lookout*

*To my husband, for the complicity.*

*And thanks to those who encouraged my life to have a purpose.*

## CHILDHOOD

“There is no road without roots, family roads are covered with bones. In order to call the dead a glass of water is put in and the root of the family path takes care of making a path.” This is how the witch grandmother speaks alive in my ears, and with this phrase opens a chest of memories.

I was born in Havana, Cuba, in a hospital owned by some Spanish people and which is called *Hijas de Galicia* (Daughters of Galicia). My birth was a stroke of luck. My mother had spent six months admitted because the vomiting got anchored in her and had weakened her. They wouldn't stop and, to make matters worse, when the birth pains came, she found out that the creature, meaning me, was coming with the buttocks first and wouldn't change position.

Hours passed by and the whole family was in agony. My mother was a dry reed pushing from the heart. When they decided to do the cesarean operation, I was about to suffocate. I did not cry in a bad time.

- She is black – Grandmother Agustina murmured.
- Little blacky – my father softened.
- But later she will whiten – said the nurse, although no one asked her.

Since I came into the world they treated my without contemplation. Criticism built slides in me.

Maybe the name was not common. But neither was my father, and it took him half a year to learn how to name his daughter. I still have a metal jug in which he engraved, proud: Berquis. And that is not my name.

He then took on the task of traveling to the municipalities of Havana countryside to feed his two lizards. My mother was left pure bone dressed in skin, and it was said that I was only eyes, big eyes close to amazement. There, in the field, the *malanga* was cultivated, a tuber with a very light flavor that pregnant women, newborns, old people and babies consumed. Daddy centered the hope of a few grams of health in the *malanga*, but moving it to my municipality was

prohibited. The police officers got into the buses and searched everything. My father always carried a briefcase and used to distract the requisition with his talk of a born storyteller, while behind his feet he hid the sack where the delicacy lay covered.

Those milk bottles with *malanga* guaranteed my food, and my father used to give me the most entertaining talks when, before bedtime, he told me about a superhero who had his same countenance and borrowed some tubers from the ground, but he could not explain it to the robotic police, who was programmed, useless, scrap ball, because he did not understand it. When fatigue overcame my eyelashes, I dreamed about a hero with the face of my father who victoriously rose a bag of *malangas*.

I can assure that my father did not know for sure what was my name, but he fed me with devotion and sacrifice. In those early years of the Cuban Revolution, many things were a crime with its irremediable consequence. This episode was the first of several disrespect.

We were practically alone, without permanent shelter, and my parents used to improvise a family life, without any support. I would be the first granddaughter of my maternal grandparents. There are those who are born with some privileges. The daughter of the *malanga* not. And we went to a little room in the house of my paternal grandparents.

That wooden house reminded me of the sea, the pieces of blue sky peeked through the cracks. The knots of the wood resembled the waves of the puddle, there in the courtyard, where the foundations of a house never passed the first level.

Old house falling. New house, dead without being born. The mother washing in basins, bleaching *guayaberas* and crying, in a murmur, alone. The girl watches the piece of heaven and climbs through the window. Neita will be there, the old black woman who loves her well and says to her

“Biscuit doll”. Or Bitin will come with his hug of a step-grandfather.

The girl wants to levitate toward the ceiling, where the pigeons of cousin Roberto nest. He blows the pillow and the pigeons’ wings help him imagine a life flight that he does not understand, that is why he will take refuge in alcohol; years later he will die without being able to say goodbye.

The immense grandmother, always smiling. A hive house is this one on Sundays. Grandparents and children and grandchildren screaming. The laughter of grandfather sound with personal melody, and when grandmother laughs, the wheelchair is the most comfortable and fun place.

We always talk about the land because the sowing and cultivation is everyone’s benefit, it sustains the soul. Grandpa says this and he scratches his shiny skull and smiles toothless. Since always, I look for it in every mouth without teeth. The school could not teach me the time, I could not discover the secret of the clock, and my grandfather Antonio, illiterate and patient, discovered for me the reading of the ticking. I know that one day my father’s parents, Tomasa and Antonio, in their little wooden house, among the sempiternal knots of the plank, will emerge as two illuminated angels.

“I do not raise other people’s children, I am done.” When my maternal grandmother, Agustina, sentenced, even the banana plantation trembled. She had a way of raising the chin that imposed, and a tough dignity of peasant with bourgeois habits. Grandma knew about the land and about the people. She did card reading and also snails (*Bucios*).

When you have a witch grandmother, your imagination has no ties, and by giving up on me, she joined to her ship my anchor. Who is my grandmother? My grandmother is a tornado and sometimes bluish foam. The Dead man tells her who should speak and she ties a love as well as she unravels a litigation. Queue is made waiting for her on the

portal, she is consulted by men, women, black people, white people. I close my eyes. I remember. There is a sick woman, she has skin with white spots, they say it is the liver, but grandmother can cure her and that woman kisses me. I think about her dying white kiss and my grandmother thinks only about rubbing, she rubs my cheeks with alcohol:

-Where was it? Tell me! -and I fear that the sick woman will listen to her there on the portal, because she seems a good woman.

-Is her kiss bad?

-A sick kiss, sick woman. Do not forget it!

When grandmother scolded, she had the characteristics of a cyclone, merciless boastfulness. She also knew how to hit with a flip flop, a belt and she ran well; you could never go anywhere if my grandmother was chasing you. Other times she was happy and laughed a lot, she talked, and in those days she used to show me her treasures. Two suitcases with fine fabrics from before the Revolution, also spheres for Christmas and the star of Bethlehem for the tip of the tree. When Grandma stopped looking at me with strange eyes, was when she told me:

-Nobody will inherit all this, only you. My dead will know you. You have double unit. You will continue to feed my saints and you will put the white flower of Marti and the tobacco of Maceo; those were men for sure. The Bronze Titan, did you know that he got more than ten bullet wounds and they did not even tickle him? What kind of mulatto! We always have to throw him his tobacco smoke.

-No one is really sure that he smoked tobacco, grandma – I tell her, almost murmuring.

But no one contradicts grandmother, not even me. She looks at me with her eyes dressed in “stay-still” (“*tatequieta*”) and I shut up. She is meek when she wants to, but she has an uncontrolled anger. One day she tied my aunt Mercy like a dog. The ankle and the rope, together, because she used to

jump the fence and go to the neighbor's house. My grandmother is like a cecropia tree (*yagruma*) in my memory. Grandpa is like a stage set, he speaks little. He has a little house in the yard where he builds tables, chairs. He talks to the wood. He smokes tobacco, he does. He builds a chicken coop that looks like a city. To my eyes as a child, it is not right that the chickens have a house and we do not. My parents perhaps should build a *family-coop* (*familiero*). Just like that, with wires and a lot of cardboard, make a room where we can climb up on each other in order to sleep. I have never tried sleeping on a stick, but living in other people's homes is not right.

We look like the three little pigs. When the cyclones arrive, they give us a bed at my grandmother's house, the witch. That house is concrete. My grandparents used to live inland, in the center of the country; so poorly they were that even they had a girl who died. My grandfather came first to the city, and my grandmother wrote a letter to Celia Sánchez Manduley, right-hand person of Fidel Castro. She told her about the four remaining children, about the unhealthy conditions, and allowed her to come to the city, to the room that was once a garage of a house of rich people. It was a small room with little illumination, but they arranged it as the days passed. Over the years they built a house and, when cyclones came, that was the best refuge. "The saints protect", my grandmother used to say, and made us pray. "With a scissor I undo a cloud tail", she assured. I never doubted that.

My grandmother was not afraid to anything, neither to the living not to the dead. She used to tell me that being a spiritualist was not easy, it depleted the body and blunted the head, but people could be helped, and whoever did not appear with coconut oil, would bring a bottle of honey. Grandma knew how to sew and weave, but she did not teach me about sewing because for her it was more

important that I understand the mysteries of religion, to learn how to perceive what is not seen. With my grandmother I learned to mend the memories.

That is why I see my cousin Roberto clearly making my pillows fly, there in the wooden house, and I get the scent of my uncle Chino, who was always handsome, still is. I see Neíta, my black neighbor hugging me and saying to me “Biscuit doll”. While everyone said that I was really ugly, Neíta made me feel special. I hear uncle Humberto’s laugh and there is the huge Chela, big in body and heart.

After being up and down from the wooden house of my paternal grandparents to the cement house of my maternal grandparents, depending on the season, someone told us that we could sneak in. This was a very popular infinitive in those days and it meant getting into some abandoned house, or apartments of those which were left behind by those who went to Miami.

In those sixties, many families had left the country, affected or fearful of the expropriation that the Revolution had undertaken. The houses were left sealed, alone. An office called of the Urban Reform, assigned housing to criteria which I never knew. Also in the workplace, bosses could support with a letter, but my father was always told to that there were large families, many people in need and so he had to wait. My father used to say that he was going to look for a tree with a branch as a roof, and my mother thought that it was not funny.

Mommy was not so patient. Several early mornings we toured the town, we looked for a closed door with a sign of the Urban Reform. Sometimes we would return almost at dawn, my mother sobbing under her breath. My father would go to work; it was hard to live without a chicken coop. One night my grandmother was told about a room that was empty. We did not take long. With a “*pata-de-chivo* tool” my father broke the latch. They put a nylon on the

floor, all in complete darkness. My mother pressed me against her, we pretended to sleep. But how do you sleep if the cockroaches are zigzagging and the floor is so hard? Silent dawn, complete darkness, my mother's breath on the neck. Perhaps a roof, perhaps.

At dawn we were thrown out. They took my father to the police station, I remember it was drizzling. Since then, I like heavy rain and without hesitation, but not drizzle. For me, drizzle is like the prelude to more misfortunes. If it is early in the morning, worse.

My mother always mentioned a word: humiliating. You could not buy houses, there was no exchanging. Everything was in motion in those years and at the same time it was not. It was already 1970.

We returned to the wooden house with the paternal grandparents. My mother to the trough and the mop. There, the wood smiled with fangs, it depended on the sun, but at times that I remember gold teeth came out from between the joints of the triangular roof. There were no schedules, but there was much joy, the healthy joy of basic families.

My grandfather Antonio came from a Spanish father. They arrived from Telde, in the Canary Islands, and soon died the great-grandfather. Grandfather had horses and he lent me some, I rode on the asphalt with the certainty that one day I would grow up and be an amazon as the one in the comics that I used to read. I would gallop everywhere, have a house under the trees and even a bridge seemed fine as long as I had my horse.

Grandfather used to go to the field, milk cows and bring us liters of raw milk. He used to sell a lot of milk at that time and he could do it. Years later, during the famine of the so-called "special period", he was taken prisoner for selling avocados on public road, and my father had to manage to get him out of the dungeon. How can they take prisoner a

man seventy-years old who has a pension of eighty-five pesos a month! How can it be possible that the police humiliates a father who lived for working and already retired has not enough for even eating?

My grandfather was young bird of Canelones and always was in a good mood. He laughed out loud while telling the ridicule of a policeman on all fours, collecting proof of the crime: avocados.

My grandmother in her wheelchair stayed longer in the portal. She got very happy to see me and had a chest like a ballroom. When she hugged me she always laughed and I bounced very amused from her immense love. My aunts, different, very smiling. My uncles working or courting, in impeccable white, wrapped in the shirts and *guayaberas* that my mother ironed. Uncle Humberto worked in a printing press and brought copies for me, the smell of the paper sheets fascinated me, but even more to see an unarmed book, like helpless. And Uncle Chino, the most handsome of all, bit my cheek because he did not know about kisses, that way he used to tell me and I would look up. My uncles, so tall, reached infinity. So tall they were that Uncle Reinerio arrived one afternoon and stepped on my wind-up toy: "I did not see it", he said and I forgave him. While drying my tears I thought that it was a mess living like that, with the head in the clouds.

One night someone came and secretly told my mother about a room that had just been sealed. "It is very small and needs a lot of repairs", he told my dad. We sneaked by day, I remember the size of the sink that looked like a toy-shelf. A drop fell regularly on a plump, static toad, oblivious to our hope. In the sink, when we opened the faucet, a sea of cockroaches came out. The ceiling of the only room, was very high and seemed attached, as if careless, to the main house. The entrance doors were double-leafed and I thought it would be like a book house. It was a street away from the

house of my maternal grandparents. The complicity of the neighbors would help, nobody was going to snitch on us. They were achievements: see the color of the floor, eject the toad, fumigate the cockroach. I went to school and returned with hope: “Mommy, already?”

We moved when my father installed the Kerosene’s dangerous stove; by then I was five and a half years old. My father, the superhero, was working when the police arrived and took my mom. He told me to run down the trail. “Go to grandma’s house.” When they take your mother, you run to save the house. I had a room and a mother to save. I ran among the marabou and its thorns seemed less threatening to me than that mother-thief patrol.

I read from a very young age. By being an only child, surrounded by elders, I looked in books for a house, friends and adventures. Whenever I ran to Grandma Agustina’s house, I thought about some adventure. My fear was appeased before the pages. When I ran I thought about Tom Sawyer and Becky. Tom would save me for sure if I was as big as Becky and had a house in the United States.

Several times they took my mother: because daddy was at work, they left him alone. Mommy explained to them that we had nowhere to live, with a little girl she could not go under a bridge. Was that the Cuban Revolution? One day I returned from school and mommy was not at the door, my grandmother was. “They took her again”, she said and I began to cry. I felt that the eight blocks that separated the school from the house would flood them in tears. As *Alice in Wonderland*, I would fill the entire municipality with water, let’s all float! Without home, let’s float! I would do very bad things, I would smoke like Alice’s caterpillar, I would steal the tobacco from grandma’s altar and I would burn the patrol. Perhaps I should ask the old lady of the white spots to kiss the cops.

My father had letters of good behavior, my grandfather was going to plead for my mother. One day she told the commander of the police station: “What would you do? We have not gotten into a house, and there are. It is a very tiny room... a chicken coop...”.

Finally, after months of litigation, we were able to stay. We lived with tarantulas and scorpions that entered into the room as if they were the usual inhabitants. There is where I knew that in a room the world can fit, if the world of a family is a bed for resting, a table for eating, in addition to a fauna of threatening appearance. I learned how to open a two-leaf door as if opening a book. But what I liked the most was the anon bush that was in front of the door and always had lizards or chameleons. On that tree I tried to hang a Cuban paper flag and I almost lost my virginity. Girls do not always fall on their feet.

My liking for reading and the certain calm made my mom enthusiastic, and twice a week she took me to the school library. I loved school, but I was always looking for a scare. The librarian reassured my mother: “They won’t come, mate, they won’t come”.

Now it was not the patrol lurking; it was them, the little group, the gang. Do they talk today about bullying (dislike, hatred and ill will towards someone) as a novelty? Who said? They could come at any time: Inés or Belkis Suco or René, who disliked me terribly. Since the first grade teacher had asked me to check their spelling and sign their homework, they had threatened me, about no signing nor marking with pen. “You are nobody to write in my notebook”, said Inés, and Suco grabbed me by my hair, by mule’s tail, and she pulled it, she shook it and threatened to cut. And Inés climbed the brick walls: “I am going to drag you all over school!”.

Suco was more devious and awaited the arrival of the recess. The pushes ended in fight and a group was made

around. I saw shoes and thought of my skirt raised, the shame that the underwear could be seen or that the uniform could get dirty. I was never sent to the Principal's office, they were, and I repeated in my head: "You will not cry", while my heart seemed like an instrument being crazy. René was more dangerous, he was albino, although that condition had nothing to do with his level of danger. He hated me just for pure liking.

The teacher continued to hand me the notebooks and, from second to sixth grade, René never forgot it. Leaving school she gathered his four minions and threw stones at the level of my ankles. They never beat me, but the boulders passing so close intimidated me, scaring my skinny legs. Years later, René was imprisoned for domestic violence. He told a friend that he had lived in love with me the whole elementary school. Too bad, he only knew how to communicate with stones.

My mother left me locked in the library, where neither the stones nor the pulling nor the punches would arrive. Ignorance did not stop there. Books gave me the best memories of my elementary school. They accompanied me. The librarian was very white and very silent, she deposited a pile of suggestions by my side and I kept on reading versions of *Peter Pan*, *Pinocchio*, *The shipwrecked of Liguria*, *Mysterious Island*, *Tales of the Grimm Brothers*. By reading I understood that the world is a drawbridge and its limits would go beyond a well fought room.

My mom did not read much, but she always talked to me about the possibilities for me: "I could not study and you will be able". She bought weekly newspapers, magazines, full of the history of the moment. Everyone's voice as echoes from the heroes of the homeland, and she told me about the revolutionaries. When I said the slogans or recited poems at school I set my mother's tone. I respected the men that my

grandmother had on the altar and always remembered her phrase: “These people had a luminous spirit”.

I thought it was admirable if someone dared to die defending something or someone. My grandfather said: “These people gave us a roof”, and in that collective noun there was every dead or alive benefactor in our history.

When I was seven years old there was a very interesting contest. They wanted to turn around the bourgeois style, as they called it, to select the Carnival Star by a rigged contest that determined the winner by the merit of her beauty or by being the daughter of the municipal mayor. The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution and the Federation of Cuban Women, which were neighborhood organizations, decided that the girls would pass in front of a jury, composed by teachers or representatives of the municipal government, and three rounds of questions would be asked. Whoever had the best score, would win the title of Municipal Little Star. And I won. They asked me to whom would I deliver my bouquet of flowers and I dedicated it to my paternal grandmother, Tomasa, who from her wheelchair, back in her usual portal, was wishing me the best.

There were no more carnival parades, they considered it a hollow custom of the bourgeoisie. Being the Little Star was enshrined in a photo, in black and white, where I occupy number five. I am standing out, no carriage.

Elementary school finished and, at the graduation ceremony, we would dance an impromptu *Swan Lake*. I still laugh, but the worst was the ridicule. Worthy of the choreography should be our costumes: slippers and tutu. My father’s salary was not enough. My witch grandmother knew how to sew and, with an old shirt, tried to make a dress that looked more like a plucked duck than a languid swan. But the slippers, those were a real mess. “We will make them out of nylon so they look like crystal”, my aunt said. And it

happened, in the middle of a song, in a hurried turn in which we, all the pioneers of sixth grade fluttered, that my slippers did not hold up anymore and my big toes dotted scandalously, naked, on the floor of soil. At the end, the semi-coiled laces on my skinny ankles and my muddy feet, managed for me to say goodbye to that school with an absolute laughter. I was not consoled by my fate of ugly little duck.

In those years Christmas was no longer celebrated, some families received the postcards from Miami or the photographs, and the Cuban grandmothers, if they got the cod, they would put it to dry in the portals. The New Year was expected with a family table and I always fell asleep, because my cousins from my maternal aunts would take time to be born. Christmas Eve brought families together and for me it had only one meaning: the elders went to eat, and that was reinforced because in the seventies any religious manifestation was prohibited, so it took me a long time to see a Christmas celebration.

The Three Wise Men brought gifts only if you had left for them herb and water. The last year that they came they brought a set of plastic cups. I knew that something was wrong, they told me it was the herb, the little water, but it was the last time my parents were able to buy toys on those dates. The Cuban Revolution determined an egalitarian way of providing them; the Three Wise Men had been banished. It was a very random situation, the change was like this: on vacation, on a given day, parents would go to the assigned store and, according to a number, they would choose three toys: a basic, a non-basic and a directed one. The first two could be doll, toy jewelry, kitchenette, weapons games. Also the second would be a charm, but the third would be a jumping rope, a spinning top. Once it was great because they bought me a kaleidoscope.

They still talk at home about the time in which on the first day I got the number two. Ahead of me, two little siblings chose their dump cars and other toys that were not in my interest. It was my turn. Since the Wise Men left, we accompanied our parents on that shopping. There was a Russian doll, it spoke and it was huge! Apart was exhibited a set of phones, the only one:

-It is broken, it does not work – my mom said.

-But daddy can fix it, you'll see.

-Your father does not know about toys.

How could he not know about toys, my inventor magician? Daddy made for me the most coveted toys in the neighborhood. He built for me *chivichanas*, which in Mexico they are called “avalanches”. Spinning tops of all designs and sizes. Stilts with cans, wooden stilts. My father had a little house of inventions; in the courtyard he and the scorpions twinned. He built it as a refuge and there he carved a divine arch, with arrows and everything, because I was reading Guillermo Tell and I told him the story and he was like me: “Let's have an arch, and do not aim at people. Just to your mom if she fights you a lot. Ha, ha, ha!”.

He made me a dartboard. My father could build, of course he could fix!, and I took the telephone and he fixed it.

# ADOLESCENCE

## MIDDLE SCHOOL (SECONDARY)

We were very happy because Junior High School would be a street away from the room with two doors, as of a book.

When the school was just built, it was a three-story drawer. It smelled of paint and the tables were two by two. The blackboards were so new that they seemed like fake. The Cuban Revolution was giving us a “package” school. The directors said in each speech: “Let’s not stain the memory of our heroes who fought so you have a decent place to study”. Some soon forgot and the teachers had to

put together a kind of detective style brigade in order to catch the parasites who were writing messages on the bathroom doors. Some said “down the Revolution” and others were low blows, such as “unknown girl is a whore” or “such boy is fag”. Detecting the culprits was not possible, so going to the bathroom was to witness a sleazy newspaper, exposed at each wooden door.

The teachers were mostly young. There I met exceptional teachers, Carmen Murias and Ermelinda Aymara, of the subject of Literature and Spanish. They were brigadiers of the Literacy Campaign around the 1960's. This campaign was intended to make a Cuba without illiterates. The farmers gave lodging and food to the brigadiers. Teens and young people of the city went to the Cuban mountains, to the most remote villages, and they taught their classes under the light of an oil lamp which worked with oil or kerosene. Aymara used to tell us that they had to wait for the families to return from the field work, and already bathed and having eaten, they devoted themselves to the classes. Some wanted to resign, others refused and went through scares. There were also hanged men, murdered brigadiers and some rape, because not everyone thought it was a good idea giving farmers the knowledge. My teachers talked to us about literature and also taught me to read around.

