

Two Maya Tales from the Mérida Cereso¹

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“For the Maya Indian—a truth more extensive yesterday than today, but still true—all beings, and even inanimate objects, exist in constant relation to spirits and occult forces that decisively intervene in human life.” —Oswaldo Baqueiro López, *Magia, mitos y supersticiones entre los Mayas* (translation mine)

“Tell all the truth, but tell it slant—” —Emily Dickinson, *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Reading Edition*

In the claustrophobic atmosphere of a penitentiary, the imagination is both escape and pressure valve. Art can be a mode of spiritual and mental resistance against confinement. For the imprisoned women in Mérida, Yucatán, the oppressions are multilayered, extending from centuries ago to the present day: they come in the forms of patriarchy, Mexican rule in the Yucatán, the memory of the Spanish conquest, the lash of prejudice against the incarcerated, and against incarcerated women in particular, and steep class-based inequalities. Outside prison walls, the telling of Maya folklore and of stories set in Maya pueblos is a form of cultural solidarity, a tribute to the ancient Mayas, one of the great civilizations of the ancient world, and a gesture of resistance against central Mexican culture (Moßbrucker et al., 155). Inside the enforced exile of the prison, where the hand of the law is felt with every breath and daily injustices, large and small, abound, the need for a) a local sense of cultural belonging and b) resistance against entrenched hierarchies of power magnifies exponentially.

The two stories translated below were written for two different writing workshops at the women’s area of the Mérida Cereso (Center for Social Reinsertion), a prison in Mérida, Yucatán. Both authors are of mixed Maya and Spanish descent; though neither speaks fluent Maya, both identify culturally with Maya culture and both report having at least one fully Maya speaking grandparent. Zindy Abreu Barón, a self-trained writer who has won numerous national literary awards, wrote “Mucuy y los niños del monte” (“Mucuy and the Mountain Children”) in 2005 in a workshop led by the Yucatecan educator and writer Verónica García Rodríguez. The book that resulted from this workshop, *Memorias de mujeres en prisión y otros relatos* (2009), features three texts by Abreu: a poem, a short autobiographical account of her apprehension, torturing and forced confession to a murder she didn’t commit, and a short story. In 2005, “Mucuy,” a work of

literary fiction, won the José Revueltas National Story Prize, an annual award, administered by the Ministry of Public Security, for the best story written by an inmate in the Mexican penal system.

Although a writer before spending fourteen years in prison, Abreu developed her talent behind bars in García Rodríguez’s workshop. Passion for the written word runs in her veins; she proudly claims to descend from the family of Ermilo Abreu Gómez. Gómez is the author of one of the canonical texts detailing the injustices experienced by the Maya people, *Canek* (1940): the story of the Maya leader Kaan Ek (Jacinto Canek), who died in 1761 while battling Spanish imperial rule. Upon completing her sentence, during which she began to give classes in English, guitar and chess to the other inmates, Abreu was released in 2014. Since leaving prison, she has become a tireless advocate for incarcerated women in Mérida, returning on a volunteer basis to give classes in English and creative writing, and organizing public exhibits of the prisoners’ artworks; she also dreams of opening a halfway house for recently released female inmates.

The second story, “La leyenda de Juan Pistolas” (“The Legend of Juan Pistolas”) by Yesli Dayanili Pech Pech, was written in the summer of 2016 in a reading and writing workshop I taught in the Cereso. In the summer of 2016, with a grant from the Mellon Public Scholars program, I led a workshop with female prisoners in the Cereso de Mérida, and, following in the footsteps of García Rodríguez, I published a book of their writings, entitled *Nos contamos a través de los muros* (*We Tell our Stories Through these Walls*, Catarsis). This opportunity allowed me to experience first-hand the workings of a prison creative writing workshop and how it may be used as a tool both to help women on an individual basis as they navigate prison life and prepare for social reinsertion, and also to spark larger conversations about conditions of prison life in Mexico and the circumstances that lead people to prison and the transformed world they face once they leave. I presented the project, along with an exhibit of photos taken of the workshop and its participants by the photographer Albert Durán, at events in Mérida and at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City. The choice to be included by their real names was made by all but one of the workshop participants; likewise, all but one of the participants requested to have their likenesses appear in the photo exhibition. As the Mérida-based writer and prison educator Lope Ávila explained to me, during one of the many lengthy conversations and interviews I conducted with local prison educators, these women are known for their crimes, and their names and likenesses often appear in local papers both upon their incarceration and upon their release.

Participation in cultural projects, such as writing workshops and other public events organized within the Cereso, serve as a rare source of positive publicity and attention for inmates, and can help create a positive impression of them as they prepare for social reentry.

Although this paper is primarily literary in nature, the following section provides important background information on some of the social conditions facing female prisoners in Mexico. The statistics below are also corroborated by information provided to me orally during a number of interviews and informal conversations I held during my time working in the Mérida penal system with prison educators and administrators. According to Leticia Romero Rodríguez, Jesús Nicolás Gracida Galán, and Carlos Benito Lara Romero the following are the conditions facing women in prison in the heavily Maya-descended Southeastern Mexico:

-“Most inmates lack resources to defend themselves...the legal process has little effect and public defense continues to be an ineffectual institution” (Rodríguez, Galán, Romero 21, *translation mine*).

