

## INTERVIEW: MAYA ISLAS (with Jessie Parmenter)

**October 2016**

**Where were you born? When?**

I was born in Cabaiguán, Las Villas, on the island of Cuba. April 12, 1947.

**Where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Cuba. In my home town. Las Villas was the province where I was born, at the center of the Island.

**What was your childhood like?**

My childhood was a gentle one. Ups and downs? the usual ones: my parents divorced when I was 6 years old. I was a very social child. I have many friends. I was a loved child.

**Tell me about your family.**

My father was a photographer. That was his profession. He has a photography Studio in our hometown. My mother was a teacher. The Principal of a Public school. On my maternal line, I have only one aunt and two cousins. On my father's side, I had 5 uncles and 4 aunts. A lot of cousins! My birth name: Otmara de la Caridad Julia Valdivia Isla. I made my pen name, Maya Islas, legal in 1989.

**What is your heritage? Does it influence your writing? How?**

My ancestors come from the North of Spain, The Province of Asturias. My maternal grandfather was born in a little village named Loroñe, near the Cantabric Sea. About two kilometers from a beach called " La Isla" or "La Ysla." Isla means island. My grandpa's whole name was Nazario Ysla e Ysla. Many inhabitants of this area possessed the name of the beach as their last name. My maternal grandmother was Cuban. She was born in Cuba and her parents came from the Canary Islands on the Atlantic Ocean. They belonged to Spain. Many people from the Canaries came to Cuba and settled in the island. I am a descendant of this people. On my father's side, my ancestors were also from Spain. From Castilla, another province in Spain. This area of the Valdivia last name was not near the coast, but rather the plains in the middle of the peninsula. I am not too sure their presence influenced my writing. I am unable to answer how.

**What was your education like?**

I left Cuba when I was 17. All my Elementary school, middle school, and one year of High school were attended in Cuba. For three years inside the island, I did not go to school, due to political situations. My parents were sending me abroad, precisely to Spain. I studied in Cuba from K- to first year HS. I got a very good education.

**Do you speak Spanish? Why or Why not?**

Yes, I do. I switch from Spanish to English and vice-versa according to need. I do speak it because I do not want to lose my mother language. (The same with English)

**If you speak both Spanish and English, do you find it easier to express certain ideas in one language more than the other?**

If I am angry.....Spanish! I will stutter in English for some reason. Language wise...you will be surprise how, sometimes, certain topics were easier for me in English. Although in both languages...no problem.

**Are you comfortable writing in both languages?**

Yes, I am. When I was young, my poems were written always in Spanish. My inspiration came in the native language. Then, I translated the poems for the English-speaking readers, if I needed to do so. In later years, inspiration to write poetry in English emerged. In a natural and easy way. I have a book inspired in English. I do need to translated into Spanish!

**What inspired you to write?**

In earlier years....the first poems' theme was about love and loss of love. Romantic poetry, about love and its abandonment. Very tragic. Later years ... life wisdom changed my perceptions. I explored metaphysics, philosophy. Reflections...being an observer of daily issues and transcendental issues, like death, for example. Themes like Goddess Myth, and poetry based on visual art. I did work with many artists. Poetic texts written for the work of other artists like painters, photographers, sculptors. Poetry based on past lives memories. I explore the metaphysics of life as a way to explain why are we here. Music has been a tremendous force of inspiration. I have written poetry while listening to music. Also, of course...Cuba, for a while, was a theme.

**Who is your audience? How do you think your writing impacts your audience?**

My audience has been other poets, of the same generation or younger. From a kind of intellectual groups who enjoy to be involved in the discoveries of life through the use of words. I have learned a lot about my work through the critics of my work. My writing is in anthologies that are used by students. I do know if poems impact students when they write to me, either to consult me about poems, or just simply to share their feelings about the poem. By reading my work, the audience responds, hence, I know who are interested in my writing. Communication between myself and readers has been the path.

**How would you describe your style of writing?**

I write in free verse. My first book had rhymes, but I do not follow those structures any more. The poem comes to me with open verse and inner rhythm. I feel comfortable when I am able to achieve this kind of verse. It is not prose, although it flows easily on the page. The inner music is very important, although it comes with the inspiration.

