

INTERVIEW: Rafael Ortiz Calderón (with Chelle Birlet)

About my Childhood

(Chencho el Diablo)

I came to United States eleven years ago and I was born and educated in Mexico. I used to teach Spanish literature in a Catholic high school in Pilsen, a Mexican neighborhood in Chicago just four years ago. One day, my students were complaining about other teachers who always asked them to write essays about “Who I am?” or “Who is the most important person in your life?” Suddenly one of my students asks me, “Now Mr. Ortiz, it is your turn, tell us about who has been the person that you most admire and what you have learned from him or her?” Immediately, the first thought that came to my mind was Chencho el Diablo, the most scary person in town where I used to live when I was a child.

Chencho used to live not too far from the town. His hut was poor but pleasant and fragrant with a strong aroma of basil, garlic and onions floating inside of his house. He used to cultivate his own food and medicinal plants in his backyard. He cooked his own meals, so his diet was basically pre-Hispanic food like pozole (hominy), guacamole, and many kinds of beverages like: atole, (a drink made of corn starch); chía seeds drink; pulque, and mezcal made of different kinds of cactus; also, Chencho used to eat a lot of different kinds of animals like snakes, possums, grasshoppers and crickets. Even these days, the most popular food in Chicago among Mexicans is pozole.

Physically, Chencho was very ugly and deformed perhaps by arthritis. He had a big pot-belly; it was like he was carrying a big full-moon. He couldn't wear shoes because his feet were big and wide; his skin color revealed that he wasn't Spaniard, or Mestizo (a mixed race person) but a pure Tlahuica Indian. He used to wear big white pants and shirts like an old revolutionary Zapatista. I think, he was one of the last Tlahuicas Indians alive. Chencho used to speak Nahuatl as well as Spanish but he couldn't read it. He was about a hundred years old, and I was just about six. The time was written on his skin like in an old papyrus. You could identify him from a long distance not because his shape, but his eternal halo of strong tobacco and wet chicken smelling.

People in the town called Chencho the *Devil* because he never went to the church; also, many people thought that he had a pact with the Diablo. Without exception, everybody knew that Chencho was a nahual. A nahual is a person who transforms himself/herself into an animal and goes out at night. Chencho told me that his favorite transformation was dog. One day Jerónimo, the church's singer was in the offertory when he saw a big dog eating the bread designated for poor people, Jerónimo took a big stick and hit the dog. The next day, a farmer saw Chencho blending and laying on his bed, and he thought for sure that Chencho was the same dog at the church eating the bread the night before.

Chencho was well known as healer, Chencho knew a lot of medicinal plants; he was a depositary of his ancestor's traditions, even the town's Doctor recognized Chencho as a healer and used to ask him questions about the effectiveness of certain plants. Chencho knew how to cure a lot of diseases like leprosy, third degree burns, and endometriosis among others. We will never know for sure about how many plants Chencho used to apply to his patients.

When I was six, I was suffering from intestinal worms; I was crying on my bed for many days with a lot of pain in my stomach. I visited the doctor's town; he gave me pills but didn't work. My father took me in his hands and we went to Chencho's hut; Chencho gave to me a horrible, bitter, dark, and thick potion that it tasted like if I were chewing a pregnant tarantula. It took to me almost two hours to decide to drink

it or not. Thirty minutes after I drank it, I defecated a bunch of worms mixed with fecal matter and watermelon seeds. I was cured in two hours.

A lot of people were afraid of Chencho because he used to read Tarot cards to resolve problems. One day my father gave to my mother a pair of ribbons and a scissors for her birthday but someone else stole them. The next day, my father visited Chencho and asked him to come to my house. He was sat on the floor and started to read the cards. Holy cow! Chencho told my parents who stole the scissors and the ribbons; Doña Lucia did it, the woman who washes clothes on the river.

When I was seven, I was scared to death when Chencho used to visit my parents once a week. After a little while, Chencho's presence was familiar to me and my fears disappeared. Sometimes, Chencho had a dinner with us in the backyard under a twinkled and sparkled sky populated by millions of stars. Chencho was an incredible story teller and I was mesmerized by his stories, especially the one about Emiliano Zapata and his tropes came to the town on the way to the mountains; even these days, old people still talking about a treasure that supposedly, Emiliano Zapata hid in the Cerro Frío.

For me, Chencho was like a bunch of shaking leaves announcing the rain; he was like a mirror who knows my feelings, worries and happiness. Chencho was like little ant that walks a long journey and crosses seven seas. My life with Chencho was full of stories and profoundly intense; he taught to me how to read the sky in the night, how to feed birds in my hands, how to fish without net. He always said to me, "Son, be yourself, don't try to be a bird if you don't know how to fly; try to do your best and don't compete with the wind or the sun, or with anybody else."

