

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*

The sound of a Safeway rolling down the empty streets of a sleeping city lost in the fog; a white silhouette pushing the cart with the urgency of a homeless bride in a hurry to get to her midnight wedding; the rattling of the cart drilling a hole into the heart of our collective memory; the floating wake of her white dress guiding us as we persisted in following her and getting close to her, as close as one can get to an urban legend in the making, a myth soon to be rooted in the most inhospitable alleys and hours of the Mission --La Llorona, The Boogie Man's Bride, Frida La Loca, a spooky, elusive specter condemned to push her cart full of brushes and paint cans in penance for our sins.

Some of us, of course, had second thoughts about stalking her like that. Yet we kept at it --blinded, you could say, by the dark, almost clandestine thrill it provided, vindicated in our transgression because we had found an unexpected source of comfort in the fact that madness hadn't managed to take everything away from her, especially what she loved most. As if seeing her all dressed up in her favorite Mexican dress and in the act of painting (more like doodling on a wall or garage door, her "placa," as she would have called it, had she been capable of translating her madness into words) was all we needed to come to terms with the death of the Amanda we had known and our own death inside her inscrutable world.

It could also be argued that we didn't know what we were doing, that we were just as astounded by her transformation as everybody else who knew her. I mean, in a city big on murals, Amanda Vargas had been one of its biggest stars. "The Joan Baez of the San Francisco Bay Area muralists," the local press called her. She had also been the most indomitable of all the community activists we knew, and we knew plenty. "An artist in a constant state of revolution" was what she preferred to call herself. So, going after her ghost could be considered, I suppose, a bizarre yet genuine way of mourning her. It also provided us with the ideal setting to vent so many questions about her madness: if she was still able to recognize her artistic legacy, for example, those giant and dramatically contorted hands and faces all over the Mission District ("When I paint," she used to say, "I only care about hands and faces"), capturing the outer and inner drama of "the brown people of America," to quote another phrase she loved to repeat and that, I imagine, has lost all meaning for her.

That is 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 himself, me and whoever else wanted to come with us would walk the dirtiest, stinkiest and darkest alleys of the Mission, hoping to hear the sound of her cart or see the flash of her dress in the

distance. We certainly never ever expected to see what we saw and then live *not* to talk about it.

Then came Alberto's suicide, which surely took care of the guilty pressure of having to confess to him what we never should have seen in the first place. Yet because Alberto was the one who had brought us all together "under one roof and one musical dream," as he liked to brag --a dream that included Amanda, of course, as seasoned rumbera and favorite muse of so many songs, parties, jam sessions and cabaret-rumba extravaganzas--, our sense of betrayal continued to permeate our shared history.

Maybe writing about it is a desperate attempt to break free from it. As Joan Didion once wrote, though, *writers are always selling somebody out*; most of the time themselves, I should add. So let's just say that, even though Amanda is the star of this tale, it is mostly about our ultimate fall from grace. It is about the last blow against a collective utopia that for Alberto (and consequently for us) always began with "the conga calling the bass, the bass calling the piano, the piano calling the trombone, the trombone calling the sax, the sax calling the guitar and the fucking universe finally making sense," and which now is marred by the closest thing to the purest form of remorse.

"You guys talk about your first acid trips and going to your first wild concerts, well, *híjole*," yes, that was Amanda's keen expression, a big and long Chicano *híjole*, "let me tell you about my first political rallies and marches. Actually, let me tell you about the big one, the one I consider the beginning of my real life, when Coretta King came to speak at Kezar Stadium. 'Cause you know what? She got me. 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. That wasn't my first time at a political rally, anyway. But the brothers and sisters I met at that time, *híjole*, they were goddamned dedicated and organized, fighting back and kicking ass like I'd never seen. And they weren't scared of the cops. The cops were scared of them, *si-món*. That's why I hung out with the Panthers, and they sure taught me everything I needed to know."

For all her dedication to murals, when Amanda spoke, it was the radical prima donna who came out at the expense of the artist, at the expense of everything, in fact, including irony, which was Rosie's greatest complaint about Amanda's murals.

