

ITZEL II:

A Three Knives Tale



Essential Prose Series 168



Canada Council
for the Arts

Conseil des Arts
du Canada



ONTARIO ARTS COUNCIL
CONSEIL DES ARTS DE L'ONTARIO

an Ontario government agency
un organisme du gouvernement de l'Ontario

Canada^{🇨🇦}

Guernica Editions Inc. acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the Ontario Arts Council. The Ontario Arts Council is an agency of the Government of Ontario.

We acknowledge the financial support of the Government of Canada.

ITZEL II:

A Three Knives Tale



Sarah Xerar Murphy



**GUERNICA
EDITIONS**

TORONTO • CHICAGO • BUFFALO • LANCASTER (U.K.)

2020

Copyright © 2020, Sarah Xerar Murphy and Guernica Editions Inc.
All rights reserved. The use of any part of this publication,
reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise stored
in a retrieval system, without the prior consent
of the publisher is an infringement of the copyright law.

Michael Mirolla, editor
David Moratto, Interior and cover design
Guernica Editions Inc.
287 Templemead Drive Hamilton, (ON), Canada L8W 2W4
2250 Military Road, Tonawanda, N.Y. 14150-6000 U.S.A.
www.guernicaeditions.com

Distributors:
Independent Publishers Group (IPG)
600 North Pulaski Road, Chicago IL 60624
University of Toronto Press Distribution,
5201 Dufferin Street, Toronto (ON), Canada M3H 5T8
Gazelle Book Services, White Cross Mills
High Town, Lancaster LA1 4XS U.K.

First edition.
Printed in Canada.

Legal Deposit—First Quarter
Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2019946789
Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication
Title: Itzel / Sarah Xerar Murphy.
Names: Murphy, Sarah Xerar, author.
Series: Essential prose series ; 167.
Description: First edition. | Series statement: Essential prose series ; 168 |
Contents: II. A three knives tale.
Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190049634 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190049642 |
ISBN 9781771834179 (v.2 ; softcover) | ISBN 9781771834186 (v. 2 ; EPUB) |
ISBN 9781771834193 (v. 2 ; Kindle)
Classification: LCC PS8626.U7585 I89 2019 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

*¿Todo es igual que ayer, entonces?
¿Ensartaremos cráneos como cuentas.
y se ha de repetir lo que el augur
grabó en el silencio de la piedra?*

*¿Con coágulos de sangre escribiremos México?
Yo el residuo, el superviviente, hablo:
los comienzos de los caminos
están llenos de gente
No haremos diálogo con la Casa de la Niebla.*

—JUAN BAÑUELOS, "(Tlatelolco, 1520–1968)"
de *No Consta en Actas*
México, 1969

Is everything the same as yesterday, then?
Will we string skulls like beads,
and be made to repeat what the augur
engraved onto the silence of the rock?

Will we write Mexico in blood clots?
I the leftover, the survivor, speak:
the roads' beginnings
are filled with people.
We will not dialogue with The House of Fog.

—JUAN BAÑUELOS, "(Tlatelolco, 1520–1968)"
from *No Affidavit Affirms It*
México, 1969

Contents



I

1	Breakfast of Grasshoppers	3
2	Riptides and Other Tricky Currents	15
3	Nausea Mostly	25
4	Fragments of Weightlessness	41
5	To Safeguard the Thrust	53

II

6	Meat and Bone	63
7	<i>El Pendejo Ese</i>	73
8	Maybe to Break the Grip	83
9	Universal Dark Indigo	99

III

10	Criticism Self-Criticism	117
11	Iguanas and Frogs	131
12	<i>Novela Negra</i>	143
13	Meanie Mouse	159
14	The Interpenetration of Opposites	171

IV

15	A Time Dilated	187
16	The Loosened Spring	197
17	<i>Macha</i> to the End	209
18	<i>Quemada</i>	219
19	An Easy Anygringa	235
20	Whacking at Things	247
21	Impossible in a Novel	257

V

22	Good on You, Daffy Duck	271
23	<i>Su Mero Padre</i>	287
24	<i>Memoria Indómita</i>	303
25	Maybe a Kalashnikov	319

	Acknowledgements	331
	About the Author	333

For those who filled that one road's beginning
that went from the Casco de Santo Tomás
on the tenth of June, 1971
to the encounter with the *Halcones* in what became
El Masacre de Corpus.

And in memory of Armando Salgado
(12 March 1938–14 April 2018)
Who took the photographs that changed everything.

