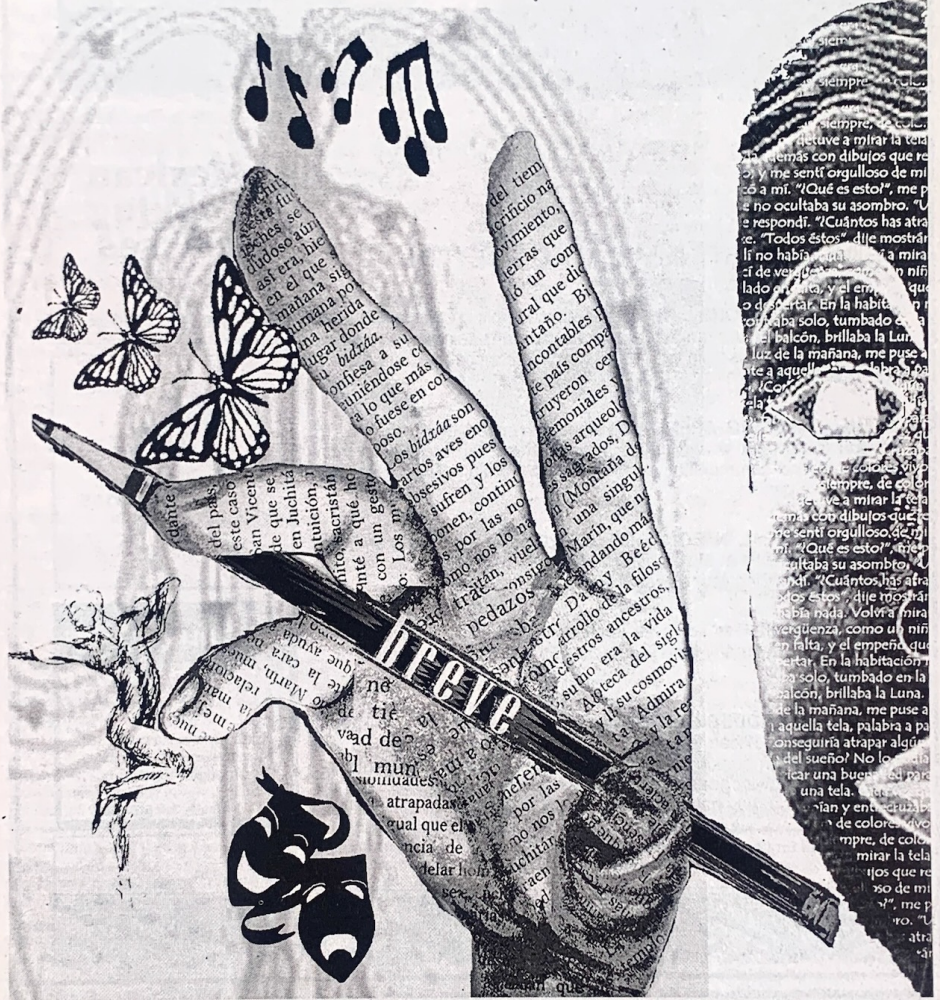




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LEARN SPANISH AT THE ICC: OAXACA'S BEST LANGUAGE SCHOOL

This Sweet Sickness

Why Humans Are the Most Ill-At-Ease Species on the Planet

By Sam Lowry

How many people can say (without lowering their eyes) that they are really comfortable in their bodies? I, for one, certainly can't. (I can't even remember when I felt really comfortable in my own body for a whole hour, much less a whole day.) There are two basic times when I feel at ease in my body; firstly, when I am fully in it (eating, walking, swimming, and, lest we forget, what is euphemistically known as "making whoopee"); and secondly, when I am more or less oblivious to it - while reading, watching a movie, or soundly sleeping in my bed. The rest of the time, there is an on-going dialogue that, if not an out-and-out argument, is at the very least a mild disagreement between "me" and "my body."

As the last phrase illustrates, there is something odd about describing our bodies as if they were a suit of clothes. Who is this "I" that is uncomfortable in "his" body? What exactly is the point of reference taking ownership of a body as if it were just another appendage to use and discard? Put more simply, who or what is the "me" to which the body supposedly "belongs"? (Presumably it is the same ephemeral entity that "was once" in a previous life Joan of Arc or Alexander the Great?) This isn't meant as a wholly frivolous question, either, because it underlines the primary difference between humans and animals - those creatures who, save when hungry or wounded, are nothing but comfy in their bodies - namely, a conception of self separate from the greater environment that houses it.

To animals, the only possible individual "self" is that of the body, and the option of alienation from it is non-existent. Animals may have diseases - they may even have cancer thanks to humans' destroying the environment - but I think it's safe to say that few of these diseases are psychosomatic. With humans, the reverse is the case: almost all our sicknesses correspond with psychological or emotional factors. Animals connect directly to the environment. They have no "self" to act as a filter between themselves and their surroundings, hence no possibility of that filter getting clogged up with negative thinking and emotions. Humans, on the other hand, with their self-reflecting ego selves, don't live "in" the environment at all, they live "in" their bodies. As intellectual rather than physical beings, we are one step removed from our surroundings, and instead of relating directly to them, we create a mind-body interface as a protective buffer. Put more bluntly, humans are the only animals that have relationships with their own bodies rather than with their environment. What other species has vanity as a primary motivating force?

