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The Tao of Majarete



On the table I arrange the seven ears of corn my husband brought me from the market. He put them in front of me as if placing precious jade stones to warm up the cold nostalgia that winter settles in my eyes. I arrange them with joyful patience on the faux stone kitchen counter top alongside which so many conversations have shown him the never-taken photographs of my childhood. From those years we only have the yellowed, blurry images that Mami guards vehemently. In those, we appear tightly grouped and scared, with the frozen smiles that we would send my father. I used to imagine the smiles swiftly crossing the blue waters to reach the snow country where I now await the other photographs—the vivid ones, the ones I draw with the pencil of my memory. In this electronic era the photographs come on cyber wings, and it is not the same. That is why I entertain myself reinventing the past for the attentive ears of my nostalgia.

I came to this country long before the plane brought me. I came in my father's dream. My journey started in 1969, when the naïveté, the desire to escape the decompensating country, called him across the blue waters to plant himself in Paterson, New Jersey. Ten years later disenchantment returned him to El Cibao's hot navel. When the plane brought me in 1987, my eyes knew the landscape. My feet knew very well which paths to avoid and which avenues to explore.

The ears of corn look so fresh. Their scent sends me back to the rainy days that dressed in green the dry fields of the Northeast area where I was born. I open them to find the line of pearls, perfect like Mami's teeth; juicy as her breasts that soothed my infant's vehemence. As if a newcomer to the world, I suck the miraculous milk of memory, drinking the past in an instant.

I carefully align the ears of corn, rubbing them one after the other on an aluminum shredder placed over a pot. The milky, cold juice hits the bottom and through it I hear Mami's sententious voice reminding me that any strong emotion, anger or sadness, will curdle the Majarete. I laugh at that nonsense and promise myself that nothing in this world will spoil my culinary project.

I see myself on the island, tired of breast-feeding hope; tiptoeing always so as not to awaken the gossip that deepened my rage and my desire to depart. On the island women walked with care, like this, the same way my hand embraces the tender corn and slides it along the surface of the shredder. I dance a melodious dance with the soft roundness of the corn. I close my eyes and let myself go into the moment, until a sharp stab alerts my senses. The corn milk is joined by the fast flow of the blood coming from my knuckles.

Again I hear Mami's voice ensuring me that if one has la luna while preparing Majarete, it will curd. I ask myself whether the soft milk mixture could differentiate this blood dripping from my knuckles from that, which, overwhelmed by emotion, inundates the feminine pad I hold between my legs. Something more than my fingers and my ovaries bleeds. Somehow I realize it is time to walk up the scaffold that can take me to conformity. Could it be that with the years and the distance from our country we become more fragile? Or could it be that what I am calling fragility is nothing more than strength? The strength that comes from grabbing life as if comes, learning to walk in the darkest part of the day? That darkness that only manifests in our ocular circle and does not exist for others. I am talking about the gray days, in which the radiant sun brightens everything but our doubt, that hard stone settled in the stomach, giving us, immigrants, the absent-minded air we have.

I finish shredding the corn and stop proudly to see the thick white juice in the pot. With enthusiasm I open the Goya coconut milk. On the wrapper a coconut tree against sunshine promises the island flavor in a sip. The two milks mix and my hand plays with the dusty essence of powdered cinnamon that diffuses new tones. Thick brown sugar falls upon the mixture and the scent ascends to my most profound essence. Growing more enthusiastic I plant myself in front of the stove and start to draw circles with the wooden spoon my hand embraces. Each circle is a movie, a passage of what was left. In file the mutilated bodies of my illusions drop dead. I want to go out and take in fresh air, distance myself so to breathe with ease, seek my essence away from my essence. I look at my hands, no longer so dark from the raw winters, and I wonder if I have not lost something more than skin tone.

I think of my son, the one who never drank milk from my breast, the one I had to teach, with slow enunciation, the word Majarete; and deep inside it bothers me to think that perhaps I

uprooted him before he grew roots. I think of his love for guayaba and tamarindo, the sweet-sour uvas de playa and the limoncillos, “the world’s richest fruits,” as he says. I ask myself, then, where does identity rest? Or is it that we are from everywhere and identities, like borders, are only political inventions? I think of the loving, industrious man, who in another language calms my nostalgia, cuddles me to sleep with a soft song that gives me back the island’s warmth. This man who buys hope and leaves it spread on the kitchen counter where so many times, between ginger tea and corn bread, he has seen images of my floating, airborne country and my essence, which does not live here or there because it has no geography.

The strong waves of emotion put me on guard; I prepare for the ritual. I breathe deeply and visualize the blue sea. I exhale the air while inviting nostalgia to enter and exit my chest, in a cleansing act. I breathe again, deeply, slowly, the blue sea. I exhale nostalgia and vigilant nights, and inhale peace. One by one I order my chakras to open so energy can descend until its beam of soft light dissolves the curds that gather amid the circles my hand draws.

I think of the ancient patience of the women who came before my entrance into this world. I imagine them balancing the tumbling energy of their tired spirits. What magic, what spell fell upon the pots so the soft, sweet, curd-free Majarete could pose, proud and presumptuous debutante, on the plates?

The women who came before me looked at the sea in front of them without imagining the other side. Their eyes drank all the blue and the salitre, a mix that confined them to the island. Preserved in time they became voices of clay, murmurs that descend into my ears, opened like receptacles. That is why I was born with this prisoner’s instinct, with this affection for flying. I entertain myself by looking at the circles drawn by my hand. I settle on the idea that if this Majarete does not work out, I always have the option to try again, to reinvent this moment, and this, and this, and this one...to open my chakras, my spirit, while playing with textures and tones. Maybe I will start to make clay pots, like the women who came before me, so to enjoy the spoiled Majarete, until the genius conquers magic and the curds dissolve or never form because my aligned chakras will do the trick.

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