Con amor y solidaridad

I

Breakfast of Grasshoppers



THE AFFAIR WILL end long before we enter the bar in Puerto Escondido. Or so Itzel and Basta will tell me. After I've struggled through days—certainly no more than the fewest of weeks—of prepping boards or stretching canvas or doing any other work requiring little creative concentration intermixed with going to classes or to meetings or venturing out all three of us on those small trips we will still continue to make, when I will smile and laugh and try to make everything seem right, normal, the way I had told them it would be, just an expansion of what the three of us have been to each other. Though maybe they will notice the psychic pain I am trying so hard to hide within my days of migraine and painting through migraine, determined to overcome something I neither understand nor want, sure each day as I get up that I am done with it, even as something remains in my face, a slowness perhaps, as if I have developed a time lag between gesture and speech, that will push them toward ending that part of their relationship. Because they can see it, how I am just a caricature of myself, mouthing the words that will allow me to believe I have the courage of my convictions. To which will be added that simpler thing more real than it's given credit for, it certainly happens often enough, that you can fall into that place of overwhelming attraction where scratching that particular itch—and there are many like that—is the only thing

that will make it go away. Or maybe it will simply be an older morality reasserting itself, one that they too are having trouble letting go. The one that talks about cheating, like at cards, as if one or the other party always has an ace up the sleeve, even if there are no shouts about hell-fire and damnation and never showing one's face in public again: that this is not additive after all, they are stealing something from me. Or from each other. That two is ever and always the only possible number.

There will be no living if not happily ever after then happily occasionally after, with whatever hadn't killed our relationship making it day by day stronger, a tale of the utterly unlikely, in which you might even find me writing treatises on polyamory rather than trying to figure it all out, or Basta will, having taken up writing them for the editor he will be working for even then, the one who will already be turning the magazine he edits away from politics toward a discussion of the sexual liberation so much the rage up north, a man with whom I will much later have a very brief fling, who will himself live in a polyamorous commune. But all simply fall into a more usual pattern. Impulses brought on by love and propinquity in difficult times fulfilled just enough to be brought under control, a good if small story of good if little sex, catharsis and yoga in the park, and we're back to tales of politics and political prisoners, torture and tear gas, business as usual in a tiny cell in a small group in a large country somewhere in America.

Except that after one of those day trips, perhaps the very one on which they tell me it is over, there will be a return to the *atole* place the three of us holding hands as we make that small restaurant ours again, sitting down to call out to the numbered children, to Trece or Once or Cuatro for our *atole de fresa*. And there will be a euphoria in their decision for all of us, a feeling of fulfillment however forced, that will make us grasp hands, though perhaps I squeeze hardest, to make us take it even further, up and over the top. So that it might well be me who first raises her little cup of hot corn meal and bleeding strawberry hearts.

Let's drink to the struggle and to friendship, I say though maybe it's Itzel.

And to celebrate let's take a trip, Basta says or maybe it's me.

But not a day trip. Let's make it longer, Itzel says or maybe it's Basta.

And maybe then we say together if not all at once but with our voices overriding one another's.

Let's make it that road trip. The one we've talked so much about. The one to the ocean. A celebration. Of us. Of struggle. Of what we've accomplished.

And we'll all believe it could work. That it will work. We haven't done each other harm we would never do each other harm of course not.

Which is why you might see us entering that bar those weeks later exhausted, our muscles stiff the way they always are after a long drive on a rough road, a whole day in this case spent coming down to Puerto Escondido from the City of Oaxaca, full of that constant automatic adjustment to each lurch, each bounce, each jarring blow from each pothole, and the pre-emptive tightening of the muscles in anticipation of them. But we'll be relaxed somehow too, after a last solid night's sleep and those Oaxaca days we had decided on in our discussions, culture before beach we will have told each other, repeat it as we contemplate the old and new indigenous delights of the place, not just the old Zapotec and Mixtec cities of Monte Albán and Mitla but Yagul as well, the markets with their dozens of kinds of chiles and fruits, heirloom we call such things now, the textiles the pottery the syncretic popular art, the colours, the old Yalalag cross Basta will buy for me with its blooming maize and its sacred hearts, fertility and sacrifice, the old cross and the new. So that yes we will love it just as everyone will tell us in those first discussions with our friends as we inform them we are taking a trip together, when even those who raise their eyebrows just that bit will encourage us in our plans, saying Acapulco is boring and the Yucatan too far and Vera Cruz waters murky and Basta and I still only recently back from our honeymoon in the northwest, so what's in the south, we'll ask and everyone will keep coming back to Oaxaca, the wonders of Oaxaca, until we ask what's on the coast of Oaxaca if this has to have at least its little bit of ocean, its sun, its sand, where then where? Is it even possible?

And suddenly Itzel will be talking to the Hungarian painter who's been in Oaxaca more than once and Basta to Tavo in his secret identity as Octo el Pulpo, the man with a tentacle in far too many places,

Doc Oc who knows everything and everybody whether he's been there or not. I'll even put in a call to Magdalena who I'm teaching some classes with anyway so I'll need to tell her I'll be taking a break. Then there's the guy who's my boss, the head illustrator at the Museum of Anthropology where I do some part time work, who will know something too. Everyone telling us of the rough road though they're sure the Peugeot will make it.

