

Frida & Diego, or Among Musicians Only

Willy Lizárraga

E, antes de ser uma história de espectros, é uma história escrita por um deles Sergio Sant'Anna, O Voo da Madrugada

I know we were notorious for our wicked cha-cha groove, but this is no funky cha-cha no more, I should warn everybody. Cha-chas, no matter how twisted, no matter how wicked, aren't suited for this kind of darkness. This is a tango, un tango macabro. Carlos Gardel meets Edgar Allan Poe in a dirty and stinky alley in the Mission. This is when the bolero gets drunk, the blues turn upside down and the ballad collapses under the weight of its own pathos. This is a song too ghastly for words. That's why I don't have to worry about singing it (and secretly wish I didn't have to write about it). This is a tune, at least in theory, ideally suited for Rosie in her *Evita La Desaparecida* mode, so she could blow her most noir trombone licks, although it would probably be Cuautemoc's sax leading, as usual, making sure the lament is juicy, warm yet desolate.

Of all instruments, however, the bass with its grave, low voice is the perfect one to carry the burden of highlighting the crucial silences and breaks in this tango, which means that we are in Brendan's hands. His chubby fingers, after all, have always moved fiercely up and down his contrabass with the overt intention to rule over the rest of us, his appetite for power only matched by his appetite for burritos. Fortunately, we had Ali, unafraid of dissonance or a power struggle, ever ready to harmonize anything that came his way with his light, sensible yet swingy piano style.

As for Jesús, our "guitar matador," this would be his chance to go deeply flamenco and play "dark and tough como los cojones de un burro." Meanwhile Alberto would most likely leave the congas aside and opt for the cajón (not *cojón*, please), "Cause el cajón, mi hermano," as he used to say, "is the king del silencio."

So, yes, it is in principle an impossible tune, a forbidden dance (if there is such a thing), a censored-in-the-Mission-District story based on a series of improbable events that we have sworn to keep as secretive as we can –although writers are always selling somebody out, I tell myself, quoting Joan Didion, as if to remind myself that I might be a traitor but can't really be blamed for that, or for being a hack, dangerous and ridiculous like a virtuous man in an imperfect and corrupt world.

This is my chance to play the villain, I suppose, so all of us could play the victims of our own ethos, the blind leading the blind and guided only, at least in the beginning, by the unremarkable yet unforgiving rattle of a rusted Safeway cart rolling down the empty streets of a sleeping city lost in the fog.

For it all started with that metallic and repetitive sound in the middle of the night and with Jesús, our guitar matador, feeling not quite responsible for his actions. He had been hit hard by the Spanish Blues, a seasonal affliction that rendered him cantankerously at odds with his surroundings:

"Coño," he would scream, "tell me if there is anything more pathetic than San Francisco after midnight. At least with the fog I don't have to see that I live in a fucking cemetery de la hostia."

He knew what he was talking about, too, since almost every night (and never before two in the morning), he had to face the streets of San Francisco as he walked home after closing *Café La Michon*.

"I mean, where are the fucking hipsters, the beats, the ex-hippies, the diehard punks de los cojones?" He would go on. "Where are the weirdos, the artists de la hostia, the so-called bohemians del coño de su madre? Where are the dotcomers with their baby faces and loaded with money? Where are the pimps, the whores, those classical creatures of the night? Where is the fucking music and the hip and multi-culti San Francisco youth, me cago en Dios? Why isn't everybody flooding the streets of this supposedly world-class city and enjoying the late night como gente civilizada, manda cojones?"

Needless to say, once Jesús felt this "deeply flamenco," there was no turning back. He had to go to Manolo's studio on Virgil Alley and share a joint with him as he listened to Manolo's unpolluted Madrilenian accent despite almost a lifetime in San Francisco. And since I can never go to bed before sunrise, and that night I certainly didn't feel like going home to write, I decided to walk with him. It wasn't that unusual anyway for us to keep each other company on our way home from *La Michon*. We lived two blocks away. So there we were, walking down Valencia Street practically blind because of the fog and Jesús, next to me, going on and on about what "an insipid city de los cojones San Francisco is" when we first heard that monotonous rattle hammering against the night's slippery frog-like skin.

