

The following historical/Magic realist novel was originally published in Spanish as *La Cueva de Naltzatlan* by the prestigious publishing house, *Fondo de Cultura Económica* of Mexico City in 1987. Excerpts of the translation that follows is by the author.

THE CAVE OF NALTZÁTLAN

A YOUNG MAN'S JOURNEY INTO HIS MAGICAL PAST

Arnoldo Carlos Vento

*In memory of our autochthonous ancestors
whose spirits are linked with universal thoughts
who make us relive a remote and true ancient past*

THE BOY with the dark, luminous eyes had traveled an eternity. He had followed the path of his destiny since his departure from the sierra; yet it seemed less than an instant since he had heard the resonant voice of the old man with deep-set eyes, like the sudden gusts of wind at dusk by the cave of *Naltzátlan*.

Take heed, my son. Few perceive the true course of time. Listen closely so that you might come to understand. Even the peace-loving doves have mourned the fruitless womb of Our Mother Earth. Look deeply into the knowing eyes of the owl; his cries forewarn us of troubled times to come. You have traveled endlessly and have witnessed the darkness of the past. The time has come for you to begin your quest.

The words of the old man rang out like an echo in the distance...he became aware, nonetheless, of his existence as he seemed to float in a warm and tranquil ocean; like an endless dream that had sheltered him through the centuries.

The footsteps of the boy now rebounded between the cragged walls of the sierra as he began to feel the burdensome weight of his thoughts. He had traveled a great distance but knew that he had to carry on. He felt that his wounds had healed from the final battle against the barbaric invaders, murderers of women and elders in the name of God. It was useless to muse over the years of victory, the crusades at twilight; useless to think of the rituals in sacred temples celebrated by priests in golden robes. Everything was like a surging sea, a constant wavering of existence.

The boy sensed the earth pulsating in time with his thoughts as everything hastened because the moment was now imminent. His attempts to control the rhythm of his being had merely left him conquered by the inevitable path, and as a witness to an explosion, he found himself in a cold and foreign world of chaos and alienation...Contemplating the counsel of the old man, he realized that this was only another step that he had to take. His departure was his arrival and his arrival another departure that he had to make...

In the background, the majestic sierras of *Naltzátlan* penetrated the towering white clouds that touched the distant sky. It was there, where people greeted poverty each day, that I had begun my journey once more. It is said that I emerged mysteriously from a cave and that even as a child my eyes glowed like lanterns in the darkness. They say that it was on a night when torrents of stars fell from the heavens. I do not know...I only know that time has eluded my grasp as the sun bathes me with its warmth by day and the moon with its sweetness and joy at night...And now the years have slipped away like sand through my fingers and once again I have heard his voice.

The footsteps of the boy were no longer heard as he emerged from the sierra. He was now entering an arid, solitary void, gradually becoming a small, dark point on the eastern horizon; transforming magically into a distant spark that flew swiftly through the vast dark sky of night...

The inconspicuous appearance of *Santos Aguila de la Paz* in *Santa María* went undetected by the community. No one seems to remember the date, but *Doña Chemita*

insists that it was before the arrival of our Holy *Virgen Santa María de los Remedios*. Like many small towns in the valley, the Mexican and "American" neighborhoods of *Santa María* were divided by the tracks that ran parallel to highway 83. On weekends, the Mexican barrio was alive with activity, as businessmen on the "American" side profited from the little money the Mexican workers earned toiling in the fields. And on weekends the *cantinas* also came to life, disturbing the peaceful tranquility of the neighborhood with their juke boxes playing continually throughout the blessed night.

*Ya vamos llegando a Pénjamo
y se devisan sus cúpulas...*

"What is your name, *mi'ijo*? Who are you?"

Santos Aguila found himself in a room filled with medicinal aromas in an old-fashioned bed with three overly-soft mattresses.

"Santos Aguila. Santos Aguila de la Paz, *ñora*."

He remembered hearing *Doña Chemita's* soothing voice praying without pause for hours on end while touching spiritual points on his body. *Doña Chemita* was a short, energetic woman of medium build who had lived a hard yet peaceful life. She was known throughout the valley as a generous curandera, always ready to serve her fellow man. Her clear, dark eyes illuminated her face, projecting a perennial smile. *Doña Chemita* arranged her hair neatly in a bun with several dark combs. Her countenance projected a saintly grace within. She dressed simply in dark colors, always carrying along a rosary, crosses and many other items necessary for her practice. *Doña Chemita's* generosity was legendary throughout the valley. Always ready to help at any hour of night, she humbly accepted the fruits and vegetables of the poor, never once charging a fixed rate for her services. And it was generally known that she had brought more babies into this world than any doctor in the valley.