Exactly what they will tell us in the tiny motel on the city's outskirts as we prepare to leave, reminding us that though slower and nastier than the mountain roads we've already been on this one lacks the trucks, but *ni modo* there's no other way, and it's true even these days it's the only direct road to connect the City of Oaxaca to Puerto Escondido, though now you can drive down to the isthmus, which will only be a side trip for us, then back along the newer coast road, what I will do on my return because all of two hundred fifty kilometres farther it still takes only two hours more than the rough old road does, anticipation of it causing us more trepidation than cheerfully eating our breakfast of grasshoppers, not previously dried like in the markets but freshly caught that morning in the fields outside and fried in oil and lemon in the kitchen by the family that own the place, a special treat for us they say as they instruct us on how to eat them once we indicate that we are willing, and who will prepare us too a hamper not of insects but delicious tacos *de carnitas* with onion and cilantro for the road as they tell us we will be back. Eating grasshoppers in Oaxaca means you will return, they'll say. And not just to drive through in a few days. Though I will never be able to find the place again.

✎ That meal of grasshoppers will still be in my thoughts as we enter the bar and order shrimp, how similar they are, dried shrimp to dried grasshoppers, and fresh to fresh, even to their chitinous shells we'd had to peel, the extra lemon juice we squeezed over them and the texture of their flesh. Though the grasshoppers will taste, deeply and hauntingly, of the winds through dry grass of Oaxaca's dry season hills where we will see them hopping in abundance, the grass so alive with them, their leaps so long, so high, they could have hopped right into the pan.

with the lawyer, or is it the doctor, I've forgotten that too, and there will be a strange look there, a question, like a space opening up, one I will let open as I think: I am falling away from this. Falling away. Please let me fall away. And I will look back out over to the water as Basta tells Itzel's story of the Plaza, how her determination, her *savoir faire*, got her out together with her six charges, his hand still pressing into hers. Then we'll have another beer and we'll go.

Riptides and Other Tricky Currents



THINK I would like to end this story before that. Perhaps even before the bar. Perhaps with how we will awaken that next day in Tehuantepec, the way when I turn over in preparation for getting up, I will find Basta staring down at us from the edge of the bed. When I will think for a moment I am dreaming him, and wonder if Itzel dreams him too. So that I am almost ready to ask it: Are you our dream, our same dream?

But before I can ask, he speaks.

You are so beautiful, so very beautiful, he says very softly savouring his words, and he's using the Spanish second person plural of course so there is no mistaking he means the two of us. And now, unlike the expressionless apparition who stood over our bed in our shared dream back in Guadalajara on our honeymoon when we first told each other in joy we would never do each other harm, that the man had only come to reassure us, I will see that, unlike that sombre figure, Basta is smiling, the smallest of triumphant smiles still visible on his face as I pull myself upright and Itzel moans in preparation for getting out of bed.

As he goes on.

What a beautiful way to start the day. I have been looking at you two a long time. Then starts another sentence that is interrupted by Itzel's sitting up.

I only wish ..., he says.

And then is silent.

And I do not ask my question either.

Though I will wonder often what he would have wished for. Thinking most times it was likely just not to have drunk so much the night before. And not even because he might wish to have been more aware of us as our hands gently undressed him and placed him in his bed, much less for anything more. But because we are facing a hard drive through the mountains, though easier and faster and on a far better road than the one we'll take those few days later to Puerto Escondido. The old Pan-American highway is a well graded two laner of unending short radius turns still celebrated as an engineering feat then, which we'll take up from sea level on the isthmus, the only part of Mexico flat from coast to coast, through the mountain passes to come back down into the City of Oaxaca at five thousand feet, passing slow trucks on inside curves and cornering hard. And so much the same still that I will almost feel I am passing those same trucks on my own those decades later. So that it may simply have been a wish for his stomach to settle before we begin. Or maybe just that he wished to keep it that way forever, in a mysterious time before, one of truncated awakening, looking at us without our looking back, so that I could long for that time too now, when both of us were beautiful, all three of us really, in each other's eyes.

✎ That way when I do think of it, I would not have to wonder if we stopped too short, rather than pushed things too far. Or even arrive at that next afternoon in Puerto Escondido when we will drive out to that little place the doctor has recommended, after a day they'll spend mostly relaxing in hammocks under the *palapa* we'll have taken for our own so tired they say they are from doing the actual driving of the day before, while I, never much of a beach bunny anyway, will take off down the beach right in front of us with my sketch pad. Perhaps out of a restlessness born out of that look from the night before I will not wish to have to spend my day deciphering, the desire to try not to notice what might be starting again for a few more hours, or an even greater

desire to prove to myself that everything is normal, just as we'd said it would be, just as I'd felt it for days, that there would be no problem whatsoever in leaving them together on their own. Or maybe, really, just because I have this terrible desire always to be out and doing. Examining, looking, thinking, *doing*. Something.

