



PROJECT MUSE®

of the green grasses

ire'ne lara silva

Pleiades: Literature in Context, Volume 40, Issue 2, Summer 2020, pp.
201-213 (Article)

Published by University of Central Missouri, Department of English
and Philosophy

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/plc.2020.0171>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/759410>

of the green grasses

I was already there when she was given by the Chontal Maya of Potonchán to the Spaniards. They were as strange to her eyes as they were to mine. In her mind, I heard her remark on the paleness of their faces and the strangeness of their light-colored hair and the oddness of the metal covering every inch of their bodies. She told herself she would not betray any fear, that she would stand tall and very, very still. The women around her shivered and cried silently. At first, I did not understand that she was being given as a slave, as a tribute, as a spoil of battle. She refused to even think it as she was presented to Cortés. She did not lower her eyes as his fell upon her. I saw him through her eyes, felt her register his sudden stillness. His eyes and hers and mine flared simultaneously with a sudden piercing light. I shivered though I had no body to shiver with.

But she was given to someone else, one of Cortés' lieutenants, Alonso Hernández Puertocarrero. I shuddered whenever he entered the tent. She never betrayed herself, not a single flinch, not a single tear—only the involuntary grunts that escaped the back of her throat. I could have shut myself away, closed myself off from what she experienced, but I stayed with her. I couldn't leave her to suffer alone. At the very least, I could share her pain and shed her tears. Hernández was careful never to touch her face or to leave visible bruising. The other women did not fare as well. A few of them had been given individually to some of Cortés' lieutenants. The others were used by all his men. They were bruised, often bloody, and never lifted their eyes.

I've inhabited other bodies, but none like this, with senses so close to my own. And even amongst my own people, I'd never felt this intense connection. I hadn't thought I'd explore this world in the body of a woman. In a body so much smaller than mine. Our peoples both have two legs, two arms, one head, similar nervous, digestive, and reproductive systems, but there the similarities end. I didn't know I'd feel through her skin as I might feel through mine. I see and hear and taste and touch everything through her.

Her pain is my pain. Nightly, he grabs her from behind and pushes her face down into the rough mat she sleeps on. I want to scream. So does she, but she forces herself to remain silent, forces her body to remain still. This is blasphemy among my people. We do not even have a word for this violence upon the body. I cannot see his face. Is it slack with desire? Is it filled with rage? Blank with satisfaction? She is not a human to him, not even a body, only a thing to slake his need. She lies a moment on the floor where he leaves her. I am weeping for her, because she will not let him see her pain. Or perhaps because she knows it is of no use. Hernández, they said his name was. She curses it with the taste of blood in her mouth.

She does not know my name. If she hears my voice, she does not understand my words. She never



betrays my presence. But sometimes, in her sleep, she holds her own shoulders in her hands as if she is reaching for me. And in her sleep, she sighs when I wrap my long furred arms around her. I do not forget why I have come to this world, but still, my flesh clings to hers, my eyes, my hands, my breath. It was not love. She simply became half of me, and I became half of her. There was no separating us.

I am the Dreamer of the Seventh Family of the Northern Circle. The youngest son, promised to the service of the Mother. I dreamt our cities in ruin, our people destroyed, our violet-colored blood soaking the ground. I was only a child when I was given this dream. Death and destruction night after night after night. Our world and our memory wiped clean.

I was taken to the Mother to relate my dream. She held me in her arms as I wept and my body shook. With her own hands she held warm tea to my lips. Afterwards, I was allowed to return to my nest family only twice a year for two seven-days. Otherwise I remained in the capital, a student of the Five Elders. Trained in our people's stories, in dreaming, in mind-sharing, in the folding of time, in true seeing. And in my sixteenth year, without warning, I was reassigned. To prepare me, they said, for what the Mother had herself dreamt.

It was another four years before the Mother revealed her plan to us. I was one of two hundred. Half of all the dreamers under a certain age. I wept when I married my wife, knowing we would not grow old together. Wept when my children were born, knowing I would never see them grown. I was twenty-five when the Mother declared the ships were ready. Ten ships with twenty dreamers each. The morning we set out, I woke covered in sweat and with tears streaming down my face. We, the two hundred, made our farewells. We didn't expect to ever return. I prayed as we left our planet's atmosphere. Prayed for a vision broader than my own. A wisdom greater than my own. Guide my hands, I begged the Supernal Green. Guide my eyes, guide my tongue, and guide my will.