"Where do you come from, Santos?"

"I come from many places, *Doña Chemita*."

"Enough said, *mi'ijo*. You must rest now. Your spirit has endured a long journey. Drink this tea and you'll feel better. Believe me, I know what is good for you. Thank God and Our Holy *Virgen Santa María de los Remedios* that you were left on my doorstep."

After two days under *Doña Chemita's* care, Santos Aguila began to ease himself out of bed in the night. He sat in an old armchair and peered through the darkness with eyes wide open, sensing the peace that prevailed in the household. He could smell the damp wood of the hallway as he felt the morning mist engulf the orange trees and caress the roosting hens huddled together in their coop. The rooster sensed it too and dutifully

delivered his usual morning call. Immersed in this oneiric state, Santos' spell was broken by the voice of *Doña Chemita*:

..... The endless cacophony of automobiles passing by outside the church seemed to disturb the priest, distracting him from his daily ritual. I could hardly wait to see *Don Jesús* who would be waiting outside with his *compadre* Leonides. *Don Jesús* was an elderly man, his beard already gray with age, who wore old, wrinkled pants that had been mended a thousand times. His hat he had found years ago during the fiesta of the Holy *Virgen*, and its faded yellow had become nondescript over the years.

"¿Cómo la ves, *compadre*? You think this *huerco fregao* will ever get to be an altar boy?"
"No, *pos*, sí. He wasn't born *Aguililla* for nothing."
"Watch out, here comes some business."
"Could you find it in your heart to spare a few cents, ?"
¿Un centavittito?

On this particular morning, *Don Jesús* was not having much luck with his job as a beggar.

"*Jijo, compadre*...What's wrong with these *turistas*? This isn't even enough for tortillas!"
"No, *pos* sí. Everyone kicks a good man when he's down...*N'ombre*, even Braulio is making better money up north...*Oyes*, what ever happened with him?"
"Well, I heard he went up north to work the harvests...to a place that sounds like *Michoacan*...Have you ever heard of it?"
"No, but as they say in my village, a good rooster crows in any hen house."
"Pos sí, *Señor*, he took off without warning at the crack of dawn with only a few of his belongings."
"¿Cómo no? *Oyes, compadre*, is this place further up north than El Campo?"
"I don't know, but they say they come back from there talking *pocho* and calling themselves Chicanos...You know where that word comes from, *compradito*?"
"Pos no, the fact is, I don't, *compradito*."
"Pos *fíjese compadre*, the late Don Maclovio Herrera told me that his grandfather had heard that word deep into the interior, over by *La Sierra de la Ascensión*. He said his

grandfather only spoke *Mexicano* and that the word came from ancient times."

"And what does it mean, *compadre*?"

"*Pos*, they say that at first it meant strong, respectable and spiritual people, as they became groups that moved from one place to another to find a better life."

"Yes, but look at how they dress. What do *you* think, *compadrito*?"

"*Pos sí*. It's like the *nopal Compadrito*. No one looks at the cactus until it bears fruit."...

"*Mira*, here comes our *Aguililla*. And look how stiff he looks!...*Pobre muchacho*. Without a soul in the world. *¿Qué pasó, Aguililla?* Aren't you spruced up today!...You look just like my *tia Cleta's* rooster..."

"Don't make fun of me, *Don Jesús*. How's business?"

"*Pos*, to tell you the truth, *mi Aguililla*, I think this meal ticket has run out. Can't even buy a lottery ticket."

"There you go thinking about money again, *Don Jesús!*..."

"That's what it's for, *hijo*, to be counted..."

"*¡Ay Chihuahua!* "Here comes the nun, and is she mad again!"

