

AHUIZOTL

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FURIOUS, THE SEA bellows, tearing the sails of the *San Cristóbal*, protests with roars of foam, yells like a woman in labour, cries like an abandoned child Those were the words I managed to make out in the last, demented babbles of a Moorish youth who, with eyes popping out, threw himself overboard during the storm that lashed the ship taking me to meet my brother's corpse.

Unlike the other passengers of the *San Cristóbal*, I did not embark for New Spain looking for fortune, but to stand face to face with misfortune and to bid goodbye to the last family member I had left. My brother, Fernando Villaplana, sailed in the year 1511 of Our Lord, being but a teenager. He had the fancy of becoming rich, gaining fame and possessing everything that our orphanhood had denied us. I remember seeing him, with eyes ablaze and hair uncombed, when he told me this before parting, as if the wind had already started flinging him towards those unknown lands full of wonder and danger, like the ones told in the *Amadís*. I knew from a letter of his that he had participated in the expedition commanded by Don Diego de Velázquez to the island of Cuba and that, a few years later, together with more than five hundred men, he joined the troops of Hernán Cortés to explore other lands and reclaim them in the name of His Majesty. After this, I had no news of him until, nearly thirty years after his parting, I received a letter from a friar named 'Juan de los Ángeles'.

With beautiful and tight lettering, the friar told me how they had found Fernando's corpse at the edge of the lake of Texcoco: "His skin was wet and slippery like that of a fish, but he did not squirm searching for the comfort of water; he remained still, as if asleep. He appeared to have no bruises or signs of violence. It was only up close that we realized his eyes, teeth and nails had been torn out with much care. '*Ahuizotl! Ahuizotl!*' cried an Indian who kept us company and, drooling like a rabid dog, refused to help us carry the deceased."

When I finished reading the epistle assuring me of a grave on sacred ground for my brother, I did not know if my unease sprang from the way

in which events were narrated or the fact that I had read that name written by an unknown hand: 'Elena Villaplana'. Letter by letter, the maroon ink on the paper from New Spain returned me to the moment in which Fernando, dragged by the wind, had left me at the door of the convent of the Jerónimas so he could follow his dreams by the sea. From then on, I was Ágata de la Inmaculada Concepción; nevertheless, with the devastating news crumpling between my hands and tears in my eyes, the Elena inside me yelled, "*Ahuizotl! Ahuizotl!*" and forced me to head towards the murky waters of the New World.

The preparations for my departure happened in a mist, as in a dream, as though I were staring beneath the water. I remember little of what happened before I found myself kneeling next to the mast, praying and commending new souls to God during such a hard trial. It was then that the young Moor came running – drenched, he seemed black and slippery, and with his eyes so ominously open, he resembled a grotesque fish. He screamed strange words, perhaps in a strange tongue. I was only able to distinguish a few in Spanish before he threw himself overboard and disappeared amidst the foam.

A couple of weeks later, we arrived at the port of San Juan, which is also called 'Ulúa', for they say that the natives of the islet where the fortress-port is located howled at the sea, "*Chlúha! Chlúa!*" Words that the Spaniards understood as the actual name of the place. The crew was tired. It was agreed we would spend the night in an improvised camp on the beach and, at first light, would continue towards our destination, la Villa de la Veracruz. It was a relief to rest upon firm and warm sand, so that I fell asleep almost at once. Nevertheless, my sleep was restless; I dreamt that a huge figure emerged from the sea. On the shore, little animals the size of a dog greeted it, wagging their long tails that seemed to finish upon a hand. Waves crashed with strength and brought in their waters human corpses. Some seemed like abominations between man and fish, or seemed to have been turned inside out, and their guts were showing. The little creatures devoured, with much care, the eyes, teeth and nails of the corpses dragged by the sea for the satisfaction of the monstrous figure.

I awoke, bathed in sweat and trembling uncontrollably. I tried to commend myself to the Archangel Saint Michael, but the abominable images of the dream continued to haunt me in the darkness of moonless night. I don't know how long I was victim of this terror, but, still drenched with fear, I noticed suddenly that not far from me there were lights dancing in the palm trees. I approached them, thinking that it was a gathering of some of the mariners and it would do me well to sit before a fire. But no sailor was there: a group of strangely dressed Indians danced around a nest of palm leaves, inside which there stood a small stone figurine, no bigger than a fist. They sang in an odd tongue, but repeated constantly "*Chlúha! Chlúa! Dagoatl! Dagoatl!*" and

howled like dogs, their cries increasing. The sailors from the San Cristóbal were awakened by the howling and, enraged, frightened them off by force. Soon, morning broke and I saw something shining amidst the sand removed by the dance of the Indians. It was a small stone figurine of a black-and-bright crystal, the obsidian stone they employ in the realm of the Indies to make knives. It represented the silhouette of a man with huge eyes and tiny, pointy ears. The hands, adhered to the body, resembled those of a frog and it might have had a tail that had broken off. I could not stop thinking about Fernando as I looked into the wide, large eyes of the figurine, so I took it with me.

