

The Zen of La Llorona

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DEBORAH A. MIRANDA



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for Margo

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The Zen of La Llorona

The Legend(s) of the Weeping Woman

For Indians, mestizos, and Chicanas of the Conquest, she is La Llorona, an Indian woman claimed by a Spaniard as part of his reward for furthering the colonization of North America. The Indian woman, whose real name may have been Maria, Marina, or even Malinche, bears beautiful children whom she loves even as they tie her more tightly to her captor. When the Spaniard betrays the Indian woman (with another woman? by going back to his 'real' family in Spain? by attempting to steal away to Spain with the Indian children?—we cannot know, except to say that betrayal is an unfathomable wound), she is enraged and helpless beyond reason. She takes up a knife, slits the throats of her dear babies, and throws their bodies into the river.

The story goes that La Llorona becomes a ghost who haunts riverbanks and lonely places after dark, moaning, “Ai, Ai, mis hijos!”

If she finds any children left alone or out by themselves, she may mistake them for her own and attempt to take them into the spirit world with her. Her grief is so powerful that she can reach out of her pain and draw others into it, where they will never escape. I agree that her grief is very real. But I think there's a still deeper loss that La Llorona knows: Only after murdering her own children does she see the Spaniard's true victory. He has stolen more than her land, her body, her children. He has stolen her power to create; he has transformed her into a destroyer like himself.

Human cultures around the world know this woman all too well. La Llorona is the name that I know her by, but she has other names in stories from other places, of which these are only a few: Rachel, Banshee, Niobe, Medea, Mesulina, Lamia, Margaret Garner, Susan Smith. Each one of these La Llorona stories testify to an entire world out of balance, a culture in which the creative force has been driven mad, desecrated itself and its purpose. It's not surprising that the stories go back into the oral history of Europe, or that they continue to this day. The stories are lessons about self-betrayal and grief: Be vigilant, maintain an active and sincere relationship with power, with the powers of the earth, our minds, bodies, hearts, and the hearts of others.

My grandmother, Marquesa, told my father and his brothers the story of La Llorona in a walnut orchard late one night, as they huddled in their tent after picking all day, and heard a weird, horrific wail out among the trees. Much later my maternal grandmother, Doris, told me the story of how my mother married too young, lost a baby to neglect and a man's rage, grieved all the rest of her life in destruction and despair—and took her remaining children along with her through hell. I grew up with the cries of La Llorona in my ears every night, every day. I fattened on those tears: my lullaby, my drink, the air I breathed. Fear and anger, depression and self-loathing lurked in my blood all year, surfaced on marked and unmarked anniversaries, possessed me. As I grew older, triggered by events in my own life that I could never foresee, I came perilously close to bearing La Llorona's grief myself, perpetuating that power gone insane. La Llorona is not a legend I can tell my own children, and then put back on the shelf, encased within paper and binding.

I am La Llorona's daughter. I should have drowned, but I didn't. Something old, strong, and tender cradled me in that river, taught me how to swim. My own blood drew me out of that river, took me home, dried me off. Yes, I'm a terrible swimmer. I can't see without my glasses, don't know how to regulate my breath, don't trust myself to a rhythm that will keep me afloat. But somehow, I swim. And I've learned that, just as La Virgen de Guadalupe emerges from the sacred ruins of the older indigenous goddess Tonantzin, La Llorona emerges from the ancient deity Cihuacoatl—originally the patron of midwives, who helped women bear healthy children, and sanctified women who died in child-birth. Significantly, Cihuacoatl knows both creation, and death—the full story—not just grief but also the crucial counterpoint of joy. First by the militaristic Aztec-Mexicas, and then by the colonizing Spaniards, Cihuacoatl's creative powers were de-emphasized, and her destructive qualities heavily privileged. Cihuacoatl was made, quite literally, unbalanced—turned into a half-person, incapable of a whole and healthy identity. Thus was La Llorona constituted, a woman

capable only of worshipping loss; passing on that twisted religion of devastation to her children and every dwindling generation that follows.

Love and the erotic are powerfully creative forces in human lives, in what Joy Harjo calls, “The epic search for grace”—grace being another word for a self-sustaining matrix, a wholeness, the act of living as a balanced being within a balanced world. Grace isn’t about a culminating moment of perfection or the achievement of a sublime mystical state. Grace, or what I call an indigenous erotic, has a particular context for this particular continent: the perpetual act of *balancing*—always working toward balance through one’s actions, intent, and understanding of the world. But both love and the erotic are at odds with the violence and domination that structures any colonizing or patriarchal culture. Thus, in colonization and patriarchy love is turned into grief, and the erotic is distorted into the pornographic oppression and exploitation of the bodies of women and children, and thus eventually, men. These oppressors are anyone seeking power in a patriarchal system—men *and* women — and the system, once the creative/erotic element is betrayed, perpetuates itself. For me, life began again when I gave birth to my own children. I tasted creation: discovered an ability to love and appreciate that I’d never experienced. Having children graced me with the gift, however fleeting and embattled, of utter tenderness and love. That was when I began to recover from my own drowning. I could fight harder for myself—love myself, unlearn destruction—when my survival also nurtured my children’s lives. But it is the curiously twinned stories of my indigenous California people, and my mother’s inconsolable grief, that allow me to ride out a devastating current.

