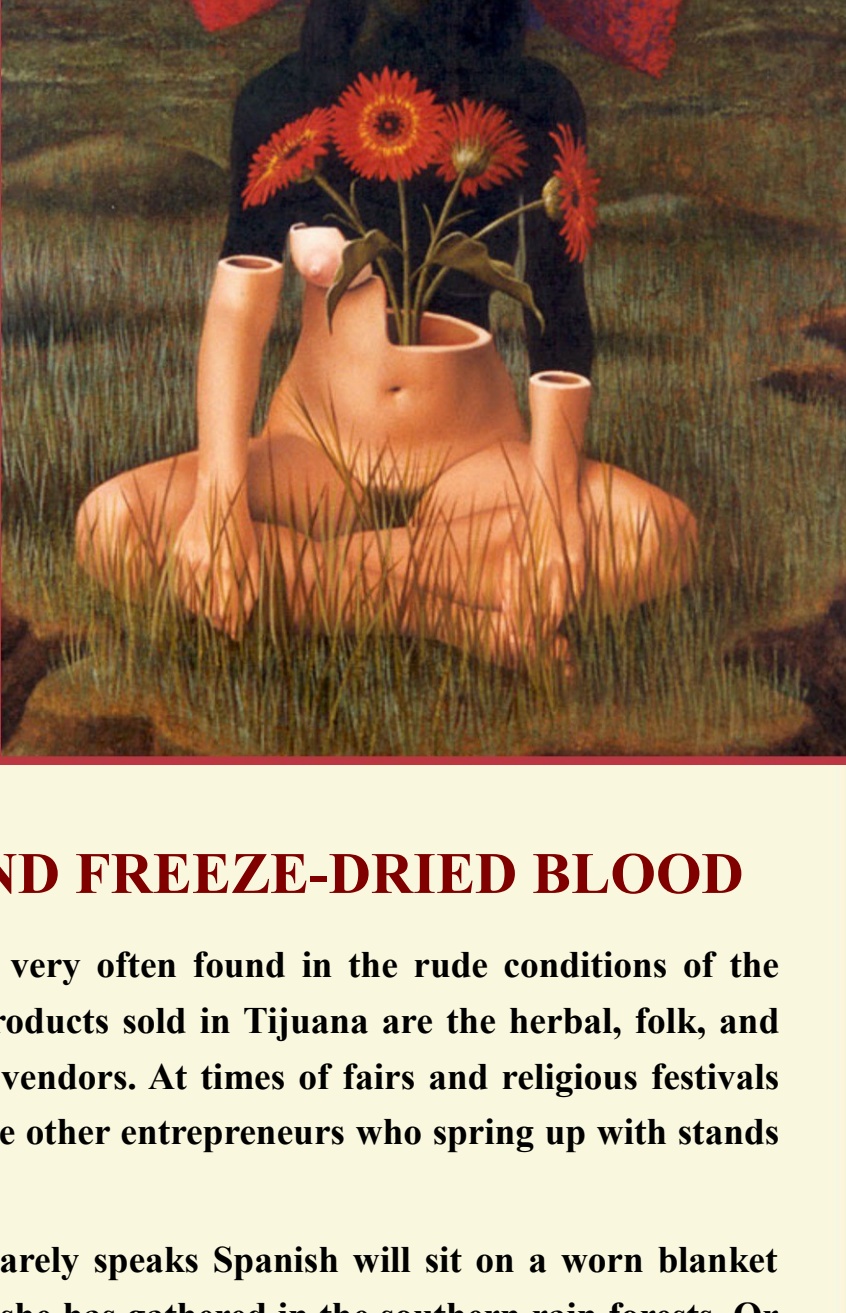
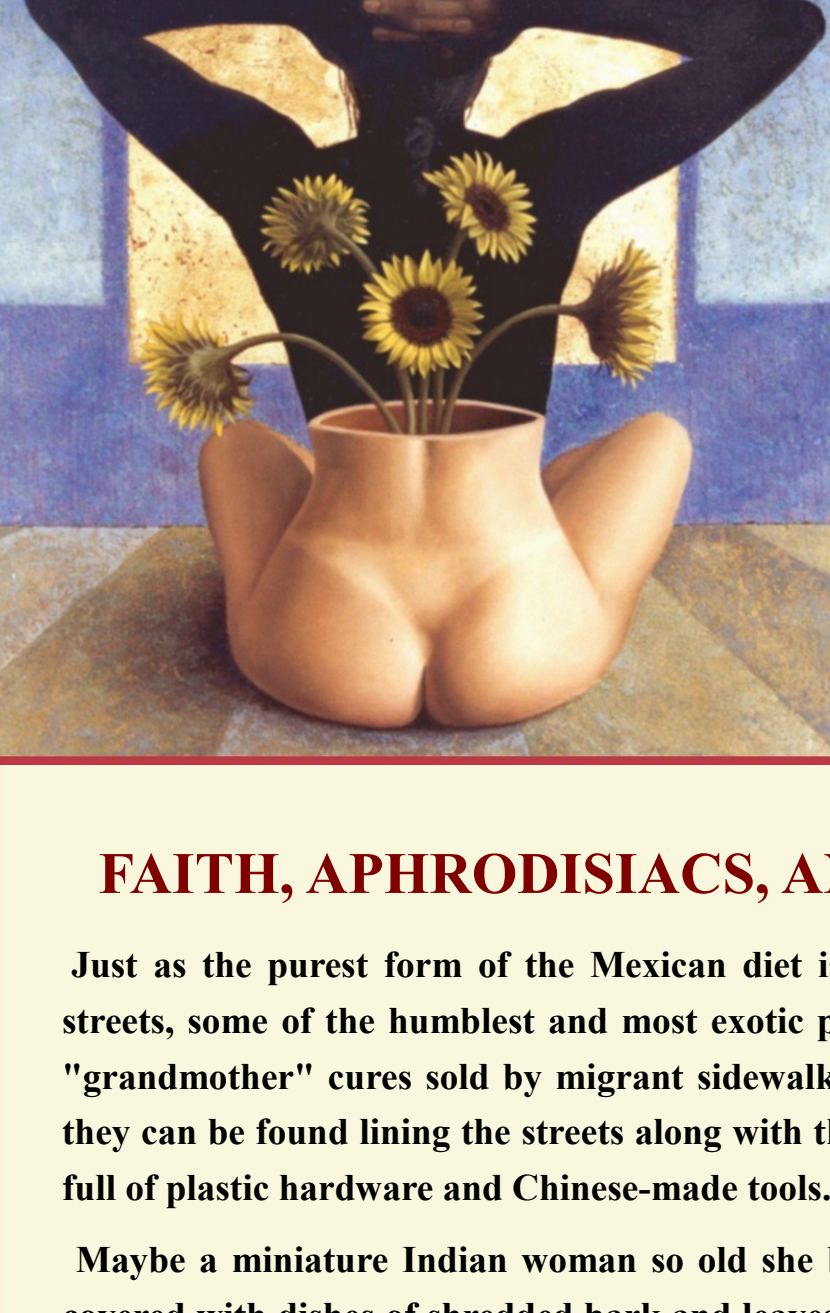


