

CREATIVE WRITING EDITOR'S COMMENTARY:

Making Poems

Patricia Trujillo

During the submission process for this edition of *Chicana/Latina Studies: The Journal of Mujeres Activas en Letras y Cambio Social*, I bore witness to my beloved grandmother dying and die. I dedicate this work to her, Ruperta "Pepa" Trujillo, 1915-2017. She was from El Prado in Taos, NM, but lived the majority of her life in Upper Ranchitos de Taos. This distinction matters, as it is not so great a distance, but just far enough that it made it difficult for her to return home when, at 14, she was married to my grandfather. He was many years her elder. She bore nine children, eight who lived into adulthood. I never knew my Grandpa Bernie but every story I have ever heard about him is atrocious. He mistreated my grandmother in multiple ways throughout their married life, starting first with marrying a child. He was abusive in every way possible, and then in ways I don't want to imagine possible.

Growing up, the women and girls would always stay in the kitchen after big holiday dinners to wash the dishes and put them away. I always loved this time because grandma had an apron for each of us. It was a time to hear the cadence of the Taoseño Spanish that blows through lips like soft whistles, and the women would assess the meal, share stories, and joke. There was always a coffee stain on the ceiling of my Grandma Pepa's kitchen. As a child, not yet trained in the things we do not talk about, I pointed to it and asked, "What's that?" The room went silent. I got the side ojo from one of the adults, that silent admonishment immediately informed me that I'd asked something

inappropriate. No one answered my question, and the conversation resumed in a different direction.

Later in my life, I found out that that coffee stain appeared on the ceiling after my grandfather violently attacked my Grandma Pepa with a percolator. He'd thrown it at her, hot and boiling. After the attack, she did not allow anyone to clean or cover the stain with paint. She left it there for him to look at everyday, a reminder of his violence. This is but one of the dozens of stories I've heard. I hate that this patriarchal violence was her experience. I hate that it is part of my legacy.

I was born after the death of this man. I never knew him. And the only grandmother I ever knew was the one who reclaimed her life in later years. She traveled the world and brought me beautiful barrettes from her travels in Spain. She bought me a doll with pretty black hair like mine from Hawaii. She visited her son who lived in San Diego often, and enjoyed gambling in Las Vegas. I got to know an independent and adventurous grandma that used her inherited government pension to restore her life to play a different tune. In addition to traveling, she took on a variety of arts during this time in her life. She turned her despensa into a weaving room. She painted landscapes and made pottery in her ceramics classes. She crocheted, quilted, and embroidered flowers on towels and pillows. (My grandma was a maker before it was cool.) She decorated her house with her own art, and I remember walking into the house with the anticipation of new projects or of the unveilings of new pieces. I credit much of my love for art to her influence.

Many years before her death, she sat with her children and explained her end of life decisions that she wrote down in a carta. She declared that she wanted to be cremated. She declared, "Que me entierren con mi Madre y Gramma queridas, porque pasé demasiado tiempo con ese hombre en mi vida!" This

was at a time when the Catholic Church still frowned upon cremation, and Grandma Pepa was a long-time Guadalupana in Ranchitos, having served in the roll of mayordoma of the capilla there. This could not have been a comfortable decision, but in making the choice she asserted her infinite authority.

Grandma Pepa was willing to forego the patriarchal stronghold her husband and her religion held in her life to have her ashes buried with her mother and grandmother.

This is poetry.

It was poetry to witness my grandma calling out to her beloved mama in her final days. She would look to us with imploring eyes as if to say, Don't you see her too? Family surrounded her in her final moments. We had just finished praying the Rosary to the Divine Mercy when she took her last breaths. And the tears that washed over my face in that moment were not sadness, but knowing that in her heart (and mine), she was returning to love, to the mother space.

The poetry of the moment was all consuming. I kept trying to note every detail. How the room felt regal because everyone seemed to be wearing royal blue. How in her strained last breaths I could hear the soft whistle that shadowed her voice. How a paloma cooed outside the window.

In her poem, "How Poems are Made, A Discredited View," Alice Walker wrote,

I understand how poems are made.
They are the tears
That season the smile.
The stiff-neck laughter

That crowds the throat.
The leftover love.
I know how poems are made.

There is a place the loss must go.
There is a place the gain must go.
The leftover love.

The gain. The loss. Our words help in our desperate search to understand, to comprehend, and to know. I offer my reflection as a preface to the following section of creative writing dedicated to poetry. We are in a cultural moment where we need women of color calling on all their poetic faculties to tease it all out, from the intimate losses to the institutional traumas, from the historic fractures to the beautiful mundane. We need to lay it all out on the page, like my Grandma did, in demanding our freedom of spirit and summoning fierce, radical love.

¡Ruperta “Pepa” Trujilloz—Presente! Que en poder descanse, mi querida Gramma Peppers.

Reference

Walker, Alice. 1991, “How Poems are Made, A Discredited View.” *Her Blue Body Everything We Know: Earthling Poems, 1965-1990, Complete*, 335-336. Orlando: A Harvest Book.