The only thing that I hated in junior high school was the command to link study and work. Once, during each school year, we had to go to the countryside for forty-five days. Nightmares from those camps still assail me. Generally, they were makeshift shelters in the province of Pinar del Río, the westernmost part of the country. They were wooden barracks, huge naves with a gable roof and up to three, because sometimes, when it rained, water fell everywhere. The bunk beds were always old and rickety. Floors of soil, with their bugs included. Latrines, nauseous mouths with eternal throat drowned in feces. Flies fought for their space

in the crap, for their place in you. The showers had no roof or doors. My first experience in a school in the countryside was unforgettable.

They gathered us in a military unit, on their training ground. At twelve o'clock, with our wooden suitcases and hunger corroding the guts, time did not seem to pass. Nightmares still assail me: wooden suitcases resemble a sleazy chest for me, they are part of an abyss. I get them lost. They do not arrive. They get opened and my books get stolen. My little and first adjusters are exposed to the sun and everyone laughs, while in their hands they hold beautiful briefcases and wear ballet shoes and even boys wear tutus. I am not wearing shoes and my clothes are full of dust...

Well, I passed out. My blood pressure went down menacingly and an uncle of my mother, who was a gardener in that place, ran carrying me in his arms for five blocks up to the polyclinic. My mother cried, and the nurse who cured me since I was a baby said that with alcohol I would come back. Calmly, since it was the sun from twelve o'clock. A sun in Cuba that does not forgive teenage lizards. Two days later, my mother said: "You got to go or, are you going to lose the possibility of being a university student?"

They had said, with great emphasis, that those who were not linked to the call of the Revolution, those who did not fulfill their duty, the misfits in any way, would not be able to get any privilege, they were *lumpens*, parasite of the previous system. And us students had to fulfill a duty, and "have" is not the same as "must", but in those times...

I entered the camp, a week later they were working in the café. To wake up, a teacher went by shouting: "Stand up!". We had a glass of milk with coffee for breakfast, that is what they said, but it tasted horrible and the carts were already waiting. The carts were rectangular wagons with half-meter

metal edges and truck wheels pulled by tractors. They moved us in that, at dawn, toward the coffee plantations.

The coffee plants grow through furrows and, when they get tall, they hug to those of the furrow next to them, and those hugs soaked with dew bathed our clothes and hair. We had to achieve the goal of filling a can of coffee beans; it seemed easy, but not. Between the water in the clothes, the sap of the plants and the cold of dawn, was shivering and collected with hatred. Many were finishing filling the can – old oil cans – and they sat down. At the bottom of the can you could find grain stalks, soil and green grains that someone should throw away, but it gave the illusion of duty fulfilled.

And I got sick. My extremely thin body could not handle the physical challenge and the cold. It could not handle the roofless bathrooms and the icy January air. It could not handle the dew to which all Cuban poets have sung to, and that in poetry feels good, but in reality it is an icy caress. I developed laryngitis. I felt really bad, but I had to go on, at least that is what the nurse said. Was it really?

And on Sunday's visit, parents traveled in buses from Havana to Pinar to see us. On that first visit my mother found me very sick, but she said to me: "You cannot leave, or, don't you want to get to college?". They gave me syrups the following week. My cough was onomatopoeia of the seal sound. They paid attention as some began to protest because they could not sleep because of me. In the silence of the night, my drowning cough began to irritate the teachers and they called my mother at last, so a doctor diagnosed asthmatic bronchitis... that was the prize awarded for each coffee furrow. In the silent talks of the family, my future was in danger in the dreamed university.

They took me out of the field and took me to my room. The two-leaf door seemed to laugh at me. I took antibiotics, syrups, inhalations, and in the solitude of the only-daughters

I took refuge in the books. Books always provide shelter and I used to read at all times. The silence in the neighborhood was total, but for me the mornings under the mosquito net had the voice of the stories of Jose Marti. I read many times *La Edad de Oro*, (*The Golden Age*) the magazine that was made book with illustrations like an old postcard. “La historia del hombre contada por sus casas” (The story of the man told by his houses), “Nené traviesa” (Naughty Babe), “Bebé y el señor Don Pomposo” (Baby and Mr. Don Pomposo) and “Los Zapaticos de Rosa”, which always make me cry. There are eternal authors: when there is soul in a text, whoever wrote it stays forever. *Oros viejos* by Herminio Almendros also comforted me.

In those days, my witch grandmother showed all her sympathy and cooked for me rice pudding, custard that distilled cinnamon and gave me access to my aunt’s bookcase, a graduate in Geography, graduated from an old school that was a hospital for tuberculosis, family pride, the most intelligent, the one who knew how to dress and how to talk, “because all that, is not given by the money but by university”, my grandmother said and pushed on me the cod oil.

She told how schools opened where it can be done and at great speed. An old tuberculosis hospital would train the first graduates of the Revolution and my grandmother said that the mothers gathered to clean, wash, sanitize that place that even had spits on the walls. “The disease was gone, life came”, my grandmother said and waved her hands as if cleaning a toilet. My aunt’s bookcase filled me with curiosities, because it had many encyclopedias and geography books. I got to know half the world through those maps and I traveled forgetting the cough. In front of that bookcase I learned that reading is a journey.

And I discovered the Decameron, a book that would have shocked my grandmother if any idea of its content

would have jumped into her head, but no. One hundred stories written in Italy and whose themes always revolve around the erotic, the sorrows for love or the villainy of a few were not reading that the very white librarian would have recommended to me, but they served for thinking about the certainty that a coffee furrow and asthmatic bronchitis were more bearable than bubonic plague or the lasciviousness of a cure. Of course I kept reading, secretly, one of the most spicy titles in universal literature.

I returned to the camp with the book lined with the cover of *Bohemia* Magazine to mislead. *Bohemia* circulated with articles on sports, culture and news of the Revolution. However, I kept the book in my suitcase, locked up, and since I was not very sociable, nobody found it strange that I stayed at night to read. I remember there were one or two bulbs in the lodge, and it was a feat to guarantee the light to read at night. I tried with candles, but they took them away from me for fear of possible fire.

I finished those days of camp being extremely thin. I could not stand the food served in brass trays and always an identical menu. In addition, the dining room closed very early and I was, daily, the last to take a bath because when I returned from the furrow I used to sit down to read.

The second year at junior high was worse. I would be fifteen years old and in that month we would be in the countryside. I cried, I begged my parents not to send me. I already knew that there would be no party because my father's salary was not enough not even for the cake, but going to the countryside, no, please... but my mother repeated distressed: "And the university? Do you want to work as a saleswoman? Clean floors? Be a housewife? Of course not!".

She knew how to get inside my head, she explained the slogans to me and something alien or vacuous made sense if she got into my head. She said: "The idea was from Jose

Marti. You adore Marti. Do you know how much he suffered? Do you remember the presidio? He was younger than you, but he understood that hard work acts in the spirit, it makes you stronger. Studying and working, are only forty-five days; let it not be said, little mate, you can with that and more”.

The worst part was that in that year I had to sit next to Juan Carlos, one of those boys that only the mixture of Spanish and Creole can give. He had mulatto skin and very fine features. His eyelashes were like curtains and his lips...well, his lips were African in thickness and color. Then I fell in love and my mother, immediately, futuristic, said: “Do you want black children? Do you want to delay how advanced you are?”.

And that year she got me sent to another camp, where I did not know anyone and where I would be fifteen years old away from the danger that one day, unlikely, being around twenty years old, JC would remember me and I remember him and we would have a son. Maybe black. Maybe mulatto. Maybe white. Maybe albino...don't ask me!

I turned fifteen years old at the camp and mommy brought a blue and white meringue cupcake. “Like heaven”, I said and I looked up to see if I had wings being born.

“Stand up!”, the teachers shouted at the next dawn and I always remember that I opened my eyes, one day after my fifteen years, and I thought that there could be no more miserable existence. That month and a half was eternal.

The field smells well in the early mornings. Seeing the sun rise behind a furrow is poetry, but I did not write not even a letter in those days. I was raging at my fifteen years, with soil even in the little holes of the earrings. I felt tired, as being thirty years, and I no longer wanted the dreamed university. I was ashamed about someone else's fatigue and mine, the lies with the coffee cans.

I dreamed that an army general came, turned the contents around and there was a river at the bottom and the water began to spurt out. The general screamed: “Irresponsible! This is not how a Revolution is built!” and the water did not stop, nobody knew how to swim and my eyes clouded like the day of the fainting. When I opened my eyes, I saw the landscape from above. I could fly and the water had covered everything, green coffee beans were floating here and there. Men with skin of *chipojo* (lizard) kicked up a fuss.

On the third year of Junior High School a call was made that interested me: a cultural camp in junior high. Those who had signed up in some artistic discipline would not go to the field; they would stay at school to rehearse. An art instructor would come and tell us what to do. I did not even know how to dance, but it was an opportunity to change the baton of the *guataca* for the *rumba* or the *guaguanco*. I signed up for Dance and that year I sort of danced. Our only obligation was to sign daily an attendance notebook and rehearse with another group of students, because the instructor never arrived. However, we formed a group that danced with certain grace and I also joined the theatre group of the Municipal Culture House. I loved that adventure.

All adults, it was a unique group because there were grandfathers and grandmothers, two actors who acted minor rolls on national television, an opera singer who was unbalanced because he was losing his voice, and a woman suffering from alexithymia. The group rehearsed at night, three times a week, they wanted to define a script. Days went by and I grew up between the school tasks, dance and theater. Skinny, with uneven teeth, deviation from the lower jaw and large eyes in constant struggle with the eyeglasses.

A radio station summoned the Municipal Culture Houses to do multidisciplinary shows for the community. From the groups formed, several were chosen to form the exhibits. An

ex-teacher of literature with very bad temper directed the proposals. They made a kind of rural audition, a neighborhood selection where everything fit and amazing things were obtained. The woman with alexithymia agreed to conduct the first show, because she did speak with a script and, according to her psychologist, would be part of the therapy. The opera singer sang and did it in a magnificent way, at least for part of the town that applauded ecstatic the *Ave María* (Hail Mary), which he interpreted “as an exception”, said the singer, because we are the product of the Revolution and of the dialectical materialism.

I did *playback*, the song is so old that today is on YouTube, in black and white. With my extremely skinny legs and my burden of defects, but with an indescribable taste for reflectors, I went on stage and pretended to sing. You could hear squeals, shouts, boos and I kept dancing *pasillo* moves that I learned and I stood on the crosses on stage. Very different from when D came out, she did shine on stage. First she danced as a couple and then alone with a floaty miniskirt and was applauded a lot. She shook her waist and raised her eyebrow when two roses were thrown at her, I do not know if it was her mother. That lady at the end of the whole thing called me and said to me: “My love, how I admire you! I admire you... with everything they yelled at you, they booed you, they made fun of you, and you were still there. Do you know what you should do? Tell your mommy to put braces on your teeth, maybe like that, my life, maybe”.

That made-up and circumspect woman spat out all the necessary poison. The stones and the blows had never hurt me as much as her words. I arrived home and told my mom. That day we concluded two things: the tongue is sharp and we must build a shield for ourselves. And I had to put order in the mess of teeth! Because of those rare twists that the existence make, years later I would meet the one who was

director of those shows, and he, believing he was hurting me, would favor my destiny.

The presentation was useful in a way because they asked me to join the theatre group of the municipal police station. It had to perform at a provincial festival and I played the role of a seventy-two-years-old mother. They made-me up with talcum powder and the sneezes seemed to be very well linked to the characterization. Someone wove a wig, so I looked like a talc powdered freak. I loved rehearsing with everyone. They were adults, three men and a woman who gave themselves to the rehearsal after working. They walked in their uniforms, overwhelmed, and they assumed the role of my children. One of them made us lose at the festival because, distracted, he got entangled in the curtain, he made a funny mess in the proscenium and, perhaps for that reason, the play did not go further. Or maybe someone discovered that the talc powdered old woman was hiding a pretentious teenage girl that was not even a police officer.

This year was Mariel's thing. In 1980, from Miami, several boats arrived to the island to take relatives away; a mass exodus followed. Relatives of Cubans came in as many boats as possible and loaded with lots of them. The government also commissioned to them political and common prisoners. They say that also a lot of homosexuals. In my house it was commented: "Everyone is leaving", but the family was full of hope. My grandparents were grateful to a Revolution that had taken them out of the field, it had given their children shelter, food and studies. An uncle said they would have more possibilities there, he knew someone who would give them a job, but my grandparents refused. My mother alerted me: "This is going to get bad".

And the acts of repudiation began. These acts were planned by the mass organizations, the Committee of Defense of the Revolution, the Union of Young Communists, the Committee of Cuban Workers, all,

because even if they were not affiliated, if they had a job, they had to participate.

To us, at school, nobody consulted us, but the headteacher said: “A teacher has betrayed us, let’s go to his door to shout him what a worm he is. We are not going to throw eggs or spit on his door, but we have to show him our disenchantment”. And he mentioned the heroes of the country and the spilled blood and other things. Eight streets down the central road, we stopped the traffic, I shouted all the way: “Give me an F, F. Give me an I, I. Give me a D, D. Give me an E, E. Give me an L, L. What does it say? Fidel, We can’t hear it! Fidel!

Now many say that they never shouted, that they did not throw eggs, that they were always against the system. Those have needed to reinvent themselves. I did shout the name Fidel and I did stop at the places where there were commemorative plaques or monuments to the dead of the movement of July 26, all young and fearless, devoted to a possible change. I did scream, and I was also silent when needed.

That day we were walking along the side of the road and we changed from slogans to Feliciano’s songs, Van-Van and vice versa, it depended on the throat who was in charge. I remember feeling a group emotion, a contagious mood, a hope that we were leaving classes to fulfill something very big that couldn’t be seen; it was something in the ideas, it was an impetus, a wishing. However, when I arrived in front of the teacher’s white shutters, I froze. I used to go through that street every Sunday to look for my grandmother, she used to sing praises in a Baptist temple. Here everyone shouted: “Pin Pon fuera, ¡abajo la gusanera!” (“Get out, down with the worms!” [*derogatory term for the opposition*]). My grandmother sang praises a few meters away from there, she raised her living arms in complaint for her dead legs. I remembered that the teacher always had multicolored

flowerpots in the portal. “Too much color to be a man”, my father said once. And the curtains were lace and sometimes floated through the window, like cotton. On Sundays, when I went to pick up my grandmother, he was always in the portal. Watering his roses or reading, always neat, lonely. But the blinds were closed. “Fagot”, shouted JCP, who five years later left for Miami. I remember he was the first to throw a stone and I understood the stigma. I thought about the fragility of that very educated teacher who had told us about Cervantes and Lorca. I thought about his delicate hands, arranging the flowers of the portal, squeezing them when he read *Preciosa y el aire*:

Little girl, let me lift  
your dress to see you.  
Open my ancient fingers  
the blue rose from your belly.

His high-pitched voice echoed, reading like an actor of Greek theatre. He bent his body as he read, he suffered like *Preciosa* and the lascivious wind scared us all.

“Fagot!” Someone threw a flower-pot and the soil drew a sign. I did not yell anymore, I told my mother.

Since that day, two great friends did not return to school, they went to Miami. It was confusing. The collective frenzy, the ideological sidekick was naked in front of my naïve adolescence. They were not yelling at the traitor, at the teacher leaving his class. In the collective mood they repudiated the man for being homosexual. They scratched his blinds because they were cowards, because they went as a mob, because they did not tolerate his courage. They shouted at the one who thought differently, at the one who turned around with tokens like in the domino. They shouted in order to belong to the protest march, to not be pointed out, they shouted out of cowardice. The group spirit gave them courage.

A short time later that resentment vanished for convenience. I understood that it is dissimulation and simulation. The cousins, uncles, siblings who now lived in the United States began to visit their families. A friend of my father wanted to take off his watch and leave it for him: "They have taken away from me even my shoes, you know already, the family".

No longer yelling at anyone. There were no worms. Now they were colorful butterflies. An open secret was made that the English teacher was sleeping with a third grade student and nobody said a word. She was waiting to leave at the first opportunity, we all knew it and there was no one who would yell at her. The men, to woo us, no longer threw stones, now they sang softly, in English. At the fifteen-year-old parties, the girls arrived with scarves on their hair or plastic flip flops, but they were from the Community, a way in which someone stopped calling them worms, parasites, lumpens. We accepted the trashy. Now they were providers for the Cuban family and they came wearing chains around their neck, pictures of the last car, scarves for women, flip flops for heel slapping and all asking for forgiveness, those who threw eggs. Those who snitched. Those who renounced family blood. Although my rural grandmother, with her dignity, topped off with a phrase: "We Cubans have lost our memory. The flip flops are f' the bath, even if they come from over there".

On those vacations I had an accident. I was going with my mother, the bus was empty, but I did not want to sit down. My mother insisted and I did not.

-Come on or you could get hurt.

-No, mommy!

The driver changed direction abruptly and I was thrown out. The central floor had a material like polished wood and I skidded on my back; my head hit the fire bomb, a really hard metal block. I saw the driver passing over me. It turns

out that an alumnus from my junior high school had crossed with his bicycle and, in order not to drag him underneath, the driver had to take a turn, almost a U-turn. Nothing happened to anyone, except to me. A mouth opened in my head. My mother, whole as always, stopped my bleeding as she could and we walked towards the polyclinic. Luckily it was very close and they stitched me about eight stitches.

I grew up in these years; the only certainty was on the roof we had. The food was delivered through a supply note book and according to the number of members of each family. We had a chicken coop, pigs, rabbits and, besides that, the Economic Aid Council, formed by socialist countries, guaranteed a very expensive municipal little store. There we bought unknown delicacies, such as blueberry or apricot jam, mustard, instant soups whose instructions in Bulgarian or Polish made the mothers to improvise. I have a neighbor from those years who writes to me: “We had a minimal, tiny, seemingly true life. Those of us who stayed had faith believing there was a prophet and we could only bleat”.

## PRE-UNIVERSITY

There has been no random coincidence in my life. Unfortunate events have proliferated, and one grows appreciating the friendly side. Bad was the occurrence that most schools would reside in the countryside. Large buildings were built half school and half shelter. The student camps would be another story, now it would be worse for me.

The Minister of Education had a brilliant idea: many schools were built that would arrest us from Monday to Friday. There, pre-university students would study and work throughout the school year. Every morning to the countryside, to cultivate, to harvest, because the peasants,

like my grandparents, had gone to the city and the countryside was abandoned. The *guajiro* (*Cuban peasant*) discovered the absence of mud in the heel, so the students would save the agriculture. Those same students who had already been trained in half-filled coffee cans, in the attaching of the tobacco leaf, in the *guataqueo* (*weeding*), the urine in the hands. Oh heavens, it couldn't be, again!

They used to send us to live to the countryside, a week of study and work to temper the spirit. Something like that. Luckily, a nearby school corresponded to us. Nothing of countryside, it was in the city next to the *La Vigía* Estate, where Ernest Hemingway had spent many years and had taken his life away.

The place transformed into museum was hardly visited; it was a holiday if Russian delegations arrived. When I read his novels, a long time after, I did not forgive myself about how irreverent we were in those days. We were disgusted about the hunted animals displayed on the museum wall. Of his gigantic shoe number, of his flip flops. For us, the name Hemingway said absolutely nothing.

We entered by paying one peso and sat there, under the shade of the trees that saw him wander around and we took out combs, tubes, handkerchief. We cut our nails. We wandered the streets fleeing from the exhausting classes of physical education and the property was alien to us, a sad farm. Now they say it has a car graveyard, but it was a dog graveyard. The names of their tombstones sounded doglike and we walked reverently through the dead dogs. We did not give a damn about the dead gringo. Years later, when I read his work, I was fascinated about it and I felt ashamed of our ignorance. How to be oblivious to phrases *Por quien doblan las campanas?*: "Dying was of no importance nor none frightening idea was made from death. But living was a wheat field swaying to wind impulses on the flank of a hill. Living was a hawk in the sky. Living was a jug between the

dust of the reaped grain and the grain stalks that flies. Living was a horse between the legs and a carbine on the shoulder, and a hill, and a valley, and a stream lined with trees, and the other side of the valley with other hills at the distance”.

My witch grandmother always said: “Respect all you do not know, because that tells you that you do not know everything”.

And over time I learned.

In that year I had braces put on on my teeth. The deviation of the jaw needed a very serious operation and the result was not guaranteed at all. We decided on the helmet, a sort of lobster hoops that come out from the devices in the teeth and connect with bands that cover the head. The pressure is so strong and painful that it reaches the entire skull. I remember how much I suffered; I only wore it at night to avoid shame at school. I slept like a mummy, I could not turn my face not even a little because the pull would wake me up in pain. I ate soft diet for whole weeks. Still today I do not know how to sleep the other way. Perhaps the best learning is guaranteed by pain. I think I am a conditioned animal. Any lateral movement was impossible because of the wires that came out of my mouth.

The thinness got worse. I started to wear eyeglasses to correct astigmatism and my daring attracted a lot of attention, because my mother had obtained very old eyeglasses. I made them mine. The molding was gold and they seemed very delicate and fragile, but at school they adored me because they were identical to those worn by John Lennon, and I did not even know who he was. Boleros were heard at my house, tenth peasant; old people music, as my friends said and they showed me the photos secretly: “These are The Beatles!”, and they sang softly: *yello’ su’marine, yello’ su’marine...* They mentioned them quietly, as if they were talking about an epidemic or murderers, and I got many friends to whom I lent my glasses, and in the turn

shift they passed it from room to room as if they were playing to conspire.

I really enjoyed this stage and also had embarrassments, because my two aunts had been at that school before me. One was a teacher and very respected. The other, student, and her grades shone so brightly in the memories of the teachers that they could not help comparing.

