

A SONG FROM TIAHUANAPU

With the earnest wind of the summer is not how this story shall open. Seasons have been erased here since countless moons ago, and the wind only blows at night, and it's painful. We lost track of time as we lost even the last of our dimes. Do not beware, there is not much to tell. No ghost to be scared of, no laugh to be expected at the end, but perhaps a moral. Or, as I insist, nothing at all.

I was born and raised in just another unnamed village on the island of Tiahuanapu. A place so far away, so meaningless, so trifling, I dare you to look at your pocket map and find it because most probably, you won't. You will, and on a whim, strive to locate this dot between Punta Cana and Mayaguez, and even with a very clear magnifying glass, it will be as hard for you to detect it as for me to find one good reason to keep on believing in this place.

We are eleven siblings. That is perhaps eight too many, or in my case eleven too many since we can barely afford anything for anyone. There is Ana, Ben, Cali, Dean, Eva, me, Gaia, H, Iva, Job and the youngest. There is me in the middle. Always me in the middle. In the middle of nothing. The three youngest are the lucky ones. The new mayor of the village is planning on building an elementary school to open in three solar eclipses. So, the youngest will go, but not me. It is pointless for me to even start to complain because by the age when your breasts start to show, no primary school will take you in since you are supposed to be an adult by then and all that. I just really want to know how to read. So, I just draw and remember what everything means.

It is not my voice who is speaking. I don't speak English but Tiapú. Of course, you've never heard of it, and to be fair, I don't blame you. I think if my mother tongue was also to be English, I would not care for any other language, especially for one so secluded. And useless. And from a miserable island in Central America. I've borrowed someone else's voice to tell this story. I've heard English before, maybe once or twice, and I know five words. That's three more than my brother Dean, who is two pregnancies my senior.

I don't know why my parents continue having children but what really leaves me speechless is how my older siblings have kids of their own and all under the same roof. My sister Cali hasn't spoken since she got pregnant the sixth time she got her period. Her daughter is starting to grow her teeth now and yet, is older than my youngest brother. We are all cramped in a teeny-tiny cabin, with no bedrooms, no windows, no doors, just one massive accumulation of wooden fragments that try to build a floor. I think it was three years ago - I'm trying to use your language here, reader, we don't measure time in this area of the globe - three years ago that the entire island was ravished by a very heavy earthquake. You can then picture in your mind the size of the island for a natural disaster to touch it in every fibre of its entity; probably not a very big one.

One lonely lake at the centre of the island connects every Tiapú person into a place of sorrow. We don't really know how it was created, but we know how to keep it alive. Everyone in Tiahuanapu has the duty to, when in times of pain, go cry there instead of their own dwelling. I'd say I go there perhaps every two or three mornings. But we're not allowed to touch the water. We don't bathe there, we don't drink it, we don't even think about playing there. We do all that at the shore. We need to keep the water of the lake alive for when the next natural

disaster strikes. No one has ever given it a name, because here, we only name the things that we are sure will last. That's why for the first long moments of a kid's life, we don't call them in any way, not to get too attached to them.

And the lake always comes across as a limbo.

There is something in my ear I don't seem able to get rid of. Quite a sharp but melodic sound that embraces me and messes a bit with my balance.

Some people in our village don't have a voice. They're perfectly capable of pronouncing all the vowels and consonants there are. Not a problem. They just don't have anything to say, really. Nothing really ever happens here. Not to me at least. That's why I keep quiet. But I do have dreams. I dream of leaving this island and going nowhere, anywhere, where things really happen and people actually smile. We barely see any teeth in Tiahuanapu, they eventually fall because they lack their purpose. Since I came to this afflicted earth, there were at least five seasons in which there was absolutely nothing to feed the village with. The children were the first to die, my mother always said she had had the strongest kids, none of us was ever near death, maybe we're not even worthy of that. Was that something to feel lucky for? I have seen children born and relinquish life here more often than I've been a witness of one happy soul. In those moments, the lake was far from being a desert, we were all lamenting there. One thing that we can be proud of is that there has never been one crime in our village. Apparently, this is something that occurs even in the happiest of places and regardless of how well everyone is doing. Not one murder (life is a bigger punishment), not one rape (we all get voluntarily pregnant anyway), not one robbery (not one thing worthy of been stolen). Our weaknesses end up being our strengths. I guess I should care for my land at least just a bit but there is not one thing that I would rescue. My parents don't know anything about this because of the invented language that I keep in my diary, not that they would really care or be shocked.

Ana takes care of the four up until Eva, and I take the other five. Gaia hasn't left the house since her birth, what a painful day for my mother that was. She's afraid of leaving the cushion where she came to life, we're not even sure why - but we don't question it. Her eyes are not working and in a way, I envy her. She's not capable of beholding all the calamities and misfortunes I was forced to observe growing up. We are not going to kill each other but the village is going to try to kill us all. Gaia is my favourite sibling. I feel that her entire life is in my hands and she is perhaps the only reason why I haven't tried to swim away and leave for another island. She dares to smile because she doesn't understand the world that we live in. She perceives things more gracefully.