Our mission was simple. Go out, find other worlds in the midst of devastating conquests. Live amongst them. Observe. Report every detail, no matter how seemingly trivial, to the Elders and the Mother. They would sift through alien histories and glean the wisdom to save our people.

I do not hope for victory, but I cannot surrender my hope of survival.

It took us a decade to come to this world. A decade of goodbyes, each dreamer pointing in their own direction in turn. When my turn came, I woke screaming. Left my bed to find the captain. At first I could do no more than point while I wept. Six galaxies away, I heard their cries and their resignation—they'd known death was coming. Their ruler's fear was such that he had the dreamers killed. He could not see their faces. Could not endure what they'd foretold.

I had not thought to find another people with their own dreamers. Dreamers with dreams that so closely mirrored my own. Inhabiting a blue planet, third from its sun.

Sleep was always difficult. For both Malinalli and me. Every night I laid awake for hours, even after Malinalli finally stilled and slept. I'd open my eyes and think of the night sky and its many stars. Maybe I only imagined it, the ever-present sense of knowing where my world was. As if I could reach in that direction and touch some part of it. Ten years since I'd said my goodbyes to my family, to my wife, to

our two children. She'd chosen to be with me for whatever time we had, knowing the Mother intended me for a mission from which I would never return. And as much as it had hurt to take my leave of her, I'd never before felt the pain I felt when I held my children's small bodies in my arms for the last time. But they were what had filled my heart with resolve. I left not just to save my world, my people. I left to save their lives, their world.

I know why I can't sleep. Even here, I still dream the end of my world. I dream the empty violet sky, bodies and rubble piled everywhere. Smoke and fire. All our cities razed to the ground. Some nights, I dream my children, their limbs terribly still. Every night I fall asleep against my will.

Those first days with Malinalli, I woke, always, to the flow of words. She practiced silently, shaping the Spanish words with her lips and tongue. She tasted them, rolled them on her tongue, bit into them. She kept long lists of words she felt she needed to know, and day by day, fit each new word into the space she had made for it. She listened to the Spaniards intently, all day, every day. The other women stayed to themselves, doing as they were bid or sitting still like stones. Her mind was never still, never silent. She wielded each word as if it was a weapon, learning its heft and its sharpness. I learned Cortés' language as she did, while learning from her the two languages she already knew. Her tongues came more naturally to me than this Spanish she was learning. Its structure was another level of alien.

There came a morning, when we were still camped by the river, when all the women were stripped and dressed in long white gowns. There was a strange Spaniard we had not seen before, dressed nothing like Cortés or his men. He waded into the water and looked up expectantly. They pulled Malinalli forward first. Some of the women screamed, perhaps fearing they were about to be drowned. The man in the water beckoned her to him. Showing no fear, she entered the water without having to be dragged in. He said something, but neither she nor I understood him. He spoke another tongue to her. At this, she leaned intently towards him and words flew back and forth. Later I learned the strange Spaniard was something called a 'priest,' the conduit between these Spaniards and their deity, and that he knew one of Malinalli's tongues. Malinalli spoke Mayan and Nahuatl. In time, Malinalli came to translate from the Nahuatl of the peoples around us to Mayan, and the priest translated the Mayan to Spanish for Cortés.

But that morning, I could not keep up with all of the different languages being spoken. The Mayan was still mostly unknown to me, and I'd only begun to understand some Spanish. In her mind, I only heard flashes of language, knew that she consented before the priest laid his hands on her head and pushed her under the water. When she rose, he called out a new name. Marina, he said, and she nodded her head. Only I heard her thoughts. *It does not matter what they call me. My name will always be Malinalli—of the green grasses.*

More and more, Cortés kept her by his side. As her proficiency in Spanish grew, the priest was called upon less and less. Cortés had her possessions moved from Hernández' tent to his. I no longer spent the nights weeping for her. She and I spent the days watching Cortés, straining to hear his every word, register his every change in mood. He wielded the power of life and death over all of us, his moods were mercurial, and his thoughts impossible to predict.