-“There are numerous violations of the rights of female delinquents. The vast majority of female inmates has never seen a judge and did not hear from his or her mouth the reasons for which her rights to liberty have been removed. The defense is of poor quality and there are also clear violations during the process and the moment of detention. Investigation into their cases by the Public Ministry is minimal (*ibid*)”.

-“Once inside the prison, the rates of corruption are high, and insufficient attention is paid to rehabilitation” (*ibid*).

-Fewer than 5% of prison inmates in Mexico are women. The crimes they commit are generally less violent than those by men. However, those who are incarcerated face higher sentences for the same or lesser crimes than men, due to a pattern of discrimination against women within the Mexican penal system.

-Types of corruption that commonly occur in the Mexican prison system include the exchange of sexual favors from female inmates with prison officials for goods or certain freedoms; the proliferation of an underground economy within the prison by which wealthier inmates receive better living quarters and other services not available to other inmates, etc.

-Women in prison are subject to more societal and familial discrimination than men. Because of their doubly or triply marginal position as women (many of indigenous descent) in prison, family members are quicker to cut ties with female inmates than with males. Conjugal

visits are more frequent to men by their wives than to women by their husbands. Women in prison are cut off from their families, rejected, and left to fend for themselves when they leave. They are blamed for ruining the honor of their families, while men are more quickly welcomed back into the family and social fabric following incarceration.

I did not ask the women who participated in the workshop to write directly about their experiences in prison. Instead, I exhorted them, in the words of Emily Dickinson, to “tell all the truth, but tell it slant.” Accordingly, although many of their stories are fictional or related to memories that took place before their incarceration, they contain a number of themes that mark their lives in the Cereso: injustice, solitude, dislocation, and violence, both physical and social.

Pech’s story is a retelling of a folk legend from her town of Dzidzantún: a pueblo located in northeastern Yucatán. Though not a trained writer, Pech is known in the Cereso as the ‘rimera’ (rhymmer), a writer of poetry, rap, and picaresque accounts such as the one translated below, “La leyenda de Juan Pistolas.” I found her to be one of the most enthusiastic members of the writing workshop, producing extra pieces of writing as the sessions drew to a close, including a stash of clever and humorously illustrated poems and songs which she wrote for herself and performed for the other prisoners’ amusement. Pech has since been released.

Since the Spanish conquest of the Yucatán, two key features characterize Maya literature²: 1) resistance to colonial rule (under which the Maya still live as reluctant Mexican nationals) and 2) the Maya cosmovision, which abounds with supernatural characters and occurrences. Both Abreu and Pech claim Maya descent; in interviews both report having at least one fully Maya speaking grandparent, through whom they root their affiliation with Maya culture and to whom they trace an early interest in Maya folklore. Both of their stories feature Maya protagonists, who are also, not coincidentally, outsiders in their society. In search of answers for why inmates, including non-Maya speakers, in the Mérida Cereso are drawn to writing, reading and recounting Maya folklore—it is one of the most-requested genres in my writing workshops there—I interviewed Abreu during a telephone call on September 17, 2018. She says that Mexicans of non-Yucatecan³ origins can find themselves discriminated against, and thus often seek to assimilate by acquiring cultural fluency. She theorized that, in a context of social exclusion such as a prison, the desire to be incorporated into the society, its norms and its values increases; in this case that desire expresses itself through the telling of folklore. Thus the telling of Maya folklore within the prison indicates a mixed cultural identification—on the one hand the

desire to draw close to Yucatecan folkloric traditions, rooted in Maya culture, and on the other, a demarcation of cultural difference from the central Mexican government and from the deculturation occasioned by globalization.

Maya folklore often features magical beings who surprise, bless, or torment humans in the *pueblos*. These beings include the X'tabay, a fatal woman lurking in the brush who lures drunkards to their deaths and serves as a cautionary tale against inebriation and infidelity, the *alux*, the *huay-chivo*, and scores of other surprising creatures who insert an element of magic into the everyday. These characters are beloved for their narrative potential, but also feared. All of them possess an essential *otherness* that mirrors the otherness of Maya culture within the context of Mexican society. Their belonging to an alternate realm of existence asserts the possibility of an alternate order that rules life and that exists quite independently of contemporary society, its laws, norms and happenings—an order capable of undercutting, defying and/or reordering reigning social hierarchies, norms and protocols.

Abreu's piece tells the story of a young autistic girl named Mucuy, who lives in a Maya village on a traditional *solar*. Karen Kramer's anthropological study on Maya children and their roles in traditional *pueblos*, *Maya Children: Helpers at the Farm*, (2005) describes a *solar* as a household compound composed of dwellings of wattle and daub, an earth floor, and pitched roofs. *Solars* are surrounded by a rubble wall which is carefully maintained. Most also have backyards with animal pens, an outhouse, herb and vegetable plots, and work areas (60).