And there will be that beach, that very long beach with the out-cropping of black rocks at its end, there right in front of me, Playa Zicatela, home of the Mexican Pipeline, though I won't know it then, but already an international surfer Mecca, the one the Albertan will already be coming to. I'm sure the only reason we won't meet her is that we won't be there in surfer season, I don't remember anybody catching any waves, nor will there be hotels lining that beach yet, except maybe one or two at its very beginning, while going the other way, toward the other beaches we'd been told about the night before you'd encounter smaller deeper inlets full of tide pools and the fossilized *carizos* of Carizolillo, the fossilized reeds of Little Reed beach where I will stay on my return, there will be no large urbanization surrounding it, no urbanization at all really, much less the one now so popular among knowledgeable Canadians—I'll meet one of Calgary's aldermen on his way there once, both of us flying into Mexico City—there will be no reason yet to even think of building the concrete and stone walkway that now links the beaches and lets you walk between the sea and a low dense growth full of marvellous orange and purple high-backed crabs that match the shells of some kind of bivalve I'll find there too, that perhaps gulls and other sea birds have dropped, that I'm sure from the shells' colour are among those traded throughout Mesoamerica and beyond, that are still a standard in the Native jewellery of the land-locked dry lands of the southwestern United States. Those purples and oranges colours you don't believe are natural when you first see the beads. Think them plastic. Though without the walkway the only way to get to those other smaller coves with their beaches will be to take the road, so we'll only get there by car later that afternoon, and find none of those crabs at all though Basta and Itzel will collect some of the heavy sandstone fossilized reeds as I swim out into deep water to cool off. I'd already been warned about entering the water off Zicatela the

night before. Riptides and other tricky currents. You'd have to be a surfer, strong and skilled to risk that.

Though there will be crabs along that seemingly deserted beach, but only the ghost crabs common to tropical beaches and tidal outcroppings everywhere, long legged and low bodied shadows who take their colours from where they stand, so they will be as black as the rocks in the distance when finally I arrive at the beach's end and perch myself on a boulder to look out to sea and notice them only as they begin to move, the way it has been each time I have stopped on the sandy beach, where they are mottled yellow to brown, and blend in as if the beach sand were one of those 3D posters that have become so popular, the ones where you only recognize the hidden mottled shape after staring a long time and focusing your eyes just right. While with the crabs you see them only when you cease to move, though the focusing and un-focusing of the eyes is the same. As it becomes a sort of dance, they move as you are still, you move as they are, as if you are the prima ballerina in the centre and they the corps de ballet, moving around you only when you are not committed to the solo of your journey. So that I will stop often to orchestrate their movement as I walk, commanding them to dance or be still with the movements of my feet. As they repeat plié after plié, rising up on the very tips of their legs and extending their eye stalks to look around with their reflective black eyes before they lower themselves only a little to begin to move, then lower themselves completely again their eyes tucking into indentations in their shells when the vibrations of your next step make them stop. Though unlike the hermit crabs that come out and dance in the shade all night long, ghost crabs leave no magic tractor tracks to tell you of their fun. So that my walk will take hours as I am drawn down that line of sand toward those rocks that for the longest time, crab dance after crab dance, seem to get no closer until I lose all track of time. All I'll know is that by the time I get back there will just be time for that quick swim before our late afternoon meal, I'll have walked my way through the noon hour by the time I get back.

Truly that *comida* will be a treat, at this place somewhere on the outskirts of the town, along the cool treed edges of the mangrove

of the cheeks from the rest of the head, places an eye in his mouth, they are enjoying oysters together in *Tom Jones*, the English film that will have served as the introduction of food and eye contact as foreplay to America's movie going public even before I leave the States, at a time when *Y Tu Mamá También* would be far into an unimaginable sexualized future in all of America, Anglo and Latin, the U.S. and Canada as well as in Mexico. Making me wonder if she has been doing this all along with each small fish, because of course I can only see her hands, whose every gesture will now appear to me erotic, as I watch how Basta's lips and tongue come into play so that I turn a bit more toward her, to become more aware of hers in this ceremony that now seems meant only for each other, so that sitting where I am I will think myself quite literally a bit not just to but on the side. While her words when she speaks them will seem electric, hallucinated, enveloping, coming somehow from all directions, even the ones that address me washing over rather than including me.

Making me realize suddenly what they mean, what they refer to, beyond their bitchy *chingaquedita* singsong of sympathy that has nothing to do with my failure to appreciate the fine fat of her fish eyes, or how she is teaching such appreciation to Basta, any more than my clutching the edge of the table to steady myself against the dizziness or my suddenly getting up to run to the edge of our clearing to throw up into the bushes has anything to do with his apparent delight in that eye disappearing into his mouth, that small ball appearing on his tongue. She has been watching me, noticed how slowly I am eating, the way my legs are stretched out widespread in front of me and has realized even before I have acknowledged it to myself what my walk along the beach has cost me, that the results of my prolonged exposure, neither a mad dog nor an Englishman, to the noonday sun are far worse than I expected. My fever too, and the nausea it brings, far too real.

✿ It will be the worst sunburn I've ever gotten. Ever. And my own fault entirely. Though in my defense I must say that before starting out I'll have taken all the precautions I'll know to take. There will be no sun block, no PABA, No SPF factors, none of that will have been invented

be sharing something special between them besides teeny little complicit smiles and knowing shrugs, you know the ones, the small squeezed together lifts to the shoulders at not having been so very fucking stupid, in this case as I had been.