At the same time, there was what neither of us could explain, what neither of us tried to articulate,



not even to ourselves. How the sound of his voice tumbled and ricocheted inside of us. How her body and mine moved unconsciously towards him whenever he was near. That same sense of lightning familiarity each time our eyes met. He stopped her breath. Otherwise, she betrayed nothing. Even without a body, I felt mine leaning towards him. Felt urgency and heat low within me. My desire and hers like kindling and flame, the desire to devour him and be devoured raging within us both. We waited, but he never reached to touch her.

Malinalli went to great measures to avoid Hernández. There was growing anger in his eyes every time he saw her. We were out of sight of everyone, bringing back water to Cortés' tent, when he stood in our path. Malinalli kept her gaze averted and turned to walk the other way.

"What, slave, now you are too high above me to look at me?"

Malinalli stood very still. By then, I knew her well enough to fear for what might happen next. She stared straight at him, her lips curling slightly.

He raised his hand and struck her. She fell to the ground, and before she could rise, he had covered her body with his, his legs forcing their way between hers.

There was a sudden loud roar and Hernández' body went flying. He quickly rolled to his feet and had his hand on his sword in seconds. His eyes widened when he saw that it was Cortés. Cortés didn't say a single word, the eerie light in his eyes not entirely sane. Hernández turned his face and walked away.

Cortés touched her cheek. She stared up at him. I stared up at him. He held out his hand and helped her rise to her feet, "Hernández is returning to our land. I will not let him take you with him. I would have you stay with me. Is that acceptable to you?"

"Do not pretend I have a choice. If I don't choose you, you will send me to another."

"Marina, I want you by my side. You will not want for anything, and I will treat you well, with gentleness and honor."

"What honor does a slave have? A slave has no choice. There is only being the slave of one man or another."

"You are a slave no longer. No one will ever raise a hand to you while I live. You will be addressed as Doña Marina. You will be my translator and adviser...and my compañera, if you wish. Already you live in my tent. You have the proof of my words. I have not even attempted to touch you."

"Because I am of value to you. Because of me, you are moving through the land swiftly, the great and small leaders of the people bowing their heads to you. You and your men are growing rich without risking your lives."

"Yes, and I am not a fool. I will not let a gift of providence come to harm. For the rest, you decide. I will not bother you. Come to me as you wish. Or not."

She went. One night and then another and then another. She went though she often lay for hours under her own blankets and told herself not to rise up and meet him under his. I heard the doubts thundering through her mind. Life was uncertain. Who was she not to suck the marrow out of it? To take what pleasure she could find in it? What strange thing was it that she felt every time he looked at

her? Every time she touched him? He was the Bringer of Devastation. The world was not what it had been. Better than anyone, she had the best vantage point to see how the world was being re-carved. She saw the maps Cortés pored over nightly. She saw the battles, heard the screams of all her dark-skinned people. He was touching her with hands seeped in blood. But what loyalty did she owe the people who had taken everything from her and given her to this alien, this Spaniard? My brain whirled with hers, all of her anguish echoing in my chest. And I wondered if, at that moment, my people were already dying or if my world was already gone.

She did not go to him alone. I went as well. Her will always stronger than mine. The longer she resisted, the louder the keening sound I could not hold back. Even without a body, I ached for him. I looked out through her eyes when he held his hand out to her. My hand also took his hand. My mouth also tasted him. My body also welcomed him into it. I sighed when she sighed. Moaned when she moaned. And I gave myself and she gave herself and he gave himself until there was only what the three of us together became.

I am not who I was when I first came to this world. I have learned too much. Seen too much. I had dreamt violence but never lived it this way, never been surrounded by it. So much blood. Fear. Pain. On my world, it had never been necessary to build walls, thick and high, around my heart. Never necessary to harden my soul, to let it callous over. This world made me something my people would never have recognized. It was necessary. Otherwise, I would have spent all my waking hours weeping. The violence would have corrupted my mind. And if my mind had gone, I would have freed my body—so much taller and stronger than these small creatures—and wreaked a more devastating destruction than they'd ever seen. My hands which had never known death would have created it, and my mouth which had never known the taste of blood would have torn at their flesh.

So I raised the walls and grew quiet. And distant. And learned not to feel all I felt. I learned to listen to her. Her thoughts. Her patience. Her will to survive.

Another night. Cortés had left us behind. Neither one of us could sleep. She'd run through all of her language drills. I'd meditated my daily report to the night sky and was wondering about my children when I heard her voice inside my head, inside her head.