And why does any of this matter to anyone but myself? At this point in global history, we are *all* La Llorona’s children. We are all howling, mourning, grieving for losses that seem unbearable. The old stories show us how we were betrayed, how we betrayed ourselves and our own powers of creation. We must know those stories as starting places, not

endings. We must teach our children how to embrace all the aspects of the creative, and *live*. For me, this means learning to ask myself questions I'd never imagined before:

What if La Llorona's daughter *survived*?

What if this daughter born of destroyers met with love?

How could such a child possibly know how to honor that gift?

I ask these questions because they are central to our lives as human beings, and to mine as a daughter, a mother, and as a lover. These poems are a record of my journey out of destruction and into a North American indigenous state of creativity, the erotic, and joy. These poems exist because my ancestors survived, and we swim out of a river of betrayal — those girls, women, boys, men, and elders—and maintain a thread of memory, a knowledge of grace, that teaches and guides us even now.

This book is for all of those ancestors known and unknown, named and unnamed; for my children, for my mother, for my brothers and sisters, and especially for my lover and companion, Margo.

DEBORAH MIRANDA
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Part One: *Passage*

Passage

Red and gold wash my study at dawn,
light seeping through fine lace curtains.
I imagine this is the same glow
my wide-open fetal eyes craved,
seeking candent mysteries
behind the wall of my mother's belly.

She walked carefully in the days of her final
pregnancy knowing, like Sarah, she was blessed;
a child of impossible conception rolling
within her body as naturally as ships
ride the swells of foreign seas.
Sarah laughed at such miracles,
but her audacity did not occur to my mother
—laughter might have dislodged
what doctors warned was precarious moorage.

So I floated, more and more snugly,
absorbed L.A. sun, swish of cars on freeway,
shade under gracious palms; my mother's voice
a powerful surge of sound translated through the mist
of heartbeats, arteries rushing, bowels
groaning under my ripening form:

this way, this way! Until I found the current,
shot down the passage into morning,
the clear song of my mother's cries
naming me *Deborah, Deborah.*

Three Months Without Electricity

She lets me hold the porcelain shell.
My fingers glow warm apricot;
illuminated cup of blood and bone.
Mama balances a tray of flame,
brilliant gold igniting the edges of her body.
In our tiny bathroom, she sets candles
at each corner of the small tub,
around the vanity, back of the toilet.
Small pearls of light shoot up the pink tiles
and onto the shadowed ceiling.
Heat waves undulate along the lower parts of walls.
In the warm water, I am first a fish,
then a dark seal, then a turtle, peering out of my ocean
to see the wax well up, lucid, drench
the burning air of my mother's silence

Petroglyph

Snow falls that night,
spreads heavy and smooth
like stone, like white granite.
It takes the sharp cut of deer tracks.

In nightgown and bare feet,
she follows a string
of cloven hearts wandering from the woods,
past the barn with its scents of straw,

cats, cobwebs; lapping the length
of the skinny tin trailer
where the girl had lain curled
in dreams of slow words; past

her father's red truck
asleep in the driveway, dents filling with snow,
tools covered in the bed made
fresh and clean, no trace

of labor, his sweat, jumbled scraps of lumber; down
the long driveway, to enter mute pines
and bare maples at the mouth of the road
that leads away.

She stands breathing in silvered swirls, heart
thumping; *this is as far as I go*. Snow
takes her print, curved half-moons
cut by the heat of childhood in skin.

Deer

They hang her in the barn, head down, tongue fat,
dripping blood. I am left alone
for a moment, venture close to stroke dark fur
made rough by winter; that is when she is whole,
intact before butchering. I'm not sure
if they shot her, or hit her by accident
with the truck, but she comes from the mountains
out of season so it is the darkness that counts, not
how she died. All winter long we'll eat her
in secret: steaks, stews, bones boiled for broth
and the dogs. But what I will remember is
the rough way men's hands turn back the hide, jerk
down hard to tear it from her body. A dull hunting
knife cracks and disjoints the carcass.
Dismembers it piece by piece.
The hide disappears—left untanned, taken
to the dump. Years afterward I walk
out to the barn, scrape my foot against
the stained floor beneath the crossbeam,
never tell anyone

I've been taken like that.