And again to the field, forty-five days in Pinar del Rio. That year, was our turn to *guataquear*. The *guataca* is a kind of hoe, but the wooden stick from where you have to grab it, is a psychopath. It gloats at taking out blood. Blisters were made immediately and we had only alcohol in the infirmary; blood came out in the morning and in the afternoon you should return. You looked at the *guataca* as you look at an enemy. You listened to the voice of the teachers: “The goal is four furrows per person”, and *guataquear*. No bandages. No desire. No healthy hands. I learned to clear my brain of pain. I learned to pee my hands, unscrupulously, and eat a mango with my hands urinated. I learned to sleep on the sunny land and learned about love, for the first time. I remember.

One afternoon we were returning from the field and we listened a guitar, there was a large group and everyone chanted. The lead singer sounded nice and I looked straight at him. When one reads, one loses fear from the eyes that look and does not see. But he saw me, and in less than a week we became a couple. On Sunday, when the bus that was bringing the parents, arrived, I waited for my mom to give her the news. Just as she had told me: “Boyfriend, when you turn fifteen, not before”.

Turned fifteen and suffered in the field, already now. My mother screamed blue murder; she sentenced that a skinny boy will be rachitic in old age, that the color of the skin was high, kind of mulatto, and that no way. It was said that there was no more racism in Cuba, but there was: “After so much

labor at birth, and look how you whitened! Now you will pull back. No and no, are you going to pull us back?"

I thought this guy played the guitar well and that he had a perfect color. Who cared about his complexion in old age? With whom would he have children? I never talked about weddings, but my mother suffers the disease of futurism, and such a mother can never be in present mode. If you have split ends in your hair, she will tell you: "That will leave you bald in the future". If you like a rachitic boy, with clear color eyes and orphan, she will tell you: "That one has good color, but he lives without a mother, he cannot know how to treat a woman. In the future he will be a wife-batterer, and with that skeleton he will be a scrawny old man, he will not have strong legs and you will carry him in a wheelchair. This is how you want to see yourself?"

A mother who is ill of futurism will not want it, but she burns your brain. My dad asked me to take a walk with him and show him the boy. The boy played the guitar surrounded by people and we smiled with complicity. My father said: "Okay". With my father there was no need for too many words. He lives in the present and gets along very well one day at a time.

When the stage in the field was over, I had learned several things. The best is that the bucolic dawn is good for the poets: "Who can contemplate without enthusiasm the magnificent paintings that Natura provides us in America?", Heredia wrote, a cult poet in Cuba who never got his hands dirty.

A week later we all returned to the house. At school someone told me that his older brother lived in love with me. Rare thing, the one with braces on the teeth and Lennon's eyeglasses. The older brother had made a bet with the musician brother. One of the two would get the yes. Perhaps the musician felt more hope because his brother did not even play the maracas and he had acne. I do not know if

it is because of the books, but a woman who reads never feels lonely and does not need anyone for her to be. I said good bye to that guitar which sounded to me like a harp and I never looked back.

Near the end of the course, the worst news we could ever imagined came. The school would close its doors and we would go to a pre-university in the countryside. The countryside laughed at me, it showed its green throat and I dreamed that I put my underwear in a bundle, I walked pulling up weeds and, while I walked, the furrows sang strident notes. The school was newly built. “You will like it”, the teachers said. I confess that I cried a lot. At home I used to sleep under a mosquito net because the nocturnal fauna was varied and the you could be eaten by mosquitoes as well as be punctured by a scorpion, and that mosquito net served me as a cloth of tears. I demanded my mother to save me. Being futuristic and everything, she did not know what to do. But there was a possibility in a medical certificate. We had to get a piece of paper that said something about me, something wrong with my skeleton or my head. It would not be fast.

The uniform was light blue blouse and dark blue short skirt. We left on a bus on a Sunday at noon and I filled the mirrors of the house with posters that said: “Bad mom, bad mother”. She could not save me. She sermonized: “Do you want college? If you do not go to college, you will have a dark future”.

And I imagined her dark future extremely white, because I was in the city, but nothing could avoid it this time and we went to the municipality of San Antonio de los Baños, where the troubadour Silvio Rodriguez was born:

Esta es la nueva escuela,  
ésta es la nueva casa  
casa y escuela nueva

*This is the new school  
this is the new house  
new school and house*

Como cuna de nueva raza      *like cradle of new breed*

And I could not find a house nor cradle in that concrete mass surrounded by threatening furrows. The building looked like a horseshoe, three stories on each side. One side was of shelters, we slept there, and we returned every morning to the unwanted: “Stand up!”, a shout that meant “the night is over; do not dream anymore that you are free. You entered the fold of hope, of the new man, of who you will be. There will be no path to school and you will look for a blue unicorn that the troubadour lost, lost in the poetry of his songs, but the reality will not have some rhyme. Not anymore”. Oh, Silvio with his songs:

Ahora sé,  
*Now I know,*  
que ha buscado y que ha tenido y que no vive preso;  
*that he has sought and that he has had and that he does not live imprisoned;*  
que sabe que el tenerlo todo cuesta un alto precio...  
*that knows that having everything costs a high price...*  
ahora sé.  
*now I know.*

The other side was of classrooms. I remember that something impressed me and it was the Biology and Chemistry laboratory. It had an arsenal of instruments, even microscopes. I dreamed that one day I would study at the university, yes, but something related to research and science.

The sides of the building were joined by a central corridor and the floor shone beautifully when the sun rose. So it would shine, as a mirror, teachers would invent night punishments and took out the group that was talking at bedtime. The group that did not pick up their cubicle. To

those who did not stop laughing, and they cut off their inspiration with a good cleaning of the hallway which we all hated, because their luster cost us a piece of our break.

They placed my second-year group on the first floor. We were very close to the mop. We were assigned bunk beds by list number and, for more misfortune, under me would be a girl with whom, in junior high school, I never got along. But these were not the only problems. As this hostel was on the ground floor, the frogs were the owners of the bathroom. In the showers you could find some, but in the toilets was the majority; there were two rows of sinks, one in front and one in the back. In the back you could not pass. They were plague and I am not exaggerating.

At night there was no light in the bathrooms because the bulbs were stolen. The teachers said that were the *guajiros* (*Cuban peasants*) of that place, but the teachers stayed there supervising over the weekend. Entering the bathroom was a task that altered the nerves, someone lent a flashlight, but the frogs jumped everywhere and they were fat, wet, fearless.

Someone came up with the magnificent idea of using the infirmary bathrooms, but the teachers soon discovered the long line and it did not work out. Going to the bathrooms of the teaching building was not an option, because the bulbs had been stolen and they had not been given sinks nor toilets, or were also stolen.

We began to go up to the other floors, we invaded the other shelters, we got into territorial messes, we suffered from constipation and urinary infections proliferated. All thanks to the frogs. The headteacher said that we were forced to a peaceful coexistence because they had arrived first, had conditioned the humidity of the bathroom as their habitat and we could not consider them a calamity. “We are not going to annihilate them – he said –. So get used to it.”

Not even at night they were still, croaking from bed to bed, and their muted jumps were heard in the wood of the cubicles. It was common that they landed on any sleeping face and, as usual, you would throw them and listened to some: ouch! For me, frogs and toads were even cute, but those ten months with them were crazy. I developed a phobia. When I go through anxiety situations, I dream that frogs jump over my sleeping face; they are few at first, while I am waking up, but before reacting they are infinite and I only see residues of my body that are crushed with their membranous palms.

Silvio Rodriguez, the troubadour, composed songs which my schoolmates hummed and I continued seeing confabulations in those poetic lyrics:

Viendo como la fiera sacudida  
*Seeing how the wild beast shook*  
de un avatar de la naturaleza  
*of an avatar of nature*  
agregaba pobreza a la pobreza  
*added poverty to poverty*  
en los extremos de la sobrevida  
*at the extremes of survival*

The work in the field was daily, from Monday to Friday. The cultivation fields were very close, we were walking and the teachers forced us to accelerate the step in order to arrive with the sunrise. Well, at the beginning, because three months after being there the teachers looked as tired and fed up as we were. We cut tobacco leaves, we attached them, we *guataquear* (*weed a plot of land*), we took out potatoes, we

harvested strawberries... but the worst thing was to attach tobacco.

It was difficult for me to insert each leaf without breaking it, piercing it with an immense needle and passing it through a cord. The leaves were to be straddled on a long wooden stick, which was eternal, and an English teacher, with sadistic patience, said to us: “You will not go to eat until you finish the last *cuje* (horizontal stick)”. And I felt as if I was Penelope entangled in an endless, green skein.

In the countryside there is no mercy. If you leave something half done, the tubercle dies, a root is castrated, a leaf is killed. You feel guilty about everything you do wrong, because nature is more sensitive than you.

When we returned to the shelter, full of soil and sweaty, it was common that the showers had no water. Someone would go to the cistern and would take out the buckets full of water. A bucket for three. The bath stopped being an enjoyment and the chemistry laboratory ceased seeming interesting to me; the formulas dictated by the professor did not compete with the collective suffocation.

Nor was I a regular in the dining room. The food was disgusting. The peas were daily, because they had a lot of protein, according to the headteacher (that is how he called the corpses of weevils), and dessert was almost daily rice pudding and the grain always had worms. Sometimes there were sardines, those canned ones, and the men asked us for the trays to get fed up with that novelty. The trays were washed by the students and, due to the lack of water, one sink was filled with detergent and the other with water. The rinsing was a mixture of water and oil. I do not know how there were not more diarrhea or amebiasis in those years. Not to mention the smell of those trays or the feeling when touching them. My mother saved me.

Once a week she embarked toward the scholarship and housing. Going from car to car, from bus to bus and even

climbed on the teeth of a planting tractor she was going to see me loaded with delicacies: crackers, condensed milk, homemade food and some juices that had to be locked up because hunger was collective.

The thefts were daily: of socks, blouses, food. In addition, as we went out every Friday of permit, when returning on Sundays we encountered with ungrateful surprises. "Someone" forced locks, stole everything, even underwear, and also in the kitchen there was theft, so classes were once suspended to wait for rice supplies. However, whenever Friday came and we went home, they checked our bags in case someone took a garlic or onions that were not in the cellars, that is why the soups tasted like rag. The field around us seemed to shout: "Take me home!" and many crops were dilapidated because there was no work plan. One day we were starting to pick up onions and the next they left the field half-harvested and we were sent to weeding, and that way, from jump to jump, as if we did a lot, without doing.

On a Thursday in 1983 I knew that something was wrong when Sosa, my dad's best friend, arrived. My grandmother Tomasa was dead. Was pouring rain. His Russian model motorcycle reached a maximum speed of sixty kilometers per hour. Under the rain, tears have no autonomy. Rain does not let cry. We passed by the side of the tobacco vegas, near the coffee furrows and I thought about my grandmother's laughter, about the stories my father told me. I was thinking about the times when my grandmother had run through the bushes of the field where she was born. What would her Galician father tell her when he brought her to Cuba? About the horses she learned to ride, about the unpasteurized milk we drank with her, about the praises that ripped out hope in one step, one more step. The rain would not let me cry and the motorcycle looked like a noisy cloud. The wheelchair had stopped forever.

In the second year living in the countryside we had already got used to the dynamics. Frogs inhabited the sink, they were the owners. We dodged the furrows doing less. The exams seemed closer to the previous day's review and I formed a theatre group. It was a call to which readers, singers and dancers came, a group was formed which was fleeing from the work in the field.

The group of theatre rehearsed in the mornings, while most of the school worked in the furrows. After rehearsal, someone took out the guitar and began to sing. From the school theatre, the windows projected the students coming and going in the furrow and we seemed to be safe. But they expelled the singer because he suffered from ideological distraction. They explained to us that it was a deviation towards customs, habits and a culture with worms. I mean, the boy liked to sing in English; themes like *Imagine*, of John Lennon, I learned it from him, because that music was forbidden on national radio. The singer left and we stayed in an awkward silence, but the rehearsals continued and they invited us to a course at the Municipal House of Culture.

In that year, my mother got an appointment for the psychologist, because the only way to escape from the school confinement was with the medical certificate that back up some inability to work in the field or to live in the scholarship and student housing. Then you had your freedom letter to be able to study in the city, normal, as before. To sleep in the mosquito net's den. To eat in the house. The reclusion was still confinement for me and I got the opinion that accredited me as a patient under a severe anxiety disorder. The open door was ready, but the theatre...

The play we were rehearsing was going to be presented in front of the whole school. They gathered everyone in the theatre. We no longer had the singer who would play the poet, but we compensated it with a chorus according to the

tradition of the Greeks. In the third act there would be a kiss. I did not like the boy who I was supposed to kiss, he thought he was irresistible and every rehearsal was a pitched battle. One of our classmates would turn off the light when the imminence of the kiss would come, and he did so, but we did not know which the appropriate switches were, and because it was a surprise even for the headteacher, we left the school in the dark for a few brief and wonderful seconds. The unanimous scream sealed the kiss, the peace between the boy who thought he was *high quality* and me. The group seemed one, twinned in the volatile time of applause.

The headteacher scolded me without contemplation, but the theatre instructor commented that he needed me in the House of Culture for a provincial event and, with that hope, I sealed my second year of pre-university. My mother kept the psychological diagnosis in a drawer and released her prognosis: “If you keep on throwing opportunities to return home, one day you will fly”.

In the third year I returned from holidays with great encouragement. As Jose Marti said: “I lived in the monster and I know its insides”. I would never go to the countryside ever again. I would live in the countryside, but I would look at it with the arrogance of the poets, from afar. In the morning, a school bus took us to the town, to the House of Culture. There we met, all of us who belonged to the different artistic manifestations and also some friends of the teachers, who always brought some task to resolve. Yes, a boy could not sing the lyrics of a song in English, but some could enjoy privileges “by contact”.

San Antonio de los Baños is a bucolic town, it has a river, narrow streets and characters like the Beba. In these years, the Beba was the most revolutionary, he or she. The park drowned in whistles, compliments, howls as the Beba passed by. With tight little pants, duckling butt and flawless hair, black as a sin of a small town, the Beba slid as if floating.

Did not lower the head, squeezed the heel and solidly transgressed the municipal pretext to appreciate her as a female in the body of a male. Those journeys of the Beba, that was an affront to revolutionary morals, taught me a lot about femininity.

We had an instructor who was in charge of the projects by schools. Student events, exhibitions and everything in the planning of the Provincial Festival was being organized. I was assigned a monologue, again of an old woman, from when the War of Independence. She lived alone and ranted against her husband's memory. She faced him, sitting down, because of a lame leg and a plaster that immobilized her of the body, but not of the tongue, and when it was a day to go before the provincial presentation, I fell prey to a virus that was already partying with the students: conjunctivitis. Few had become immune. The eye was swelling, suppurating constantly and you had to look through a milky cloud. It hurt up to the ears and like that I went to have the plaster measurements taken, which would stay immovable until after the presentation. Conjunctivitis was a party for many, they passed eye boogers from eye to eye, in order to go home. The infirmary was not an option, there was no capacity for so many patients, and that each one had left, was better. But I was not going to escape.

The night of the presentation even my nose was crying and I remember that the eye was very small, ashamed of showing the rottenness of a disease that affronted me. I said the monologue with all the strength that denied my discomfort and they applauded standing up, the instructor jumped on the proscenium and hugged me crying. There was also Tomas, a friend who I lost in the turning of the way and to whom I never told: "Thank you, you were almost a love!".

I got the first place in provincials and, then, followed the National Festival on vacation. This year was defining.

According to the ranking, it would give us access to the university; grades were the most important thing. There were easy roads and some did not hesitate in taking them.

The third cubicle of twelfth grade changed its physiognomy. Some bunk beds wore curtains at night. The men teachers of Physical Education, Physics, English and Military Preparation, began to go out with students. Only one was married, but because of the relaxed discipline everyone saw it as a normal matter and at night the rattling of couples was heard.

The teachers took their pupils to their chair and they had the students as their accomplices, who would later sleep in our shelter. These accomplices took care of them from the headteacher. As expected, the numbers and grades began to move vertiginously, those that were once somewhere after the twenty, now appeared in the first places with grades close to perfection.

“Is there nothing to do?”, my mother asked me when, in anguish, she heard the news of the pleasure cubicle, but, what could be done against the use of power, against the complicity of the majority? Now I see on Facebook some of those faces showing naïve smiles and marriages. They parade through the vanity showcase and I think about that guy, so polite, who sang songs in English. We did not defend him and to them we protected them with complicit silence.

On Friday afternoon we were traveling home, and one of those Saturdays when I was almost able to sleep in my blue room, I heard an uproar. Without a doubt, my father’s voice was upset. I went out. It was the year 1989 and Fidel had determined to build shelters for the population in case of air attack. We were constantly threatened by the United States, at least that was what the national news said, the only ones to which we had access, and two enthusiasts of the Revolution Defense Committee came to ask my father, first, and demand him later, to allow the construction of the

shelter in our yard. My father had explained to them that it was stupid:

-My daughter, you can open here more hole than a woodpecker, but this land is no good for that.

-But, fellow, you are obstructing a duty that must be fulfilled with the Revolution. Have you already forgotten who gave you that house?

My father reasoned until they pissed him off. He took out the machete and said that whoever wanted to go ahead to open the ridiculous little hole. Those women who defended the absurd, today they are living in Miami and in Spain. My father is still in Cuba and he likes it.

On my way back to school I saw that, with my average, I could aspire to the Faculty of Fine Arts (Instituto Superior de Arte) and I took the written and oral exams. I brought a poem by Benedetti and a piece of the monologue that had already been tried in the theatre. When I was in the line about to enter, they asked me to step back. Later I understood, they let the niece of a television director enter; the manager smiled at her as if on the catwalk. I knew that I would never have a chance. There is no place without influences, there is no place without image, there is no place if you do not sell the body, there is no place for vocation nor the truth. I did my exam and I came out with the certainty that that would not be the career I would study. It never was, they did not accept me. I designed a plan B.

We were still in the scholarship and housing system, and one afternoon, when going out to the balcony of the third floor, the horizon looked green. Those who saw it started screaming. Soon there was talking about the end of the world. The son of a policeman said surely it was a sabotage and the teachers rushed us to the shelters. As we passed through the central corridor we saw that the puddles were stirring, as if in circles. "Everyone in their bunk beds and

you cannot get down!”), a teacher shouted as she closed the windows. It was then that everything began to shake up.

The books talk about how the wind howls and people think it is a liar resource, but it is true. It was a dull, sad and aggressive sound; the rain fell very hard on the windows. Soon a roar came, that was the worst, the front door of the shelter broke off and the air dragged it into the bathroom door, where the frogs must have been surprised by the untimely attack. We did not know then, but it was a tornado. Fury of the air, accomplice of the water that broke mirrors, murals, windows and doors; it was a destruction that left us without water, without power.

At night the transports came to pick up all the students and it looked like a caravan of ghosts. The buses looked like pilgrims bypassing the disasters of the road. The cultivated land is not alien to me when the crop perishes, the land hurts. That night nobody sang on the roads. Silence weighed on the drowned tobacco fields. The mosquito nets that covered the crops fell twisted, crushing in amorphous silhouettes kilometers of leaves. I have never seen again the sky dressed in green and I do not even want to remember it.

As the news has always been slow in Cuba, the parents found out about the disaster when we each arrived at each house, pressing the briefcase, still frightened. That weekend we returned to school that had already lost the hall mirrors and where the fallen doors would remain down, inert, for a while longer.

I had to define what I was going to study at the university and I thought about plan B. I would not be an actress, but there was a possibility of knowing another side of the world, that universe lived in postcards and the magazine *Sputnik*. I would go to the Soviet Union to study! I would study Russian Language and Literature because I felt good being close to books. This was a career they called of special requirements and I had to go through some interviews.

They would go to my neighborhood and ask the Committee, an organization led by neighbors who evaluated the behavior of each one, who would talk to the envoy, down to the last detail, to see if the ideological distraction or any unknown possibility attracted me from abroad.

With my average, that despite the advancement of the pleasure cubicle stayed in a good place, it was enough for the career. That year several companions decided to study English; today they are all in *Gringoland*.

When I told my parents that I would study in the USSR, my father said: "Poor thing, it is really cold there". My mother, I suppose, activated her crystal ball: "My daughter, but, how long do you think the Russians will last here?". My witch grandmother mumbled: "I better not say anything, that is what the snails are for".

I was warmed up by hope, I had faith in ending up as an interpreter translator, and in those years Cuba was infested with Russians. They were noticeable in all the companies, even in my campestal municipality they could be seen in the steel factory, with their very white skin, fed up with heat.

I say, now that I think about it, that the magazine *Sputnik* was to blame. Never be guided by magazine photos, nor by Pushkin, nor by Tolstoy. How beautiful are the postcards from the Red Square in Moscow, and the Russian forests, how beautiful they look on the postcards! Nevertheless, snow froze my plans even before I saw it falling, and my mother surprised me with her rare ability.

Pushkin's verse would be the only Russian thing that would be able to come true. I did not know it then. I had never designed the C plan. This verse concealed a prediction.

The prisoner

was in his homeland, under that blue sky.



Maternal grandfather, Rogelio, December 2016.



Maternal grandmother, Agustina Cordero, 2002.



Paternal grandparents, Tomasa and Antonio, 1974.



My parents, Onelio and Juana Maria, 1976.



Belkis girl. Havana, Cuba, 1972.