"If you just learned to appreciate your art a bit more," Rosie would tell her, "if you could just put your politics aside, just a bit, you have no idea how good you could be."

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

Their rivalry had very little to do with art, politics, or the use or abuse of irony, though. It was just plain old mutual mistrust at first sight, which meant that they didn't spare a single opportunity to turn any conversation into "one more chapter in the battle of the *mamasotas*," as we called it. And when Amanda flexed her more-radical-than-thou posture, you could count on Rosie to leave the room. If she stayed, however, she was sure to use her most refined sarcastic ammunition against Amanda, although we had to admit that when it came down to appreciating Amanda's art, Rosie was the best art critic of the pack.

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

Secretly, I think, even Amanda wished she could talk about her own work the way Rosie did. On the same note, although not so secretly, she also wished the local press would compare her more to Bob Dylan than Joan Baez. “Cause just like him, *híjole*, I’m terrible in front of cameras and I hate doing interviews, so I get antagonistic and stupid.” We couldn’t have agreed more with her on this. She was all heart and somehow felt it wasn’t cool or acceptable to speak so earnestly about art. So, most of the time, all she’d end up saying to the reporters was, “My job is to paint and raise hell. Let the fucking art critics do the talking.”

Talking politics, on the other hand, came rather easily to her.

“Well, since you guys asked, I probably should start by saying that I consider myself an exile from the Central Valley. Born and raised in Fresno, *híjole*, I really didn’t want to die there. So, going to college was the perfect excuse to leave *mi pueblo* behind, you know. And even though I had no idea what anthropology was all about, that’s what I came to study at San Francisco State. There was so much political activity going on, anyway, that I didn’t have time to study.

“In those days, San Francisco State was Radical City Central, in case you guys don’t know. And our department, *híjole*, was the mother of all radicals. 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. Ronald Reagan was governor. Talk about double trouble. Well, we confronted those *pinche cabrones* and closed down the university and eventually won after a long and bloody, I mean, brutal strike...”

According to our most trustworthy late '60's historians, Amanda and Alberto must have met around May 1969, a highly volatile period for racial politics in general and for the Mission in particular. Seven young men were accused of killing a police officer. And by the way the police acted, it seemed like every young Latino in the Mission was guilty by ethnic association, particularly if they had long hair. It all started when two young Latinos were loading a car and the police thought they were stealing whatever it was they were carrying. Amanda Vargas helped 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.

Alberto and Gio Lopez, one of Los Siete, were friends from drumming at Dolores Park. And since the day of shooting, nobody had seen Gio or knew anything about his whereabouts. Rumors had him hiding in his grandma's basement, living in Cuba, or dead. So Alberto and a few other 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 community meeting to collect funds for the other six who were still in jail. Alberto was more than happy to help and asked her if she needed drummers "to warm up the event." That was how their friendship began, a friendship that included, "híjole, some pretty good casual sexual lubrication," as Amanda liked to say.

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 now, Amanda? I’ve seen your latest mural, and I notice 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.”

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

“What’s our next gig, Ms. Revolution? Are we playing for the United Dykes for a Free Nicaragua, for the Jews for Jesus Against Circumcision, or maybe for Puerto Ricans on Welfare Against U.S. Involvement in Central America?”

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, which was probably the reason why her daughter Isis was the most well-behaved girl we ever knew, which perhaps isn’t saying much since we didn’t know many children. On the other hand, Isis’s good behavior could also have been the product of her abuelita’s old-school Mexican influence. She usually spent more time with her in Fresno, anyway, than with her mother, who was just too busy with a zillion community projects.

On a more personal note, I admit I found Amanda “a bit off-putting,” if I may borrow Rosie’s favorite expression when describing her. I mean, she could be cold and manipulative. Or maybe I should say she had learned the hard way how to recruit apprentices and collaborators and secure funding for her mural projects and political events.

She was also a bit too blunt about making sure we knew her connection was primarily with Alberto. We came only after him.