Like most school-age Maya girls, Mucuy must spend many hours a day occupied in domestic work. She assists her grandmother around the *solar* to support the family. Jobs for women in a typical Maya village include “food processing, food preparation, collecting water and firewood, running errands, tending domesticating animals, sewing, washing, and cleaning” (Kramer, 105); meanwhile the men typically spend more time cultivating the *milpa*, or maize field (*ibid*, 104). In the story, Mucuy can be seen performing several chores, including washing clothes, cleaning the patio, gathering firewood, grinding corn kernels in the *nixtamal* and drawing water from the well. Meanwhile, her grandmother feeds the hens, butchers, cooks, and serves one for dinner, weaves hammocks, tends the house and oversees Mucuy's work, and her uncle Paciano works all day in the *milpa*, all following the traditional gendered roles outlined by Kramer. To her disappointment, Mucuy is not permitted by her grandmother to attend school. Beyond primary education, low school attendance is common in Maya villages, where “the

limited amount of training necessary to be successful at maize production, coupled with the unavailability of skill-based wage labor, results in a low payoff to parents who forgo their children’s work and formally educate or train them” (Kramer, 38). However, because of her autism, Mucuy is denied even the chance to learn to read and write; to make matters worse, she is shunned by the other village children. She is beaten and starved by her grandmother, sexually molested by her uncle, and her only friends are the mysterious *niños del monte* (children of the mountain), who resemble *aluxes*, mischievous local sprites. The magical elements in both stories are firmly rooted in the mythological tradition of the Yucatán. The journalist and cultural expert Oswaldo Baquero López (1932-2005) undertook a study of this tradition and defined the *aluxes* as

little spirits that live in the mountains and who manifest their presence with devilish tricks, with the goal of receiving gifts of their favorite foods. Sometimes, they can even cause illness due to the harmful ‘wind’ that they leave in their wake . . . On the other hand, if the *alux* makes friends with the *Indio*, he or she can be certain that no thieves will steal their corn crop . . . They only appear after the sun sets and in the form of a child of three or four years old, naked except for their head . . . They are very agile on their feet and can run backwards as well as forwards. (33, *translation mine*)

The duality of the *alux*—who despite their mischievous natures also serve as protectors to *Indios* who manage to befriend them—is apparent in Abreu’s story, in which the narrator makes friends with the *aluxes*, in spite of her grandmother’s disapproval. They become her playmates when the village children refuse to play with her, and even punish her uncle for drunkenly molesting his niece by fatally smashing his head in with rocks from the garden wall. In the presence of the *aluxes*, hierarchies between young and old, male and female, and weak and powerful collapse. As a result of her friendship with them, the otherwise disempowered narrator experiences small but significant joys and triumphs. During our interview, Abreu explained to me that her aim in writing “Mucuy” was to create a slice of life based on accounts of the *pueblos* told to her by Maya inmates whom she describes as enveloped in a world of fantasy (i.e. fantasy as subversive of material conditions) that helped them manage the poverty and injustice of prison life. Likewise, Mucuy’s fantasy relationship with the *aluxes* helps her survive the domestic abuse she lives at the hands of her grandmother and uncle.

Similarly, in Pech's story, the *alux*—and the *huay chivo* that appear are examples of the magical hybrid creatures that abound in Maya mythology. In his *Mitología Maya*, the prominent folklorist Roldán Peniche Barrera, author of several books of Maya legends he collected and transcribed in the *pueblos* of the Yucatán peninsula, describes these creatures variously as 'seres perversos' (perverse beings), and 'nefastas criaturas,' (nefarious creatures) 'siniestras,' (sinister) and 'deleznables' (despicable), elaborating on their nature as follows: "Los seres mitológicos mayas se comportan... como verdaderos flagelos. Son todos de impresionante presencia, feos por dentro y por fuera, intimidantes, ... y además vagan por las noches" ("The mythological beings of the Maya act... like true scourges. All impressive in appearance, they are ugly on the outside and the inside, intimidating... what's more they roam by night") (5). In stark contrast with these primarily negative descriptions, the narration of both Abreu's and Pech's stories sympathizes with these often demonized characters, both humanizing them and demonstrating how they are (unjustly) vilified by the larger society. In the case of Mucuy, the *aluxes*, though considered a nuisance by her grandmother, rescue her from the sexual molestation that she suffers at the hands of her uncle. Thus the outlier figure of the *alux* is shown to be misunderstood, even heroic in the context of Abreu's story. Meanwhile, in Pech's retelling of the *Huay-Chivo* legend, the violent punishment greeted on the titular character by the people of the pueblo is disproportionate to the crimes of vandalism he has perpetrated—thus she turns the legend into a parable about the unjust sentencing of a misunderstood outsider.

Pech originally recounted the story of Juan Pistolas orally in our workshop. The first draft she presented was brief, yet indicated her talent for rhythm, structure, suspense, and captivating subject matter. In her second draft, she added more details to the story, such as descriptions of Juan Pistolas's body and of his activities that so frightened the village people.