The consequences of this are plain to all: large scale destruction of the ecosphere has resulted from behavior directed not by instinct but by the intellect. The intellect, we may quickly see, is the "me" that, like Lucifer, cannot resist the temptation to seize the throne of creation and take possession of Nature (the body), all the while remaining so

damned uncomfortable "in" it!

If animals belong to the species, and to the environment that sustains it (like cells in the nervous system of the Earth), it is literally impossible for them to conceive of or aspire to an existence independent of it (in a word, to revolt). The closest equivalent would be when an entire species has an excess of food and conditions overly conducive to breeding, and expands to the point of threatening the balance of its habitat. What happens in these cases (which are not species revolt but only a natural response to the conditions) is simple: Nature being a self-preserving system, the increased numbers result in a diminishing food source (and possibly species in-fighting), and the briefly thriving species is quickly reduced to a mere fraction of its population, and sometimes extinguished altogether. With humans, things are not quite so simple.



Individual humans may belong to their species (and to the Earth) every bit as much as the other animals (opposable thumbs and a hairless body hardly merit a new evolutionary category, after all), but what makes humans special is their curse-privilege of believing otherwise. The evidence (being self-created) supports our grand illusion: unlike the other animals, humans truly are a threat to the environment, not only as a species but as individuals. (In theory, it only takes one lunatic president with an itchy finger to decimate the planet.) This would indeed seem to place humans on a higher plateau of specialness and, as if in confirmation (perhaps even as reward?) for our exclusivity, we are far and away the sickest, most diseased, miserable, and self-destructive species on the planet. Not only are we the sole species with the capacity to exterminate all the others, we are (not, I fear, coincidentally) the only one depressed, demented, and depraved enough to want to.

The intellect is full of ideas for progress, self-realization, manifest destiny, and all that. It is certainly what causes humans to strive after greatness and to explore hidden realms, unknown worlds, and seek an ever deeper understanding of ourselves. Yet it is

also what gives us the ability to ignore the most rudimentary evidence in front of our eyes, and to override our instincts and common sense when it comes to harmonious, healthy living, both for ourselves and for the planet. Every problem we are faced with today as a species is the result of yesterday's brilliant solutions. The danger of the intellect is that it operates constantly, without pause, even when common sense or intuition would serve infinitely better. It cannot secede or keep silence, it wants to fix everything, even things that were never broken to begin with.

And if the body had a voice, what would it say? "I am not comfortable with this thing called mind," perhaps? Maybe that is exactly what it is saying, whenever we are feeling ill at ease in "our" bodies? After all, every symptom that is diagnosed by our (intellect-driven) doctors as sickness is in fact the opposite: the body's attempt to correct an internal disorder and to make itself well again. It is the body's means for drawing our attention to conditions that desperately require our attention. What we call sickness is the body's voice. So what is the internal disorder, if not the symptoms themselves? The answer is simple, though we won't like it. The internal disorder is us. And the Earth's response to the internal disorder of humanity is a wealth of symptoms ranging from the local to the apocalyptic, from minor storms to major tsunamis; wars and disease may also be part of Nature's attempt to check the population explosion - whatever it takes to correct the imbalance, reduce the pressure, and wake us up to the situation.

Where did we get the idea that we could be part of a collective social system than is slowly destroying the environment without experiencing a knock-down effect within our own bodies? Are we really that naive? That's the intellect for you. But the human body is connected to the Earth in the same way that the cells of our bodies are connected to us, and if our cells begin to think for themselves - develop ego and intellect and try to do "their own thing" - what do we get? Cancer is what we get. The revolt of the cells. As above, so below.

It seems like an insurmountable problem, but in fact, the solution is deceptively simple. Like the rest of us, the body (and the Earth) only wants one thing: love and attention. It may seem trite, but if so, maybe we have let our intellectual bias make us overly cynical? Instead of fighting bodily discomfort or dis-ease as an enemy, we have another option: to embrace our sickness, even unto death. By listening to it, however bitter its song may sound to our ears at first, we can learn from it; we may even hear the voice of the body, and find that it is the voice of the Earth. The less we heed it, the sharper and shriller it will get, the worse the symptoms become; conversely, the closer we attend to it, the sweeter it may begin to sound.

Despite his continued imaginary status, Sam Lowry remains (uncomfortably in his body) somewhere in Oaxaca; for Sam's Temazcal experience, see page 7.

Mano de Obra

The New Annual Short-story Contest

by Elizabeth Wu

Experts lament that "nobody reads anymore." If that is true, it could just as easily be said that "nobody writes anymore." Even Oaxaca, a city alight with cultural festivals, a vibrant visual arts scene and a varied musical platter seems to dim down when it comes to literary life. This is partly understandable, as reading and writing are solitary activities; but in a town that produced many great writers (such as Andres Henestrosa), one would expect there to be more of a buzz around encouraging and promoting aspiring writers.