Though I will manage to smile a wan smile at a group on their way to the restaurant. Not surfers but scuba divers who have arrived on a boat only that day. And I will not notice the leader of them sizing me up. In fact, I'll notice pretty much nothing at all.

II

Meat and Bone



DON'T REALLY remember what happened next. That walk is something I will always see in fragments. Some tiny piece of environment or anatomy as if lit by a flashlight on a blacked out street, with occasionally a lightning flash to illuminate it all. And it will be our feet I see mostly, giving the sense that I am always looking down. Even when off at an angle that my eyes aim down. So there is little of the downtown streets we walk that I will notice as they change from newer concrete to stone faced colonial buildings except that occasionally there will be broken pavement or cobblestones maybe a small plant a large wood church door then the lights again from hole in the wall restaurants or newsstands flowing onto the sidewalk, occasional stops, hands, eyes, brief touchings, but mostly just his feet, I still remember his feet.

And one long interval, only one into which he speaks, while mostly we are accompanied by what I know must be the sound of my voice trying not so much to convince him as to convince myself that I am still there, still present. That he does not have to stop so very often to look at me, to have me look at him. So that I will try for lightness. Even as I answer his question, that very first question that started all this, the easy parts of it anyway, at least at first, take it back to the streets of my tomboy childhood with talk about that learning to practice one's

emergencies, where the joy in it, for all of us, was that you could be ready for what the streets threw at you, so that I will start with the first time I concretely remembered doing it, remembered talking about it, about training the body to react. Or not to.

And I will modulate my voice to cheerful somehow, they are after all strange happy childhood moments these, epitomized by the kind of elation I could feel obliterating all other sensation as I stood at the old sink, the one with the lead pipes leading to it that will crystallize and break and to our good fortune never be repaired, that time in early summer I'd been running with a glass in my hand and tripped coming up from cobblestone to curb, and cut my hand open from side to side, so that I'll feel great pride with no adults at home to know to wash it in cold water and let my blood run swirling red into the drain as I proudly proclaim looking straight in at the still cartilaginous joint of my middle finger—the one between proximal phalange and metacarpal I'll explain to El Flamenco in words I only just that very year learned in art anatomy—as I call all the kids over to say: Look look we're meat, meat and bone.

Because the torn flesh of my hand will be left clearly visible too as the water continues to sluice away the blood so that it will look like steak the teeny tiniest of steaks, isn't that what they tell us these days that as we age we should eat steaks only the size of our palms, well this my child palm will be only one fourth that steak size and open for all to see as I extend my fingers as far back as they'll go and then waggle the joint so we can watch it move, its translucent ridge shining amid the meaty red and so much like the white cartilage end of a chicken breast I'll know it's not really bone but won't know what to call it until at seventeen in a brief fling with a med student he'll tell me you can always tell age by the lack of ossification in the hands, still think about it often enough when I eat a chicken, which is what I'll tell El Flamenco too as I extend the scarred hand in front of him as we walk, while already back then I'll regret out loud that I hadn't known to quell that automatic response that makes you put down a hand to break a fall, which in turn will make me swear to my brother and the older boys there present I'll know to have a plan in place if it ever happens again,

to in a split second throw away whatever it is I hold or to shoulder tuck and roll, and it's true I will.

I've fallen with objects and never again, I've thrown soda bottles afar before flying over bicycle handlebars in a crash after my brakes fail coming down a hill, rolled with objects too precious to break including much later my infant son who won't even let out a whimper as I trip on stairs and he's held to my chest as I do a full somersault, so that as well as a strange lesson in anatomy and vulnerability and crazy pride I will learn from that cut how there are some things that if you examine them carefully can be made to never happen at all, making me laugh at that as we walk or try to sound as if I am anyway as I add, because he asks, that no, there were no stitches taken, stitches were something we just didn't do in our house, Billie said we couldn't afford it and it was left up to Dan if he was around, this is when she'll remind him he's a war hero, the heroic Indian scout who was one of the first Pathfinders onto Saipan, so it's past forty and for an operation I finally do get stitches, though childhood will see me cut to the bone or what passes for it several times, though I don't remember if Dan was around for the hand or if it was just me my brother and the boys who'll come up with the strategy of bandaging my hand and half-closing it, which will seem to work well enough until the night two or three days later when I wake up to the sharp metallic smell of my blood, my gauze wrapped hand open under my pillow, awash in pain the way you always are if it's on waking, my sheets drenched in blood and the only comfort my cat Chiquita purring as she licks the dried blood out of my hair, so that I will find a way to reward her that fall back at school, fifth grade I think it was though we just called it the tens in my progressive school, after the weeks of wrapping and rewrapping the hand as it slowly heals, the skin going hard as only the skin of palm or sole can do and the middle still open so that I remember staring down at that tiny translucent white ridge while showing it off to the other kids, or sitting in the school library noting how sometimes the hand gets stuck half open and I have to close it to open it again, and then there's how easily it cramps as I continue on my homage to Chiquita, my first childhood book, *The Adventures of Chiquita and Her Friends*, a literary disaster because