One interesting element of Pech's tale is its hybrid character. There are characteristics of the Western film in the story, with people riding horses and seeking to lynch the *Huay-Chivo*. Indeed, many of Pech's texts contain cinematic elements indicating her interest and influence in film and popular culture. The name Juan Pistolas shows the influence of Spanish culture, as pistols are not native to Maya culture. The horse is a Spanish import to Mexico, as are the church bells, the notion of the 'soul in pain' and the references to Satan. Even the *Huay-Chivo* is a cultural hybrid, since goats were also imported to Mexico from Spain. However, *Huay* is a Maya

word, Dzidzantún is a Maya pueblo, and the *choza* where Juan Pistolas lives refers to a typical provisional Maya hut, constructed of sticks or mud and a thatched palm roof.

In the context of ongoing ethnic conflict and inequality in the Yucatán, it is significant that the protagonist of Pech’s story is an “hechicero” (spell-caster or sorcerer) who mutters a “Satanic dialogue.” Pech describes Juan Pistolas as a sorcerer, and he raises his wife’s suspicion by muttering verses from the Black Book. The story registers cultural conflict when Juan Pistolas’s wife and others in the village judge him for practicing a belief system that they judge evil, based on their Manichean worldview. As in Abreu’s story, it is the principal character’s contact or association with an alternate world order characterized by magical, pre-Catholic belief systems that lands them in trouble. The presence of folk Catholicism, or the mixture of Catholic and pre-Catholic beliefs that characterize contemporary indigenous cultures across Mexico, is clear in the story which includes references both to the biblical Satan and to the Maya *Huay-Chivo*, conflating them into one in the eyes of the villagers.

Other important elements of Pech’s story are its themes of violence and injustice. Is the violence perpetrated against Juan Pistolas by the villagers and his own brother really merited by his crimes? His crimes are, by any measure, petty: breaking and entering, causing public disorder, and slaughtering chickens. His punishments— imprisonment, assassination, eternal damnation—feel unwarranted and unjust.⁴ He is a scapegoat for the ills of the village and punished accordingly, after being betrayed by his own family. For the crime of social deviance, he is now a prisoner of the devil, condemned to eternal suffering. As for many of the female prisoners at the Cereso de Mérida, his punishment and public vilification far outweigh his crimes.

Both of these stories speak to the cultural hybridity of Mexican culture, which has arisen as a product both of Spanish colonialism and Western cultural imperialism. Abreu uses the form of the short story to bring characters from Maya mythology to life, instead of employing the traditional *leyenda*⁵ format (the format that Pech employs to great effect in her story). Meanwhile, Pech introduces elements from the cinematic western to her original retelling of the *Huay-Chivo* legend.

Due to the distinct process of conquest and mestizaje undergone by Mexico during and after the Spanish colonial period, indigeneity functions differently in Mexico than it does in the United States. In Mexico, indigeneity has been embraced by the nation as an important symbol

of national identity and culture. Yet at the same time, indigenous populations in Mexico face enormous structural inequalities. Both of these stories bely a unique sensitivity to the multiple oppressions their characters face. Both also bely a playful sensibility that derives humor and enjoyment from the figures of Maya folklore, and subsequently and simultaneously function as a denunciation of social marginalization and a celebration of the unique landscapes, customs and supernatural characters of the Maya world.

Beyond appealing to a local audience, or even to a readership concerned with issues of prison justice, these stories transcend through their universal themes of injustice, otherness, violence and abuse. Both are the work of gifted storytellers. Abreu is already recognized in the world of Mexican prison literature but deserves an even wider national and international audience as a writer whose work stands on its own. Meanwhile Pech's work is until now largely unknown outside the Mérida Cereso, yet readers should appreciate the fine quality of her writing. For both women, this is the first time their work has appeared in English translation. Their stories demonstrate the potential of Maya prison narratives to transcend prison walls, as well as linguistic and geographic boundaries, carrying their authors' critique of injustice, and also their cry of hope, to readers around the globe.

A note on the translation: Abreu and Pech's stories appear below first in the original Spanish versions and then in my English translation. In the Yucatán, Spanish is frequently mixed with Yucatec Maya. I have left Maya words and expressions in italics, with English translations in the footnotes, to preserve the bilingual flavor of the Spanish in the region.

MUCUY Y LOS NIÑOS DEL MONTE

Zindy Abreu Barón

Cada noche, por entre los hilos de mi hamaca, los veo llegar. Vienen del monte. Caminan sobre las piedras de la albarrada y arman gran alboroto en el patio. La luz de la luna llena alumbrá sus cuerpos arrugados, de piel morena como la mía. Son de mi tamaño, aunque algunos alcanzan a asomar los ojos de carbón encendido por las ventanas de madera.

