

# Decency

*poems*

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Black  
Lawrence  
Press

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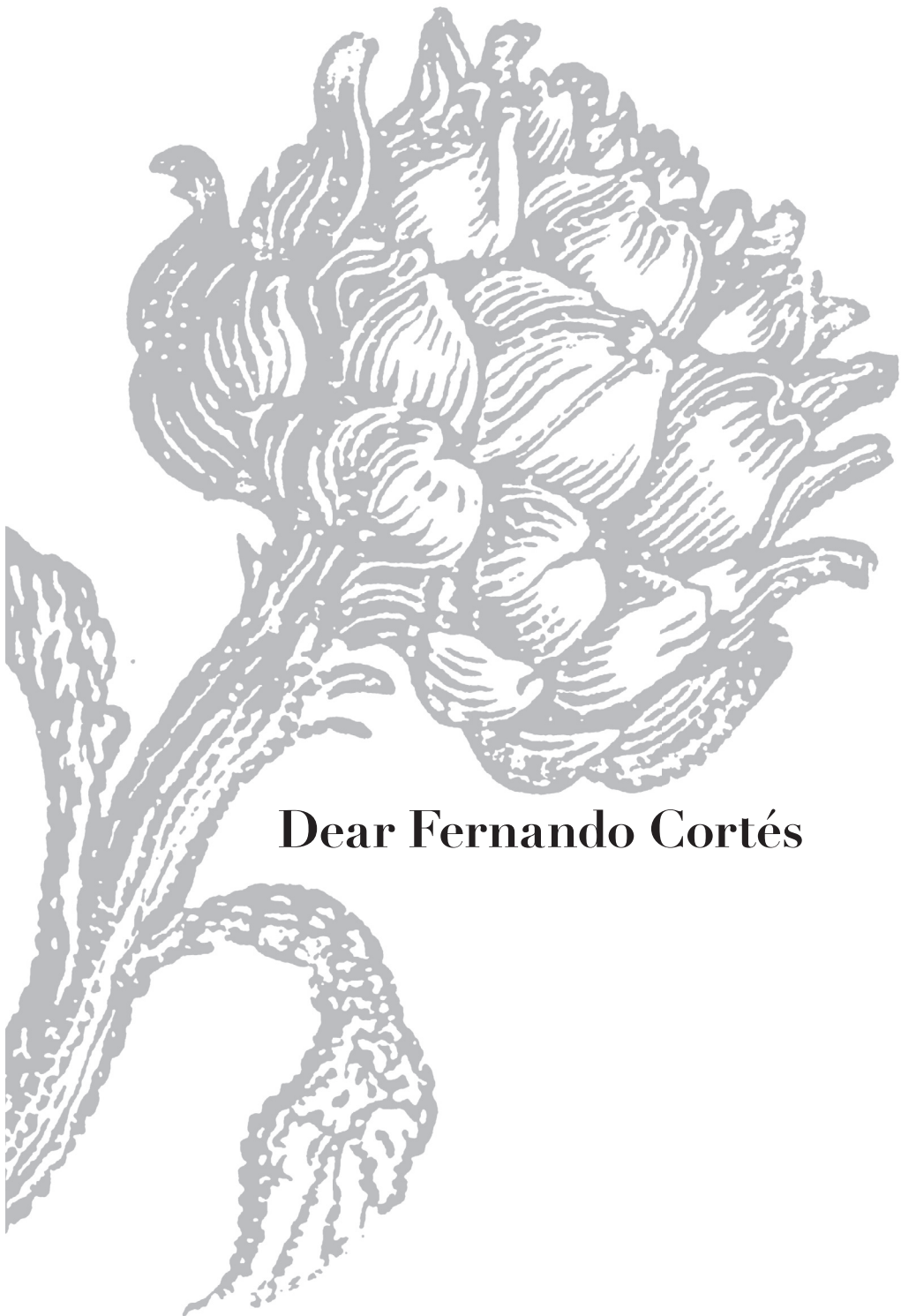
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**Dear Fernando Cortés**

# Ecclesiastes

*Katamon, Jerusalem*

It's so nice to be pretty and wearing polka dots  
on a swinging dress with a small cinched waist  
pushing a blue-eyed child through  
the trade winds in her pram. The trees  
are swaying, and on the bench below them  
an old woman looks up through the boughs  
to a parcel of clouds; when she sees us she smiles.  
When we pass she stands up and begins with her  
*zlata moje, my golden child*, and she reaches to  
touch our cheeks, and her hand stays outstretched,  
and she's asking for just a little of our gold, something  
for the bus or for lunch or, I reach into my tiny purse,  
drop some coins, since her hand is now the meter  
that turns us in our slot.