tomboy terror of soon to be up and coming Near City Brooklyn that I may have been, soothed by the salt taste of my own blood, I could not even let Chiquita do the same in my book, won't even write that blood soaked night into my work however often I might speak of it in gruesome child triumph to my friends and take whatever opportunities were offered to horrify the girlier girls in my class by speaking of my whole neighbourhood's bloodthirsty delights as I detail the cat's purrs her slurps as she chews on my blood caked hair because the truth is I never did want anything of importance, anything that really hurt or dismayed, to impinge upon the lives of Chiquita or her kittens, even the toms she must have run with nights to get herself in the family way, or elaborating on how we watched her give birth and lick off the amniotic sacs just as she had my blood were out of the question, I'll only allow for a genteel bit of yowling from fences and the thrown shoes of the cartoons of the time, as I would each day close the blood red paste cover with its precisely drawn tabby while chewing on the pink eraser of my pencil now held in my left hand, breathing in the musty smell of the library's books while imagining new adventures for the cats not to have.

Something I probably will tell El Flamenco about, not so much to try to persuade him that there might be a kinder gentler pacifist Nauta inside me somewhere as to make some kind of humorous aside, telling him no matter how much I had a childhood love of *Archy and Mehitabel* with its typewriter key jumping cockroach—we had already spoken of *las cucarachas* in the *atole* place after all—and *toujours gai*, archy, *toujours gai*, merry widow style cat, a book Billie would read from to us sometimes to pretend to some form of near normal mothering, only to fall into one of her maudlin moments the minute she got to There's a dance in the old dame yet, missing not so much Matt O'Brien as the life they were supposed to have, guaranteeing a drunk that would have her hunting us down calling us Little Shits soon after, still I'll know I should have titled my kitty adventure novel something more like *Tales from an Event Free Zone*. Despite or maybe in good part because during the time that fall we must have hit our maximum of pets, thirteen cats three dogs and a rabbit, with half the cats accounted for by Chiquita

and her litter of six, the others belonging to cousins of Billie's away for a while in distant lands stashed in the basement along with her temporary Mexican lover, her substitutes for Dan who by fall will be away at sea on one of his nine month to year long voyages to the Persian Gulf or around the world, Billie will be hunting for her standard hangover cure of milk and raw eggs and break an overly eager one of Chiquita's kittens' back in the refrigerator door and I'll turn to watch it mewling drag its way across the floor.

And then I'll go on with that quote from somewhere I don't remember about how we weren't raised we just grewed, though that is never really true of anyone, knowledge of how to get by in whatever human society you're destined to live in is always passed on by someone, still most of the time it will seem to us to be passed on in increments, the way children's rhymes and games often are, not from adults but from older to not very much younger child, so that you never know where such knowledge comes from it just seems to float in the atmosphere, nobody ever needed the internet for that, the things I learned could have been more pattycake and double dutch and the words to go with them had I been of a girlier persuasion, while our climbing instead made me find the correct Linnaean name to use to compare us to the *ailanthus altissima* the tree that grows in Brooklyn made famous by the book of that title, brought over from Asia to start a shantung silk industry in the borough only to have the worms die while the tree will thrive and become famous for growing up through concrete and cracking foundations as well as for a musk all its own that transfers to your skin if you so much as touch a leaf, so that we might rub them in someone's face but knew better than to ever climb the trees whose brittle branches break far too easily to count on them sustaining the weight of the smallest among us in a light breeze no matter the force of the trees' upward growth, even as I'll tell him that no matter how brittle any given one of us might feel from time to time, and no matter that one or another of us might shatter, we grew up through concrete too, impaled ourselves on picket fences or barbed wire, climbed to the heights of stronger trees, the faces of buildings or the girders of the Brooklyn Bridge.

At a time when still too young for scuba by subway we played on

the near docks when no ships were in and watched turds and condoms float out to sea, white eels the condoms were called and laughed at because we knew somehow they were a dirty secret no matter that we didn't know their use, though we were never among the super brave or the super stupid who actually went into the East River's waters even if sometime in those years there was a lover of Billie's bragged he helped rob the docks from the water and had swum from Brooklyn to Manhattan, likely just the braggadocio he was famous for, the currents were fierce the water cold and whatever it was lived in there could likely kill you, rumour had it when cops fell in or had to rescue someone they were later given typhoid shots; so we'd just balance one footed on the bollards and wave our arms pretending we were about to fall, then maybe go up into the Heights among the more elegant townhouses where we'd pick a stoop to start from then run along the second storey ledges of the brownstones leaping from stoop to ledge to ledge to stoop as fast as we could occasionally knocking on a window fingers wagging from ears or noses if we saw someone inside, the owners coming out sometimes to yell at us threatening to call the cops, or going to the official playgrounds to see how high you could get on a swing before letting go to fly over the enclosure fence and land on your feet, this time the parents of more restrained children doing the yelling and the hectoring. While fighting, yes fighting, marking out territory and fighting—something passed on as well from older to younger—was part of it too, and one of the things I got remarkably good at along with balancing on the top rails of the narrowest fences and shinnying up light poles, so that sometimes even one or another of the regulars might set me up with some new boy, when they'd get him to tell me I'd never manage to do whatever new trick I was trying out because I was only a girl, even if with my dirty hands, jeans and short hair you might hardly be able to tell, I'll even get a crew cut one summer when Billie's Mexican lover takes me to a barber who doesn't know, that or the lover told the barber in Spanish and I didn't get the joke, but the boys will do it just to see what will happen. What I might do to the new kid. It will almost become a rite of passage.