Mi abuela dice que yo atraigo a esos *malos aires* que le quitan el sueño. También asustan a sus gallinas que ya no quieren poner más huevos. Por eso hace de todo *pa'* que se larguen:

acomoda tijeras en forma de cruz bajo su hamaca, cuelga ajos con hojas de *guano* tras de las puertas y se pasa las horas *cuchicheando* con la estampa de una señora con rebozo de estrellas, rodeada de un montón de chiquitos gordos con alas, *quesque* viven en el cielo. Antes de dormir, se santigua y asienta junto a la batea tres jícaras, que son como mitad de pequeños cocos secos, sin pelos, llenos de atole de maíz nuevo, chile habanero y aguardiente de mi tío Paciano. Cuando duermo en el patio, me trago todo lo que encuentro en las jícaras, *pa'* que los niños del monte nunca se vayan.

Después de que el gallo canta, mi *chichí*, con los pelos canos largos, sin amarrar todavía, le da de comer a las gallinas. A la que más se acerca a ella le aplasta la cabeza con sus *sayonaras* y le tuerce el pescuezo. La cocina con caldo de arroz en leña y prepara agua con naranjas agrias, sólo *pa'* mi tío, porque es hombre y trabaja la milpa. Yo como de lo que encuentro en los árboles. Más tarde, se pone a urdir hamacas con hilos de colores. A mí me pone a lavar ropa, limpiar el patio, juntar leña, moler los granos de maíz en el *nixtamal* y sacar agua del pozo. Todo eso hago hasta que el sol cae, como bostezando, entre las flores que cubren el *tajonal*. Me quedo a *gustarlo* porque sé eso de las flores y el sol que, agradecido en que lo guardan de noche, les regala sus colores.

Ya se durmió mi abuela y su hijo que no aparece. El pobrecito llega de trabajar la milpa, siempre borracho, ya muy noche, desde que esa mujer con la que peleaba mucho, por mi culpa, se fue.

La luz de una vela alumbra las sombras, que, bailan y se alargan por las paredes de adobe. El humo a cartón de huevo quemado llena la choza y ahuyenta los moscos que dan vueltas sobre mi cabeza. Sentada en mi hamaca arrullo entre mis brazos el cuerpecito de manta de mi muñeca. Paseo mis dedos por su cabello enmarañado y negro como el mío. Le pregunto si conoce el cielo por donde se pasea mi *má*. Dice mi abuela que, al rato que me parió, se nos fue. No lloro; aunque sienta que cruja, como cucaracha aplastada, lo que punza dentro de mi pecho. Unos ratones chillan y *acorretean iguanos* transparentes sobre los palos de madera que atraviesan el techo de paja. Los persigo con la mirada. Algunos caen, resbalan por el pabellón en donde ronca la vieja y se escurren bajo la tierra roja del suelo. Al menos ellos tienen con quien jugar.

Los chamacos del pueblo no quieren jugar conmigo. Corren a atraparse entre los árboles. Con soga de *henequén* se amarran a los tobillos *jícaras* redondas llenas de piedritas. Desde lejos los miro. Brinco y aplaudo cuando pescan a alguno. Si me acerco, gritan que apesto a *wishs* y

con piedras en las manos corren tras de mi hacia la milpa. El corazón que se me quiere salir por las narices cuando me guardo entre los maizales, los niños del monte los reciben a pedradas. Los chamacos, con los ojos bien abiertos, dan la vuelta y huyen hacia el pueblo, las piedritas en sus tobillos zumban como panal de abejas. Con los brazos al cielo y mi lengua de lado, los persigo hasta que los pierdo de la mirada.

No falta quien llegue de acusón con mi abuela, quien, sin preguntar, deja caer una lluvia de *huascops* sobre mi cabeza. Grita que sólo sirvo *pa'* hacer maldades, que soy bien bruta y que en mi cabeza de *cocoyol*, sólo las liendres y los piojos se pegan. Por eso no me llevan a la escuela. Además *quel* dinero no alcanza *pa'* libros. Entonces sí lloro. No por los pescozones que rezumban mi cabeza, sino porque quiero ir a la escuela, a jugar con los niños, a leer las letras.

Mi tío no me pega. Deja que remoje mi tortilla en su caldo cada que llega y encuentra dormida a mi abuela. Me sienta encima de su enorme panza. Mientras devoro lo que queda en el plato, él hace *cosquías* a mis pies. A veces pienso que con su dedo más gordo quiere atravesar la carne entre mis piernas y no lo dejo. *Revoloteo* como gallina que le *tronchan* el pescuezo y *wisho* su pantalón. Para esas veces; gruñendo, Paciano se levanta, me bota al piso y del pelo me jala a dormir al patio.