Then, when crossing "the border" while remembering how much Alberto liked to call Mission Street "Tijuana" and Valencia Street "San Diego," and not before Jesús added that "the distance between the two can't be measured in blocks, man," we noticed the rattle got awfully close to us, close enough, in fact, to give us a first glance of the floating wake of her white dress as she pushed the cart away with a desperate sense of purpose, like a homeless bride late for her midnight wedding.

That was it, really. Or maybe I should say that was all it should have been. But then came a wet, cold, sticky urge to follow her as one pursues a ghost, an urban legend, a myth that had already left its fragile yet immortal mark on the most inhospitable alleys and hours of the Mission. It was about time, we told each other, we ran into La Llorona, The Boogie Man's Bride, Frida La Loca, condemned to push her cart full of brushes and paint cans in penance for our sins.

It could be argued, of course, that maybe all we wanted was to watch her paint; all we cared about was to witness the almost miraculous fact that madness had somehow not been able to take everything away from her, especially what she loved most; all we needed was to have a chance to mourn and come to terms with the death of the Amanda we knew and our death inside her impermeable world. Considering, then, that in a city big on murals, Amanda Vargas was one of its biggest stars ("The Joan Baez of the Bay Area muralists," the local press called her), it could never be overstated what a monumental tragedy her mental breakdown had been. And given the fact that it was (and it is) simply impossible to walk the streets of the Mission without running into her murals, I guess it was only to be expected that after that night, we would begin to take late-night walks "chasing Frida."

That was how it all began (and ended, of course). That was how once, twice, sometimes three times a week, after Jesús flipped the open/closed sign hanging from La Michon's door, Rosie, Cuate, Ali, Jesús, of course, me and whoever else wanted to come with us, would venture into the night hoping to hear the sound of her cart, follow the flash of her white dress and (with almost unctuous reverence) watch her paint her placa on a wall or garage door, as we wondered if in her madness she was still able to recognize her artistic legacy, those giant and dramatically contorted hands and faces ("When I paint," she used to say, "I only care about hands and faces") capturing and expressing the outer and inner drama of "the brown people of America," to quote another phrase she loved to repeat and that we imagined had also lost all meaning for her.

"You guys talk about your first acid trips and going to your first wild concerts, well, *hijole*," yes, that was Amanda's keen expression, a big, long, very Chicano *hijole*, "let me tell you about my first political rallies and marches. Actually, let me tell you about my big one, the one I consider the beginning of my real life, which must have been in '66, maybe '67. *Hijole*, I'm getting old, *mano*. Anyway, Coretta King came to speak at Kezar Stadium. And you know what? She got me, *Si-món*. She and the people around her pierced my heart. I swear. They made me realize that history is something you make, not something you read about in a book, you know. And I'm not saying that my life would've been different if I hadn't attended that event. But the brothers and sisters I met at that time were goddamned dedicated and organized, like I'd never seen. They weren't even scared of the cops. I mean the cops were scared of them. That's why I decided to hang out with the Panthers and they sure taught me everything I needed to know."

For all her dedication to murals, when Amanda spoke in public (or maybe I should say when she spoke as a public figure), it was the radical prima donna who came out at the expense of the artist, at the expense of everything else, really, including irony, which up to this day continues to be Rosie's greatest complaint about Amanda's murals.

"If you'd just learn to put your politics aside just a bit, *che*," Rosie would tell her, "you have no idea how good you could be."

To which Amanda would respond: "D'you want to paint murals, Rosita? Be my guest."

Their rivalry, though, had very little to do with art, politics or the use or abuse of irony. It was just plain old mutual jealousy at first sight. They were both born to rule and be followed, which meant that they didn't spare a single opportunity to turn any exchange between them into "one more bloody chapter in the battle of the *mamasotas*." When it came down to appreciating Amanda's art, however, we all had to admit that Rosie was the best art critic around.