Who are you? What are you? You were not here before? I have heard you but I did not know the meaning of your words. I have seen you, Cozamalotl.

You have named me 'Rainbow'?

For your fur, for the way the light and the colors dance in it and above it.

You can see me?

Yes, when I see my reflection, I often see yours. Sometimes I stay staring because I am lost in your eyes, their lustrous darkness, that thin circle of hot gold.

Thank you for accepting me.

Until now, I did not know I had. Though we could not speak, you made me feel less alone. You wept when I couldn't. You made me stronger. I did not mind sharing my language or my memories with you. She hesitated, You know that I have seen your Dreams?



No, Malinalli, I did not know that.

I see your people fallen, their bodies piled everywhere all the way to the horizon. I see your world burned, smoke rising, your homes and your temples razed to the ground. I hear weeping and screaming. The sky is a strange color. Is the sky always that shade of violet?

Yes, that is the sky of my home world.

Except for the sky, that is the same Dream my cousin dreamt every night of his life.

Was he at the massacre?

Yes, like so many others, called by the emperor to relate his Dream. Killed because the emperor could not bear to hear them all speak the same Dream. I dreamt him before we heard the news, and in my dream, he told me to be strong because the time of devastation was coming. Survival was a narrow road, he said.

Did you ever dream him again?

No, just the once. And when I saw the Spaniards, I knew it was the beginning.

I do not know what Cortés made of me. If he thought he imagined me. If he thought I was a demon or some strange thing borne of this new world he was intent on claiming. We were both “*amor*” in his bed. Where his strength was greater than Malinalli’s, mine eclipsed his. Those first nights, I never knew where Malinalli ended and where I began. Then a night came when I slipped out of Malinalli’s skin, when I felt Cortés’ hand on my skin and not on hers. He paused for an infinitesimal second, but then the lightning jumped between us and neither of us knew how to resist it. He held nothing back in the dark. There was no caution in him. He gave everything over. He didn’t flinch when his body touched my fur. I swallowed his cries with my mouth. He trembled and shuddered under me, his body convulsing while I was still inside him.

Sometimes I watched him with Malinalli. Sometimes she watched me with him. Most nights it was the three of us, infinitely tangled, infinitely undone. It was never just Malinalli and me. The two of us were kindling. He was the spark.

Tell me of your people, Cozamalotl. Do they live as we live? Are there slaves and warriors? Are they as different as we are from the Spaniards?

My world is very different, Malinalli. It is a peaceful world unified by the Mother.

You have no battles? No wars? No nations? No slaves?

No, nothing like what I have seen of your world. The elders tell ancient stories of strife, but I have never seen it or known it. My people live in cooperation. We are all empaths. To hurt others would mean hurting ourselves. We make art. We sing. We grow crops. We have families. We meditate. We learn the ways of the Elders. Our lives are long, much longer than yours.

It sounds like a paradise. I can see why you would do anything to protect it.

Anything, Malinalli, even make an exile of myself.

And come to this mad world.

If I can learn something here that will help my people survive, then I will have no regrets.

Have there ever been conquerors on your world?

So long ago we have only one story--how The Wisest One of Us taught the First Song of Unity and linked minds for the first time. How this led to the defeat of the invaders we do not know.

Sing to me, Cozamalotl. I would like to hear the songs of your world.

I sang her to sleep on the nights we were alone. The other nights, we spent with Cortés. On and on. Night after night of caresses and whispered things against his skin my fur her skin. Our bodies slipping in and out of each other. And during the days the campaign continued. We moved on, from one land to another. And as I learned more of all the languages I began to listen for the changes Mallinalli made, how she softened and rearranged, praised and flattered. Where words failed, swords rose and the blood flowed into the earth, staining the rivers and the crops. Where language failed, the bodies piled up and burned. Where she failed, we were sent away while the soldiers meted out their fury. And sometimes Mallinalli fell to her knees on the ground, begging for the end of blood. Sometimes Cortés listened. Sometimes he didn't. Difficult to reconcile the man who murmured sweetnesses in the night with the man who could command death without speaking a single word.

I was not entirely sure he was sane all the time. How could a man be wholly sane when he had set his ships on fire and told his men there was no return? A man who bathed in blood and dreamed of empire? A man who walked a land he had never known amidst a people he had never seen and yet believed he could shape it into the world he'd left behind?

