

# **CUENTOS WELA TOLD ME**

**That Scared the  
Beeswax Out of Me!**

SECOND EDITION

A Bilingual Capirotada of Musings

**Priscilla Celina Suarez**



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McAllen, TX

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# ABOUT THE COVER ART



*"EL CALLEJON DEL BESO"*

2011, ACRYLIC ON CANVAS

**by Chusy Ocala**





## DEDICATION

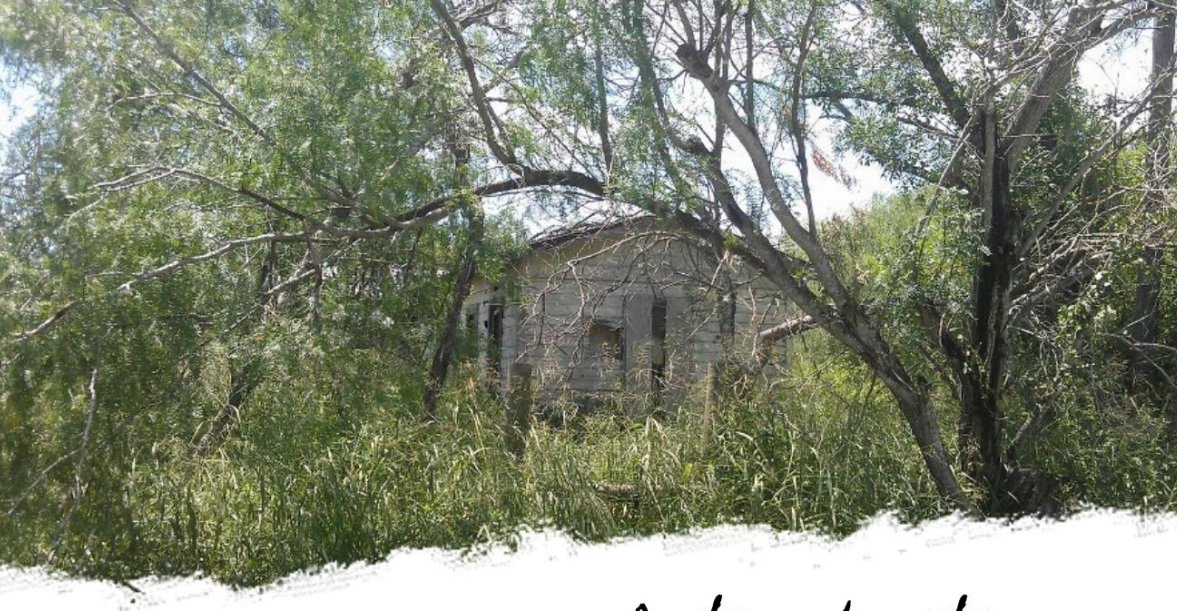
Dedicated to my abuelitas. Life has blessed me with many. Some of them were related to me by a bloodline, some of them not. All of them are admired and adored.

They taught me to honor my ancestors who carried unimaginable burdens on their back to provide these privileges I now live with, cherish the family I am blessed with, and learn from the cuentos of their past.

To the new generation of abuelitas in my family. My mami querida (QEPD) and my tías. You kept these stories alive, spooking even the youngest with cuentos we have shared throughout the years.

To my nephews and nieces. I am inspired to document these stories passed on in our family because of you.





## Introduction

As a child, I often lost my wits when listening to the narrative storytelling of the legendary creatures that have, for centuries, been a part of our South Texas folklore. Myths I have learned from my own family and am now sharing with you.

Now and then, these myths came as an embellished retelling an abuelita or tía heard as a child. Stories were usually shared around the kitchen table before bedtime while drinking a cafecito or warm tea. There were always those strange expressions, high-pitched squeals, and exaggerated whispers making up the art of their cuentos.

I remember hanging onto my older brother's hand when the cuento was too much for me to handle. Peeking beneath the table to make sure nothing was creeping near to bite at my toes. Jumping anytime someone startled me by making the slightest sound.

After hearing those frightening cuentos, some relatives have claimed to experience an eerie chill crawl their skin and give them goosebumps for no apparent reason. Some have even claimed to be haunted for several days by a ghostly apparition.

The truth is we learn most of these cuentos because they teach us a lesson, such as not walking alone at night because of the unknown perils lurking around.

Regardless of whether they are fictional or not, these urban legends are intriguing.

Who knows? Maybe you've already heard a version of some of these cuentos you're about to read.

In this new edition of *Cuentos Wela Told Me*, I've included a capirota of bilingual musings I'd like to share with you – ranging from riddles and poetry to reflections and traditional dichos.

Read on, enjoy, and beware of those pesky cucuys!

- Priscilla Celina Suarez

June 12, 2020

McAllen, TX





MIENTRAS MÁS SE VIVE,  
MÁS SE VE.



THE LONGER YOU LIVE,  
THE MORE YOU LEARN.



- Mexican Dicho



# TINY DANGER

A RIDDLE TO GUESS WHAT I AM

tiny, tiny  
they will call me -  
I am danger  
but I am no stranger  
to your home

little, bitty  
things gone missing -  
you blame each other  
when it was I, no other,  
right beneath your nose

what am I?

*duende*

## DUENDES



Have you ever noticed how sometimes when you are having difficulty falling asleep, and everyone else is in deep slumber, clamors one would refer to as *the house settling* seem to creep into your awareness?

You try to ignore the annoying titters and tatters that surround you. Maybe too insignificant to be noticed the first few occasions heard.

At times, it is the sound of a soft scratching on the floor or walls. Not quiet enough to entirely ignore. But when you check for the source of the noise, the only sounds you can make out seem to come from the air conditioning unit or a ceiling fan.

Maybe it is the sound of light footsteps too soft to be real. And when you investigate where the clatter is coming from, it is only your subtle breathing you can distinguish.

Or maybe a slight knock on the window you assume could be a branch hitting carelessly against the panes. Except, when you look outside, there is no breeze visible in the night skies.

Have you sometimes felt a slight tugging at your feet while you sleep, but realize you are all alone when you wake? The only logical explanation is it must have been a sensation from your dream.

Or have you felt something climbing your bed, but when you turn on the light, nothing is there?

I know I have.

Maybe it is only our imagination playing tricks on us.

Mexican folklore, however, has an explanation for those baffling experiences.

Duendes.

Duendes are creepy tiny trolls or evil-looking gnome-like creatures that make their abode inside the wooden walls, ceilings, and floors of our home. These creatures are messy and have wild hair and stringy beards that reach to the ground. They tend to reside in spaces where children live and are *traviesos*.

When things mysteriously go missing around the house, it is from time to time blamed on these annoying little pests. They are known to mostly take items of particular interest to children, notably toys.

If any unkempt children are around, duendes take it into their own hands to clip a child's toenails, usually cutting off skin in the attempt. Sometimes even removing the entire toe!

At nighttime, they spy on children playing past their bedtime to find their faults. They gather up their *research* to later try and convince annoyed mothers to give up their own young.

It might seem like a long shot. But believe it or not, it works!

Saying all this might make it seem I declare duendes despise children.

That is not true.

The reality of it all is duendes merely want to take human children from their parents because they are a favorite meal that is decent and suitable for Duende cuisine.



# Thoughtful Duende



# DUENDES

BELIEVE THE HOME THEY  
RESIDE IN IS THEIRS AND ARE  
RUMORED TO BE THE SPIRITS  
OF ONE'S ANCESTORS.

*tongue twister / trabalenguas*

## TRICKSTER TROLLS

twelve-ish tricky  
tiny trolls  
trying to tickle  
Trixie's toes

tippy-toeing  
trickster-toeing  
towards Trixie's  
ticklish toes



## LAS LECHUZAS



In Southwestern folklore near the borderlands separated by the Rio Grande River, las lechuzas are known to be dreadful brujas dedicated to their black magic. They traded their human souls to the Chamuco in exchange for a set of magical powers that last them a lifetime.

At nightfall is when their transformation occurs. With a single flutter of an eyelid, lechuzas turn into a mysterious monster with a bird's body and a beautiful woman's face, before flying and screeching through the night skies in search of their prey.

Yes, lechuzas are generally known to be barn owls found in many regions of the world. But these lechuzas I am referring to are stunning creatures that come out for a feast once the moon has set.

Their delight comes from giving sustos, which is when someone is frightened so badly that the lousy feeling remains with one for the remainder of the day. The higher the susto, the stronger a lechuza's strength will be when the morning comes.

People have passed from the shock of these terrible sustos.

When a lechuza finds her target, she will perch in an isolated location where the untrained human eye cannot easily see her. From there in the distance, she will make either strange high-pitched whistles or the sound of an infant crying.

Anyone curious enough to attempt and determine where the sound is coming from is at risk of becoming an unsuspecting target.

The lechuza will then swoop down and carry off the confused and horrified individual, who will be in for such a shock that he will be in an unconscious state without ever having a chance of running away for cover.

# Lonesome Lechuza







EL DIABLOS SABE MÁS  
POR VIEJO QUE POR DIABLO.



THE DEVIL KNOWS MORE FROM EXPERIENCE  
THAN FROM BEING THE DEVIL.



## EL CHAMUCO



El Chamuco was a slang term my cousins and I grew up fearing, and the only way we were allowed to refer to the evilest spirit of all.