"Her politics, as you all know, can be corny. No question about it. But Amanda's murals," Rosie would explain, "are the most powerful emotional chronicles of the Mission. She can be clichéd. Sure. But she's the best *cronista* we have. And you know why, *che*? 'Cause she paints struggle like no one else. Maybe that's all she knows how to paint, but she's damned good at that."

We all thought, of course, that Amanda wished she could talk about her own work the way Rosie did. We also thought that it would make more sense for the local press to compare her to Bob Dylan rather than Joan Baez. For just like Dylan, in order to cover up her hyper-sensitivity to criticism, she usually ended up seeming too haughty (in an awkward way) and unnecessarily provocative, especially in radio interviews, which meant that they would always censored her most honest

(although not necessarily eloquent) answers. Like: “Híjole, cabrones, my job is to paint and raise hell. Let the fucking art critics do the talking.”

When you asked her about her politics, on the other hand, it was almost impossible to shut her up.

“Well, since you asked, I’d say I consider myself an exile from the Central Valley, Fresno, to be more exact. Which is a great place when you’re a kid, don’t get me wrong, but I really didn’t want to die there. So, going to college was the perfect excuse to leave el pueblo behind, you know. And although I had no idea what anthropology was all about, that’s what I came to study at San Francisco State. I lucked out too ’cause there was so much political activity going on that I didn’t really have to study.

“I mean, in those days, híjole, San Francisco State was Radical City Central. And our department was the mother of all radicals. That’s why I was a founding member of the TWLF. Yeah, yeah, I know you guys have no idea what I’m talking about, right? What do musicians know about the real world anyway? Well, the TWLF was the Third World Liberation Front. Hey, no fucking laughing, Alberto. We represented all the ethnic minorities on campus and our main goal was to start an Ethnic Studies Department. Hayawaka was president of the university and Ronald Reagan was governor. Talk about double trouble. Well, we confronted those cabrones and closed down the university and eventually won after a long and bloody, I mean brutal strike...”

According to our most trustworthy late sixties historians, Amanda and Alberto must have met for the first time around May 1969, a highly volatile period for racial politics in general and in particular for the Mission District. A police officer had been shot in the barrio, apparently in a scuffle. It had all started when two young Latinos were loading a car and the police thought they were stealing whatever they were carrying. Seven young men were accused of the murder. And by the way the police acted, it was as if every young Latino in the Mission was guilty by ethnic association, particularly if you had long hair. Amanda Vargas helped to organize legal assistance and services for “Los Siete de la Mission,” as the accused were known. She also worked on Basta Ya, a newsletter born out of the conflict.

From drumming in Dolores Park, Alberto knew Gio Lopez, one of Los Siete. Nobody had seen or knew anything about Gio’s whereabouts since the day of the shooting. Rumors had him hiding in his grandma’s basement, living in Cuba or dead. So Alberto and a few drummers went to the improvised offices of Los Siete de la Mission to find out about Gio. Amanda told him that nobody knew where he was. She also took the opportunity to ask Alberto to distribute flyers calling for an emergency meeting to collect funds for the other six who were in jail. Alberto gladly agreed to help and asked her if she needed any drummers “to warm up the event.” That was how their friendship began, a friendship that also included, according to Amanda, “some casually hot and muy chingona sexual lubrication.”

A year or so later, by the way, Los Siete were acquitted and freed. Gio Lopez was never found. He had, indeed, hijacked a plane and gone to Cuba and, as far as everybody knows, has been living there happily ever after.

“What revolution are you working on, Amanda?”

“I’ve seen your latest mural and I’ve noticed the cops look like dogs and the dogs look like Rosie with a mustache. Is this a political statement or something personal between you two?”

“Hey, look here, Amanda, they desperately need revolutionaries in Peru. They even pay your airfare. Only one way though.”