Then older of course there will be the knives we'll learn to carry.

Because that will be an adolescent thing, part of that don't panic and have a plan stuff he'd mentioned that you didn't have to be a boy scout to figure out, so my reaction the night before had been like that, we'd certainly practiced that knowing when to still your instincts in order to take effective if not necessarily right action, if someone pulls a knife on you this knowing not to stay mesmerized by the blade, to keep your gaze focused wide, so we'd feint and strike, sticks in hand never with the blades themselves except for an occasional gesture outward toward someone too far to reach, though we might use the flexible broad side of machetes which had never been sharpened like in any pretend sword fight, Dan always brought one or another from the Caribbean when he was sailing coastwise, light weight women's machetes mostly or others available often enough in bodegas or hardware stores too, cheap things I remember well with rough wood handles and red painted blades, the kind of thing no Mexican jungle or coastal *campesino* would be caught without, not at all the prestige weapon they seem to have turned into, and I'll be conscious enough that I'm babbling again by then that I'll slow down enough to say that as practicing with knives went I'd seen him do that too, widen his gaze like that, not back there in the hotel in Puerto Escondido where I will only be able to locate him far to my back and side in my peripheral vision, but there on the street only minutes before. Not that the knife thing happened much in the neighbourhood, play fighting or whittling and playing mumblety-peg with hard to open two bladed pocket knives aside anyway, I'll say. I'd been beset with chains a couple of times and we used the buckles of our belts, but knives no, though all of us, by early adolescence we carried them, single bladed, the opening easy. And for the boys it was really to show you were part of something, of the group maybe, and sure it was still the same for me, but it was also different. For them it was becoming a man, for me it was showing that even if I'd never be a man, still: I owned the streets.

But it's odd too, because when I started carrying a knife won't mark when I started fighting, but when I stopped. Which will mean, of course, in just that same attempt at light-hearted humour I will have to tell him about my last fight, my last official neighbourhood fight anyways. And just that little bit more too about how I do believe it's a

good idea to know how to fight, to know you can. And what I'd learned by that time in my practice of the art over my childhood years is to know well that place where the question is never strength or even speed but predicting your opponent, staying always one, two, three steps ahead. And giving your all to doing it. Every ounce of energy and focus you might have. So that in the neighbourhood, you can bet I really will have a reputation.

Then thrown into all that stuff I'll mention too how in the movement up north when asked that question we always asked each other about where our commitment came from, I'll always say that no, I was not a red diaper baby like so many from New York, just a *déclassé* Brooklyn tomboy with an overdeveloped sense of justice, how I'd always fought for the underdog and then there's how at thirteen I'll be biking with a friend, one of the few girls I hung with, a middle class kid from the Heights with no fighting skills at all but the best arm on her you ever saw, fighter and climber that I am throwing well will still always seem something of a miracle to me, but this kid could put a ball through the fourth story window of her town house when it was only open five inches, and this day it's that one of the Latino kids, Ernie his name, I see it incised in the sidewalk each time I go back to Brooklyn, remember him drawing it with a stick in the wet concrete after the old slate was removed, and he's down that day from the Joralemon Street housing projects, the first in Brooklyn I think, with tiny rooms but wonderful arches and crazy spiral staircases so oddly beautiful that they too have gentrified, and he's giving my friend trouble so she decides to practice her newly learned profanity and she calls him a son of a bitch, only he thinks she's called him a 'Spic' so he knocks her off her bike and I drop mine to give chase, well aware that I'm about to get the shit kicked out of me because already I will have grown small. Except for the odd boy who won't have hit his growth spurt yet, compared to the guys my own age I'm already small. And Ernie is sixteen.

Yet I'll know I have to face him down. I have to *dar cara*. Knowing how to take a beating is part of the rules too, maintaining your dignity more important even than humiliating your enemy, so that sometimes you even get to win by losing. Only when I corner *ese chavo*, I'll probably

call him as I talk to El Flamenco, the way later it will be *el vato ese* for *mi amigo de Sinaloa*, I was still fast after all, my pelvis hadn't widened that much yet, damn but I'll regret that each time I notice the glittering stretchmarks along the sides of my hips that tell me how much that quick growth slowed my run, only instead of beating me up this kid will cower and beg me not to hurt him.

