

# THE DREAM OF SOR JUANA INES DE LA CRUZ

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I

A century after the Conquest, in Mexico City's convent of San Jeronimo, the nun known as *The Tenth Muse*, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, slept in a cell resembling a miniature academy. It was crowded with books and maps, musical instruments and charts of astronomical computations, scrolls tied with red and blue ribbons, beakers, test tubes, and cumbersome hunchbacked trunks "covered with hairy brown hides and ribbed in wood" which were loaded with treatises, discourses, mathematical equations, letters, and poems.

Each night in this organized confusion, from 1669 to 1695, she slept the sleep of abundance, where Aztec temples tumbled through her dreams; presences, pulsing in the dark, one moment were sacred or sacrificial blood-splattered hearts and the next expressionless skulls staring from sudden mirrors. In a moonlit landscape, rugged but without distinctive features, she saw an eagle clutching a snake beside a phosphorescent shore; Greek gods strolling through shadowy groves that were Indian holy places; and crowds of corn grinning their rows of teeth at her, surrounded by dry stalks shuddering in the still air like skeletal old women in loose but tattered gowns.

II

In her sleep the nun rose above the convent and the city, saw the moon-powdered roadways winding through a countryside of silver lakes and dry plateaus and platinum mountains, a flinty length of land lying between two oceans which stretched away like endless expanses of smoked glass. She saw deer trembling in the dark beneath trees, dogs sleeping in graveyards, rabbits huddling in holes, cattle and sheep dipping their chins in chalky fields.

She listened to all the breathings in the dark below her  
in ditches at roadside, in stables, in the huts of Indios,  
and in the palacial bedroom of the Viceroy; listened to breathings  
in the nests of swallows and the burrows of mice;  
and heard the humming and saw the glittering weavings of spiders,  
smaller than fingernails, whose intricate designs perfectly reproduced  
the celestial movements swimming like clockwork above her.

She witnessed all the things of the earth "a rioting mob,  
a dizzying cargo, a cacophony of carcasses" jostling one another  
in a babble of human, animal and vegetable tongues,  
as if they rose from the base of an invisible pyramid  
and streamed toward a heavenly apex of delirious light.

III

Seated upright at a desk, but turned from it, filled bookshelves behind her  
in what must be that famous cell, she looks out at us from the Cabrera portrait  
as if from a mirror, so that the black hood encloses our heads,  
the white robe, with the carved ebony rosary gracefully looped over it,  
hangs heavily on our bodies, and the fingers of our right hands  
absently bend the page of the tome in front of the silver inkstand"  
the one with the three white quills at the rear of the desk  
she's just turned from to look at us, for it seems we have arrived  
at that very moment for a visit, or a consultation, or a reprimand;  
her expression doesn't hint at which. Even her oval, alabaster face"  
with its wing-like black eyebrows and straight nose, its small jaw and red lips  
tells us nothing, intrigues us with its aristocratic, not spiritual, beauty,  
just as her entering the convent at nineteen intrigues us  
but has gone unexplained. Some say it was a disappointment in love;  
others that her confessor, Padre Antonio Nuñez de Miranda,  
tempted her with the idea that no husband would allow her  
to pursue her studies: "But if you were a nun, as a bride of Christ  
your life would be dedicated to learning about His world."  
And that learning became her husband, her father, and her son,  
and she, the loving, dutiful wife, learned and learned,  
and found in science and philosophy more than a domestic vocation:

the world "its plants and animals, its winds and seas" was her kitchen. Everything, from the most abstruse argument to a child's spinning top, engaged her attention, and simple recipes made her once exclaim, "If Aristotle had known how to cook, he would have written much more than he did."

#### IV

In a world of men, she was more than a match for any man. When she was seventeen, the Viceroy, in order to test her, had her debate an assembly of forty philosophers, scientists and poets and in his own words, she was like "a royal galleon defending itself from smaller sloops which were attacking it." Still, as a woman she could not attend the university, and proposed to her shocked mother that she would go to classes dressed as a man. There was as much humor as defiance in that, and elsewhere she describes herself as lighthearted, playful a sunny spirit. But it is that other spirit, the one defiant for the sake of dignity and learning, that Cabrera saw and painted: the upright back the imperious carriage, the black inquiring eyes and marble skin. And yet there's no severity in her features. They are clear, sharp, but also soft and sensual. The relaxed placement of her hands alone dispels all notions of a peevish or contentious nature. Purposeful, direct, patrician rather than petulant, composed, even serene, she is simply there, interrupted for the moment from her book by our presence, and we, like all things that come into her view, command her full attention for this one instant, which has lasted more than three hundred years.

