Mexico, glories of a mestizo nation: Chilean, Cuban, Spanish and other immigrants.

Arcadio, the traveler with the sack and La Moneda.

Arcadio woke up that morning thirsty and with a bitter taste in his mouth. It was a common occurrence: intestinal parasites caused him bouts of anemia, which his family attributed to his strange habit of licking the walls.

Since dawn, some men from the Petorca Cooperative had been arriving at the house looking for his father. They sounded agitated, eager to leave for an unknown destination. Something strange was happening in Valparaíso.

Carolina, his mother, kept changing the radio stations. Unlike other days, she didn't bother with her personal hygiene or getting dressed

for her daily chores. The news broadcasts were interrupted or gave way to entertainment programs. She was so absorbed in worry that she didn't notice the boy. So as not to disturb her, Arcadio placed the remains of yesterday's beans on a plate. From the dining room, he watched her silently as she tried to piece together fragments of information.

Finally, from Radio Magallanes, the long-awaited voice of the president of the republic was heard:

—I call on all workers. Take your jobs, remain calm and composed. Rest assured that the President will remain in La Moneda Palace defending the Workers' Government.

After that, silence reigned. Carolina remained hunched over, her face buried in her lap. Arcadio, distracted, arranged a row of noodles on the table, creating a path for a fierce encounter between Play-Doh dinosaurs.

—The loyal forces, together with the organized workers, will crush the fascist coup that threatens the Fatherland.

Right after that statement, Eduardo, the father, arrived, looking tired and accompanied by two coworkers from the mine. He glanced briefly at his son and then went aside with Carolina to tell her something in secret. She burst into tears.

—"Let's go to your room, darling," her mother said as she returned . "We need to pack some suitcases. We're going on a trip."

—Where are we going?

—To a very far away place. Don't forget to pack your most cherished toys.

The voice Carolina heard was real: Salvador Allende's last message, broadcast between 7:55 and 9:10 am on September 11, 1973. In it, the president declared:

—'This will surely be the last opportunity I have to address you. [...] I feel not bitterness but disappointment, and these will be the moral punishment for those who have betrayed the oath they swore.' 'I will not resign! [...] History is ours, and it is made by the people.'

Shortly afterward, the La Moneda Palace was bombed by Hawker Hunter jets of the Chilean Air Force. The military claimed that the country was on the brink of civil war, that the government had violated the Constitution, and that it was necessary to “save” Chile from communism. The truth was that the country was facing runaway inflation, shortages of basic goods, and deep polarization. The CIA actively supported the opposition.

Arcadio was dressed in clothes typical of a peasant child. Along with his mother, he was put on a truck loaded with straw and fertilizer. He received clear instructions: greet any stranger, but do not answer any questions.

The journey was long, interrupted by military checkpoints. Travelling with them was a robust man who made frequent stops: to answer questions, get food, or receive information. It was through these voices that Arcadio learned the president had died . Some said he had committed suicide; others, that he had been assassinated while defending La Moneda Palace.

The soldiers never questioned Arcadio or his mother. They just stared at them contemptuously from the window, pointing their rifles at the driver.

Upon arriving in Santiago, they stayed for several days at Aunt Águeda's house, a kind woman surrounded by cats in a small but comfortable home. The little animals would envelop her on the sofa each afternoon, sharing conversations with her through their purrs. She was adorable, but a terrible cook. She had recently acquired a Mexican

cookbook with which she conducted experiments that tortured the palate.

Time passed slowly, with no news of the father. Until one early morning, he arrived accompanied by men who spoke in a friendly tone, as if they were singing. Especially one with dark skin, whom Eduardo often referred to:

—My heart is broken. Please tell Mr. Martinez that I will never be able to thank him enough for his kindness.

—You should leave with the child too.

—"The risk is high. The military probably already has a photograph of my face. That's why I insisted that Carolina travel separately. The life that matters most to us is Arcadio's."

After that conversation, both parents reunited with the boy. He burst into tears, his voice choked with emotion, and Carolina embraced him. Then came his dark journey inside a sack and the trunk of an elegant black car. The order

was clear: remain hidden and don't move if someone opened the trunk.

The journey was terrifying. The silence enveloped him in a feeling of abandonment. What had he done wrong? Was it because of that time he drew dinosaurs on his father's banknotes? Had they given him away? A cascade of tears soaked the cloth that wrapped him.

The engine was the only sound, until, not far away, he heard gunshots, screams, people running. The vehicle stopped. An imperative voice broke the silence:

—Show identification.

—Samuel Macías, attaché at the Mexican embassy.

—How many are traveling with you?

—The same ones you're looking at. There are three of us, all government personnel from my country.

—What's in the trunk?