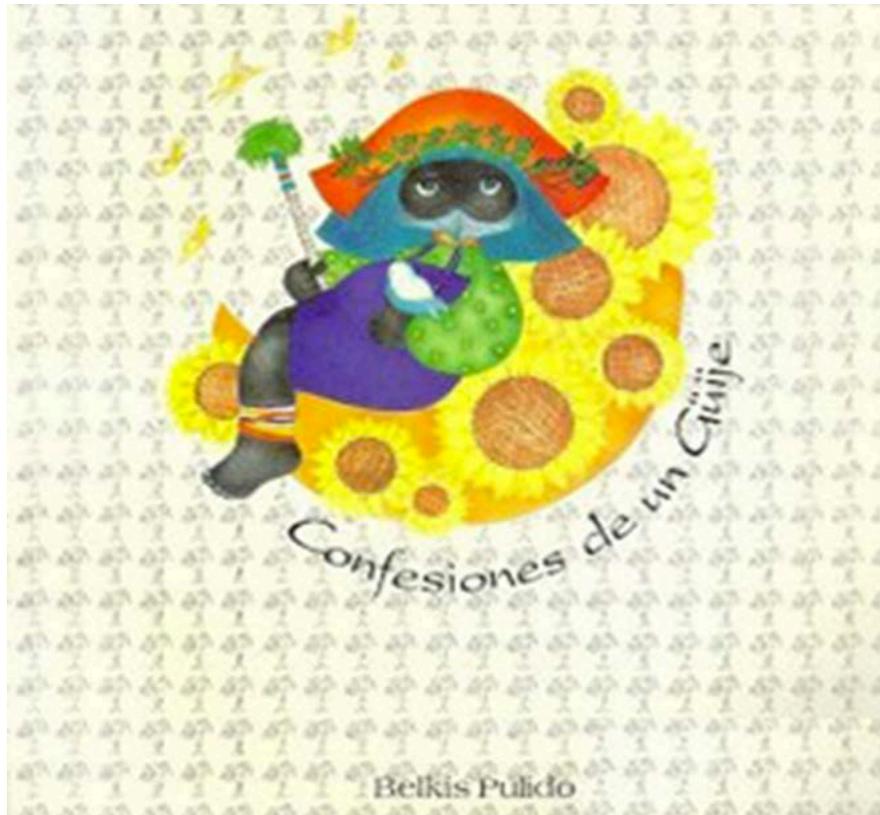
Estrellita Municipal Contest, San Francisco de Paula, Havana,  
Cuba, 1974.



**Belckys Pulido**  
*(1er Foro Internacional de Oralidad y Cultura. 1994).*

foja 17

Museum of Popular Cultures, Mexico City, 1994.



Children's book *Confesiones de un güije*, Alcaravan Collection, Instituto Mexiquense de Cultura (Mexican Culture Institute), 1996.



*Cuentos sin fin* (endless stories) Group, Monterrey, Nuevo León, 1998.



Street of stories, Garza Nieto colony, La Coyotera, Monterrey, Nuevo León, 1999.



*Y sigue la cana dando* Project. Group Pesqueria, Nuevo León, 1999.



*Y sigue la cana dando* Project. Group Monterrey, Nuevo León, 1999.



Show at Tepeyac Institute, State of Mexico, 2010.



Kindergarten Show. *Cuento Puro invento* (Pure invention story),  
State of Mexico, 2011.



Children's Show *Mamá me cuenta* (Mom tells me), 2011.



Belkis Pulido Estopiñales, 2018.

## YOUTH

### PREPARATORY SCHOOL (HIGH SCHOOL) “HERMANOS PAIS”

You never know what tricks weaves fate. Does luck exist? Coincidence weaves and entangles, you believe it. You make a labyrinthine map and recognize roads with paths, but the guide that we are, designs a route and then there is no such.

We had to attend a faculty in Playa municipality, quite far from my house, but it was a nice place. There we would study the languages of the countries that belonged to the socialist bloc and with whom Cuba had an agreement to train Cuban students in college careers. Various of engineering, Journalism, Russian Language and Literature, Law and some others. The majority studied the Russian

language, but there were also classrooms for Polish, Bulgarian and German.

The school had a central area and several large houses which served as shelter for students from province. Surrounded by trees and conifers, the place breathed exquisiteness, it had a wooden language. Students from all regions of the country coinhabited and the atmosphere was very fun, especially with Journalism students who made meetings bohemian and put together some cultural clubs in no time at all. There I met incipient writers. Also engineers who today teach percussion in Germany. Girls who studied Russian and now have a beauty shop in Moscow. A geodesist astronomer who no longer looks at the stars, secluded in her rural office, after all, many destinations that were uncertain.

I remember that language confused me a little, and in Geography classes I understood absolutely nothing. The teacher was a fragile, ethereal Russian, who had come to Cuba flying behind an immense male from Central Havana, an average technician in electricity, ebony black and batterer. Some knew they lived in a tenement house.

For her, the tenement house must have been like entering the Cuban reality head first. Whole families live in a room, it is like a horizontal space, but with constructive problems. They were old family big houses before the Revolution, with interior corridors, with a central bathroom and that now, in promiscuity, they had to share it; they lacked water and toilets, so it was common to see the little bags of excrement in the doors and the collective garbage. Where a family used to live, now ten were living together.

Suffering was vivid in this woman's pale countenance. She had discovered hell where she thought she found paradise; sometimes she came with dark glasses over her infinite green eyes that, surely, were hiding a blow from her male.

One afternoon I was walking in the park of Medical Students, when I saw her. Outside of school she looked like a fairy. Alone, camouflaged with the park bench, she looked at a two-year-old mulatto who was throwing stones at the memorial. I did not greet her, I have always revered sadness. I have never forgotten her because she cut her veins a month later.

In that prelude to the trip we learned languages and formed an intertwine of relationships. We played games between classes. News circulated with fragments of poems, some anonymous. Direct and expressive the most. Readings were also circulating against the Revolution, banned books that were smuggled. *Rebelión en la granja* (Rebellion on the farm) was one of the ones I read. The books were covered up to hide their title page and we lost ourselves in them in the stops, in the journeys, in the breaks, to return it the next day because others wanted to read them. Those lectures did not change my soul, but there was repercussion. The anonymous metaphors had a climax when many stayed in Canada, Germany, or crossed to Sweden.

Years later in Havana I met with one of those journalism students. It was 1994 and he worked at the Museum of Fine Arts. He told me that ten of his group returned, most had spread throughout Europe. When I told him that I was traveling to Mexico, he became nervous and, as a little animal in a cage, he said goodbye. My parents explained to me that to certain jobs it was prohibited to contact people who traveled or who lived in another country. Their job position would be in danger if they had any communication with these people.

I worked for the Ministry of Culture and I lived in Cuba, but my former friend did not give me a chance to explain to him. Friendship with a passport was conditioned, and years later a military uncle disappeared from family gatherings if I

participated. Any connection with people who traveled abroad was prohibited.

I discovered love in Preparatory School; the first real crush. Alejandro was already a man, he worked and studied when I met him. He was eight years older, measured almost two meters and had large teeth well concealed by thick lips. He laughed easily. With him I shared many readings and we had the complicity of *La Giraldilla*, whose vision entered salinitrous through the large window of his living room. His room had eyes towards the pier and the sea warmed our temples when we murmured in his tiny house, where everyone seemed to be on the lookout for the waves. He knew that those afternoons would not be eternal, he would study in Germany and so it was. He traveled, I did not. He stayed in Sweden, never came back.

In that year there were two scandals. One, when the student leader, son of a consul in some European country who was expelled and punished with remaining in Cuba. The boy had foreign exchange and was caught buying at a store for foreigners. It was forbidden for a Cuban to have a dollar, and he always had them in his wallet. The other mess was when the Russian Literature teacher was arrested for a rare accident that killed her husband. She declared that she was peeling an onion when her drunk husband fell on the knife and was stabbed. Knife cuts onion, knife cuts heart. "It was an accident", the authorities said, and the poor woman did not even say goodbye to us. He returned to his frozen world. He must be peeling potatoes in the taiga.

And nobody saw it coming. At the end of 1990 the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (CAME by its acronym in Spanish) fell; no more. The socialist bloc was crumbling. We were brought together all of us who would travel to the Soviet Union: Russian teachers and translators would no longer be needed, they could change their career to Law, Typhlopedagogy, or something similar. Once again

I changed my dream and now I had no plan B. None of these careers caught my attention. Life was spinning again like a ferris wheel and I felt like a carousel horse riding around without getting anywhere, reason why I decided to stay in Cuba. My grandmother told me: “the coconut sees a future somewhere else. The dead one says that all changes lead somewhere. Pray without stopping”.

I was invited back to the church and we crossed the baroque threshold. We prayed to *Caridad del Cobre* (*Charity of Cobre*). The high ceilings, the main altar and the saints on their high pedestals scared me a lot. When I left the church, my grandmother told me where not to step. She said: “M’daughter, the biggest witchcraft is thrown here. People think that in the cemeteries, but here they throw to kill”.

They let me choose several options and I decided on the Degree in Pedagogy. “You will be a teacher like your aunts”, my mom said. “You are crazy!”, said my grandmother, let’s throw the snails, come here”.

I asked the snails, to my grandmother’s cards. We interrogated the coconut and the tobacco smoke, but nobody answered. I underpinned my destiny with hopes, the pediatrician I could be, the actress, the translator, none of that would I be anymore. The dead who sat on my grandmother’s head spoke about wings to succeed, about a long road of stumbling blocks. She passed eggs through my body, put husks on my heels. She told Elegguá to open the doors of destiny, which ajar kept me off from passing. And I stayed on the isle, sweaty, dealing with the porthole at my grandmother’s door. Shivering with every playing of drums. Frightened at the *machete* that passes through the back of the possessed and does not cut it. Asking to the books to clear my crossroads and let me see. We buried a chicken in the yard, she sanctified me, we threw herbs into the river. I trusted with resentment. A life was opening before my grandmother’s tricks. With their voices of little bones, the

dead laughed at my uncertainty. I was twenty-four years old and I was beginning to doubt.

My parents have never believed in witchcraft; my father because he only believes in him, and my mother because she is very spiritual. She studies another existence in the courtyard herbs. And I, the unbeliever. How to believe in the strength of Something or Someone if everything turns out backwards?

## HIGHER INSTITUTE FOR TEACHING

All my friends went to study abroad and I entered the Higher Institute for Teaching (*Instituto Superior Pedagógico*) with a generation that was younger than mine. I did not know anyone, not even a soul. That place had a history because in 1959 it was a military camp, it belonged to the army of Fulgencio Batista, and when the Revolution triumphed, he gave it to the Minister of Education in order to transform it into a school. All pedagogical careers were studied there and future teachers of secondary and higher education specialized.

Although the distance from my house was very long and there were shelters and dining rooms to live there all week, I did not want to go back to confinement. Relative confinement, because what prevailed there was freedom and debauchery, of course.

The transportation service had gotten worse and it was common for men and women to be hanging from the doors. In the early morning it was worse, there was no possible space that was not filled. Goodbye to the personal bubble, and in a mass of sweat you traveled three quarters of an hour or more to the city center and another forty minutes to the Institute.

At the end of the first part of the trip we arrived up to the Park of the Fraternity. Without public illumination, some exhibitionists sat there. They redesigned the scenery of the place and pretended if you walked next to a man. They looked like dark statues making ugly the place. But if girls went alone or in groups, two or three guys would show up with absolute impudence. That unpleasant experience was daily and there was never any authority to stop them, nor do I remember any man chasing them away. To avoid them we had to surround the entire park, sometimes losing the only bus that guaranteed punctuality.

When we got to the classrooms where we were taking classes, the desks were individual and reminded me of the scholarship. Groups were formed there, those who had taken the career by vocation, the least, and those who had lousy average in the pre-university and had no other opportunity. Most of us were girls. A high percentage came from other provinces and were very regional, they defended their groups and always hanged around together. They sold everything: perfumes, brushes, shoes, belts. Although the sale was prohibited, in the university you could find some oddities.

I joined the fencing team and began to conduct the cultural shows that were organized with some periodicity. Each month there were student shows, and for me it was very stimulating to bring the artistic parallel to the academic. It was common that, on Saturday, some of the students linked culturally would meet in a museum in Havana; there the troubadours or actors organized good afternoon entertainment.

One of those days I went out with my best friend to the Museum of Fine Arts. Upon arrival there was a group of freaks at the entrance (that is how they called the boys in different clothes, tight pants until suffocation). They were extravagant even in the haircut, and at least those that I

met, had many intellectual concerns; they were smart, creative. They wore long t-shirts and with signs or images, usually in English.

“Little miss!” said my friend and came to greet a girl who was in the group. Then I found out that that girl belonged to our faculty. A week later she was expelled. The reasons were never exposed, I never saw her again. I assumed that my friend, who some time later assumed a student position, had betrayed her.

Since elementary school I chose not to give way to gossip, but some grow with a very long tongue, and others make it grow according to their convenience. My ex-friend would soon hold the position of president of the Federation of University Students, reason why she attended little to classes; however, she improved her grades and showed her claws.

On the Institute for teaching you could see everything. Sexual encounters in the forest, which was like a central lung. There was also much to tell in the shelters, at the entrance, always in the dark. Theft of clothes, of shoes. There was alcohol, but as far as I know there were no drugs. The hated subjects befriended when one from Spanish went out with a boy from Mathematics, and there were also romances between female students and male teachers. I never knew about female teachers with male students, maybe. In the professorship of Leninist-Marxist Philosophy there were two teachers who courted two by two. I remember the dictates of those classes, endless, without interlocution, without dialogue, but it is said that they were both good fornicators.

In second year several schoolmates became pregnant. In front of the university, the child maternal hospital was built, where abortions were performed and you had to line up to get them. I accompanied a friend who cried loneliness. It was common to see very young women alone. The men did

not go to those risky operations, there was no male responsibility at all, and many times the curettage was taken as a contraceptive method.

My virginity was still in safety thanks to a platonic love and, although it seems unreal, because of the readings. A book isolates. Protects. When you read you find other friends, and the characters, although imagined, becomes your best allies. The waiting at the bus stops did not feel eternal thanks to the books. The silence of the libraries trained me to avoid collective bustle, and if I liked a boy, he had to be a reader.

I fell madly in love with a boy of my faculty, son of a famous writer in Cuba; had access to books that I would never find in bookstores. With him I read Milan Kundera, a Czech writer who was mentioned secretly and would never be included in the curricula of our career. He had a history of problems with the Communist Party and his literature was incisive, sharp in criticism against the system. In those days we were in Tarará, a student camp where we were summoned to support their activities.

It was my responsibility to be at the head of a huge house with a view to the sea, whose owners, like all those in that place, had left the country. Now I was as the owner, but with a feeling of usurper. Three times, throughout my life, I have lived in houses which belonged to other people. Two owners, because they left the country. The last house, from my in-laws, who have already departed.

When I have seen from the windows of these houses, when I have sat in their spaces, a feeling of nostalgia always assails me. At times I get an image of those presences. A voice, something inside me feels sadness and is not solved. I looked at the walls of the place and the very rare construction, because it was a round house totally and full of magnificent large windows. Now it was a house with board games and an ice cream machine. Amazing. Who were the

owners of that place? What pain story would hide the farewell? Gerardo and I read at night, giving Kundera a voice as the sea drew an imminent farewell: “What happens only once is as if it never happened. If man can only live a life, it is as if he did not live at all”.

Gerardo soon changed his career and again I considered the loneliness. The worst thing is not the absence of the body, but the lack of words. The books seemed empty to me and I hated the readings that speak about eternal love, about bonding lives.

A high school friend started writing to me from the USSR, it was not called like that anymore, but we kept calling it that. Our letters were filled with index cards, references, we stopped talking about the weather and about studies, in order to chat, in writing, about the characters, the plots, the arguments and the writers we read. One in particular entangled us: Gabriel García Márquez. The letters arrived every week and I returned my thoughts with subtle references to what was growing in me. I felt accompanied again. We read the novel *El amor en los tiempos de cólera* (*Love in times of cholera*), in sections, tasting that love between Fermina Daza and Florentino Ariza. There have always been oracles in the books I read, this was no exception when we shared phrases like this: “It was inevitable: the smell of bitter almonds always reminded him of the fate of unrequited loves”.

A romantic love was brewing from afar. I said “yes” at the end of a letter and we named it courtship. We dedicated several pages to each other, we spelled out what we read by living someone else’s literary existences, trusting that we were characters of a novel to write. How long would it last? I was still oblivious to the predictions and everything was going to depend according to his vacations, but it was not long for it to happen.

“Grandma, ask for me, put his name on the cards, tell me what. Grandma, tell your dead that I do not want bad news. The loneliness scratches, grandma, and I do not want the mark of his nails anymore. Do you know something? If you are going to tell me something heavy, don’t even say it. Let me be, your cards cut off my inspiration... Yes, do not laugh. What use are your dead if they do not help for something good?”

And my grandmother asked to those extended cartons. She listened to the voice of the dead and the silence of the snails. I wove a beading of hopes, but

-It is not good for you, keep going. The snails have said not to leave way by path.

-Grandma, you are from mother. You drag me with that voice that scares. Girl, don’t be like that, I am falling in love and I know that a book does not lie, but, have you read it yet? No? and how can your cards say, so cool as a cucumber, that he will have sand in his heart?

My grandmother did not know how to decorate the silence with rattles and made me let me squeeze myself inside. I cried alone in the blue room. At the bottom of the bookcase I hid the letters. From that first year of college, I remember that I had only one pair of shoes, sewn by a shoemaker that molded as he could. It was common for the heel to be deformed and the seams destroyed my ankles. We had no gauze, nor micropore tape. In those times the wounds were shown as a bullet and healed by the miracle of salt. Not even the mercurochrome took care of our feet. We were beginning to lack everything, but the worst was the same shoe on the suppurating sore, the martyrdom of walking trying to flip-flop a little. I had glucose tests done in those months, because the wounds did not heal and the problem was not health, it was the need. My father made for me some wood flip flops, he stuck a tape on the top with

colorful tacks, and with those I healed. There was no elegance, but my skin thanked it.

That year in 1990, two neighbors got a boat, we heard it from my uncle. They would come to pick them up, they would sneak away. They had plans. They were very hardworking. They wanted to sail ninety miles. They left their daughters, who were my friends, and they promised them that they would return for them shortly. But the coastguard intercepted them. The owner of the boat did not want to slow down, they say they shouted at them with the speaker and did not stop. The coastguard crashed the boat and the older brother broke his skull. He was returned to Cuban territory and was hospitalized for fifteen days until he died. The neighborhood mourned in silence.

I finished second-grade with excellent grades and started as an assistant student, a job after school. At night I would work teaching for elementary school teachers who had no degree. It was a nice time, because I was in front of the classroom where my second grade teacher was studying, a happy coincidence. I was paid twenty-five pesos, which I gathered to buy a pair of shoes. It was not possible unless you turned fifteen, but a friend had a special card because her mother worked at the Ministry of Interior and was allowed to buy in an exclusive store and there I got a pair of real shoes.

Thanks to my after school job I learned to study for exams and to prepare the contents. I would not go to secondary school practices in the area and I would be a teacher of teachers who doubled my age. I was optimistic. I could change career, specialize in Philology and write for a living, but I decided to stay, everything was going well and I solved it easily. I also joined the fencing team and participated in several tournaments, I did not train much and almost always lost.

Then it happened. A friend received a call: my platonic love was coming for me. He was already in Havana, he would arrive in a few minutes, and I froze. They were not vacations; it was the best surprise, but when I saw him, I did not recognize the boy in the letters, he did not speak as he wrote. I did not recognize the character created in me.

He said he had suspended a school subject and that meant being expelled, that he was dying to see me again and I believed him. But he was not from Havana, he was from the westernmost part of the country and the distance began to draw, again, the coordinates. He left with his parents and sometime later I found out the reason he was expelled: he made pregnant the daughter of a leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, and as soon as the scandal came to light, they sent him back.

I do not forgive the lie! When someone lives dreaming expectations, reality does not happen as “nothing”. I cried for weeks. The quotes that I had piled on the wall jumped free: “Take advantage now that you are young in order to suffer as much as you can since these things do not last a lifetime”, my grandmother used to say.

With that break-up something splintered in me. The questioning, the doubt, the experience of loneliness disappeared and I felt hate for everything that sounded romantic, loving, cheesy. I gave up reading poetry and began reading historical novels. I assumed that a woman should build a shell to the sound of disappointment and I melted a cold, insulating helmet for me. I told myself that a phlegmatic temperament would go well with the new me, and I stopped trusting to transform myself into a snake. And then he appeared. He looked fragile and innocent, smelled like wet chicken.

In the days after the break-up, I felt a growing pain and anger. One night a musical group came to the *Castillito* of the Institute of Teaching. It was called like that because it

looked like a miniature castle. It is said that Batista escaped from there, through underground passages never seen. I had no classes and I saw a blond boy circling around the group of spectators. He had a silly smile, but green pretty eyes.

The next day I went to the rehearsal of the theater class and he looked out the door. He looked like a lost child, such was his apparent fragility. Then we bumped into each other in the halls and he asked me whatever. I remember that he smelled like wet chicken and I told him. He took it as a compliment and laughed. He told me that he lived nearby and that he had a job at the school storerooms, he came at times. His chat was elemental, but his eyes predicted an entertaining territory to ease my anger. His apparent innocence was an enveloping beautiful sheep costume. I have terrible memories of him.

I started a relationship that I knew it would fail from the beginning, my disorientation and my anger managed to take me to a worse territory. He looked like a lap dog that followed me day and night. He suffered from dyslexia. Maybe it was worth helping. I invented methods that would facilitate his reading and he simulated very well. He lived far from my house, but that did not limit his visits. Due to transportation problems, after nine o'clock at night the buses passed one hourly, and after twelve o'clock, they took even longer. He was subjected to that rhythm and spent pieces of midnight sitting at the bus stop.

Those "loving behaviors" aroused some tenderness. I thought I felt the charm of consecration, and with that green-eyed boy I invented myself an unreal story. It was a thoughtful decision, but despite the miracle which he told me, I imagined that with him I was going towards the sacrificial stone. "But he is so good", I said to myself. I whipped my ego for dreaming of someone better. Is not love a sacrificed surrender? I repeated, and from those monologues I woke up with my hands smelling of wet

chicken. If I was born again, I would leave anger aside. Rabies is a minion of senselessness.