#### V

Her upright back, her independent stare, her aura of elegance and aristocratic self-control she had to be humbled, she had to be taught her place. The Bishop of Puebla, her "friend," advised her in a public letter to give up worldly learning, a letter to which Sor Juana forthrightly replied that it was her and every woman's right to learn and study alongside men. Two years later she closed her books forever and renounced her ways. That must have been like shutters going up on all her windows, leaving her without a candle in the dark. But she insisted,

sold all her books, maps and instruments for money she directed  
be given to the poor. That was in 1693, when she was forty-five,  
two years before she died. The year before that in Massachusetts,  
on the Atlantic seaboard three thousand miles to the north,  
the rigorous reverends would have hanged her as a witch  
for her unnatural love of learning and her secular inquisitiveness.  
All this occurred twenty years after Anne Bradstreet, the Americas' first poet,  
had died a peaceful death at home near Boston, not far from Salem  
where the witches would twitch their last upon the trees.  
Anne had been a proper wife, having left seven children  
and praised her husband and her God in verse, needing from one,  
if not from both, the male protection she couldn't live without.  
She realized this in 1666 when her house burned down  
and she renounced its smoking timbers for the mansion in the sky  
built by "that mighty architect." Even then her vision was domestic,  
full of furniture and dishes. Hers was an ordinary world,  
not marvelous a daily round of pillows and swept floors.  
When the lid closed over her face, it was parish stones, not fiery stars,  
that showered on her head.

VI

In the Mexican convent, two years after her reply,  
from which every word had snapped like a whip at those who admonished her  
to turn away from worldly wit, the woman in this portrait  
signed document after document with her blood, declaring herself  
the worst person in the world; starved her stomach and her mind;  
hung herself with straps like Christ upon a makeshift cross;  
and beat her body with what men would call a medusa-headed whip,  
a scourge lashed with metal-studded thongs as if she had become  
as enthusiastic about self-torment as she had been about books.  
Why? What had happened in the two years since 1691?  
Torrential rains, floods, famine, a rebellion of the poor,  
and in her case, repeated admonitions, paternal pressure from the prelates,  
especially from Nuñez de Miranda, her father confessor, to abjure her worldly  
thoughts.

Her biographers infer that this induced self-hatred, guilt  
that others, less sophisticated but more devout,  
should suffer pestilence and hunger while she played music  
and devoted all her time not to prayers but to science and poetry books.  
We'll never know for sure. Whatever it was, its arrival was swift:  
One morning she awoke, primed or prayed, looked in the mirror  
as if at this portrait where she sits so regally composed,  
and saw what? the skull beneath the skin? the skeleton beneath the clothes?  
and realized the beauty of her face, to which knowledge had lent grace,  
was skeleton, was dust, was shadow, was nothing, and would disappear without a  
trace.

## VII

She continues to stare from the portrait, and once again I think  
that she is looking at herself in a mirror and we are the mirror image  
that she sees: that staring serenely from her desk, she is imagining us  
standing before her, so that everything we are, in a sense, is her  
yearnings deeper than lung-wind, desires more cavernous than the heart;  
and no less emphatic, the blunt lineaments of bone beneath the face,  
as well as tunnels of racing blood; the blind cells, bunched in crowds,  
bumping into each other; the atoms rushing together, flying apart,  
or circling one another entranced, like two magnets held in mutual tension,  
or two souls simultaneously attracted and repelled so they can never touch.  
It is as if on a dusty moonlit night in Mexico City, toward the end  
of the seventeenth century, in a cell cluttered with Old World learning  
this woman, who insisted on writing poetry not only in Spanish and Latin  
but in Nahuatl as well, dreamed us into existence. We are her children,  
offspring of her dry womb of this woman, whose imagination populated  
Toltec valleys and Aztec ruins with Greek gods and Christian saints,  
and saw in flat-topped Indian pyramids the remnants of Egyptian monuments.

## VIII

Sor Juana, Sor Juana Ines de la Cruz, nee Asbaje y Ramirez;  
granddaughter of Don Pedro Ramirez who immigrated from Spain;  
daughter of Mexican-born Doña Isabel de Asbaje and her Spanish husband;  
You, who were born of both continents and so could write,

What magical infusions/of my country's Indian herbalists  
pour/their spells through my words?; America's first feminist,  
who loved knowledge not more than life, but as the loftiest part of it;  
*La Décima Musa*, The Tenth Muse of Art and Learning; my muse  
I choose you over Mistress Bradstreet as my true mother,  
choose you as the first poet of colonial *Norte y Sud America*,  
because you chose us, chose not the limitations of what we were,  
but what we could become; delighted in the multitudinous diversity of things,  
seeing us not only as fly-specked hunks of sinning meat  
but as glories rising to amorous union, a compendium of Angel, plant and brute  
that contains in seeds and cells, in the filled cargo holds of our chromosomes,  
everything that has lived before, as if we were those hunchbacked trunks,  
ribbed and rugged, that were shipped to the New World over ancient seas;  
and that with reason, desire, and the ability to imagine folded inside us  
we stream toward the apex of your heavenly pyramid, that blinding point  
of celestial light which holds the universe in thrall.  
From your tiny cell you unloaded all the goods of the Old World  
onto our moonlit shores, and departed, as we watched from the trees,  
naked, scarcely breathing, not knowing who we were, nor that your face  
was imprinted on our own, so that each generation identifies itself  
with the radiance you imagined as you slept in your crowded cell  
and dreamed who we were on that Mexican night so long ago.

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[Back to TOP](#)

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