"*Ai nos vemos, Don Jesús.*"

"*Ándele, Aguililla!*"

The students were back into military formation, ready to return to class, and the only person missing was the penguin with a switch that was off searching for me. I made a mad dash, jumping back into line and blushing slightly as everyone around me burst into hearty laughter. After that, I kept a low profile for the rest of the day, trying to avoid contact with the famous wooden rod that had taken so many victims over the years. That day went by slowly, and as if that weren't enough, Don Perfecto left me behind when the nun told me she was punishing me by keeping me after class. For my penitence I had to say 200 Our-Fathers and 300 Hail-Marys. I'm not sure why, but I wasn't afraid when I discovered that Don Perfecto had left me behind. I did exactly what any other boy would have done. Instead, I went home by way of the tracks that ran from *Los Cedros* to *Santa María*. Once I made it to downtown *Los Cedros*, I simply followed the tracks that led to *Santa María*. I enjoyed this route immensely because I could walk on top of the rails forever without falling. This game lasted a long while, and when it was over, it was already dark, obscuring the orange groves that grew beside the tracks. It was also growing colder and it seemed as though the tracks were at an incline as I climbed higher and higher. Or perhaps I was growing tired, causing my legs to feel heavier. Just as night fell, I came to a spot where a long bridge crossed over a large lake. On the edge of the lake, there appeared to be several men stepping out of long canoes by a thick clump of trees. I moved in closer, staying out of sight, to see what was happening, and noticed beyond the shadows, men dressed as I had never seen before in my life. I remember they had rings and gold bracelets embedded with beautifully shining jewels. I know because I could see them reflected in the fire like glowing stars in the night. I was unfamiliar with

their language, and yet I could somehow understand what was being said. After a while, I shifted my weight, accidentally breaking a twig, and making them aware of my presence. Then, without a word of discussion, each of them moved into the darkness and circled the brush until they came upon my hiding place.

"Who are you, *Pilli*? What winds have brought you here?
Why have you come? Why does your spirit seek us now?"

Frightened by the sudden encounter with this obscure figure, I was left virtually breathless. Still, I felt a sense of kinship and familiarity with this warrior, who was now accompanied by five others.

"I am searching for one who is known as *Coyote*, from the *División del Aguila*."
"Do any of you know him?" asked the warrior who appeared to be in charge.

Just then, an old man entered carrying a staff made of gold and precious jewels, who was immediately given due respect merited by his age and wisdom.

"I know him," the old man announced, "but here the young one refers to *Niltzinkóyotl*, of the *División de Tlatelolko*...Leave us, I will take care of this matter."

The old man with bronze skin, black eyes and long, dark hair sprinkled with venerable gray took me by the shoulder with a soft, light touch, and it was then that I felt I had found a spiritual protector.

"Let us sit here by the fire to call on the divine forces."

Between prayers and songs, the old man lit aromatic incense called *Kopalli* that filled the intoxicating evening breeze. After a while, he lifted his arms up toward the boundless heavens, saying:

"My son, jewel of the universe, sacred feather of the Soaring Eagle. You have arrived; the Creator and Keeper has sent you here. And for a brief time you have come to contemplate, you have come evolving, growing like a small bird far from his shell, ready to leave your confinement, ready to grow your feathers, your tail and your wings, so that you might fly. You have arrived as the spirit of Ketzalkóatl. Niccui nicana in Chalchihuitl. Speak, my fine pearl, ma mixtlapohui in amix in Amoyollo, so that your eyes and your heart may be opened."

"*Muy Señor mío*, I do not understand why I am here. I only know that I feel I have been reborn and that everything I am seeing, I have witnessed before. But what does it mean that I have arrived as '*quezacuate*'? *Señor mío*, please explain this to me."

"*Hijo mío*. In the beginning, *Ketzalkóatl*, symbolized the force of intelligence in a faraway star in the universe, and pertained to the mathematical alignment of all things. It also signified the operation of matter and spirit, as well as a direction that was represented by a man who came to *Tollan* to provide an example for the Toltecs, and within time, disappeared in the east. *Quil'mach* his spirit will return one day."

"But this cannot be, *maistro*; my name is *Aguililla*."

"Your name is not important now. You are like a petal of a flower sent to us by the Giver of Life."

"And I have come back as a spirit, *Señor mío*?"

"*Cuix nelli, cuix no amo nelli*, perhaps and perhaps not. Life is quite complicated, my little *Kuauhtli*. According to our ancient books of *ámatl*, these times are symbolized by the *Nahui Ollin*, a turbulent age full of earthquakes, hunger and suffering. This is our Age of the Fifth Sun."

"And is this age of suffering over yet?"

"No, little feather of the Soaring Eagle. According to mathematical calculations based on the Calendar of the Sun engraved in a great stone, the end is many years into the future, still; we calculate some eight and one-half *Aztekah* centuries. We will then enter into a new Sun and a new life. Perhaps this new Age will arrive when the spiritual force that unites returns to harmonize the things of this world."

To hear all these things seemed wondrous to me as I gazed at millions of stars sparkling in the clear, dark night; only the crackling of burning firewood echoed into the darkness.

