

The Tourist's Antidictionary

By Jennifer Schneider

Belonging *Noun* English

*When vines sprout from your legs and wrap
around the land you call home.*

I thought myself at home at eleven, with my brother on the Peruvian coast. We leaped over crabs, seashell slices, and tiny sea urchins we call muy-muys. Later in Mexico, I lost my identity amid companions who ate spicy gummies and burned their mouths with so much chile that they developed holes in their tongues. There I clutched for the affection offered by a pair of blue eyes until my infatuation withered my chase for windflowers.

In Peru, I learnt to dance salsa in parties thrown by girls who did not need a fake id to drink Pisco, and in Mexico, I snapped my tendons from twirling and jumping in dance festivals adorned with

cempasuchil flowers. I feared forgetting the tangy taste of ceviche and of gefilte fish while painting flowery skulls and cured my infatuation by reading *Twenty Poems and a Song of Despair*.

I felt like an immigrant when my Peruvian compatriots complemented me on my Spanish and asked me if I was a gringa. In the land of spice, my name got shortened until I got written as the Peruvian girl in the school's dictionary.

Yet, I feel wary of defining myself as an immigrant here in Canada. Guilt punches my intestines when I think of my grandparents selling fabric at the docks of El Callao Port, and of my Venezuelan friends who have fancy lawyer degrees and still had to work minimum wage jobs.

Should I instead give myself the identity of a traveler or a tourist? Maybe I should just create an antidictionary; a pastiche of Nicanor Parra creating antipoetry to reject language's rules. Just as Parra

declared that shoes should be named coffins,
I declare that country is a synonym for books.

Kinehora *Verb* Yiddish

*The wish for G-d to ward you from bad
tongues by wearing an evil eye bracelet.*

We Jewish people believe in the power of letters and names. My grandmother Eva taught me not to write God. Our faith compels us to write G-d.

When G-d cast Eva away from paradise, she walked through Noah's ark, the Egyptian exodus, the dual nations of Israel and Yehuda, to the exile of Babylon, the Maccabi revolts, the crusades, the Spanish inquisition and landed in the small town of Hrubieszów in Poland, where the matriarch reincarnated in my grandmother Eva.

Eva longed for wine and sweet gefilte fish while traversing the green landscapes of Germany in June of 1939. In a couple of months, the greenery would be replaced by ashes and the windflowers would not bloom

again in the coming spring. With their blonde hair, Aryan features and shut mouths, the little family escaped in a train towards a transatlantic boat.

To quiet their heartbeats, they silenced Yiddish words and exhaled with their hands in a bittersweet game of charades. Eva saw windflowers blooming in the saltwater of the Pacific Ocean and heard the tanned Spanish immigrants share stories in a language that would soon become hers.

After docking at el Callao port, Eva grows up amid tangerine peels, and prepares sweet gefilte fish for her own shabbat dinners. My grandmother whispers kinehora when her grandkids board separate planes in the Jorge Chavez airport, and hopes they find windflowers in other parts of the continent.

Windflowers bloom when I feel safe as an immigrant. Windflowers are the national flower of my home.

Quetzalcoatl *Noun* Nahuatl

A feathery-serpent deity that created mankind and controls Mexico's bipolar weather.

The Inca God Inti governed grey skies. The Aztecs have many sun gods, but they choose to pray to a feathery snake. My new school has grey walls, ironed barred windows and a day of alternative workshops called "health day." I spent the morning listening to a conference between a drug addict and an alcoholic, and the afternoon preparing aromatic oils with the etymology teacher. I stare at the blue skies waiting for the start of the psychological drawings class and think about my best friend back home in Peru. The first time she saw a blue sky, she thought the painter mistook the colour palette.

The presenter asks us to draw a person. I turn my page horizontally and pencil in a fifteen-year-old girl with grey eyes and open palms over a squared floor. I inhale the lavender smell of the aromatic oil and

watch as the rain begins to pour. How ludicrous to have deities fighting over your beautiful Mesoamerican sky and still choose a rain-controlling snake to guard your empire. I never saw the rain before I left Lima.

"Drawing yourself doing an activity means you are creative..." says the psychologist to the kid sitting next to me.

I smell the lavender oil and think how I could wax poetic about the rain, but I could not draw a landscape without mixing the colour palette and painting the sky grey. The kid gives a self-sufficient smile.

"You are the Peruvian girl, aren't you? The one that speaks funny. People say you pronounce Starbucks like Starb/a/cks" he says. I nod.