But those were thoughts that lived only in the daylight. I never thought of these things at night. Not when I was with them. Not when I touched them and they touched me. Not when I watched them with each other. We drank and drank from each other's mouths, drank our commingled scents, drank until our heads spun, until our bodies gave out, until we forgot each other's names, until we had no names.

But then Cholula happened. It wasn't an accident. Not an impulse. It was deliberate, executed step by step, and even I didn't understand until too late. It was Malinalli herself who damned the people of Cholula. She'd befriended one of the noblewomen who warned Malinalli to flee to safety before the attack. Malinalli reported the conspiracy to Cortés. The Tlaxcalans had become allies to the Spanish and traveled with us in great numbers.

Our allies, Malinalli said.

What, are you one of the Spanish now? I'd asked her.

They are our survival. Cortés is our survival. Without him, what becomes of me? Of us? And he is all the power I have in this life. Without him, I am a slave again.

He is more than your master—

And more than yours too, Cozamalotl.

And your people?

They all die without me. You have seen my dreams as I have seen yours. A world of ashes or a world of blood. There isn't an alternative.

What if you are suffering only from a lack of imagination, Malinalli? Of faith?



Faith in what, Cozamalotl, what is there for me to have faith in? The gods—the gods did not prepare us for the Spanish. The gods did not stop the shedding of our blood. The gods are standing by, watching us die. There is nothing to have faith in but the swords of the Spanish.

Tell me no untruths, Malinalli, you did this to save Cortés. Or to earn his trust.

Cholula cannot succeed. They are foolish to think they can—they imagine that Cortés' men are all the Spanish that exist. It is not so. You have heard it from Cortés himself. There are multitudes in the world he comes from. More will follow. Always, more will follow.

But your people—

What 'your people,' Cozamalotl? They are not all my people.

It is how the Spaniards see you. To them, all of you are savages, all of you are to be conquered. Killed.

We are not like your people. We are neither a united people nor a united land.

Then may the Mother protect these lands and these peoples, Malinalli, because I do not see how any of you will outlive these times.

Some of us will survive. I am determined—some of us will survive.

Cortés gathered all of Cholula in the square and accused them of treachery. The musket's sound boomed across the city, and then his men and the Tlaxcalans laid waste to every man, woman, and child in the square. Malinalli stayed where Cortés had left her and watched the red blood of Cholula run.

I withdrew from her. I had nothing to say to her.

I meditated. Sent my report to my world. Waited again for some tiny pulse of acknowledgment that it had been received. Nothing. Again, nothing. I prayed fervently in that moment. I prayed that the unity of my people would save them. I prayed that no would-be conqueror would divide us or turn us against each other. I prayed that no one of our kind would ever betray us. I prayed that there would be an end to these visions of blood spilling, red blood and violet blood.

Days later, I emerged and looked out of Malinalli's eyes. They'd begun without me. Cortés was in her mouth and then he was in mine and his fingers dug into the longer tufts of fur at the base of my head. I looked up at him, wanting to hold him with my eyes the way I held him with my mouth. But it was neither the heat nor the tenderness in his gaze that seized my heart. I looked up at him and saw him covered in the violet blood of my people. Thought of him on my world with bodies piled all around him. Thought of him mercilessly spearing the children of my world. I heard their cries. I felt their terror, their pain, their anguish.

I choked on him, falling away from him and collapsing into Malinalli as I felt the bitterness rise in my throat, as I felt the need to convulse, to retch, to tear out my own mouth, to destroy myself for taking pleasure where I had taken it. I fled, further than I'd ever gone into the recesses of Malinalli's mind. He didn't call out for me, didn't ask where I had gone, didn't reach for me again. I felt Malinalli searching for me but I withdrew more than I ever had before, until I didn't think she could feel me. I couldn't stand to be in my own skin. Or hers. I couldn't answer her, couldn't speak to her. Cortés was not the conqueror of my people. My people would never die at his hands. But in that moment, I could not bear Malinalli either. Her people and her world were dying at his hands. How was she able to let

his hands touch her? So many times, in the midst of passion or afterwards, while resting against him or me, she'd bite at his hands, suckle at his fingertips, kiss his wrists. As if she didn't taste the blood or feel the death in his hands. I didn't know if she could hear my thoughts. I wanted not to think anymore. I wanted not to be.

