

Grindia

By Gizella Meneses

“In the Borderlands...
you are at home, a stranger,...
To survive the Borderlands
you must live *sin fronteras*
be a crossroads.”
-Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*

Here it comes, the customary question followed by the obligatory response. I try to guess what he means: Where are you from? Okay, so I'm in graduate school in Tempe, Arizona, the daughter of Ecuadorian parents, who has lived most of her life in Chicago, talking to the cashier as I order my chicken shawarma. Oh, the tedious familiarity. I'm too white to be brown, too brown to be white, too *nacida aquí para ser de allá*, and too Latina to be American, but sometimes I can be Greek or Middle Eastern or Italian. His eyes dissolve as I shed my skin, but here's my order of lightly seasoned rotisserie chicken peeking out of the pita and enabling my great escape.

I thought I had enough labels, but the Southwest provided me whole new menu options. Scene one: Dinner party at neighbor's house. Where are you from? Ecuador? I've been to Ecuador. You don't look Indian. How is it that you don't look Indian? Scene two: You're not Ecuadorian; you weren't born there. Scene three: *Si vos sos gringa, mirá como hablás el inglés*. As a child, I use to recite, “my family is Ecuadorian, but I was born here.” There had to be the

furtive disclaimer: birth right. Everyone else was White. You don't say White when everyone else is White, but when you're an Ecuadorian child raised in Chicago and Quito, who speaks Spanish at home, and has an unusual first and last name –well, then you have some explaining to do.

My parent's peculiar taste in nomenclature landed me a Germanic name; maybe if I were from Austria or somewhere in Europe, I wouldn't be so unlike my classmates. I loved my Ecuadorian family and I loved Quito, but I prayed that God might transport them all to Salzburg, *Sound of Music* still en boga in the 70s, and then maybe I would be more akin to my peers. Looking back, it's the one time I was glad that field-matter transport had failed, and, well, yeah, unanswered prayers.

My visits to Quito throughout my entire life have brought me on occasion to this place where the north and south meet –the equator. If you visit the Mitad del Mundo, the site in Quito, Ecuador that separates the north from the south, you will find a pyramidal monument which marks that spot. You can take pictures of loved ones straddling the northern and southern divide by placing one foot in each hemisphere.

Often, I have reflected on this space and my relationship with it. Throughout my life, I have straddled two hemispheres and have lived in the space to the north and the space to the south, as well as the liminal space in between. I only know what it's like to be part of two worlds: Latina in the United States and gringa in Ecuador. My cousins in Ecuador lovingly call me grindia, part gringa and part Indian (or part of that large indigenous culture of Ecuador). I am an expert straddler and can easily hop to the north and then to the south, but mostly my feet stand at the rand. This is my borderland—my own mestiza consciousness.

Since Eliana's death, I have reflected on the equatorial marker. This spatial relationship is again playing a part in my life. This time, though, I have been thrust into two opposing worlds: one of horrendous pain and emptiness and the other of quotidian life. I guess the latter world was and is a part of all of our lives, but the challenge is to live in that world while also living in the world of loss: the unimaginable and unnatural loss of my child. It is not unnatural in that it does not occur, but rather that the very nature of the death of a child shifts the order of things: grandmother dies, mother dies, child dies –this is, I suppose, the natural structure. When it is otherwise, however, this seismic displacement magnifies the absolute incongruity of life. *Este arrebatado*, and every *arrebatado*, as Anzaldúa observes, tears you away from home, “Cada arrebatada (snatching) turns your world upside down and cracks the walls of your reality...You are no longer who you used to be. Exposed, naked, disoriented, wounded, uncertain, confused, and conflicted, you're forced to live *en la orilla*—a razor-sharp edge that fragments you” (547).

Shortly after Eliana died, I read a book on Judaism and grief, and I learned an interesting fact. After a Jewish family experiences a loss, a circle, a visible and tangible marker, is placed around the home. Those who enter the threshold of a house of mourners have to physically lift their foot over the marker in order to pass. Once in the abode, your comportment changes accordingly. There it was, *mi línea equinoccial*, *mi Ecuador*, not only in my entryway but everywhere I turned and everywhere I stood. I was suspended between spaces, between times and between emotions. I would be forever marked by one moment, and my life would be forever branded by before and after.

On the first-year anniversary of my daughter's death, the first space, that of despair and emptiness, was most predominant. I was, though, able to somewhat function in society, engage in conversations on our surviving children's lives; discuss politics or the state of the world; and

maybe even catch a movie. I prepared meals for my family, cared for my girls' needs and walked the dog. I also stood in front of a classroom and lectured on the Conquest of the New World or the intricacies of the subjunctive –*mi dolor imperceptible para los demás*.