"Cool." I secretly snicker at his Spanglish and think that Mexicans behave like Latin gringos. "Did you live in Machu Picchu?"

The rain ticks away the class. I approach the psychologist to get a personal review of my drawing. Unlike my classmates, mine has no ears. The psychologist claims that Mexicans draw ears in their personality tests because they are more alert. Must be all the spice.

“Hmmm so you drew horizontally, which means you are not comfortable with authority. You colored the eyes, so that’s a body part you are insecure about.”

I adjust my glasses and nod. Maybe if I pray to Quetzalcoatl the rain will stop.

“What else...open palms; means you are an open person. And a floor... You are the only one with a floor and no ears! Means you are processing a big change. What might that be?”

I wonder why I cannot be artistic or cultured, rather than new and accented.

“Didn’t you just move from this little country in South America? Guatemala, maybe?”

I smear lavender oil behind my ears. The rain keeps pouring and the sky is still blue.

Mamihlapinatapai *Noun* Yaghan

The look lovers share during a silent charged moment, when both want to initiate something, but neither knows where to start.

I imagine my cousin Vivian and her spouse experience Mamihlapinatapai when she decides to leave for Costa Rica. Windflowers colour the windowpanes. The heat tickles my skin. We sit with Vivian’s new family a day before her wedding.

Vivian dances in the tropical paradise and I think that is how it ought to be. You fall in love with a country and its people and eventually get the accent. Vivian loves Ronnie, Gallo Pinto as breakfast, the Manuel Antonio beach, and the foreign friends at her kindergarten job. She walks a path to belonging filled with volcanic cleared-water views, and Ronnie’s eager friends and family.

I hope I adapt to the taste of chile
when I move to Mexico next year.

I hear that Mexicans are open.

Eishet Chayil *Noun* Hebrew

Poem for the strong proud Jewish Woman.

Three women from the same family
migrated to another country.

The first, Eva, arrived at Peru with
one hand in the front and the other one
behind her back. She traded death for selling
fabrics from house to house.

The second, Vivian, packed a bag
filled with a job, a husband, and a house. She
stamped palm trees and a list of friends on her
passport.

The third, your writer, feels halved
between the extremes of her family's history
of migration. She hides in books from her
inability to belong to a fixed identity.

I admire Eva.

I feel jealous of Vivian.

Mazel Tov *Noun* Hebrew

Expresses congratulations or good luck.

“I don't recognize myself anymore.”

The air is hot and humid. Light shines
upon the tents. One in the morning looks like
the golden hour. We sit at the corner of the
camp where the rest of the grade sleeps.

“I don't know how to talk or act
anymore. I used to be proud of speaking
openly, *sin pelos en la lengua, without hairs
in my mouth.*”

I link my arm with his, as tears rain
down my face. A cow moos in the field.

“I feel like I have become dependent
on you, I don't know what to do anymore.”

I hate that I need you to defend me.
You are the only honest person that allows
me to speak openly. I love discussing with
you. Belonging to someone terrifies me.

I keep quiet.

“Have you thought about going to
another school?” he asks.

I sway from front to back, in a praying
motion. I laugh as the tears melt like saltwater

in my mouth. Windflowers grow around me,
yet I only smell lavender.

“I just changed countries; I’m tired.”

The cow moos at the stars, like a wolf
howling at the moon. “Just...promise me that
we’ll grab a coffee sometime. I’ll miss you.”

His blue eyes laugh at me.

“I’d love to. We’ll still be friends.”

I clear the stones under my sleeping
bag. Twinkling lights, the grey shadows of
trees and the sound of cows at a distance lull
me to sleep. I smile for the first time in a year.

The literal meaning of Mazel Tov is
“may your stars align”.

His blue eyes have not laughed at me
since.

Chingar *Noun* Mexican Slang

To humiliate, punish, deceive, or fuck.

My new high school blooms with
cempasuchil petals and windflowers. I left
the grey walls behind, next to blue eyes and
tales of girls living in Inca ruins, but carried

the rain and the smell of lavender. My new
foreign friends talk in prose and live inside
novels.

I read *Pedro Paramo* on a tour of the
cactuses in the Mexican landscape. Juan
Preciado is killed by murmurs in his travels.
Windflowers grow alongside agave leaves
and page after page I fall in love with the
Mexican concept of death. The Aztecs view
death as another phase in life.

The novel reads, “I don’t know, Juan
Preciado. It’s been so many years since I’ve
raised my head that I have forgotten about
heaven. Even if I had, what would it have
mattered?” It matters because the sky paints
the heavens either blue or gray, but God
should still listen. It matters because my soul
bled out of my mouth just like yours,
Dorothea, yet I chose to travel through
novels.