—Suitcases. That's what it's for. Do I need to remind you that this is a diplomatic vehicle?

—Continue on your way.

Arcadio never forgot his first impression of the Aztec nation. Before him, beside a valley filled with glass and houses, appeared two colossal snow-capped mountains. Similar to those he had seen on the road to Santiago, but now they were close, with slopes covered in pine trees and a blue sky that seemed to stretch on forever. He clutched the brontosaurus plush toy he held in his hands tightly: his most prized playmate.

At the airport, a lapse in security left him alone. Drawn by a sweet aroma, he walked toward an exit. He found himself accompanied only by his brontosaurus, until he encountered a thin man who looked down at him and spoke in a guttural language. Without further ado, the man raised a chubby girl from La Villa—

rescued from a woman expelled for selling cookies—to the sky and, with gestures, indicated to the boy that he should open his mouth to receive the unusual offering.

It couldn't have been more distinguished. Usually, that person performed this ritual with a potato chip, but this was a special occasion.

As soon as it happened, a group of uniformed men rushed to rescue the child from the itinerant clergyman's advances. The encounter had no further consequences. A taxi driver explained that it was just Cande, a crazy kid who had been brought there one day by a blond bureaucrat with a German accent, who then lost sight of him.

The mestizo inn and the new homeland.

Thanks to the revolutionary government and the solidarity of her compatriots in exile, Carolina and her son lived in relative comfort—and some hardship—in a small dovecote in

the Santa María la Ribera neighborhood, while they waited for the father who never returned. What did arrive was Aunt Águeda, accompanied by four cats and a spotted rat named El General, whose authoritarian leadership prevailed over the ferocious nature of the felines.

Soon after, the two enterprising women started a business taking orders: dishes from their Andean homeland. And there's nothing Mexicans love more than something different and new. It was then that they began to understand the infinite and profound nature of a mestizo culture, which delights in appropriating, combining, and transforming anything with an appealing touch.

The beginning was frustrating. After the first tastings, their clientele rarely showed interest in repeating the experience.

If you intend to negotiate with Mexicans, there's something you must understand:

simply captivating them with something new—that goes without saying—isn't enough. Its intrinsic quality must resonate with their emotions and hearts. Emotion with beauty, precision, and ingenuity; the heart with effort, empathy, and affection.

Fortunately, Águeda ran into Ernestina at the market, a commanding Tehuana woman who always went shopping with a child in tow. After tasting a meat pie, Ernestina was stunned. Without a word, she took Águeda by the arm and led her, with a stern gait, to her kitchen.

The image of this matriarch pulling a child with one hand and a plump woman with the other aroused great curiosity among passersby. In that kitchen, amidst sizzling pots and griddles—like two witches preparing poison—came to the creation of corn empanadas with poblano pepper strips, Oaxacan mole, sesame seeds, quelites (wild greens), and a touch of

árbol chili with piloncillo (unrefined cane sugar).

The success was immediate, although Águeda refused the grasshopper filling. Three pairs of hands weren't enough to meet the demand, so they decided to centralize the delicacy in one place.

This is how the inn called *La Moneda* was born .

Public school and Arcadio's second life.

For Arcadio, adapting to his new environment wasn't easy. He went from the sack to the school desk, from silence to the bustle of recess. Thus began his second life: in a Mexican public school.

At first, he didn't understand that he himself was a novelty. His origin aroused curiosity among the other children, who didn't miss an opportunity to test him. He was overwhelmed by a magical and symbolic language, a victim of double entendres that provoked laughter at

his expense. A tamarind candy made him cry from the burning sensation, and the shouts, whistles, and bells of dawn deafened him as if the whole world were offering him merchandise and noise.

But he was also surprised by hugs for no reason, by the pleasure of being flattered with sweets and new flavors, gifts even from strangers. He soon learned to give witty nicknames. He discovered that the message can sabotage grammar, that a word has five hundred meanings depending on the tone, volume, inflection, placement, and order of the subject, verb, and noun.

He understood that many mysterious worlds coexist in the same place. That the objects of the universe communicate and have a coded voice. He learned quickly. And he was quickly loved by the community. He achieved this thanks to his intelligence, but also to his

encyclopedic knowledge of dinosaurs and some corn empanadas with spicy peppers.

'The Chilean catches' was a nickname he respected all his life.

It was in public school where he learned respect and affection for two figures who connected him to the land of fire: Pablo Neruda and Violeta Parra. Their lyrics and music reached him thanks to his teacher, Teresita.

It's been so many years since I last saw this dear friend. I know he became a prominent paleontologist, renowned for his research and restoration work at a museum in General Cepeda, Coahuila. He has represented Mexico before the international scientific community.