### **What do you do besides writing?**

At this moment I take care of my mother who is 92. I am her care-giver. Also, I have a cat, Sebastian, who also needs me. The three of us share a home. I am retired except from writing. Before retirement, I worked as a Counselor at The New School in Manhattan, NYC, and taught Spanish at Baruch College, also in New York.

### **What is your favorite poem or visual art?**

A poem I wrote in 2003 titled "The Hours," and I dedicated this poem to Virginia Woolf. I listened to the music of the film *The Hours* and I was inspired to write a poem that was a monologue to her trespassing time and space. Very soon I will send you a book that was published in the web in 2001 so you can see some visual art. Besides this personal work, I love the Pre-Raphaelites in style of painting and theme. I used them in my collages.

### **What's your favorite topic to write about?**

Beyond the Physical: Metaphysical poetry. Poetry of vision with topics that deal with Quantum Physics. I explore surrealism in my writing. These schools of thought allow me to explore visions that do not contain logic as much as imagination. Everything is allowed. This kind of poetry involves inner structures of being. From love to existence.

### **Who were your influences on your writing? How are you similar or different?**

First, when I was young, early twenties, I was influenced in theme and style by the 19th century poets of Spain like Gustavo Adolfo Bécquer, a poet from Sevilla, the South of Spain. A similar style of writing and the same issues, the same themes of Love and its consequences. Very similar to Bécquer.

A more contemporary style: Surrealism: influenced by Max Ernst in the idea of writing poetic texts to surrealist imagery. First readings of Andre Breton. The idea of trespassing time and space and "see" the visions and transforms them into words. Quantum Physics. I was being influenced more by the Science of the Quantum. rather than a person, another poet.

Themes: Feminism. Women as equal using the metaphor of the Goddess. Myth

Vicente Huidobro. Chilean poet. School of Creationism

After reading his ALTAZOR, I wrote my third book *Altazora acompañando a Vicente*. Highly influenced by Vicente Huidobro. I learned how free a word can become, the idea of freedom was important to me. I became more creative in that sense.

Another theme: the Cosmos as something to discover. Beyond that... the awareness of other cultures in the cosmos upon us.

Anthropological explorations trying to find an answer:

*Sombras-Papel* book of poetry 1978 (material on the Mayas, Mexico)

*Merla*, book of poetry 1990 (material on consciousness awakening in humanity)  
Perú, South America.

### **Is there a deeper meaning to your work?**

Yes, I think the answer to your previous question gives you some insight. I will add that any kind of art opens doors to new levels of consciousness. I do art, writing and visual, with a personal mission of the awakening of consciousness of others. The art is the channel.

### **What advice do you have for new writers? Dos? Don'ts?**

Do:

Listen to advice from writers who have been there and know what it is to confront a society, the obstacles that may arise, to avoid them. Take courses in writing. Workshops. Prepare yourself by finding your own voice. First, Read good literature. If you are a poet, do research on the poets who really made it in history. Follow the journey. Do not imitate their style, but follow the profoundness of their work, the thought process that will help you to develop your own. Read quality, not quantity. Nobel awards in literature are good examples. Set priority for yourself. To be a writer requires perseverance and faith in one's work.

DO NOT

waste time if your need is to become a good writer and be recognized as such, you need to put aside minor achievements.

FOCUS!

### **What advice do you have for your younger self?**

Do not waste time in non-functional relationships. These will take a lot of energy and at the end they will have no future. Do not be impulsive and think twice before accepting a path. Observe the pro- and cons. Be wise in your priorities.

and again,

FOCUS ON WHAT YOU WANT IN LIFE TO BE ACCOMPLISHED,

AND PUT ASIDE LESS PRIORITIES.

LISTEN TO YOUR HEART. IT IS WISE.

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### **Is writing your principal occupation?**

Almost. Life sometimes presents to you a priority that is very important, which is to take care of a mother who needs me. Together, with my writing, she is my principal occupation.