A week later we went together to a plastic art exhibition, I was honored to explain to him what expressionism was and he seemed interested. As I descended the steps of the place, I heard shouting: "The star! The star!" it was a group of gay homosexuals who applauded my almost literate companion. "Suddenly you do not know or what?" they asked him zigzagging around us like jerks. Hi stuttered an excuse and pulled me out of the circle. He looked scared and the giggles were left behind. There is no worse slam than silence and he did not speak and I thought about the path of my blood on the floor. In the hopeful devotion and the pain of lies, loneliness, anger. "They are not going to seize me like dumb", I used to say and I fell.

From closed door to drawbridge the doubt rose and I began the interrogation. He said they were from the neighborhood, known people and nothing else. I kept reasoning doubts on that trip to my parents' house. I wanted to turn back time, recover myself. That apparent naïve one, after much questioning, confessed to me that since that stage of his life it had been a long time, that before, with two drinks it did not matter if he touched a man or a woman, that in his adolescence he went to orgies and not any more. "I never used protection, but, as far as I know, I am not sick...you don't know about the neighborhood, the neighborhood is tough and has its thing", he murmured.

I painted a farewell in the air, traced it in words and explained the size of the lie on my temples. I have no doubt that loneliness is a bad ally, but worse is rage, it puts its claws and you believe in your ability to dominate it while it hurts your body, scratches your brain and you do evil against you, against yours, and in that momentum of outburst you flagellate your wings...you hate yourself and you are alone. Honestly, I did not even know there were

teenage orgies. The nights in my neighborhood were more candid and you could hear naturally that someone very young already had a boyfriend, but nothing about sharing with several the mattresses.

Then he came to the faculty several times to convince me with his lack of vocabulary. I felt repulsion as soon as he said the word love. His inability to smell another scent that wasn't of chicken disguised as cockerel, enraged me. It is indescribable what it feels in such a circumstance. I did not give him another opportunity. Whatever the price of our breaks, it is better to define when we slam the door. I never looked back, but years later I bumped into his mother: "I live alone in the same place. He went away with an Italian friend, they have been living together for a long time, there. Poor thing, I think my son will remain single".

The third year of career came with the Scientific Days; they were weeks in which students of all levels presented their research on literary subjects. They fascinated me, they were absorbent, but they meant becoming detectives with authors or works. I focused on the figure of Jose Martí of who was talked about so much, but whose poetics caught my attention. I wanted to read his letters, understand what he felt in exile, rediscover the history of his hobbies, his loves, his *Versos libres*. In these meetings I met spirits with common passions, future cultural promoters, poets, writers such as Ignacio Cruz, Gerardo Fernández Fe, Ernesto Hernández Busto. In addition, I learned more about universal literature with these meetings than through all the courses of the Institute.

In fourth grade a friend alerted me: "Cultural activities, fencing, or your grades will not matter. If you want your academic ladder to be respected, you have to enter the Union of Young Communists of Cuba **UJC** (*Unión de Jóvenes Comunistas de Cuba*)". And the accumulated grades would not matter. Just as schools in the countryside were an obligation,

now belonging to revolutionary organizations was a mandatory requirement. A formality.

I asked for my admission, they would do some interviews in the neighborhood. I would participate in some meetings, at least I thought so, and I should pay a fee in Cuban pesos, three or four pesos minimum. In these meetings Study Circles should be made. A brochure was sent to the person in charge and political documents or an issue related to youth was discussed. But I am not lying, there never was a single meeting.

They gave me a card, I paid my fee to the girl who picked it up and nothing else, it was pure formality. The brochures were photocopied and were handed to each member, whoever wanted to could read them. The person in charge guaranteed her place in the promotion ladder although her academic performance fell short to one's expectations. I saw her several times, in class she filled her minutes of meetings which never took place. Of course, you had to parade with the members of your study group on May 1<sup>st</sup> and July 26 so that everyone would see you and there would be no doubt that your parade supported your revolutionary affiliation.

In my case, I arrived at the meeting point and while the contingents were grouped, I returned by some side street to go drink lemonade at the house of an old woman friend. She thanked those visits, because she was completely alone, widower and with a son who jumped from Russia to Sweden and who seemed to have forgotten his mother. She took months to tell him that the father had died so he would not come back. "So that he never sets foot here", she excused herself, and he did so, punishing her with years of silence and abandonment. We watched the parade on television.

In that period I had a very strong physical exhaustion, accompanied by an amebiasis which dehydrated me. In the hospital I was returned to reality with a serum and several medications. The doctor told my mother that I was

malnourished and dehydrated, but it was inevitable. When I returned home my hunger continued. There was a shortage of food, electricity, water. What there was for sure, were medications and the attention was immediate. In those times you could still get sick.

I was also very stressed when this happened. The University Student Festival would unite all theater groups. Two recognized actors in the country agreed to help me prepare a monologue by Francisco Garzón Céspedes. Garzón, playwright, minstrel and writer, facilitated to me his monologue *Amar es abrir las puertas*, a personal talk about a girl who suffers a breaking, she is torn to pieces, shattered, and later accepts it in a phenomenal catharsis.

The montage fit like a glove. It included starting with background music, locked in a mosquito net, like shroud. Debating myself in that metaphorical confinement, I free myself and begin a dialogue with the absent guy, playing with the clothes of the lover, his memories, the smells of his writings, and I end up in proscenium breaking the shirt that evokes him and I walk among the audience while a song from Silvio Rodriguez makes the setting for the end.

I rehearsed several days. The applause was intense, I thought that first stage was freed, but not. The jury determined that in the shroud net, the gone lover's jacket, his writings and that cryptic monologue – that is what they told me and I will never forget it – , there were veiled matters, hidden, that I should not believe myself so clever, that no one was going to talk there against the Revolution. And they disqualified me. Aha! That way they were able to judge, these judges without tribune. Many of these characters emigrated to the United States, the second texts inhabited their heads, grew in their intentions and thus mutilated many wings.

By the time the fifth grade came, I had the best average of my career. The teachers selected me to do a

demonstration exercise with which they would begin a new way of evaluation. It consisted of teaching a class on an assigned topic and should then explain everything related to its preparation and the methodological fundamentals. That class was for junior high school students; the subject: Antonio Machado.

After that moment, life showed that poetry designs scenarios: “*Caminante no hay camino, se hace camino al andar...*” (“Walker there is no path, path is made by walking...”)

The results were excellent, the teachers congratulated me and I assumed that I would stay working in the Institute, but in the second semester the group meeting would be held. Now the academic achievement of each one did not matter. Your place in the promotion ladder would be erased. All the fifth-grade groups, gathered, should propose the places according to their individual visions and never forgotten from the participation in political, cultural and sports activities.

Before the vote, a student got up and took out a notebook. “Here I wrote all the evidences of my interventions as head of the Circle of Political Study from the **UJC**, and apart all the cultural and sport activities in which I have participated”, and began to read. That little woman had paraded more than the president; she had been in so many activities that, I suppose, she attended five places simultaneously and had practiced more sport than the Cuban baseball team. They asked her to stop her reading and, given so much written evidence and her good political reputation, they wrote her down in the first place. Today she lives in Miami, but that does not matter, she must sleep clinging to a new notebook.

Then the vote continued lead by two students. They were second and third place. I began to see kind of cloudy, that had the color of the absurd. They got the place three, the fourth and I understood that I had no longer the option of

staying to work at the university. The whole thing was summed up in three words: political, ideological and popular. Me, unrelated.

The rejection had remained hidden. The girl who had been fourth place, already assured, remembered me and said: "It is enough already!" and she defended my stay in the first five places. I was flabbergasted, they would be the best graduates, according to the majority, leaders of the UJC or of the University Student Federation FEU (*Federacion Estudiantil Universitaria*), no matter what kind of professional you would be, the teacher with vocation, that stayed at the bottom of the witch casserole. We had the soul stained with appearances, we were a fallacy, an imitation of what we should be.

A month before delivering my diploma work, we were informed that, for the first time in the history of the Institute, the best graduates would not stay working in the city, now they would go to the *becas* (*state subsidized high schools which includes student housing*) in the field; after the fifth place, that is, my position, the whole generation went to Isla de Pinos. There they had advanced with more than forty schools full of African students.

The hearers of infamous notebooks, all to work on the Isla de la Juventud. They could visit their families once a month, sometimes over a longer period. They had to deal with the aggressive and tribal character of these students who did not understand any Spanish and it would be very hard. But for me, the *beca*, the school in the field again; there could not be worst torture.

When I was immersed in this concern, my paternal grandfather died. The one who taught me how to read the clock. The one who lent me the horse to ride it on the asphalt. A week before, he had asked me a favor: "M'daughter, cut my toenails". And I was in a hurry, I didn't do it. I have never forgiven myself. As always, I

looked for a pretext to escape from my sadness, something to mitigate the fall of hope. You can never put your eagerness on the precipice. And I looked for the theater.

In the last year of the career I returned to the stage. I could reconcile the dramatic eagerness with the universe of books and it came through a call in the newspaper. They invited to a Basic Workshop on Scenic Oral Narration, a workshop to form modern minstrels and would be taught by Mayra Navarro, a long-time narrator, and Francisco Garzón Céspedes. I remember that I went to ask my grandmother for a consultation, I told her that I needed to know if my life would go that way, if I could run away from the mud, the beca, the row of frogs. My grandmother was washing some lettuce in the sink, she looked tired, I remember it because she was very vital, and she told me: “Ask God for it, kneel in front of the altar and ask Him, if so it should be, to be so”.

I could not believe it, my grandmother was giving up. Her black gods who made miracles from the darkness of the dead prostrated themselves before a Being that shone with own light. I questioned about that coexistence of gods and universes although I had already studied everything about religious syncretism and we had the general acceptance of some Spanish gods in coexistence with the African gods. “You are the daughter of the Virgin of Regla, Yamayá protects you”. and the Virgin of Regla reigned on her altar and did no longer go before the sea. My grandmother asked her faithful to bring her a wave in a bottle, locked up, and Yemayá reigned in the water, danced in her blue dresses as the drum thundered, and grandmother would lay her everlasting flowers while praying an Our Father.

In the group of narrators I made several friends and met one of my best teachers. Mayra was cordial, landed the concepts, did demonstrative exercises. Francisco was distant, concentrated and came from a journey through Spain. He

had founded the Peña de los Juglares in a park near my house and also he wrote. The workshop had an introductory part that subjugated me, recognizing storytelling as an art was another dimension. In addition, its origin in the Scandinavian culture, associated with the promotion of reading, fascinated me and I began to do research. The individual closing exercise arrived. We had to go wearing dark clothes and tell a story on stage. It was the year of 1990.

I chose *El hombre de los dientes de oro* by Eliseo Diego, because his narrative, although plagued with poetic prose and underlying meanings, was very significant to me, this story thrilled me. Innocence, superstition, the permanence of evil as a threat were intertwined to create an unsettling atmosphere, and I told it on the clothes I was wearing, I looked like a famished magpie. I defied the heat of the island, like a hot flush. I dressed in gray, my mother's pants and a blouse of my aunt. This should have distracted, because the first comment from Francisco was: "I don't like your image!" I took a deep breath and told the story.

My hands assumed the mist, the tissue, the sadness of the story and I concluded. It is a story that scares. It tells the story of a girl who falls in love, who languishes, who gets lost by a man with gold teeth. A man alien to mercy and who seems to be the incarnation of the devil.

That night the huge ceilings of the Federico Garcia Lorca Theater seemed to shake. I was convinced that the strength of an orator is not in the cloth that is worn, but in the verb used. Mayra was very kind in her analysis and Federico lashed out at my outfit because it made me look older, that I should change my haircut. Perhaps he sensed the discordance of my age and my exterior image. I don't know, but I smiled and continued as usual, raising my head up and thinking about constructing myself.

After that workshop several shows followed. By then I was going out with a rear-guard sergeant of the Revolutionary Armed Forces, a boy who studied with me in elementary school and was the typical chubby that everyone bullies, but he had flourished as a tall, muscular young man with whom I could not talk about many issues; however, he was very funny and made me laugh. The “worse is nothing” companion pattern was repeated.

I invited him to one of my presentations and in the bus he told me he was carrying a long-barrel gun. “You look at me, only me”, he threatened. He was the nephew of a commander of the Revolution who it was said that he had fought in the Sierra Maestra. The Sierra Maestra seemed a niche for each convenience. I have never found that last name in any history books. The fact is that the gun was his father’s. We arrived at the theater and I counted. I made eye contact with each of those present while the lights illuminated me. I saw his face contorted. He got up and left, he wanted to dominate a woman who told stories. He did not know that I was armed with words, and since that day I was not alone. The guy with the gun was gone, may things go well for him.

These workshops brought together doctors, teachers, librarians, actors, retired grandfathers and grandmothers. There were of all ages and even a worker from the lighthouse in Havana. There was also a tall, nervous boy who had worked for a long time in the women’s prison, it was said that he was from the Ministry of Interior and was there to listen to us, to infiltrate and to monitor us. In a presentation, a narrator told a short story: “A man spends hours in front of the television. He is accompanied by his dog. They look at nothing. The man wants to leave and can’t...also the dog”.

That seemingly harmless tale raised thunderous applause in the room. Many wanted to leave the country. Even the

dog wants to leave, that was the slogan of the moment. The Special Period had been decreed and the hunger was unbearable. We said there were sudden light (contrary of blackouts), because the power cuts were constant. There was also no water and it showed in people's spirits. Many were looking for a door to flee, a trip to escape, a tale to express themselves. He was expelled from the workshop, his name was Tony.

Although the others told what had been rehearsed in the workshop, most applied after the dog's slogan. Of all that group in which we were more than twenty-two, only two remain in Cuba.

And we graduated from the Institute of Teaching about 150 future teachers of Spanish and Literature. It was in the Karl Marx theater; an aunt lent me a dress and the shoes were those from my fifteen years. Every girl who turned that age could aim for a pair of shoes; the rest had to go with the artisans who "indeed" would get the leather, the soles, the sewing machines and the glue...the government, not. In that ceremony the titles were given, a speech was read and awards were given to the most outstanding of the career. There were five categories and I won four of them. That afternoon I did not have any work done from my grandmother. Before leaving home, she said: "You are the daughter of envy, you will have and you will not have. Your name will be written high, but many evil eyes will have built a nest at your feet".

I can't deny that it impresses, but I had stopped fearing the predictions of the orishas. The road is one and there is no road without path. My teachers did justice, they assigned the awards. The notebooks full of fallacy probably drown in some corner. I didn't look elsewhere to see reactions, I concentrated on giving thanks to Him, my readings took another spiritual turn. I was studying J.C. Lewis. I managed to think of a powerful and balanced will to which I didn't

have to offer sacrifices. I was living a spiritual growth, I started reading the Bible, but I did not understand it.

## SOCIAL SERVICE

After graduation we were informed the fate of the next two years. I was assigned a Spanish and Literature teacher position in a Pre. Pre-university students lived on these becas (*state subsidized high schools which includes student housing*) and followed the dynamics of work in the field. Again the inevitable, eventful field.

I was leaving my house at four thirty in the morning, getting on the almost empty bus. My mother, fearful of the night, accompanied me to the stop, the dog was going too. It was not what we had dreamed, it was not what was worked every day in front of the notebooks, but there was no other possibility. The bus brought me forward a third of the way, then I walked through dark streets of a problematic municipality with an allusive name: La Víbora (The Snake).

I had to get to the badly called Plaza Roja (Red Square), perhaps remembering some meters from the Kremlin Square. There the buses were formed in order to move teachers to their different destinations. But before arriving, the martyrdom was other. Those dark streets, bordered by mansions that once were beautiful and imposing, had several portals for shops or warehouses, and behind the columns the exhibitionists hid, they hissed, yelled, and then you had to run without looking back in order to dominate fear. Without thinking about why you, at dawn, alone, were running like insane without being able to inhale the exquisite smell of the rose bushes.

I arrived being thirsty to the Red Square. Many times without having had breakfast, or with the tasty orange-leaf tea which Mommy served in the mornings as a comforting remedy. In addition, it was early morning for everyone, and

the men stayed sitting down, downcast, sleeping, and many of us women travelled standing up. The blabbing about gender equality put everyone in their place. Didn't we say that women were as equal as men? Well, let's travel standing up, carry the bulk of books and our weakly body. Seat for the one who arrived early. It was a strenuous journey and it lasted for more than two hours.

I was assigned two tenth grade groups. I placed myself down the stairs. The groups began to rise with the excitement of the first day. Everyone without uniforms because the warehouse had not received the delivery. A student asks me: "What grade are you in?"

In the professorship there were three women, two lived in the rural municipality. The head of the professorship was an older woman who had not finished her career, but since she was a neighbor of the municipal inspector, she was assigned the position. The other teacher also lived in that municipality and she was a graduate; she never talked about classes, she was obsessed with getting pregnant. With the descriptions of her effort the door of the professorship opened every morning. Conversations always revolved on the subject of positions, sperm quality and lunar transit. There was talk about everything but literature.

The third one was not a graduate either, then I knew what fears this circumstance brought to her. They told me: "This is your table, where it says 'Witch', ha ha ha!" while with invisible threads they moved the disgusting liquid of a witch casserole.

The students were from complicated municipalities of the city: Centro Habana and Santos Suarez. Those of Centro Habana staged fights. There used to be fights in male shelters and even in female, and those were the worst, very vulgar, forced to survive in an almost marginal life. They had a very aggressive behavior. The robberies in the shelters were constant and also the robberies to the countryside. The

Directorate asked us teachers to search the briefcases. Some teachers took out the five garlic heads, the only onion; not me. Being cooked, empty stomach, a period of famine, garlic cloves made any mother smile. I even took vegetables for my house, of course. There were more serious cases of alcohol consumption in the shelters, a boy intoxicated with poppy...in short, behaviors that were linked to the dreamed student morals and that exhibited another, relaxed, fluctuating to convenience.

I enjoyed my classes, I followed a methodology, planned the contents and always researched the topics. I was given also a third year group (the twelfth) and the head of professorship took work off herself. With greater maturity, these boys discoursed, argued, we were able to do creative classes and poetry began to break apart into pieces to be understood as a living body, made to be interpreted.

There was a visit from the municipal inspector, the neighbor. She was a close friend of the three teachers of my professorship. That is why, perhaps, she went straight to check on my classes. Although she had no negative observations, I noticed a mutual rejection. She spent the morning laughing out loud about the descriptions of an exhausted husband and a woman determined to get pregnant. She finished her visit in front of a cup of coffee and telling them to take their assessments for granted, ha ha ha!

I began to meet with the subdirector, also a Spanish teacher, and soon she told me who the witch was: her. She had arrived four years before and discovered that these three women had put down roots in school. They sustained very good relations with the municipal authorities, had the highest salary and were untouchable. When the now subdirector arrived as a simple teacher, she protested about unfair assessments, about the workload and they made her life impossible. They stole her things, stained her planner,

stamped the mark on her desk. But... one day they needed a deputy director and nobody could question her preparation and, apart from that, the three quarrelsome had only one interest: not working; so they kept silent, they dressed as sheep. “Take care of yourself – she said to me –, I take care of myself because I do not know where will it burst”. They would soon take out their nails.

Distances to school were felt strenuous to me, but the return was worse. The collective transport was meager. It was impossible to get on a bus and on the dump trucks, concrete trucks, dredges with or without cargo, they picked us up at the stops. Those gigantic wheels of cargo trucks never look as big as up close. Climbing on them and getting on the truck bed was an odyssey. Sometimes it took me up to four hours to return to my house.

I opted to bathe and, without eating, I fell asleep. I lost more weight and began to have constant dizziness. I hid that from my mother, because for her it had been the title, my graduation with honors. It was also her daily effort. She made for me a bread with an omelet and that was what I ate all day, because it followed the metal trays full of fat, rice with weevil and peas without flavor. No more.

It took many years for me to be diagnosed with nervous anorexia which began in these months. I rejected food. We had eggs at home because of the hens in the yard. As queens, my grandfather designed their metal cages to prevent them from robberies, increasingly frequent. Some raised a little pig in their bathrooms. Also those who lived in buildings looked after them like lovely pets, hid their bad smell and prepared them aspiring to the meat at the end of the year. A special meal which some advanced because of famine. Hunger has no negotiable terms. You have to go hungry in order to know what a piece of bread is. Without Russia, subsidies were over. Someone kicked the can.

The truth is that I wanted to die in those days. I could see my hair dry, dark circles, my clavicles betraying effort and shortcomings, I could not take it anymore. If I did not finish my social service, I would not have the degree, and without the university degree, I was nobody. I would go to work at a store, at a warehouse. The five-year career could not go through for nothing. I walked to the field with the students and we looked like a cloud of idiots, there was no enthusiasm; if my generation had given glimpses of laziness, this added apathy.

Promiscuity began to be experienced, and unwanted pregnancies were a day-to-day thing. Male-teachers slept with some female-students and changed mate as if they were flip flops. A spirit of escape prevailed, an escape in the sexual thing; however, female-teachers remained faithful to their external relations. I do not remember any case in which the relationship male-student with female-teacher occurred.

Several colleagues moved to tourism. They drove taxis. They worked as hairdressers and went well. I hardly recognized that a woman who cleaned bathrooms in a hotel earned more than me. A cousin made beds and looked striking.

I went to an interview at the Habana Libre Hotel. An older man welcomed me behind a trench of papers. They were the most visionary minutes of my life. I knew what I should do. I kept working. I repeated myself: "Every day has its own effort. Resist".

The director of the Pre always had problems and reasons why the subdirector reigned in the place. From my professorship, the one who dreamed of pregnancy, succeeded and left with a license. The head of professorship continued without teaching and talked about food to come. Each inspection visit was still directed at me and it did not bother me, because my only attraction was the students and

all they were learning about Don Quixote, the modernist poets, Kafka. That itinerary of letters saved me.

