

## Son of Malinche

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In this violent sea called history a family is just a small life raft trying to keep afloat but sometimes being engulfed by forces much larger than itself

When I was 18 I was swallowed up by the terror and bliss that others called psychosis. Six years later, when I was in the grip of a renewed hunger -- the moth once again circling above the flame -- I holed up in a cold cabin to write a two hundred page letter to my mother. I believed that it would keep madness at bay. As it turned out, I was right.

I look back now on this boy - I am now fifty - who had the courage and naivete to speak through his wounds to his mother. How familiar he is and yet stranger than a stranger.

I recognize in him the voice of a child of La Malinche, the slave given to the conquistador, Cortez. We Mexicans say that we are the offspring of la chingada, the children of the one raped, the one split open by the Spanish. When I look back on this letter I feel warmly towards this young man's awkward attempts to say the unspeakable, being both naive and feigning naivete by using a conversational tone in which the violence of the soul is always modulated by tenderness. It is as if I

created a fictional character to fictionalize my relationship with my mother and the result is both excruciatingly real and yet, to me, wonderfully unconvincing. What I hear, like a drunken shout between words is the crazed unmodulated alloy When we invoke la chingada this way we are not talking about "dysfunctional families," We are not talking about neurosis, psychosis, schizophrenic mothers, narcissism or any of the medicalized -- and therefore sanitized -- language with which people try to explain away the the madness of history swallowing up the intimacies of what life is made of.

We are talking about the adamancy of the heart in the midst of it. La chingada had many sons and daughters who in their turn bore children.

To be split open wide by the dilemmas of empathy, even identification, with the mothers' wound knowing full well that you share the gender of the one who raped her, is the heart of what it is to be *hijo de la chingada*. The masquerade of machismo -- the defiant masculinity that thinks it can avoid the ordeal of facing the feminine by saying "I am not her" -- is one all too predictable way to play out the failure of courage.

As an act of self-healing the letter was both a modest success and a great failure. As a sophisticated little piece of conjuration -- thinking I would achieve a

kind of redemption if only my mother would see my woundedness as I myself came to see it -- the words fell on fallow earth. She read it in its entirety, was righteously outraged, then kindly indulgent towards whatever I regarded as necessary to puzzle out my life. She never agreed with it. As for myself I was more than a little embarrassed that I really believed that dancing naked before my mother would cure me of the shame of nakedness.

As for modest success -- or the success of modesty -- two things shifted for me. Firstly I began learning the talent of honesty with myself. More importantly the letter ultimately delivered me outside of my very private self and outside of the conundrums of that self trying to explain itself to itself. Towards silence. I took to my meditation cushion -- and by befriending poverty and working graveyard shift at the bedside of an old woman with multiple sclerosis I was able to give six years to the task of learning to sit still.

The fiction that I inhabited in the letter -- now unconvincing but back then an honorable alternative to the way of machismo -- was bound up in a mother mysticism that was also a mysticism of raw experience. I imagined myself perching on the edge of three vast domains that were somehow the same -- my mother's psyche, the psyche of women and my own interior life. Human beings, of course, are marvelous animals much susceptible to exaggerating their enormity. When I crawled out of the cocoon of the *hijo de la chingada* - not

surprisingly my mother ceased to be *la chingada*, immense and bloodied. If I were to draw a portrait of her now she would be a very different woman than the one of the letter. Nowadays I'm rather more likely to find the edge of mystery at the seashore, under the starry night or in entering the forest. My mother, women, myself have taken on smaller, more human dimensions which, I've found to be much more interesting and considerably less overwhelming.

*La chingada* is not personalized.

She is the earth and she has been raped, is being raped.

We are her children.

*Todos.*

*Somos todos hijos de la chingada*

There is no doubt that my mother and I came closer as I grew into the role of fathering a young girl. I was ground to dust by the primordial recognition that no one comes out of childhood unwounded and that no one parents without wounding ones' child. Every new generation of parents has to face this or refuse to face it. For the sake of my daughter, my mother and myself, I am grateful that I found the courage to look these things in the eye and allow my heart to break.

And my mother? She is, as I had predicted, coming into her own as a *viejita*, a wise old

woman, She is an artist, a quietly practicing Catholic, obsessive, imaginative and exceptionally kind. Our friendship is easy and unselfconscious.

In my long letter I declared my hope that my mother would remarry. This she never did. As her parents aged she took to living with them and caring for them as is traditional for the daughter in a Mexican family. I wondered if my mother would ever make it out of the role of the dutiful daughter. This concern turned out to be small minded on my part. In fact it was during those ten years of caretaking that my mother ripened. She told me that in those years of her parents decline she never ceased, in her imagination to paint and to work the clay with her hands. After their death a year ago her art reemerged from its long latency, very much alive and considerably deepened.

From my mother I learned tenderness and grief can be deep and possible responses when violence cuts into the world of what one loves. In an increasingly crazy world these lessons hold the two of us in good stead.