It seemed El Chamuco came to visit anytime there was temptation from one of us kids to do something wicked.

We could be trying to sneak out of the house to play without asking for permission from our parents or elders, and El Chamuco would be waiting for us around the corner.

Crawling under a table or a bed was El Chamuco's territory, where he might magically appear if we stayed there for too long.

Staying up past our bedtime was inviting El Chamuco to take us away into the unknown.

I imagine him being tall and thin, with reddish and maroon skin. His tail had a triangular and pointy tip that could be quite dangerous. One foot is a chicken's claw, the other a horse's hoof. His creepiest feature to me is

the horns that adorn his sinister face.

I have never seen this fearsome spirit, which I am soooooo grateful for, but that is how I have heard him described.

How would you describe El Chamuco's appearance to someone who has never heard of him?

# SNEAKY CREATURE

A RIDDLE TO GUESS WHAT I AM

my abode  
my home  
is in deep South Texas

where an occasional  
lucky goat  
becomes my yummy breakfast

what am I?

*chupacabras*



## THE CHUPACABRAS



Many falsely believe the chupacabras, also known as goat-suckers, are creatures that came into existence only in modern times. An alien species mysteriously transplanted from another planet and now hiding in plain sight.

There has been documentation of the presence of the chupacabras for centuries, with original sightings credited to the Mayan civilization in pre-Columbian times.

Abuelita Toña described the chupacabras as a species of vampires. Strange creatures that prey solely on farm animals, and never on humans. Amongst their favorite meals are cattle, goats, pigs, and an occasional dog.

Their existence became recognized in modern pop-culture after sightings in the Americas during the mid-1990s. Claims from South Texas hit the media airwaves after a local farmer found his goat with mysterious wounds consistent to those of the chupacabras, clean puncture wounds on the neck region.

After that incident, several farmers living in rural areas around the Valley made the same claims. Few caught a glimpse of the creature attacking their animals.

Lucky them, huh?

Chupacabras resemble large bat-like creatures that walk on their hind legs. Wing-less, of course.

Their long and oval-shaped faces sport beady, red eyes, and razor-sharp fangs. Their weathered skin is a pale-grey coloring, almost greenish, with dark scales lining their spine. Chicken-like legs help them make a speedy and silent getaway.

Wait a minute.

Doesn't this kind of sound like the description of an extraterrestrial being?



# FOREVER

a riddle to guess what I am

a look in the mirror  
does not reveal much  
as my reflection doesn't stare back

I can live forever  
but you will not see me  
during this day's light

I am part of clan  
we walk after nightfall  
occasionally we prefer  
not to tread, instead taking flight

what am I?

*vampire*

## THE DEVIL AT THE DANCEHALL



Susana lived in a small and rural town in Starr County. A beauty, the girl was at an age where her good looks came into form, and she had discovered how easily she could get others to fuss over her.

Her favorite past-time was spending time with her friends at a Tejano dancehall a few towns away. Although she did not drive, and none of her friends owned a vehicle, nothing could stop her from going to the baile even if it meant walking the lonely dirt roads while wearing her favorite pair of cowboy boots.

You see, dancing was a passion she carried in her veins. Susie's father and uncles taught her how to dance cumbias, huapangos, and polkas at family gatherings such as weddings, celebrations, and birthday parties.

Her very first dance was at Tía Nidia's quinceañera. A natural, she was not yet six years old and enjoyed dancing with her cousins and family friends so

very much, kicking her heels with every beat of the tune. Dancing became her passion after that.

Despite being from a strict and religious household, Susana would go out of her way to attend dances, no matter the holiday. It was all the same to her.

Everyone who saw her dance agreed she was the best partner, with potential dance partners waiting in line to charm her. Her father and uncles would look on to make sure they respected her.

At one juncture, she admitted to loving dancing over anything else. Susie went as far as saying she would probably even sell her soul for the opportunity to go to a baile!

Maybe, just maybe, this was something she should have never said out loud. Especially not during Lent season when it is the custom that most Catholics willingly give up something they appreciate the most.

During Lent, only those who disrespected their family and had no fear of being rebels would show up at the dancehall. One particular day during Springtime, something felt different in the air. The evening humidity became thicker, and the night sky got darker much faster than usual.

At the baile, the men present were the same partners Susie occasioned to dance with, except for an enigmatic vaquero hiding in the corner of the dancehall.

This stranger had such a strong appeal on Susie that she had no sooner seen him before she had introduced herself, eager to keep him from noticing any other possible dance partner in the room.

Tugging him out onto the dance floor, the house band played a polka as she let him lead her in a dance. He twirled her with little effort and laughed at her glee, delighting her with his lively talk, at times, belting out a verse from the song.

Strangers, they shared a few words at first. When her confidence had stirred up, she found conversation came quickly. He asked of her interests, and she spoke mostly about dancing, the music she enjoyed, and the bailes she loved best.

Curious, the vaquero tipped his black hat with his thumb as he asked Susie what she would do for this passion of dancing. Being as trusting as she was, Susie told him she would do almost anything.

He laughed as he grabbed her by the waist and slowly dipped her over, asking her if a dance with the devil would frighten her.

She giggled as she informed him just about anything was worth the leisure of dancing.

He dipped her over again as he laughed with delight in a tone that made her unsteady. And when she saw his expression, she noticed something odd.

There wasn't much of a chance to think about it while he twirled her faster and faster around the dance floor.

So fast, she could hardly make out anyone else as they whizzed by them. It was sufficient to make her dizzy enough to ask her newest dance partner to slow down.

While regaining her posture, she looked down at their feet and noticed the vaquero wore no boots. He wore no shoes at all.

His feet were like none other she had seen. One foot sported the claw of a chicken, and the other was the hoof of a horse.

Susie tried to comprehend what she saw as his red and pointy tail wrapped around her waist. He laughed when he took notice of how stunned the silly girl was.

It took a good minute, but Susie now realized the oddity of his face.

It was red. Not a blushing red, but a maroon red. Devil maroon red, to be exact.

Coming to a full realization of who she was dancing with, she cried out for help, but everyone was too busy to care. Susie's eyes widened as her mysterious vaquero planted a kiss on her cheek, warning her he would be back someday to finish the dance.

Within seconds he had puffed into a fog around her, leaving her behind with a vulgar scent of sulfur.

To this day, Susana has never attended another fiesta nor engaged in any dances, not even at her wedding.





- *La Vida es un Carnaval* by Celia Cruz
- *Baila esta Cumbia* by Selena
- *I Gotta Feeling* by The Black Eyed Peas
- *La Macarena* by Los Del Rio
- *Juana la Cubana* by Fito Olivarez
- *Cha Cha Slide* by DJ Casper
- *Sigue al Lider* by S.B.S.
- *We are Family* by Sister Sledge
- any Huapango

**SONGS I'LL DANCE TO AT A  
QUINCEAÑERA OR WEDDING**



# CREATURES OF FLIGHT

## A RIDDLE TO GUESS WHAT I AM

my sisters and I  
take flight in  
the night skies

our wings wide  
when outstretched  
on our journeys  
to fetch

sometimes you'll hear us  
as we hoot  
our wicked cries

but never cross us  
or you'll come to learn why  
we are the most feared  
creatures of flight

what am I?

*lechuza*

## WHAT I KNOW ABOUT LAS MARIPOSAS



For over a decade, I've been researching the myth of las mariposas and their role in South Texas folklore. I first learned about their existence from my wela, Antonia De La Garza, who died a few years back in San Juan, TX.

One person in the Valley other than my wela has validated this myth. I will refer to her as Malena.

Malena agitated about the end of las mariposas, their duties on Earth, and her theory about why their stories have disappeared from local folklore.

I am obliged to keep the source of her information a secret, as it is too dangerous to disclose with anyone else.

Of all the sources I've studied at libraries and on online databases, there is little to nothing mentioned about this particular breed of white witches. At random times, I wonder if this was a tall tale all made up by my wela.

But then I listen to other narratives of shamans and curanderos, men with

the power to heal people. Their charms and ambitions are so similar to that of las mariposas.

Maybe their associations aren't remembered because of the discreetness these women took in their work.

What I can tell you about these ladies is they were once the sisters of las lechuzas. But that was long ago.

They inhabited the land in the shadow of their sisters, cautious and discreet regarding their resilient powers.

Still, people's instincts tend to anticipate who's enchanted with supernatural abilities. I believe it is a human instinct for one to sense certain things, such as noticing the fear in the eye.

Same as their sisters, las mariposas were born into beautiful bodies and wore their thick mane of hair much below the waist.

They were born into the line of their female ancestors. Mariposas were one-third human, one-third witch, one-third glorified. Living as normal women did, but capable of turning into butterflies resembling that particular breed of monarchs.

Already blessed with incredible powers, once baptized, her charms bloomed to more considerable strengths with practice.

Until the girl accepted her path into this lifestyle, and her powers granted, she was free from any particular duty. She had the choice to choose her endowments or to continue living a regular existence.

Las mariposas had a considerable role to play in society. They were the angels people unknowingly prayed to — the ones in charge of completing generous grants.

Because of the duties bestowed upon them, few married and had children.

Humans feared their qualities because we have trouble accepting what we don't understand. It is for this reason they were associated with las lechuzas. Not that their sisters were bad women.