There were no harsh feelings between us, though. And since she didn't really live with us, it wasn't like we couldn't take breaks from each other when our emotional or political disagreements flared up. All in all, 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 tenaciously promoted our band among the local progressive groups. Well, she did a lot more than that. She essentially produced most of our outdoor concerts while disguising them as block parties around some freshly-painted mural, which is probably the reason why Amanda's and Pescaíto Frito's career shared almost too symmetrical a pattern from beginning to end. Not surprisingly, our last concert and her last mural before her breakdown shared the same stage. And if we consider the fact that it was a mural about *us*, we can even think of it as her farewell note to a world she knew she was losing for good.

"So, yes, adorables ladies and un-presentable gents," Alberto, as expected, had to play the band's official voice to the very end, "we've gathered here to celebrate an incredible feat: we've finally made it into an Amanda Vargas mural. And I'm afraid to say it, but this is it. This is as immortal as we'll ever be. We can die in peace. We're history. Do you have any fucking idea how this feels after thirty long years of playing the alternative to the alternative bands in a city proud of its fucking alternative lifestyles? No wonder it feels like our funeral, a happy funeral, by the way. How many bands can boast of playing at their own funeral anyway? And how incredibly telling, santísimas ladies and pecaminosos gentlemen, that most

of our outdoor concerts are connected to stinky alleys full of murals thanks to our queridísima Amanda Vargas.”

I should also add, as if to underscore the “happy” end-of-the-road feeling Alberto wanted so badly to communicate, that despite an uninviting and implacable gray sky hovering over us, not to mention the pathetically rich collection of used, rusted, hypodermic needles and dog and human shit decorating Clarion Alley, the general feeling couldn’t have been warmer, and effusively so.

“It feels like we’ve been given a Grammy for lifetime achievement, man,” Ali kept repeating as we played a bit harder and more frenetically than usual to compensate for the absence of Cuate’s dry-and-swingy sax. He was touring Europe.

Then, I remember looking at Amanda and thinking to myself how pronouncedly thin and aloof she looked in her Frida Kahlo dress, removed from everybody, including her troupe of “young, anarchic, post-nuclear revolutionaries,” as we called them. And I remember sharing this thought with Ali between songs and being surprised at his absolute indifference to what I had to say. 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 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 campy and radiantly poetic about the seven of us with our starving salsa and samba-funk-kings look intact. Ali was right, though. The only true-to-life characters in the

mural were Alberto with his big Afro and mustache, flying like a manta ray over his congas, and Rosie in her Black Widow Special, absolutely contorted into a backbend, blowing her trombone to the heavens. The rest of us were merely generic, retro-looking musicians, which could be attributed perhaps to the fact that Amanda was, by then, already losing her mind.

For our last song, and in this case *last* also means that we never performed on another outdoor concert again, we played “Amanda’s Torera-Ranchera.” Despite its title, though, it has nothing to do with a traditional Mexican ranchera. It is actually a popular Spanish paso doble that we turned into a dirty-merengue and dedicated to Amanda because she was (in her revolutionary way) the true “reina de las mujeres.” And when we started singing “morena, oeoaoá, la reina de las mujeres...” like in the old days, Alberto freed himself from playing congas and began to run around the audience like a bull. At which point, Amanda jumped in to play the matador and, after a few passes, killed Alberto-the-Bull with one stroke of her dirty, old broom.

That was the last time we saw Amanda laugh. I mean, laugh *with* us, not the crazy laughter she now has that sends goose bumps up our spines.

After our “funeral” block party, we saw Amanda briefly once or twice, and she appeared visibly thinner and anxious to get away from us. 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. Every year, she’d come up with a new Day of the Dead “concept,” costumes and choreography included. It had become our moral and inescapable 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 at us the traditional concentration-camp threats, he told us in a state of almost blissful good humor that 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. 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 nurses. She didn't know who we were and left the room right away. I remember walking out of the hospital feeling angry at her, as if she had been pretending not to know us.