“And in South Africa too.”

“A couple of homeless men came by last night looking for you, ’Nanda. Did you tell them this was a homeless shelter or something?”

“What’s our next gig, Ms. Revolution? Did you find us a gig playing for the Dykes on Bikes For a Free Nicaragua or for the Jews For Jesus Against Circumcision?”

“Maybe it’s a benefit for Puerto Ricans on Welfare Against U.S. Involvement in Central America, man.”

You could only tease Amanda lightly, though, and not for too long. She was as famous for her gigantic murals and radical ways as for her temper, the reason why, we suspected, her daughter Isis was the most well-behaved girl we ever knew. Isis’ good behavior, on the other hand, could also have been the product of her abuelita’s old-school Mexican influence. She usually spent more time with her, anyway, than with her mother. Amanda was just too busy with a zillion

community projects.

On a more personal note, I have to confess I found Amanda “a bit off-putting,” to borrow one of Brendan’s favorite expressions. She had learned the hard way how to find apprentices, collaborators and funding for her mural projects. So she could be cold, bossy and bluntly manipulative. She was also perhaps too fond of making sure we knew her connection was essentially with Alberto. We came only after him.

There were no harsh feelings between us, though. She appreciated our readiness to give her a musical hand whenever she needed a “banda pachanguera” for her innumerable fundraising events; and we never took for granted the way she so tenaciously promoted our band among the local progressive groups. We were also keenly aware that we owed to her both our first official outdoor concert and our last, the latter with the added attraction of a mural painted by her about us, which now has the peculiar honor of being her last mural. And the block party that came with it now stands in our collective memory as the closest thing to her last and final farewell, all framed and punctuated, of course, like every performance of ours, by Alberto’s MC Tropical rants:

“Yes, adorable ladies and disreputable gents, we’ve gathered here to celebrate a very special feat: another incredible mural by Amanda Vargas. Doubly incredible and special, in this case, because we’re in it, of course. Oh, yeah, we finally made it into an Amanda Vargas mural. So I guess this is as immortal as we’ll ever be. We can die in peace now. D’you have any fucking idea how this feels? It’s like being alive at your own funeral, let me tell you...”

I should also note that, as if to make the event even a bit more historically melodramatic, we had above us the same uninvitingly gray sky we had during our first outdoor concert, the same used, rusted hypodermic needles, the same dog and human shit decorating the alley. The general feeling, though, just like at our first concert, couldn’t have been warmer, effusively so.

“It feels like we’ve been given a Grammy for lifetime achievement, man,” Ali kept repeating.

Cuautemoc, by the way, was absent. He was touring Europe with Francisco Aguabella’s band, the reason why we had to rely on Jesús’ Santana-ish guitar to ground us in our old-school funk, which took a couple of songs to get back but, once we got it, the groove was as “hot and cool and guapachoso” as ever. And while we played, I remember looking at Amanda in her favorite white Frida Kahlo dress and thinking to myself how pronouncedly thinner and aloof she looked, removed from everybody, including her troupe of “young, anarchic, post-nuclear revolutionaries,” as Alberto called them.

I also remember sharing this thought with Ali, and being surprised at his absolute indifference. Apparently he had more pressing artistic and emotional concerns at that moment. He was pissed off at Amanda because the pianist in the mural didn’t really look like him.

“Look at the mural, man, except for Rosie and Alberto, the rest of us aren’t really there, at least not in any recognizable shape or form.”

Overhearing Ali, Rosie replied: “It’s got Pescaíto Frito’s spirit, though. Can’t deny that, Alligator, o no?”

It did. Without being a naturalistic representation of us, the composition captured something essential about our band. On the other hand, Ali was right. The only true-to-life characters were Alberto with his big afro and mustache, flying like a manta ray over his congas, and Rosie with her short, spiky hair, wearing her Black Widow Special, absolutely contorted into a backbend, blowing her trombone to the heavens. The rest of us were sort of generic, retro-looking musicians, which now I am tempted to attribute to the fact that Amanda was, by then, already losing her mind and probably felt the need to finish the mural in any way she could. Having said this, there was something endearingly campy and poetic about the seven of us with our fierce salsa, samba and cha-cha-funk kings glamour intact.