One day an inspector from the countryside arrived, an older lady who did not smile at any flattering compliment. The head of professorship stopped being funny and the other teacher alleged a strong stomach ache and vanished into the shelters. She literally disappeared, and this attitude was repeated before each visit that was not the one of the neighbor of the municipal inspection. The methodologist reviewed exams from who was on pregnancy leave, she made notes and commented that there would be an evaluation scale which would imply some improvement in salary. She had to see the classes of each one. Of course, they would start with me.

Interestingly, that day would work on Kafka and his tale *La metamorphosis*. It tells the painful life of a nullified, alienated man, who wakes up one morning turned into a kind of beetle or cockroach. I saw myself in Gregorio Samsa. The students had as a project the preparation of visual aids for the class, some elaborated with wire and cloth a kind of repugnant insect. Another team made a cardboard room and others, with plasticine, made a bust of Kafka and exposed interesting aspects of his dramatic biography. The class took place with good rhythm, guaranteed by students and their exhibitions. As I am passionate about this writer, it was not difficult to spread my interest to them. Upon leaving, the methodologist smiled and told me that it had been very pleasant to see such a young teacher with such management of content and group. She could not say the evaluations immediately, but I had the highest. The subdirector also attended.

Days later the municipal inspector arrived and said that, because of my age and little experience, they could not give me the maximum evaluation. I felt the return of popularity votes, the notebooks of the mythomaniac, the injustice, but

there was nothing else to do. The witch casserole began to bubble revealing its disgusting brew. I went with my grandmother and the cards spoke again: “You live in affront. You have a job done behind and those grudges have to be untied”.

I knew about brandy, about tobacco smoke, about the decapitated hen and its burial under the ceiba tree. She made a work with a magic egg. The egg rested on blue cottons, but remained standing, you put it in the palm of the hand and did not tilt. There was no hole, but it felt empty. It stayed under my bed and it was only moved for cleaning; however, it was always a mystery, because it never stunk, nor lay down on any hand. Not even on mine.

My exhaustion grew along with the rejection of my companions. Their evaluations allowed them an almost symbolic increase in their salary scale. I suffered black-outs and I lost sleep due to stress. I ate little, slept badly. In addition, came a plague of lice that did not respect even the teachers. Not even as a child did those bugs walk through my head and now they were. Hungry, anxious, squalid and full of lice, such was the image.

“Resign. Leave the title on the road, get free now”, my mother asked and tears flowed. I was Gregorio Samsa turned into a reified insect, in the collective nothingness. The students were enthusiastic when talking about recreational activities, they helped me endure. In those two years, I still belonged to the UJC, but they never called meetings, we only paid one contribution.

The second year of this social service, I found out that the secretary was charging me more than what he should, as if I had a higher salary scale and that man laughed at my claim. He did not take seriously all the money he had stolen from me during a year and a half; he stopped talking to me and I stopped quoting. Until that day lasted my belonging in an organization that never ceased to behave as something

symbolic, a long simulation. “Ask God”, my mother said. My grandmother told me to speak to the hollow egg like the mystery. Empty as the nothing, enigmatic in its shell.

That last part of the second year was disastrous. The hostility was uncovered. They did not forgive me the predilection of the students, my achievements in full youth, my obvious interest. I applied my exams and got sick. I missed school for two days and, upon returning, I found out that the inspector, the very close friend neighbor, had come to check my exams. I left all my papers locked and they had broken the lock. Brilliant students were suspended after the macabre revision. They crossed out my grade, erased answers, with the sarcasm of their envy they hurt many of my students. They marked as error, definitions that I handled very well: the metaphor, the similes, resources that I studied for many years for my graduation work. Was boiling their broth of evils and I showed the subdirector what was altered. She knew my students very well, it was not fair and I requested a meeting with the municipal director; naïve of me.

He agreed to meet with the methodologist, the head of professorship came, the one who just gave birth, and I confirmed that they were all neighbors. In front of a hill of books that I took from my house as accomplices, I explained to them the reasons of my evaluation. I reproached the obvious alteration of the grades, the false blots. I gave them the names and background of my brilliant students who had been graded very poorly, unethically, maliciously. When I explained to them the correct definition of literary resources, the inspector, who looked like a cartoon by Edith Piaf, shrieked: “Don’t give me more classes!”.

The municipal director seemed amused: “We are not going to extend more, I see that you do not agree and you will not want to continue working here, right? Of course I did not want to and they transferred me to another school.

The subdirector tried to comfort me: “With me they couldn’t, with you yes”.

Fifteen days later I went back for some documents. There was a month left to complete the course and my students told me that one sentence was enough to make mad the witch in charge. They would wait for an opportunity and would said: “My teacher (I) told me that it is not done that way”. And the threats, the screams began to fly. The witch in charge foamed from the mouth. They never corrected the damage they did to my students, but they paid their infamies and I did not want to fight. I will always regret about that.

The new school was in town, they didn’t go to the countryside and the guard shifts were very sporadic. One guard shift consisted of sleeping in the central hall. Sleep halfway, because we had to take care of the shelters and prevent any stranger from entering the place. In front of the dining room we watched the sacks of rice and peas with weevils. I remember that I worked on the theme of El Quijote de la Mancha and thought of windmills: “each one carries several that challenge them or crush them on the road”.

That year an International Festival of Scenic Oral Narration was held, storytellers from all over the world would come and I focused on that. Rehearsals took off. I entered the theatre, the white marble of its stairs and the huge windows filled me up with light. I never lost hope.

As soon as the school year was over I asked for my withdrawal and began the procedures to recover my university degree. It did not take long for it to stay rolled up in a drawer.

The festival lasted five nights of presentations in various spaces and I met writers, narrators and troubadours from around the world. Without knowing it, another knitting of destiny was being planned here.

## LITERARY RESEARCH CENTER

My mother got an interview with the Director of Municipal Culture. A research center would open and she had read my curriculum. She thought that my literary research during the career, joined to the experience in Oral Narration could generate community work projects and would link the Center with the community.

I remembered a phrase from my paternal grandfather: “If a stem is surrounded by shade...it bends over. Cut the way. Always find the light”.

And my mother made an effort introducing me. I went to interviews. The new institution was unheard of in the territory where we lived, but it would become a reality. It would be settled in a very picturesque town, near my father’s house. Santa Maria del Rosario saw the birthplace of the Cuban hispanist who would name the Research Center: Jose Maria Chacon y Calvo. Alejo Carpentier had married in his magnificent church. A month later it was already functioning at fifty percent. It was a restored large house with tall posts, large windows and balustrades of the eighteenth century. It was not the house where the hispanist was born, but it was in the town. The historian of Havana approved a donation which included mahogany bookcases, nineteenth-century secretaries, desks of good carved wood and all the aroma of the past we concentrated there. Old editions and library donations arrived and the Spanish embassy gave us an extraordinary collection.

I had a lot of enthusiasm and, finally, I felt in my element. At the front we had the church... it showed us its lateral cheek and the neighbors came by to greet us with the spirit of the small town, between friendly and gossipy.

I had to follow a literary investigation that would confront me with a nineteenth-century poet, Luisa Perez de Zambrana, who sized elegiac poetry with a life full of losses

and loneliness. Her existence was surrounded by martyrdom, she was even reflected in virgin Dolorosa, the image of Virgin Mary crossed by knives.

I will take a wild leap in time. A preview. It is June 2013 and a misfortune occurs. This is what I wrote that day: “June sweeps. June with a wet face. June lacks pleasures”.

On the 12<sup>th</sup>, in June, Felix Ernesto Chavez was stabbed in Mexico. He was at a relative’s house. He came from Spain and was heading to Cuba. Something improbable had happened, a poet like Felix defends a thesis on the poetics of Luisa Perez de Zambrana and, with this, obtains his doctorate from the Autonomous University of Barcelona. But, in the land of Quetzalcoatl, he found his death.

It was a terrible impact. I fell prey to anxiety. Luisa’s reading always moved me to tears, but to this it was added the petty part of a society in which poetry seems banished. I wrote: “With him, possibly, Luisa will rest forever kept in the utmost secrecy that confer centuries and centuries of oblivion. And the Virgin de los Dolores is personified in another mother who longs for the son’s embrace. The vileness always surprises me, maybe that is why one looks for the book and its support”.

I go back to the years when the Center of Literary Research filled me with hope. It was 1993 and I was walking through libraries with the security of who has grown up among books. I bought many old books about the Zambrana, I spent my salary there and everything seemed to be going well. I handled newspaper libraries full of jewelry, newspapers and magazines from past centuries. Texts that looked like onion skin. I could not be in a better place, when my father had a heart attack.

He was admitted to intensive care and it was there that I began to give myself to prayer. I asked God to save him, I needed his impulse, his contagious joy. We saw the sick people from a kind of passage through a very high window.

Daddy raised his arm, smiled, was under control. His life was prospered, he quit cigarette and alcohol. These vices were comfort in Cuba against the hunger of those years. My father got better. He had never believed in any religion, but prayer saved him.

Another International Festival formed a cascade of events. I took a group of storytellers to my center and we introduced ourselves to the community. We wanted it to be in the atrium of the church, but we were not allowed. Different accents filled the walls of that old house with images and the voice echoed in every arrival of neighbors. That year a Meeting of Sociocultural Promotion and Research was held and I presented a paper that showed how the Center where I worked was inserted in the community and especially in oral narration. On Saturdays, although I did not get paid for that, I opened the house and the children arrived to hear me narrate. There was no better place to be. In those times the absence of cultural options and the distance of the place in relation to the capital, condemned them to the lack of culture. I won recognition at the event. That week the directors congratulated me and the editor of the place took the opportunity to comment: "They say that this year, that Meeting lowered the quality a lot".

For all that I had already lived, I was used to these shenanigans, I prepared myself for more and smiled. One develops a merciful feeling with these people. Evilness, selfishness, disloyalty, are snakes these days and one must leave to the zigzagging body its own path. You can get around it, but not avoid it.

The second year I received an invitation from Mexico; it was 1993. Narrator Jesus Vera, with a very long career in the field of oral narration who would later become an everlasting friend, and the anthropologist Jerman Argueta, they invited me to the First Meeting of Orality and Culture that would be held at the Museum of Popular Cultures. I

was notified that, in September, under the rain that washes the city, writers, narrators and journalists from various countries would join in this event.

In order to leave Cuba, one had to go through many filters. The getaway of brains was a daily matter and few returned to the country. That was not my intention. They interviewed me many times, in one of those, they summoned me for the handing over of the passport and asked me to wait. A chubby man came out and called me to a lustrous, lonely portal. With a mysterious attitude, he told me that the passport would be delayed, that I should wait, but he could solve it if I promised to bring him a video player; he would pay me on my return. Days later I found out, with my document in hand, that he was a scammer, but there, with the mini-authority, everyone tried to take advantage. It was common hearing comments like this: “Look at the hill of papers to be done, and you are down there, my girl. Nobody remembers one, about everything that one does for the one who is going to travel. When they come back they don’t even bring you an eye shadow... who will remember? they cried crocodile tears and enjoyed their bureaucratic and tendentious deadlines.

That year the famine, the blackouts, the lack of water intensified. I was dating a boy from Centro Habana and his father had to be operated due to an intestinal obstruction. The first night after his operation, inexperienced in the management of the colostomy, with the dawn in bloom and without electricity nor water, we had to change the bag to him. There was no water in the whole hospital. This man had been secretary of the Ministry of Interior, he handled files and classified documentation. He was a silent man. He lived in a one-bedroom apartment with two sons and his wife. He never complained, but that night, dripping feces down his hip, I heard him sob. What would he think about the dream that he helped to dream? I had to wash him with

the bottle of water we had for drinking and, both of us in silence, we sat down in order to watch the grimace of darkness. He survived and got a job as a guard in a pharmaceutical laboratory. Less than a year later he died of a heart attack in his bed. He passed away in silence as he had lived.

While still being in Cuba, I was called from Mexico. The Institute Mexiquense of Culture will publish my first book for children. The emotion is indescribable, we made arrangements by phone and the date was determined to make two presentations in Toluca and Mexico City.

Upon landing in Mexico, the pollution dome caught my attention. I had never seen a sky in asphyxia. There were no volcanoes, neither green nor blue. That night I was attacked by “Moctezuma’s revenge”, a reaction which includes vomiting, diarrhea and dizziness. When I looked at my face in the solitude of the hotel room, I had real fear of death. I felt that way. The calendar of activities included city trips, days of conferences and of storytelling. The city captivated me, it is impossible not to fall in love with those breaths of the past. It rained every afternoon and I was not wearing neither a coat nor a jacket, nothing. Mayra Navarro and Francisco Garzon Cespedes, my teachers, were around and we met in a restaurant. Mayra saw me tremble, took off a coat she was wearing and gave it to me: “If your throat closes, you won’t be able to narrate”, she said as the tutor she has always been; pure heart. They gave me money so I could buy some food and get away from chili pepper because of its unknown burning of the palate. I will never forget that encounter.

Three days later the event concluded and the Arvide family welcomed me into their home. They did not know me and they were very kind...a marriage with two girls. They prepared their library so that I could be in a magnificent house with a vaulted ceiling, in Tlalpan; they

gave me shelter. The grandparents lived in the house next door; she cooked delicious soups and the grandfather of noble walking was the evident gallantry of a gentleman of the past century.

I learned to use the light rail train, to move by subway throughout the city and, in fifteen days, I believed I was an expert already.

Chacon y Calvo, the hispanist who gave name to my workplace in Cuba, had been friends with Alfonso Reyes. I visited the Chapel Alfonsina to investigate and I met Ines Reyes, who offered me an exquisite cup of tea and her friendship. We talked for a while, and when I walked the place, aromatized by the books, I felt an unknown fullness.

One morning I went out from the house of Tlalpan and needed coins to pay for the bus. I arrived at a little store and asked if they had menudo, because that is how we name the small change in Cuba. They smiled amused and said they did not have. I went back to the bus stop. A taxi passed by, it stopped and came in reverse.

-Where are you going? – he asked me.

-I am going to the Chapel Alfonsina, but I have to go through the city.

-Want me to take you?

-I only have fifty pesos.

-Get in, I will take you to the light rail train, you will advance something.

I got in the taxi and sat next to the driver, as I used to in Cuba. The next question was:

-You are not from here, right?

I got to know an unquestionably supportive face of Mexico. He wanted to know about Cuba, about its food, about the people, about what we felt when we went to the sea and he took me to the Chapel Alfonsina for twenty pesos. He said: “keep the rest so you can go back. Be careful,

you can't trust everyone, but I would never hurt someone who comes from so far away".

He went to say goodbye on an afternoon of drizzle. He gave me a book about Frida Kahlo's work and told me that he was going to cross the Bravo River. He asked me if in Cuba we had a talisman or something, as The Virgin in Mexico. I gave him a stamp of Caridad del Cobre. I never heard from him again. He was a taxi driver and his name was Manuel.

Days later I presented my book flanked by writer Becky Rubinstein and oral narrator Vivianne Thirion. As everything in my life has tragicomedy nuance, the book had two peculiar aspects: one, my name was written wrong, so, forever, that edition will seem written by another person, and two, as the stories are about my childish vision about the gods of my grandmother, I mentioned one that is special in the pantheon Yoruba, king of lightning, of thunder, of justice, pretty black who punishes liars, and when seeing his name the illustrator drew a chango (monkey) where I wrote Shangó.

I traveled to Monterrey with a definitive exit permit; this implied that I would go for five days and would return to my country. The official who interviewed me asked me again and again if I did not want more days, I guess he found strange my urge to return, but I missed my parents, boyfriend, my job...one gets used to hunger when affections fill your belly and heart.

Near the Cerro de la Silla, another oral narrator would wait for me and I would have lodging in his house. I arrived by bus, twelve hours to there, and upon arrival there was no one to welcome me. I called to the phone number they had given me and it was hard to hear. A woman's voice answered from the other side, but she spoke at the same time. Later I knew that I was talking to an answering

machine, but those magnificent devices were unknown in Cuba.

I collected a lot of information in Monterrey and I won a sister. Adriana was an only child like me, she was about my age and soon she introduced me into her group of friends. I felt safe there. Thanks to her and her father I got to know Monterrey.

I went to many interviews and they offered me a contract. Before I left, I met Tucita, an actress that everyone remembers from Pedro Infante's films. She conducted a television program and interviewed me. I remember that day, I felt in the inside like a scared hare, but I pretended security. I narrated a story by Ecuadorian writer Pablo Palacio about infidelity. I loved the cameras and Tucita became an excellent friend.

It was an incredible journey and I ate with sanity, because food always made me want to vomit. For many years I had not seen a steak, a good fish fillet, and I thought of my people.

I returned to Cuba, I took a very well-supported summary of research and another invitation to return, but in the imminent trip the questions multiplied. The Ministry of Culture that invited me had to change the ticket several times and this affected me. I was going from interrogation to interrogation. I answered the same thing over and over again, I was not interested in staying in a country other than mine. I went out three more times to impart workshops, gave lectures and worked with teachers and cultural promoters; when the most important contract arrived with the Council for the Culture of Nuevo Leon, new suspicions came. In my workplace the quarrels disappeared to give rise to an ice law. My director kept trusting in the possibilities and appreciated the donations carried, but the others...

I asked God to make that contract possible, but I also sat with my grandmother. She found it harder and harder to

concentrate, and while she threw the cards she talked about the food, about the gossip in the neighborhood. The consultation was no longer serious, I think she no longer cared to prove to me anything. By then I had noticed that the times are not determined by a coconut or a snail, time is woven into a larger dimension. In one of the many interviews I said to the person in charge: "Why me? I have seen musicians there who don't even play maracas, dancers with two left feet and go on as if nothing happened. How do these people arrive and stay? Who makes things easier for them?"

That year the Ministry of Culture had created an artistic contracting company. If an artist, writer or worker of the Cuban culture had a contract in any other country, he or she joined, and when handing out his or her documentation and declaring the payment he or she received by contract abroad, he or she was assigned a fee to pay. Monthly one had to deposit an agreed amount that would go to the coffers of the Ministry of Culture. My contract was for two months to teach Scenic Oral Narration workshops in popular colonies and I left with a month permit. My friend Adriana had rented a tiny apartment for me, it was a room and a bathroom. In that room she placed a stove, and on my first Christmas in Mexico, she cooked a stuffed chicken. The turkey would come many years later.

I started working with devotion. I requested an extension of my permit, but my director was traveling and in Cuba the process did not work with speed. Then I kept working and made my papers available to the hiring company. I sent a letter to the manager and my mother paid the contributions to the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba; she delivered reports which I sent to her for my workplace and I continued paying contributions to a company that did not answer me. In that second month, my mother is told that

they will not receive any contribution because I was a deserter, I had stayed abroad.

This is a fragment of the letter they sent: “they explained to me by phone that in the Department of Immigration and Foreign Affairs (DIE by its acronym in Spanish) of Cuba, it was considered that Belkys Pulido had stayed in Mexico. The Minister of Culture has already made the letter to the DIE to request her visa and to be considered an independent artist...”

The official who led the hiring company had disappeared with everyone’s money. In my workplace, in the absence of my director, the second in command sent a letter to the Ministry and said that I had not returned, had left the country and the news stirred me. But, in addition, my boyfriend with whom I had been going out for five years, told me by phone: “Look at the distance, I am alone here and you are there. We better stay apart, you in yours, me in mine. I do not want someone who is neither here nor there, better this way, each one its own way and, by the way, Nelson says that one day he will visit you there. He became holy, remember? He says that he was already on the raft, all burnt by the sun, and he sees a little boat and begins to shout: ‘Hel(p), hel(p), hel(p) me!’, and he felt he was already in Florida when he sees the Cuban flag and a guy laughing out loud says to him: ‘Shut up, mate, you are in Matanzas’. And he, who will try again, when released. Yesterday I went to see him, that guy is amazing, what a willpower...and well, you already know...go and one day I regret it, but bye”. And I stay with the phone in my hand and my feet in the air. Only my parents for protection.

The workshops I taught were very well guided and I obtained results. I was interviewed by local newspapers. I started collaborating with *El Financiero* and my adaptation problems were less.

The neighborhood Garza Nieto is a marginal neighborhood, borders with streets where prostitution is exercised. The wooden little houses, even with dirt floor, show the spirit of many families to have a roof, but they have not had opportunities. Children from there accompanied me in the classroom which was assigned to me by the National System for the Integral Development of the Family (DIF by its acronym in Spanish). They recognized in literature, a universe that enriched their souls and gave them hope. We used to read, to interpret, children aged six to twelve stopped watching afternoon shows in order to come to learn the art of storytelling. When at the end of fifteen days we had a show set up, we showed up in the streets of the neighborhood for families. It was a wonderful period and we chose a street close to the tolerance zone to do there La Calle de los Cuentos (Street of the Tales); the children were interviewed by the press. They were recognized. They narrated in libraries, in schools, in the city theater and they attended several events. Those children were the extension of my Cuban family.

I began sending letters to the Ministry of Culture and those responsible. In my Cuban workplace they should've waited for a time limit and they did not do it. Immediately, my position was occupied. I kept writing and the phone calls to my parents were filled with mutual despair. I told my mother that I would be the first Cuban to return to Cuba on a raft. I spent two years in a kind of immigration limbo. On the Mexican side everything was fine, but on the Cuban side, not.

They tell me that there is another official in charge of the hiring and I am writing him a letter. They summon me. I expected a clarification, but this man questioned the tone of my writing. He waved his arms as he assimilated every step on the carpet of the place: "I am not to blame! I do not

know who are you. This is not my business, this is a dead dog”.

He did nothing. Two endless years watching the group of those who arrived and those who never returned pass by. Of those who crossed to the United States to never look back. Of those who got married for interest, of those who gave birth for a document. Of those who entered as musicians without knowing how to play even the conga drums. I listened to the one who said that he would clean the bust of Jose Marti with his tongue if it was necessary in order to obtain his documents. The thing is that there are plenty of tongues...gossips (bad tongues) had stirred my journey.

One day I received the news that Haydée Arteaga, a legendary Cuban storyteller, was sending to my children’s group of narrators a recognition. On behalf of the Cuban consulate the vice-consul would come and deliver it in front of the entire community.

