

(featured at the Phoenix Readings, November 1996)

Language of the Self

“True loss is for him whose days have been spent in utter ignorance of his self.”

—Bahá'u'lláh, *The Hidden Words*

In the graveyard walking is not easy. There are no smooth surfaces in the highlands. In *San Cristóbal* the streets are cobbled—the stones flesh-colored like the upturned soles of feet—and the houses sag. Telephone poles lean into the wind and listen.

This is not the city. This is an early morning in the village of San Juan Chamula. Mist rises off peaks and in the graveyard of the burned out church, it rolls from waiting graves.

“The light is fantastic.” Clare snaps her camera. A man stumbles out of a cloud. “Damn. I almost missed it.”

“Where did he come from?” The air freezes my fingers into a hook around my water bottle. I’m not used to the altitude.

“I think he was sleeping in a grave,” Clare says.

His legs bow and wobble as he moves across an ocean of crosses and clumps of grass mottled with ribbons. He might have a bottle of *posh* under his poncho, or maybe he’s just rubbing his stomach.

Behind us, music—squeak of strings and the harmonious squeeze of a concertina—dissolves in the distance. It’s early. I remember reading the words of Rigoberta Menchú:

...requests for marriage usually take place at four in the morning because most Indians leave home before five, and when they come home from work at six in the evening they’re usually busy with other things. It’s done at four in the morning so as not to cause too much

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*inconvenience and they leave when the dogs
start barking.*

Let me begin again. Clare stands in the sunlight looking at her hand, her fingers flexed wide. "It's incredible," she says.

I'm in the dark, in the doorway of the *talle*. A man presses his foot down in the bottom of a basket. Underneath, wet pulp flattens on the stones. He's making paper. He lifts the basket and the circular pattern of the weave remains there in a square of tan mush, flecked with the lavender of orchid petals and the small pinioned spines of leaves. Over my shoulder a wide face in a bas relief of brown paper whispers in Tzotzil: *the light, the light*. I am making a story.

Let me begin again.

Once, a small, filthy child in a cave of pepper tree branches held the black Labrador's bouncing teats—not knowing how they ached—amazed at their fullness. A squeal from the sunlight and she runs from the shade. Pails of water empty in the air—droplets streaming over her—then hit the ground with a slap, that sound only water can make as it raises puffs of dust.

We ran the vineyard rows, vines swelling around us, bees hiding under leaves. The ground was different from the gray dirt of the yard. The black mud sucked my toes down, drinking my steps. At the end of a row, I turned, saw my footprints fill with water then melt in the sunlight. The leaves held their breaths—accumulating a silence—behind them in the shade, a universe of grapes and bees humming in their orbit.

Let me begin again.

A lunar eclipse calls us. Hotel guests stand on the roof where ruffles of red tiles outline a patio. Fingers point. Lovers hug. Crack of fireworks in the air—smaller than the crack of gunfire—as Mayans launch their prayers toward God. A moth throws itself at the jelly jar of a light fixture.

I don't see the photo of the graveyard until we return to Los Angeles because I've spent the day in the streets of *San Cristóbal* chasing shades of meaning. Clare returns—exhausted, elated—finds me in the hotel room sunk in the

mattress, the flattened backs of books around me.

"Did you see the eclipse?" she asks as she removes her backpack.

I say no, even though I did.

"I watched it from the road." Film containers roll onto the bedspread. "I hitchhiked back to town, rode in the back of a pig truck," she says, her lashes wide as wings. My spine stiffens. It's dark. We're not supposed to be in the villages after dark.

"The light this morning was great. You should have come. I shot this guy in the graveyard at sunrise." She spins around the room, bumps the dresser, sends a guava tumbling under the bed.

We go to the *zocalo* for coffee and to check out another bookstore. Feather giants of clouds saunter across the dark sky, luminous and deep blue as they pass. The restaurants have come to life, breathing music and the dusty infusion of candlelight into the streets. The front door of the bookstore casts a yellow parallelogram onto the stone sidewalk.

"Here's something you can relate to," Clare says as she hands me a slim white book, *Sarcófagos* by Carlos Adolfo Gutiérrez Vidal. I'm not sure if she means I'm obsessed with death, or obsessed with verse, since this is a book of poetry. She smiles and moves on to a shelf of Mayan histories.