As everybody expected, as our last official homage to Amanda, for the grand finale we played Amanda’s Torera-Ranchera, a song that throughout the years had become her favorite and that, ironically, had nothing to do with a traditional Mexican ranchera, the type of music she usually played when she painted. It was actually a popular Spanish paso doble that Jesús liked to play when drunk and that we had turned into a dirty-merengue and dedicated to Amanda because she was (who else?) the true reina de las mujeres. And when I started to sing morena, oeoaoá, la reina de las mujeres... just like in the old days, Alberto got up and began to run around the audience like a mad bull, which was all Amanda needed to jump in to play the matador. And after a few passes, as she had done it so many times throughout their long and peculiar friendship, she killed Alberto-the-Bull with one stroke of her magical dirty old broom.

That was the last time we saw Amanda laugh. I mean laugh with us, not the crazy laughter she acquired after her breakdown that even now, just thinking about it, sends goose bumps up my spine.

After our “funeral block party,” we must have seen Amanda maybe two or three times, very briefly (each time looking thinner and thinner). Then she disappeared. When The Day of the Dead came and went and she didn’t show up to recruit us, we began to seriously worry about her. Every year, she had to come up with a new Day of the Dead concept, costumes and choreography included. It had become our inescapable moral duty to be in charge of the drumming and the music.

Then, one day in early December, our landlord stopped by to pick up the rent (we were late, as usual), and instead of screaming and uttering the traditional concentration-camp threats, he told us, in a state of almost blissful good humor, he was selling El Castillo. We had until the end of January to move out. As the landlord walked out, Luis, Amanda’s brother, walked in and confirmed the worst rumors.

“I’m afraid Amanda’s pinche gone, man. She doesn’t even recognize her family,” he said.

Rosie and Alberto went with Luis to the Psychiatric Ward at General Hospital but they weren’t allowed to see her. The rest of us tried several times and failed too. Three months later, we managed to see her under the supervision of two very bossy nurses. She didn’t know who we were and left the room right away, absolutely uninterested in spending time with us. I remember walking out of the hospital feeling angry at her, as if she had pretended not to know us or if it were somehow her fault that she had lost her mind.

We had moved out of El Castillo, by then. Jesús and I, in fact, were the only ones left in the Mission. Brendan had left for Seattle. Rosie had moved to San Rafael. Cuautemoc and Ali had settled in Berkeley. Alberto rented a studio in downtown Oakland, although for all practical purposes it could have been Seattle since he rarely came by to see us. We even wondered if he would come to Jesús’ grand opening of Café La Michon.

Then came the night Jesús and I ran into Amanda’s ghost, followed by many others accompanied by the rest of pescaitos fritos.

One night, driving in Ali’s cab, we saw Amanda pushing her cart down 16th Street. She was wearing the same Frida Kahlo dress she had worn at our mural block party, and for the first time I noticed she had painted her eyebrows in such a way that she appeared not to have a face anymore. It was all taken over by one big black uni-brow across her forehead, which contrasted with her now totally gray and wild hair. She appeared extremely busy talking to herself.

Some other night, I was high or drunk enough to walk up to her and ask her what she was painting.

“The house is falling down, there’s fire under our feet. They all love artists, unless you eat pizza,” she said.

“Are you okay, Amanda?” Ali asked her.

She didn’t acknowledge his presence and walked away, mumbling something like “M’ija, remember what I told you, all men are a bunch of cabrones perverts.”

At some point, she began to stop by La Michon once in a while before closing time. Jesús got into the habit of having a doggy bag ready for her. Sometimes she would be in a talkative mood and pretend to have a conversation with us. I say pretend because she couldn’t really hear us and we couldn’t really step into her world.