The last time that I was with Chencho, he said to me the words that have been tattooed in my heart, "My little humming bird, be careful with the things that belongs to the earth; cultivate the soil; plant cactus, cacao, avocados, cotton, flowers and then, you will have things to eat, to wear, to drink. With all of those gifts, you are going to be in good shape and you will be a real man. Don't forget to respect all of the things that are alive; then in the future, people are going to talk about you; they are going to praise you, and respect you. If you are happy with the things that you do for a living, you will have a passion for doing it; if you have a passion, you will be a creative person; if you are a creative person, then you will have reached your freedom; If you don't reach your freedom, then start looking for a clover with four leaves."

These days I can feel Chencho's presence everywhere especially when I'm camping, and I look up at the sky. Last summer, I was lying down on the grass, there were thousands of cloves and I realize that I don't have to look for the four leave clove. After all, I learned my identity an my path in life through Chencho el Diablo since I was very young. Chencho was my first teacher in life after my father. I'm a happy person who doesn't need to find a four leaves clove because I enjoy the things that I do for living.

When I moved to this country I brought Chencho with me, without him, my life would have been very difficult to survive in our materialistic society. After all, Chencho was the right answer to my students.

Where did you go to college and what did you study?

I have been a student of language since I was a young child in Tehuixtla, México. In this small village where I was born, I heard my father's family speaking Nahuatl, and I began to inventory the Nahuatl origins of commonly used words in the Spanish spoken in México. Thus began my lifelong passion for language.

Later my family moved to Cuernavaca, and I was fortunate to be invited to attend the Catholic primary school at an orphanage located close to my family's home. This prepared me to later attend the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. While my academic pursuits focused on

political science and foreign affairs, I also attended literature and poetry workshops. I began to write my own poetry and my passion for literature grew.

My education was enhanced through experiences beyond the university. I was a teacher at the Instituto Fénix in Cuernavaca, México, where I taught grammar and conversational skills to foreign professionals and diplomats. I received training in teaching Spanish as a second language, and through this experience my knowledge and passion for the Spanish language grew. I learned to see the beauty and logic of grammatical structure, and more importantly how to translate that passion to my students.

In the 1980's I left México to live in the United States. Arriving as an immigrant without English skills, I drew upon my teaching experience and love of Spanish to create my own school, called Experiencia Intercultural, where I taught Spanish to adults and professionals. My years of teaching Spanish contributed to my knowledge and interest in second language acquisition.

During the years I worked to establish myself in the United States, I continued to pursue my love of Spanish literature and the arts. I was active in the Latino community in Chicago, in particular the arts and literature community. I was a co-founder of a literature publication called Fe de Erratas, where local Spanish writers published fiction, poetry, essays, art reviews, and commentary. I was also active in a Spanish language theater group, and several Latino community organizations.

My dream was to be a writer and obtain a PhD so that I could continue to research Spanish language acquisition and Spanish literature. This dream was a burning passion during the years that I worked to establish myself in the United States, improving my English skills in order to attend an American university. During this time I became a teacher at a private high school in Chicago where I taught AP Spanish and AP Spanish literature. As a teacher my greatest passion was to convey a love of literature to my students, and demonstrate that literature is the highest expression of personal experience and the human condition, and a reflection of the historical, political, and cultural context of the work.

In 2004 I left teaching to pursue my dream of becoming a scholar of Spanish language and Spanish literature. I enrolled in Northeastern Illinois University, and graduated with honors with a BA degree, fulfilling all the required classes for a Spanish major. I am the first person in my family to obtain an undergraduate degree. My application to the PhD Spanish program at the University of Michigan is the next step in my journey to become a scholar of Spanish language and literature, and make a worthy contribution to the academic body of research and knowledge on Spanish language and literature.

Where do you think your inspiration to write came from?

"Mi inspiración viene de la curiosidad sobre cómo funciona la naturaleza y la sociedad."

How would you define your own writing, in relation to your style, and what are some of your favorite themes?

"Estoy concursando en el Premio Nacional de Poesía Aguascalientes en México.

Mi poemario se llama Fe de Erratas (ensayo poético sobre una contradicción).

La obra trata sobre la contradicción humana actual. Nosotros nos estamos destruyendo lentamente, como especie humana no tenemos un proyecto de vida. Estamos inmersos en un gran consumismo, en la vaciedad, en la falta de relaciones genuinas; la tecnología nos está robando el espíritu. No tenemos idea de lo que significa el progreso, la necesidad y mucho menos el amor. Queremos ser felices pero no hacemos mucho por serlo.”