Imaginary Lines



FAITH, APHRODISIACS, AND FREEZE-DRIED BLOOD

Just as the purest form of the Mexican diet is very often found in the rude conditions of the streets, some of the humblest and most exotic vendors sold in Tijuana are the herbal, folk, and "grandmother" cures sold by migrant sidewalk vendors. At times of fairs and religious festivals they can be found lining the streets along with the other entrepreneurs who spring up with stands full of plastic hardware and Chinese-made tools.

Maybe a miniature Indian woman so old she barely speaks Spanish will sit on a worn blanket covered with dishes of shredded bark and leaves she has gathered in the southern rain forests. Or there might be a timid young mother nursing a new child and offering small paper sacks scrawled with spells, pictures of the organs they promise to relieve, or emblems of saints. A certain weathered *ranchero* is almost always seen with fresh-cut desert herbs and skinned, headless rattlesnakes dried into stiff loops.

The herbs usually have native names that are outlandish even to Mexicans and can be counted on for relief of vague symptoms that might include "female complaints", loss of love, and tumors. Endorsements include personal testimony, generations of folk wisdom, and much pointing to saintly names written on the sacks while making signs of the holy cross or the evil eye. Of course, opportunities to experience these "divine gifts of purest nature" are too unpredictable for those who don't wish to wait until the next Festival of Guadalupe to purchase an ounce of *tlanchichinole* or dried viper. But fortunately for those who haven't properly planned their infirmities and thus have to content themselves with purchasing their cures over the counters of more conventional establishments, Tijuana has a wide range of such shops, each specialized in certain types of tastes and organicism shortcomings. Places with names like *Centrál Botánica*, *Farmácia Homeopática* or *Centro Naturalista* sell herbs, health food, "grandmother cures", and sexual enhancements. But they play a much more important role in the national metabolism than food, medicine, or even sexuality—they sell magic. Or what might be called applied faith.