"Can you tell me, *maistro*, how this world was created? Do your people go to Mass to honor the God who was crucified?"

"My little *Kuauhtli*, I know nothing of this thing you call Mass, and less of the god who died. For us there can be no death of God, for if *Téotl* is dead, then all of Creation is dead. *Téotl* is a force, a natural phenomenon, controlled by the natural laws of the universe. It is also called *Ome Tekuhtzintli* or Two Lords. In Creation, that is, in *Téotl*, the male and female factors that are the two elements of Creation co-exist. The law of the positive and the negative exists in all things. Our mathematicians and astronomers have known this for some time, and because of this, they are aware that *Téotl* is the essence of the cosmos, and consequently, of human life, and it is Creation that directs the evolution of the human species.

We have other names for the One Supreme Force: *Zentéotl* which means the One Force; *Ipalnemouani* or the one who grants me my existence; *In Amota* or the Invisible Force; *Teyokoyani*, the Supreme Creator and *Teotahtinzeze*, the Father of the All. This force has existed always; it is the origin of all things. It is the one principle that has its manifestations from that one source, and thus we call it *Teyokoyaliztli* and this is creation in all its aspects. And within two elements arise *Zitlallatonak* and *Zitlalkuey*. These represent the duality within the living force of all things. Our sages had a supreme science that was called *Ilhuikayotl* which is our inheritance of thought and knowledge. It consists of knowing how to interpret our writings on five different levels: *Teonemilizzotl*, *Teomaniliztli*, *Teoizauhtli*, *Teomtilli*, *Teoyotl*. For example the first level consisted of interpreting from the metaphysical plane, the relationship between *Zentéotl*, its energy flux and the *Tonalli* or spirit-energy in all living things, our *Youalli* or spirit guides, the *Tonalkatl*, *Tlalokan*, *Miktlan* as resting places for different types of evolved souls, but never is there punishment or condemnation, for there is no hell. If there is one, it is here on earth where man must struggle in an unstable world.

"With regard to our adorations and meditations, everyone has the obligation to meditate, chant, to light fires and incense, and to sacrifice with fasts, prayers and songs to Our Father Sun, the creative force of this planet. It is required, Most Precious Gem and Sacred Feather that Soars in the Sky, that man weep, that he lift his feeling to the Supreme Spirit, that he worship the divinity and that he be diligent, never losing control, never being negligent. This is perhaps what pleases the Supreme Spirit most and so we must fulfill our obligation to light fires and make offerings

of incense. This is the way one enters into the presence of the Supreme Spirit; there, where the heart and inner self overflow; there, where man's true nature is revealed; where he becomes worthy of the Supreme spirit through compassion and good deeds. There, where he shares his gifts with all. He who works in this way becomes mother and father of the Sun...He begins on the left side and wears the sandals of the Father, the sandals of the Mother, the forces of the universe. It is he who is the center of the earth, *Xiuhtekuhli*, the symbol of time and of fire.

"Yes, my *Kuauhtli*, we must enter into the refuge of the Keeper of the world, Lord of all, night and wind. We must give all of our mind and spirit to the Keeper of all. It will manifest itself through the laws of the universe to deal with each of us. And if we conduct ourselves in this way we will come to live in peace and tranquility; without obstinacy or pride, without antagonism or disdain; without the vanity of knowledge, saying whatever we please. We must not show ourselves to be deceitful serpents, nor feign knowledge. We must not stand in opposition to anyone, but attract them to us instead, making them benign with our kind treatment and consideration. The Supreme Forces will measure you and will bestow justice in accordance with the positive and negative nature of your actions in this transitory life. Last of all, my noble *Kuauhtli*, we must not remain idle, but rather be of use in this world. We should never pass a day or night in vain. The necessities of life, our bones, our flesh, and provisions for our nourishment, we draw them in, and in searching for them, we invoke the Supreme Spirit. Everything we hang from our neck, everything we place on our hip, we also ask of the Supreme Spirit. This and much more is our way of life, our way of seeing things in accordance with our concept of *Tloke-Nauake*.

The spontaneous crackling of firewood diminished as the hours passed, and the blue-red light of the fire was softly reflected in the old man's face. The husky sounds of toads throughout the quiet lake now accompanied his deep and melodious voice. It was becoming late; yet I felt renewed with each passing minute, gathering energy as my curiosity grew.

"We have also been told that we should behave ourselves if we want to enter heaven. But what is this *Tloque-Anaqua*?"

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