By then, we had moved out of El Castillo. In fact, except for Jesús and I, everybody had left the Mission. Brendan had found a computer job in Seattle. Rosie had moved to San Rafael. Cuautemoc and Ali had settled in Berkeley. And Alberto had found a studio in downtown Oakland, although for all practical purposes it could have been Seattle, since he rarely came by the Mission anymore. He showed up, though, at Jesús' grand opening of Café La Michon.

Then came the sound of her Safeway cart like dissonant note in the otherwise too predictable melody of our uneventful ex-musician lifestyle, opening a disquieting parenthesis in the remains of our collective experience, prompting us to look for her and her placas, and casually obsess about her transformation into a Frida Kahlo caricature. She had painted over her forehead a humongous black uni-brow that fiercely contrasted with her totally wild and

gray hair. She wore the same long white dress she wore at our last concert. And whenever we ran into her, she appeared extremely busy talking to herself.

Once, 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,” she said. And she kept uttering images of dissonant beauty: “They all love artists, unless you eat pizza.”

“Are you okay, Amanda?” Ali asked her another time, desperate to establish some meaningful contact.

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

She began to stop by La Michon before closing time. Jesús got into the habit of having a doggy bag ready for her. Sometimes she’d be in a talkative mood, and we would pretend to have a conversation with her. I say “pretend” because she couldn’t really hear us, nor could we 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. Sometimes they threw rocks at her. We heard a gang raped her, five or six of them.

Then, one night, we saw Amanda and Alberto.

It was a miserably cold and 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 usually 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"). Anyway, when I walked in, they were getting ready to go out for "a Frida stroll."

The Day of the Dead was coming around again. For nostalgia's sake, Jesús decided we should go to Balmy Alley, following the rout of the original procession, before it grew too big to fit in the alley. We were about to turn into Balmy from 24th Street when we saw Amanda pushing her cart and acting as if she were waiting for somebody, wired up, nervous, the usual. We didn't really expect anybody to come to meet her. But, then, as we crouched behind a few garbage cans, we saw Alberto approaching from the other end of Balmy. From a distance, we recognized his unmistakable Afro and that pimpish tumbao of his. Nobody else walked like that.

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

"I don't know how he can 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 if they had discovered us peeping at them.

As Alberto pumped Amanda from behind, we could hear her urging him on with a raspy, libidinous 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 dress rolled up to her waist, leaning against her cart parked against a garage door. Her eyes had a deep, sated expression, which is what has stayed in my mind ever since. 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, to not be discovered by them.

Then came (comes) this un-silent silence that we occasionally break by cracking a joke about Amanda and Alberto, and which usually strikes its gravest note right after Jesús locks La Michon, and he and I (and whoever else happens to be with us) face the night as one faces an old wound.

For a moment, then, we feel outrage at what we did. Then an awkward and sticky sense of complicity settles in. And even though Amanda and Alberto no longer roam the streets of the Mission (she's been living in a nuthouse in Napa, and Alberto, so far, hasn't

resurrected), when I walk the streets late at night I still expect to run into one or both of them.

“You gotta remember the good, too, coño. Amanda was so special, man. I mean look at her murals. And Alberto, manda cojones. I mean, we can’t forget that we ruled the world from our castle on top of the hill, me cago en Dios, ‘like the only true kings of the Latin funk-fusion,’ like Alberto used to say, o no?”

For some reason, Jesús likes to repeat this when he’s drunk and he leans on me as we cross from “San Diego” to “Tijuana,” which is what Alberto called Valencia Street and Mission Street.

I usually don’t say much, and when I do, I tend to ask “the same question del coño de su madre,” according to Jesús.

“What I want to know is how come Amanda recognized Alberto, man? I mean, she didn’t recognize any of us, not even her family, for God’s sake.”

And Jesús, despite the repetitive and monotone quality of my inquiry, tries to come up with answers, some better than others, of course.

“How do you know she recognized him, man? How do you know they didn’t have a totally new thing going on, free of the past, coño, like Frida and Diego de los cojones?”