Don't laugh.

Lechuzas have simply earned a lousy reputation.

I wish I had more to tell you about these marvelous beings. But the truth is sources have run dim on this topic.

I mean, I genuinely doubt their entire bloodline has become extinct.

So I say to you, many females whose family has been in South Texas for generations have a chance of being a descendent of the mysterious mariposas



— or perhaps being related to one.

If that is so and you are a female descendent, all you need to do is accept the duty as a Mariposa to receive the charm.

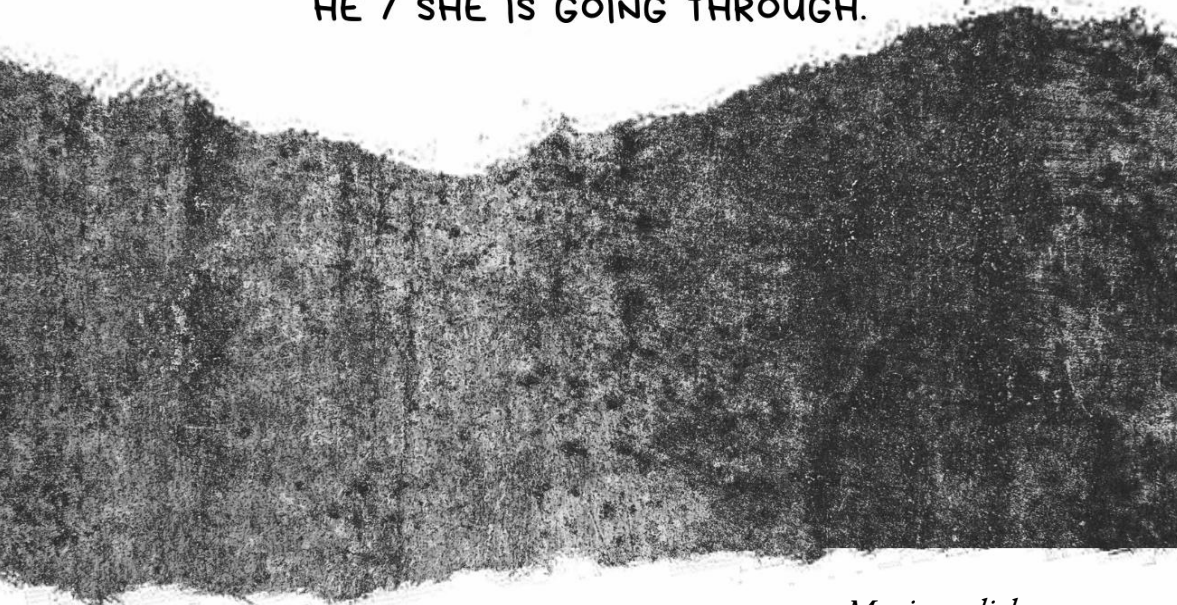
But only if you can handle the responsibility granted with that duty.



NADIE SABE LO QUE HAY EN LA OLLA  
MÁS QUE LA CUCHARA QUE LO MENEА.



ONLY THE ONE EXPERIENCING  
A SITUATION UNDERSTANDS WHAT  
HE / SHE IS GOING THROUGH.



- *Mexican dicho*



# CURANDERISMO

IS A TRADITIONAL FOLK HEALING  
PRACTICED BY CATHOLIC HISPANICS  
AND HAS DEEP ROOTS COMING FROM  
INDIGENOUS AMERICAN CULTURE. IT  
IS BASED ON HEALING USING  
SPIRITUALITY, FAITH, AND NATURE.

FOLK HEALERS ARE OFTEN  
REFERRED TO AS CURANDEROS,  
BRUJAS, OR SHAMANS.





## DON PEDRITO JARAMILLO

Many of us from the borderlands of the Rio Grande Valley have at one time heard of Don Pedrito Jaramillo, a revered folk healer who died in 1907 in Brooks County, TX.

For those of us who frequent the check point in Falfurrias, TX, we have probably at one time passed by a roadside marker pointing us in the direction of his shrine.

During his adult life, people came to him from all corners of the U.S.A. and Mexico seeking help. He was known as *'The Healer of Olmos Creek.'*

The faith people in the region have in him continues to drive them to visit his shrine in Falfurrias, TX, with petitions for guidance and blessings. The ofrendas often offered range from flowers and photos to hair clippings and personal mementos belonging to the person whom one is asking a blessing for.

This picture above was one I took several years ago when taking an ofrenda asking Don Pedrito to guide my grandfather to the afterlife, shortly after my abuelo had passed.



## LAS LECHUZAS DE FALFURRIAS



Legend has it las lechuzas from the Mexican-side of the borderlands relocated in the mid-1900s to a town in deep South Texas named Falfurrias. Although the breed of these black witches has diminished to a few, their reputation is still well known to most in our community.

Unlike their sister counterparts, las lechuzas have not died out and are premised to return to high power.

It isn't common knowledge why they had to make their home in this region, but speculation has it the collapse of the Reynosa Bridge in 1934 had an impact on the reasoning behind it.

Intuition tells me they have intentionally been keeping a low profile. Only, I can't even begin to figure out why.

These brujas are born as human women, but when their powers are unlocked, they have the capability of transforming into owls.

Though folklore says they are witches working only with black magic and

bad intentions, this is not the case. They are half-human and half-witch, a characteristic most of us have.

Las lechuzas mostly have good intentions but are often trapped with the moods of greed, hunger, and hate. These are the cases in which their power turns sour and are typically the ones remembered by society.

Lechuzas prefer working with black magic against the white magic of nature, and you should not fear them for this. They were not born with the power of both.

The white magic they know to use has survived in them from the teachings of las mariposas, their sister counterparts.

Do not blame them if their craft has harmful consequences on others.

You don't know what it is like living with powers discriminated against, yet hypocritically called upon, by commoners who won't let the charms of these brujas die out. Lechuzas have more energetic emotional states than you or I could cope with.

Don't bother these brujas with your foolish requests. They can abuse their powers to keep you from annoying them. And trust me, this is not done charmingly.

If you ever plea for one, you can't be sure which particular one will answer your call.

Each bruja has a different personality and intention. After all, lechuzas are our sisters, mothers, aunts, and neighbors.

What I am trying to say is to call when it is truly a great need.

To call them out, you have to speak in a firm and demanding but sincere voice. Use a rope made out of horsetail and tie seven knots less than an inch apart. While doing so, recite the following chant after making each knot:

*“Woman of disguise,  
lady of dark charm;  
sister of white light,  
listen to my call.*

*Come fly in soft hue flight,  
I do not fear you;*

*the craft of blood in me,  
listen to my call.”*

You will need to repeat the process, but backward. Do so by saying the chant before untying each knot.

Please do not make a mistake in this process of calling them out to you because you might accidentally hypnotize them, and they will hurt you instead.

If you are successful in calling a lechuza out, do not be fearful. Do not risk offending.

I am sure that sometimes at night, you could hear one accidentally scratching on your roof. Do not shoo her away because she may need to take breaks between long flights.

And she may just be carrying a good omen for you.

*tongue twister / trabalenguas*

### BEWITCHED MITCH

which witch  
bewitched Mitch  
with an itch for riches  
which Mitch wishes  
weren't Richie's  
but his own  
riches instead?



This image is of an art piece I created to accompany the poem *Memories of a Moon Mother.* It is currently part of the **100 Women, 100 Words** traveling exhibit by South Texas College.





## MEMORIES OF A MOON MOTHER

the dirt road between McAllen  
and Las Milpas<sup>1</sup> is  
as fond a memory  
as the Magic Valley's dry current  
bordered by a dancing river.  
sugar canes and fields of melon  
are scars on my hands  
in this silly story -  
might be more memory than truth.  
the dusty dirt roads spitting rocks  
as we endlessly wandered deserted montes  
and a bag of collected cans  
slowly took the shape of profit.  
Toña telling her stories that mixed  
the bible and Aguascalientes,  
my brother lagging on one hand  
as I gripped the other.  
I never noticed her ropaje then  
as I did when she embarrassed me  
in my teenage years.  
Toña is who I see  
when I find the strength or when  
she dances and marks my scars.

<sup>1</sup> *A colonia is South Texas*



## THE GIRL WHO BECAME A MERMAID



In many cultures, Good Friday is a holiday taken seriously by Catholics.

Amongst the common beliefs for this day is that of not showering until the day has passed — the reason being an old belief where water signifies the blood of Christ.

Accordingly, it would be malice to wash oneself with his sacrificial blood.

As a child, I couldn't even begin to comprehend the reasoning behind this. But Wela had a way of sharing stories to convince me to obey old customs.

She once told me an old folktale of how long ago, in a town near the Gulf of Mexico, a young girl named Manuela experienced the curse of bad judgment.

Just like me, year after year, she had been warned not to shower on this

holiday. She should not even wash her hands or face. She was aware of the significance it was to follow tradition, and she dared not to challenge her family, out of respect.

At Sunday mass, Manuelita learned of the bad things that would happen if she disobeyed these traditions.

Over and over, she heard the lectures of how disobeying would lead to her hair falling out until she was bald, teeth rotting until they too fell, eyes that would go blind, fingernails that would go black, skin that would wither, and so on.

