

My Father Was a Toltec by Ana Castillo

Week: 1 of 3

Pages: xvii-xix, 72, 140, 81

Themes

- Race relations
- Cultural identity
- Working class women

Recommended Opening: What's one thing people might not know about you just by looking?

Before Reading:

- Ana Castillo – Poet & novelist, also writes essays and magazine articles; Mexican American; born and raised in Chicago on the Near West Side; unmarried, has one son; currently teaches at DePaul University.
- What do you notice about the cover photograph? Ana Castillo says it's important for women writers of color to have photographs of themselves on their books. Why do you think that is? Do you agree?

Recommended Reading Passages and Questions:

Read the Preface, pp. xvii-xix

- What do we learn here about Ana Castillo and her experiences growing up?
- What do we learn about the Toltecs in this preface? Who are they?
- How does Castillo describe what Chicago was like when she was young? How much do you think this has or hasn't changed? Why?
- Why do you think Castillo would title her book, *My Father Was a Toltec*? How do you think her father's experience/identity might have affected her?
- What do you think the poems will be about?

"Me and Baby" p. 72

- Who are all these people waiting? What are they waiting for? Where are they waiting?
- Do you think this an accurate picture? Why/why not? Have you experienced anything like this or heard anything about it? If yes, what has your experience been?
- The narrator talks almost exclusively about women at the aid office. Why do you think this is? Why do you think this might be a task that falls disproportionately to women as opposed to men?
- What challenges do poor and working-class women face? Poor and working class mothers, specifically?
- What are the stereotypes attached to people being on/receiving aid? How do you feel about these stereotypes?
- Why does the narrator/woman's voice feel like she has to "pound her fists if they ask her for forms?" What are some of things the government requires from people on aid? Are they reasonable or excessive?
- The narrator says: "i'll speak up when i get my chance," but then ends up kicking the wall instead. Why do you think she doesn't speak up? Why does she kick the wall? How do you imagine she's feeling "At 5 of 5," towards the end?

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- How does the ending of the poem make you feel (the remarks of the workers at the center)? Why do you think the workers treat the people they way they do?
- How can people break the cycle of poverty? Is government aid a help or a hindrance in this process?
- Discuss the way that the poem is divided; does it remind you of anything? Why might she have chosen to form the poem this way?
- Why do you think she titles this poem, “Me and Baby”? How would it be different if she’d called it, “Me and *My* Baby”? Why do you think she phrases it this way?

Read “A Christmas Carol: c. 1976” pp. 140

Translations-

- ¿Ya ves? *Pórtate bien y a ver qué te trae* means **See? Be good and see what he brings you**
- ¿Ya ves que bien? *A ver qué te trae Santa Claus, a ver que te trae!* means **“See how good it is? See what Santa Claus brings you; see what he brings you!”**
- What is happening here?
- What does the narrator mean about *signing dreams away*? What dreams is she talking about? Why are she and the other women signing them away?
- Why does the narrator mention dignity? What role might dignity play for the narrator and other women in similar circumstances? How do people show or assert dignity?
- What is the significance of it being winter in the poem? Literally? Figuratively?
- How is the narrator affected by it being Christmastime? What is Christmas time like in downtown Chicago? What memories or feelings do the holidays evoke in people?
- Imagine walking through these crowds of happy people, holiday scenes, when you’ve just signed your divorce papers; what might that feel like?
- In the event of divorce or separation, what responsibilities do women usually bear?
- What’s going on with the girl in the 3rd stanza? Who is she? Why does this memory come up?
- What do you think might be next for this woman? What does it take to begin a new path after a big change in your life? What do you all think it will take/is taking from you to do this program and make this change in your lives?
- What’s the significance of the mother’s words about being good and seeing what Santa brings her? Why do you think this is what the narrator thinks about in this moment?
- What are some differences the narrator notices between how she felt as a younger girl and now as a woman? What are some differences you’ve noticed between how you felt or what you cared about as a child versus as an adult?
- Why do you think the poet shifts from telling the story of the woman, then the memory of her as a young girl, then back to her as a woman? What is the effect on the reader of moving back and forth?

“Poem 13” (pp. 32):

- Why do you think the poem is essentially just a list of things the speaker can do? Why do you think the things listed were chosen to be in this list?
- The poem begins (and later repeats) “i too can...” What do you make of this? Who do you think the speaker is talking to? Why might they be saying these things? Who do you envision the speaker is (gender, where do they live, race, what’s their job, who do they live with, etc.)? Why do you imagine them that way?
- When you read the list of things the speaker says they can do, which lines/actions most stand out? Why?

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- What do you think “saying good-bye effortlessly,” “silently removing myself from an undesired space,” “turning about face,” and so on have in common? What kind of person would declare that they can do all these things?
- What do you think it means to “erase unnecessary experience”? What sorts of experiences would you consider unnecessary? Would you erase any of your own life experiences if you could? Why or why not?
- What do you make of the ending of the poem where she says, “i too could live satisfied with all my acts content amidst my ignorance”? What do you think they are ignorant of/about? How—if at all—has growing and learning changed your understanding of your own abilities/actions?

“Women Are Not Roses” (pp. 95):

- What is the feel/tone of this poem to you?
- What lines or ideas stand out?
- What do you think Castillo means when she says, “Women have no beginning only continual flows”?
- Why do you think she compares women to rivers, roses, oceans and stars—but all to say women are NOT these things? What would it mean if women WERE those things (if women were rivers, were roses...)? What does it mean that they are not?
- Who do you think the “she” in the final stanza is? Why might a woman want to tell another woman these things? What would make you think a woman already knows these things?
- What other things are associated with women—or are women compared to—that you believe women are NOT? How do these associations get built? What are the benefits to comparing women to things we sometimes compare them to? What are the harms/drawbacks to comparing women to things we sometimes compare them to?

“We Would Like You to Know” p. 81

- Who is the “we” the narrator is referring to? Why do you think she would choose to write in the plural voice as opposed to the singular (we instead of I)?
- What stood out of the things she would like us to know? Why?
- Who is she talking to in this poem? What do you think she would like them to do with this information?
- How would you describe the mood or tone of this poem? Why would she choose the tone she did?
- What kinds of stereotypes are prevalent about your community? Your culture/race? Your age group? Your gender? How have you come up against these in your daily life?
- What do you make of the ending? What does she mean by “guilt or apologetic gestures won’t revive the dead...?” What does she want from the listener?
- In the last lines, she says: “we are going forward. There is no going back.” What do you think she means by this? In what ways do you think she intends to “go forward”?
- What solutions do you see when facing stereotypes like these? What would you like people to know about your identity or community?

Recommended Poetry: --

Recommended Poetry Prompts: “We Would Like You to Know...”

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Write a piece addressing the assumptions that you've come up against in your life (culture, age, gender, situation, etc.) or anticipate coming up against in your job as a tradeswoman. Speak as a voice unifying the group you come from or identify with. What message do you have for these people? What message do you have for others who might be listening?

In addition to "we are not all," make sure you include some positive things that "we are," some things that an outsider might not know.

Recommended Closing: "Happily May I Walk"