There followed a long period of darkness. I didn't rise to the surface of her consciousness during that time. I couldn't bear to see any more killing. They were human bodies, but in those days, I could only see the bodies of my children, my people, lying in their spilt blood.

I couldn't understand how Malinalli could continue, not only to witness but to speak, to act. Until I found the iron wall of her will, the bedrock of her mind, which refused to give in to despair or madness. And I realized that she had no option to withdraw. She only had two choices—live or die. I had the luxury of a third—to hide.

And so, I hid. So deeply I didn't even emerge to meditate my reports to the Mother. I couldn't. There was only weeping and screaming in my mind. In my days and nights, in my sleeping and waking, I could think only of my world and my people. Were they now dying as all of Malinalli's people were? Were they already dead? Was I sending my thoughts into the Void with no one on the other side to receive them? Had I traded my last few years with my family for nothing? Had the Mother sent us all on a mission merely for the sake of maintaining hope? I'd known I would die without ever seeing any of them again, but I had not known how the time—how the years— would stretch and roll endlessly. It was one thing to sacrifice your life, another to live all of it on an alien world, in an alien body, never to return.

For a long while I did not answer when Malinalli called. For a long while I did not stir when I felt Cortés' hands running along Malinalli's body, searching for me. When I heard him call "amor" and know he meant me, not her. I was a body but not a body. I had no will to pull myself from Malinalli's flesh, to manifest myself in my own form. The Elders had warned against this. It was dangerous to let too much time lapse without materializing. It was only our force of will that allowed us to preserve the hold on our physical forms. To manifest them or disperse them as needed. But prolonged absences from our bodies made it possible to lose our bodies, to forget them.

I forgot to be afraid of forgetting my body. Of losing myself. Days and days and days passed. I didn't care how many. Malinalli called for me without ceasing. That was all that tethered me, her voice, such a strong voice though it reached me only faintly in the well I'd fallen into. I didn't want to respond. I had nothing to say to her. I had nothing but the howling pain in my heart. The vision of my slaughtered family, my slaughtered people.

Then the night came when I couldn't turn away from her anymore. She was screaming my name. I rose to the surface, and her relief at hearing my voice shocked me. I could feel the tears in her eyes, tears I'd never seen her shed before.

All of her thoughts swept through me at once. We were in Tenochtitlán. Cortés had returned from the coast. He'd heard rumors that Governor Velásquez of Cuba had sent a large force to arrest him. While Cortés was gone, he'd left Pedro de Alvarez in charge. The power had gone to his head—de Al-



varex had ordered a massacre of nobles and priests and not even Moctezuma had been able to calm the people's outrage.

Afterwards, the Spanish remembered it as the Noche Triste. Malinalli's mind was focused on surviving, nothing else. For myself, I didn't care. It wasn't my sad night. I laughed and laughed, laughed without ceasing. Cortés gave them permission to carry away what they could. I laughed to see the Spanish killed by their own greed—fatally slowed by their desire to haul away gold. I laughed to see the Eagle Warriors rise up. The old songs bubbled up in my throat—the ones my people no longer sang, the songs that we had sung in ancient battles. I laughed as we ran. I did not care if we lived or died. If we lived, there could only be more blood. If we died, I would rejoin my own kind, the energy of my life flowing back into the Supernal Green. I'd be united with all of my loved ones, finally and forever at peace.

Malinalli chose not to respond to my howling laughter. She ran with the Spanish soldiers, ran for her life, away from the fires and the dying and the rage of Tenochtitlán. Into the night and over the river. And when we made it to what safety we could and I saw the tears in Cortés' eyes, I shrieked with laughter. Malinalli held him in her arms as he wept. She dressed his wounds and I laughed to see his blood. Howled. While he slept, I emerged and licked his face, tasting the salt of his tears, and then dipped my head to lap up his blood with my tongue.

Have you gone mad, Cozamalotl?

Yes, Malinalli, yes. Mad. I had not known—I needed to see the Spanish die. I needed to know they could die. I had begun to think it was not possible. I needed to see him weep, to see him bleed. I needed to taste it. Kiss me, Malinalli, taste his tears and his blood on my tongue. I will share them with you.