# Chocolate

The day I won the custody case my lawyer gave me a bitter chocolate  
in black and silver paper. Once I saw cacao pods  
drying in a Venezuelan village square

during Easter week; through the open church doors, peeling saints sniffed  
and were carried  
like colicky children through night streets. The local hot chocolate  
was thickened with cornmeal and canella bark

somebody tore from the trees. To reach that village we found a fisherman,  
plowed  
through rows of porpoises, then hiked five kilometers  
inland through banana and cocoa trees,

which like shade. Once only men could drink  
chocolate. Women were permitted cacao beans as currency,  
to buy meat or slaves or pay tribute. It feels good to imagine a single seed,

hidden in the forbidden mouth, the tongue  
curled, gathering the strength to push. The Aztec king discarded  
each gold-hammered cup after its initial use; his chocolate was red as fresh  
blood.

He was a god to them. It was frothy,  
poured from great heights. When we bathed in the village river, girls  
gathered around me, whispering, why is your skin so pale? Why is your  
hair so straight?

Can we braid it? *Dime, eres blanca?*

The judge, our lawyers, her father, and I decided the fate  
of my child. The dark liquid we poured was ink, initialing our little  
negotiations.

Who can know the heart of another, the blood  
spiced with memory, poured from one generation to the next  
over great distances? The Mayan word for chocolate means *bitter*. The  
village

used to be a plantation; now it is a co-operative, owned by descendants  
of the former slaves. At Easter Vigil the women lined up  
behind the most beautiful, in a long sky

-blue dress adorned with gold stars. Between the decades of the rosary she  
called out,  
while we shuffled our feet in merengue beat, bearing the saints  
through the streets, someone shot off a Roman

candle. The men's procession paused for rum. I know I'll be paying for it  
the rest  
of my life. The Mayan word means *bitter water*. The cacao  
tree was uprooted from paradise.

# La Malinche's Love Letters to Fernando Cortés

1. No body of water is named for Cortés.

I rarely think of him embodied  
when I think of him.

The natives are always  
the inverse:  
white-as-blank-page moths,  
drawn by  
the dark light of reason.

These mornings I awake—pushing  
back the covers  
of a slowly closing tome—into  
that dark spot  
-lit void we all assume  
is the stage.

Between the sturdy banks of his voice,  
I like how my tongue flows.



2. As his translator,

there was nothing I feared  
more than his silence,  
except the words against  
which the world receives  
her degradations.

He said the streets were paved in gold.

He said the streets were paved.

He said there were streets.

He said there, there.

### 3. Cartography

If there is one  
true road only,  
as the friars say,  
there must be  
many maps, and their  
cacophonous cartographers, drawing  
our attention to the  
similarity between it  
and a golden tongue

They call me *La Chingada*,  
because of him,  
but it was my mother  
who sold me,  
and didn't I make a  
map so fine  
you could fill every loss  
with a world?

#### 4. Vacation photos from the new Eden

Usually

I travel local transportation  
systems,  
snapping photos from dusty  
windows.

Dead-

pan, our secular approximations  
trip  
across the photographic paper  
of the divine.

## 5. Mother & father gods

Wild teosinte is very small and hard to open.  
It seemed impossible in the beginning, seven,  
eight, twelve thousand years ago, that anything  
would come of it. But then an ear of corn appeared,

and from it, the mother and father gods.  
We are beyond all that now. We haven't yet  
learned to inhabit that world. And yet  
its wet footprints reappear in dreams of drought.

The seven famished cows consume  
the seven succulent ears. We have about  
the same chance at surviving in the cupule  
of an "us," wrapped in green shucks,

as the future has at miscarriage—though  
she is growing older every year, and so  
one can always *wait without hope, for hope  
would be hope for the wrong thing.*

## 6. Circumstances under which you may resign

The anorexic stomach  
clenches  
its swallowed fist  
of food.  
It's wrong, Cortés,  
to say,

*to consume beauty, you must  
completely break  
with it. It must come to you  
on a platter  
from outside. You must arrange  
yourself, too,  
so that your inner ugliness*

*does not disrupt your pleasure.*  
Anything I say,  
you say, will be caressed  
until it comes  
to resemble a truth we once  
read about.

If only he would have  
liked me a little, it would  
have made such a difference.  
It would have changed everything.

## 7. Gold

Here they are, those cornfields  
that led Cortés to claim  
the streets of Tenochtitlan  
were paved in gold. Whose  
ankles swished through them today  
to meet a minor destiny?  
I carried our son through  
those very fields the day  
he was born, *mestizo*,  
*mestizo*, translated across  
Cortés's pollinating tongue.

## 8. Cortés's vanity

One evening you described the void  
between the pillars of your world,  
which you have dressed in the most modest clothes

and never mention in public. How your face,  
reclining on the unflattering yellow sofa, finally  
looked its age. It was a relief.

How I would have loved  
to stand one night with you  
under a meteor shower

and let some other entity  
cascade its celestial seed all over the world. And could  
you hold my hand and squeeze until I returned

from the skies I rarely visit anymore  
to the yellow sofa, now  
smelling faintly of drought.

9. You can call me mother, of course

They call me *La Malinche*,  
because I betrayed. Cortés called me  
Doña Marina. Our friends

called us by the same name.  
You can call me mother,  
of course. But what I like most,

is the unanswered calling in the sun  
and the corn and the coins, those luminous  
voices eternally seeking their gods.