Some of these botanic stores resemble San Diego "health food" stores and sell foods like wheat germ and whole grain bread (*pan integral* as it's called here). Others stack herbal remedies beside the type of products sold in conventional pharmacies. In Tijuana these are often selected towards such medicines as strong sedatives, rejuvenation formulae and cures for cancer or sterility that are not available in the United States, where the line between the medical canon and unorthodox cures is more sharply drawn than here.

The entire idea of "alternative medicine" is much less clear in Mexico than in the United States, which is why people cross the border for drugs and treatments that are illegal on the other side. There are two perspectives on that matter: some denounce exploitation and fakery while others reclaim against narrow-mindedness and suppression of health by powerful interests. To me it seems that in the United States science is like a powerful floodlight, like those observed lighting the border. There is light and there is darkness: the shadows have sharp edges. In Mexico, the official sanction is more like a bonfire whose light shades off gradually into darkness and casts softer shadows that flicker and dance.

Some shops, like the *Centrál Botánica de California*, sell very little except herbs, but every herb you could think of. It is like a clean white warehouse full of herbs and dried plants. In fact, it looks something like a clinic, and I find it amusing and a little frustrating that all those aromatic herbs are sealed tightly in glass jars and stacked in alphabetical order: their cures are all genuinely organic and botanic, but there should be so much more to smell!

On the other hand, as part of a large network of herbal growers, gatherers, and vendors, they are very serious and knowledgeable about herbs and provide literature and advice on their uses. Which is fortunate because it could take years to sort out the variety of folk cures available. It is very helpful to approach these tall walls of odd-looking dried plants knowing that *cuachalate* is good for ulcers, *azocopaque* for rheumatism and gout, *sihupatlé* for painful menstruation, *tlanchalahuá* for burning fat while dieting, and *pimpinela* for combating dandruff, hair loss and follicle damage. But in what doses, and by what preparation? And what if they are taken together? It's like walking into a drug warehouse wondering which color pill might do some good.

Centrál Botánica de California emphasizes their selection of plants from all over Mexico and even the world, but some of the herbs are from local sources. Eucalyptus leaves, for instance, which can be picked for free in much of San Diego, become exotic imports when sent to other Mexican cities. *Guaita*, a kidney remedy, and *alcachofa* for cirrhosis and other liver diseases, are regional desert plants that *Centrál Botánica* gathers not only for their local store, but to ship throughout the Republic. Even humbler is the powerful diuretic weed *la gobernadora*, which grows alongside highways throughout the northern part of the state. Local people harvest it during its flowering season and it, too, becomes a state export. *Damiana* is the most famous Baja California herb, not so much for its curative properties or the liquor made from its leaves, but because of its reputation as an aphrodisiac.

Which approaches another important sideline of the herbal shops. Man, after all, does not live solely by bread; not even integral bread. When the flesh starts to fail the spirit—or vice versa—semi-medical avenues can be attractive and most of the *botánicas* stock as many sexual tonics and invigorants as can be found. There are entire walls covered with various formulations of Ginseng. Preparations of exotic Asiatic herbs like *ma huang* and *gotu kola* promise virility if not actual passion. Almost all such stores and all drug stores carry patent potency potions like Zumba. Such preparations are almost exclusively in support of male vigor. Willing women are considered a bit too sexy as it is and any lack of response they might experience would best be cured by more vigorous male attention. Naturally a cure for female unwillingness would be a best-seller, but so far little has been reliably established on that frontier.

Though there are impressive claims. A male friend once pointed out to me a product called Gerovital, another popular Tijuana drugstore item since it is illegal in the United States. He told me he and his wife, both of them in their middle fifties, had bought some and tried it out right there at the store. By the time they got home they were both frantic. They left a trail of clothes into the bedroom and fell upon each other like what he called, "adolescent animals in heat".