I also learned, from a reliable source, that he was present and wrote a symbolic letter during the funeral of Gonzalo Martínez Corbalá, Mexico's ambassador to Chile during the 1973 coup. An upright and kind man who protected

and gave asylum to more than 2,200 people persecuted by Pinochet's dictatorship.

By the way, beating Arcadio in the challenge of eating the most cruel chili pepper that can exist in the Mexican nation is a losing bet.

From some place in Galicia that I can't remember to the neighborhood of the republics.

In 1979, we learned that "The Lost Child" was none other than President Lázaro Cárdenas. At least, that's what the official version suggested, justifying the renaming of that central avenue in Mexico City. However, the Church insists that the child was Jesus of Nazareth, according to the biblical passage in which he was found among the doctors, which inspired the name of the adjacent neighborhood.

To be more precise, it wasn't just one child, but more than 25,000 people who arrived from 1939 onwards, coming from the great Galician homeland—which in the Mexican mindset represents the entire Iberian Peninsula. They came in waves until the 1970s. The first were the 1,599 passengers of the ship *Sinaia* , received on June 13, 1939, by Lázaro Cárdenas himself, who told them:

—' *We do not receive you as shipwrecked victims of dictatorial persecution, but as exponents of the imperishable cause of human freedoms* .'

Then the others arrived, like unexpected guests at a small-town party: with their berets, their cigars, their espadrilles, and their wineskins. If I make any historical inaccuracies, please keep quiet: I'm the one writing this chronicle, and I couldn't care less about your disagreement.

Most were fleeing the Caudillo of Spain by the grace of God, who—thank God—paradoxically died in 1975 at La Paz Hospital in Madrid, a victim of the anger provoked by Mexican President Luis Echeverría. This anger caused him heart failure, peritonitis, and kidney failure. On September 27 of that year, the self-proclaimed "divine leader" ordered the execution of three FRAP militants and two ETA members, accused of terrorism, which provoked international condemnation. Echeverría broke off diplomatic relations with Spain and requested the UN to expel the Franco regime in a letter to Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim.

During the fascist regime, these Mexicanized Spaniards—whom they called "indianos" back home—had a field day opening cantinas, grocery stores, and bakeries. Following Hernán Cortés's example, besides filling the cash register, they took the opportunity to win the hearts of countless Malinches. This custom

only served to enrich the genetic diversity of a people who can hardly boast of racial purity. That's why José Vasconcelos chose to make it cosmic.

Their arrival was met with ambivalence. On the one hand, there was a historical resentment difficult to understand in a population that blamed them for the atrocities committed by the conquistadors five centuries earlier. On the other, there was a perception that Spanishness represented status, fueled by a fierce self-criticism of our national identity.

Among his legacy are institutions such as El Colegio de México, the Fondo de Cultura Económica, and the Hospital Español.

These migrants were at the center of a moral contradiction typical of those decades: on the one hand, they were called 'gachupines' (Spaniards), as a form of reproach in revenge for crimes against their Indigenous ancestors. On the other hand, those who used that term

also used 'Indian' to denigrate the Indigenous migrants arriving in the cities.

Both groups were the target of ridicule and scorn that permeated literature, film, and television. Vengeful hatred for some, contempt for others. A pointing finger aimed at our own faces, like an unconfessed shame.

In those days, the prevailing belief was that everything Mexican was synonymous with fraud or poor quality. It was no coincidence that propaganda tried to convince us that "Made in Mexico is well made." We were inhabitants of an underdeveloped nation, with streets riddled with potholes, and people who consumed junk from the streets and traveled in dilapidated buses.

Nothing like our neighbors to the north, those friendly gringos who brought smiles to our faces on the streets, from a land of skyscrapers and eight-lane highways, where even the poorest person owned a car. The

same ones who created all the wonders of Tepito, the ones who taught us to wear bell-bottoms and appreciate the raucous sounds of rock.

By then, there was only one thing superior to the kingdom of Disneyland: Europe. A world of magnificent castles where Spain was seen as the poor kid in the neighborhood, which only worsened our already shabby self-esteem.

I am not that old man who tries to give more weight to the past than to the present. Today, I value the pride with which 21st-century Mexicans hold their heads high for their mestizo roots. I also value their welcoming attitude toward people of any race who set foot on our soil, their care to avoid offending others with their origin or identity. Perhaps I don't share their fear of using the words authorized by the Spanish language to name the world, words that are inherently innocent of malice. Having said that, you can call me

old as many times as you like; that's what I am. What does offend me is being labeled a "Seniors."

