

María Luisa and the Anáhuac Valley

As she got settled in the Palace, María Luisa Manrique de Lara, Marquise of Paredes and Laguna, wife of the Viceroy of New Spain, felt the desire to visit Mother Juana Inés de la Cruz, who had welcomed them with the distinguished “Allegorical Neptune,” comprised of an arch and a sonnet. Weary and excited after their travel across the sea, and the parades in Otumba, Puebla, and Tlaxcala, coming into the city awed her. She, who had seen vignettes and paintings that alluded to the beauty of the capital, who knew the chronicles of Englishman Thomas Gage, could not but sigh a deep breath and hold more tightly to the arm of the Marquis when, from the creek of Rio Frio, she saw the Anáhuac Valley sparkling like a diamond thanks to the water of its lakes. She looked to her right and saw the snowed brightness of the volcanoes in a land of such nice temperature, and her eyes could not but associate the image of that valley with the wellbeing waiting for them. Despite a royal origin (her husband was brother of the Duke of Medinaceli and she was the daughter of a prince of the Holy Roman Empire with blood ties to those in Mantua, and linked to the poet Manrique on her mother’s side), she had not guessed that it would be their luck to become governors of such an extensive and unused realm as New Spain. And that coming in through the big door due to such entangled blood ties, given that the exiting Viceroy Friar Payo was her husband’s cousin, their time to reign would be extended for three more years. The Countess of Paredes celebrated all of that. She assumed that in this new land and with the favor of the climate, she would, without a doubt, be able to give birth and raise the children that had not come to term in Spain.

Tomás de la Cerda, dressed in golden brocade, carried in his hands the commander’s baton that Friar Payo de Ribera had given to him days before in Otumba. The Viceroy and

Archbishop left them a calm realm, just as he himself had asserted with the aplomb and the security of having vested upon him the combined figures of the Church and the Crown. That was not the case of the marquis of Laguna, but he would figure it out. The Marquise would take charge of supporting her husband and making sure that the news would travel about their good judgment and level-headed rule. With the baton between his knees, the Marquis of Laguna was already the Viceroy, and therefore she was the Wife of the Viceroy. Still, just like when they got married, they were not willing to settle at home. They wanted to enjoy a honey moon of sorts, for a few weeks, to pass by the Villa de Guadalupe to offer their tribute, flowers, and prayers to the Patroness of Mexico, and then go to the spring waters of the Chapultepec woods, which would appropriately allow them to recover their energies, lost after their long trip. Not that they were not received at the best houses and treated with the most cordial attention during their travels, with a lot of people doing so in order to gain their favor, a custom that the Marquise knew too well. How many had approached her in Spain, trying to get a favor from Felipe IV, with whom she had a sincere friendship while the king was alive.

If she thought of those days of peace before going into the Palace on the last day of November as a sort of a honey moon, she did not do that because of the bodily appetites that she would sate with her husband, for he did not provide her with heaps of pleasure in bed due to his lack of imagination and being eleven years her senior. Sometimes she thought that those were the reason for her wrecked pregnancies. Other times, naughty and blushed, she wondered if it would have been a good thing to reciprocate the looks of that young man who was invited to the soirees at the Palace in Madrid. However, being a married woman, she could not let herself go, just her thoughts, and even about those she would have to be prudent and mindful, since God would be watching, and to whom, as a man, she would not confess some of her desires as she would to

other saintly figures, such as the Virgin of la Paloma, the patroness of her hometown, who was much more understanding of women. She thought about the Virgin when she saw the bluish reflections upon the water that promised a hospitable and regal island at its center.

“Please embrace me in Your Glory,” she thought selfishly, since that was the sensation inspired by the landscape, which seemed like a lyrical verse, or a painting, or a song. The beauty moved her, but she thought it would be useless to try to share that with her husband.

