Kelsey Maki about 2,900 words

16 Kennedy Ct

Middletown, NJ 07748

908-642-4127

travelwritingprof@gmail.com

Monophonic Mash-Up

by Kelsey Maki

**A description she dislikes**

The music sounds like Morse code, SOS signals in the drumbeats. Luz Stella is attuned to its energy, its pulse, but she can’t untangle its meaning. Soon so many eyes will flash to her for the answer. The playbill claims she’s the woman who can make you see sound, wrapping and bending her body around a note, rendering it visible. It’s a description she dislikes. What’s missing is her sacrifice, the story of how she got here—how each step, every sweep of her arm, each bend of her back, right down to the angle of her fingers, takes so much sweat and work.

**This is not a love story**

Luz left Lima when she was sixteen. It took her two years to travel to the US alone. Music—its incessant rhythm, its forward march—had given her the momentum to escape. Luz left behind a mother who eyed her twenty-three inch waist with scorn, telling her: *You are not my child, Mestizo. My people are brave conquistadors. They are not small and skittish like you.* She escaped the calloused hands of her father, hands that smelled of anchovettas and other dead things. She escaped the confinement of dances like the Alcatraz, where partners step with a strip of paper tied to their waists, each holding a candle, each fearing the conflagration.

In the US—no citizenship, no visa, no GED—Luz found work as a waitress in a run-down diner and as a cleaning lady in a low-end assisted living facility. Her coworkers couldn’t understand how she endured sixteen-hour days, sweating away her youth without uttering a single complaint, but Luz—practical and frugal, stealthy and savvy, a girl who’d traveled across the borders of eight countries, traveled by train, bus, car, and foot, a woman who’d made it all the way to the US, a runaway who’d seen more violence than most war correspondents—was grateful for this new life, grateful for her studio apartment in a modest neighborhood near the UCLA campus, seeing this space, a place she paid for with her own money, as evidence of the greatness of the country to which she’d traveled.

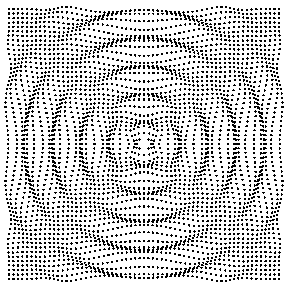
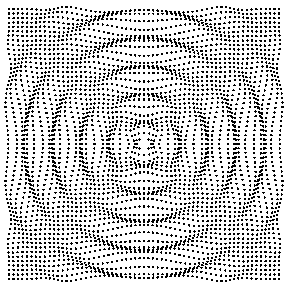
Is complacency an affliction that affects us all? Is our desire for permanence pointless? This was what Luz wondered after quitting both of her jobs and securing a position as a server in an upscale steakhouse. Only a few years in the US and Luz was no longer content to exist as a ghost—hollow and invisible. The passion she’d been suppressing needed an outlet, so she celebrated her 20th birthday by enrolling in UC-extension dance classes. Every night after work she practiced, reviewing what she’d learned, fusing it to her own experience, striving to create something new, a whirling alchemy, as she danced with her eyes closed and arms extended, strong legs intuiting each step, her entire body striving for the meditative state that made dancing feel like a rebirth, the life that came after the melting of her wounded self, a swooping cycle of salvation brought on by the spark that was the song.

At the conclusion of her ten-week class, her teacher said she was ready, that there was nothing left for her to learn. Luz knew this was a lie, but his words propelled her forward, giving her the confidence to compete for parts in avant-garde productions. Luz lived for the moments when she was onstage: her body sinking into sound, the physical world dissolving. With each passing day, she let go of a little more, leaving pieces of her past behind, walking with the uncalculated stride of a woman without attachments. But her decision to remain single, to come and go as she pleased, only made the men try harder.

Wherever she went, there they were—demanding her time, her attention.

It was never an even exchange.

The best way to get them to go away, she’d found, was to take their numbers and leave without a word. Luz never revealed her name; she never lied and said she’d call. In her mid-twenties, finding herself at the height of some feminine force, Luz collected an impressive array of business cards, napkins, and the occasional ripped backing of a cigarette pack. Not by nature a wasteful woman, she stashed these numbers at the bottom of her sock drawer on the off chance that she would one day want to talk.

[](http://www.acs.psu.edu/drussell/Demos/rad2/mdq.html)

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**Free Falling—in waves**

two stones dropped,

dancing surface

ripples

~~outward~~

like celestial circles

like a Pythagorean symphony in the sky

like solar systems and galaxies

spinning

worlds

apart.

Like suns seeking

binary orbits,

seeking

co-existence without

cancellation.

**This \*might\* be a love story**

The night she met Percy, her performance was perfect. It took thousands of hours of work just to appear effortless. There was a rawness, a hunger in the way she moved, like *la loba*, never pausing to wipe her brow or brush the sweat-dampened hair from her eyes. Onstage, everything was as it should be. But when the music stopped and the lights came on, she noticed a dull pain in her heel and the burn of broken blisters on her toes.

