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Letter from Angélica as Sor Juana; Memory in the Making: A Poetics

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Letter from Angélica as Sor Juana

Keep many thanks. I will wait to see you quickly, because, after all, the dream is everything, finally. Forgive my writing, the silence that formerly occupied it and then was unbearable clamor, like many dogs barking at thieves. Ladrando, ladrones. A night full of the long, thin shadows made by guitar strings, lovers dangerously awake, too near my mother’s house in Torreón. Too near the iron gazebo. A band played on Sundays, girls circling one way, boys the other. We were not supposed to look. And, as you know, so many men like to cross the Río Bravo and then act like bachelors. But now, thanks be to God, the children are fine and honor me for getting them out ahead in life. Also, finally, the dream is anything but silence. Also, now the clamor is not unbearable and is the sound of my own voice, speaking. En fin, may you have a happy journey. Come back before long. Angélica esteems and loves you. Forgive, it’s that I almost don’t know how to write.
Memory in the Making: A Poetics

for Lorna Dee Cervantes

Remember the tale where the maiden lets down her long, charged hair for the lover, his climb to her tower hanging by golden threads, by the very roots of her dreams?

This is not that story, which even then was vague about who, if anyone, was saved. No, we are just past what some call, without irony, the American Century.

At my university, students who own Beemers ride bikes into the fields for Earth Sciences while brown men from another country bike to other fields for food.

The students remember this, the brown men that. They are not the same. I say this as plain fact, though many hold sincerity has been cheapened in our complex age.

A little girl called Shelly weeps on her way to the school bus. She wears jellies, cheap plastic copies of a Greek fisherman's sandal. She spoke Spanish before English,

her Salvadoran nana, both her parents at work. Pink keys, purple keychains, clank against her turquoise backpack. She did not dream last night. Tearstained, she watches a family of lizards careen around the bleached trunk of a dead redwood, limbs bleached bones in the Wedgwood bowl of the sky. I can't see children these days without asking what they'll remember of all this. Am I Shelly's Miss Frances, strange neighbor woman who dressed me in shawls and sang

sadly in German? Whose husband, it was told, went up in flames on the Hindenberg? How do we know what will touch a child, mark her forever? Remember the girls in their pale summer dresses? Remember the women they became? And then there's the memory locked in the cells, in the blood. Certainly potatoes are a kind of faith to the Irish. Also recall Poland, someone's grandfather escaping under his mother's skirts, this cliché all that's left of being Polish, Jewish, poor. Even so, the moment still somewhere in the bone; potato stubble, smoke, strong smell of a woman's skirts, becoming Catholic. Gazing at grandmother, what did she know, and how did she learn it?

And now we are everywhere and nowhere: videophones, internet. No borders in the air, fresh blood on the ground. How to dance? Where does memory go in all this? To work, emplumada! ¡A la chancla! We wear the black velvet hat that came with the dream, loosen our tongues with the fire of roasted chiles.

The Greek women of Souli danced off the cliff of their village to keep out of the hands of the Turks. And here we are on the purple lip of the cañon, telling and telling, and there's no such thing as going too near the sun. Each time and each time the first. Just past the close of the American Century, the child's plastic keys rattle down the street.