The loss of our child, and the impact on our family life, is what occupied most of my thoughts, even while focused on other menial tasks and conversations. I straddled and still straddle two planes of existence. Initially, during the first few weeks and months, I only lived in one plane, where the noise and movements of everyday life were not a part of my purview. I couldn't remember to take care of my own basic needs, such as bathing, eating or hydrating. Slowly and for the sake of my surviving daughters, I have learned to function again in simple but meaningful everyday life. However, that plane where life moves on effortlessly despite the suffering in the world and, on a much smaller scale, despite personal suffering and loss, has been and is still somewhat of a stranger to me. It starts with the seemingly innocuous question of "how many children do you have?" At the grocery store, it expresses itself through the words of the cashier when he mechanically asks, "how are you?" or tells you to "have a nice day." It is especially infuriating going to the park, running into other moms with their small babies and their simple pleasures and their simple conversations of which I desperately wish I could partake.

A school mom recognizes me and approaches me in her affable, carefree manner and proclaims, "you must be so thrilled that both girls will be in school all day this fall." I manage a little smirk, a crack of the lips, and offer a change in conversation. There's no thrill and no excitement about sending them off to school and coming home to a horribly quiet, empty house. That particular fall Eliana would have been 20 months old, and I would have relished in the boisterous conversations of my toddler and the high spirits this wonderful age would have

offered. I look desperately to my other daughters, desperately to escape the benign ignorance of ordinary oral exchange on an ordinary summer day.

A few months after Eliana's death, I was working on a film project at Lyons Township Television (LTTV), where, through a connection, they generously allowed me to borrow their computers along with some of their time. It required me to drive to a southwestern Chicago suburb about 40 miles from my home. Since I wasn't quite capable of returning to teaching that semester, editing my film and sitting in front of a computer seemed more or less tolerable and required me to get out of bed and bathe. Since I worked alongside young, single men in their twenties, I felt safe knowing that they would not ask any questions about children or family life. As far as they were concerned, I was someone else in the room working on a project, someone who occasionally piped up to request some help.

I had just exited the toll way and was heading east on Ogden toward LTTV. It was uncannily sunny for Chicago in mid-November, just three months after Eliana's death. I was suspended in thought: rewinding, forwarding, rewinding again. Two blue, flashing lights waved me over to the side of the road. "What the fuck now," I thought, I hadn't even been speeding. He walked up to my window and asked, "Do you know that your sticker expired last month?" Life was a fog of nonsense. My baby was now a pile of ashes, her cold, lifeless body an image I couldn't shake, and here he was asking me about a sticker on the car. Otro arrebató, disconcerted, disoriented and just plain dissed, that was my orilla, and here I was falling, again. There was the sudden burst of tears and the uncontrollable weeping and shaking in front of this utter stranger. He asked me what was wrong, and the words came out in between sobs. "What was her name?" I couldn't tell if he was testing me and wondering if my outburst was worthy of an Oscar, or if he was giving her memory a voice, a name; I long to think it was the latter. He

gave me a warning but no ticket, and I was left hunched over the steering wheel, thrust to the curb like road kill, my chest drenched in tears and snot, otra vez hendida.

Nine months after Eliana died I became pregnant. Suddenly, I had a barrage of cashiers, delivery personnel, postal workers, receptionists, and other casual encounters inquire about my brood. Again, such a benign query in the realm of small talk encounters, but now I had to have a plan: If the person was one that I would never meet again, my response, as I pointed to my belly, was simple, “this is my fourth.” Of course, there were the curious few who needed me to elaborate with age and names. I would, and still do, comply and include Eliana and give the age she would be at the time. If it’s a new parent at the school who doesn’t know our story, then I say four and explain that I have a daughter who died. Usually, anxiety sets in since I’m not sure how I’ll react, and I’m not sure of his or her response. Sometimes I am brought to tears and, depending on the person’s level of comfort or discomfort, I might receive a hug or a pat on the back. The uneasy ones, however, will quickly change the subject, look to the ground in search of a drop-floor getaway or find another person who will rescue them from my mire.

I’m driving south on 10 toward Tucson. It’s been years since I’ve been back to Arizona, 11 to be precise. There’s a Chevy El Camino Conquista in front of me with a torn bumper sticker that reads, “Como México no hay dos” –la ironía palpable. Once again, I am adrift. Where was I...11 years ago...oh yeah, reading poesía modernista, watching Latin@ theater and eating chicken shawarmas. I am bereft of my former self. Bereft, now that’s a palabra I know well. I pass Casa Grande and the White Dove of the Desert. One final billboard before my exit: “23 sabores blended into one extraordinary taste... inconfundible.” Yes, I am home.

Works Cited

Anzaldúa, Gloria. "now let us shift...the path of conocimiento..inner work, public acts." *this bridge we call home: radical visions for transformation*. Eds. Gloria Anzaldúa and AnaLouise Keating. London/New York: Routledge, 2002. 540-578. Print.