When she entered the Palace and the help introduced themselves, after resting for a little while, she wanted to know where to find Mother Juana. There was a certain sensibility that she liked from that piece about Neptune and the allegorical arch built in front of the cathedral and which was as tall as the Palace itself, with a central figure featuring the Marquise and her husband as Neptune and his wife Amphitrite, naked inside a giant sea shell. She would not deny that it pleased her to see herself in it, instead of seeing the Viceroy by himself as was the tradition. She would not deny that it piqued her interest that it was a woman who came up with the concept and the accompanying texts. Just as she had praised the monumental and exotic aspects of the first arch that had welcomed them at the Plaza de Santo Domingo (a name for the square which Friar Payo had explained) and as she had been amazed that the roman arch had figures of the ancient native rulers of the city called Tenochtitlán, when she learned that the piece was the work of a former Jesuit, Carlos Sirgüenza y Góngora, a mathematician and astronomer, she compared the praises of the former and learned that it belonged to a nun and poet. Her admiration for the arch of the cathedral overflowed. Friar Payo had then explained that it was he who convinced the city council that Juana Inés de la Cruz, of notable grace, talent, and eloquence, should welcome the prominent Viceroy and his wife.

From one surprise to the next, María Luisa did not know if she should look at the enormous plaza and the crowd of Indians, Spaniards, Mestizos, and Negroes, or tend to her desire to meet the person who had made her visit a big surprise – all from the seclusion of a convent. If Tomás did not understand that the nun had equated him to Neptune because he was the marquis of an area rich in lakes and that the arch already had the purpose of addressing the pressing matter of the flooding issues that happened in a city that grew in complications as it grew in size, she then understood, on the other hand, that the references to her own beauty, about which the nun said that the brush strokes had done no good in their attempt to copy the vicerojal couple, were an exchange of political finesse. While praising and comparing them to Roman gods who could control storms, the nun was pointing out, as a master counselor, all the urgent tasks that the city demanded. Without a doubt that nun was someone who she, thirsty for some beauty and intelligence, had to meet.

A Little Paper Called “*El Sueño*”

María Luisa left the convent after seven in the evening. The sky of Mexico City was starting to turn blue, but her spirit was full of expectant joy for being the owner of a treasure. She was carrying a file tight against her chest. Mother Juana Inés had mentioned that work which grew slowly while she finished the carols for Holy Mary, for it was a priority that those were sung at the cathedral that year. The nun had mentioned the arduous work that constituted writing that piece, mixing hendecasyllables and heptasyllables rhyming freely. María Luisa thought about how prudent it had been to give the nun Góngora’s most recently published poetry and how grateful Sor Juana had been to have that book. It was a complicated matter, the journey of the spirit to get to know all the things in the universe and of humankind, that intuition of the soul, that disregard for reason as if in a dream that soars through all the levels of the universe and understands (without reasonably putting that into words) the harmony of the celestial bodies and the music of the spheres. Mother Juana’s teacher was Kircher, the hermetic. He had intended to pass onto her his readings of all the vast and amazing knowledge of the physical world and its wonders, be that of zoology, astronomy, alchemy, botany, magnetism, or acoustics. She had told the Marquise about all of it with such excitement during the preceding months without revealing wholly that those studies of hers and that passion for the German Jesuit would become a long and hard poem. The Marquise had seen the peach fuzz on the lips of the nun plagued with droplets of sweat when she handed her the file, which was a reaction that María Luisa did not know, as if something had taken away the nun’s serenity.

“*El Sueño*,” the nun said as she deposited in María Luisa’s hands the delicately written words, as if in that word itself lied an intent and a longing beyond her pen and her intellect.