As she grew older, she would roll her eyes at these tall tales because when no one would see her, Manuelita walked behind the house to dip her face in cold water. It would have been embarrassing to have people glimpse her dirty face, so it didn't matter to her what the warnings were.

When this girl had married, things were different. Now she was the woman of the house and could do as she pleased without fearing the lectures from her parents.

Manuelita did not know what was awaiting her when she decided on this particular Good Friday, the first one as a wife, to bathe in the river near her home. Regardless of the skepticism, vanity won her over.

As the morning rolled on, she walked over to the freshwater and sunk her body in.

Just as she had predicted, none of that nonsense she had been told her entire life occurred.

For a long while, she swam in the water while it quenched her skin in the most comforting way, for it was the freshest she had ever experienced it to be.

When the afternoon sun rolled in, her husband found her in that same spot and frowned at her foolish deed. He asked her to get out of the water and pray nothing would happen to her for being silly.

Her retort was she didn't have to do anything she didn't want to do.

When seeing how angry her husband was, she reluctantly tried getting out of the water until Rodolfo's astonished expression made her realize what had occurred while she wasn't looking.

Without warning of any sort, Manuelita had transformed into a mermaid,

unable to leave the water that was now to become her permanent home.

Her legs and feet had fused and become a pale, scaly fin that splattered water all around as she panicked to get out of the river.

*Nimodo. Oh well.*

She knew this was a punishment for doubting what she had learned. She had become a sea person who would never again walk the Earth, who would never be entirely human.

When people heard of what occurred, they shunned her disgraceful acts and refused to be sympathetic to her dilemma.

The community marked her as a curse and refused to go near when she swam near the riverbanks.

The shunning had become so evident, even her parents and husband had become so ashamed they too refused to go near when she called out to them from the river.

With time, they outcast her from the nearby waters because she belonged nowhere near the land, as she became a creature with no business associating with humans.

Nobody knows what happened to her afterward.

Rumor has it her punishment is waiting to repeat itself with any rebel disobeying tradition. This is how, for generations, children have come to understand the implications of not following customs practiced during Good Friday.



## **CAPIROTADA**

During Lent, many Catholics in South Texas will take the opportunity to make capirotada, a traditional Mexican bread pudding often prepared on Good Friday.

It is delicious, with its origin going way back to Spain in the 1600s.

Capirotada was not always a sweet dish, but once the recipes came to Mexico with the conquistadores, it was adapted to often include piloncillo (unrefined brown sugar) and has taken on a new form in the Americas.

Depending on the region where one's family is from, recipes may range in the type of ingredients used and is usually simple to prepare.

Bolillo bread, sugar, cinnamon, cheese, and raisins are generally part of the rich mixture used in most recipes. It tastes best when warm but is also eaten as a cold dish.



## THE CURSED DAUGHTER



Somewhere in Northern Tamaulipas, near the South Texas borderlands, lived a spoiled daughter named Jasmin. She was the only child to her parents. Since she was born, her parents had no heart to refuse whatever she asked from them.

When they went to town, they would purchase new patterns for her dresses and buy her the freshest sweets from the local bakery shop.

When they did not have enough to purchase Jasmin what she wanted, she would throw a tantrum and roll around the floor, yelling and kicking anything that was in her way. Out of embarrassment, her parents would eventually ask the small shop owners to credit their account so she could have things her way.

As she matured, the girl became a problematic child and a problem to her parents, disrespecting everyone she met. Her attitude had become so disgraceful that by the time Jasmin had become a young lady, her parents had begun loathing her.

Maybe it was their fault for never teaching their daughter the world did not revolve around her.

They knew she was not to be trusted and believed the rumors around town about her being discourteous to everyone, even her grandparents.

One particular evening, while her parents were furious at her for having arrived past midnight the previous night, she asked them for permission to go to a dance. As a punishment, they denied her their consent.

Not that it mattered much to someone with no respect for her parents.

Of course, this terrible daughter didn't care about what her parents said and decided to go against their will. She dolled up in the prettiest of her dresses and parted her long hair to the side, aware of how beautiful she was.

To avoid an argument with her parents, Jasmin jumped out of her room and headed straight for the door.

Catching sight of her as she ran from the house, her mother yelled out to her, "*Que te trague la tierra!*"

At that exact moment, the ground opened and swallowed the bad daughter alive. She disappeared without a sound.

Despite the numerous attempts to dig her out from underground, no one has found her. And her mother lived with the regret of cursing her only child, even if she was a terrible person.

The morals of this tale are apparent.

Obey your parents so they will not curse you. And never say something you do not mean, as it may just come true.



## FAREWELL

They say she buried  
the wind beneath the soil -  
it would become her own tomb.

And so, it would be that day  
she'd make her escape.  
Her voice drifting.

But the worst is not her voice  
haunting us.

But the songs  
she has carried to bellow.

## THE WOMAN COYOTE



It was a small pueblo outside of Nuevo Laredo that attracted Cuca. Not many people lived in the area, making it a reasonable settlement for the solitary woman to build a private home. She particularly appreciated there would be few nuisances from the nearby townsfolk.

It is not clear from where she came. Cuca never spoke much about her past.

All we know for sure is she came to town on a winter night when it was unusually dark, with no bags or garments other than the ones she wore. She arrived on foot, which confused everyone since the nearest town was fifty miles away and nobody there had ever heard of her either.

That same night she arrived had been hit by thunderstorms lasting for more than a week and was followed by a disgusting plague of mosquitoes.

It wasn't long before this mysterious woman built herself a small cabin.

What wasn't clear was how Cuca built the place if she didn't have aid to cut down the trees or tools to hammer the wood. Even more of a mystery

was how she completed all work in a single weekend.

Soon after having built her home, she befriended her neighbors by inviting them to dinners that stood out as the best held. She would often cook a buffet of meats, steamed vegetables, a variety of bread, fruits, and pastries – a pleasantry not familiar to the hardworking ranchers in the area.

Oddly, Cuca owned no animals of any sort. She had not yet grown any crops from which to gather her vegetables or fruit.

And because her only mode of transportation was walking on her two feet, it was apparent she hadn't gone to another town to buy the meals.

Nobody dared question her about these oddities.

There was something about her character everyone feared, but nobody could quite point out exactly what it was.

Rumors began spreading that she was a witch of some sort.

After all, she always seemed to know what the weather was to be like and never became ill from the unusual outbreaks that routinely began to affect the community.

When discovered Cuca had a potion that drove off any illness, people hoarded her home for the cure and were amazed to have been told no lie. Before long, everyone knew she could read the future by observing the lines on one's palm and knew of secret potions to change fate.

Strange things happened to those who spoke badly of Cuca or refused to listen to her.

They would become ill with bleeding blisters, stench like a rotten animal, or prematurely become white-haired. Unless they went to apologize to Cuca in person, there was no hope of getting better.

Because of the wrongdoings she enjoyed, the rumored witch became feared to the point where soon nobody bothered to visit her.

That is why when she left town, nobody noticed.

One day, she returned to the outskirts of town on a mule with a couple of children by her side. The boy and girl wore no shoes and were disheveled, probably from a tiresome journey. It was a coincidence when thunderstorms haunted the land for days after her presence.

When asked about her new company, Cuca explained the young Lucinda and Lazaro were her niece and nephew and would be staying with her for a



few weeks.

During those weeks, a small group of coyotes began showing up to attack the cattle and chickens. But no tracks were left behind.

Soon, even mules began disappearing.

Until these occurrences took place, the townsfolk had not considered guarding their herds at night. There had never been a need.

A plan became necessary, and families rearranged their daily routine so they could sleep during the day and guard their herds throughout the night.

It was a practice many picked up, and for many weeks there were no attacks on animals of any sort.

Not much later, they heard the attacks had now hit the herds of a neighboring town. Little by little, after the attacks were no longer occurring in their area, people went back to their typical routines and tried to forget the incidents.

Nobody heard much about Cuca, nor knew whether she was still in town. And no one dared stop by to find out.

A year after Cuca had first appeared, there was a full moon.

That night, a local farmer heard his cattle making a ruckus.

He quietly sneaked outside, predicting the coyote had returned to eat his new herd. As he crept around, the farmer caught a glimpse of an enormous coyote feasting on a calf.

Just as he aimed at the animal, it heard him and began to flee, and the farmer struck a hind leg.

He made little commotion the remainder of the night but kept a good watch over the place, expecting the coyote to return. At the rise of the next morning, he went to sleep after a long night and did not wake until the afternoon.

It was such a coincidence that the next morning Cuca decided to depart from town to find a decent place to live.

She had made a great fuss before leaving as she explained someone had injured her before dawn.

According to Cuca, she woke early to wash clothes when out of nowhere,

something struck her in the leg. She made an uproar about how some fool had ambushed her.

That afternoon, the farmer arrived in town and explained how he ran into the famous coyote that had been eating the cattle. He carefully detailed on how it devoured some chicken and a calf, and how he injured it in the hind leg before it got away.

Everyone was in awe after hearing the news, believing the possibility of Cuca having been that same coyote.

Since then, not a single coyote has appeared to attack the animals.

When townsfolk tell stories of the feared woman, they refer to her as Cuca Coyote.



MEJOR SOLO QUE MAL ACOMPAÑADO.



IT'S BETTER TO BE ALONE  
THAN TO HAVE BAD COMPANY.