We barely escaped with our lives—

This is the moment, Malinalli, we are alone with him, and he cannot protect himself. You see the knife among his things. This is the moment—plunge it into his side. We will be free of him.

Until they come to kill us—

Then we will die free, Malinalli. Come close, taste his blood on my lips.

You have gone mad.

Yes, *I have*, and I laughed and I howled and I crumpled into a small pile inside her. We would never be free of him, I realized. Not while he lived. And not afterwards either.

I could not hide forever, and madness was not the refuge I'd hoped for. Not while the desperation of my people thrummed under my skin. I cursed myself the first night I went with her, the first night I went back to Cortés. The weakness of my people, to need touch, to crave it. In my whole life before this world, I had never slept alone. I'd never felt solitude as I felt it here, even though I lived within Malinalli. But I knew she would not understand me. She never looked back. Her childhood, the arrival of the Spanish, last year, last month, last week—they did not exist for her. She lived, always, in the present moment, and in preparation for the dangers of the future.

Outside of their arms, I could never forget my world, their world. Could never forget unless he was touching me. He had not fully recovered the night I returned to him, but he kissed every inch of me from the crown of my head to the bottoms of my feet, whispering his adoration over my skin, my fur,

my eyes, my lips. I don't know how to describe what the need burning in his eyes did to me. It could make me forget. I think he made Malinalli forget. I think we made him forget.

We wouldn't have survived without each other. In time, the people came to speak of them as one person, one voice. They never knew me. I was the invisible third, bound up as inextricably as they were in the breaking and creating of the world. There was no better vantage point for me to observe, to report the unfolding of events to the Elders and the Mother. To endure my isolation, I needed them, their arms, our nights. I hesitate to think what Cortés and Malinalli would have become on their own.

The years began to pass, faster and faster. In the year after the Noche Triste, Tenochtitlán, the glorious capital of the Aztecas, fell. While the Spanish rebuilt the city in their image, Cortés had a house built in Coyoacán for Malinalli to live in. We had servants. Blooming flowers and captive birds and a trickling fountain in the courtyard. Sometimes we could imagine that the world was peaceful, that Cortés was not extending his hold over the continent.

And as the years passed, tears came more often. My world was often on my mind. I missed the violet sky, missed the almost electric green herds of clouds in the sky, missed seeing our two moons. Missed the mountains of my home. The scent of my world. The sight of my people. It became harder and harder to remember my parent's faces, my wife's hands, my children's voices.

I knew before Malinalli did that she was with child. Martín was a bright little light suddenly spinning before my eyes. I whispered songs and stories to him before he was born. Although she carried him within, Malinalli would not speak to the babe.

The babe wonders at your silence, Malinalli.

You know as well as I do, Cozamalotl, he does not belong to me. Of my blood, of my flesh, of my bone, but he will be his father's child, his only heir. One day Cortés will take him away to live in his father's world.

He is still your son.

Is he? He will be half of this land and half of that land. I will not try to keep him. It is best this way—he will never be torn from what he knows, what he loves. This child must be raised among his people, so that he will never feel like an outsider amongst them.

Martín was born early one morning. I was the one that cradled him until he fell asleep, the one that rose in the night when he cried out. Malinalli kept her distance. Martín had her eyes, dark and impenetrable, and his father's habit of curling his fingers in my fur when he slept. I loved him like he was mine. And he was mine. Born as much of my love as of theirs. I sang him the lullabies of my people, watched him breathe as he slept, brushed the silky hair away from his forehead.

A night came when I felt a presence and woke with a start. I'd fallen asleep with Martín on my chest. Malinalli was standing there, in the dark, her fingers lightly stroking Martín's rounded cheek.

This life requires a heart of stone, Cozamalotl. I have never told you this, but my father loved me too much. My world ended when he died and my mother gave me away. I have not wept since that day.

Do you want to hold him?



No, if I hold him tonight, I will hold him again, and then it will hurt too much when it is time for him to go. I will let you love him for us both. The way you have wept for us both all these years. What little love I am capable of in this life, I give to Cortés. She laughed harshly. Martín stirred. I rocked him gently until he calmed. *I give it to a madman covered in blood.*

I looked up at her, the only time I couldn't hold back the question that I'd bitten back a thousand times, *Why?*

Her eyes were deep, black as they'd ever been, *He was my only choice. The only choice I was ever given.* She moved her hand, laid the palm flat on my chest next to Martín. *I do not love you, Cozamalotl. That is not what I call what you are to me. You are my very heart. All of the love I possess you hold in your heart. You give it life. You give it faith. You give it hope. I can survive whatever happens, as long as you never leave me.*

I held out my other arm, and she curled against my side. I held them both, mother and son, until the sun rose.

