

I. 1974. Puerto Angel, Oaxaca

I'm ten years old when my parents and I vacation at a small fishing village in Mexico. My mother and I dig for seashells, pose in ankle deep water while my father takes our picture. "Lift your chin a little," he says. "Turn your face to the left." This is his role in the family. He directs. Records. There he is behind the super 8 camera as we open Christmas presents, practice ballet steps, point to a tree in the front yard that will soon be cut down. After my mother dies, he will spend months splicing together her greatest hits, a few images that over time begin to stand in for an entire life. I will watch as my mother poses again and again at the side of the house, my father instructing her to smile. She mouths for him to turn off the camera, then —when he doesn't— wills herself to follow along. My mother is beautiful— a sort of Ava Gardner meets Katherine Hepburn, with red lipstick and wavy brown hair, always in a dress and heels, a smile that both absorbs and fills the air. Still, she moves tentatively, as if she might not be enough to fill up these moments on film.

On the beach she is playful. We laugh as sand tugs at our feet, invites us into deeper waters. We don't think to question why we are the only ones on the beach. None of us can read the Spanish signs that tell us not to swim, that the waves are not mischievous but dangerous. By the time my father loses us in the viewfinder my mother and I are far from shore, being pulled not just out but down. Under water the world slows, our legs and arms pale and strangely illuminated, as if they no longer belong to us. And then we burst to the surface where everything is churning— the waves darker, all sound coming as if from the other side of a tunnel. My mother is pressing into me from behind, her arms wrapped around my waist. We do not die that day. Either way, she's not letting go.

II. 2013, Havana

I light a candle and kneel before the statue of the virgin. Our Lady of Charity, dressed in gold, both she and the baby in her arms copper-skinned like her people. At her feet the three Juanes, those fishermen before whom her effigy miraculously appeared four hundred years before, look to her with the same wonder I've brought with me from Ohio. What to say to this figure I've come all this way to know? How to articulate a longing that is beyond words? All I know is that there is something out there in the world, some secret about being a woman, about being me, and the closest I can get is to open my hands and ask that someone show me the way.

I look out at the sanctuary's stores of statues and stained glass, candles and prayer stations. The marvelous "stuff" of Catholicism so different from the bare Congregational church of my childhood. I remember a single crucifix, stripped of its flesh. Mary all but absent. We pulled her out at Christmas to round out the crèche scene but otherwise she remained silent, her role in the drama of God requiring that she be receptacle, not participant.

Yet here her image appeared everywhere. As Our Lady of Charity and Our Lady of Regla. As the Virgin of Lourdes, the Madonna in prayer, Santa Maria, The Greatest of Mothers. At the main altar, Our Lady stood above the son, occupying the largest, most central spot in the cathedral, the patron saint of an entire island. "We are a country of believers," I'd heard from taxi drivers and shop owners. And "Whether or not we are religious we believe in Our Lady." How to make room for an idea of the feminine that is this large?

In five months I would turn fifty. Surely it was time to feel like a woman. And yet, in spite of all my re-inventions –from daughter to wife and mother, teacher to choreographer to writer, I often felt like the same nineteen-year-old girl who, thirty years before, stood

shivering before Lake Michigan, crying for her mother: That tether that holds one in place. That voice that says, *Shhh, I've got you. No matter what. I will not let you go.*

I watch as Our Lady's devotees genuflect before her. I mouth their prayers in my own language: "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost," my tongue tripping over the masculine sounds, the word "God" in all its iterations sounding both too male and too lofty to have anything to do with me. As hollow on my lips as a dry bone.

The word "goddess" also problematic. Not just because of its deference to its root "God", but because in my mind it is a word made ridiculous by white new age women, perhaps no different than myself, whose searching – my searching – embarrassed me. We seemed to have lost both context and claim to her. The word "Goddess" floating in a bubble of distant imagery: fat Neolithic artifacts unearthed in Germany and France, an ancient Venus with enormous breasts and hips. Her secrets long ago buried with her people, only the artifact remaining, reminding us of our longing to understand something we could no longer name.

The word that seemed to get closest to what I was looking for: "Beloved."

I stare at the statue before me. Our Lady is a slab of wood, painted and clothed— a doll, a material expression of an ideal. And yet...It is here, in this country of believers, that nothing is just one thing. Here in these streets where exhaust from 1957 Chevy's, kept running on Soviet pistons and brake fluid made from soap, mixes into a sky filled with papaya and prayer. Here that a virgin might also be a goddess of love and sensuality and the notions I grew up with about what a woman could and couldn't be might dissolve like sea foam.

When I lift my palms I'm surprised to feel them tingling, a palpable, prickly sensation that starts at their centers and spreads outward. An energy I've learned in meditation class to

call chi or life force. What the Cuban *santeros* call *aché*. Neither good nor bad. Not a particular power but power itself.

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