That demonstration, as you might imagine, convinced them to buy more Gerovital, even at a price of over twelve dollars per dose. But it never again worked the same magic as the first application and they quit buying it. He thinks the initial effects were due to anticipation, or to belief conditioned by the decision to spend the money. He mentioned something called "the placebo effect". What that means is: if a person truly believes that a medicine will help him, it will. Having been given this respectable name, the principle becomes very scientific. Perhaps it's just my ignorance of both medicine and mysticism that makes me unable to differentiate "placebo effect" from superstition. Or from a healing through true faith.

This "placebo" idea seems to describe a space between the medical and the mystical that refuses to be clearly defined; a space in which the great majority of the naturalistic boutiques do most of their business. And in that space, in the collection of "*productos místicos*", there can be seen a spiritual portrait of the local people.

A favorite product is "*Legítima Agua Espiritual*"; plastic bottles of water to be used in blessing, cleansing, or attracting fortune. *Sanctísima Muerte* water, which seems to be a big seller, offers success, strength, and fortune, especially if conscientiously applied in a nine-day program. Obviously the appeal of this product among Catholic people is drawn from the insinuations of the *Novena* and the charged words "Holiest Death", just as the acceptance of the powers in water is conditioned by the use of Holy Water in the Church. Many of the waters also use the names of Saints, especially such as St. Antonio Martyr, Santa Marta and St. Cipriano, who bring fortune or protect from witchcraft. Other waters invoke "Macho Garlic", "Adam and Eve", "The Buddha Divine Grace", "Against Witches", "Just Judge", "Double Good Luck Thirteen", "Peace in the Home", and "Come To Me".

Another form of magical application is the "Legitimate Powerful Powder"; an envelope of dust which can be sprinkled on the wet hands, the body, perhaps even the bed and clothes of the intended enchanted. The powders are simple and easy to use, so there are many of them. "The Black Hen" protects against curses and the evil eye. "Hunting Dog" will get rid of bad neighbors—unless, perhaps, they are "Black Hen" customers? More practical are "San Martin Caballero", which aids in business and financial success, and "Student Powder", which promises "ready brains and a clear mind". An envelope of "Frog" allows a lover to "dominate the thoughts of the beloved and always have him captive"; "Kneel at my Feet", with its picture of a man kneeling in front of a temptress, indicates a form of love perhaps somewhat less pure.

The most bizarre of the powders, sold in "*La Guadalupeana*", only blocks from the *Cuahuila* red-light district, features a silhouette of a prostitute leaning on a lamp post and the name "Woman X". On the back of the envelope, instead of more useful instruction, are several inscriptions. First a famous quote from the famous nun poetess Sor. Juana Inez: "Who is more guilty, she who sins for pay or he who pays for sin?"

Next a quote from Jesus Christ, "Let he who is without sin throw the first stone." Furthermore, the package notes, the Holy Church itself has said that, "Sin is Original".

"So firm your resolve, go ahead," the little packet concludes. "But put on this powder before you go to work." It would not require subtle psychology to assume that just reading the packet would provide a woman sinning for pay as much relief as whatever benefits the powder itself might provide. Certainly a bargain at only two thousand pesos each packet.

Many of the "Name" brands of waters and powders also appear as colored candles and incense—more examples of copying proven Catholic imagery—as well as soaps, and shampoos. The apparent idea is that if a name works it can be successfully franchised to other products; thus concept-marketing love, grace and fortune in the same manner as Oscar De La Renta or Ralph Lauren. There are even matches to strike for luck or protection and, certainly the latest technology in the ancient field of commerce, aerosol sprays. Just a touch of the button can soak a room, boudoir or automobile in the essential vibrations of St. Marta, St. Jude, or Holiest Death.

This combination of primitive magic and modern pressure technology is a good analogy to the ways in which faith seeps around and through the boundaries of the world. I'm sure many developed and enlightened Americans see the use of luck matches and saintly aerosols—apart from being damaging to the ozone—as childish and primitive, a little too charming to be absolutely laughable. But what's really on sale is faith, in a variety of strength and flavors. Many of those who mock superstition are only incapable of having or imagining faith. Which is also a lack of hope. And, for that matter, charity.

Magical thinking, especially about luck (a kind of magical concept in itself when you think of it: a name for a force beyond randomness) and romance (the most magical thinking of all) is still very prevalent at all levels of Mexican culture. When I was at the University I worked in a florist shop. Women customers would ask if I sold a boyfriend and pass on little recipes to getting one through *magia blanca* with flowers. I sold a lot of white and red carnations that were used to make petal baths for bringing luck in love. And I got a lot of advice on using the petal water on a lucky day like Friday, thinking positive thoughts while soaking the petals, and consulting the phases of the moon.