- Mexican dicho







**WILD COYOTE** | Pictured above is a wild coyote dazzled by the car lights shining from the crossing traffic in North McAllen. Nearby, developers bulldozed and cleared brushland to prepare for new subdivisions. The area had most likely been this animal's home. This picture captures the first coyote I have seen in person.



## COYOTE EYES



As a child, I often enjoyed questioning my wela about cucuys and leyendas she might have heard while growing up in Mexico.

Coming from a culture rich with traditions and history, she had many stories to share and particularly enjoyed giving me the chills.

One of my favorite topics for storytelling was about animals, notably about coyotes.

Until recently, I'd never seen a coyote up close.

But Wela enlightened me with details about how their eyes are sly and yellowish, with a gleam resembling burning coals. She clarified it wasn't always so.

Wela once explained to me that many centuries ago, coyotes had the eyes of a dog.

A long, long time ago, before even Wela's own great-grandmother's grandma had been born, a solitary coyote was passing by the house of an old,



widowed woman, minding his own business as he strolled the monte.

Back then, coyotes were friends of ours, just as a dog is.

The viejita was sitting in front of her fireplace, bulked over herself, and sobbing loudly. She bent her head while she cried and cried, "*Ay! Ay! Ay!*"

When the coyote heard her cries, he became alarmed and decided to peek into the window to see if anything was wrong.

Noticing how the viejita was bulging, moaning, and in some type of pain, he believed her to be ill. Feeling sympathetic to her cries, he took a quick leap through the open window to help her.

As he loudly thumped onto the floor, she was not aware of his intentions and panicked, believing him to be a thief.

She reacted in defense without any hesitation and pulled out the coyote's eyes with her bare hands, throwing his eyeballs into the burning fireplace.

The viejita scurried out of the house, yelling to her neighbors about the thief in her home.



Because the coyote could not see a thing, he poked around the fire for his eyes. After a long and painful search, he finally pulled them out, with flames still burning in them.

He placed his eyeballs into their sockets, but the anger he obtained from this experience has never let the flames die out.

To date, the coyote continues to loathe humans for that occurrence.



## DAY OF THE DEAD

The Day of the Dead is celebrated every year throughout October 31 – November 2. It is a vibrant holiday set to honor the memories and life of one's dearly departed.

Families often place altars (ofrendas) on their loved one's gravesite with memorabilia of the deceased person's photos and favorite snacks, such as tamales and sweet breads.

You'll see many depictions of skulls and skeletons that to outsiders may seem gory and creepy. But, remember, it is a celebration to honor those who have left this world and is not considered a sad or spooky event.

Families will gather by the gravesite or altars set up at home to pray and remember their loved ones with fondness, wishing them safe travels from the other world. It is believed that during these days, the spirits of their departed can come back home for a visit.

This holiday goes back centuries, believed to have first been celebrated by the indigenous peoples of Mexico and Central America.



# LA CATRINA

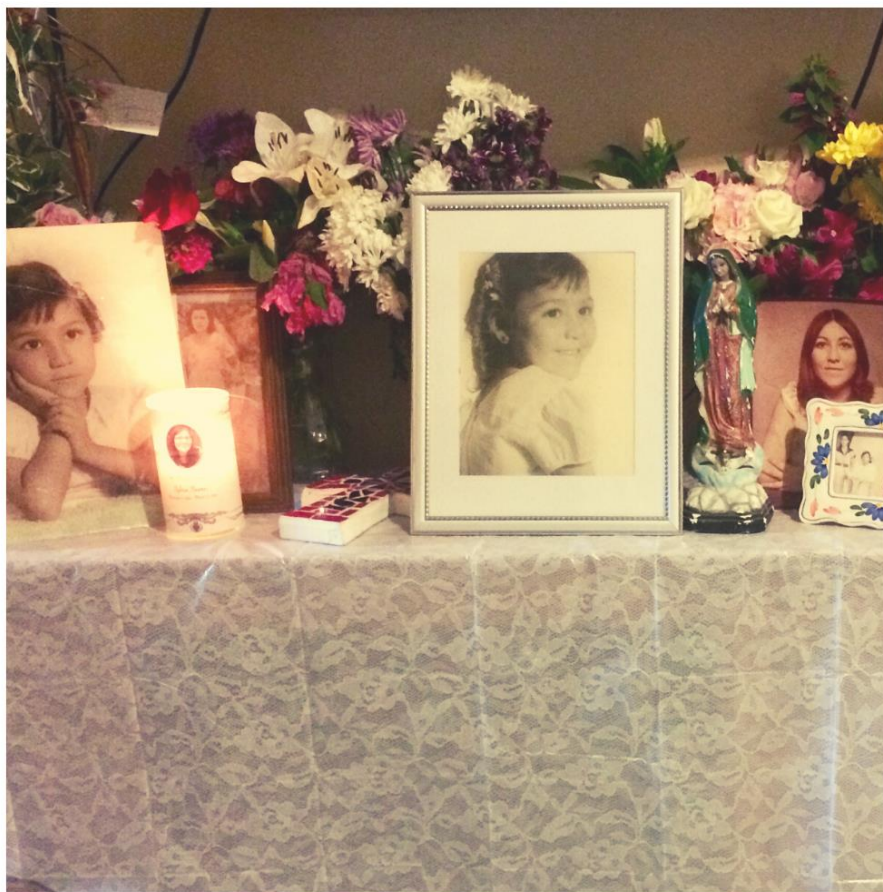
LA CALAVERA CATRINA IS A CARICATURE ASSOCIATED WITH THE DAY OF THE DEAD. SHE IS A SKULL (CALAVERA) OR SKELETON (CALACA) DRESSED UP FOR A CELEBRATION.







**CON LA CATRINA** | Pictured here is my nephew Julian Ismael Diaz during the 2019 Catrina Music Fest. At this point, he was a fan of the Pixar cartoon *Coco*, which featured many catrinas and catrins, and knew not to be frightened of this enormous mariachi figure.



**ALTAR FOR MAMI** | This image is of an altar we had set up in honor of my mami, Sylvia Suarez (De la Garza), on March 17, 2019, the first anniversary of her passing. Her altar had flowers, pictures throughout her lifetime, candles, crosses, her favorite snacks, and a few other memorabilia.



## NAHUALES



Nahuales are said to be humans with the ability to morph into a multitude of animal forms such as bats, donkeys, cows, pigs, and snakes.

Throughout history, nahuales have remained described as witches, wizards, even aliens.

It's argued that centuries ago, these beings were transported from another world and have talents of the extraterrestrial.

They eat raw meat, a motive for their shapeshifting, and hide in plain sight.

This happens to be Manuel's story, who tells of the day he encountered a nahual living in his home:

"My name is Manuel Córdova Favela.

I am an old chap from Matamoros. I have no children with me because they all left to cross La Frontera.

It was during late fall, about ten years ago, when my chickens began to disappear.

My donkeys and pigs also started to go soon after, one at a time.

I said to myself, "It must be my greedy compadre, wanting to not use a single one of his animals for this week's dinner."

My wife told me I had to speak with Don José and demand for him to pay back what he had stolen.

I did not doubt his wrongdoing and planned on confronting him myself.

I waited for the late morning hours to visit him, positive I'd find him snoring at those hours. Indeed, I was correct because when I got to his home, Don José was still sleeping.

That was suspicious to me, as just the night before, I lost another donkey, and this man is usually early to rise. I woke him up to let him know how upset I was.

My compadre denied stealing anything, and even though I wanted to believe him, there was nobody else I could blame.

He refused to replace a single missing animal and told me never to return to his home. I warned him never to return to mine either.

I was furious after that and rushed back home in a hurry.

That's how I caught the off-guard pig eating a donkey.

I was baffled.

Out of curiosity, I walked closer only to notice the pig had no tail, was walking on its hind legs, and singing a song of *No Tengo Dinero* by Juan Gabriel.

Realizing the pig was singing, I instantly became afraid of it and walked back into the house, ready to get my weapon.

I called out to my wife and from outside the house, heard her question what I needed.

Peeking through the window, I asked her to come inside.

As she told me to wait a minute, I noticed the pig was speaking with her voice. I began to fear it had eaten her until it transformed into my wife.

I froze with shock.

When she strolled into our house, I ran to my compadre's to let him know what had occurred.

He convinced me it must be nerves, and after a few days, I mustered the courage to go back home.

By the time I returned, my wife had abandoned me.

I have not seen her since.

Maybe I have, but not in her human form.

And to think, I lived with her for thirty-two years without imagining what she was!”



## GARCIA WOMEN

my breath simply finds a way  
to swallow me  
when Chuyita pays a visit.  
we've all said it  
before  
how when we die  
our last hours on Earth  
won't be in these bodies.

we believe it  
we've threatened it  
we've knocked on wood  
and counted stars  
to promise our loved ones  
we'll never abandon them.

for five generations  
we've parted ways and prayed thru  
sleep-deprived nights  
with veladoras counting our  
sighs and  
knuckles gone white.

we've kissed them goodbye  
and locked ourselves closed...  
but for generations of Garcia women  
those apparitions are still there  
after us, haunting of presence  
when we cannot  
comprehend what we fear.

doors closed  
and feet entwined  
as sisters and nieces  
or mothers and daughters  
search for sweet dreams.

existing in some realm  
amongst evening stars  
when sleep would come swiftly  
and dread took heed  
some other moment.





