

Not a Mother's Day Poem: MyOTHER TONGUE by Rosa Alcalá

written by Sylvia Aguilar Zéleny | October 13, 2017



[MyOTHER TONGUE](#) by Rosa Alcalá (Futurepoem, 2017)

A Mother's Day poem.

Come on, confess: most of us have done it at least once. Right? I did it a long time ago. I was in first grade, I wrote "my mother my mother is a flower" no commas, one long line. I guess I was a young concrete poet because I drew a flower and I linked it to my poem with an arrow... Rosa Alcalá's [MyOTHER TONGUE](#) is not a Mother's Day poem that arrows flowers with words, but a solid collection that voices and rallies motherhood, language and the perks of being conceived under one tongue only to be part of another.

As Hoa Nguyen says, these poems reckon the histories of family, generations, language, and love. Yes, love. *MyOTHER TONGUE* pays homage to the Spanish mother who comes to the US to write/create a new story for her kids, "You came/ to give your children/ -a cliché-/ something/ to get them started-into breathing/ I came fully into/my own/and can/barely/kiss you/with these wavering/words-you cannot/-anyway-/ make them out/(reading glasses or/not" (7).

How does one write about one's mother, especially in a language that was not their mother's? Alcalá approaches this enterprise subject by visiting the hardest archives to read: one's own: "At dinner in a fine/establishment/I make/everyone/sad/talking/of you-" (10). Memory releases images such as this, "My mother cut threads from buttons with her teeth, inquiring with a finger in the band if it dug into the wait. Or kneeled against her client and pulled a hem down to a calf to cool a husband's collar. I can see this in my sleep,

among notions” (17). As one witnesses this **vínculo** between mother and daughter, one realizes that “Although there’s/ blood in/ this poem, that’s not/the plot” (35), the plot is about Alcalá enacting the mothering outside language.

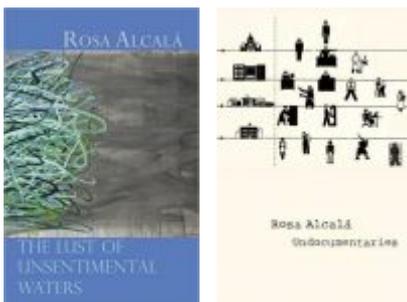
Alcalá intertwines lyrical meditation with existential concerns and current affairs: the women in the maquiladoras, occupy Wall street, the birth of a Minotaur, the many projections of the name Maria, the domestic perils and dangers of the everyday life, all woven organically. *MyOTHER TONGUE*, then, swings between poetry and poetic prose, between lectures, performances, and essays, because –it seems–that is the only way to journey language. The four sections of the book speak out a sense from the conceptions or misconceptions of being a woman, a daughter, a mother, did I say a woman? “Even love poems enter into a politics,” [Rosa said once](#), and they do, her love poems, her mother poems, her mother tongue poems enter into politics as an extended metaphor of our time,

English is dirty. Polyamorous. English

wants me. English rides with girls

and with boys. (70)

Throughout this collection the reader will notice the use of quotation marks which suggests a dialogue between the poet and those who have also realized that, in the end, we are all the result of our mother tongue because, as Andrea Beltrán says, “with mother, with other, with one’s and (an)other-s tongue, one learns unlearns relearns”. Alcalá’s poems converse with Jessica Livingston, Alicia Schmidt Machado, Ryan Jeltema and Jacques Derridá, essayists all of them, but also with poets such as Farid Matuk, Joe Brainard, David Shapiro, Bernardette Mayer, Valerie Mejer and many more.



With *MyOTHER TONGUE* Rosa Alcalá revisits the painful intimacy in [THE LUST OF UNSENTIMENTAL WATERS](#) (Shearsman Books, 2012) and [UNDOCUMENTARIES](#) (Shearsman Books, 2010) her previous books, and provides vibrant and needed instances of poetic bilingualism because, as she states, “we fail every moment we turn our slippery grammars against us and let our children be adopted into perfect homes” (77).

I told you, definitely not a mother’s day poem.