The end of the trip was short and calm. We arrived at the Villa de la Veracruz at midday, thus I decided to leave immediately towards the city of México-Tenochtitlán, where, thanks to a letter from the Mother Superior, I would be received by the newly established convent of the Jerónimas of New Spain. The roads were tortuous and the mist did not allow me to see the mountains surrounding us. Sometimes, you could hear howls like the ones of the natives of the port of San Juan; the driver told us it was the coyotes from the mountain and that we should not be afraid. Nevertheless, I felt a drop of cold water stream down my side, until it reached the pocket of my habit, and it incremented the weight of the black figurine until I was slouching.

After I finally arrived at the convent and rested, I went to visit Friar Juan de los Ángeles at the Jesuit home. He was an old man and walked with difficulty. Even so, he wanted to take me to my brother's grave, which was far off, in the atrium of a small chapel. As we walked together, he once more related the story of the discovery of the corpse, going into detail on the missing eyes, teeth and nails. The friar's gaze seemed to grow empty every time he spoke of the appearance of Fernando's skin, "moist and slippery, like a fish". I tried to speak of something else, but he seemed engrossed, as though he did not know I was there. After a little while, we arrived at a small cemetery, where I prayed in silence. I carried no flowers to place next to the wooden cross, so I took out the figurine and decided to leave it by the grave, as a gift for my brother. Friar Juan de los Ángeles grew pale when he saw it, made the sign of the cross several times and began to scream, "The *Ahuizotl*! Have respect for the dead and take away from this sacred place the demon that murdered your brother. You, servant of the aquatic Satan, do not deserve to wear the habit with the figure of Our Lord!"

Not knowing what to do, I rushed away, disconcerted, through the cemetery.

Back at the convent I fell victim to feverish tremors, which kept me in bed for many days. I dreamt, over and over again, about the titanic figure emerging from the sea and on the beach, it was received with joy by the *ahuizotls*, who, imitating the screams of a birthing woman or the cry of an

infant, devoured my brother over and over again, or made terrible necklaces of teeth and nails. One afternoon, when my fever seemed to have eased, a dark-skinned girl with black hair took me to walk by the edge of a river. The sun was sinking, revealing the intense brightness of a few stars, when the girl told me to wait, for she could hear something resembling a baby's cry. I could not stop her. A dark, scaly hand rose from beneath the murky waters, pulled her hair and everything went black.

Days later, they found the dead girl. A little child told me her corpse glinted, like a horrible fish at the market. I resolved then to abandon New Spain forever and with it, my brother's corpse and the terrible dreams.

I arrived at the port of Veracruz on a Thursday at dawn, the first rays from the sun greeting the sailors with hundreds of dead frogs and fish upon the sand. My ship was soon parting, but we managed to hear the screams from the coast; I felt a drop of cold water stream down my side, until it reached the pocket of my habit, and it incremented the weight of the black figurine until I was slouching. I held the figurine between my hands and, though I tried to pray, no words came out.

THE WAVES RISE until they resemble a mountain in the ocean that turns dark, like the skin of the *Ahuizotl*. Barely illuminated by the convulsive light of the candle, the obsidian figurine seems to glint by itself and I feel it coming: black, huge, stirring the ocean with its innumerable scales, its eyes eternally open. The scent of salt and blood drifts through the air. God help us.

Nelly Geraldine García-Rosas is a Mexican writer and a freelance copy editor. Her stories have been published in local independent magazines and small-press anthologies. When she's not dreaming about cats or Cthulhu, she updates her lovecraftian/astronomical blog, "Desde R'lyeh ..." (fascinante-mente-freak.blogspot.com), searching for scientific data about the time when the stars will be right.

The author speaks: I decided to set the plot of "Ahuizotl" in early New Spain (a couple of decades after the Spanish conquest of the Aztec Empire), because this period represented the primordial soup of the present Mexican idiosyncrasy. Aztec mythical creatures and gods, like the *ahuizotl*, were considered to be demons or diabolical beings by the Spaniards, so it was pretty interesting to "play" with the narrative, mixing that ancient lore with lovecraftian Mythos and actual historical details.