If there's one thing that distinguishes Spain, it's its tavern tradition, blessed by paintings of martyred saints or those seemingly searching for something lost on the floor. In these establishments, you'd always find a tambourine accompanying the off-key songs of the regulars, or a photograph of the son-in-law who fled to Mexico with a sausage to tie up the first dog he found in the street.

It's no wonder that their nostalgia for their homeland inspired them to start a liquor business, with some variations on the snacks: they swapped Galician-style octopus, empanadas, olives, and rye bread for Apatzingán-style pork shanks, sopes with sausage, and peanuts in their skins. They remained indifferent to the abomination of adding chipotle to Galician broth.

Moreover, its contribution to the camaraderie among the bureaucrats and office workers of Tenochtitlán is something we should appreciate, as much as the quality of its brandy, which should already be considered an emblematic drink of Mexican identity, on par with tequila. A discerning drinker won't turn down a glass of Terry or Fundador. But a true connoisseur will appreciate a Cardenal de Mendoza, a Gran Duque de Alba, or a Carlos I.

We should have been merciful to these Spaniards or returning emigrants who arrived with a pittance to win our affections. But above all, we should have been lenient with the beautiful women who remained spinsters awaiting their return, unaware that in these lands, a generation of cinnamon-skinned devils with eyes as green as ripe olives would soon be born.

Sometimes, my mother made me uncomfortable with her fondness for pickled

olives stuffed with paprika. But that suspicion vanished when I saw the dark tobacco color of my pupils in the mirror. Mixed heritage isn't hidden, it's celebrated.

At *La Moneda Palace* , Águeda and Ernestina had a disagreement over a matter of love, because of Antón Martiño, a clueless young man with a beret and a close-cropped beard who, with a harsh, dry voice, demanded a glass of sherry and a tapa. That kind of commanding voice charmed Ernestina, who harbored the premonition that she had found her fourteenth husband.

For her part, Agueda was struck by Cupid's arrow when she saw in their dirty and neglected appearance the image of those rough copper miners who made her feel deep vibrations from her big toe to her thumb.

After a brief discussion, they decided to entertain the visitor with a corn on the cob with dried beef from Yecapixtla, while they

consulted a Galician cookbook. Within minutes, the pots of the coven yielded a stew of onions sautéed in lard with beans, poblano peppers cooked in piloncillo syrup, served on a tlayuda tostada garnished with black olives and goat cheese.

Despite any prejudice one might have, the result was formidable. The transnational stew was a true delight, as evidenced by the expressions of enjoyment on the face of the overseas character.

Satisfied with their work, the two autumnal women secretly discussed the right of conquest achieved by the victory on the battlefield, without noticing that Sandra, "La Pericocha", then a waitress at the distinguished establishment, was already providing relaxation to the customer with a loving back massage.

After throwing the frightened customer out with a series of insults and rude manners, the

two women regained cordiality with a supportive hug, while La Pericocha was confined to the dishwashing area.

Later, Antón Martiño owned a cantina called ' *La Distancia* ,' the best place to snack on olives stuffed with jalapeño peppers. Someone, one day, puzzled by his mixed accent, asked him about his ancestry.

– You see, you may have descended from the Aztecs, I only came from a ship.

Be that as it may, the Spanish heritage is the undisputed winner in the blending with our American chromosomes. But this isn't just true in skin color: it's also true in literature, murals, every breakfast and dinner, the distorted way we demand the bare minimum, and even the hypocritical corruption of our leaders.

I find it difficult to understand why the old main streets of my wanderings bear so many names of republics: Cuba, Chile, or Argentina.

Perhaps one should say "Kingdom of Spain," as a tribute to all the bakeries that, for over eighty years, have filled our bellies. We would admit that, besides the tortilla, the Spanish bolillo roll is also the raw material with which the gods of Anáhuac prepare cauldrons with the saints of Galicia to create mestizo children.

The drinkers and dreamers of enlightened miscegenation.

Traveler, you have arrived in the clearest region of the air. Here, the ground yawns at night and snores during the day. You need no agenda or travel guide: time isn't even a word. The fabulous is routine, tragedy laughs at itself, and laughter is sorrow.

Don't turn away if a tree speaks to you as you pass; perhaps it only wants to be intoxicated by your breath. Don't dream that something will change your world: one step before, it has already changed. Here, every color conspires,

every phrase is a symphony of confusions with a majestic rhythm. The irrational allows order to breathe.

In this place, one drinks for and with the dead. Serving them a drink is a sign of good manners. Mexico is the land where the unconscious doesn't need a pillow: it's everyday conversation, like anything else.

You arrived without a seat, as if an interstellar rocket had deposited you in another world. Chana the cat sleeps on the television's roof, a strategy to keep her warm. There's a bar that assures its customers they're happier than in the cemetery across the street, and a cemetery that boasts its residents are those who were happy in the bar.