Don't do anything to me, don't do anything to me, he'll say, hoarse, so it's like a combination of a whisper and a shout, and there will be something so ridiculous in it, how he will beg for mercy his hands turned backwards to clasp the fence pickets behind him, his open mouth at the level of my hairline, that I will start to laugh and be unable to stop. But just turn and with all the swagger I can muster walk away. And I will never fight again.

That's how I always tell it anyway. Little scraps there'll be of course, Billie if you count her, acts of self defense and disarmament, but nothing really neighbourhood big. And I've always thought that a good way to go out.

With my neighbourhood reputation intact, because yes, it will be that puberty time, and I'll have to figure it all out. How to become a woman, if you're not sure you've ever been a girl. And above all, and I'll already know this, what I will not give up. And that's what I'll tell El Flamenco about, not the clouds going pink and the terrible loneliness of those bike rides home the way I would with Itzel, but what I would not give up. And I will repeat it, how that's when I'll start to carry the knife. Because that will be one of them, the best of them: the freedom of the streets the weapon declared.

Acknowledgements



AS IN ANY PROJECT dreamed over decades, worked on from time to time over years, *Itzel* owes debts of gratitude for the insight of many. At its very beginning, and perhaps most importantly, to the man who took me to the story, or the story to me, my Choctaw father William D. Sherar, a sailor whose love and breadth of knowledge of the indigenous history of the Americas sent me to Mexico, made me bilingual and brought me to my life's work among Latin America's exiles. A small smattering of others, important perhaps for just one conversation, one insight, or many times many, whether of artistry or identity, would include, Jorge Antonio Perez Vega, Guadalupe Otero, Claire Harris, José Emilio Pacheco, Rafael Gaona, Luna Allison, Robert Richard, Daniel Viglietti, Lillian Allen, Gilberto Guevara Niebla, Rosemary Brown, Margaret Randall, Weyman Chan, Marie Jakober, Marcial Muñoz, Caterina Edwards, Adrian Stimson, Francisco Capdevila, Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Armando Salgado, Margot Adler, Sheri-D Wilson, Victor Gavilán, Keith Jafrate, Salvador Martinez de la Roca, Leila Sujir, Robert Kroetsch, Carlos Sevilla, Mario Cruz, Stuart McKay, George Melnyk, Ken McGoogan, Regie Cabico, Marlinda Freire, Daniel Millstone, Laura García Lorca, Joe and Pilar Montero and many others, nameless because they already know who they are or nameless because I know they would still prefer to go unnamed. And

too, the man who was there at the beginning and almost made it to the end, my brother Timothy G. Murphy, who knew ordnance enough to identify the bullet holes in the walls of the Plaza's buildings but also the answer to any question, however trivial, I ever had about Brooklyn, and who grew up with me in the back of Monteros Bar and Grill. With a special shout-out to my readers on this book, Roberta Rees, Todd Gitlin, Michael Brown, Valerie Larson, Chuck Kniffen, Michael Radetsky, Peggy Grubel, Alexandra Jurisic, Cynthia Huntington and of course, Michael Mirolla. To my Proudlock family and finally, to the funding bodies: The Alberta Foundation for the Arts, Arts New Brunswick, and in particular the Canada Council for their support, at beginning and middle and at 2018's ending which allowed me to be in Mexico for the fiftieth anniversary of the Massacre looking down from my balcony at the tens of thousands entering the Zócalo to see the power of what it means to Mexico that *el dos de octubre no se olvida*. A trip which gave me time too, to make sure I had my facts as straight as possible and to jog again my personal and historical memory.

About the Author



INTERPRETER, TRANSLATOR, COMMUNITY activist, teacher, visual, performance, and spoken word artist, Sarah Xerar Murphy (Sarah Murphy), is also the award winning author of multiple works of fiction and memoir among them *Connie Many Stories*, *Lilac in Leather* and *Last Taxi to Nutmeg Mews*. She has published, performed, exhibited and toured in Mexico, Spain, the United States, United Kingdom and Canada. Xerar Murphy has been honoured with Canada's Golden Beret Award as well as an Arts Council England International Artist's fellowship on which she toured and saw produced a live music and sound art CD of her full length spoken word monologue *when bill danced the war*, a story of her Choctaw father's war heroism and PTSD. At a Banff Centre residency facilitated by Adrian Stimson, *The Weavers 2012*, a literary installation in celebration of Maya weaving and commemoration of the Guatemalan genocide of the eighties was brought to fruition then exhibited in both Maine and New Brunswick. Brought up in New York where she began her work in movements for social justice in 1960 at fourteen, she has subsequently been a resident of both Mexico and Canada, with much of her work among Latin America's exiles and refugees in both Toronto and Calgary, work for which she has received special recognition in an award from Calgary's Chilean community. Murphy holds a degree in studio art and Mexican pre-Columbian and

colonial art history, as well as studies in Latin American and Spanish literature. She brings a multicultural and biracial perspective to all her work. She currently lives in Passamaquoddy Territory in Bocabec, New Brunswick.