Everyone in the audience had left or was leaving, an accordion of people expanding out the door, losing shape—she imagined—on the street. She stood to the side, stretching as she waited for the crowd to recede. Luz scanned the empty seats, her eyes running over the curved rows, lines like boundaries of concentric circles, ripples radiating outward. She was surprised to see one person, a man, still sitting, leaning back in his chair, looking like he didn’t care what anyone else was doing, where anyone else was going. It was as if he were still hearing the music, still witnessing the performance. He nodded when he saw Luz looking at him. Embarrassed, she turned away and silently stepped past the people who’d been tasked with taking apart the sunrise, a puzzle of color painted over plywood. In a dressing room, she slipped out of her form-fitting costume and pulled on a pair of jeans and a threadbare *Pixies* concert tee shirt.

The fact that she was thinking about him—this man she’d yet to meet—was a first. Never had a stranger stayed in her mind for more than a few minutes. But her thoughts about him were not fully formed. Hers was a primal awareness, a sense of something swirling below the surface. Seeing that he was still there, she strode across the stage with her eyes fixed on the door, trying to tamp down her desire to stay. Jumping off the stage, walking down the aisle not far from where he sat, her eyes on the illuminated EXIT sign, Luz could feel him looking at her. He was sitting with both arms angled over the seats, claiming more space than he needed.

“You remind me of Isadora Duncan.” He said it like he didn’t care if she heard, and yet he seemed desperate to impress her. It was this duality that drew her in. He had creases in his brow and the skin around his eyes crinkled when he smiled. He appeared to be about thirty-five, still young, but ten years older that Luz. He was dressed like a banker or a businessman, but with an artistic flair. His shirt was starch-white, but his tie was splashed with color. Her desire to sit beside him felt primitive and powerful. She knew she should keep moving, sail past him as if nothing mattered, but her sneakers were stuck. She winced and kept walking.

“What's wrong?” He was still seated. His air of entitlement was foreign and fascinating.

“I’m fine,” she said, planting her feet, claiming her space.

“Do I look like every asshole you've ever known?”

“Yes.” Her tone was flat, far from flirtatious. This was a part she refused, a role she rejected. She would not stand in the background and be cast as a *love interest*.

“Fair enough,” he said, taking his arms off the seats, seeming suddenly smaller, more vulnerable. Luz contemplated walking away, but the marching orders from her brain had yet to reach her feet. He dug his hand into his pocket, awkwardly pulling out a lighter and a pack of cigarettes. She pointed at the *No Smoking* sign.

“Shit.” He clumsily shoved the lighter and loose cigarette into his pocket.

“She's my favorite, you know,” said Luz, letting go of her vigilance, sensing his need, feeling it to be greater than her own.

“Duncan?”

“She’s the one that everyone knows. The one that everyone reveres, but that doesn’t make her work any less meaningful. She taught me that it’s not about doing some steps you've memorized. It's about your own movement, your own truth.” Never before had she shared her thoughts with such ease. The words sounded small and silly and she scolded herself for her lack of restraint. Why the sudden desire to explain? Luz didn’t need his understanding; she wasn’t seeking his approval.

“I used to take ballet,” he said.

“Really?” Luz was surprised. He looked too big, too masculine. She scolded herself for thinking in binaries.

“Ended up liking it better than football,” he continued.

She laughed, realizing that on some level she’d been right.

“I wasn't light on my feet. Not like you,” he said.

“Show me something.” Luz stepped forward, her movements instinctual.

“What?” The coolness in his eyes had dissipated. He sat straight up and nervously chewed his lips.

“Dance for me,” she said, feeling a small stab of satisfaction, knowing she had the power to make him nervous.

“I don’t do that anymore.” He shook his head and crossed his arms.

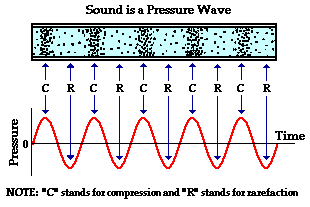
Used to fending off men, she had not expected his defense, his wall. “Why not?” she persisted. “I don’t judge. I’m not like that.” This, of course, wasn’t true. It was her hurt—the pain of her past—not some intrinsic sense of morality that prevented her from making assumptions, from having the energy to judge.

“Okay,” he said, awkwardly lifting a pant leg, revealing the bottom of a prosthesis. “I lost my leg a long time ago. It’s not something I talk about. But watching you, it’s like I’m dancing again. It’s an escape from my body.”

Luz held her breath. What could she say? The reason she danced was the reason he watched.

**Not what she imagined**

All these years picturing an actual wave, and now it turned out that’s not entirely accurate. Sound is not a wave, but the vibration of particles—back and forth, up and down—moving through areas of high and low pressure.



🡨 **visual depiction of particles**

🡨 **abstract representation of energy**

http://www.physicsclassroom.com/Class/sound/u11l1c.html

**Fine. It’s a love story**

He had broad shoulders and strong arms. His stomach showed the slant of hipbones and fibers of muscles in his obliques. The first time they made love she tried not to look at his leg. When she moved above him, she forgot about imperfection.