Even more common are traditions of plants that bring luck. I remember when almost any business you visited would have a potted *albahaca*, given for luck by friends. Better yet, a *millonaria* with a coin (preferably gold) buried in the soil to bring wealth. In the older days, a garden with *albahaca*, *romero*, *ruda* and medicinal *salvia* would bring a wholesome spirit to the entire household.

The best-selling *Beauty Advice from Head to Toe* by Arturo Palacios, famous hairdresser to movie and music stars, has a great deal of advice that would be considered as much magical as herbal. For instance, he recommends cutting the hair at the full of the moon then planting the clippings under a plant that flowers or flows in the desired way so the hair will grow as the plant grows. It is amazing how many vain idiots blindly follow Palacios' advice, even though I can testify from personal experience that it doesn't work.

At another level, I could use the example of my own mother. She gave my older sisters nice flower names like Gladiola and Jacaranda. Then, after four girls with no boys, and two miscarriages, she started calling us after saints. And after only two of us, Ana and Monica, with saintly names she had Juan Jose. And after Marta, Tomás, Tonio, and Clara. What would you call such behavior? Superstition? Faith? Responsible Catholicism? Sympathetic magic? Call it what you will, a notable thing is that it worked. What would you say such results? I myself consider the path from the Holy Names to my mother's womb a little too complex to allow the drawing of facile conclusions.

Maybe this is the famous Latin tendency towards "magical realism". Having the disadvantage of being an actual *Latina*, rather than a New York literary critic, I'm not really sure what "magical realism" actually is. It seems to be a sort of infection which causes other normal books suddenly to develop characters who are surrounded by butterflies. But the point of all these potions and lucky charms is the engineering of belief. Since belief is the strongest power in the world, the technology is potent, if shadowy and poorly-understood. What is important to the normal believer is to believe in something that works.

Which explains the confusion of images one finds in many of the *botánicas*, where you can see pyramids next to Buddhas next to crosses and ankhs. One dark store with a gypsy atmosphere of incense smoke has a meter-high statue of a bald Chinese Confucius or Lao Tse cast in solid red transparent plastic. It's quite grotesque, of course, but I could visualize it with a bulb inside it, making a warm red night light. That particular shop sells the ultimate in products for clients who want to spread their nets; little icons covered with pictures and statuettes of everything from the Virgin of Guadalupe to the third eye, from Saints to the Buddha, from horse shoes to Indian idols to lottery symbols to national flags. The shrines are covered with heat-shrunk plastic wrap to shield the fetishes inside from dust and other physical harm, perhaps so they can concentrate their powers on more important protections.

Obviously this is ignorant superstition at its most chaotic. But those little shrines are also a form of folk art, cultural realities that indicate that the Catholicism of Mexico is not as solid as many people believe it to be. In many ways we are as primitive as Africans and for a large percentage of Mexicans, Catholicism serves less as an absolute than as a central institution to organize whatever mob of credibility can be hung upon it. I'm not sure that the Mexican ability to believe in everything at once is inferior to a country like the United States in which most people appear to believe in nothing at all.

Apart from that, even the most objectionable and sacrilegious of this mixing of Catholic, native, and lost-and-found images is typical of the religion of the world, which is also not as solid as people think; less like banks or governments than like blurring urban languages and mutating fashions. The hybridization and cross-pollination of belief systems has been going on everywhere, forever. And the use of Catholicism as a host to sustain more primitive beliefs is nothing new at all. The most famous Catholic parasite is Voodoo. It is not widely known, but Voodoo practitioners must be Catholic communicants—even Papa Doc Duvalier, head of the only state in the world with Voodoo as the official religion, couldn't practice his own religion after he was excommunicated from the Catholic church.

A Latin American version of witchcraft and paganism hidden in Catholicism is *Santería*, "saintcraft" very similar to Voodoo. *Santería* is also a religion of possession—perhaps not at all that different from the recent phenomenon of "channeling"—and it is also a parasite on Catholicism, like a tapeworm or the eggs of the cuckoo.