## FAMILY PORTRAIT

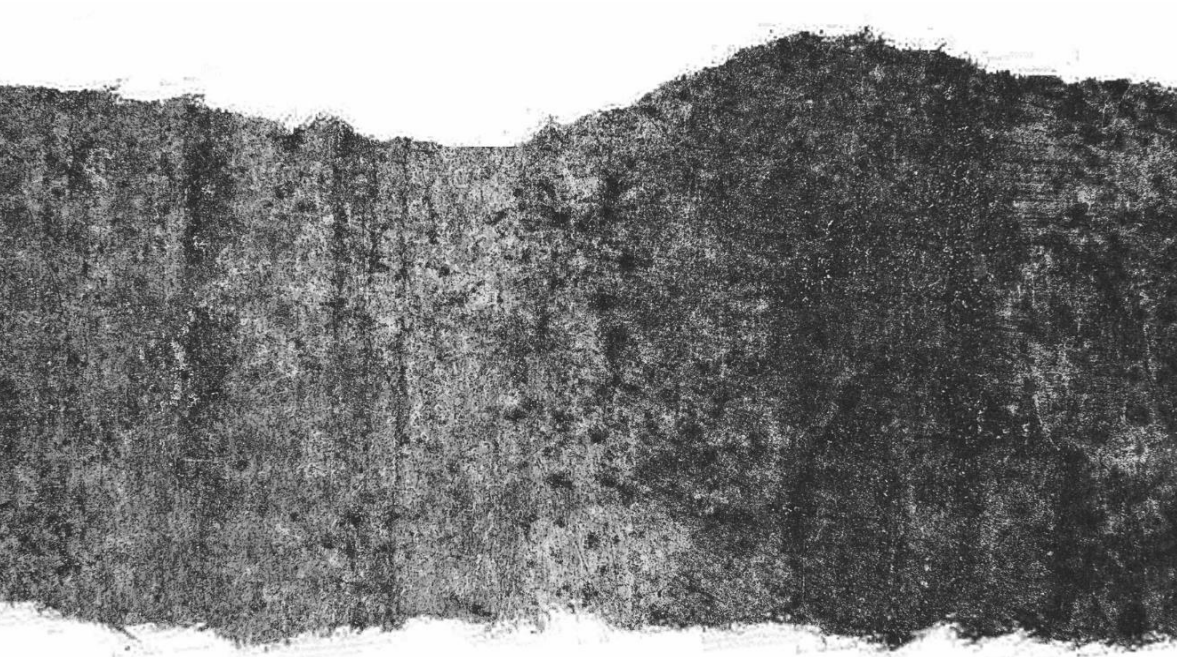
*[Pictured from left to right: Great-uncle Macario Garcia (husband of Irene), Great-aunt Irene Garcia, Great-aunt Maria de Jesus Sanchez (Chuyita), Grandma Esperanza Suarez, and Grandpa Eduardo Suarez.]*

This photo was taken in Reynosa, Tamaulipas, during a baptism sometime in the late 1950s. It shows three of the Garcia sisters who inspired the poem ‘*Garcia Women*.’

Esperanza is my paternal grandmother, and Irene and Maria de Jesus are my great-aunts. As sisters, all three of them were very close and our families frequented each other when I was growing up.

Sitting around the kitchen table and listening to their enigmatic family stories was always one of my favorite past times as a child. I absolutely loved learning about the ancestors their cuentos connected me with.

But sometimes, I would go home spooked by the tales they shared.



DIME CON QUIÉN ANDAS,  
Y TE DIRÉ QUIÉN ERES.



I CAN TELL WHAT YOU'RE LIKE  
BY THE COMPANY YOU KEEP.

- Mexican dicho



## THE VANISHING GHOST



Carlos and Sulema Palomos decided to leave their Reynosa home for a life in South Texas. They intended to give their four sons opportunities American communities were known to offer.

It had taken them months to find a residence to rent because they had little money to buy or build one.

The house they would live in had an old wooden frame, with little appeal to the eyes, but big enough for the family.

It was located directly in front of the old town cemetery, right off HWY 83. Back in the 1960s, the grayish house was the only site for miles off that road.

The journey to their home was only a couple of hours away, and all the Palomos clan was excited to begin their new life. Most of the trip was spent singing old rancheros and giggling in anticipation of their future.

Sulema was relieved her boys accepted this change. She knew they'd miss

their family environment back in Mexico, but understood the move was for their well-being.

They had not anticipated the change in weather on that day of their move. The closer they were to their destination, the colder and wetter the atmosphere became.

Within minutes of arriving in Texas, everything took a drastic turn.

The clouds became black and loud. The road too dark and risky for Carlos to see as he drove.

He couldn't pull to the side of the road and stop the journey because the boys needed shelter from the hail and lightning.

The truck was too small for all to fit inside, so the boys sat in the back bed. They huddled together, so the thunder hit their backs and not their faces. Sulema cried from worry, fearing the worst.

In an instant, another car struck the truck with excessive force.

And just like that, all the boys were gone.

Their parents escaped the incident without a scratch but remained forever scarred with the agony of their loss.

Several years had passed when Sulema discovered she was pregnant for the fifth time and cursed the fact this child would be born to her. She preferred never to have more children, nor suffer the pain of motherhood again, as she lost her spirit after the death of her sons.

Besides, she was waiting for the day to join her children in the afterworld.

Carlos, on the other hand, was thrilled to hear of the news.

He knew his wife despised the baby in her womb because it postponed her leave from this world.

Night after night, this father prayed his wife wouldn't do anything drastic, and she would learn to love their new child.

He knew his prayer was heard because on the same day that Sara was born, Sulema's hatred towards life and the child vanished.

The moment Sulema laid eyes on the baby girl, her heart grew to what it had been in a previous lifetime and filled her with the love and compassion

she had forgotten existed inside of her. The only fear that haunted her was losing another child.

Night after night, she prayed Sara would never be taken from her side.

Carlos and Sulema gave all their hopes to this daughter of theirs, as she was the last child born to them.

At the age of seventeen, Sara had lived close to a decade longer than her eldest brother had. She had faith in God, with a strong character of love and goodness.

She was beautiful in many aspects, especially in her appearance. Like her mother, she had long black hair, tanned brown skin, and large green eyes.

Blinded by the feeling of true love when Jordan asked her out on a date, and knowing how strict they were, she lied to her parents a friend of hers had invited her to a birthday dinner.

Sara looked beautiful in her pink sunflower dress her mother had sewn for the occasion, blushing with excitement.

It had already been planned she'd meet him by the edge of the road, a few feet from the house, and would wave him down when she saw the car lights.

She conveniently hid in the sugar cane field until he came by.

Sara jumped onto the street when the car lights shone, assuming it was Jordan.

What a tragedy it was when the driver of the car turned out to be old-man Santos on the way to visit Carlos. Because the road was so dark and he was driving rather fast, he accidentally struck the girl with the car.

Sara passed away instantly.

Years after Sara's death, Sulema was in her bedroom, weeping for her children.

A young man knocked on the front door, and she reluctantly went to answer it. As she opened the door, she hesitantly asked the young man what he needed.

He told her his name was Miguel, and had taken Sara out dancing the previous night, but forgot to retrieve his jacket. Sulema slowly looked him in



the eyes and angrily exclaimed, *"You should be ashamed of yourself for playing a cruel joke like this on an old woman!"*

Shocked at her objection, he assured her it was no joke and simply needed his jacket back. She countered it was impossible because her daughter had been dead for years, and he'd probably mistaken the house.

Miguel assured her it was no mistake.

He was sure this was precisely the same house where Sara had requested to be left.

Sulema asked him to describe the girl, confident it couldn't be her daughter. But when he described her very image, wearing a pink sunflower dress and having a cold body, Sulema grew curious.

She asked where he picked her up, and he replied it had been on the road, by the sugar cane field.

She remembered her prayers, begging God not to take her daughter from this world. She asked Miguel to follow her to prove she was in her tomb, and his joke wouldn't fool her.

But as she led him to the graveyard, footprints marked the path.

And on the cross marking Sara's tomb lay Miguel's blue jean jacket.

It is rumored Sara's ghost travels that same road every night. She appears only to men traveling alone, asking for a ride to her first dance.

Don't be afraid if you find her jumping out of the sugar cane fields.

The girl won't harm you.

She haunts this world only to satisfy her mother's prayers of not losing another child.

# DESCANSOS

ARE FOUND BY ROADS AS MEMORIALS  
TO LOVED ONES WHO PASSED AWAY  
IN AN AUTOMOBILE ACCIDENT. YOU  
WILL TYPICALLY FIND FLOWERS AND  
A CROSS MARKING THE SPOT.



# DOWN THE RIVER

## A RIDDLE TO GUESS WHO I AM

my babies, my babies  
mis hijos, mis hijos  
I cry to the cardinal directions  
of the wind

my babies, my babies  
mis hijos, mis hijos  
they are out of my sight  
and I, I am going out of my mind

my babies, my children  
mis hijos, mis niños  
down the river  
I hear them  
down the river  
I hear their cries

who am I?