“Híjole, the fruit in the market is all rotten, all gone to Tijuana. Wanna help?”

We worried about her safety. We spread the word so people would protect her and not be scared of her. But kids often insulted her and threw rocks at her. We heard a gang had raped her, five or six of them. Then, one night, we saw what we shouldn’t have ever seen.

It was a cold, windy night, “like fucking Glasgow” Brendan would have said if he had been with us. It was a Tuesday night. I remember it clearly because I had my Russian Novel class from seven to ten. Afterwards, I would normally stop by La Michon for a bite to eat. I didn’t mind them making fun of me for going to school (“when you should be

thinking of your fucking retirement, Foncho”). When I walked in, they were getting ready to go out for “a Frida chase.”

The Day of the Dead was coming around again. So, for nostalgia’s sake, Jesús decided we should go to Balmy Alley, following the procession’s original route. We were about to turn into the alley from 24th Street when we first saw her white silhouette pushing her cart, moving about as if waiting for somebody, wired up, nervous. The usual. Then, as we crouched behind a few garbage cans, we saw Alberto approaching from the other end of Balmy. From the very first glimpse, we recognized his unmistakable afro and that pimpish tumbao of his. Nobody else walked like that.

She seemed genuinely happy to see him. She ran toward him, embraced him and kissed him on the mouth. Then they walked holding hands toward her cart. She picked up a brush and painted a contorted doodle on a garage door. When she finished, she went toward him and kissed him again for a long time. She raised her skirt, bent over. He undid his pants and penetrated her from behind.

“I don’t know how can he get it up, coño, con el frío de la hostia que hace,” Jesús whispered in my ear.

I put my hand over his mouth. I don’t know if I could have lived with myself had they discovered us peeping at them.

As Alberto pumped her from behind, we could hear her urging him on with a raspy, masculine voice:

“Harder, pinche cabrón, can’t you fucking fuck like a pinche man?”

Alberto grabbed her by the waist and pumped harder. She kept talking and moaning:

“Ay, cabrón, you’re a pinche sissy or what?”

It went on and on, long enough for us to experience a whole array of emotions in which shame and lust were impossible to tell apart. Finally Alberto collapsed all over her.

An incongruous silence flooded the alley. It felt as if we had been swimming in a pool and all of a sudden the water had dried up and we were now lying flat on our bellies on the floor, wondering what had happened.

It got cold. Amanda turned around to look at Alberto who bent over and kissed her. We began to shiver. They kept on kissing, Alberto still with his pants down and inside her, Amanda with her white Mexican dress rolled up to her waist and leaning against her cart parked against a garage door. Then he began pumping her once again.

“Manda cojones, macho,” Jesús whispered.

Somehow we managed to muffle our nervous laughter by biting into our jackets, burying our faces, suffocating, willing to die, willing to do anything, really, not to be discovered by them.

Then came this awkward, unspoken pact to not talk about it, like the sudden appearance of a silent universal law forbidding us to mention what we saw but not preventing us from obsessing about it. And so far, it never fails to take a hold of us, especially at closing time, right after Jesús locks La Michon, and he and I face the wind and the fog and the night as one faces an old wound or an invading army.

Occasionally, though, one of us feels reckless enough to mention something about that night or all those nights that preceded it, after which we tend to feel outraged at what we did, followed by a rather physical sense of guilt.

“I don’t know what it is, but I feel it in my stomach, coño,” Jesús would say.

Then there are those nights when I tend to ask the same question over and over again (Ali calls it my “one note samba”), as though somehow I believed that if I find an answer I would free myself from being hunted by what I saw.

“What I’d like to know, man, is how come Amanda recognized Alberto? I mean, she never recognized us, not even her family. That’s what I’d like to know.”

To which Jesús has only managed to come up with one answer so far:

“Coño, how do you know she recognized him? How do you know they didn’t have a totally new thing, free from the past, something fresh like Frida Kahlo and Diego Rivera de los cojones? How do you know?”