To a *santero*, the saints are just masquerades, faces the old African gods wear in the West, just as Negro people needed to put on different faces and names in the new world. On a *santero* altar, a candle of Santa Barbara really represents Shangó. Saint Lazarus and Saint Peter hide within them Yamaya, and Ogun. Matters of exact identity are of little import to gods who come down to earth and take over human bodies; speak with their mouths, rampage with their genitals, kill with their hands. A prayer book for the Seven Powers contacts the Gods. A call to Great Saint Peter is redirected to Ocha, orations to Our Lady of the Waters are heard by savage ears. The candles, the herbs, the blessed water, even the authentic holy prayers—all serve different masters in a religion that treats of blood, sensuality and power. To a Catholic, *santería* is a blasphemous parasite that invades the bosom of the True Church. But to a *santero* the Church is merely a flavorless shell that protects and nurtures the spark of true faith within it, just as Zen Monks and Sufis see Buddhism and Islam as mere vehicles.

This is not to say that *Santería* is common in Tijuana, although it does exist here and its adherents buy products from the *botánicas* I have mentioned. Even the white, stomach *Centrál Botánica* sells freeze-dried deer blood which can be used both as a cure for gastric pains and occult purposes. They promise that it is as medicinally dynamic as fresh blood, but would it serve as well for occult purposes? I couldn't find any witches or vampires to testify, though one woman did whisper to me that the blood was not really from deer, but cattle. I certainly wouldn't have known the difference by examining the little brown nuggets, but I did find that they reconstituted very easily in hot water. Instant blood. I imagine that vampires would find it similar to instant coffee, the sacrifice in quality compensated by the convenience.

Similarly, they sell rattlesnake in gelatin capsules. Claimed to be just as good as the crude cadaver for purifying the blood, reducing tumors and ridding of acne... but do these capsules have any of the sexual potency so instinctively present in the stiff, taut-ribbed snake? Who would you rather believe, the educated words of a white-suited expert or the naked, blatant sight of the flesh of a serpent in the hands of a weathered, ancient cowboy?

Because faith exists in many gray zones and shades: even Voodoo and *Santería* are formalized religions with many followers who share the same beliefs and symbols, but there are thousands of similar blendings and heresies and minor "sects" with no name. A local *curandero* might do a cure through herbs or sacrificial magic, yet attribute the cure to Jesus or the Virgin. A devout woman might go to mass, buy small metal *milagros* in front of the cathedral to influence holy grace, stop by for some mystic powders to rearrange her health or love life, drink some Buddha Dream Tea before going to bed with a book on Zodiaec Karma. The little shrink-wrapped shrines are sacred to some nameless impulse. This has also been the case around the world throughout time. When Christianity was introduced into India, the missionaries were pleased with how fast it was accepted, then horrified to realize that Hinduism, a huge, amorphous amoeba of a religion, was capable of swallowing up their teachings and converting Christ into the latest manifestation of Krishna.

And here in Mexico, where Octavio Paz once said that Mexicans believe in nothing except the lottery and the Virgin of Guadalupe, there are heretical evidences of cultural blending and appropriation in the *Guadalupeana* cult. These are things a devout Mexican scarcely dares to think about—but there they are. One attack on the legitimacy of the virgin of Guadalupe has been widely read because it was authored by the Rius, Mexico's favorite cartoonist, satirist and polemicist. In comic book form, Rius sets out to show that the Guadalupe "myth" was actually a Catholic plot to convert the Aztecs and enslave the Mexican working classes with the opiate of religion. Rius, for all his other talents, is an atheist, Communist, vegetarian, feminist, and author of a self-teaching suicide manual. Aside from attacks on the Church itself, Rius relates interesting ideas about the succession of Gods in Mexico. The spot on Tepeyac hill where the Virgin wanted her temple built was the site of an Aztec temple to Tonantzin, mother of Huitzпочитл, a Christ-figure in the Aztec religion. The Virgin took on various aspects of the Aztec goddess, including the date of her solstice celebration.