I began linking several projects at once. At the moment, despite being a foreigner, I was founder of the Mexican Association of Reading Promoters and representative of the Northeast Zone of the country. I had to maintain the network of teachers, cultural workers and storytellers who spread the taste for reading and who linked their work to the popular colonies.

The consulate sent its new acquisition, a vice consul of my age with a lot of spirit for working and an absolute conviction of what he should do. He gave the recognition to the children, said a few words and, hurriedly, told me that he was leaving for a party meeting.

“The party? – I said –, the same one that has not done anything for me?”. I told him everything that had happened to me in those years in Mexico. Without seeing my parents. Without stepping on my homeland, with a job that I loved and to which I could not return. I was sincere when I commented: “Two years in which I have learned to really

work. I no longer hide my research, I do not simulate to work, I am not surrounded by people who are and are not. I am the evidence of my creativity, but I want to have the right to hug my parents”.

Two years had been enough to recognize a professional rise in Mexico. The vice consul was surprised at how long the paperwork took. The unfairness of an arbitrary decision, clearly full of personal interests, and he promised to help me. I will never forget when two days later he arrived and said: “Come on because you’re leaving! Pick up, you’re leaving, but now”.

And two years of estrangement, adaptations. My children, the events, capitalism jumps me, I say: “And...what do I do with the contracts?”.

I flew to Cuba the next day and my parents’ hug opened my appetite. Something was rebuilt. My parents had their first color TV. I brought them everything they needed: clothes, shoes, soap, shampoo, deodorants, medicines. It was a trip of reencounter and farewells. Since that month my grandmother would not be the same. She was looking at the photos of my visit to the Pyramid of the Sun and suddenly she began to say inconsistencies, she stood up and began to spin. She looked like a broken doll. I screamed for help. My grandmother had suffered her first ischemia and her speech center would be affected forever.

The orishas, kings of darkness, had silenced her. In a whirlwind of words, her brain could not dominate the tongue and was caught in a new way of saying, that little by little, many years later, it was no longer understandable.

The Jose Maria Chacon y Calvo Research Center, where bad people, simulated specialists cohabited, sank. The project hung from department to department and the condemned house was left uninhabitable. I do not know where the ornaments and period furniture have gone. Everything disappeared. Even the members, only two

remain in Cuba. Those who traveled after me sought refuge in the countries they visited. They stained my papers, because in their thoughts was the personal escape.

The freedom of man lies in choosing where he will bury his bones. Those same people condemned me, but in their wickedness another path was built for my destiny.

I started a new period in which travels were a natural thing. Affiliated to the Ministry of Culture and working on Mexican soil, I focused on creating socio-cultural projects that involved the elderly. Grandparents are cabinets of history, they have in their memory a universe. There is no contest, letter of convocation or project which reminds them, at least as protagonists; there are few that exist and I decided to do a workshop to form a group that would help me.

The group was called Nomads of the Word and we traveled all over Nuevo Leon. The state has a reputation of tough and hard people, but I found excellent people, it is a magical state. We met in collaboration with DIF and we created an oral archive with the life stories of the grandparents who attended out workshop.

Grandfathers and grandmothers brought their memories, also physical, period objects, crafts of past centuries, ancient photos, and we organized shows with which they showed some talent: there were orators, violinists, writers and poets. Also folk dancers, guitarists...it was wonderful to see them in full function, showing a vitality that only applause summons.

We met with the grandparents from DIF Monterrey, in Sunday sessions. During the week we divided the work to cover Pesquería, Apodaca, Escobedo, Guadalupe and the most remote municipalities, such as Galeana, Linares, Iturbide, Allende, among others. We stayed three or four days depending on the place. I traveled alone. The other members of the group worked or studied and had their own calendar of activities. I dressed in mining boots, leotard and

overalls. I wore a bra that did not show my chest and looked through the windows of the bus to avoid any eye contact. Several times I traveled most of the journey alone with the driver. But I always carried the blessing of Queta.

Queta was my landlady. I rented an apartment on the top of her house. She is Christian and always acts as such. Every time I traveled far away, she would take me by the hand and prayed. The feeling that tucked me in was similar to when I went to pick up my grandmother Tomasa. My wheelchair grandmother, her arms full of strength to praise, and a nameless emotion filled me up.

I knew that the spiritual part that makes us up has nothing to do with something external, created by men. The spirit that dwells in us has a voice and a cuirass. There is no blood that cleanses evil, nor casserole with bones to build prosperity, one makes the path with the help of the Supreme. When we put our life in his hands, he impulses, pushes, heighten.

On those trips I stayed wherever I could. I remember with gratitude those in charge of Galeana, Iturbide and Linares, who struggled to support their grandparents, but others, being towns very far from the city, had no conditions for visitors. For example, in Doctor Arroyo, the restaurant of the place, two rooms for truckers who made their trip at dawn, and any sporadic visitor, like me, shared space. There was a bathroom in the middle of a huge patio, a wooden construction with a canvas as a door. They also had a latrine.

With the thirty-and-something degrees of regulatory temperature, I locked myself in the dirt floor room, I did not open the window. I was wet in sweat. I did not bathe during the three days of the workshop. I urinated in plastic bottles, defecated in bags. I waited for dawn and walked to DIF. On the way the donkeys brayed, the roosters sang and the adobe of the houses improvised a carnival of alebrijes. I was very

patient in those days, martyrdom was guaranteed and also the check for work.

In the bathroom of DIF I used to wash myself very quick before grandfathers and grandmothers arrived. My nervous anorexia returned. The project “Y sigue la cana dando” (*and the white hair continues*) reached several municipalities. Just like the latrine, I got to know bathrooms where I had to go like if I were Super Mario: jumping obstacles of rooms under construction. Boards over the vacuum, removable doors. The food was so spicy and greasy that even my sense of smell rejected it; during those days I fed on yogurt and pancakes.

The pancake assured me memories of Cuba. There was a man over there who stole the factory’s pancakes and sold them in one peso. His wife had a lover and the lover made fun of the cuckold by calling him Pancracio. Through the fence of the backyard the lover climbed as a Romeo in order to fall into Carmela’s arms, and in the neighborhood they were betting on whether Pancracio would arrive or not. Of course he came one day earlier than usual, and the lover flew the barbed fence while shouting: “Don’t do this to me, Pancracio!”. They were never friends, but peace reigned, apparently, after there was a tacit agreement in the schedules of husband and lover.

On one of those trips I felt a stinger. At dawn of any morning I woke up with a lot of itching on the right side of my stomach. I had a huge rash and it was stinging me. The welts got their schedules. For weeks, months, it itched after the bath and when sweating, the rest of the time it left me alone. In Cuba I visited a doctor, but since there was no indication of any hole, there was no much to do, he offered to make a small cut in the operating room and to investigate. My grandmother used to tell me about stingers that climb up to the heart and about unknown bugs that suck the soul, but I remembered the story of Horacio

Quiroga, *El almohadón de plumas*, and I was afraid of that eternal stinging that broke my composure, it poisoned me perhaps or it killed me little by little.

The worst thing about an itching is doubt, but I carried it for more than six months. Literature saves, but all the stories I had read scared me more. Until once, while on vacation, in the Caribbean heat, I scratched, and it came out: it was certainly a stinger, very thin, apparently encapsulated and poisoning. The wicked had brought me a lot of fear and, to rest my ideas and the side, according to my grandmother's sentence, it would no longer reach my heart.

To the heart came other darts, solitudes and nostalgia. Also break-ups and unborn relationships that showed cultural clashes, male chauvinism, prejudices, in short, loves that are stored in the nothing or are stuck in the memory full of darns.

I continued working on several projects at the same time, I wrote little, I read a lot about promoting reading and children's literature. I saved up money and my mother came to visit me to get back her memory of Christmas. A friend bought a huge tree and, while I complaint, she covered it with lights, spheres, thousand dolls. For me Christmas was a crushed sphere. My aunt kept a suitcase full of spheres under the bed, and my other aunt, almost my age, splintered them to make a kind of frost that we deposited in the nail polish. She also sold it at school, hidden fake frost, in paper envelopes.

In Cuba, Christmas was banned because it was considered part of bourgeois life, in addition to being associated to religion. Everything religious was prohibited, virgins and saints were hidden. The altars to the African gods too. For me the word Christmas was associated to rich and poor, to snow that freezes, to many purchases and more. When I could have lived it, I did not enjoy it. When I had money to invite my mother to Monterrey, she cried in

front of the tree and opened her presents as the girl that she once was. Many people showed her their affections, the hill of gifts seemed endless to her innocent surprise.

After that, I lived eight Christmas with families who received me in their homes. The exquisite food and the warmth of home was not enough to awaken in me the spirit of Christmas. I felt that they got stressed, they ran loaded with shopping. Everything cost more at that time and I noticed in the family reunions the loneliness of the cooking mothers. All gathered, absorbed in their dishes, and the mothers running to serve them, given to the family spirit, to the joy which ignored the swelling of the legs, the sleeplessness of the previous night. Prodigal children who returned after months without calling. I questioned my own decision. And the boy in the manger did not quite convince me.

## ADULTHOOD

When you have grown up believing in *Madame Bovary* and the romance novels, you go through life with butterflies stuck in your temples. You are not normal, you can behave like a sage or an idiot. The universe of possible love fills our brain with imagery.

That is why, back in my fifteen years, I followed a ritual whose convocation caught the attention of all of us. At twelve o'clock at night, when we would turn fifteen years, we had to take a mirror in the dark. To part our hair in the middle and then brush our mane half and half. Twelve times, at twelve o'clock at night, in complete darkness and in the mirror...we would see the face of our future husband!

My hands were shaking. Perhaps the mosquito net scared away mosquitoes and caught dreams, because nothing was seen. I combed and combed, I was half bald because of so

much combing, but in the mirror I did not even see my shadow. However, that night I dreamed or made up a dream, who knows.

A man with straight hair was smiling. He looked at me, smiled. He walked towards me, his perfect teeth smiled. He wore glasses. I had seen him!, it was great. My future husband would be a reader like me. Better, he would be a doctor as my mother wanted. Smart, confident, his myopia would be from studying so much. He burned his eyelashes and he showed his good character with that good-natured smile. Ah!, and his straight hair like the boys in the movies that they shake it and it goes and comes back, they shake it and they keep their hairdo just the same, they are so handsome on TV.

After so many Christmas, the search for that image seemed fruitless... when it happened. He was a member of the family that welcomed me in Monterrey, but he lived in Mexico City. Oblivious to readings, cultural projects and absent from all sensibilities, he was the exact duplicate of that image in the dream. It had to be him! I had sought for perfection, empathy, nobility and love, but it did not come and now...the straight hair, eyeglasses, the smile; well...he had crooked teeth, but maybe I did not see him well in that dream from my fifteen years. Nothing is perfect, I told myself when colliding with the evident disproportion of his teeth and something worse: he was not a doctor, not even a laboratory technician, he was an accountant.

I concluded my contracts in Monterrey. I said goodbye to the groups of grandparents and my children from La Garza Nieto. I felt again anxious to leave, but the spell of my fifteen years showed a panorama with love. I believed so. I loaded boxes and boxes of books, I sent everything by parcel and decided to leave my stability to go to the city. He assured me a castle of letters and numbers. Would that have a fundament? Boyfriend.

As I was closing my projects, he showed several falsehoods. Almost childish things that I let go in the spirit of eternal hope. Was it worth leaving my professional life on the precipice? His entire family got involved, they had known me for six years. I was introduced to new members and he questioned me the way I dressed, the hairs on my arms, my nail polish, but I smiled, gullible.

I traveled to the city and we rented an apartment. I calculated my savings and took over the purchase of the household appliances. I let go of every last penny and trusted. Within a week, the signs became apparent contradictions. He drank; I hate alcohol. Every weekend he arranged meetings with his friends in a bar or disco, where you cannot speak. I felt that accompanying him to those places was like someone taking the pet for a walk. I did not understand how everyone stood behind a chain so that two orangutans raised the selection finger. They would always let us in quickly and he smiled: "It is because we are both white", he commented, smiling with his crooked teeth.

I come from a country where color neither pushes nor limits. I could not understand.

One day, watching a movie in which Palomo, a Mexican actor, disguises himself as a woman and runs his fingers through his thin stockings, he had an erection. I asked him and he evaded it. since then a beast was activated. His apparent apathy turned into verbal aggression. I prepared horrendous eggs at breakfast, her mom washed better his white T-shirts, I wasted too much toilet paper. "You have a runny nose all the time, the city is not good for you. I am going to sit with so-and-so in the car because he is embarrassed talking in front of you. Why do Cuban women not shave their arms? You shouldn't have hair anywhere...", he had a very bad nature and a Holy Inquisition mood.

I looked for a job and did all the housework, but I felt a shameful loneliness. A rudder bump can lead to self-destruction and my ship had run aground. I crashed into the reefs, head first.

I called Queta, I leaned on my friends. she recommended me to read the Bible, she thought it was a matter of vanity. I thought I was superior, that had to be. I was not being a good wife, I did not want to lower my head. I endured. Without intimacy and with many conflicts, a question came to me: where was my other self?

One afternoon I visited his mother to tell her. I spoke to his father, I insisted them: "You know me well". We were deep in a talk about marriage and motherhood, when the phone rang and it was a call from Monterrey. My parents had had an accident. Both were in intensive care and with a reserved prognosis. My aunts were waiting for me. I had no money, nor job, and this man said there were no flights. Nor money. It was convenient to wait. My friend from Monterrey paid down what was needed and immediately sent me the reservation number. At a bad time, my worst nightmare, made man, did not want to be there. I traveled to Cuba.

La Benéfica is a hospital that belonged to the Spanish people living in Cuba. In 1990 they remodeled it and rose it imposing, majestic, but in 2000 it was no longer. The rapine, the need and a lousy administration had left the building in poor condition. The elevators did not work, the corridors had no light bulbs. The windows that formerly displayed their glass shutters were now hollowed out, smiling into the void. The semi-darkness of the rooms, the conditions of mattresses and stretchers were scary. I confess, I was scared.

Mommy had fractures in her hand, a deep hip injury, and a blow to the head that left her unconscious. Daddy had an exposed bone wound. The hospital allowed them to stay

together in the same room, as an exception for my arrival. My father told me that it was a front-facing car: “In broad daylight, my daughter, but nobody saw. It seemed he wanted to kill us, it came front-facing and your mother flew. He fled. The guy ran away”.

My parents live in the same small town where I was born. Everything is known, but nobody wanted to speak.

The only thing worthwhile in that hospital were the doctors and nurses, they perspired vocation. But the elevators did not work. There was no electric light nor water in the bathrooms. Several rooms were empty, discarded, dark as an empty memory.

My parents' healings were a painful sight. To chase away the pain, my father began to smoke again, but being diabetic, this delayed the possibility of healing. My mother was subjected to a cold-blooded refracture. There is no daughter's heart that can tolerate something like that, indescribable. While my mother prevailed over her pains, she suffered the return of my father to vice. The nicotine formed on the immense wound of the leg, a whitish fluff.

The entire Cuban family mobilized. Some stayed in the hospital while the aunts cooked in order to bring food, because the local food was unpalatable.

When my father gave up cigarette, the wound took on a light pink and it began to heal, but measures would have to be taken because of the depth, they would make a flap. It is a technique in which you open like a window on healthy skin and stick it to the exposed wound. The skin multiplies, it grows. That time I went to the operating room. The nurse on duty was nowhere to be found and the anesthesiologist asked me to assist them. I know this sounds exaggerated, unreal, but it was so: the orthopedic and anesthesiologist were alone in an operating room. There was no air conditioning and my father was operated in front of a fan

that made the environment less hot, but, of course, we ran all the dangers of an imminent infection.

I put the liquid on the surgeon's hands, there were no gloves, I was there. They did the same thing to my father's feet as seen in the images of Jesus: they crossed him with a nail to immobilize him. He must remain like that, half crucified, in excruciating pain, but it was a hope. When daddy returned from anesthesia, I thought he would have another heart attack, such was the pain! He asked to smoke and I said no. My father cried imprisoned by such anxiety that the anesthesiologist told me: "Give him a cigarette, damn it, he is going to get a heart attack!".

Everyone narrates about their parents good or bad things. Mine is a miracle. He lived for twenty-one days with his legs crossed. A nail traversed his feet. He could not turn his body ever. The pain was indescribable and with stoic patience he endured.

After met the deadline of weeks, we saw that it did not work. The flap did not attach. The skin did not return. The wound, like a shark's bite, was still showing its grimace. The grafts would begin. A total of fourteen.

A neighbor came to see us, he had overheard a conversation. The topic coincided, the time when they washed the car. The whispers of the beast that ran over him. We had him, even though it remained crouched. They say he spitted out: "I centered them!", I asked and looked for all ways of justice so that they would get to him. The officer who stopped him said he was trembling, he looked like the vermin he is. Although we all knew about his predilection for alcohol, because weeks had passed, his drunkenness could not be proved. Perhaps under the influence of alcohol he did not see them in broad daylight. Maybe the change in direction was carrying the full weight of his complexes and he no longer said: "I centered them!", but in the car evidence was found and he confessed: "That at twelve

twenty in the day he fell asleep...”. They gave him an absurd sentence and he would be on a farm working. We know that he was on the street, as if nothing. He did not work, and soon we saw him driving. Turns out he was the nephew of a colonel in the Home Office and that exonerated him. That guy with the gun in the theatre was his brother.

I have in my forehead the strength of my father, his temperance to endure the martyrdom of those days. I carry with me the screams of my mother. I know like nobody what a doctor is capable of doing in Cuba and how badly they eat, the lousy of their salary. Their total vocation. I saw the decadence in the hospital, the withered mood of the people and the blossoming evil.

I returned to Mexico when my mother was walking with the help of a cane. I immediately got a contract with the Alfaguara publishing house, I was determined to support my parents and I told the accountant that we couldn't continue. He was offended, he threatened to leave and leave me with a mattress on the floor, he would leave me like a bitch. He went to his parents' house, he crouched down. Vermin with pants always know how to wait.

I was hired to give a workshop at the Sor Juana Forum University, and this guy watched over the opportunity. He came with a locksmith and took everything, including the light bulbs on the ceiling. He only left the mattress as promised. I confess that I did not expect so much evil because he belonged to a known family, because I had spoken to its members throughout the process. But at that moment the family opted for him and his version: the one who wanted to go out every weekend was me. I demanded him a life that he could not give me. That is what he said and they believed him, because the lover of the night clubs was not me. The one who drank was not me. I imagine that

each family nucleus covers up, if it wants, the vileness. I fell into a damaging depression, but my job saved me.

With the help of a family from the building, we placed two light bulbs. I thanked them and what they told me corroborated my pathetic situation: “This could have been domestic violence, an immature man who did not want to grow up”.

And that same afternoon I bought the mattress base and a landline phone. I could not comment on any of this to my parents, who already in themselves were carrying enough discomfort. I started working at two universities. Nothing even close to what I earned in Monterrey, now I was paid 78 pesos an hour. I had to pay the rent, the transfers, the books, something to eat!, and I got to teach seven subjects related to my career. I prepared classes. I graded. I only spent on books, I went to work with the same two changes of clothes. At the University of Cuautitlán Izcalli we shared, students and teachers, an educational platform for evaluations, projects and assignments, and messages began arriving making fun of my appearance. “Poor-teacher” called me some student vomiting rancor.

I asked God why so many misfortunes happened to me. I blamed him, I thought that an omnipresent God should be forgiving, but I don't know which sins I was paying. He could not be the God of love if he was condemning me to suffer loneliness and heartbreak. They were very difficult months, a year in total solitude, but, as always, work heals.

I used to go to the city on Saturdays to study at the Library of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). In order not to spend more money than I could, I only carried in my wallet for the transport and nothing else. I ate on my way back and kept on dressing as a bricklayer. The wide clothes, the thick boots, the face without makeup and I never had problems. At least that way camouflaged, and if I did not open my mouth, I did not attract attention.

I had the possibility of returning to Monterrey, but my foolishness made me believe that I could demonstrate my strength, the mettle of my femininity. Sitting on the floor of the empty room, I asked God what I had done wrong. I asked for mercy to continue enduring. I asked him to have compassion on me, because I couldn't take it anymore. And I decided that, in the holidays in August, as soon as the courses ended, I would close contracts and return to Cuba. My parents were already well and I just wanted to close my eyes and forget that I ever dreamed about a better life.

As an extension of work, I took the responsibility of uniting a group of students who needed to perform their social service and I trained them as stage oral narrators. We had hours in the afternoons that the authorities of the university did not pay me, and in the facilities of the place we did exercises of body expression, breathing, voice. But, most importantly, we worked on the stories montage to take them to the different centers of the municipality; they asked us to introduce ourselves to the groups of children who attended the psychology consultations or their workshops, and we also went to primary schools in the area. I am sure that this experience was beneficial for everyone.

In my case, I was able to recover from sadness with occupational therapy and, for them, who were trying to grow as future journalists, it opened a path of self-recognition, of disinhibition. I never pondered that I spent so many months doing this without receiving a cent, such was my dedication to work. There was a need to rebuild myself.

That Christmas I returned to Monterrey on a short visit. I went to see my kids in the old workshop who had suffered the disappearance of the cultural projects that I started. With each change of administration or of authority, cultural work was transformed or frozen or came to nullity.

I went back to sit at the tables of others, thanked the solidarity of my best friend who had to deal with a paralyzing pain. I had decided to return to Cuba, at least there was the family and the nearby sea.

Many times, when I went through bad times, I imagined being on the pier. The infinite face of the sea always frothed a smile. The sea also relieves, and although my professional growth would stagnate, everything was familiar there. Here, being completely alone, the estrangement was daily. Even the smells of the food were privative because the grease made me sick, I didn't eat tacos, Mexican rice, mole, all the delicacies were off limits. I kept eating poorly and little, I worked a lot. The emotional consumption, and also the physical, left evidence again.