That's why getting into the carriage and giving the driver the order to take off had a different color that day for the Marquise. There was a rush to get to the Palace and lock herself in her room, which was unusual. Leaving the San Jerónimo convent was always hard for her. The hustle and bustle of the streets stole away little by little the intimacy of reason and the company of her own soul. It was like coming out from the depths of her skin riddled with silence and collusions so she could be hurt by the demands of the Palace, of her son, and of the Viceroy himself, although truth was that she was able to abandon herself to duties of the Palace just as well once she had crossed that threshold. But today, the desire to accompany the intelligence of the nun with her reading, to know the uneasiness and effort of that poem, to understand the fine bullets that sweated on the nun's lip — all of that was unusual. Mother Juana had read to her, with unimaginable pleasure, sonnets, glosses, and stanzas, all dedicated to her, but with this delivery Juana Inés handed her a precision tool, a light prism, a smoke telescope. That excitement for the reading resembled that of the journey across the Atlantic, when the Marquise expected to arrive to New Spain and glimpse its unexpected beaches. It also resembled the birth of José María Francisco when she still did not know if he was a girl or a boy while she carried him in her belly. And it resembled the excitement of unveiling the unknown when she received the letters of Felipe IV back in Spain, tokens of his trust and words that granted her a place among the affections of the monarch. And now she carried a shared mystery, pressed tightly against her chest and over the brooch of amethyst that adorned her body. If the nun had expressed so much appreciation for that poetic endeavor, she could expect much more of what already amazed her, especially considering their friendship and the nun's kindness. This time María Luisa carried the torments of an artist, her findings, and she knew she would not face

confessions or eyesores or understandings enlightened by her beauty or their closeness. She faced a mystery.

“Hurry, driver, hurry!”

María Luisa Manrique would be the first reader of “*El Sueño*.” The trust and compliment of giving it to her made her outstanding. The inked papers seemed to buzz against her bosom, but she wanted to have them in front of her eyes already. She would delay her presence at the reception that was being held that day at the Palace due to the visit of the Peruvian ambassador. She would send the musicians ahead of her, claiming to have an unbearable headache until she finished her reading, which could not and should not be rushed or careless because of the sheer number of verses.

“There are almost a thousand,” Juana Inés told the Marquise while the nun wiped her brow with a linen handkerchief. Sor Juana was ridding herself of a piece of herself, an organic part, a physical extension that she was entrusting to her friend. María Luisa also noticed her paleness when the fingers that held “*El Sueño*” let go of the papers that the nun placed in her hand, and even when such an exchange of papers and books was common between them, in this occasion time stopped with each of the nun’s fingers that released the file. They now belonged to the wife of the Viceroy, and she had to take care of them.

“What is that, driver?”

“A flock of turkeys.”

In what sauce would they be cooked that could surpass the dressing of words and thoughts that awaited her? What feast could be any superior to that of intelligence crystallized in

verses? Every yard that the carriage advanced made the Marquise a little younger. She seemed like a fifteen-year-old receiving from her father and the court all the wonders of the world, just as she had become entranced by the sound filigree in front of the Alhambra palace, byproduct of the water and light. She yearned to bathe herself in those verses, abandoning her naked senses and her unprepared mind and feel the outburst of the senses.

The carriage entered the coach house and the Marquise forgot to wait for the servant to open the door and extend his hand. She stepped onto the footboard any way she could and rushed upstairs like a young girl in love. She shut the door of her bedroom behind her, without replying to the women that bombarded her with questions. Should they prepare the basin for her? Would she like an infusion? Had she chosen her attire for the event already? She allowed the fuss to die out behind the door. She took off her boots, got rid of her dress and her corset, and remained in her light petticoat, which covered the nakedness of her body. She threw herself on the gold-laced sofa, right beside the light of the oil lamp that always burned readily whenever she arrived, and she put on the side table all the papers in order to start with the first one, excited by the handwriting of Juana Inés.

As if she were doing some kind of dark act, she read:

Pyramidal, terrible, from the earth

born a shadow, to Heaven it guided

vain obelisks to arrogant top,

climbing up expecting the Stars...

The Bath of Juana Inés

“The will is not ours,” her mother had told her in Panoayan. They had to abide by what lady Isabel had decided. Juana was a gift for miss Juana Inés.

“For Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz,” corrected her mother, for even if they had the same name, they were not equals by far.

The two were Juanas, but she was born after Juana Inés and baptized with her name, because in that hacienda everyone was Juana, Isabel, María or Inés, and the names repeated. The second daughter of Captain Diego and Lady Isabel was named Inés, and it did not matter that there was a previous one bearing the Inés.