Con la mano espanto a los moscos que dan vueltas sobre mi cabeza. No dejan que se aquieten mis pensamientos. El ruido de unas piedras que caen de la albarrada hace que de un salto me levante de la hamaca. Camino hacia la puerta del patio. Acecho, primero un ojo, luego otro. Por mis cabellos se cuele el aire fresco de la noche. El susurro de las hojas secas que el viento pasea de un lado a otro llena mis oídos. Los grillos cantan cosas de la gente del pueblo: el llanto de los huesos enterrados bajo la tierra, del *nené* que aprieta con su boca el pecho seco de su *má* y del chillar de tripas que se retuercen de hambre, como las *mías*. Camino sin prisa hacia el fondo del patio. Con los dedos intento pellizcar las estrellas que cuelgan del cielo. Una, la más brillante, abre y cierra sus ojos. Con su luz acaricia mis pestañas. Un viento colado se mece entre las hojas de los árboles y trae hasta mis oídos murmullos que parecen decir: *Mucuy, koóx paxal*. Me detengo junto al brocal del pozo, agarro una piedra y la aviento hacia la oscuridad. Entre los árboles estallan las risas de los niños del monte. Mi corazón parece querer salir por mi boca abierta cuando los miro bajar y deslizarse por las matas de tamarindo y aguacate. Del tronco de ceibo se despega uno que se apoya de una vara al caminar. Acerca su rostro de papel arrugado al mío. Su aliento a tierra mojada baña mi rostro. Se carcajea con los dientes puntiagudos de fuera.

Un grito agudo, como graznido de *kau*, escapa por mi garganta. Cubro mi boca con la mano y *wisho* mi *huipil*. Corro hacia mi hamaca y me enrolló en ella.

Por entre los hilos, miro a los niños colgar sogas de las ramas. Esconden el lazo entre la tierra y riegan granos de maíz encima. Abren la reja del gallinero, azuzan a las gallinas y trepan a los árboles. Cuando las gallinas se acercan a picotear el maíz, los niños desde las ramas, jalan las sogas. Las muy mensas quedan colgadas boca abajo, cacarean, giran y aletean, unas del pescuezo, otras de una pata. A lo lejos, en las calles vacías del pueblo, los perros aúllan.

Para cuando decide asomarse mi abuela, el patio amanece cubierto de plumas y las gallinas, todas tiesas, como tieso amaneció hoy mi tío Paciano. Con la cabeza, como *tauch*, aplastada bajo las piedras que cayeron de la albarrada. La vieja, sin preguntar y a chillidos, me raja las nalgas con sogas remojada. Aprieto los ojos. Con las manos cubro mis oídos para no escuchar como si un montón de hormigas *sayes* marcharan hacia mi nuca por los huesos de mi espalda. Una voz dentro quiere llevarme a caer hacia las aguas del cenote sagrado en donde nacen los niños del monte. Si no fuera por la luz brillante de esa estrella, que abre y cierra sus ojos, dentro de mi cabeza.

MUCUY AND THE MOUNTAIN CHILDREN

Zindy Abreu Barón

Each night, from between the strands of my hammock, I watch them arrive. They come from the mountain. They walk on the stones of the garden wall and make a huge ruckus in the patio. The light of the full moon illuminates their wrinkled bodies, dark-skinned like mine. They are my size, although some of them are tall enough to peer through the wooden windows with their burning coal eyes.

My grandmother says that I attract these evil spirits that rob peoples' sleep. They also frighten her hens, who refuse to lay their eggs anymore. That's why she does anything to shoo them off: she arranges scissors in the form of a cross beneath her hammock, hangs garlic with *guano* leaves behind the doors and spends the hours whispering with the figure of a woman dressed in a starry *rebozo*, surrounded by a mountain of fat babies with wings, because they live in the sky. Before sleeping, she crosses herself and next to the tray she places three *jícaras*, which are like little halved dried coconuts, hairless, filled with young corn *atole*, *chile habanero*

and my uncle Paciano's *aguardiente*. When I sleep in the patio, I drink everything I find in the *jícaras*, so that the mountain children will never leave.

After the cock crows, my *chichi*,⁶ with her long white hair, not yet tied back, feeds the hens. She crushes the head of the one who gets nearest to her and wrings its neck with a *sayonara*. She cooks it in a broth with rice over firewood and prepares water with tart oranges, only for my uncle, because he's a man and works in the *milpa*⁷. I eat from what I find in the trees. Later, she weaves hammocks with colored strands. She sets me to washing clothes, cleaning the patio, gathering firewood, grinding corn kernels in the *nixtamal* and drawing water from the well. I do all this until the sun sets, as though yawning, between the flowers that cover the *tajonal*⁸. I stand there enjoying it because I know this about the flowers and the sun, that, grateful that they preserve his essence at night, he gifts them his colors.

My grandmother has already fallen asleep and her son hasn't yet appeared. The *pobrecito* always comes back from working the *milpa*, always drunk, late at night, ever since that woman who he was always fighting with, over me, left.

Candlelight illuminates the shadows, which dance and lengthen across the adobe walls. The smoke of burnt egg crates fills the hut and drives off the mosquitos circling above my head. Seated in my hammock I rock my doll's little cloth body. I run my fingers through her hair, which is tangled and black like mine. I ask her if she's been to heaven where my *má* walks. My grandmother says that, just after giving birth to me, she left us. I don't cry, although I feel something crunching, like a crushed cockroach, piercing my heart. Mice squeak and transparent iguanas scamper over the wooden poles that cross the thatched roof. I follow them with my eyes. Some fall, sliding down the pavilion where the old woman snores and they burrow beneath the red earth of the floor. At least they have each other to play with.

The village kids don't want to play with me. They run and hide between the trees. They tie round *jícaras* filled with stones to their ankles with henequen ropes. I watch them from far away. I jump and clap when they catch someone. If I come close, they yell that I stink of *wishes*⁹ and with stones in their hands they run after me toward the *milpa*. My heart wants to jump out of my nostrils as I hide myself between the corn stalks; the mountain children throw stones at them. The village kids, their eyes open wide, turn around and flee toward the village; the rocks at their ankles buzz like honeycombs. With my arms waving in the sky and my tongue wagging, I chase them until they are out of sight.

There is no lack of complainers who come to my grandmother, who, no questions asked, lets fall a shower of *huascops*¹⁰ on my head. She yells that I’m only good for making trouble, that I’m a brute and that my head of *cocoyol*¹¹ is filled with nothing but nits and lice. That’s why they don’t send me to school. Besides they don’t have enough money for books. Then I do cry. Not because of the blows that reverberate in my brain, but because I want to go to school, to play with the other children, to read letters.

My uncle doesn’t hit me. He lets me moisten my tortilla in his broth whenever he comes and finds my grandmother asleep. He sits me on top of his enormous belly. While I devour what remains in the dish, he tickles my feet. Sometimes I think that with his fattest finger he wants to pierce the flesh between my legs, but I don’t let him. I flap and flutter like a hen with a twisted neck and I pee on his pants. On these occasions, he gets up growling, boots me to the floor, and drags me by the hair to sleep on the patio.

With my hand I frighten away the mosquitos that circle above my head. They don’t allow my thoughts to settle. The sound of stones falling from the garden wall makes me jump from my hammock. I walk toward the patio door. I spy, first with one eye, then the other. The fresh night air sneaks through my hair. The whisper of dry leaves being blown back and forth by the wind fills my ears. The crickets sing about the villagers, the lament of the bones buried beneath the earth, of the *nené* who sucks his *má*’s dry breast and of stomachs twisting with hunger, like mine. I walk unhurriedly toward the back of the patio. With my fingers I try to pinch the stars that hang from the sky. One, the brightest, opens and closes its eyes. Its light caresses my eyelashes. A draft blows between the leaves of the trees and carries rumors to my ears that seem to say: *Mucuy, koóx paxal*.¹² I pause next to the lip of the well, grab a rock and fling it into the darkness. The laughter of the mountain children explodes amidst the trees. My heart seems to want to escape through my open mouth when I watch them descend, wriggling through the tamarind and avocado plants. From the trunk of the *ceibo* drops one who leans on a crutch when he walks. He nears his wrinkled paper face to mine. His breath of wet earth bathes my face. He cackles with his teeth pointed out. A sharp cry, like the squawk of a *kau*¹³, escapes my throat. I cover my mouth and wet my *huipil*. I run back to my hammock and roll myself up in it.

From between the strands, I watch the children hang ropes from the branches. They hide the loop in the earth and shower kernels of corn on top. Then they open the chicken coop, bait the hens and climb up the trees. When the hens come close to pick at the corn, the children pull

the ropes from where they are stationed up in the trees. The stupidest get strung up mouth down, squawking, spinning and flapping, some by the neck, others by a leg. Far away, in the empty streets of the village, dogs howl.

By the time my grandmother decides to come out the next morning, the patio is covered in feathers and the chickens are all stiff, stiff like my uncle Paciano looked this morning. With his head, like a *taúch*¹⁴, crushed beneath the rocks that fell from the garden wall. The old woman, without asking what happened, screams and whips my bottom with a wet rope. I squeeze my eyes shut. With my hands I cover my ears so I won't hear what sounds like a mountain of ants marching along my backbone toward the nape of my neck. A voice inside wants to carry me to the sacred *cenote*, to fall into the waters where the mountain children are born. If it weren't for the brilliant light of that star, that opens and shuts its eyes, inside my head.

LEYENDA DE JUAN PISTOLAS

Yesli Dayanili Pech Pech

Cuenta la leyenda que en un pequeño pueblo llamado Dzizantun, en Yucatán cuando llegaba la noche unas cadenas sonaban. La gente decía que cosas insólitas pasaban en el pueblo.

Los ancianos del pueblo decían que todo era a causa de un brujo al cual le llamaban “Juan Pistolas”. Juan Pistolas tenía ciento cinco años de edad. Su madre era una mestiza de aquel pueblo. Por las noches se transformaba en un animal grande con patas de chivo, cabeza de caballo y pelo de mono. Sus ojos, como los del venado, sólo se distinguían de noche. Juan Pistolas asustaba a la gente del pueblo transformándose en un animal llamado “Huay-chivo”. A partir de las doce de la noche ningún alma en pena caminaba por las calles por miedo de que se les apareciera “Juan Pistolas”. La hora de salir de aquel animal era las doce de la noche ya cuando la gente del pueblo dormía. Juan Pistolas salía de su choza que quedaba por San Juan Chuilén y en ese mismo pueblo asustaba a la gente metiéndose a las cocinas de las chozas y tirando todo lo que hallaba a su alrededor: ollas, sartenes y cubetas. Pero en realidad se comía la comida y mataba a las gallinas y pavos sólo para sacarles el corazón.

Cuenta la leyenda que “Juan Pistolas” se había casado con una mujer más joven que él. La mujer era de otro pueblo, cerca de Dzizantun, llamado Cansacob, Yucatán. A pesar de tener dos hijos con él, una noche ella lo abandonó porque descubrió que “Juan Pistolas” se dedicaba a

hacer la brujería, magia negra. Una noche ella se levantó y le escuchó susurrando un dialecto a Satanás del "Libro negro". Poco tiempo después, en una noche oscura, la gente del pueblo, cansada de sus fechorías, decidieron lincharlo pero una y otra vez se les escapaba.

Juan Pistolas tenía dos hermanos: Herminio y Pedro. Un día, Pedro, el mediano, decidió acabar con su propio hermano. Agarró su caballo y se dirigió a la cueva donde vivía el brujo. Llevaba un litro de gasolina. Cuando llegó comenzó a rociar toda la choza con el líquido, prendió un cerillo y quemó todo. Juan Pistolas estaba dormido después de una de sus corridas nocturnas y no anticipó el ataque.

Cuenta la leyenda que Juan Pistolas murió a manos de su propio hermano, pero su alma en pena sigue andando arrastrando la cadena que lleva atada a sus pies y a su alma: es prisionero del diablo. Hasta la fecha la gente se acuerda de sus infamias.

THE LEGEND OF JUAN PISTOLAS

Yesli Dayanili Pech Pech

The legend goes that in a village called Dzidzantún, in the Yucatán, when night fell the chains began to clank. People told of unusual things that happened in that town.

The old people said that it was all the fault of a sorcerer who was known as Juan Pistolas. He was a hundred and five years old. His mother was a *mestiza*. By night he would transform himself into a large animal with the hoofs of a goat, the head of a horse and the hair of a monkey. His eyes, like a deer's, could only be distinguished at night when they reflected the light. Juan Pistolas would scare the village people transforming himself into an animal called a *Huay-Chivo*. After midnight no one could be seen in the streets because of the fear that he might appear. That animal left the house at midnight when the people of the village were already asleep. He would leave his hut, near San Juan Chuilen, where he would scare people by entering their kitchens and ransacking their pots, pans, and drawers. But really he was only after the food, and he killed the hens and turkeys by tearing out their hearts.

The legend goes that Juan Pistolas had married a woman who was younger than him. The woman was from Casacab, a village close to Dzidzantún. Although she had borne him two children, one night she abandoned him because she discovered that he performed witchery, black

magic. One night while she was dreaming, some murmurs awoke her; she walked toward where the voice was coming from, and found him whispering a Satanic dialogue from the Black Book.

On a dark night, the villagers, tired of his misdeeds, decided to lynch him, but again and again he escaped them.

Juan Pistolas had two brothers, Herminio and Pedro. One day, Pedro, the middle one, decided to finish off Juan. He mounted his horse and headed toward the *choza*¹⁵ where the sorcerer lived. He carried a liter of gasoline. When he arrived, he poured it all over the *choza*, lit a match and burned it down. Juan Pistolas was asleep and had not anticipated the attack.

That's how Juan Pistolas died at the hands of his own brother, and he drags a chain tied to his feet and his soul; he is the devil's prisoner. To this day people still remember his infamies

Notes

¹ Research for this article was supported by a Mellon Public Scholars Grant

² I understand Maya literature to include Maya folklore and stories written by people of Maya descent. Because both Pech Pech and Abreu claim Maya heritage, I classify both their stories as pertaining to to the tradition of Maya literature.

³ Yucatecan refers to inhabitants of the state of Yucatán, located in the north of the Yucatán peninsula, in South Eastern Mexico. Mérida is the capital city of Yucatán.

⁴ I am indebted for this interpretation to a conversation about Pech's writing that I shared with the noted Yucatecan writer and educator Lope Ávila.

⁵ Traditional Maya *leyendas* (or legends) are short written accounts of oral myths. They often begin with the lines "Cuenta la leyenda..." ("The legend goes that...")

⁶ Term of endearment for a grandmother.

⁷ Maize field.

⁸ An herbaceous bushy plant covered in yellow flowers that grows wild along roadsides and in fields in the Yucatán.

⁹ Pee.

¹⁰ Blows to the head or neck delivered with closed fists.

¹¹ A palm tree nut that has been stewed into a sticky, sweet candy.

¹² "Let's play."

¹³ Great-tailed grackle.

¹⁴ Black *sapote*, a species of persimmon also known as chocolate fruit, chocolate persimmon, or chocolate pudding fruit.

¹⁵ Typical Maya hut, frequently made of wood or mud and palm leaf branches.

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