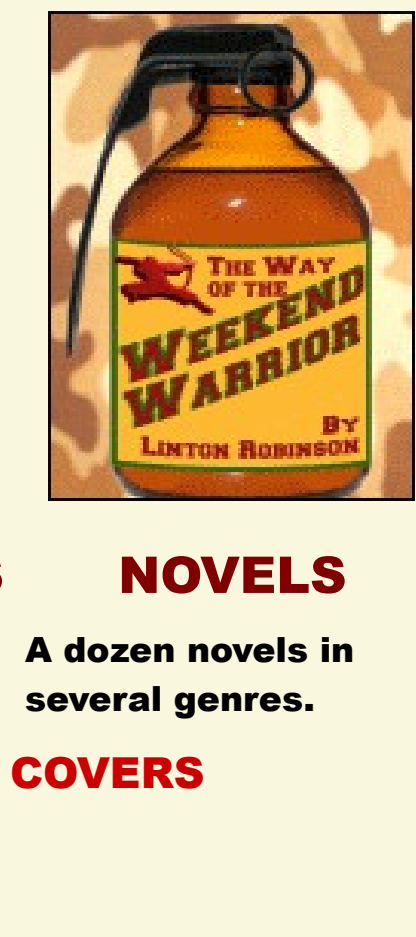
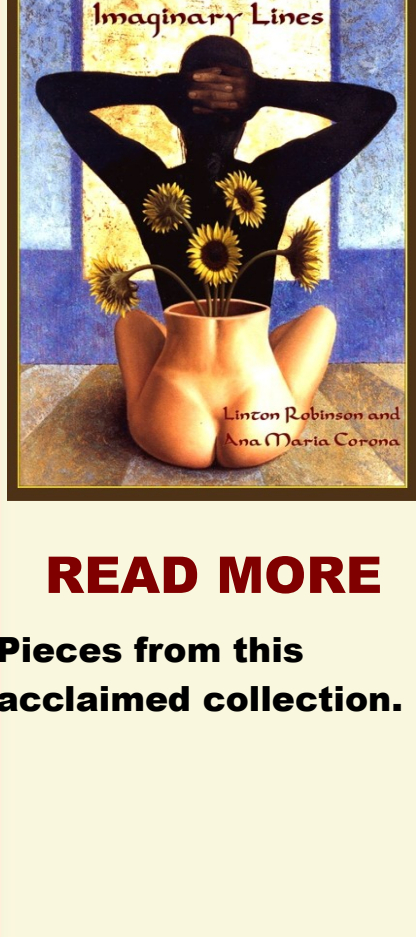
This is a fascinating area of scholarship, but Rius devotes most of his work not to exploring the similarities of Aztec and Christian concepts, such as the missionaries comparing the rain god Tlaloc to John the Baptist, but to collecting proofs that challenge the entire story of the Virgin appearing to a humble Indian and painting her image on his cloak to prove to Bishop Zumurruga that he should build a church on Tepeyac. He identifies—but how reliably?—the man who painted the cloak. He makes much of the switching of Church calendar dates to approximate pagan festivals, but we see the same thing with St. Valentine's day, and even Christmas—much less Easter, Lent, and Carnival, which are derived from the Equinox. He shows, with proofs virtually impossible to deny, that Bishop Zumurruga never mentioned the incident in his writing and was actually absent from Mexico when the vision took place.

So, should I accept these beliefs because they are documented? Renounce them because they are heretical? Or just continue believing or disbelieving that God's grace could rise out of Man's fakery, that the Christ could rise out of a manger, that health can rise out of a weed, that luck and romance can rise out of concentration on trivialities? In a world in which scientists, doctors, and governments disagree on the values and dangers of the food and medicines we consume things like faith, magic and love remain difficult to prove, but impossible to disprove completely.

And so we come again to the important and tiresome matter of proofs and facts, supposedly the very things that differentiate the sheep from the goats, the light from the darkness. Everybody wants faith in things unseen, but also everybody wants to see for themselves. How wide is the circle of light, how broad the umbrella of faith? Who among us understands even the simplest miracle?

As a Catholic, I believe that if a certain man says certain words he can convert ordinary wine and bread into the actual, literal blood and flesh of a man who died twenty centuries ago but it's certainly nothing I would try to prove to anyone. It is one of the oldest and most widely held beliefs in the world: scientifically ridiculous. So should I laugh at the superstitions of the ignorant? Or condemn them as inferior competitors of the true faith? Or sympathize with the odd perversions and contaminations we render to the spirit when we try to apply it to the weakness of the flesh?

Life, health and sanity are all circles of light surrounded by endless darkness. Perhaps it is in the twilight between the two that the nature of both become more clear to us. If we're going to have faith, we might as well have blind faith: if we're going to be realists, we might as well be a magical realists.



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