I then read *The Labyrinth of Solitude*
and I understand. I immigrated to a country
whose Aztec Gods were murdered, an orphan

town that bleeds for an identity. A country that calls foreigners the sons of la *chingada*, of the inert passive mother: “To the Mexican there are only two possibilities in life: either he inflicts the actions implied by *chingar* on others, or else he suffers them himself at the hands of others.”

The only breath in the country of spice and deceit is la fiesta, where society revolts and negates its paradigms, to open itself like a flower where norms are discarded in favour of dancing with God and kissing life itself. In the parties of Mexican words and culture, even a Peruvian daughter of la *chingada* such as myself can belong.

Juan Preciado migrated to the mouth of hell and I migrated to Mexico. I burned my mouth with spices, developed friendships a bunch of gastritis, learned to despise Taco Bell, prayed through traffic, fell in love — *debatable*—, changed high schools, said goodbye by a pair of swings, moved to a place where the grass is frozen rather that

green, was brought back *twice* by a global pandemic, and read Octavio Paz.

The flowery skulls I paint give way to parties and I immerse myself in the labyrinth of solitude.

Mar *Noun* Spanish

The sea, and the name of my deceased pet.

White bubbles pop and windflowers bloom in the seafoam. My brother Jonathan dives into the dark saltwater wave, while I submerge my whole body and float on my back. The freezing Humboldt current tickles my ears and I stare at the beautiful grey sky.

“I want to stay here forever.”

“You’ll starve. Or get bitten by a jellyfish,” Jonathan replies while digging for *muy-muys*.

“Maybe I’ll turn into a mermaid and drown you,” I say, splashing him.

“I want to move abroad, maybe to the US with all its fancy technology.”

I sit on my knees facing toward the coast and use the next wave as impulse to surf horizontally. Jonathan submerges once again.

“I don’t ever want to move. I’ll be in the same class as my best friend until we graduate and live here with our family for the rest of my life.”

We run as sand covered monsters toward the coast, careful of not stepping over any jellyfish. Daniel, the lifeguard, waves at us, clutching a red wounded crab in his tanned hand. We build sandcastles with Mark the crab (“its name is *Mar*, Jonathan”) and fill a bucket with dark sand, saltwater and *muy-muys* to take the Mark home.

We munch on ceviche and peel tangerines while regaling our family with the tale of saving a drowning crab. When the sun burns, we look for Mark to take him home, and stare at the tiny red crab lying dead in the makeshift home we built for him. My mom grabs mine and Jonathan’s hand. We walk with shame toward the beach.

“We killed Mark,” I mutter, while the sky turns from dark grey to bright grey.

“Not everyone can adapt to living outside of their home. The sea is humid and has all the food Mark needed. Do you guys want to say some last words to him?”

We bury Mark next to the broken seashells on the Peruvian coast and hope that the sea waves drag him back home, to the place where he was happy and saw windflowers bloom.

Tefilat Aderech *Noun* Hebrew

The traveller’s prayer Jewish people cry over every generation.

In Peru, the brand Coca Cola buys the Peruvian soda Inka Cola. An elderly couple prepares wine and sweet gefilte fish for two, while whispering about their aching hips in Yiddish. Eva sips on Inca Kola and says hi to her whole family over a zoom grid.

In Costa Rica, Vivian visits the town of Limón where the Caribbean population

speaks in Spanglish and has gringo names.
Her children play charades with the
neighbours and eat sweet corn tortillas for
lunch.

In Mexico, women dance dressed as
calacas for the day of the dead while growing
cempasuchil flowers. People pray to the
virgin of Guadalupe near the temple of
Quetzalcoatl and get drunk off tamarindo
flavored tequila. During parties, cows moo
the word “cool” at a distance.

In Poland, Jewish kids clutch the the
tefilat haderech while visiting the Poleise
National park. Windflowers bloom over
ashes for the first time since 1939. They vow
to remember, hold eleven and a half minutes
of silence, and continue the walk started by
the matriarch Eva.

In Canada, I befriend a group of
immigrants, swim in postcolonial novels,
pray for my mom and the beach, eat tacos and
drink Inca Kola at Kensington market, hate
on Chipotle, learn the history of the

indigenous land, stare up at the CN tower,
and burn my ears with snow.

Still, in the verses of Derek Walcott’s
Omeros, in the voices of Canuck strangers on
the TTC, in the bittersweet taste of pad thai,
and in Drake’s lovesick crooning, I search for
belonging.