*La Llorona*



## LA LLORONA'S GHOST

An old woman  
visits the cabin  
of a past  
her town became infamous for.  
They say  
La Llorona's grave itself  
is inside those walls.

On many nights  
a voice could be heard  
weeping  
into the many directions  
a child can follow.

Cursing like that night  
a mother's mind went furious with hate.

The old woman waited  
for the weeping woman's ghost to appear.  
She heard tales  
of La Llorona's ghost  
when she herself was but a girl.

Frightened of this ghost.

She thought of that now.  
And how she would always be afraid.

She thought of this now  
as she waited and waited.



## LA LLORONA



The legend of La Llorona has haunted me since I was a child.

Whether it was her shadow appearing by the banks of a lonely canal, a cold breeze from the ocean's waves, or a whoosh in the wind that spooked my ears.

Her ghost is a mixture of mysteries to me. I've never seen, felt, or heard her, but I always imagine her to be there.

The myth of The Weeping Woman is popular lore in South Texas, passed on to me by my wela, who had heard about her from her abuelita in Mexico.

It is always the tale of a woman hunting and searching for the innocent that stray alone by any bed of water at late hours.

Although several variations of the tale exist, the basic story is of a beautiful young woman by the name of Maria, born to a humble family near the banks of the Rio Grande River.

Charmed by a wealthy man much older than her, she ran away with him against her parent's wishes.



He took her to live on a remote ranch near the river, where she spent weeks on end without seeing him, or any other person. She gave him three children – two adorable daughters and a dear son.

With time, his visits seemed to come less often, and the money he gave to support the family needed to be stretched out a bit longer. It became a struggle to keep her children well-fed and dressed.

Later, the visits just seemed to stop altogether.

Maria was alone near a secluded spot by the river and needed financial help from the father of her children.

She decided it was due time to seek him out at the town he worked.

Maybe he had fallen ill and had no way of getting out to the ranch.

It didn't take long for Maria to figure out the father of her children was a cheat and had lied to her from the very beginning of their relationship.

He had no intention of caring for them any longer.

Betrayed and in anger, she raced back to her home, entranced in a furious rage.

When her starving children cried about being hungry, she threw a tantrum, pulling each child out to and tossing them into the river.

One by one, she led them to their misfortune, waiting for their shrieks to die out before throwing in the next child.

It took a few days, but eventually, Maria's temper subsided, and she awoke from her trance. Her home was a complete disaster, with random items scattered all over the house.

Maria was instantly aware of what malice she had done to her three children.

Mad with sorrow, she foolishly believed there was a possibility they might still be alive and searched the riverbanks every single night.

Until, because of her sorrow, she drowned in the river too.

Maria is not permitted to enter the afterlife until she finds her children, forced to wander Earth for all eternity, searching in vain.

Her constant weeping earned her the nickname of La Llorona, The Weeping Woman.

Popular belief has it you can find her ghostly form throughout the region. Sometimes, grabbing children who go wandering alone during the late

hours.

Legend has it that when lonesome children cross her path, La Llorona will run to grab them while crying out, “*Ay...donde estan mis hijos?*”

*tongue twister / trabalenguas*

## LLANTO DE LA LLORONA

La Llorona  
llora sus  
lamentos entre llantos  
y llora  
por llorar  
ya que es lluvia  
su llanto



**MAMI'S PRANK** | Mami was a jokester and continuously tried to prank others. In this picture, she disguised herself with a wig and tried to frighten her grandchildren by claiming to be La Llorona.

Nobody was fooled.



## DANCING ON THE RIVER

The woman calls out  
as if summoning our dreams  
in the moonlight.

Dancing with ghosts  
and the spirits  
swimming towards the river top.

Dancing on the river  
holding her tears.

The banks beneath  
hold her feet.

Have so many times  
held her clumsy feet.

And the moonlight asks her  
to forget those pasts.



## LA MANO NEGRA



La Mano Negra is a legendary creature that has indiscreetly roamed the American Southwest and Mexico for at least a couple of centuries.

This creature is rumored to be one of the most evil creatures and said to have been a hand taken off a man burnt at stake after being accused of practicing sorcery.

At that time in history, it wasn't uncommon for those accused of witchcraft or sorcery to be persecuted and tortured for their alleged practices.

The cruel thing after being accused is a person often was not given the benefit of the doubt to defend oneself.

The man wore a green talisman on his finger – though he swore it had merely been a green ring.

Because the ring was feared, nobody wanted to touch or come near it.

So instead, the hand was cut off and buried apart from the remainder of the burnt body.

Unfortunately, the severed hand came back to life, seeking its vengeance.

Because no one foresaw the powers of the talisman, the hand haunts the land searching for the relatives of those who took part in burning the body of the man he used to belong to.

## ORBS OF FIRE



The presence of witches is often associated with the appearance of bright fireballs floating effortlessly in the air, bouncing from tree to tree in the middle of the night.

It isn't common to catch sight of these orbs of fire, particularly near cities, and they often are mistaken as extraterrestrial UFOs.

For this reason, people are warned not to roam alone outside when there is a full moon out or when it is past the midnight hours, especially if one lives out of the city limits and away from the populated suburban neighborhoods.

It is not entirely clear whether these witches who travel as orbs of fire are las lechuzas, or if they are from a different clan.

What is known is that when one encounters these orbs of fireballs, one is to stand still as not to distract or catch the attention of these witches.

Don't even risk trying to sneak back inside your home because if you do catch their attention and anger them, they are said to instill such intense fear in you that you will remain frozen to the point where your limbs do not move,

and your eyes stay in a permanent daze.

Most recent sightings in the Mexican city of Monterrey have been recorded and posted online, but their authenticity is up for debate.

## UY CUCUY



Have you ever heard of the Bogeyman?

Consider El Cucuy a scarier version of it.

With red eyes and shapeshifting abilities, El Cucuy has appeared to many a child in a variety of physical appearances.

Much like duendes, he likes to seek out badly behaved children.

He'll hide beneath beds or in closets searching for his next meal. He camouflages into his surroundings to become invisible to the adult human eye.

You probably heard of him when you were a child yourself. Maybe you even glimpsed him once or twice.

There are several song rhymes about the legendary Cucuy.

Mothers sing some as a lullaby to children about how El Cucuy will come to get them if they don't fall asleep.

The following rhyme is one my mami would sing to me when I fought off



sleep. I remember mom would knock on the wall calling out for El Cucuy.

*“Go to sleep, my baby,  
duermete my niño.  
Here comes El Cucuy,  
so go to sleep, my baby.*

*Duermete my niño,  
go to sleep, my baby –  
because if you don’t go to sleep,  
El Cucuy will take you away.”*



## OUR RIVERS THAT HAUNT

Her cries at night  
are a mountain of fear for the mother.  
But she has not a desire  
other than her own.

Legends fall onto ears of children  
while she wails to be forgotten.

No one truly understands  
why she waits by rivers  
hunting for what no longer exists.  
But those moments whistle her to life.

*"Where could I hide you?"*  
she weeps to the wind.  
And we know she must have gone crazy.  
She weeps to what does not exist.

There is only the wind  
and her imagination.

# MIRROR

## A RIDDLE TO GUESS WHO I AM

Mirror, mirrors  
All-around  
They are my prison  
To which I am bound

You'll call me once  
You'll call me twice  
Call me again,  
Come on, play nice

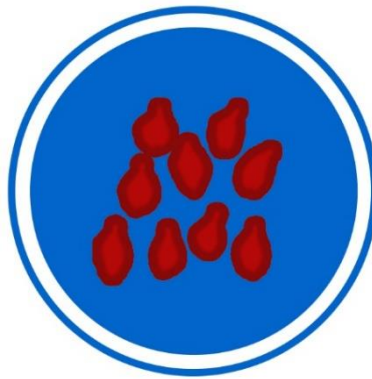
Mirror, mirrors  
All-around  
They are my prison  
To which I am bound

Mary Margaret  
Is not the name  
Bloody Mary  
Is my game

*Bloody Mary*



## MARIA MARGARITA



Maria Margarita has become a famed character with children throughout South Texas. Her story is often shared in schools.

There are many versions to her tale, many in English and Spanish. As reiterated as these tales are, no one is sure which version is real, or if there has been more than one Mary Margaret.

She is known as Bloody Mary, a nickname that well describes her ghostly attributes. This popular legend I first heard about at a sleepover and have listened to one too many times.

The story states that back in the late 19th century, Maria Margarita survived a fire in her home. This fire engulfed every corner of the house and had taken the lives of her dear mother and siblings.

Her cruel father intentionally set the house on fire while everyone in it slept. His motive had been because his wife had driven him mad with jealousy.

Before the fire embellished Maria, she jumped out a bedroom window and into the obscurity of that dreadful night.

Without knowing it hadn't been an accident, she ran to a neighbor for help. Word got around about the burning house, and several families struggled to distinguish the fire.

Unfortunately, help had come too late, and her family, all but her father, perished in the fire.

Her father had allegedly been out on a business trip. He returned a few days later to find the home burnt to the ground, just as he had hoped.

He fringed in anger when told Maria had survived.

The town held a mass in honor of the deceased, and Maria Margarita and her father soon left town in search of a new home. They wanted to get as far possible from the memories of the dreadful fire.

The night after settling into a distant inn, her father confessed he provoked the fire, madness burning in his stare. Without giving her a chance to speak, he told her she was to meet the same fate as her family.

