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Undergraduate

Mud

By Erika Andrews

Introduction

This story was inspired by a scene in Allen Christenson's translation of *The Popol Vuh*, the ancient Mayan creation myth. In it, the Farmer and the Shaper, the Mayan world creators, have decided to make beings out of earth and mud to worship them. However, these mud people fell apart and spoke in gibberish. This disappointed the creators so they destroyed them. I liked the mud people, when I read *The Popol Vuh*. They just seemed sort of silly and sad, and they only had a few sentences for their whole existence. I wanted to give them more of a voice.

Mud

The Frammer and the Shaper looked upon what they had wrought, the land and animals, and thought. "Let us make a being of clay to worship us," they said, and immediately they set to work. The Frammer dug a pit while the Shaper collected clay to shape. The Shaper shaped the red clay, and the Frammer built a fire in the pit to dry out the wet soil. The Frammer then lined the pit with rock, and when the Shaper finished shaping, the Frammer placed the clay being in the pit and covered it with wood. The Frammer set the wood ablaze and covered the pit in wet clay. They waited.

Heat. A soul was borne up from the dark nothingness, his gentle heart beating in the mud. The Frammer and the Shaper watched their creation climb from the pit, watching

him in dismay as his fingers cracked and his hair dripped from his head to sizzle on the hot ground.

The sun touched him, and he saw it with his eyes and felt it with his skin. The breeze blew, and this he heard with his ears and breathed in with his muddy lungs. The trees grew, and he felt them in his feet and deep in his bones. He lifted up his hands, each dripping with the glory of his creation, and they crumbled from his arms back into the life-giving mud. He looked at them, lying in the brown mud. He touched his stubs to the place they fell, and he created his hands anew. He laughed. What a silly thing he was.

He looked around, exploring this place with his muddy eyes. The world was brown, oh yes, brown enough for beauty. Each shade of brown was almost better than the last, creating an entire world of humble brown life. He enjoyed this silly brown place with his gentle heart, with its brown trees and broad brown leaves. The air was thick with the sounds of brown birds: chirping, cawing, cooing, as they hunted for brown food. There was a mild rain, and the water splashed down on his skin, creating little dimples. He smiled his muddy smile, feeling mud give way for laughter.

He attempted to move but could not. He crumbled at the attempt, and this he laughed at, for he did not need those parts really, anyway. He could not look beyond this place where his eyes have been set, and this he was content with, for this view had enough for his eyes to see, anyway. He looked at this view, vast in its brownness, and he saw the brown Framer and the brown Shaper, and he rejoiced. These, he knew, were the hands that drew him from dark nothingness, from the patches of clay from the mud, from the earth. He wanted to show his happiness to them, to somehow let them feel his thanks, so he shouted. But when he spoke, nonsense fell from his tongue. He could see that the

Framer and the Shaper did not understand, and for the first time in his eternally short life, he despaired. What good is a being that cannot thank its creators? What good was he, then, who cannot create what should be created, praise what should be praised?

He cried.

This was only the second minute of his life, and already he regretted his making. The water from his tears coupled with the rain to dissolve his body, and his despair deepened. Even his sadness was his undoing. His Framer and his Shaper, in their steady brownness, looked at him with dispassion. He only dissolved and crumbled and came undone and spoke nonsense in his infinite misery.

“It cannot walk, neither can it multiply. Then let it be so,” the Framer said.

“We have made a mistake; thus let this be merely a mistake,” the Shaper said.

“Let it be merely left behind as a thing of no importance,” they said.

He looked upon the Framer and the Shaper, and he shook off his despair. This life had been a long one, full to the brim with seconds, even minutes, replete with the beauty of an entire brown world made just for him. His Framer and his Shaper would make him anew; they would make him most capable. He rejoiced in this thought, all thoughts of despair vanished from his mind. From this life to the next, his eyes would see and his ears would hear and his heart would beat in the mud, mud, mud.

The Framer and the Shaper gave no thought and toppled what they had framed and shaped.

Justification

I originally wrote the narrative in second person, from the perspective of the mud person, but I found that was a limiting perspective for such a rich history. I changed to

third person and added the viewpoint of the Framer and the Shaper, which I think really enhanced the story. It also allowed me to include some information about the ancient Maya's clay firing techniques, which was fun.

The general outline of the story came from Allen Christenson's translation of *The Popol Vuh*. I used a lot of repetition, since that's the style I noticed that the *Popol Vuh* was written in, and I wanted the story to have a similar feel. I immediately liked the idea of the mud people; their only crime was that they were a little too stupid to honor the gods properly. The mud people did not cry in the *Popol Vuh*, but it does say that they got water on them and were dissolved, so I thought it would be interesting if the Framer and Shaper didn't realize that the mud person was crying, and instead only saw the rain, so they missed the humanity of the mud people.

I used the actual lines that the Framer and the Shaper say from the *Popol Vuh*, but I switched the order and attributed it to one or the other instead of both. I also used a similar last line. The line from the *Popol Vuh* is "Therefore they undid it. They toppled what they had framed, what they had shaped" (67). I tried to keep a similar feel to the ending without feeling like I just plagiarized the whole thing. I also wanted the end to feel like a rebirth, instead of a death, since that seems to be a major theme of the *Popol Vuh*. I also referenced the *Popol Vuh* when I decided which jobs the Framer and the Shaper would have when they created the mud person.

The shape of the pit I got from the journal article *Pottery Kilns of Ancient Ejutla, Oaxaca, Mexico*. The color of the clay I found in Prudence Rice's article from the *Journal of Archaeological Research*, "Ceramic Composition, Production, and Theory." The entirety of the description of the pit firing process I learned from Laura Heacock's

field report from the journal *KIVA*, “Investigations of Three Mesa Verde Anasazi Pit Kilns.” I know the Anasazi weren’t the most similar to the Maya, but I couldn’t find a really definitive, simple description of the actual pit firing process for the ancient Maya.

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Erika Andrews is a fourth year Management student with a Writing minor at UC Merced. She was born and raised in Redwood City, CA. She has previously published a short story called “Playtime” in Matchbox Magazine, an UC-wide artistic magazine published by UC Santa Cruz. She specializes in creative writing, particularly short thrillers. She volunteers at the Merced Applegate Park Zoo and reads Neil Gaiman books in her free time.