At that time I had plenty of good friends. Mexico has a colorful bounce that expands into stretched hands, in hugs that cuddle, in angels that protect. My sister friend from Monterrey did not abandon me at that time. I remember watching together *The Diary of Bridget Jones* movie, and talking about loneliness, the absence of good life partners, domestic violence as a reality. It was a sad afternoon.

I was never abandoned by the advice and black humor of Jesus Vera, my faithful friend who bore the responsibility of his five children, his wife and my depressing spirit: "Like a daughter studying in France – he said to me –, only headaches".

My friends laughed to transmit to me a glimpse of happiness, but inside me there was a sick resentment. I had guilt and guilt is carried like a brick saddlebag. The guilt is carried and one gets used to it, but the resentment corrodes.

In April 2001, a student from the Journalism faculty told me:

-I'm going to give a rock concert, I want you to join us.

-I don't like rock – I said.

But Sundays of sad movies had my head puzzled. I knew it was necessary to distract myself, to break my routines.

-Don't take any chances on public transport, an uncle of mine will pick you up. I want you two to meet, you two are a lot alike.

-Is he maybe a cookie with weevils? – that is what we call married men in Cuba who pretend divorces, they cause problems.

The student laughed and we agreed to meet at a certain time. His farewell reassured me:

-Don't worry, there is no hidden intention. He will pick you up and I know you will have a good conversation, you two are alike.

When the man arrived, I remember his silhouette, blurred by the poor lighting in the parking lot. I was struck by his concentrated, silent attitude. He opened the car door and greeted me shaking my hand, that seemed fine to me. I have never been able to explain it, but I do not like hugs. The talks and speculations about Cuban women in Mexico border on the disrespectful. The first questions in talks with strangers were about: is it true that they give themselves for a lipstick, thin stockings, a soft drink? How did you get here? Are you a dancer? There are many respectable Cuban dancers, but the question is not about that and it carries restlessness. I walked through Mexico looking for the strength of the subtext.

He had a sad look. We talked on our way to the concert. I no longer believed in dreams reflected in mirrors, but when I arrived at the bar I realized that this taciturn man was wearing glasses and I thought that I would listen to a little song, have a drink and leave with the excuse of the grades, the preparation of classes, you see, I am a “poor-teacher” and I suffer...that way I would avoid any chance to

the girl of the spells. That stupid girl who fell prey to her own invention.

We certainly heard a song. He didn't drink, neither did I. Hard rock contradicted his and my sadness. We left the concert at the second song. The venue buzzing with beers topped with squeaky guitars scared us away. We stayed at the door of the place and talked later in a nearby cafeteria. He was divorced, and when he was trusting the presence of a new love, she died in a car accident, precisely on Christmas. He was reading and writing about the events of death, and the writing allowed him to wash his mind of anxieties, but the solitude there continued like a catrina with a happy hat. In the face of his pain, mine was less. I verified that one observes the problems from the nose, lifting the ego with a jump, but in this micro-universe the other leads us to the presence of the Other. Recognizing ourselves fallible, imperfect and disoriented, we must look for more than that upturned tip of the nose to see the battle of the neighbor.

From that day on we used to meet daily. At our meal times we shared veggie burgers, chicken salads, and one day I dared with the tacos al pastor. The combination of meat, coriander and onion uncovered an exquisite mystery on the palate. How could I do without that flavor? And I learned about the huitlacoche tacos, the cochinita pibil, the marinated salted meat. Sometimes I taught my classes at a university all morning. I had two hours for eating and from there I traveled to the other. During that time we would meet to share our readings and food. He is an architect and we were building a bridge without knowing it. When I did not have to grade or prepare my classes, we would meet to talk. It was always in my apartment, sitting on the empty floor in the living room. "Japanese style", we said and we would talk for hours. He is Christian and he answered my usual question "why?". He helped me formulate another question if I dared to question God: "What for?".

When my life changed that question, it drew a very different path. It is easy for us to place the blame on others. Irresponsibly we place the forges of bad decisions in a Spirit, we lighten the burden, but we keep on carving an existence of rocks. We call random our destiny and the part that twists our way, but, what about us? There is no random in a purposeful life.

After several months we became boyfriend and girlfriend. I met his family. It was very large, and the way of gathering around the parents reminded me of the Cuban family.

It was a mother's day, a May of homages, and my mother-in-law called me "daughter". I thought it was a formality, but no. She was a light, she had a very beautiful life story, plus her eyes looked straight ahead and augured verticality. She cared for everyone, and with the music of a trio she hummed a song. The father recorded every family reunion since they were married. When domestic cinema came out in black and white and without sound, he already recorded, so her wedding was also in that family ark where each event was reviewed by the eye of his camera.

He also kept the newspaper notes that talked about the wedding of twin sisters and twin brothers. He and his brother married two sisters. Although they were not twins, they really looked as if they were. My father-in-law was very creative and had a magic room, as my dad. If you gave him a piece of plastic, from his hands would sprout a lamp, a photo frame, a flower. My future husband had many brothers and sisters, so family events gave away a carnival of spirits, moods and customs.

In November 2002 we were married at the Cuban embassy. My in-laws and Jesus were our witnesses. The consul read the required documents, but he was surprised when my husband asked for a copy of the articles of the Cuban Constitution which spoke of the rights of men and women. "In the history of the embassy, no one has paid

attention to this document”, said the Consul, and they became good friends.

We went to Cuba in March 2003 so that my parents could get to know him. On the plane my husband felt discomfort in one eye. Something seemed to pierce it, like an eyelash, a fluff, something really uncomfortable that made the eye shed tears.

Upon arrival, at customs, you are guaranteed one of the most uncomfortable moments of Cubans. We were scrutinized, weighed, charged. Open all suitcases, because I had my Cuban passport and that is a signal, like the red rag for the bulls. They searched everything from us, they investigated about the tuna cans, my grandmother’s panties, they could not be more than three. About the Bible and the devotional books, about the coffee. After that, and although we were not carrying household appliances, we had to pay in the currency “cuc”, a rare thing that is equivalent to the dollar, but only circulates in Cuba. If, due to forgetfulness or negligence, you travel to any part of the world with a “cuc”, you will not be able to buy anything, nor exchange it. Its exchange rate is always comparable to the price of the dollar worldwide, but this coin only works in Cuba.

When you arrive at the airport you have to go to the foreign exchange bureau, windows where they receive the dollar or the Mexican peso and exchange it for this currency that only circulates in Cuba, but which is subject to a twelve percent tax. So you take something there and they exchange it for less than what its value represents.

My family recognized a good man. He did not have to make an effort, he fit in the little house like another member, but the next day we had to go to the hospital because the eye discomfort did not improve. They did several tests on him and sent him to Dr. Mockey, an eminence in eye operations. Certainly, he had injured his cornea in a dangerous way, but the worst thing is that he

had been wearing contact lenses for years and both corneas were very injured. All this, increased by keratoconus, which is a malformation of the cornea that makes it sharp-pointed like a pyramid and, since it is not round, the contact lens lacerates it.

The doctor suggested us an operation immediately. At least the most injured eye had to be operated. In Cuba we are aware of the importance of donating organs, so its cornea bank was ready to offer him a healthy one. We accepted immediately, payment would be made at the end. The procedures were shown step by step. On the day of the operation we were gathered with a group of Cubans, the only foreigner was him. He was surprised that the changing of clothes to his hospital gown had to be done by more than fourteen people in one same bathroom without light. I was very embarrassed; for Cubans that is normal. They were led into a room where we could no longer be, and a woman asked me if the foreigner was my relative. I replied that he was my husband. Another one said with an angry face:

-If he is a foreigner, surely he will have preferential treatment, hmm!

I turned around towards the gossiper and yelled at her in order to reach everyone's ears:

-The only different treatment is the payment! You all undergo any operation for free, to us, we are charged in dollars, but if you noticed, everyone gets undressed equally.

My mother says that life has made me a mangrove, as inhospitable. Each one is a mangrove, carries its share of salt and mosquitoes with it. And yes.

We were called to a room where, supposedly, the patient's companions are called depending when the patients are operated. An aunt accompanied me, we did not move from the place. Several times we asked the receptionist and she always answered: "Not yet, I already told you that I would inform you".

A long time passed and we were left almost alone. I decided to go upstairs to find out. They have several very effective “surveillance” filters. I violated all. When I got to the room, I asked for my husband and a guy yelled at me: “Dear!, where were you?”.

I replied that, at the reception, waiting to be notified. My husband had been left alone, sitting on a chair, wearing a hospital gown and underpants. We never knew what happened, but knowing the mood of the Cuban receptionists and their eagerness for a mini-authority, I am sure that she enjoyed watching me wait, uninformed, in growing frustration.

We paid a little more than what we were offered, of course, after the operation. There was no need to wait another minute anymore. We went to the house. My mother had the food ready and another avatar started there, because we had to have gauze, hydrogen peroxide, swabs, plaster and none of that was in the pharmacy nor at home. At the hospital they gave us some gauze for eye cleaning, and we boiled the water in a brass jug. When we uncovered his eye for the first checkup, a party happened. My husband said to me: “Now I can see you”.

My mother and I cried, he looked so happy. The doctor who operated him is an eminence and his operation is goldsmithing. He sews the cornea by hand, the stitches are visible to the naked eye and are perfect. He is a God’s messenger. So good was the result of the first operation that, after a month, my husband asked him to have his other eye operated, but he suggested him to wait. The entire immune system worked to heal the first intervention, the result had been perfect; however, a second intervention so soon was very risky. But my husband told him not to lack faith. It always strikes me when a convinced man looks directly at another man. They agreed to do it in one more week.

They operated his second eye and it also worked out. Doing the transplant in Cuba, in addition with the magnificent doctor Mockey, was a blessing, but things for healing were scarce. Boiled water could not do its job well and a slight infection began to develop in the second eye. My mother-in-law phoned him and said to him that she would have him here among cotton. In addition to her manifest love, it was true that here we would find everything necessary to clear the infection and regain vision. We returned to Mexico.

Everything went well, but with some symptoms very unknown to me: we found out that I was pregnant. I was thirty-eight years old and a certainty, the leaf of the tree does not move without the will of God. I no longer questioned it, there was no force capable of weaving destinies, conforming existences. My mother had suffered her pregnancy, mine would not have to be. But it was.

Until recently I learned that what I suffered has a diagnosis. When I had the ultrasound done and we were given the news of the pregnancy, six weeks had already passed and the certainty was a trigger because the vomiting was constant; therefore, I did not eat and dehydration ensued. My fatigue did not stop, my ears buzzed, the pressure dropped and what I ate did not even last fifteen minutes before I threw it up. Each scent was of an unbearable intensity. I did not go out because I detected every aroma, every stench, every perfume. I thought that Patrick Süskind, writer of the novel *The perfume*, must have been a woman in order to describe with such authenticity the way in which its protagonist perceives even the smallest aroma in the air. Today I already know that those symptoms are indicators of a disease: hyperemesis gravidarum. Some, like the princess of Kensington Palace, may pass it at rest, but not all of us belong to royalty.

Many women are hospitalized throughout their pregnancy and are at risk. I only thought about enduring, something that I learned throughout my life. Overcome, resist. I repeated: “It is going to pass”.

My mother-in-law helped me a lot, she cooked various dishes and came from her house, loaded with bowls and a very good will. “I do not want to disturb”, she said, and her embrace returned to me the soul to my body. My father-in-law kissed my cheek and always repeated: “It won’t be long”.

By the third month the symptoms disappeared and I began to eat better. I knew it would be a baby girl. My Mexican and Cuban family were happy. My mother-in-law started knitting and, like a little spider, filled our bed with gloves, hats, shoes, coats, vests, mittens. Her daughters said that they had never seen her so excited and I filled up with her child-proof advice, because she had ten.

My parents lived the pregnancy at a distance, I wrote them a lot and everything arrived to them by letters that sometimes took up to a month, but they were one after the other. We talked on the phone and every visit to the gynecologist filled the family with hope. The first ultrasounds were a party. Seeing the life inside me, that little face that I imagined, was indescribable. In December the doctor said: “The baby girl will be born in January, in the first weeks we will have her here, but I am going on vacation, I will leave the contact of another doctor. He will take care of it, or if you want me to do it, we can do a C-section, the baby girl is in sitting down position. If we leave it until she decides, there may be a complication. At your age you should not take risks”.

And we went to Patzcuaro to think. With almost nine months I walked the adorable streets of Michoacán and saw the blacksmiths in their perfect synchrony shaping silver. I

thought back to the times when I took my hammer and started opening my own path without a mold nor direction.

We decided to do the caesarean section and, while the doctor was opening me, my baby girl heard Psalm 23 in her parents' voices: "Your rod and Your staff, they comfort me".

She had very big eyes and looked straight ahead, there is a photo in which she seems to tell me a secret on the second day of birth. She is an enlightened being, full of spirituality.

I spent all the months of pregnancy without working. I read what discomfort allowed me, and when my first daughter was born, I began to study a lot about early stimulation, and I also wrote a novel for children. She was growing very awake and I never felt better accompanied. We have thousands of photos, videos, each small conquest made her a giant.

When she was a year old, I got pregnant again and the symptoms started again. The little girl could not understand her mother in a different condition than from her playmate, she did not enjoy her freedom. She wandered around the house and went back to bed to watch me lose weight, haggard, I imagine she could feel those sounds of vomit like a cruel enemy. She still did not talk much and one day, to get my attention, she bit me on the buttocks while I was lying down on the bed, demoralized, and in a silent scream she said to me: "Mommy, here I am!".

When the third month passed, everything changed and the cycle of accompanying my girl in her daily discoveries returned. I read to her many stories, we made drawings. She was discovering with joy the new words. We went out to the patio to listen to the tree and to the earth, to the domestic animals and ugly magpie. Her dad came from work to accompany us and his arrival was always a party.

In the afternoon, when he returned home, my girl forgot about me to dedicate every second of her attention to him. They were accomplices, with him she would devour the

plate. With him she danced. With him the best drawings: “Look, dad”. With him she could get muddy, gobble a mango and fill the walls with her juice. Take a walk in the air and extend the bath time and the bubbles. Dad was the carnival.

When our second little girl was born, another sun came out. She was very vivacious with huge eyes and brought with her the eternal spring to the house. She spoke very soon. She crawled with a very peculiar style and when she walked she looked like *Meñique*, that little hero from the story of Martiano, the one who wants to know everything.

My parents came to visit. Everyone asked me: “Why don’t they stay?”, but my parents do not conceive of any other place than the land where they were born. Their spaces and their times. After fifteen days of being here, my dad already wanted to return: “I already saw you, I already got to know the girls, I have things to do there and I know that you are fine. Stay a little longer with your mother, I will leave her here”.

He saw my little girl being born, he admired each of her fingers, her cheeks. My father is very direct: “She was not born ugly and black like you”.

And he returned. My mother spent six months with us, accompanying everyone, attentive and discreet. She missed Cuba a lot, she cried at night with that mixture of joy that brings having recovered the daughter lost in the distance, seeing the granddaughters, but longing for the company of her husband, also sisters and parents. The day she left, she told me: “Now I will live with my brain here and also there”.

My little girl was one year old and the other was two years old when my father had another heart attack. This one had been very severe and he was in intensive care. If he managed to pass it, he would undergo an open-heart surgery

and that would guarantee him more years of life. It was 2004, he was at the Cardiovascular hospital, where other times he had been treated. The doctor in charge, Pedro Roman, had been our family doctor.

This term referred to a care program that the government had designed to guarantee a doctor for certain blocks. A two-story house was built for them, upstairs the doctor lived with his family and downstairs was the office, all equipped. The cardiologist had served as a neighborhood doctor for many years. He started very young and specialized in Cardiovascular Medicine, he kept an eye on my father.

I left my Mexican family and took a plane immediately. The country's problems were still getting worse and I started writing a Diary. Any given day at this hospital included useless toilets clogged with excrement up to half a wall. Without water service, the nurses carried buckets on their shoulders to bathe the sick. The food was terrible, the one for the sick people, because the hospital had no cafeteria for the companions of patients. Although it is common that if the patient is in intensive or intermediate therapy, no companions of patients are allowed, our family was on duty around the clock in the hospital waiting room. In those days I wrote down: "The country is a crack. Every day has the opportunity to make the hole bigger. In the midst of illness, man had the vocation of another man. There is no new man. The man has worn out and asks for help so as not to jump into the void".

Days later my father recovered and he was transferred to the Amejeiras hospital. This is a hospital with better care and where they would perform the definitive operation. There the problems were different. The elevators did not work or only one worked, with the constant crowds, going down and up the stairs was already a natural matter. The doctors told me about the risks my father would take, they

explained the procedure to follow and placed him in a small room on the eleventh floor. Any negotiation was up the stairs and knowing my father alive, I did not care.

The food at this hospital was exceptional, it included meat, chicken, fish, and a variety of grains. The companion also had the right to eat there, and six women from Central Havana who acted as the owners of the hospital moved freely in the kitchen, were interviewing the newcomers. They interrogated me about my stay abroad. They introduced me to two Cuban women who were taking care of relatives and came from different countries. They served larger or smaller portions, depending on approval, and all of them slept in a hospital room. Folkloric and absurd like everything in Cuba. Of those days I wrote: "A doctor describes to me the emerging nurses: they are young people without souls. Look, that one finished high school and asked for his file. They wanted to put him in as an emerging teacher, but he said he had no vocation and they bombarded him with the 'battle of ideas'. If they want to get rid of military service, they can stick an injection or stand in a classroom, even if they do not know how to teach. They are provincial boys, semi-savages who wander until an opportunity like this falls on them".

I left my father alive, re-established. I walked along the boardwalk with my life in the palm of my hand. One never leaves completely; one takes away the corners, the wounds, the sap of things and learns to breathe where it doesn't smell like red guava. One gets up in the morning and learns to walk on asphalt instead of green land. One gets up and goes on, one goes back to that place where was born, strangely. A personal island is designed. Cultivates mangroves and in that tangle of roots the smoke from the copal, clouds its sight to be with another life.

I returned to Mexico when my father was out of danger. I live convinced that there is time for everything under the

sun. The word says it: “Time to sow and time to reap”. My father bragged to everyone: “My daughter left her family in Mexico and came to help me. As a daughter there is none”.

I gave up my professional life in order to give myself to the family. Some people dream about an active professional life. I had it, but I had not lived through marriage nor birth nor nurturing. I gave myself up to the study on early stimulation. I looked after the house while my husband went about working for a living. My girls grew up with me, each fever, each new tooth, each second, I did not want to lose it.

I enrolled them, the oldest in fourth grade and the youngest in first grade of primary school. The traditional, boring school, made for the unifying cote, I could not afford it and I began to educate them at home. To certify their primary there was a way: the National Institute for the Education of Adults (INEA by its acronym in Spanish).

Every school subject was new to me. I studied to teach them, and especially the history of Mexico meant a long time of reading and videos. I tried to instill them that study is a necessity, not an obligation. The classroom is a laboratory, not a prison. Each question opens a door and student and teacher go through the door of knowledge together.

On February 11, 2012 my witch grandmother passed away. The saints, the pot, the altar, became silent. My mother says that they took her to the pantheon under a bright sun and, as they lowered the coffin, a storm broke out that washed away all the tears, and then, in those minimum minutes of farewell, the sun rose again as an omen. I miss her. That day I wrote: “Grandma left last night. Two days before, her tongue, dry as a broken branch, looked for a grotto on the palate. Grandmother was filled with silences. ‘The Blood looks like fire’ and embraces life and consumes

it. One merges with each farewell. With the absences, the death throws a bundle of memories at our necks”.

I have come to a point along the way where I stop to wonder what I could have done better. But looking back freezes momentum and the past doesn't allow any change. I believe that a woman who assumes her real independence is the one who builds the personal path in sections. Grab a chisel, hammer and open the stone. Perhaps there are those who work early or who study, but if you let yourself sink into nothing, the Nothing will take over you.

Today I sometimes take the feather duster and sometimes I write articles or literary essays. The one I am does not annul the one I was. I believe that each being has its battles and, at the end of the road, the best battle is the one that you face by the side of your family:

I am the granddaughter of...

I am the daughter of...

I am the mother of...

I am the wife of...

I am...

But in that “I am” there are avalanches and backwaters, there is a furrow in the way. You are always for someone somewhere: “Do not get lost from you, you are unique and there is no one who is repeated”. In this phrase from my grandmother lies all certainty...it takes you many years to find your home, not the legacy of your parents nor the inheritance of grandfather, but the one that you build within yourself and with the Other, your intimate home.

You go down the path of your life looking for yourself in others and in every circumstance, but the miracle is in your will, in the character. When you manage to locate yourself,

then the geographical space is blurred. You are aware that you carry a passport from the place where you were born. You get there and find your things in the same place. Must be mom who won't let you go at all. Dad shows you the childhood toy, the jug with your misspelled name and your daughters use your dolls and steal your parents.

The maternal grandfather is one hundred years old and he cultivates the land. He tells you: "We may never see each other again". He grabs the broom and goes to sweep the patio. Grandfather knows that you must scare the ideas at a clean-up.

A week later, you leave the island and return to see the volcanoes with amazed eyes. Always the strangeness with which you also look at the sea, because this is not Merida and there is no pier. You lived a prelude to get there. Something in me is activated by the roads, I never see a ceiling, a room, a belonging as an affectional attachment. People make a place indifferent or not. For me, the places I love are defined by people, and absences erase me from the place. One is not a house. Someone is not a place. No one is the one who does not have a place to be remembered.

If you want to visualize the paths of this autobiography, you will see that it is a tangle. There is only one life to paint inklings. You may feel the emptiness of the elementary when you read it, but there is no small nor great life. There is life, nothing else, and each one has to do the mending. I could have done other things. I was reborn. God transformed me. I am...I lower my head at the memory of my people. I am for them and for you, that when you read you revive my dead.

"There is no path without root, family roads are upholstered with bones."

Mexico City, January 12, 2018.