Juana de San José had little memory of who was Juana Inés because she was three years old when the girl left for the capital with her aunt and uncle, the Matas. And she never saw Juana Inés again. Juana grew up taking care of the children of the Captain and Lady Isabel. Antonia and Inés were the light in her eyes, the reason for Juana’s joy aside from her mother and her siblings and Catalina and Jacinto, with whom she sang at night. That’s why she was so scared when she was told that she would leave Panoayan for the convent. Juana felt the same fright from when she went to the cave with Jacinto and everything was dark and humid. Inside there she would see the Devil blowing out the candles as soon as they entered, and then He would whisper bad things in her ear and haunt their sleep. She was certain that the convent full of nuns dressed in black was just that—a cave from which she could not exit.

“For how long, mother?” She asked with resignation.

“It’s not our life, daughter. It belongs to the masters.”

Juana de San José had felt the urge to hang herself from the red oak in front of her house. Only one reason stopped her: Antonia and Inés had been sent to join their sister, the nun, “to distance them from the dangers of the countryside,” in the words of the Captain, which he said as he looked at Jacinto with contempt and suspicion. Jacinto had not taken a wife yet, neither Negro nor native. The Captain thought, wrongly, that the boy, just like all the natives that lived nearby and worked the fields, liked creole girls. Now that the girls were fourteen and thirteen, the Captain was afraid of their puberty and their bodies that were not girly anymore and the temptations that could be unleashed in the fields without his or his wife’s knowledge.

“The girls will go to the convent at the capital”. He had said this to Lady Isabel in front of Juana as she served dinner at the table.

Lady Isabel crossed herself.

“If they want to become nuns, they can do so. If not, they will be at peace with their studies and their prayers,” he added.

Only the expectation of seeing the girls who had left several months prior gave Juana the solace to depart, heading for that cave and leaving behind the hills and the rice with plantain that her mother cooked and the singing at night and the telling of tales that occurred when those who remained in the hacienda and the youngest kids gathered. Her world had been torn asunder when the gates of the convent opened and she walked in carrying her bundle of clothes. She looked back down Calle Verde as if she had left an uncertain paradise of the life in that city that she did not know. It seemed like a lie and a contradiction that, even though she was a slave, the company of her family and her kind had given her a sort of freedom. Now she had to quit it all because her

will did not count. She thought that, at least, a mulatto could enamor her and give her the freedom that her masters had not.

The gates closed behind her and she was guided to the cell of Sor Juana Inés by an old and hunched nun. She asked Juana rude questions all along. Would she become a nun? Negroes could not be nuns because they were creatures of the Devil. Who had the nerve to send her to the convent? Mother Juana Inés was granted too many favors by the vicerojal couple and rich patrons and the priests. And these were bad times in which to live. The old nun dragged her feet while the huge medallion on her chest, instead of clinging to her body, hung like a bell's clapper because she was so hunched over.

Juana de San José did not speak, she just walked across the patio scared, waiting for the familiarity of the eyes of the Ruiz Ramirez girls to console her after her banishment from the countryside. But when the old nun left her at the cell of Sor Juana without further explanation, the Negress had to face the silence of the place. And she did not know how to react. She stood still because nobody had given her permission to sit down. She looked at the wall covered by books and had the weird feeling that she was in front of the library of Don Pedro. And then she knew she would have to clean them as she did back in Panoayan, without understanding the signs or the secret pleasure derived by those who looked at them, but knowing well enough that among those rows of leatherbound spines and parchments, life beyond the hacienda could be found.

When the girls walked in and found her, they hugged her and hopped around joyously, in spite of Juana Inés, who came after them and quieted their rejoicing, reminding them about the

appropriate behavior at the convent. Juana explained that Lady Isabel had sent her as a gift for the nun.

“Miss Juana Inés—excuse me, Mother de la Cruz,” Juana said clumsily.