In the beginning she told herself she wouldn't fall. But she'd been clumsy, unguarded. His wounds had made her armor seem unnecessary. With him, she lost her rigidity. They became liquid, bleeding into each other, ignoring boundaries. He now had melting power, welding power. She was losing control.

At first this felt good.

Then it didn’t.

They started to fight. About stupid things, words like proxy wars for what they wanted to say. They debated the properties of wristwatches: What’s the difference between waterproof and water-resistant? They argued about wine: Does the color of the grape affect the color of the wine? They fought about what was on TV: Is Alex Trebek an asshole in real life? Each fight seemed stupider than the last.

She felt herself becoming clingy, codependent. Luz wasn't sure when it happened, but somewhere along the way she'd started to need him. It began innocently enough. A lawyer and a dancer, both of them tirelessly expressing their point of view in hopes that others would see their side. If given the chance to go back, would she? Her solitary life felt far away, harder to reach than her past in Peru, further away than a foreign country, existing in a distant galaxy.

\* \*

***Sound cannot travel through the vacuum that is outer space.***

\*

When he wasn’t with her—when she was free to practice, after she’d turned on her stereo and let the sound echo off the walls of her apartment, bouncing back, as if to obliterate itself—it was then that she discovered the music that’d once moved her, no longer elicited a response, as if her love for him had made it impossible to hear anything outside their circle.

Luz was angry at herself for letting it get this far, for ceding control and letting the course of her life be shaped by someone else. What she needed was a counter, a defense. Her only option was to weaponize her words, to say something that could not be taken back: a false confession of infidelity, a detailed description of an affair that hadn’t happened. But as soon as the words were out—riding currents of air, spreading through space—it was impossible to stop them from rippling into every corner of their relationship.

**On the neatness of whole numbers and the uncertainty of sound**

Melody is made

of specific ratios.

But sound

is not

certain.

It seems that something strange

happens inside the brain

when we listen:

My sound

may not be the same

sound that you

hear.

It’s the same story with color.

A philosophical question:

if my

red is really your blue,

but we’re both consistent in our naming,

how would we know we’re

discussing different colors?

**The hoax of happy endings**

Time passed. Weeks and months rolled into years. Needing to supplement her income, Luz went back to waitressing. She continued to audition for parts in dance productions, but now, in her late thirties—her strength and beauty beginning their slow descent, a fading that would only accelerate—she was landing fewer parts. This was to be expected. Luz refused to worry about wrinkles. Her body was still strong. The problem was in her mind, in her temporal lope, or whatever part was responsible for processing music. Nothing sounded the same since he’d left. She hoped that things would go back to the way they were before she’d met him, but they didn’t.

Each day her desire to reconnect deepened. She wondered what would happen if they were to try again, inventing scenarios each time she took the long route home, driving by his office, noticing when his name was added to the list of partners, worrying when it was removed, an erasure that puzzled her. The number he’d given her had been disconnected. For months, she thought about calling his office. Sometimes, after a glass of wine, sitting on a flimsy folding chair on the balcony outside her apartment, her loneliness amplified by the beauty of another sunset spent alone, she would punch the firm’s number into her cellphone and stare at the screen, realizing the futility of an after-hours call.

Early one afternoon, after insomnia had eaten away at her inhibitions, Luz finally called. She hadn’t had a good night’s sleep in weeks, maybe months. It had been ten years since they’d parted ways, yet somehow his pull on her had grown stronger. She had a feeling that something significant had happened. It was in the air around her, changes of cosmic proportions, alterations of time and space.

The woman who answered the phone sounded stoic and shrill. *I’m calling for Mr. Raines*, said Luz, feeling as if she were speaking into an abyss, wondering if the woman could hear the suck of oxygen leaving her lungs. *Mr. Raines is no longer here*. The woman’s voice was weighted with emotion. Luz opened her mouth to ask a question as the woman was hanging up.

Sitting cross-legged on her bed, the same bed that she and Percy had shared, Luz had a sinking feeling that something horrible had happened. She felt it in her body, in her thundering heart, in arteries she imagined to be filled, not with blood, but something thicker, heavier, a liquid that would soon congeal and leave her insides calcified. She spent the rest of the afternoon sitting on her bed, an overworked computer warming her lap, finally locating his name in an obituary that was two weeks old.

*Percy Raines, 48, of the firm Marx, Malloy, and Raines, died three days after suffering a stroke. Raines, who earned his JD from UCLA in 1992, is survived by his sister, who lives in New Orleans. A former football player at Georgia Tech, Mr. Raines was also a strong advocate for the arts. He will be missed by many.*

His death hit her like a sonic boom: noise trailing behind a fast-moving source, sound that would soon find her, shattering her eardrums, bending and breaking tiny hair follicles. She heard the ringing, its incessant reminder of an earlier trauma, and wondered if it would ever stop.

**Infrasonic Coda**

There are some who believe that every word ever spoken still exists somewhere, growing quieter as the arrow of time hurtles forward, voices becoming softer, but never fully disappearing. It’s a thought that gives Luz comfort, an idea she will never utter aloud, not wanting its energy to dissipate.

END