

The Ugly One With The Jewels

Laurie Anderson

In 1974, I went to Mexico to visit my brother who was working as an anthropologist with Tsutsil Indians, the last surviving Mayan tribe. And the Tsutsil speak a lovely birdlike language and are quite tiny physically; I towered over them. Mostly, I spent my days following the women around since my brother wasn't really allowed to do this. We got up at 3am and began to separate the corn into three colors. And we boiled it, ran to the mill and back, and finally started to make the tortillas. Now all the other women's tortillas were 360°, perfectly toasted, perfectly round; and after a lot of practice mine were still lobe-sided and charred. And when they thought I wasn't looking they threw them to the dogs.

After breakfast we spent the rest of the day down at the river watching the goats and braiding and unbraiding each other's hair. So usually there wasn't that much to report. One day the women decided to braid my hair Tsutsil-style. After they did this I saw my reflection in a puddle. I looked ridiculous but they said, "Before we did this you were ugly, but now maybe you will find a husband."

I lived within in a yurt, a thatched structure shaped like a cob cake. And there's a central fireplace ringed by sleeping shelves sort of like a dry beaver down. Now my Tsutsil name was Lau sha, which loosely translated means "the ugly one with the jewels". Now ugly, OK, I was awfully tall by local standards. But what did they mean by the jewels? I didn't find out what this meant until one night, when I was taking my contact lenses out, and since I'd lost the case I was carefully placing them on the sleeping shelf; suddenly I noticed that everyone was staring at me and I realized that none of the Tsutsil had ever seen glasses, much less contacts, and that these were the jewels, the transparent, perfectly round, jewels that I carefully hid on the shelf at night and then put for safekeeping into my eyes every morning.

So I may have been ugly but so what? I had the jewels.

Full fathom thy father lies
Of his bones are coral made
Those are pearls that were his eyes
Nothing of him that doth fade
But that suffers a sea change
Into something rich and strange
And I alone am left to tell the tale
Call me Ishmael