There is a melody stuck in my head, from time to time, a melody I know she would love, but I don't have the secret to pass it to her. Gaia has never been seen walking and she is as quiet as an image. She has never created any trouble, unlike my other nine siblings. I wish there was a way. A pill. A potion. For my mom to stop this competition she has with herself. Her womb must have become hostile by now, and my father can never say no to her. I guess the feelings he has for her are the strongest. I guess I wished there was a word for that. I guess it's all pure

magic, the way he looks at her every morning with unconditional devotion, and at night when she falls asleep in his arms. They're each other's most precious thing and there is nothing they wouldn't do for the other. I wish I knew the word for that feeling, but I wouldn't use it other than for my parents because I'm pretty sure

that this will never happen to me.

Today, something unusual happened. The morning felt uneasy because we were embraced by a lukewarm breeze and a very bright and yellow ray of sun. Gaia had been awoken for long. She came running towards me, breaking my sleep. I had a dream that night. But more importantly, Gaia was moving.

"You are walking little sister!!! You are walking!!!" I cried with the loudest emotions running through my veins, but she shushed me instantly. She didn't want anyone in the cabin to know about this, but my tears were already running from my face. I was feeling the joy of my sister invading me in every way possible. But she begged me to keep quiet. And she said that I should follow her. I know she was taking me to the lake, she knows I owe it the village to let my tears rest there. But she didn't know how to get there, she had never been there.

I ended up guiding her there, but we had to run. Gaia's heart was pumping faster than our feet, faster than our pace, faster than life itself. My tears were running even swifter in my face and managed to get to the pond on time for them not to go to waste.

But today, something unusual happened.

There was someone in the lake, when we were told countless times that we were not supposed to be there. And this man looked nothing like me. Everyone in the village had very big black eyes, but his eyes were slanted like an arrow. My skin was carbon black but his was kind of yellow, but not the yellow you get when you are sick, he looked full of life. He was barefoot, wearing little to nothing to cover his personal area, had a very long beard and looked dirtier than all of my brothers combined. But there was something about his smile. You couldn't put a price on that. He had a couple of very old timpani on the small wooden boat he was standing so peacefully on. I felt the need to talk to him, but I knew he wasn't from here. I tried to remember some of my words of English, and managed to say hello to him and my facial expression was so confusing, he must have understood that I was expecting an explanation. He smiled to himself, stood up on his boat, looked straight into my eyes and kept quiet for a few instants.

And then in the clearest of Tiapú, he sang to me:

How would you describe those things to me?

The things that

cannot be bought and cannot be sold,

cannot be held, though can be told.

And roses as all material things, they fade,

but not the words, they're out of sight,

and those, I'll take them to the grave.

And even the grave itself will turn into dust

and that dust, gone will be.

Yet the wind prevails,

for that I cannot touch.

How many of the things

do I take for granted today?

Because my eyes allow them to be,

or my hands mark their beginning,

since I can divide them into several different pieces.

Pieces of worthless

material

nothingness.

How empty, thus, would you feel to admit

that the empathy of the stranger

sitting next to you

has more weight than the crystals

and stones you so boastfully wear this day?

And what about my own soul?

It is the things that I cannot touch

the ones that touch me the most.

Shortly after that he disappeared. And I swear to all the gods I don't believe in, that this message changed forever my vision of things.

That was Gaia's melody. The one that has been stuck in my head for this long. Maybe this man had appeared in my dreams. Maybe from my cabin, I could hear him every morning but never seem to acknowledge this was real. Maybe he wasn't real. But at least this moment was.

And the song is to this day stuck in my head, but those were his words, not mine. I needed to respect his privacy and his rights.

I never learned how to read. By the time the school was built, I was already in my grave. But I drew this before going away, about a man I shall not forget.

In this forsaken village

of unnamed identity

one lonely man,

a clown

with a pair of drums

stands right in the midst of nothingness

staring at something only *he* can see,

gazing at it with the blindest of devotions.

And the drummer kept on drowning in

those dreams that others didn't dare to dive in.

And as clear as the sun rises every morning,

the loch kept on flowing earnestly,

even though it bathed no one,

not a soul,

that gave one dime about this unmistakable

enticing oasis of tenderness and zeal,

no one

but the drummer,

who from a crooked home built another one,

right here

from below

out of emptiness

for him to be

the only son

the lonely sun

the forlorn king

in this no man's land

of unnamed identity.

And to this day, I have the memory of my sister running free from her burden, even though every night she lies, now in a bed, in absolute darkness, and she keeps this moment forever a secret.