Over here, a washing machine is dressed in a hand-knitted outfit made by a devoted mother. Further on, the apostle James shares an altar and votive candle with a skeleton dressed as the Virgin Mary and a portrait of a vandal with a

mustache and hat. Not far away, a cactus adorned with Christmas decorations watches over the woman selling herbs, ready to banish the father who still scolds you from within.

Don't be surprised that brilliant minds seek freedom on this planet. Just as Arcadio went from the sack to the school desk, many others went from exile to toasting. In *La Ópera, La Covadonga, El Tío Pepe,* and other cantinas, Ortega y Gasset was discussed over carnitas tacos and shots of Fundador rum.

Max Aub debated the future of Latin American literature, while Renato Leduc fled from marriage, a dictatorship worse than Franco's. Pablo Neruda composed an ode to chile en nogada. Violeta Parra sang passionately, giving thanks for life after tasting a spicy tamarind.

There, money was a fleeting luxury. Benjamin Péret would pay his bill with a drawing of a unicorn, while Remedios Varo discovered the hidden dimensions of corn at the bottom of a

glass of mezcal. The bartender accepted the currency as collateral.

Inspired by Pancho Villa's bullets, León Felipe recited verses. José Gaos discovered, within the fibers of a calf, that mestizaje was "a drunken revelry of cultures that doesn't end in a hangover, but in creation." All this unfolded before the silent patience of Luis Buñuel, who devised a plan to wound the heart of an Andalusian dog dying of heartbreak in Castile.

Ángel Parra improvised Mexican cuecas with an Andean rhythm, while his compatriots, near Tierra del Fuego, imitated Javier Solís and were moved by the matriarchal violence of Sara García.

Philosophy and art entered through the throat and flowed out with the breath of those exiles who founded an invisible homeland that could fit on a napkin. Intoxicated by a baroque landscape that nourished and imprisoned

them, like Remedios Varo caged the moon to capture the unattainable.

Alongside them, other names: Mathias Goeritz, Jacobo Kostakowsky, José Donoso, Alice Rahon, Luis Alcoriza, Leonora Carrington, Gabriel García Márquez. And national figures such as Juan Rulfo, Diego Rivera, Octavio Paz, Rosario Castellanos, José Revueltas, Carlos Fuentes, Alfonso Reyes. All, faces of an artistic and intellectual splendor that forged a mestizo identity within the national culture.

This cultural earthquake has many explanations, all complex though they may not seem so. Many were thoughtful victims of the great wars, of monarchical folly, of authoritarian prudery, and of military brutality. For them, Mexico was a magical, surreal, and indolent world, one that distanced them from the unwavering program of authorized activities and thought.

A planet without farmyards, gates, or windows, a world they only dreamed of in freezing garrets, where the crack of gunfire and cheers for the tyrants reached them. Filthy rooms where they amused themselves with the forbidden texts of the Communist Manifesto, The Origin of Species, The Theory of the Unconscious, and Infantile Sexuality.

And they arrived, yes, in the land of enlightened tyranny. The tyranny of those plutocrats who were everything a tyrant can be, except for being idiots. From Porfirio Díaz, enamored of the naked muses of France, to José Vasconcelos, the great educator of the cosmic race. The same ones who saw in each of those thinkers a future of greatness, not a threat.

Vasconcelos proposed a society that would synthesize all races, to be located in Latin America, but especially in Mexico. He envisioned the children of the nation traveling

the world to absorb the contributions of art and knowledge, and synthesize them into a mestizo civilization, where our country would be the new Athens of the world.

They arrived as purebreds and ended up intoxicated with surrealism, lying on a beach with a thousand turtles making their way across their stomachs, next to a tiny boxer with whom they argued about bulls and the deductive certainty of psychoanalysis.

“That man fights like he’s praying,” Buñuel remarked about Ratón Macías. “Anyone who calls me the father of surrealism doesn’t know Mexicans,” said André Breton. For León Felipe, Mexico was a country where monstrosities and miracles coexisted. For García Márquez, it was the place where the novel he had longed to write was born. He “fell out of bed” upon reading Pedro Páramo.

The mestizo nation quickly embraced them, seasoning them like hot corn on the cob.

Remedios Varo and Leonora Carrington appeared not only in magazines but also adorning the decor of bohemian bars. José Renau and Vicente Rojo found their way into schools and markets. Buñuel gave new nicknames to the crabs of forgotten neighborhoods. Chilean cuecas provided rhythm to the corridos, and even son jarocho became infused with European influences.

Their voices, their music, and their images became part of the textbooks for those born between the 1950s and 1970s, an educational heritage imposed by force, with due respect for talent and knowledge. From kindergarten classrooms to universities, they were taught as part of a legacy that was not foreign, but our own.