Her spirit remains on Earth as a means to revenge her family. She has no compassion for the humanity that had so severely offended and hurt her.

Back in the 1930s, a witch was said to entrap Maria Margarita's spirit into a mirror, after the ghost had haunted and killed many people. For some reason, it is exciting for many to come face to face with this hideous ghost.

It has become a legend that if you enter a dark room and look into the mirror, repeating her name several times, the image of Maria Margarita will appear. The mirror will bleed human blood, and she can tell you your future, but only after she scratches your face and tastes your blood.



## THE LEAPERS OF PORT ISABEL



Elena was a fair beauty and had many men rivaling for her hand in marriage. Just as soon as she'd accept a beau, she would leave him for another.

It was a game she played, time and again.

Her mother warned her to be careful. Eventually, she would lose her heart to a man.

But Elena thought that was the furthest from her reality. She was sure she would never fall in love. At least, not with the men who had pursued her.

She wanted to marry a wealthy man. Until the opportunity came along, she would not engage in the idea of marriage.

The girl won over the love of any man who crossed her path, as she did with Cornelio. He had pursued her since childhood and was the first one to admit his strong feelings for her.

It took her many years to accept his proposals of dating. Elena reached out to him only after she had grown tired of the other men who courted her.

She engaged more time with Cornelio than with her other beaux. He was easy to get along with and loved her for more than her looks.

They would have profound conversations she had never had with anyone else. Cornelio treated her like the most intelligent and fascinating being he had come across.

Their friendship and bond grew with time. Before she knew it, the moment became a month, the month became six months, and the six months soon became a year.

That is when Cornelio asked her to marry him. She refused him with the excuse she was not ready for marriage. But we know her true intentions.

He had always fixated on her, and now even more so.

Gossip spread she had finally fallen in love, but Elena claimed it to be just a rumor.

One day, while out for a walk, she bumped into a businessman she hadn't before seen in the area. After apologizing to the stranger, they conversed for hours. Mostly about the local attractions and their backgrounds.

His style amused her and he was obviously a wealthy man.

Soon enough, she broke off the courtship with Cornelio to begin an engagement with the wealthy man.

His was the type of commitment she had been waiting for, and she took for granted if it didn't work out, she could return to her faithful Cornelio when she pleased.

The days wore off, and she missed Cornelio more than she'd ever imagined she could miss anybody. She wouldn't admit to herself what she felt was love.

The willpower was more potent than the heart's desire.

She was to marry a wealthy man as a beauty like her deserved. Not a poor and plain boy like Cornelio.

Elena avoided Cornelio.

But he was not ready to give her up.

He came to her the eve before her wedding and demanded her to return to him. She refused, despite the countless hours of his begging and crying.

It was apparent she wanted to jump into his arms. He noticed this, but she kept firm to her decision. When he finally gave up on her, he warned her if she didn't return to him by the morning, she would never see him again.

As she dressed for her wedding, the pain hit her to the gut. On the way to church, the pain hit her chest so strongly, and she thought she would die.

It was only before entering the church she realized her love for Cornelio was more than she could handle. Money wasn't nearly as important to her as the love she felt.

While she turned to run to the man she loved, a cold chill settled in her heart. She knew Cornelio had kept his word.

She would never see him again.

For the following weeks, she lived as a zombie, speaking no words and shedding no tears. The shock had driven her mad.

Her mother prayed for her well-being every night and morning and afternoon, and during the period between. She endlessly prayed for her daughter's sanity.

A few months had gone by, and the mother was worried more than ever.

Elena would speak to the air and the walls, but not to people.

She wasn't her usual self, always restless. When discovered she would spend the nights on Cornelio's grave, her mother cried for days.

Elena explained Cornelio was to return for her so they could marry on the other side.

The girl was mad.

Afraid she'd hurt herself, her family locked her in the shed where she couldn't sneak out, not even through a window.

That same night she was locked in, Cornelio walked into the shed and unlocked the door with ease. When the couple crossed the patio, the family sat in shock of seeing the dead man alive.

Her parents followed them slowly, afraid. They realized the young couple was nearing the sea, walking towards the bridge leading to the island.

Elena's parents let out a loud shriek of fear as the younger couple looked back at them, waved, and leaped off into the black waters.

Elena's shawl gently flew in the air, but Cornelio and their daughter had disappeared midair.

Her parents told their tale for decades. Even after the bridge collapsed, and a new one built in its place. Elena had reported as a missing person, and

because everyone knew how overprotective her parents had been, there were rumors they made up this tale.

Many say the girl had run away to elope with some odd man. But not ever could the young couple have leaped off the bridge.

Remember, Cornelio had already been dead for months.

Oddly, Elena has never been heard from again.



**STILL WATERS** | This photo was taken in 2019 near the bridge in Port Isabel, TX. For many of us in South Texas, a visit to South Padre Island was a short road trip we took during holidays.





## WHEN A STORY IS AN HEIRLOOM

their stories are secrets  
scented like a river of lavender water  
tell-telling a map of where  
they have been  
and flowering as a bouquet  
of sequences  
now settled in my memory,  
parting me into two –  
that which I know is me  
and that which I figure  
becomes a history of me.  
a trace, a bloodline, an inheritance  
an atlas  
of the worlds before me  
and the paths we as an entity  
have already taken.

their stories are to be buried  
but never hidden  
away in the grating lumber chest  
my grandparents  
brought home from Reynosa. not every  
moment  
must be so hard  
on us  
when the distance  
we traveled  
is never far enough  
to hide and cry

for fear of belonging.  
too much to too many.  
their stories are rather the worst kind  
insisting they have a chance  
to exist and re-exist  
as they travel  
from one ear out one mouth and into another ear.  
so they become  
a rather fragile  
heirloom needing constant care  
and renovations  
from the passing and re-enacting  
an aunt, a cousin, a son, a nephew  
bring to light  
with the recollection another story  
has triggered.

their stories are like a trance  
we as offspring cannot escape,  
whether because we respect our elders  
when they tell us a boring chronicle  
of childhoods spent out in the labores  
or because we are enchanted  
by the ghosts  
of an old farmhouse in North Dakota.

experiences which are curative  
against blemished ambitions  
and gently ignored  
by our young ignorance  
of appreciating, but not really knowing  
what we ourselves  
have never encountered.

their stories are fractures  
on our ribs

as we slowly breathe out  
the subsistence of our departed

sangre de sangre  
    who come out  
rolling the punches  
and remembering the relampagos  
of their earthly existence,  
slowly invading  
space only the living  
are given credit for.

    que en paz descansen  
pero  
    in another cuento,  
we resurrect them  
from a tomb of hidden memories  
    that are passed on and on and on  
    because without them  
    our heirloom, our family  
    vanishes  
into a steady stream of wondering.



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

These are cuentos that belong to no one in particular – they are leyendas we have all heard in our communities, and that have become a part of pop culture. Most of these cuentos I first heard from my relatives, friends, and several of my schoolteachers.

I was first inspired to document these cuentos for the youth in our South Texas community at McAllen Public Library, where my peers encouraged my storytelling and provided me a platform to share these leyendas with our patrons.

In the 2<sup>nd</sup> edition of this book, I was inspired by my father (Luis Armando Suarez, Sr.) to include a mixture (*capirotada* was his precise word) of poetry and riddles. Thank you, Papito, for the ideas you gave me.

The beautiful cover image, ‘El Callejon Del Beso,’ was graciously provided for this collection by artist Chusy Ocala.

Some of these stories were first published in *Along the River III: Dark Voices from the Rio Grande*.

**FOLLOW THE AUTHOR  
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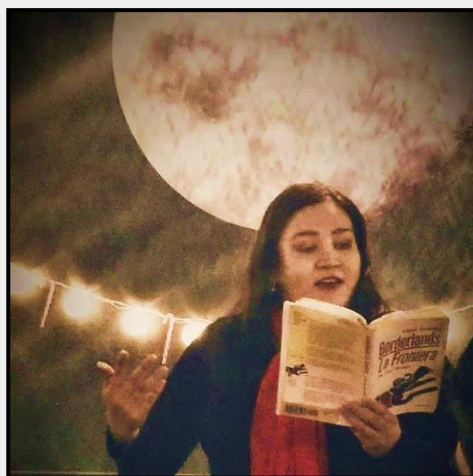


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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Priscilla Celina Suárez is a Mexican American author served as the 2015-2017 McAllen Poet Laureate, where she had an opportunity to rediscover the many communities in the Rio Grande Valley. During her childhood, she lived surrounded by the farmlands of the then small colonia of Las Milpas, TX, where she first heard many of the cuentos in this collection.

A recipient of the *Mexicana Writing Fellowship*, her poetry is a hybrid of rancheras, polkas, pop, rock, and música internacional. A past contributor to the American Library Association's *Young Adult Library Services* magazine, she authored the Texas State Library's *Bilingual Programs Chapter* – allowing her an opportunity to gain experience in writing poetry, rhymes, and tongue twisters for children and teens.

She has shared her poetry in *¡Juventud!: Growing up on the Border* and *Along the River III: Dark Voices from the Río Grande*. In 2003, her work was selected by The Monitor as *The Best Poetry of the Year*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

The author's work has also appeared in:

