

## Everything I Kept: Reflections of an "Anthropoeta"

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If I had to choose one aspect of my life that had the greatest impact on me as a thinker and a writer, it would be that I was born a Jew in Cuba. And after that, it would be that I came to the United States as an immigrant child, carrying this doubled sense of identity which would eventually be articulated in an American context in the English language, but always with a longing for the native Spanish that was spoken in my family. As a girl and a young woman growing up in New York, I struggled to find a way to give voice to the experience of being a Cuban immigrant, while always yearning to know the island that my family remembered nostalgically, but to which I was told we would never again return to live.

Like other young Cubans of my generation who came of age in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, I was politicized by the leftist and multiculturalist movements of the era. I searched for a way to take pride in my Cuban identity, while trying not to internalize the epithet of being a *gusana*, "a worm of the revolution," as those of us who left Cuba after the revolution of 1959 had been branded. The young Cubans of the era chose the slogan, "Not all Cubans are *gusanos*," and that's how I would have described myself at the time. Later, I refused to see myself in such negative, self-annihilating terms, when I came to understand that

such an epithet was part of a long Latin American legacy of disowning and declaring traitorous those who dared leave their homelands for “the other America” across the border. I decided that I would find a way to celebrate my identity as a woman of the diaspora, while still reclaiming my bond with the island that it was my destiny to lose as a child, before I knew what it meant to have a country.

As a girl, I thought that the best vehicle to express my feelings about these complex yearnings would be poetry and fiction, and I went off to college with the hope of becoming a writer. But I soon lost confidence in my voice as an artist. I was, then, the “Obedient Student” of my poem by that name, and when my teachers discouraged my efforts at poetry, I gave it up. Perhaps, ultimately, it was a good thing that I put aside my artistic ambitions, because it was a moment when I was searching for an intellectual framework in which to examine issues of language, culture, and belonging, issues I didn’t yet know how to ground in social and political reality. In my last year in college, an inspiring anthropology teacher convinced me I had the potential to become an anthropologist. Following his advice, I decided to turn my creative impulses to the study of anthropology.

Anthropology offered me a crucial intellectual and philosophical framework for my explorations of identity, memory, home, and the crossing of borders, the dislocations that are at the root of anthropological thinking and that are part of the lived experience of those who live in the diaspora. It was through anthropology, as well, that I was able to undertake the magical, and also politicizing, journeys into the everyday reality of people living in the Spanish-speaking world. My anthropology took me to a rural village in northern Spain, a small town in northern Mexico, and eventually, and essentially, back to Cuba, the root of all my wanderings.

I believe that the dreams of our youth never leave us. Even as I tried hard to conform to the norms of academic writing in the discipline, my anthropology became increasingly haunted by my longing for poetry. I told myself I was creating a poetic

anthropology, that I was an *anthropoeta*, unveiling the poetic underpinnings of the anthropological quest for home in a world of homelessness and homesickness.

And then, as I began to travel regularly to Cuba beginning 11 years ago, I found myself needing to actually write real poems again. Returning to the homeland I lost as a child made me want to claim poetry again as an essential part of my life. I found that initially, being back in Cuba, I could not do anthropology, I could not speak in the voice I had acquired through my schooling in the United States. I didn't want to turn Cuba into an ethnographic field site. I didn't want to be an anthropologist in Cuba. The experience of being in Cuba was emotionally so moving, so heart wrenching, so beautiful and so painful at the same time, that I struggled to find a language in which to express who I was and who I had become through my journeys as a woman of the Cuban diaspora.

I began to find the language I was seeking in poetry. Although I wrote primarily in English, I would create Spanish versions of the same poems that were more often new renditions of what I was saying in English rather than literal translations. Often, snatches of a poem would come to me first in Spanish and I would move from Spanish back into English. Through this writing, I realized that my need to have a voice in the Spanish language was motivated not only by my desire to return to Cuba, but that it came as well from a yet more distant past, from my father's Sephardic ancestors who refused to stop speaking the language of those who exiled them. My poems embraced a doubled sense of loss, a language of exile that had deep roots as it sought to express the immediate and current emotional impact of being back in my childhood home as a grown woman, with a fierce longing to belong, even though I had no memories of my native land.

My return to poetry would have been impossible without the anchoring provided by my intellectual and artistic collaboration with the Cuban artist Rolando Estévez, the artistic designer of Ediciones Vigía, a publishing house founded in 1985 that produces handmade books in Matanzas, Cuba, in editions of two hundred copies. These books have become collector's items, not simply

because of their small print run, but because of their excellent literary quality, their charming, whimsical designs, and the original way in which the artistry is produced on plain brown paper, proving that beautiful books can be made even within an economy and aesthetic of scarcity. Ediciones Vigía books are now known throughout the world, and major collections exist in Spain, Britain, Mexico, and the United States.

Reading and savoring the books of Ediciones Vigía opened my eyes again to the power of poetry, and of literature more generally, to speak the unspeakable, to soften our hard hearts. I was fortunate that Estévez and my friends at Ediciones Vigía encouraged my efforts at writing poetry, giving me opportunities to present my poems in Spanish to curious and compassionate audiences in Matanzas, who want to understand the desire for the island of Cubans like me, who live in the diaspora. I have had two books of poems published in Cuba by Ediciones Vigía, a small collection entitled *Poems Returned to Cuba/Poemas que vuelven a Cuba*, and recently a more ambitious collection of 40 prose poems in English and Spanish entitled *Everything I Kept/ Todo lo que guardé*.

*Everything I Kept* was inspired by and dedicated to the Cuban poet Dulce María Loynaz. The daughter of an illustrious general who fought for Cuban independence, Dulce María lived in a Havana mansion of faded elegance until her death at the age of 94 in 1997. Although she could have easily left Cuba after the revolution, her sense of patriotism kept her rooted on the island. Yet she wrote all of her major works before the revolution, and her wistful, meditative poems and intimate womanist fictional writing were not the kind of literature initially encouraged by the revolutionary process. She did not receive major attention for her work until advanced old age, when a younger generation of Cuban writers and artists began to seek her out as a model of artistic integrity. Later, in 1992, the Cervantes Prize was bestowed upon her by Spain, and this brought an international group of readers to her work.

It was Rolando Estévez who introduced me to the poetry of Dulce María Loynaz. When we first met, he was producing

stunning watercolors in which he used fragments of her poetry in combination with artistic renderings of her work. His artistic vision drew me to the humble and yet bold quality of Dulce María's voice, the mixture of melancholy, regret, and simplicity that pervaded her writing and which has often been likened to the work of Emily Dickinson. I was especially impressed by Dulce María's volume of prose poems, *Poemas sin nombre*, published in 1953. Acclaimed at first, it was soon forgotten, even, it seemed, by Dulce María herself, who feared her work had become irrelevant in the wake of the historical transformations wrought by the Cuban revolution.

I decided to write a series of prose poems that would evoke the mood and yearning of Dulce María's poems. The majority of my poems poured out of me in desperate haste in the last months of my 39th year and in the first days after turning 40. I was able to read many of these poems aloud to Dulce María, whom I got to know, and I was especially lucky to be present at a literary event that was held in Havana in honor of her 94th birthday, just months before her death. There is no greater gift than being heard by a poet you love, a poet who has moved you to want to be a poet.

In 2001, when Ediciones Vigía brought out *Everything I Kept*, I was delighted by the design that Estévez used to present the poems. On the cover of the book is a suitcase made out of cardboard. Inside the suitcase, which can be opened and closed with little strips of velcro (that had to be brought to Cuba by me from the United States, since velcro isn't available in Cuba), there are pictures of Dulce María and me, as well as an ocean scene, complete with sand from Varadero Beach, the famous *playa* of Cuba, where my parents honeymooned and where I was conceived. Also inside the suitcase is a Jewish star, wrapped in aluminum foil, marking the fact of a Jewish presence in Cuba. The suitcase evokes the desire to take things on one's journeys. It evokes the displacement of the immigrant, the traveler, the anthropologist. It is also the suitcase of our memories and dreams. And the suitcase that brims with our ambivalent desire to keep things, to want to keep things, the desire to keep things that shouldn't be kept, that cannot be kept.

The poems in *Everything I Kept*, a selection of which are included with these remarks, explore a variety of desires and regrets, fears and longings. Cuba is present in the poems, but so too is the US. The poems speak in the voice of a woman who is still searching for home, a woman who forgets to water her garden, a woman who longs for mangoes and has all the apples that are desired in Cuba, a woman who is driven to desperation every winter, a woman who has tomorrow and tomorrow. A woman for whom poetry is a cruel beast, the beast she cannot live without.

### GARDEN

I passed a garden yesterday. It was planted with every kind of flower. It was flourishing, every leaf joyously green, every flower open to the light. I slowed down to look. And I remembered that my own garden had gone dry because I forgot to water it. At the beginning of spring I planted sunflowers and geraniums. When they wilted, I stopped looking at them.

That is how I have lived my life: I refuse to see the things I abandoned, the things I let die.

### JARDÍN

Ayer pasé por un jardín plantado con toda clase de flores. Florecía ese jardín, cada hoja alegremente verde, cada flor abierta a la luz. Me detuve a mirar. Y recordé que mi jardín se había secado porque olvidé regarlo. Al comienzo de la primavera planté girasoles y geranios. Cuando se marchitaron, no los miré más.

Así he vivido mi vida: me niego a ver las cosas que abandoné, las cosas que dejé morir.

### OBEDIENT STUDENT

I was such an obedient student that when my teachers told me I wouldn't make a good poet, I stopped writing. I adored words more than anything else in the world and preferred to cut out my tongue rather than to insult the Muses with my sickly and impoverished language. That is why these poems are so timid: like

the invalid who rises from her bed after a long convalescence and walks embracing the unnatural walls.

### ALUMNA OBEDIENTE

Fui una alumna tan obediente que cuando mis profesores me dijeron que no llegaría a ser una buena poeta, dejé de escribir. Adoraba las palabras más que cualquier otra cosa en el mundo y preferí cortarme la lengua que insultar a las Musas con mi lenguaje enfermizo y empobrecido. Es por eso que estos poemas son tan tímidos: como la inválida que se levanta de su cama después de una larga convalescencia y camina abrazándose a las paredes.

### FEARS

I have so many fears: of the night, of growing old, of seeing those I have loved fall ill or die, of my own death. Those are normal fears, of course. But I also have stranger fears: of my heart pounding too quickly; of unexpectedly going blind and not finding my way home; of losing my memory before I find the time to write the stories still dormant in me; of cold winters which will never end. I am also afraid to get wet in the rain, to stand on my head, to run down staircases. And police, soldiers, and immigration officers terrify me. Yes, I am full of fears. If you took them away, I would be weightless and free. You would see me dance like a dry brown leaf and then I'd blow away in the autumn wind.

### MIEDOS

Tengo tantos miedos: de la noche, de envejecer, de ver a los que he querido enfermarse o morir, de mi propia muerte. Ésos son miedos normales, por supuesto. Pero tengo miedos más raros: de que mi corazón se ponga a latir demasiado rápido; de volverme ciega de repente y no poder llegar a casa; de perder mi memoria antes de que yo encuentre el tiempo de escribir los cuentos dormidos dentro de mí; de inviernos fríos que jamás terminan. También tengo miedo a mojarme en la lluvia, a pararme de cabeza, a bajar las escaleras de prisa. Y los policías, los soldados, y los

oficiales de inmigración me espantan. Sí, estoy repleta de miedos. Si me los quitaran, no pesaría nada y sería libre. Me verías bailar como una hoja parda, seca, y después me soplaría el viento del otoño.

### FOOTPRINTS

Oh dear grandfather in your grave, remember when my beloved boy was born? You came for the circumcision in joy that your first granddaughter had the good sense to produce a son. I was happy you were happy. My love for you was primitive, unable to doubt, earnest as the last leaf on a late November maple. The wounds of my labor healed as you tucked tired geraniums into cold beds of Michigan soil. Even the muddy footprints you left on the new baby blue bathroom rug seemed odes to life, sweet reproaches to time, smears of eternity.

### HUELLAS

Ay querido abuelo en tu tumba, ¿te acuerdas de cuando nació mi hermoso niño? Viniste a la circuncisión contento porque tu primera nieta tuvo la inteligencia de producir un hijo varón. Yo estaba alegre porque tú estabas alegre. Mi amor por ti era primitivo, incapaz de dudas, honesto como la última hoja de un arce a finales de noviembre. Las heridas de mi parto sanaron mientras tú acunabas mis geranios cansados en sus camas frías de la tierra de Michigan. Hasta las huellas de fango que dejaste en la nueva alfombra azulita del baño parecían odas a la vida, un reproche dulce al tiempo, manchas de eternidad.

### PRAYER

This happens to me often, too often: I am on my way home, driving down familiar streets, only a few blocks to go, and out of nowhere a merciless hand comes and grips my heart and wrings it dry. I tremble. Fog clouds my eyes. I am no longer sure if I am awake or dreaming. If I die, who will find me? All I can do is pray: Let me return home, I am almost there, please. . .



I don't know why this happens. What I know is that, so far, my prayers have been answered. Hardly breathing, I reach my house. And when I open the door, I hear many keys clanging, the keys my ancestors stubbornly took with them to their exile.

## REZO

Esto me pasa con frecuencia, con demasiado frecuencia: Voy camino a casa, manejando por calles conocidas, faltan solamente unas cuantas cuadras, y de no sé dónde viene una mano despiadada y agarra mi corazón y lo exprime hasta dejarlo seco. Tiemblo. Una neblina tapa mis ojos. No puedo saber ya si estoy despierta o soñando. Si me muero, ¿quién me encontrará? Lo único que puedo hacer es rezar: Déjame volver a casa, ya casi llego, por favor . . .

No sé por qué me pasa esto. Lo que sé es que, por ahora, mis rezos han sido contestados. Dejando casi de respirar, llego a mi casa. Al abrir la puerta, oigo el ruido de tantas llaves, las llaves que mis antepasados neciamente llevaron con ellos a su exilio.

## LETTER

My dear friend:

I have the autumn leaves. You have the blue ocean.

I have the wide and terrifying highways of the world. You have the crumbling streets of our tearful island.

I have the fear of a lamb in a den of wolves. You have the courage of a samurai warrior.

I have silver and steel; I have a house too big for me and a calendar marking the days when I will be away; I have tomorrow and tomorrow; I have everything.

You have the witness of your eyes.

## CARTA

Mi querida amiga:

Yo tengo las hojas del otoño. Tú tienes el azul del mar.

Yo tengo las carreteras anchas y espantosas del mundo. Tú tienes las calles derrumbadas de nuestra isla llorona.

Yo tengo el miedo de un cordero en una madriguera de lobos.  
Tú tienes el valor de un guerrero samurai.

Yo tengo la plata y el acero; tengo una casa demasiado grande para mí y un calendario donde están marcados los días que no estaré; tengo mañana y mañana; lo tengo todo.

Tú tienes la mirada de tus ojos.

## ORCHID

I bought an orchid last winter. It had a blooming flower that lasted for many months. I loved the orchid but I also loved the hand-painted ceramic pot it came in. One day the stem of the flower broke. I mourned the loss of that flower. Every morning I had held it with my eyes as I sat writing at my desk.

I missed the flower, but I knew very well that I was happy the pot was intact.

That is how I am: I cannot stand to see a beautiful ceramic pot shatter in pieces. I would rather every flower in my house wither than for one of my pots to break.

Unfortunately what you say about me is true: I seem to be more in love with things than with life itself.

## ORQUIDEA

Este invierno pasado compré una orquídea. Tenía una flor que duró muchos meses. Adoraba la orquídea pero también adoraba su maceta de cerámica pintada a mano. Un día el tallo de la flor se rompió. Lamenté la pérdida de esa flor. Todas las mañanas la había aguantado con mis ojos mientras escribía en mi buró.

Extrañaba la flor, pero sabía muy bien que me alegraba de que la maceta estaba intacta.

Así soy yo: no soporto ver una linda maceta de cerámica hacerse pedazos. Prefiero que todas las flores en mi casa se marchiten a que una sólo de mis macetas se rompa.

Desgraciadamente lo que dices de mí es cierto: parece que amo más a las cosas que a la vida misma.

## APPLES

I regret many things, but none so much as the time I refused to buy the five red apples for little Amanda in Cuba. The apples were very expensive, it is true. Terribly expensive, even though they had a few bruises. They were for sale in dollars and only I could buy them for her. I thought: Why does she want apples when it is the mango season and everywhere there are plump, juicy, big, yellow mangos falling from the trees? But she wanted apples, the ordinary fruit of cold northern lands. And I would not buy them for her.

Now it is autumn here and apples are everywhere. But I long for mangos.

How sour are the apples that would have made little Amanda so happy.

## MANZANAS

Arrepentida estoy de muchas cosas, pero de ninguna tanto como de aquella vez que me negué a comprarle en Cuba las cinco manzanas rojas a Amandita. Las manzanas eran muy caras, es cierto. Terriblemente caras, a pesar de estar un poco estropeadas. Estaban a la venta en dólares y sólo yo podía comprarlas. Pensé: ¿Por qué quiere manzanas cuando es la época del mango y en todas partes hay gordos, jugosos, grandes, amarillos mangos cayéndose de las matas? Pero ella quería manzanas, la fruta ordinaria de las tierras frías del norte. Y yo no las quise comprar.

Ahora estamos en otoño y hay manzanas por todas partes. Pero yo añoro los mangos.

Qué agrias son las manzanas que le hubieran hecho a Amandita tan feliz.

## BEAST

I scratch at the silence with my nails.

Look at my fingers bleed!

Poetry—cruel beast, why do you hide the words from me?

## BESTIA

Con las uñas arañó el silencio.  
 ¡Mira mis dedos como sangran!  
 Poesía—bestia cruel, ¿por qué escondes las palabras?

## OFFERING

A few months ago I would have said goodbye.  
 I tell you, I was ready to shut the door and not look back.  
 I tell you, I did not expect to touch you again.  
 I tell you, I had forgotten how to kiss you.  
 That was in winter, and winter drives me to desperation.  
 Closed windows, locked doors, days like shadows, and memories  
 of an island to which I will never return.  
 Forgive me, I lost a country, I cannot be trusted. So take this  
 offering. Light me like incense. Watch me go up in flames.  
 Turn to ash.

## OFRENDA

Hace unos meses por poco te abandono.  
 Te digo que ya iba a cerrar la puerta sin mirar para atrás.  
 Te digo que no pensaba tocarte otra vez.  
 Te digo que me había olvidado como besarte.  
 Eso fue en el invierno, y en el invierno me desespero. Ventanas  
 cerradas, puertas bajo llave, días como sombras, y recuerdos de una  
 isla a la que nunca voy a volver.  
 Perdóname, perdí un país, en mí no se puede confiar. Así que  
 toma esta ofrenda. Préndeme como incienso. Mírame arder.  
 Hacerme ceniza.



*Everything I Kept (Todo lo que guardé)*  
mixed media by Rolando Estévez