That strict method contrasted sharply with the rebelliousness these illustrious figures displayed with spontaneous ease. It was this very virtue that ignited their love for a culture

that, deep down, always finds ways to incite daily rebellion and disobedience.

Thus, with these magical contributions and in another part of this disordered universe—more precisely, at the *La Moneda* inn —an unusual transformation occurred. After a franchise of groceries and mixed goods called *El Exilio* opened on the street across the way , adorned with colorful embroidery of virgins and dogs eating corn on the cob, and run by an Otomi woman named María Azucena, Ernestina had a wonderful inspiration.

La Moneda would not only continue cooking piloncillo empanadas and Galician toast with árbol chili. Soon they began serving moons caged in potato prisons, liquid clocks on double tortillas, and other recipes dictated by cats who spoke to them in their dreams. The magic also arrived with a reproduction of Remedios Varo's *The Creation of the Birds* —a gift from a high-society client who spoke to the

void and distributed pastries to malnourished children. From then on, the casseroles bubbled with strange rhythms, the spoons moved on their own, and the fruits rotated on the tables around the axis of a candle.

In one corner, next to the altar that Saint Hippolytus shared with the brooms, a crescent moon made of papier-mâché appeared on two bicycle wheels, seemingly changing phases each night. Arcadio said the moon spoke to him in a low voice, dictating the names of dinosaurs yet to be unearthed. One day, Ernestina decided to paint the bathroom door with a winged female figure holding a golden net. “She’s the star hunter,” she said. “She’s the one who catches what slips away: the homeland, love, flavor.” From then on, customers entered the establishment through the bathroom instead of the front door.

I can't finish this section without recalling that childhood memory of strong autumn winds

that toppled the giant cypress tree rooted in my backyard. As it fell, it smashed the roofs and the main wall of the bedrooms. Seeing the damage, Dad declared that the catastrophe had to be repaired. We planted a new cypress, and for many nights, the sight of the stars lulled us to sleep.

Cuba, a love in the middle of the ocean that doesn't need a passport.

In the 20th century, not only bearded men with rifles arrived in Mexico, intent on setting fire to the dictator Fulgencio Batista. The bolero, the danzón, the guaracha, and the rumba also landed on the beaches of Veracruz, determined to prove that the mambo was merely an appetizer.

Masters of the most voluptuous dance the world had ever known, Cubans soon filled enormous ballrooms in Mexico, celebrating the lives of extramarital second partners,

united by rhythm and more loyal than those who wore wedding rings. The danzón became a way to exile boredom, frustration, and aching muscles. Very soon, in the echoes of Salón México, Los Ángeles, and La Maraka, we made it our own.

Amidst congas, timbales, bass drums, and snare drums, each musician possessed steps as elegant as their attire, interpreting in their own unique way the melodies of Acerina y su Danzonera or Danzonera Xochimilco. Mexico contributed iconic pieces such as *Nereidas* , which was once performed by the Mexican Military Band in Moscow.

Music was a bridge of love to the island, not only through the danzón, but also through the artistic talent of figures like Benny Moré, Celia Cruz, La Sonora Matancera, and Compay Segundo. Celia Cruz and La Sonora Matancera's time in Mexico, after fleeing the dictatorship of the "New Man," was brief but

memorable. They left their mark in venues like the Teatro Lírico, in films such as *Ritmo de juventud* and *Salón México* , and in their love for Bacardi, which forced brandy to share its dominance at family gatherings and cantinas. Their performance in Puebla in 1960 is still remembered as a night of pure, unadulterated rhythm at the Arena Puebla.

It must be said that tequila was not an elegant aperitif until the late eighties; before then it was seen more as a marginal drink, typical of low-budget taverns.

Just as the rhythms brimming with sensuality captivated those who are now grandparents and great-grandparents, the Cuban nueva trova was the revolutionary love of university students who, in the late sixties, made origami *Granma-sized* boats to sail not on Playa Girón, but on the beaches of Acapulco. At that time, our era did not give birth to a heart—according to the poetic voice of Silvio

Rodríguez—but rather to brutal repression in the Plaza de las Tres Culturas in Tlatelolco.

Cuba then became the standard-bearer of the socialist dream in Latin America, associated with the sentimental songs not only of Pablo Milanés, but also of artists from other countries such as Mercedes Sosa, Víctor Jara, Daniel Viglietti, and the Chilean group Inti Illimani, who, to the rhythm of the charango, urged beardless youths to die skinned alive to silence *the cry of the Indian* . Mexico joined this trend of the *Latin American "We Shall Overcome* ," inviting—with José de Molina—young mothers to give birth to guerrillas.

—' *Latin mothers will give birth, more guerrillas will give birth, they will plant gardens where there were garbage dumps'*

But it wasn't all percussion and death-inducing rhythms. After Fidel Castro's triumph, many Cubans opposed to the new regime sought refuge in Mexico. Among them were

businesspeople, intellectuals, and journalists, to whom Mexico granted asylum. Many of them also enjoyed rum at the *La Ópera and El Tío Pepe* bars , and of course at *Café La Habana* .

Mérida became an important center for the Cuban community, along with central neighborhoods of the capital such as Roma, Del Valle, and Santa María la Ribera. Personalities such as Juan Marinello, a Marxist writer disillusioned with the new regime, and the journalist José Ignacio Rivero, director of the *Diario de la Marina* , one of Cuba's most important newspapers before the Revolution, also arrived in Mexico.

Although only occasionally, Nicolás Guillén also had a special connection with Mexico, particularly with the City of Palaces, which he described as "one of the most beautiful in the world." In some of his chronicles, he expressed

his admiration for the city as a refuge for ideas and resistance.

With this, and with a century-old past that unites the sorrows, tragedies and dreams of those born in both nations —since the landing of La Niña, La Pinta and La Santa María—, many Mexicans know that the Cuban is an endearing brother: forward-thinking, full of joy, with pleasant (although noisy) conversation, ingenious and in good humor.

I know, from a reliable source, that Cubans see Mexicans as a historical brother with shared roots, a warm and generous attitude. The land of admired men like Emiliano Zapata, Pedro Infante, Jorge Negrete, Juan Gabriel, and Chavela Vargas, who aptly expressed a truth of emotional mestizaje that we all share:

—'We Mexicans are born wherever the hell we want'

It's not all about Chile and butter, there's also Lebanon, Japan and more.

Not everything that nourishes us comes from Chile or is fried in lard. There are also flavors that arrived from Lebanon, Japan, and other corners of the world. It's a mystery how they get tortillas in Switzerland to make enchiladas, why the French cut potatoes into strips, or what ingredients they use to make the spicy sauce that accompanies them. Where do Italians get chilaquiles and al pastor meat for their pizzas? What we do know for sure is how the Japanese invented peanuts encased in a crispy coating with soy sauce.

If there's one thing that distinguishes the people of the Land of the Rising Sun, it's their skill for meticulous and precise work. It's a talent learned within the family, one that accompanies traditional trades and that their clients demand rigorously. They are meticulous in the art of calligraphy, in furniture making and carving, in watchmaking, and in lens polishing. It's no wonder that optical shops were among the favorite businesses of

Japanese immigrants who came to Mexico. Although, of course, that never helped them enlarge their eyes, unlike in the comics and cartoons that have become popular worldwide.

In Mexico City, they occupied homes and businesses in Bucareli, the Doctores neighborhood, the Historic Center, Santa María la Ribera, and the Clavería neighborhood. It was popularly said that Parque de La China, located in the latter area, owed its name to the large number of Japanese residents, whom the local population mistook for Chinese. But that's only partly true. Before becoming a park, the land belonged to the Matsumoto family, renowned Japanese florists who arrived in Mexico during the Porfiriato. Tatsugoro Matsumoto was famous for designing the gardens of Chapultepec Castle and introducing jacaranda trees to the city. He used the land as a nursery and experimental garden. Because of its

abundant vegetation, the neighbors began calling it "El Bosque de la China" (The Chinese Forest), as a synonym for the Orient. Over time, it became a public park that has nothing to do with China.

His most valued contribution, as we all know, is the Japanese peanut, which in a way is indeed Japanese, even though in the land of the samurai they are known as Mexican peanuts. This was an invention of Yoshihei Nakatani Moriguchi, originally from Awaji Island, Japan, who arrived in Mexico in the 1930s and worked in a mother-of-pearl button factory owned by Heijiro Kato. After being accused of espionage for Hirohito's Empire, Kato was deported, and Nakatani was left unemployed. To survive, he made his first experiments with muéganos (a type of Mexican candy) and fried snacks inspired by goldfish. Then he came up with the idea of coating shelled peanuts with a mixture of wheat flour, salt, and soy sauce, which caused a sensation

among discerning palates from La Merced to Cerro del Judío, and from Peralvillo to Tokyo.

Nipón, the company he founded, was a monopoly on this delicacy until multinational corporations from the United States began including a bag of spicy vinegar along with the product.

Something similar to what happened with Japanese peanuts occurred with Swiss enchiladas, which—no matter how hard you look—don't exist anywhere near the Alps. In the 1940s, at the Sanborns de los Azulejos, chef Alex Cardini, of Swiss-Italian origin (brother of Caesar Cardini, creator of the Caesar salad), began experimenting with a new type of enchilada.

First, he tried placing a bread roll with a chicken leg on top, smothered in almond cream. The result was deemed a primitive concept. After analyzing the grotesque scale of his creation, and following an incident with a

woman selling meager sopes on a third-class bus, who rubbed one of her culinary creations in his nose, he devised something that possessed both feminine aggression and the subtlety of dawn beneath the mountains.

Thus he placed a tortilla between two turkey breasts, bathed in *Grevi* salad . The critics, always attentive to the whisper of the unusual, saw in it an aggressive approach to the nostalgia of fields woven like brown shawls. Wild, they said, the evocation of his project.

Trapped by frustration and emptiness, he had the good fortune—or rather, the pressing need—to enter a urinal which, surprisingly, led him to the dining room of *La Moneda* . There he found some transparent women rehearsing with chicken fibers rolled inside flat empanadas, bathed in sour cream, on top of which they placed Oaxaca cheese and sauerkraut.

That set our artist's mind soaring, as did the dishes that landed on his table, among which peeked the green eyes of a wild cat. Thus was born an enchilada covered in white sauce and melted cheese, snowy like the Swiss Alps, renowned for its contradictory and rebellious air, yet also sophisticated and European.

Fabrics, Arab heels, and Lebanese cedar

In the sixties and seventies, everyone, for one reason or another, had to go to a fabric store: for the school uniforms of the wild children, the quinceañera dress, the new tablecloth for the dining room, or the cashmere for the suit that would make us respectable. The sewing machine was an indispensable piece of furniture, and clothes were only discarded at the irreparable end of their lifespan. The same was true for shoes as for dresses.

In these endeavors, the Lebanese people's entrepreneurial spirit was invaluable. I dare

say that, without them, many people would have walked naked through the streets.

During the Ottoman Empire's rule—which lasted until 1924—the Maronite Christians of Mount Lebanon faced religious persecution, famine, and land dispossession. The silk industry, their main source of income, collapsed, leaving thousands of peasants destitute. Some settled in cities like Puebla, Veracruz, and Mexico City. Others were deceived by travel agents in Beirut, who promised them passage to New York but instead disembarked them in Veracruz or Tampico.

Many Lebanese migrants found in the sale of textiles a key way to survive and prosper in Mexico from the late 19th century through the 20th. They came from regions where the silk and textile trade was an age-old tradition. They began as street vendors, carrying rolls of fabric on donkeys or wheelbarrows, and later

established grocery stores and haberdasheries. Some businesses grew into textile factories, boutiques, or wholesalers.

In addition to that activity, some people set up food stalls offering traditional *shawarma* , although instead of using lamb, they began using pork or beef, cooked on a vertical spit. This is how the taco árabe was born, considered the direct predecessor of the taco al pastor. The latter incorporated achiote, pineapple, and other mestizo ingredients.

It is a source of pride that they planted cedars in our soil, just as it is a source of pride for French croissants, Chinese lanterns, and the plight of the Americas that knocks at our door. Long is the list of languages that line up in my homeland to tell their stories; of nations that weave a piece of their flag into ours. We are the proudest of this banner, stitched together from a thousand scraps.

In this Mexico where a sylph on a bicycle doesn't need a visa and empanadas don't require a passport, every foreign accent is a cry of curiosity: a cook dictating recipes to a country always dissatisfied with yesterday's food and scenery. The Mexico of my youth was—and still is—the place where everything that arrives can be captured in a taco... and anyone who wears one is a saint. Here, exiles learned that the best way to survive is to cook something that amazes, that embraces, and that builds another floor in the top apartment of reality.

In this land, ghosts have nicknames, saints share altars with bandits, and you enter a cosmic wasteland through an absurd door. If you ever wonder what Mexico is, don't look in books or on maps: toss a coin; if it lands on the moon, it will send you back, with a travel ticket and a key.

Neither Arcadio nor Antón Martiño were ghosts, though they did have other names. In fact, they shared the sunset together on a beach near the mangroves of La Tovara. They were two orphans, gazing into the distance, as if in the very spot of their gaze, they could find a lost love.

—What became of your father, Arcadio?

—I don't know. He wanted to stay home to fight the monster. I think it devoured him.

—"In my homeland there was another monster too. That's why I'm here."

—If they had been together, one would have been the other's dinner.

—What are you most afraid of?

—To be locked up.

—How scary! You're in a country that seems to have locked up the world.

—Did you know that many millions of years ago, there was an explosion here that wiped out everything that existed on the planet?

—If that were to happen again, many of us who came to Mexico would rebuild it again.

—Yes... But it wouldn't be the same world.