Juana de San José and the girls laughed, telling the slave that they called Juana Inés “sister,” and since she was their real sister, they were not at fault. The Negress held them tight against her chest, like grabbing her own life, like holding onto a rock that would not let her slip and fall into the depths of the cave she had entered.

It had been a while since all of that had happened, Juana thought as she prepared the warm tub for Sor Juana. Juana was the one who heated the water week after week and carried the buckets to the tubs used by the Mothers in the company of their slaves and servants. And it was in moments like those, of dark and warm solitude, right before the intimacy of Juana Inés, that melancholy assaulted Juana, for it had encroached in her days after losing the joy of singing by the cauldron in Panoayan. Far from the rest of the nuns, from the time for dinner, from the chores of the cell where the girls walked in and out along with other servants who looked after them, where the abbess or Sor Cecilia would show up asking for favors and sweets (because the bulky nun knew that Antonia and Inés received sweets from home). She was far away from the mass and the confessionals of Friday where the nuns would put their faces on the floor to scream out their sins and which made for an imposing spectacle for Juana, since there were those who had been condemned to the cilice in their cells, and that refuge of water and silence gave her an obscure and necessary peace.

That day could not be like the others. Sad news had arrived about the death of Leonor Carreto. Twenty days before, the Marquis and Marquise of Mancera had come to say goodbye to

Sor Juana. They had spent a long time in the visiting room and Juana Inés did not attend any of the prayers, nor did she attend dinner. She had the abbess's permission because it was a special day. Juana de San José, from the cot in which she slept, saw the nun go into the top part of the cell, which housed her bedroom and her study. Juana stared at the flickering light of the candle against the wall until she fell asleep. She imagined Juana Inés writing, using the inkwell that Juana de San José kept clean and full. But this morning Father Antonio Núñez had called the nun to the office of the abbess. She then came back brokenhearted, paler than her usual with the wimple that crunched her face.

“Leonor died,” she said, holding back tears.

Juana de San José did not know what to say. She announced clumsily that she would prepare Juana Inés a bath even if it was not the day she usually took one. And Juana Inés accepted. May the abbess forgive Juana, since she had scolded the slave other times in the past, but she could not call Juana Inés “Sor”. She preferred to call her “sister” like the girls did, since that made the familiarity more real. Now that she poured the fire-heated water into the marble tub, she feared that she would see sister Juana Inés's suffering. She knew how important that fancy lady, who visited Juana Inés frequently, had been. Sister Juana Inés had told her about the Palace, how she taught the nun and had beautiful dresses made for her, and that all of that paled in comparison to the worth of her friendship with that woman.

When the nun entered, Juana could barely recognize her amidst the darkness of the place. Behind the folding screen that stood in the room, she undressed in silence. On the side, she handed to Juana de San José the medallion that she always had on her chest, and the Negress put it on a little table. She then untied the cord from her waist and handed it over. She removed the

wimple that wrapped her face and that hid her black and abundant hair, which Juana de San José liked to wash in the water. The touch of that shiny mane was the hidden life of the nun that only Juana was allowed to see. Foreign to the nakedness of her body, as if it did not belong to her, the nun kept shedding each piece of clothing, handing over to the slave the black scapular, the white habit that felt heavy in Juana's arms, and finally slipping her trousers down her skinny legs, trousers that Juana washed with the same care as the other clothes of the nun. Wrapped in a white cloth with which she would later dry her body, Juana Inés walked to the tub and dove one foot in the steaming water. She took it out swiftly and asked Juana to cool the water. Juana poured some water from the bucket she always had to regulate the temperature. The nun must have been more sensitive than usual, since Juana knew well how she liked her bath water. She held her hand to help the nun get into the tub and slide into the water. Barely four years older than she was, Juana could not help but to compare their bodies. She was amazed by the contrast of the nun's dark pubic hair against her light olive skin and the purple of the nipples on her breasts. Juana thought that no man would ever see them. It was not a body that spilt over like hers, but was rather harmonious, because the hips were slim, almost manly. And as she bathed Juana Inés as always, passing the sponge over her small feet, Juana remembered her own, roughed and rugged, and she envied them. The feet of a nun that did not have to walk barefoot in the fields, she would tell herself.

