FROM *NOISY BONES*

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Ars Poetica

I create from a place of desire. A desire to recuperate that which has been lost to me: family, history, and identity—a complete narrative often reading as incomplete. A creative place of examination, the poem, the performance, the picture-poem, the personal essay, is driven by a search for fragmented stories because the full story is not available. The many stories this place enfolds include the old Nahua concept of the human heart, the muscle that contains human knowledge. This human capacity for having "memory of the heart," an awareness driven by feeling, is highly valued. With the use of craft, what blossoms is an articulation in response to childhood, familial, social, and ancestral trauma. Having a mind of its own, the creative process has made me inquisitive amongst older and young family members, amongst elders, children and mentors outside of my family who may carry messages, all in dialogue with the creative project in progress. I am driven to ask and read about the different geographical places, times, eras, historical accounts, and information my ancestors have inhabited. When possible, I visit. This place of examination is not a place of concrete answers, but rather a place of healing, one made possible by the creative process.

I was eleven months old when my mother passed away. She hung herself from a tree in the backyard of our home while my three-year-old sister watched. I remember constantly asking my aunt the reason my mother died. She had been my mother's oldest sister. Never having had children with her husband, my aunt and uncle ended up adopting both my older sister and me. Old enough

to be our grandparents, they were simultaneously parental and ancestral elders in the greatest sense of the word. When I was four my maternal grandmother moved to our home in Santa Ana, California, the same house where our mother had passed. Her presence inspired many questions: How did she die? Why did she die? Why did she leave us? The older I grew, the more I asked my aunt, grandmother, and sister. Everyone in my family was convinced that I was still too young to understand, so they'd tell me it had been an accident. So I began to play make believe: maybe my mother is not dead, maybe she just left us and no one will admit it. Maybe one day she'll come back. I bet one day she'll pick me up from school like the other children. I'll recognize her in an instant. Her hair will be long to her waist, chestnut-brown, just like her eyes. Her body will speak to me, just like in the pictures.

During the winter holiday my mom's youngest sister visited with her husband and children. My oldest cousin, Jazmin, finally told me the truth. I was about nine or ten. She said it had not been my mother's fault because she was sick from depression. Two years later we got a phone call from Jazmin telling us that her mother, Aurora, had been taken to jail after a violent confrontation with the police. At the time my aunt had been dealing with her husband's emotionally abusive behavior while sustaining a full time job and raising four kids. Jazmin told us her mother woke up that morning acting unreasonable. She began preparing luggage, claiming she and the kids where moving to Mexico. She appeared like a stirring hurricane, her tone rapidly changed from aggression to calm. Jazmin called the police in fear. The police entered the front door: Aunt Aurora threw an open soda can at them and was immediately arrested. Word got around rapidly, and my grandfather's cousin told my aunt's husband that she needed a psychologist, not a judge. "Your wife is sick," he said. "She has mental illness, just like two of her sisters had. Just like one of my half-brothers who jumped off a bridge in Mexico decades

ago. What Aurora has runs in the family." My aunt's mental break down led her to visit a psychiatrist who diagnosed her with bipolar and schizophrenia mental disorders. She was told one of the possible factors for the disease was genetic. Hearing this as a twelve year old absolutely terrified me. I lived haunted by the idea that I had possibly inherited my mother's disease and that it would surface one day. I came to find that the disease that killed my mother was passed forward in the genes of my grandfather's family because several of his older and extended family members had committed suicide. What reverberated most was finding out that other families in the rancho also had dead and living relatives sick from various mental illnesses. This led me to speculate about the possible historical trauma experienced by our ancestors. What could have happened in *el rancho* that contributed to the development of so much mental illness? In one of my visits to el rancho while I was an undergraduate in college, my cousin handed me a book written by an elder from a neighboring town, a locally recognized non-academic historian who collected oral stories and documented accounts of the area's history. This small town, El Rancho Las Jicamas (Jicama, from the Nahua word Xicamatl, is a watery white yam native to the land, eaten as a fruit), also known as El Rancho by the few hundred who now live there and by those who consider it the homeland, is part of a large valley called Valle de Santiago, or El Valle de las Siete Luminarias (Valley of the Seven Luminaries). Located at the center of Mexico, in the state of Guanajuato, the valley is surrounded by seven volcanoes said to have risen out of the earth from a petition in our ancestors' prayers. They asked for mountains to rise in specific locations so they could pray closer to the star nations. Every one hundred and fifty-one years the seven active and inactive volcanoes surrounding the valley become aligned to the star consolation known as the Little Dipper. My grandmother says our family and ancestors have been living there since the beginning of time, and

I believe her. The elder's book came to me at a time I started asking questions about my mother's homeland. Captivated by the knowledge I was learning in my ethnic studies classes about the Spanish colonization in the Americas and finding out through my grandmother's accounts that El Rancho had been a Spanish hacienda controlled by a single family, I concluded that the commonality of mental disorders must have been part of the traumatic effects imposed by the violence of the hacienda system. The first chapter of the book, however, took me to a deeper place.

West of the volcano mountain where el rancho stands is the state of Michoacán, the indigenous land of the P'urhépecha peoples, known to have been a strong nation-state during pre-Spanish invasion. They were able to defend their territory from the spreading invasion of the Mexica-Aztec Empire in Central Mexico or Anahuac, the Nahuatl name for the land. About one hundred miles southeast of El Rancho is the land of Tenochtitlan, present day Mexico City, pre-Spanish capital city of the Mexica-Aztec nation. Our ancestors, the Chichimeca-Otomi peoples living in Jicamas, were slaves to the high and ruling classes of the Purepecha and Mexica-Aztec nations. They were used as slaves for labor and bodies for warfare. Eventually the territory came to be ruled by the Purepecha nation-state; places were re-named from their original Chichimeca names and given Purepecha ones. Yuriria, which means lake of blood, is the name of a large lake a couple miles north of el rancho. It is also the origin of my first name, Yuri, short for Yuriri, which means blood.