I open the pages and my eyes catch on a phrase, *la calle se bebe las palabras*—the street drinks words—and this is the book I must have. As we walk past the *indigenistas* asleep outside the cathedral, I hold this book in the warmth of my armpit. In the courtyard, a child wearing orange sandals kicks a skinny dog. The dog yelps. I'm agitated. In Spanish dog is *perro*. In Tzotzil it's *tzi*, pronounced with the teeth and tongue. The dog's tawny eyes look at me as it runs sideways in the dark.

Let me begin again. Many of the *indigenistas* asleep outside the cathedral are outcasts. They've been forced to leave their villages because they've upset the Mayan balance of life, usually by professing an evangelical faith. They come to the city of *San Cristóbal* to make a living selling whatever the tourists will buy, hand woven belts, wool ponchos, *zapatista* dolls. They stake out a section of sidewalk, roll out their

blankets, and live—from sun up to sun down—weaving, making, selling. At night they sleep in the *zocalo* or in the shanty town at the edge of *San Cristóbal*. Their children live with them, often roaming the block with black plastic bags on their arms, bags which are filled with tiny clay figures or macramé pens, *para uno peso*. This is a fact.

We walk by the green and blue bat design of a woven blanket, the heat of my armpit captured in the pages of my book. A family of Chamulans sleeps beneath a Coca Cola sign. Tomorrow, the sun will rise in a yellow blaze, amplified by the *flan* colored walls of the *San Nicolás Catedral*. They will have the morning light, then in the afternoon, the blessing of shade. I imagine a brown hand reaching for the rough edge of the billboard, finding it at daybreak the way I find my tongue sometimes on the edge of a just chipped tooth.

How would it be to live between the parenthesis of night in space no wider than my height? To know so perfectly the edge of the sidewalk—that silhouette of stone—as if it were my own signature? To lean against the terra cotta tiles and breastfeed, while the sidewalk is worn shiny from shoe leather and the oils of bare feet? The sparkle of a discarded gum wrapper could enfold the intimacy of a distant space, a counter over which the money was exchanged, an airport where the gum was purchased.

Now, I'm making a story.

Clare is annoyed with my lack of presence. "C'mon. Are we playing chess or what?" She waves at Julio to bring more cappuccino and tequila. The flickering light on the chess pieces stretches their shadows beyond the parquet of the board. In the far corner of the coffee house, stucco arches over a small stage where a five-man band plays American and French top forty. In that grotto the glint of electric guitars and belt buckles moves across the darkness with all the sheen of a velvet Elvis painting.

"You're in another world," Clare says as she takes my knight.

In the eclipse of memory I am in a cave with the small applause of leaves swimming the air above me, raining down shafts of light on my outstretched hand.

"You should have been with me this morning," Clare says, looking down at her chess pieces.

"You and I approach things differently."

"You don't approach them at all," she says as the band leaves the stage. In their baseball hats and surf T-shirts, they are indistinguishable from the tourists in the coffee house.

"That's not true." I rub the sweat from the side of her tequila glass. "There's an intimacy you know, an intimacy to space, no matter where you go." Clare focuses on my mouth as I speak. "I don't have a camera to capture what I want. I have words. My words already have things attached to them. Spaces." At a table far to the right, a woman laughs as she touches her husband's knee. "You want me to run out and find a story, but I've already got one. I remember every space of my home, every corner I ever hid in. Things keep doubling back for me. There's an elliptical quality to experience and memory."

"I disagree," she says. "I can't remember all those spaces. My parents moved a lot when I was small. We lived in more than thirty different houses."

"But perhaps that's why I write," I say. "I do remember."

"Perhaps that's why I photograph," she says, "I don't." Clare finishes her drink. A small drop of tequila leaves a yellow hyphen in the bottom of her glass. In the coffee house mingled laughter and conversations come to an end as the band takes the stage.

Let me begin again.

My cup makes a brown ring on the table. Clare stays to hear the band play and to wait for Julio's "last call," so she can photograph the lead singer. On the stage Spanish songs now swirl the air, stirring the cigarette smoke. The drummer yawns. On the *Calle Diego De Mazariegos* a dog raises its head from its paws and looks at the sky, waiting for the darkness to go gray. I stay in the street for a long time, drinking in the past, the way a long distance swimmer can't help but swallow a gasp of water.