Juana Inés closed her eyes, alien to the washcloth with which Juana scrubbed her body. She let her arms be lifted, just like a doll, so that her hairy armpits and the fold of her breasts could all be cleaned. Juana scrubbed the pubis with the washcloth carefully, as always. In a way, thanks to the conversations with the nun, she was certain that the body of Juana Inés was not like hers—it was just the shell of a soul. And there, scrubbing the skin, she did not tarnish the purity

or the virtue of the nun. The body of the sister was a soul in need of cleansing. In the same way that hitting herself with the cilice was cleansing, Juana Inés was punishing a sinning soul.

Suddenly, Juana Inés grabbed the washcloth that had just brushed her womanhood and put it over her face. Juana de San José, stunned and fearful of having done something that offended the nun, remained very still, kneeling by the side of the tub. She could hear the muffled crying under the dampness of the washcloth. She stood up and left to let the nun weep. Moments later she returned with some anisette that her mother had sent her for stomach aches and mood pains. She put the glass close to Juana Inés.

“Take a sip, sister. A sip.”

“Maybe she did not want to leave,” said Juana Inés abruptly, and somewhat feeling better. “Because dying while being so close to boarding the ship that would take her to Spain, leaving Don Antonio alone and confused in Tepeac, are not good manners. She should have done it beforehand, in order to pray for her soul at the cathedral, to cry for her and to give a farewell like God wills. But not so far away from everything. She will be buried there, because one belongs to the place one dies, not where one is born.”

Juana de San José listened to her, thinking with contempt that when the nun and she died, they would not be taken to be buried in Panoayan. She took advantage of a brief moment in which Juana Inés closed her eyes, and took a swig of the anisette that remained in the glass. One died when God willed, that’s what she had learned from the prayers at the chapel in Panoayan. Our fate belongs to God. In her case, because she was a Negro, there was no other fate but to be a slave. And where would she die? Hopefully not at the dark convent. She would prefer the cave of her native land, that of the snowed sunrises and sleet from the volcano.

It seemed that the anisette was making Juana Inés talk more than she should. Juana de San José liked to listen to her thinking out loud. For a moment, Juana pondered the good fortune of those who could leave words on paper and of those who would take them from the paper with their eyes, because then they could be repeated over and over again, just like the prayers she saved in her memory. Maybe she should ask the Ruiz Lozano girls to teach her to understand the words in books. Maybe that way she would be less alone when she thought about the fate of her bones, which were as white as everyone else's.

Juana Inés jolted her out of her trance with a sigh that signaled that life had to go on. When the nun stepped out of the tub, the Negress covered her nakedness with the drying cloth, and while the nun rested in a chair with her body wrapped, Juana combed the wet hair and untangled it smoothly and patiently. That simple act reminded Juana of her own mother trying to untangle her knotted curls. Once dried, she helped the sister by bringing her clean clothes that were on the little table by the folding screen. Finally, the slave tied the waist cord and handed Juana Inés the rosary and medallion, which the nun decisively put on, as if the shivering and naked woman had dissolved in the warm water of the tub. Juana smiled. She liked to see the nun rise again. There was always the risk that she would stay down, sad — and the nun had to be a part of the choir that evening.

“Do not miss mass,” Juana Inés commanded.

Juana agreed because the choir cheered her up and once a day was all the time she had to be at the chapel of the convent among her cleaning duties and washing of clothes. That service, she assumed, would be special. Father Antonio had been invited for the sermon. And he did not use to have special treatment for the convent. To listen to him, Juana Inés had said, it was

necessary to go to the cathedral, and listening to him was always edifying. All the more reason for that if he would be dedicating his words to such a generous and sensitive woman.

“May God embrace her in His Glory,” said Juana Inés out loud. And after crossing herself, she left the bathroom.