To rescue the tradition of story-telling and breathe a little life into Mexican literature, the Institute of Communication and Culture decided to throw a short-story contest. The ICC, which is generally known for offering Spanish courses, is an organization dedicated to sharing and promoting cultural knowledge and activities. Beyond helping to break the language barrier, the ICC works to create a cultural bridge for foreign visitors by publishing this monthly newspaper and by organizing cultural outings, salsa classes, cooking lessons and other activities.

Within days of putting up the first posters inviting submissions of 3-8 pages on any theme, the office received a strong response from writers who wanted to participate. Three local artists donated poster designs to help spread the word. After a while, the enthusiasm

carried over into the greater community, attracting the support of several local businesses. The end of the 3-month acceptance period saw the submission of 58 original stories written by people from ages 8-70. Most submissions came from Oaxaca, though some came from Mexico DF, Puebla, Cuernavaca and Veracruz.

Out of these 58 stories, 15 have been

chosen to be published in book form (in both English and Spanish) later this year, with the cover illustrated by Maestro Francisco Toledo. The winners were announced and all contestants honored at a ceremony April 22 at the Macedonio Alcalá Theatre. The top three authors, judged by a panel of eight people representing various cultural agencies, received cash prizes of MX\$5000, \$3000 and \$1500 respectively.

Although the contest has proven to be a success, it isn't over. The ICC has decided to make this a yearly event, and hopes to expand the program to include another area, such as poetry or script-writing, or another medium,

such as film. They also hope to launch publicity throughout the country, to encourage a greater number of writers to participate. Of course, this will depend on generating sponsorship and further funding. However, if the project's first months are any indicator, Oaxaca is on its way to having a thriving literary scene to complement the rest of its cultural smorgasbord.

The winners of the 2004 Annual Short-story Competition are:

1st place: Luis Aboites Aguilar, Mex D.F. with "Martín, Martina y Pancho Villa"

2nd place: Alejandro Armenta Mendoza, Oaxaca with "Jano"

3rd place: Patricia Rodríguez Saravia, Mex D.F. with "Treinata y tres"

Judged by: Freddy Aguilar,

Biblioteca Andrés Henestrosa; José Elias Bautista, Coordinación Estatal de Bibliotecas Públicas (CEBP); Omar Fabián Rivera, IAGO; Héctor Huerga, ICC; Abraham Nahón, Revista Lunazeta; Manuel Matus Manzo, UABJO; Sergio Beltrán, Unitierra

Sponsored by: La Albahaca, La Biznaga, Oaxaca Sicaú, PAUSECULTUR, Casa de la Ciudad / Biblioteca Andrés Henestrosa, Universidad de la Tierra

Posters created by: Eva Cuyar, Isa Emmanuella Hinojosa, Marta Sánchez



Martin, Martina and Pancho Villa

Winner of the first Mano de Obra Short Story Contest

Excerpt from winning story

by Luis Aboites Aguilar

"Kill Madero?" Pancho Villa looked at his assistant questioningly. "Bring me the fool who said that." Villa reached for his gun, brushing his ample paunch, then began to search his pockets. He retrieved a carefully folded piece of paper, opened it. He smiled, then gently re-folded it and put it back.

Someone knocked on the door. "General, here is the man who was talking about Madero."

"Oh, it's you," said Villa. "Sit down." It was Martin Cortes, a short, chubby man with unfortunate features. His face was mishappen, his hair thinning, and his ears so large they nearly bent over with their own weight.

"So," said Villa, "you want us to kill Madero?"

"Yes, General."

"Well, it seems to me that in fact we'll be killing someone else. You."

"No, no!" cried the man. "At least, listen to what I have to say. Remember I have a daughter, a wife."



"OK," said Villa, "let's hear it."

"My General," pleaded Cortes, "Madero is a land baron. With him in power, nothing is going to change. He will continue to support the rich, just like Porfirio Diaz. Remember how he insists that we disarm ourselves? Why? To win over the federal army. Nothing will change, but worst of all, he is going to deceive everyone, including good men like you, who have given everything for the cause. But if we kill Madero, we also kill any chance for the rich to continue pretending things have changed when they haven't"

Villa stroked his moustache, deep in thought.

Cortes continued, desperately. "Believe me, that's what Madero is and that's what he wants. I already talked to General Orozco and he agrees."

"Don't even mention Orozco," interrupted Villa.

Cortes was discouraged, but kept on anyway. "Listen, why do you think those damn gringos have been helping us? Do you think they would have done that if they knew what Madero is? We have to kill him to stop the deception, then make a government for the poor by the poor."

"Yes, but the gringos will come for us," said Villa gravely.

"That they may," said Cortes, "but they can't defeat all of us. Listen carefully - if we kill Madero, we kill the tyranny of lies. What-ever happens, don't forget my words, General."

Villa gave him a piercing stare. "All right," he said finally, "I'll think about it. And I will spare you, on the condition that you keep your mouth shut."

Translated by: Rafael Bucio