Years and more years. Cortés married her to a loyal man named Jaramillo. When the time came, Cortés took Martín away. I wept for us both, for myself and Malinalli. Martín was so little. Too little to remember me, but I knew his little heart would feel betrayed. I wouldn't be there when he was hungry or afraid or sleepy. Wouldn't be there to play with him or hold him or make him laugh. I prayed Cortés would find him a loving nursemaid. That he'd never cry himself to sleep calling for his *Coza*.

Although Malinalli was married to Jaramillo, it was always understood by everyone that she belonged to Cortés first. Jaramillo didn't even protest when we packed our things. Malinalli and I spent two years with Cortés during his campaigns in Honduras. It was very much like our first days again. I observed, listened, reported back to my world. I was often weary, but not threatened with madness again. Afterwards, we went back to Jaramillo. Malinalli gave birth to a daughter. She stayed with us, though I could not tell you if she was Jaramillo's blood or Cortés'. She was Malinalli's and that was all that mattered to me.

The last time we saw Cortés, it was 1530. Eleven years since we'd first met him. A few more lines on his face, a deeper darkness in his eyes. Malinalli's husband left her alone with him. We ran into his arms as if it was a homecoming, forgetting all our time apart. His hands on her hips as she leapt to wrap her legs around him. Pressing close behind him, I encircled them both with my arms. He leaned his head back, craning his neck to kiss me after he kissed her.

Later that night, our three bodies lay close, joined and separate. Malinalli was sleeping. Cortés was awake. He raised himself on one elbow and for the first time—his eyes clear and unclouded by passion—deliberately looked me in the eye, *She calls you Cozamalotl, no?*

Yes.

What is your true name?

I do not expect you to be able to pronounce it, but I will tell you. It is ____.

I don't know if I will ever see you again. I wanted to speak to you at least once like this. Wanted you to know I knew you. That I knew it was no dream.

He leaned down and kissed me. Again and again and again. Then laid his face against my chest and breathed deeply of me until he fell asleep. I stayed awake. They both slept in my arms.

Years and more years. When Malinalli died, it felt as if half my body was torn from me. I have never stopped mourning her. Everything in this world reminds me of her.

I found another body to carry me and then another and then countless others. A year passed. A decade. A century. More centuries. I loved, many times, but never again like I'd loved Malinalli and Cortés.

I travelled the continents, time and time again. I saw the deaths, the poverty, the oppression of Malinalli's peoples. Saw their numbers dwindle. I saw Malinalli's face on so many young women through the centuries. Nightly, I meditated and sent my reports back to my world. I lived centuries of despair and struggle and hope. Malinalli's people did not survive in their entirety, but they survived with enough intact to find their way back to themselves.

The new millennium was well into its third decade when I began to feel my days drawing to a close. By then, I'd been settled for close to seven decades in the place they called San Jose in the land of California. Everywhere there were signs of hope as I heard all the languages Malinalli had spoken spreading, all the stories she had told me being revived. The last two humans I chose to inhabit were both teachers and healers. I shared with them everything I could remember, everything I'd ever learned, everything I'd ever seen. There was a brightness in all their students. A light that shone inwards and downwards and outwards as they learned the words of their ancestors, tasted the medicines of their ancestors, danced as their ancestors had danced. There was a brightness in their eyes that made me want to weep. A brightness I'd never seen in Malinalli's eyes. A brightness that blood and conquest had dimmed in my memory.

And then I did weep, for Malinalli and for Cortés, for the broken world and the world returning, for all of my centuries and my own lost world. I wept until my breath grew shallow. Until I knew the time had come to release my bodies, mine and the human one I'd decided would be my last. I did not know if my children or their mother still lived, but I embraced them in my heart, tried to remember their forgotten faces, hoped they'd come to understand I'd spent my life hoping my small efforts would help them survive.

I lay myself down and closed my eyes. It was time to return to the Mother.

