

Living the Unedited Life: An Interview with Alma Luz Villanueva

Interviewed by Octavio Quintanilla

Alma Luz Villanueva was raised in San Francisco's Mission District by her curandera/healer Yaqui grandmother, Jesus Villanueva, with the assistance of her mother, Lydia Villanueva, and her sister Ruth Villanueva. She began publishing poetry in the late 1970s, winning first place in poetry (the Chicano Literary Prize) at the University of California, Irvine. She has written eight books of poetry and four novels, and her work has been included in several anthologies. Villanueva has taught at several institutions, including the University of California at Santa Cruz, Naropa Institute, Stanford University, and now Antioch University in Los Angeles, where she is involved with the low-residency MFA in Creative Writing program. She lives most of the year in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico.



Octavio Quintanilla: *Song of the Golden Scorpion* is your most recent novel. What were some of the challenges you had to overcome when writing it?

Alma Luz Villanueva: I think of Sherman Alexie's words, "What is my truth and how do I tell it?" Every poet/writer faces this challenge if the work is to be alive and authentic. When we bring our characters to life on the page, we must breathe our truth/breath into them. And then we begin to dream together—the characters, the writer. The poet, the song. With my own students, I teach the "dreaming process," the fictive/waking dream, and 98% of the time they're set free to dream, to fly. Many of my students have gone on to publish, and I am very proud of my "dreamers." But on a personal note, since I have four grown children and two grown grandchildren, I know that most likely they're going to read my writing—so that's always a hurdle I must leap/fly over. After the novel was published, I received from my granddaughter Ashley a mystery gift in the mail with no note: a beautiful, golden scorpion covered with crystals. My youngest son, Jules (same age as Ashley, born in the same year), just laughs at me—"We know you're human, Mom."

The novel is broken into four parts, and each part begins with an epigraph by Rumi. What's your fascination with Rumi?

I pick up Rumi at least twice a week (Neruda also) for inspiration, so when the characters in *Song of the Golden Scorpion* started to haunt me, as in "When you going to start anyway....," I found this Rumi quote: "Gamble everything for love/if you're a true human being." I wrote it down at the top of my notebook—I write everything by hand first (like Toni Morrison and Louise Erdrich, so I'm in good company). And then my characters began to come to life on the page; the journey was begun. This Rumi quote led me to others throughout the novel; from the thirteenth century so alive and *human*, and in love with *The Beloved*. And so his quotes were a wonderful spirit guide with this novel, as was Neruda's poetry, another guide of sheer passion. I also read other poets, of course, but these two spirits were my main guides.

When the characters speak Spanish, it is immediately translated into English, which is a way to guide readers who do not know Spanish. For example, in the opening scene, when Javier knocks at Xochitzalita's door, Xochitzalita says, "Quién

es, who is it?" This is done throughout the novel. At first I felt the translation interrupted the narrative, that maybe it was unnecessary, but the more I encountered these moments, I found myself expecting them as part of the novel's cadence. Why did you feel that doing this, translating Spanish as you went along, was necessary?

My first language was Spanish. When I went to school at six, I could read in Spanish. I read poems out loud often, and I wrote very simple poems, stories. I was immediately punished for speaking only Spanish (the racist 1950s, even San Francisco). I was taught English by a beautiful Mexican, bilingual nun next door to the Catholic school I was switched to (from the very punishing public school). She sat behind a wrought-iron gate of black roses and very patiently taught me English, daily. Now I'm a writer/poet mainly in English—but as my poem from *Soft Chaos*, "Wings (fear and fearlessness)" states in the final stanza, "I dream in Yaqui, / I know in Spanish, / I reveal in English, / I fly without / words." I'm bilingual and tend to write that way, although there were passages in the novel when I didn't translate, of course. I'm in touch with a professor in China, who tells me she loves *Dear World* (my bitch and moan, sometimes praise, poem, a book in its twentieth year). Poetry/writing/music crosses all borders.

It seems that Xochitzalita's grandmother is everywhere. Xochitzalita smells her in the food she eats, sees her in the hands of waitresses, hears her in mariachi songs. At a church, when visiting El Niño Doctorcito, Xochitzalita thinks of her grandmother and says, "En cambio tu nunca mueres, Mamacita ... In transformation you never die." Was your grandmother the inspiration for some of these passages? And if so, is this your way of keeping her memory alive, in continual transformation?

I've had people at readings thank me for Mamacita—I cry, of course—and they tell me that she's become their mamacita. How wonderful! I heard this song—"Niña, cuando me muera no llores en mi tumba / En cambio si tu me cantas, yo siempre vivo y nunca muero"—here in Mexico, and of course, she continues to live within me, as all those we've loved continue to do. And as writers/poets we sing them to life (in one guise or another).

Your character, Xochitzalita, a well-read, intelligent professor of photography, is familiar with García Lorca's concept of *duende*. She's a poet herself. She sees it everywhere in Mexico. In the way people live, for example. You have lived in Mexico for many years, and I am wondering in what ways you have felt in Mexico what García Lorca meant by *duende*. How have you experienced it in the everydayness of living there? Do you ever witness it in the U.S.?

The other day, while shopping at my vegetable/flower stand on the main street, La Ancha, I heard the sound of a band playing a sweet, cheerful tune which announced a funeral procession. Six men carried a casket behind a white hearse, with all the family and friends walking behind. Everyone held a black umbrella—for el sol, some privacy—and the large group walked slowly. Cars, buses, trucks stopped; no one honked their horns. Everyone stopped to honor El Duende, the passing of our deaths/transformation. As my "flower guy," Gabriel, handed me the flowers I'd picked, he smiled gently. "El muertito," he said. Not a stranger, someone else's death, but a shared experience: El Duende lives in us all, giving us endless passion for la vida. This happens often, the procession through the main street to the very beautiful,