The collective historical trauma undergone by my ancestors is not limited to the Spanish invasion and invasions of other European nations. Violence against our bodies through force labor, removal, killings, and rape, as well as assaults against our language, land, and spiritual ways, began decades

before the coming of Europeans and Christianity. What does this have to do with the social, linguistic, cultural, and spiritual trauma that followed? What does all historical trauma against our land and ancestors have to do with the mental illnesses developed amongst the families of el rancho? What does it have to do with me? What does it have to do with *Noisy Bones* and the larger necessity to create an artistic space for documentation, understanding, and healing? May 1, 2007, Patricia Gonzales published an article on-line in Column of the Americas, titled "In the Spirit of the Ancestors: Reconciling Post Tribal Stress Disorder." She quotes Karina Walters who refers to historical trauma as a collective experience across generations and affirms, "Trauma is held personally and transmitted over generations. Thus, even family members who have not directly experienced the trauma can feel the effects of the event generations later. " What I see manifesting itself through my poetry in what Gloria E. Anzaldúa (1987) names La Facultad, "knowledge or memory of heart," pushing to articulate itself. Sometimes when seeking to record an old family story that takes place in the last century, the writing produces images that don't seem to fit or take place in the moment I imagine. Violent images that I don't consciously understand, usually having to do with mass numbers of people being executed, hung, or already dead, also occur in my dreams. Later when I awake, I write about them, sometimes they become part of a poem, sometimes they don't.

These images are not always violent. My first poem in *Noisy Bones* titled "Spiral Notes," for instance, began as a conversation with a "fossil seashell" I observed from behind a biology department glass display cabinet in the halls of the University of California, Riverside. The poem takes on the voice of the spiral shaped seashell and invokes food and food objects, "the grindstone, nuts, spices, and leaves" used by indigenous peoples in the Americas. It asks to acknowledge the mobility of indigenous peoples in the Americas centuries

before modern-day political borders, and it mentions the more specific traveling of men from el rancho that became contracted workers to the United States. I see that the poem is traveling in spirals, briefly explaining images and people from various eras speaking to me. Asking me to remember them and honor them.

Because of the effects of colonization, sometimes art is the only space we have for dialogue with our ancestors; how can I form a language for memory? How can I access the experiences lived by my ancestors? Are the effects of other indigenous languages, not original to my Chichimeca and Nahua ancestors, too strong? Have the effects of the Spanish and English languages been too severe that I can no longer articulate a faculty standing outside the historical or cultural context of those languages? As an artist, I believe I can form a space for that articulation to happen. As a Chichimeca-Nahua Xicana Indigena and human of this earth, it is the love for my ancestors and the future generations that drives me to do so. People in El Rancho Las Jicamas are not only affected by mental illness or poverty today. For years, many men had migrated back and forth to the United States and now entire families have left. Those who can return during summers or winter holiday vacations—they drive in with huge American-made trucks and SUVs, wearing brand-name clothing purchased in the United States but, ironically, manufactured in Mexico. They return to el rancho to celebrate meaningful events like weddings, quinceañeras, and baptisms and prefer to incorporate as many American decorations and small party rituals as possible rather than hand making local traditional decorations or rituals for festivities. The formation of divide-and-conquer gang style rivalry has resulted in territorial divisions of the rancho marked by spray paint tagging on adobe and ancient volcano rock walls. The list goes on, and every time I visit I sense among the youth very little desire to remember our ancestors. I last visited El Rancho

in December of 2007 for two weeks. Returning from the completion of a University of California field research program in Mexico City, I meet with my aunt and sister at the international airport in Leon, Guanajuato. A relative has driven us there. Accompanying my aunt one evening on her daily visits to relatives and old friends, she re-introduces me to an old neighbor of hers, a knowledgeable man in his fifties who has never traveled to the United States and is critical of American influence on the town. As we conversed about the town and its recent dramatic cultural changes, the conversation became more nostalgic. He told me about an older man who lives on the peak of the mountain volcano, miles above the town. "He comes down once in a while on a donkey selling small figurines made of old clay that he's found on the mountain. I think they are very old, probably made by the ancestors. I have one for you to take back to California," he said. The ancestor figurine sits on my altar in Santa Ana. She is about eight inches tall, three feet wide. She is cross-legged, sitting "Indian style," with two long braids that hang to her side; she wears a headdress and is holding her lower stomach, or womb area. She is old with wrinkles around her eyes, squinting as if in pain. Like the old clay female figurine, the place of memory invoked by art can have a response outside the poem and come in concrete and tangible forms. When we call the ancestors they listen and respond.

The creative place for examination and healing made by the writing in *Noisy Bones* is an artistic project against amnesia. The forced implementation of mestiza/o identity upon indigenous peoples who survived cultural and linguistic diaspora has denied our ability to reclaim our indigeneity. However, the spirit of my ancestors is a stubborn one. Perhaps the imagination in my dreams is more real than the knowledge systems imposed by patriarchy, Mexican nationalism, nation-state projects, and racism. Perhaps it is more real because it speaks to me in a more "real" way, in a way that my heart

knows. In Guanajuato, it is said that Earth deities who exist to aid in the communication between us humans and the rest of the cosmos die if they become forgotten. I cannot afford more massacres. My mother's death should be the last in our family caused by emotional and mental suffocation. Palabra is a space holding many broken places. A place I have decided to decipher with memory.